Islamic Poetry and Ethics in an Age of Hindu Nationalism

The Gabriel of Madness

ANAND VIVEK TANEJA

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To those in prison for struggling for a more inclusive India.
To those writing poetry in these dark times.

mujh se kaha jibril-e junun ne yeh bhi wahy-e Ilahi hai
mazhab to bas mazhab-e dil hai baqi sab gumrahi hai
The Gabriel of Madness said to me, "This too is divine revelation.
Religion is only the religion of the heart, all else is going astray."

—"MAJROOH" SULTANPURI (1919–2000)

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Nashville, August 2025

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

The world I am writing from and about is multiscript, with people moving between Devanagari, Nastaliq, and Roman scripts. Styles of transliteration are also wide and varied. I have used prevalent Romanizations for the names of people and places. For the sake of general readability, when transliterating speech and texts, I have avoided the use of all diacritical marks except for ʾ to indicate the hamza and ʿ for the ayn in Urdu. I have translated the consonantal form of the Urdu letter و with a *w* for words with Arabic roots and with *v* for Persian and Indic words: hence, *wehshat* and *svaraj*. All translations from Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani are mine unless otherwise noted. For translations of the Persian poetry quoted by Maulana Azad in *Ghubar-e Khatir*, I am greatly indebted to Mohammad Meerzaei.

Prologue

"I Saw Nothing But Beauty"

munkir-e karbala huʾe dard men mubtila huʾe
hamko bhi ek yazid ka daur dikha diya gaya
We became deniers of Karbala, we were embroiled in pain
We, too, were shown the age of a Yazid
—IQBAL ASHAR (B. 1965)

I first heard this *shʿer* (distich/couplet) in 2018, at an open air *mushaʿirah* (poetic gathering). The poet Iqbal Ashar recited it as part of a ghazal he announced as "*achchhe dinon ka marsiya*" (the elegy for good days). The title is a play on "*achchhe din ane wale hain*" (the good days are about to come), the slogan of the Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi's successful election campaign in 2014, when he was first elected the prime minister of India.

We, too, were shown the age of a Yazid. On a beautiful February evening, at a large park in central Delhi, three miles from the Prime Minister's official residence, a mile and a half from Parliament, a poet stood before an audience of thousands and likened the ongoing reign of Modi to that of Yazid, the archetypal tyrant of Islamic history, who ordered the killing of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussain and his family and followers at the Battle of Karbala. When they heard his poetic metaphor, the crowd roared in appreciation.

The events of Battle of Karbala are central to the devotional life of Shia Muslims but have much wider ethical and religious resonances, resonances that were constantly invoked, especially in poetry, in the years following 2014. For Indian Muslims, the naked Islamophobia displayed by the Indian state and much of Indian society in these years made Karbala profoundly relevant; it was a frame for understanding the circumstances they were living through both spiritually and affectively and for finding the most ethically appropriate ways to respond.

What might it mean then, as an anthropologist, to think with Karbala?[1]

. . .

It is the year 680 CE. Imam Hussain, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and son of the fourth Muslim caliph Ali—the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet and the first male convert to Islam—refuses to pledge allegiance to Yazid, who is seen as a tyrant and an unjust usurper of the leadership of the Muslim community. On the plain of Karbala, Hussain and seventy-two of his followers bravely fight Yazid's thousands-strong army. The Battle of Karbala is bloody and cruel. Hussain and many of his men are decapitated, their bodies trampled by horses.

Yazid's soldiers set fire to the tents of Hussain's encampment and take the remaining women and children prisoner, marching them first to Kufa and then to Yazid's court in Damascus. Among the captives is Sayyida Zainab, sister to Hussain, daughter of Imam Ali, granddaughter of the Prophet. Two of her sons were slain on the battlefield. During this time of intense grief and abject subjugation, Sayyida Zainab becomes a pillar of courage for the survivors of Hussain's caravan, the moral leader of a Muslim community facing injustice and oppression. In Kufa, she and the other captives are paraded through the city and forced to witness the heads of Hussain and his companions displayed on spears. Sayyida Zainab is brought before the governor Ibn Ziyad, who mockingly asks her, "How did you find the way Allah treated your brother and your family?"

Tradition records that Sayyida Zainab begins her response with these words: *Ma ra'itu illa jamila* (I saw nothing but beauty).[2]

• • •

What might it mean to insist upon seeing beauty in the face of violence, oppression and destruction? What might we learn, conceptually and theoretically, from such vision? This question became salient for me as an ethnographer spending time with Muslims in India while regnant Hindu nationalism consistently and relentlessly attacked Islam and Muslims—through TV and social media, through legislation and lynchings—and endlessly undermined the basis for Muslim belonging in India. Time and time again, in the face of anxiety, grief, rage, and the threat of dispossession, my friends and interlocutors would see nothing but beauty.

Consider this instance. February's end, 2020. My friend Saba and I walk down High-Tension Road toward Shaheen Bagh, where a sit-in protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) is in its third month. It is a particularly strange and unsettled time. The CAA, passed by the Indian parliament in December 2019, is widely understood as having targeted Muslims' very right to be in India. There have just been riots in North East Delhi, attacking Muslim homes and businesses for protesting the CAA, and worries and rumors about COVID-19 have begun to circulate.

We stop to get cigarettes and run into Sareha *bha'i*, whom I've never met before. He talks about the videos circulating on social media of Muslims gruesomely killed and tortured and mocked by Hindu rioters in North East Delhi. It's been barely two days since the riots, which began with targeting anti-CAA protest

sites, subsided. "*Itni nafrat hai, itni nafrat le ke yeh kaise sote honge rat ko? Par nafrat kabhi muhabbat se nahin jit sakti*" (There is so much hate, how must they sleep at night with so much hate? But hate can never win against love).

He starts talking about positive news stories, about how he was brought to tears by the story of a young girl named Priyanshi whose father saved his Muslim neighbors from a mob attack. The father was being hailed as a hero on television while being vilified as a traitor by people on his own street. As she was interviewed on camera by journalist Barkha Dutt, Priyanshi wept, because she had grown up in the home of her Muslim neighbors, they were family, and she wanted them to come back.[3] In a moment of unscripted television, Sareha *bha'i* found hope for the victory of love over hate.

Two nights ago, everyone at the Shaheen Bagh protest was afraid that they were going to die. There was an electricity blackout and rumors of mobs gathering across the road in Madanpur Khadar. Saba shows me a video she shot that night. In the darkness, people shout anxiously, "*Jagte Raho!*" (Stay awake!) This belief in the victory of love over hate, in the openness and freedom of Shaheen Bagh, was sustained in the face of every night possibly being the last night of the protest.

. . .

To see nothing but beauty in the face of destruction is not a form of blindness but of insight. It is a rejection of the destructive forces of skepticism—in the sense used by Stanley Cavell in his conversation with the work of anthropologist Veena Das[4]—in one's understanding of the world and the possibilities of being human. While not disavowing the deprivation, despair, everyday humiliations, and structural and episodic violence that Indian Muslims live with, especially under Hindu nationalist rule, this book focuses on the ethical *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the many forms of striving that I witnessed Indian Muslims bring together into a cohesive whole—through poetry, self-fashioning, art, and theology—and by doing so, imagining and making real a different future for Muslim selfhood and Muslim belonging in a plural India. I use a term borrowed from aesthetic theory to characterize the coherence and underlying unity I saw in diverse Muslim forms of striving precisely to highlight the relation between aesthetics and ethics, between beauty and chivalry, that Sayyida Zainab's statement emphasized. Writing such a book has meant a disavowal of the hermeneutics of suspicion[5] and a rethinking of what it means to practice anthropology.

. . .

One night in Delhi in August 2018, as I sat with the Urdu poet Farhat Ehsas and some of his friends, the conversation turned to anthropology. I brought up the contrast between the Urdu word for anthropology, *bashariyat*, with its sense of the general study of humankind, and the Persian word *insan-shinasi*, which (at least rendered into Urdu) has the far grander sense of "recognizing the human."

This reminded Farhat Ehsas of Ghalib, the famous nineteenth-century Urdu poet. "Ghalib," he said, "is the first to make the distinction between *admi* (man) and *insan* (human)." He then quoted Ghalib's famous *shʿer:*

baskih dushvar hai har kam ka asan hona
admi ko bhi muyassar nahin insan hona
It is so difficult for any work to be easy
Even to man becoming human is unavailable

"My own poetry," Farhat Ehsas continued, comparing himself to Ghalib, "is about *admi* and his *kaji*." *Kaji*, or crookedness, implies a deviation from moral normativity, from the straight and narrow. In this distinction, *insan* implies an elevated moral stature, an aspirational state of human moral perfection. This distinction comes from Urdu's inherited history of Sufi doctrines and practices of human spiritual and ethical perfectibility, culminating ideally—and as Ghalib strongly suggests, with great difficulty—in the *insan-e kamil* (the perfected human). The tradition of Urdu poetry, a tradition which Farhat Ehsas considers himself to be both in deep dialogue with and in rebellion against, is, in his understanding, primarily concerned with *insan* rather than *admi*. This distinction made me turn back to the linguistic difference between the words for anthropology in Urdu and Persian and think of these as *conceptual* differences. Is anthropology *bashariyat* or *insan-shinasi?* Is it a study of human messiness and complexity, or is it a study of human virtue and moral striving toward perfection? While the vast discipline of anthropology would be incomplete if it left out either of these aspects of the human condition, the reader is duly cautioned that this is a book of anthropology as *insan-shinasi*, a recognition and celebration of the ethical askesis and moral exploration I witnessed in the face of violence and destructive skepticism. Hence, it is also a book suffused with poetry.

Introduction

ham dekhenge, lazim hai kih ham bhi dekhenge
voh din ke jiska wʿadah hai
jo lauh-e azal men likha hai
ham dekhenge
We will see, it is given that we too will see
The day that has been promised
That is written in the eternal tablet
We will see
—FAIZ AHMED ("FAIZ") (1911–84)

In December 2019, the Indian Parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). It called for the fast-tracking of citizenship applications for Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Parsi, Buddhist, and Jain refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, pointedly omitting Muslims. This was the first time there'd been de jure preferential categories based on religion for the granting of Indian citizenship. Passing the CAA had been a key part of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s election manifesto for the 2019 parliamentary elections, which the party won with an absolute majority. It was widely understood as a first step in the disenfranchising of India's Muslims—the country's largest religious minority and the world's third-largest Muslim population, with about 200 million people—and making them into second-class citizens. This was both because of the electoral rhetoric of the BJP and because of how the previous five years of BJP government had played out for India's Muslims, with an exponential increase in Islamophobic rhetoric, lynchings, and other acts of violence against Muslims with the implicit and explicit support of the ruling dispensation.

The passing of the CAA precipitated a huge wave of protests across the country, with people (especially young people) from multiple communities protesting. Even places known to be largely apolitical, like the campus of the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, saw students turn out in massive numbers to protest. One of the unifying factors in the protests was a song that virtually everyone

sang—*Ham Dekhenge* (We will see), the first lines of which serve as the epigraph of this introduction.

Ham Dekhenge has a long and colorful history as a song of protest.[1] The acclaimed Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz wrote it in January 1979 in America, perhaps to commemorate the ongoing Iranian revolution, whose final shape was yet indeterminate. The print version of the poem, first published in 1982,[2] is titled *wa yabqa wajhu Rabbika*, from a verse from Surah Al-Rahman in the Quran: "And there remains the Face of thy Lord."[3] The poem's many verses bring together Quranic eschatology and socialist imagery. In 1986, the famous Pakistani singer Iqbal Bano sang the *nazm* at the Alhamra Arts Council in Lahore, in a speech/song act widely understood as an act of defiance against the undemocratic, oppressive, and increasingly conservative regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, which sought legitimacy through the Islamization of Pakistani state and society. In the recording from that evening in Lahore, which initially circulated across Pakistan and the subcontinent on bootleg cassette tapes and is now available on YouTube, you can hear the crowd chanting "*inqalab zindah bad!*" (Long live the revolution!). Twenty-seven years later, the same *nazm*, sung to the same tune, had become the anthem of the countrywide protests in India against the passing of the exclusionary CAA.[4]

The history of Faiz's poem and its reception and circulation opens us up to a set of seeming contradictions. A poem explicitly Islamic in its references became an anthem of protest against an "Islamic" state.[5] The same intensely Islamic poem was for a long time an anthem of leftist political activism in India, often sung, for example, at May Day celebrations. Two generations later, this same intensely Islamic poem became a widespread anthem of protest in defense of the "secular" character of India.[6] This seemingly peculiar history, rather than being paradoxical, opens up a way for us to understand the critical role poetry plays in the Islamic tradition, and how poetry acts as a medium for Islam as a *universal ethical discourse* beyond the boundaries of Muslim religious identity. It also shows us how the rapid spread of the internet and social media in India has given rise to a novel *networked public sphere* and an extraordinary *mimetic archive* of Urdu poetry that has begun to transform Indian public culture and ethical life.

THE NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE TRANSNATIONAL MIMETIC ARCHIVE OF URDU POETRY

In Zeynep Tufekci's characterization, the networked public sphere "does not mean 'online only' or 'online primarily.' Rather, it is a recognition that the whole public sphere . . . has been reconfigured by digital technologies, and that this reconfiguration holds true whether one is analyzing an online, offline, or

combined instantiation of the public sphere of social media action."[7] In India, as in other places, social media has been used to promote disinformation, manipulate behavior, and even incite mob violence. But amid all this, I also saw how Facebook and WhatsApp were instrumental in the creation of communities of common interest and friendship that transcended the usual limits of locality, sectarian identity, institutional belonging, and even age. These intergenerational and intersectarian networks have brought a profound dynamism to religious, cultural, and ethical life among Indian Muslims and others.[8] For instance, in chapter 3 I discuss how patriarchal norms and language are being challenged by Muslim women in Delhi[9] and how the new networks enabled by the affordances of social media play a central role in the increased participation of women in the networked public sphere and their transformation of extant forms and conventions of writing and doing, poetry and politics. In chapter 6, I explore the changing nature of religious authority in the networked public sphere by looking at the work that went into making possible the uncommon practice of Shia and Sunni Muslims praying together in public.

The dynamism of cultural and religious life in the networked public sphere is brought about not only by the new networks made possible by different forms of social media but also by the unprecedented access to *mimetic archives of tradition* available to these networks thanks to the widespread use of mobile internet. By *mimetic archive* William Mazzarella invokes an idea of collective social forces or *mana* "as resources deposited and variably available for excavation and citation—for activation . . . that we activate and apprehend as much by sensuous, mimetic tactics as by discursively citational means."[10] Mazzarella here invokes Walter Benjamin's concept of the *mimetic faculty*, which, closely following Benjamin, he does not see as merely creating an archive of imitability. Rather, "the mimetic faculty activates latent yet historically embedded—let's say immanent—resonances that open the way for transformation."[11] The mimetic archive, following Mazzarella, makes the past activatable: The past does not remain past, but becomes an embodied potential for the transformation of the present. The spread of mobile internet in India has made the mimetic archives of both literary and religious traditions widely available to young Indians in an unprecedented manner—especially through the vast audiovisual archive that is YouTube—unconstrained by national, sectarian, and institutional boundaries. This has had a transformative effect on Indian public culture. The story of *Ham Dekhenge*'s reception and circulation in India's networked public sphere is but one powerful illustration.

Ham Dekhenge did not jump to prominence in countrywide protests straight from May Day celebrations, which are now a small part of North Indian politics and public culture. Instead, it had a renewed life in India thanks to its use as the introductory song to the eleventh season of Coke Studio Pakistan, released

in 2018.[12] Since its first season in 2008, this program has been hugely popular in India because of the high quality of the musicianship; shared cultural, linguistic, and musical idioms; and the easy availability of Pakistani music in India on the internet. Ryan D'Souza argues that Coke Studio, which began in Pakistan at a time when it was a frontline state in the War on Terror, "shows a novel presentation of Pakistani culture to a transnational audience . . . an oppositional discourse showcasing transgressively gendered performances and a mystical and subversive Islam."[13] While I would disagree with D'Souza's characterization of the Islam showcased on Coke Studio as "subversive," it is nevertheless true that Coke Studio draws upon elements of the Islamic tradition—in particular poetry written by Sufis in Balochi, Pashto, Punjabi, Persian, Sindhi, and Urdu—that have been rendered marginal in contemporary understandings of Islam, especially for outside observers, and chooses to present these as "the sound of the nation," as the show's logo goes.

The rendition of *Ham Dekhenge* on Coke Studio was released on YouTube days before general elections in Pakistan that brought Imran Khan to power, and just a few weeks before the mid-August Independence Days of both Pakistan and India. It showed famous qawwals Farid Ayaz and Abu Muhammad—with family links to the Sufi shrine of Nizamuddin Awliya in Delhi—sing the verse "*uthega an-al-Haq ka nʿarah jo main bhi hun aur tum bhi ho*" (The cry of "I am the Truth" that is me and that is you). These verses invoke the martyrdom of the tenth-century Sufi Mansur Al-Hallaj, who is remembered as being martyred by the Abbasid caliphate for his statement "*An al-Haq*" (I am the Truth), which the Sufis understood as God speaking through Al-Hallaj after the dissolution of his ego, and other Muslims understood as a heretical claim to divinity punishable by death. Faiz's poem turns Hallaj's antinomian statement into a collective identity—the truth that is you and that is me—an ecstatic and devoutly Muslim collective identity that is in opposition to straitlaced ideas of Islam, and through the invocation of the divine attribute of *Al-Haq* (the Truth), enfolds the idea of *parrhesia*, of speaking truth to power.

The video that accompanies Coke Studio's rendition of *Ham Dekhenge* both anchors this speaking truth to power in a recognizable lineage of Islamic piety through the figures of the qawwals and radically broadens the oppositional collective invoked in Faiz's poem. In the video, the last lines of the poem—"*aur raj karegi khalq-e Khuda jo main bhi hun aur tum bhi ho*" (and the people of God will rule; that is me, and that is you)—are sung by a young member of Pakistan's Hindu minority and by members of the transgender *hijra/khwajasara* community. As soon as Coke Studio uploaded the video to YouTube in July 2018, my Facebook feed exploded with young Indian friends sharing the video again and again: a vision of what could be, from the "enemy country" across a hostile border, in stark contrast to the national present.[14] Fifteen months later, as the Citizenship Amendment Act limited who could legally claim to belong to India, *Ham Dekhenge*, redeployed toward a more inclusive version of

Pakistan, became the anthem of those who envisioned a more inclusive vision of India.

THE WAʿIZ AND THE RIND AND EVERYONE IN BETWEEN: URDU POETRY AND POLITICAL THEOLOGIES OF SELFHOOD

The story of *Ham Dekhenge* and its importance to the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act highlight how central Urdu poetry has been for the imagination of both ethical life and political action in South Asia, especially (but certainly not exclusively) for Muslim communities.[15] Why is this the case? Through my interactions with a wide variety of Muslims and other Urdu speakers in India, I came to realize that Urdu poetry is a crucial medium for the articulation of *political theologies of selfhood*.

Between 2018 and 2020, I was engaged in ethnographic research in India on the very broadly defined question of what Muslim ethical life looks like in an age of dominant Hindu nationalism. The bulk of my research was conducted in Delhi and Lucknow, cities with long histories of Muslim presence and substantial contemporary Muslim populations and institutions. I also conducted research in Western UP (Aligarh, Amroha, Kandhla, Meerut), West Bengal (Bhatpara, Kolkata), and Maharashtra (Mumbai). I was led to the majority of my interlocutors, many of whom became close friends, through what is often referred to as "snowball sampling": People to whom I was speaking about the questions that interested me introduced me to their friends and acquaintances, and those people in turn led me to their friends and acquaintances. Snowball sampling is prone to selection bias, as it recruits a nonrepresentative sample of the population. This was undoubtedly the case in my fieldwork, but the sheer diversity of interlocutors in urban North India to whom snowball sampling led me was remarkable: religious leaders, politicians, journalists, lawyers, students, entrepreneurs, civil society activists, filmmakers, authors, and poets across the spectrum of age, gender, and sectarian divides of Shia and Sunni, Deobandi and Barelvi. The networks that my friends inhabited and allowed me access to were much more diverse than commonsense secular/religious divides and sect-centered studies would allow for: Sunnis introduced me to Shias and vice versa, and I met with a whole spectrum of Muslims subjectivities, ranging from, to use the classificatory language of the Urdu ghazal tradition, the pious abstemious *waʿiz* (preacher) to the libertine *rind*.

One evening, while sitting in a friend's car, I heard this *shʿer* by Faiz and realized that it perfectly encapsulated my fieldwork experience:

> *waʿiz se rasm o rah rahi rind se suhbat*
> *donon me farq itna ziyada to nahin tha*
> (I) maintained cordial relations with the preacher, intimate discourse with the non-conforming libertine[16]
> There was not so much difference between the two

In Urdu poetry, the *waʿiz* and *rind* are figures defined in opposition to each other, and if they cross paths, it is only for the *rind* to mock the hypocrisies of the *waʿiz*, perhaps most famously in this *shʿer* by Ghalib:

> *kahan mai khane ka darvazah Ghalib aur kahan waʿiz*
> *par itna jante hain kal voh jata tha kih ham nikle*
> Where the door of the tavern, Ghalib, and where the preacher?
> All we know is that yesterday he entered as we were leaving

But in Faiz's *shʿer* the binary collapses. Not only does the speaker have good relations (even if with differing degrees of intimacy) to both *waʿiz* and *rind*, this subject finds that there is not that much difference between the two. This second part of the couplet also held true for my experience with diverse Indian Muslims: Rather than the opposition between pious and "everyday" Muslim subjectivities that are found in both poetic and academic discourse,[17] I found many commonalities. The biggest commonality of all—because it was the very medium of shared discourse—was Urdu poetry. Across age, gender, and sectarian divides, Urdu poetry—particularly the aphoristic poetic couplet or *shʿer*—was the medium in which ethical, political, philosophical, and affective responses to living with a deeply Islamophobic and authoritarian regime were articulated in both public and private settings, including on social media. Urdu poetry was the medium in which public and private conversations about *political theologies of selfhood*—how to be a self in relation to a cruel and oppressive beloved, to use the language of the *ghazal*—were being conducted.

Carl Schmitt's influential idea of political theology is famously concerned with the nature of the modern state: All key concepts of the modern state are secularized theological concepts, such as the sovereign's God-like ability to declare the exception to the law.[18] By gesturing toward a political theology of selfhood, I am pointing to a very different relation of the theological to the political, one in which the cultivation of virtuous selves, rather than control of the state, is the *telos* of the *polis*.

As Wael Hallaq has noted, "Unlike the modern citizen, largely a product of the state, the [premodern] Muslim subject was produced by nonstate socioethical formations."[19] These interrelated socioethical formations and forms of knowledge included (but were not limited to) theology, mathematics, poetry, Sharia, and Sufism. "However different the approach and even the subject matter," Hallaq notes, "the desideratum constituted a common denominator, namely, the cultivation of the individual as a moral subject. This cultivation, far from being an *externally* imposed system of 'training the subject,' was designed to operate *internally*, through deliberate and self-conscious choices of conduct and belief that the autonomous subject exercises upon his or her body and soul."[20]

Many of the nonstate socioethical formations and forms of knowledge of premodern Muslim societies were profoundly and often destructively transformed

by the impacts of colonial modernity, as was the case in South Asia. However, Urdu ghazal poetry, with its formal and thematic continuities with the premodern habitus and its modes of self-exploration and self-cultivation, embodies and carries forward the inherited ethical plenitude of the Muslim subject.[21] This is a point I will expand on throughout the book, but for now it will suffice to say that Urdu poetry, rather than being marginal to or separate from Muslim discourse, played a crucial and central role in contemporary South Asia, serving as the critical edge of tradition at a moment of grave social and political crisis. Tracking the public and intimate lives of Urdu poetry, as I do in this book, thus allows me to tell a cohesive story of the remarkably diverse theological, ethical, and political experiments that Indian Muslims have been carrying out in urban North India in the face of a deeply Islamophobic regime. Three key terms are important to this story, terms from the Urdu poetic tradition dense with conceptual and affective valences: *muhabbat, wehshat*, and *junun*.

Muhabbat indicates a capacious understanding of love and the cultivation of relations far beyond (but not exclusive of) romantic love; *wehshat* is the state of savagery and frenzy brought upon the soul through ordeals (*bala'/ibtila'*), including the trials of love; and *junun* is a state of divine love-madness, a state that moves one to act in ways unconstrained by any rational or pragmatic calculus. Each of these terms in the Urdu poetic universe simultaneously indexes an affective state, a stage of the soul's spiritual journey, and a guide to ethical being in the world.

Muhabbat

The beautiful twenty-five-foot-high mural was painted on the side of a building in Shaheen Bagh as a celebration of the women-led protests against the CAA that originated in this neighborhood and became a part of its life for over three months. The mural, by artist Shilo Shiv Suleman and other members of the Fearless Collective, shows two old women in traditional Muslim dress, their heads covered, one of them holding a copy of the Indian constitution. One woman's speech bubble says, in Hindi/Devnagari script, "*ishq inqalab*" (love [is a] revolution); the other's says, "*muhabbat zindabad*" (long live love). Words of love uttered by old Muslim women not only enframe the constitution but *enliven* it. The mural powerfully expresses a common sense I encountered throughout my time with Muslims in India: Without the affect and practice of *muhabbat* between individuals and communities, the constitutional guarantee of equality for all religious communities had neither meaning nor efficacy.

What, then, is *muhabbat*? In the ways that I encountered the term in India, *muhabbat* was not just love as feeling, but love as practice: practices of making, nurturing, and sacralizing a diversity of relations far beyond cisgender heterosexual couplehood. *Muhabbat* was the practice of love between diverse communities, and not just within communities. It was an understanding of love very different from that of right-wing nationalist groups where, as Sara Ahmed shows, love of

FIGURE 1. Shaheen Bagh mural by the Fearless Collective, image courtesy Wikimedia Commons, February 2020.

the community (the white race/Hindus) is closely tied to the passionate generation of hatred, because others (racial minorities/Muslims), by their very presence, are seeing as violating the phantasmic purity of the imagined community.[22]

As the enframing of the constitution by poetic words for love shows, here we see the "politicization of love" that bell hooks called for, "loving practice . . . as the primary way we end domination and oppression."[23] Such an understanding of *muhabbat*/love as political practice has a long history in South Asian Muslim political thought, perhaps best expressed in the thirteenth-century *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* (Nasirean ethics) of Khwaja Nasir-ud-Din Tusi, a text central to Mughal norms of governance and political culture: "Justice (*ʿadl*) leads to artificial union, whereas love (*muhabbat*) generates natural unity. . . . The artificial comes after the natural, and thus it is obvious that the need for justice, which is the most accomplished human virtue, is because of the absence of love. If love among the people were available, justice would not have been needed."[24]

As the Indian state increasingly moved beyond even its formal commitment to justice, I witnessed a remarkable diversity of conversation, literary and artistic innovation, and ethical and political experimentation being carried out by Indian Muslims: the praxis of *muhabbat*. The most well-known of these collective

experiments, if I can so characterize it, is the women-led sit-in at Shaheen Bagh, where for a hundred days, thousands of women and men and children occupied a stretch of highway in Delhi to protest the exclusionary Citizenship Amendment Act and the brutal police violence meted out to students of Jamia Millia Islamia, a storied Muslim institution, one of three central universities in Delhi, and a major center for Muslim intellectual life. Shaheen Bagh, a space created, nurtured, and maintained by the collective actions of Muslims, became a radically inclusive "temporary autonomous zone"[25] where many different experiments in democracy, pedagogy, intimacy, and solidarity were carried out across divides of religion, age, class, caste, gender, and sexual orientation that would have been considered insurmountable before.

The rethinking of intimacy was focal to the language and affects of Shaheen Bagh, and the vocabulary of love—*muhabbat*—was central not just there, but to a diverse range of Muslim activities in the years since 2014. Muslim historians, writing and speaking in English, Hindi, and Urdu, turned to the history of the later Mughals, particularly the history of the last Mughal sovereign, Bahadur Shah "Zafar," to illustrate the *muhabbat* that existed between Hindu and Muslim communities before colonial conquest.[26] Muslim activists organized interfaith *iftars* to help challenge misconceptions and ignorance about the community through hospitality and thus to foster new intimacies. Muslim filmmakers like Kabir Khan made films like *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* that questioned the divides between India and Pakistan, Hindu and Muslim, through the fostering of love in unusual circumstances, across the usual divides.[27] In *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, at Shaheen Bagh, and in the retelling of late Mughal histories, *muhabbat* implied not a conventional or taken-for-granted account of love and relationality but a transformative force. It had the potential to overturn the order of the usual, making possible entirely new intimacies and forms of belonging.

As I show in chapter 4, the rediscovery and massive popularity of the poetry of Jaun Elia (1931–2002) brought into public consciousness a way of belonging to the geography of India different from the militant religious nationalism demanded by the state and the media. Jaun's poetry and biography embody an idea of *watan* (or homeland), an idea of localized belonging and topophilia that embraces intimacy with radically different others with whom one shares a home. Activist collectives like United Against Hate brought together broad coalitions of Muslim and non-Muslim groups and individuals ranging from the "Islamist" Jamaʿat-e Islami to left-wing and Ambedkarite student groups to create and sustain spaces of dissent. Muslim politicians and activists made common cause with Dalit activists and took on board Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar's (1891–1956) ideas and rhetoric against deeply ingrained social hierarchies and exclusions. The most prominent of these politicians is Asaduddin Owaisi, whose political speeches are full of the language of *muhabbat* and *junun*, and whose party has put forward Dalit candidates for elections and allied with parties representing other marginalized groups.

He aims to "shake up the political equilibrium which has forever taken Muslims for granted."[28]

Wehshat

A popular song from the 2015 Hindi film *Masaan* begins with lines from the poet Dushyant:

> *Tu kisi rel si guzarti hai, main kisi pul sa thartharata hun*
> You pass like a train, I tremble like a bridge

In October 2018, with a droll grin and a deadpan voice, a friend recited a parody of that line as we were hanging out in his apartment:

> *Tu kisi gaʾe si guzarti hai, main muslim sa thartharata hun*
> You pass like a cow, I tremble like a Muslim

My friend's transformation of a beautiful expression of longing and desire into a fragment of absurdity and terror captures much about those days. Muslims now had—and continue to have—good reason to be afraid of passing cows. Every few days the headlines disclosed "beef lynchings" of Muslim men. These first came to prominence with the mob murder of Muhammad Akhlaq in 2015 for the alleged crime of killing a cow and storing the meat in in his fridge. Between May 2015 and December 2018, at least forty-four people had been killed by state-abetted vigilante *gaurakshak* (cow protector) groups.[29] A seventeen-year-old madrasa student, Junaid Khan, was murdered on a crowded commuter train after being called a beef eater on the day before Eid-ul-Fitr in 2017. Then, there was Yogi Adityanath.

After the BJP had won a massive electoral victory, Yogi Adityanath was appointed to the position of Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (UP)—India's most populous and electorally significant state, with a 20 percent Muslim population—in September 2017, despite not even being on the ballot or part of the campaign for state assembly elections that year. This sent a clear signal to Indian Muslims, especially those living in UP. Adityanath, who had hitherto been in the political wilderness because of criminal violence and publicly professed genocidal Islamophobia, now held the most powerful political office in the most electorally important state in India, a clear signal that hatred of and discrimination and violence against Muslims was going to be institutionalized and rewarded.

By 2018, in BJP-ruled states, pretty much all forms of Muslim public presence were an invitation for trouble, including public Friday prayers, which were disrupted and then criminalized in Delhi's satellite city of Gurgaon that summer.[30] An eight-year-old Muslim girl was raped and murdered in a temple in the Hindu-dominated part of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, and the (Hindu-dominated) Jammu Bar Association engaged in a public protest in support of the accused, marching under the Indian national tricolor.[31] There was the circulation of toxic Islamophobia masquerading as historical fact on WhatsApp

forwards. There was casual Islamophobia—including insults to the Prophet Muhammad—being normalized in corporate offices. There was the fraying of lifelong friendships between Hindus and Muslims. It was relentless, it was never-ending, it was every day, it was exhausting.[32]

Not surprisingly, anxiety disorders spiked among Muslims.[33] One night, as I sat in a friend's Unani and Ayurvedic medicine shop in Jafrabad in Northeast Delhi, a dense industrial, residential, and predominantly Muslim neighborhood, he showed me a bottle of a syrup called Neurin. The package said that it was a cure for "Insomnia, Nervous Irritability, Tension, and Anxiety Neurosis." Sales have gone up a lot, he told me. He himself was recovering from a violent mob attack that the police had refused to register as a hate crime—this despite the fact that the mob had ascertained his Muslim identity before attacking him—and that had left with him severe injuries, including a broken arm.

. . .

What many Muslims were feeling in those days was encompassed, in the Urdu poetic vocabulary, by the term *wehshat*. In Platts's dictionary, *wehshat* (transliterated as *wahshat*) is defined as "A desert, solitude, dreary place;—loneliness, solitariness, dreariness;—sadness, grief, care;—wildness, fierceness, ferocity, savageness; barbarity, barbarism;—timidity, fear, fright, dread, terror, horror;—distraction, madness."[34] *Wehshat* is a *hal*, a state, greatly elaborated in Urdu poetry. It carries the connotations of uncanniness, of being feral, frenzy and violence. In the understanding of the poets, *wehshat* is a state generated by trials and afflictions (*bala'/ ibtila'*), especially the trials of love (*muhabbat*). It is a state and stage of the soul that comes before *junun*, which I translate as divine love-madness.

What is *wehshat*? One evening in November 2018, I ran into some of young Urdu poets at one of their regular haunts, an open-air café in central Delhi, and I asked them this question. Abhinandan responded with two couplets of a ghazal by Faiz, which was a translation of a Persian ghazal by Iqbal:

> *hawas-e manzil- e layla nah tujhe hai nah mujhe*
> *tab-e sargarmi-e sehra nah tujhe hai nah mujhe*
> *chhoriye yusuf-e gumgashtah ki kya bat karen*
> *shiddat-e shauq-e zulaykha na tujhe hai na mujhe*
> The inordinate desire for the encampment of Layla, neither you have nor I
> The endurance for wandering the desert, neither you have nor I
> Leave speaking of the lost Yusuf
> The intensity of the passion of Zulaykha, neither you have nor I

These two couplets, Abhinandan said, gave the best approximation of his understanding of *wehshat*. The first couplet is a reference to the story of Layla and Majnun, in which Majnun wanders the burning desert, searching for the caravan and campsite of his lost beloved Layla. As Shahab Ahmed tells us,

> The 'real' Majnun was a poet who lived in the first century of Islam by the name of Qays from the tribe of Banu ʿAmir . . . who fell in love with a woman called Layla. Layla was unattainable, and so great was Qays's love for her that he became possessed by his love, went mad, and spent his life traversing the desert in search of her caravan. . . . Majnun was cast as the hero of the epic of his love for Layla—an epic that was told and retold in the poetry of the languages of the Balkans to Bengal complex.[35]

The second two lines of the couplet refer to the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha, found in Surah Yusuf of the Quran, and later elaborated on by Sufi poets, most famously by the fifteenth-century Persian poet and Sufi master Abdur-Rahman Jami (c. 1414–1492). In the Quran, Yusuf (Joseph)—lost to his father because of the stratagems of his jealous brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt—comes to reside in the house of Zulaykha (unnamed in the Quran, called "Potiphar's wife" in the biblical narrative), as the slave of her husband. Enraptured by his beauty, Zulaykha tries to seduce him. Initially he desires her too, but he remembers God and repels her advances. When he tries to run away from her, Zulaykha tears his shirt. Later, she attempts to frame Yusuf for having tried to seduce her, but the fact of Yusuf's shirt being torn from behind exposes her lie. When gossip spreads among the ladies of the city about Zulaykha's attempt to seduce her own servant, she invites the ladies to a banquet at her house and gives them each a knife to cut fruit with. She asks Yusuf to enter. Awed by his beauty, the women miss the fruit and cut themselves instead.

We can understand the Zulaykha of the Quran, following the understanding of the poets, as a figure of *wehshat*: she is so obsessed with Yusuf's physical beauty that, breaking with normative morality, she tries to seduce him despite being married, even violently ripping his shirt as he resists. Her passion is so overwhelming that she is willing to hurt Yusuf, threatening him with imprisonment for not acceding to her wishes. The ladies of the city, judgmental about the intensity of Zulaykha's passion, quickly learn at their own first astonished sight of him that she has good reason.

In the Quranic narrative, Yusuf prefers to go to prison rather than be further subject to Zulaykha's attempts at seduction. Years later, when Yusuf reemerges from prison, after successfully interpreting the king's dream, Zulaykha testifies to his innocence. Here her role in the Quranic story ends; the narrative is now concerned with Yusuf's success as the keeper of the king's treasure and storehouses, and his reconciliation with his brothers and his reunification with his father and natal family. But even in her brief appearance in the Quran after Yusuf's imprisonment—her testimony, "Now the truth has come to light. It was I who sought to lure him from himself, and verily he is among the truthful"[36]—we see Zulaykha's spiritual development.

> Some [Quranic] commentators understand that at this juncture in the story, her love for Joseph had grown so strong that it had surpassed her own self-interest, and so

> she spoke the truth about him. The narrative indicates that there was a progression in the degrees of her love in Zulaykha's own soul and therefore in her spiritual journey. Her initial attraction to Joseph was purely sensual, but by this point in the narrative she had overcome her lower self, and her infatuation with Joseph's physical beauty had now been transformed into a spiritual love in which she is able to see Joseph's inward beauty.[37]

In Jami's romance *Yusuf and Zulaykha*, the story of Zulaykha continues as an allegory of the soul's journey toward union with the divine. Zulaykha's husband dies, and she loses all her earthly possessions, including her beauty and her sight. She has now entered the state of madness (*junun*), to use the vocabulary of the poets, having expended all the frenzied violence that characterized her earlier passion of Yusuf and moved beyond the realm of merely physical attraction. Although she has lost the vision with which she beheld Yusuf's physical beauty, she continues to yearn for him. Zulaykha finally breaks the idol she is praying to and prays to God to restore her sight so she can look upon Yusuf. Yusuf and Zulaykha are united, in a divinely sanctioned marriage, and her beauty and her sight are restored.

Jami's elaboration of the Quranic story, hugely influential for the Urdu poetic tradition, allows us to see the *wehshat* of Zulaykha's passion for Yusuf not as sinful or negative—as an exoteric reading of the Quran would have it[38]—but as a necessary stage of the soul's journey toward *junun*, the highest stage of love. Iqbal and Faiz, in Persian and Urdu, write of the intensity of Zulaykha's passion—with its violence, rule-breaking, and destructive potential—as an aspirational state.

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As I explore in chapter 1, *wehshat* is also what you feel when you love a country like Zulaykha loved Yusuf, and the country doesn't love you back. Wehshat is the *hal*, the state that drives one, like Majnun, to wander in the wilderness, to be restless, to be unable to be at home in the city, in civilization. Indian Muslims have been increasingly made to feel not at home and unloved not just by the Hindu right, but even by the secular liberal Hindus who ostensibly support them, and who repeatedly betray their lack of knowledge of Islam, and their skepticism about Muslim religiosity. As Mayanthi Fernando has observed in relation to republican France, In India too, liberal secular discourse continues to "figure the Muslim as a subject in need of secularization."[39] In one telling example, the historian Ramachandra Guha, in an op-ed in *The Indian Express*, equated the *trishul*—the trident used as both symbol and weapon by the Hindu nationalist right—with the burqa, a garment chosen by Muslim women to cultivate and express the Islamic value of modesty: "Many people, this writer among them, object to Hindus flaunting saffron robes and *trishuls* at rallies. While a burka may not be a weapon, in a symbolic sense it is akin to a trishul. It represents the most reactionary, antediluvian aspects of the faith. To object to its display in public is a mark not of intolerance,

but of liberalism and emancipation."[40] For Indian Muslims, the public rhetoric and performance of anti-Muslim hate along with betrayals that felt more personal and intimate—including liberal ignorance, condescension, and skepticism—led to a feeling of *wehshat*, of frenzy, of needing to violently act out, and yet that feeling was contained, internalized. And when people spoke of both this *wehshat*, and not acting on it, it was as if they were standing beside themselves, amazed—*hairan*, in a state of *hairat* (wonder)—at being able to tolerate all of this and not explode.

Looked at from the perspective of security studies, such conditions of oppression and alienation were incubators for radical violence by Muslims. Why haven't Indian Muslims become radicalized? At least one think-tank session I attended in Delhi asked this question, puzzled by the lack of Indian Muslim militant violence in the face of oppression. It wasn't the only one. Looked at from the perspective of psychology, Muslims were victims of trauma. Seen from the perspective of poetry—all of this *wehshat* was a stage, a *maqam*, in a journey of askesis, a prelude to the state of *junun*: of inhabiting a state of divine love-madness which overturns all givens of self and society and makes a world anew. As an ethnographer, it was the third frame that allowed me to fully comprehend and do any justice to what I was witnessing unfold around me. For while the potential and actualization of violence and savagery are definitionally constitutive of *wehshat*, the widespread affect of *wehshat* in extremely trying times did not lead to acts of public violence committed by Muslims or to an apathetic disengagement from public life. Rather, it was contained and channeled into forms of artistic expression, poetic speech, and political action that were constructive rather than destructive, imagining and bringing into being new worlds. The violence of *wehshat* was turned from frenzy into divine madness, *junun*, the manic art of predicting the future by inventing it.[41]

Junun

In April 2018, I met Shah Ain-ul-Haidar *sahab*, the *sajjadah-nashin* (custodian) of the Kakori Sharif *dargah* (Sufi hospice) in a small *qasba* about thirty kilometers outside of Lucknow. Ain-ul-Haidar *sahab* sports a trimmed mustache and long white beard, and I have only ever seen him dressed in a white kurta pajama and traditional *topi* (brimless cap). In other words, he is the picture, we could say, of Islamic orthodoxy, or to be more precise, a particular stringency of following the *sunnat* or example of the Prophet and his companions. I was there with a dozen or so men and women from Kakori and surrounding areas, whose ailments and complaints he was treating by offering firm commonsense advice and writing out Quranic *t'awiz*.[42]

I, too, was looking for a cure. When he asked me why I'd come, I explained that I was trying to understand how Muslims in India were responding to the *halat*, to contemporary conditions. Many of the people who come to you, I said, must be *mayus*—despondent, hopeless, desperate. Confronted by what was happening to my country, I had become all of these things.

He responded, "*India men abhi bahut jagah se halat bahut behtar hain*" (Things are still relatively better in India than in many other places). Look at Syria, he said. He talked about his own experiences of traveling in Iraq, when the government wouldn't give them permission to travel from Baghdad to Samarra because it was too dangerous. Where despite all precautions their car was shot at, and where someone in the car ahead of theirs in a convoy had died. And as for *mayusi* (despair), he said, "*mayusi to karb hai*" (Despair is an affliction). "*Log ate hain, ham logon ko hausla dete hain*" (People come to us and we give them courage).

All of this was spoken in front of other morning visitors sitting in attendance in his meeting room. I was not the only addressee of Ain-ul-Haidar *sahab*'s speech. He went on to say, "*mazi ko bhul jana chahiʾe*" (We should forget the past). "*Hal hai aur mustaqbil hai*" (We have the present and the future), and things, he reiterated, are still relatively better in India than in most other places in the world. He then quoted Iqbal:

> *yaqin muhkam ʿamal paiham muhabbat fateh-e ʿalam*
> *jihad-e zindagani men hain yeh mardon ki shamshiren*
> Firm conviction, continuous striving, world conquering love
> In the struggle of life, these are the swords of men

There are two things in the world, he said: "*Nafrat aur muhabbat*" (Hate and love). "*Nafrat shaitan se ati hai, ham Allah ke bande hain*" (Hate comes from the Devil, we are the servants of God). He then recited this *shʿer*, which he said was Majrooh Sultanpuri's:

> *mujh se kaha jibril-e junun ne yeh bhi wahy-e ilahi hai*
> *mazhab to bas mazhab-e dil hai baqi sab gumrahi hai*
> The Gabriel of Madness said to me, this too is divine revelation
> Religion is only the religion of the heart, all else is going astray

Jibril-e junun. The Gabriel of Madness. Gabriel, of course, is the angel who revealed the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. Shah *sahab* said, "The maulvis will ask, *jibril-e amin ko jibril-e junun kyon kaha hai*?" (Why has [he] called "The Faithful Gabriel"—as the archangel is usually referred to in the Islamic tradition—the "Gabriel of Madness"?) "*Par junun to muhabbat ki intiha hai*," Shah *sahab* continued: "But madness is the extreme limit of love."

In response to questions about politics, Shah Ain-ul-Haidar *sahab* responded with poetry, and what was expressed in this poetry was deeply theological. In Majrooh Sultanpuri's *shʿer*, the same angel who brought revelation to the Prophet Muhammad speaks to the poet. If authority is central to the constitution and unfolding of the discursive tradition of Islam,[43] then here we see poetry as Islamically authoritative discourse, speaking with the authority of revelation. This is not surprising. Poetry has a long history of being considered meaningfully Islamic discourse because of its ongoing relation to the potentialities of revelation, or what

Shahab Ahmed characterizes as the *Pre-text* of revelation to the Prophet.[44] But, in Shah Ain-ul-Haidar *sahab*'s account, the authority that the poet draws upon operates in a fundamentally different mode than the authority of the *maulvi*, the male figure of Islamic learning who is the usual picture of authority in both academic and commonsense understandings of Islamic tradition.[45] Rather than the Gabriel remembered in scholarly tradition, who faithfully transmits divine revelation to the Prophet, it is the Gabriel of madness (*junun*) who brings revelation to the poet. And madness, in Shah Ain-ul-Haidar *sahab*'s response to a question about contemporary politics, is the extreme limit of love (*muhabbat*). How might we understand this gnomic political theology?

In Arabic, madness is associated with possession by and trafficking with spirits known as jinn. To be mad is to be *majnun*—possessed by the jinn. It is a term we find in the Quran, responding to and reporting the speech of the Meccan unbelievers, who used the term to suggest that the Prophet Muhammad was possessed, and to discredit the revelation brought by him. In Majrooh's *shʿer*, rather than being associated with jinn, *junun* is associated with angelic inspiration—with the very same angel that brought revelation to the Prophet. Madness is divine. It is not medicalized mental illness, as it became in Western epistemology,[46] and it is not demonic possession. It is rather an exalted state, akin to the way Socrates speaks of divine madness in Plato's *Phaedrus*. What might this state of *junun* mean for contemporary Muslim ethical and political life in India?

Late one night, on the eve of India's Independence Day in 2018, I was sitting outside Best Bakery in New Seelampur, Northeast Delhi, drinking butter coffee with friends. The Best Bakery in Delhi, opened in 2003, is named after the Best Bakery in Gujarat that was burned down with fourteen people inside during a 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom. All around us, the neighboring stalls selling glass bangles in the three colors of the Indian national flag were closing down after doing brisk business all day: It is a tradition among Muslim women in Delhi to wear these tricolor bangles on Independence Day. On his phone, my friend showed us an image circulating on Muslim WhatsApp groups of an Indian Muslim woman wrapped in the same three colors of the Indian flag, praying in front of the Kaaba in Mecca. The hajj was ongoing. *Divane to divane hain* (The ones who are crazy are crazy), he commented. He said it with admiration.

We sipped coffee outside a shop named for one burned down in a genocidal pogrom. The person on whose watch the pogrom had unfolded was now the Prime Minister of the country, and accusations of Muslim disloyalty to the nation were the staple of prime-time television. In that context, to express love for the country at the literal center of one's faith, to drape oneself in the colors of India in front of the Kaaba during the hajj, was crazy, in the sense of being entirely unreasonable. It was crazy for Muslims to express such love for a country that hated them so much. But Muslims loved their country passionately anyway: because they were crazy. *Musalaman to jununi hote hain* (Muslims are mad/passionate), a dear friend

said to me, about his decision to fast during Ramadan minus a gallbladder. In that moment, I remembered what Ain-ul-Haidar *sahab* had said: *Junun to muhabbat ki intiha hai* (Madness is the extreme limit of love).[47]

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Majrooh Sultanpuri's *shʿer* stuck with me for several months after that encounter. When invited to speak in public, as sometimes happens when your professional identity is that of a professor who teaches at an American university, I would often find myself quoting this *shʿer*, emulating the tradition of poetic quotation in Urdu public discourse and literature. I did this, for instance, at a joint Shia-Sunni *iftar* on the rooftop of a hotel in Old Delhi, with a grand view of the domes and courtyard of the magnificent seventeenth-century Jama Masjid.

The Shia-Sunni *iftar* was held in June 2018, during the month of Ramadan, in response to a news story that had been given much TV airtime: A stamped, handwritten fatwa from the Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband, a major and influential Sunni seminary, opined that it was not advisable for Sunnis to eat with Shias. A day or two after the story broke, on a Sunday, a joint Shia-Sunni *iftar* had been announced, organized by a coalition of Muslim journalists, media professionals, community leaders, and social activists. I was there to witness the event and speeches, but with five minutes notice, I was called upon to speak. I introduced myself to the gathering of about a hundred people as an anthropologist who was here to study the ethics that Muslims were choosing in the time of Hindutva. I have nothing to say, I added, because I am here to learn from all of you, and what I see is that you are countering a politics of hatred with love. Then I recited the *shʿer*. There were many *wah wah*s of appreciation from the audience. One person loudly exclaimed, "*SubhanAllah*."

SubhanAllah translates as "Glory be to God." It is not a lightly used exclamation in everyday speech, usually indicating a high degree of wonder. In *mushaʿirah*s, for example, it is used only for a *shʿer* of a certain excellence and also aptness—a way in which it captures, and perhaps even gives new meanings to, the collective mood of the audience. Which is to say that the *shʿer* I had recited had been judged to be appropriate for the moment, a joint Shia-Sunni *iftar* to be followed shortly by a collective sunset prayer in which Shia and Sunni men and women would pray together behind a Shia imam. Where, in the face of a conservative and potentially divisive Muslim legal opinion, a very different idea of Muslim unity was being articulated, one characterized by challenging the order of the usual.

If the inspiration of the Gabriel of madness—*junun*—was considered an apt characterization of the event by those who were its organizers and participants, what might that tell us about their understanding of *junun*? This madness too was characterized by a loss of reason, but being marked by angelic inspiration, it was not medicalized or demonic, but rather generative. The event was marked by *junun* because it heralded a loss or breaking of conventional reason, the usual

calculus of doing things.[48] Madness had positive value, because it heralded a positive ethical shift, in the same ways that the revelation brought to the Prophet heralded a theological and ethical paradigm shift for Meccan society—a message that those committed to the status quo dismissed as madness.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says, "Madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human."[49] *Phaedrus* links madness to the art of foretelling the future: "But this at least is worth pointing out, that the men of old who gave things their names saw no disgrace or reproach in madness; otherwise they would not have connected it with the name of the noblest of all arts, the art of discerning the future, and called it the *manic* art."[50] The *junun* of much Muslim activism in India in the years of the Modi regime, like the Socratic account of divine madness, was oriented toward the future. The new forms of *muhabbat*, of love, community, and relationality that were being experimented with, were looking for future potentials for Muslim belonging in India, different from the present, where Muslims were being moved from marginalization to exclusion.[51] In Delhi and Lucknow and Aligarh, young people moved from the *wehshat* they undoubtedly felt after the CAA rendered being Muslim as a disqualifier for acquiring Indian citizenship, and after the brutal police attacks on the campuses of Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University, to the divine madness of Shaheen Bagh, where Muslim women and men created a unique space of solidarity and the rethinking of love and made possible a reimagination of India and what it means to belong to this place. A wise friend called Shaheen Bagh *Protest Sharif* (the exalted protest), using an honorific commonly used for sacred spaces, like Muslim *dargahs* or saint shrines.

THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF HINDUSTAN

To think of madness as divinely inspired, rather than as a medicalized diagnosis, is to think of *junun* as an exalted state, one that can only be attained through practices of askesis, of ethical self-formation.[52] You gotta earn the crazy. What are the practices and resources through which Indian Muslims, in the years between 2014 and 2020, moved from the *wehshat* they were feeling to the divine creative madness of *junun*? In this book I explore the everyday acts of askesis, of ethical practice and spiritual formation—in mosques, in neighborhood conversations, and in art and poetry—that contained and channeled the destructive potentials of *wehshat*. This necessitates an engagement with Indian Muslim traditions of living with plurality that are central to Muslim ideas of belonging to a multicultural India but have often been suppressed and obfuscated by the rhetoric of "Indian secularism."[53] As Saba Mahmood writes in the conclusion to her book *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*,

> Secularism as a statist project exerts inordinate power on our political imagination, most evident in our inability to envision religious equality without the agency of

> the state. . . . How can we expect the modern state to ameliorate religious inequality when . . . its institutions and practices hierarchize religious differences, enshrine majoritarian religious and cultural norms in the nation's identity and laws, and allow for religious inequalities to flourish in society while declaring them to be apolitical?[54]

What I came to realize as an ethnographic witness, and what I aim to show in this book, is that the resources and dispositions for the "critical practice of pluralism"—to use Mahmood's phrasing—arise for Indian Muslims from a deep engagement with the discursive traditions and practices of Islam, and not in opposition to it. In a public address to a crowd gathered at the steps of the historic Jama Masjid in Delhi, at an event to celebrate Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's 130th birth anniversary on the evening of November 11, 2018, Professor Akhtarul Wasey, president of the Maulana Azad University in Jodhpur and a major Islamic scholar, said, "*Yeh mulk mera* motherland *aur* fatherland *hai kyonkih adam ko jannat se nikalkar hindustan bheja gaya tha*" (This country is my motherland and fatherland because Adam was sent to India after being expelled from paradise). This brief statement is dense with tradition and meaning. The term that Professor Wasey used to refer to India—*Hindustan*—is not just a Hindi-Urdu equivalent for India, but a term that carries a very different conceptual and affective history, deeply linked to the Indo-Persian historical tradition. This idea of Hindustan "as a concept, an idea, and a place that contains multitudes of faiths and polities"[55] that was also a beloved Muslim homeland, was among other things, a theological one. Wasey's articulation of Muslim belonging in India being ancient, and sanctified by prophetic precedent, is one that, as Manan Ahmed Asif shows, has precedents in texts going back to at least the eighteenth century, where Hindustan is referred to as *jannat nishan* (the sign of heaven).[56] This long theological history of Muslim belonging in India informs the contemporary political vision of Indian Muslims, their engagement with the system of government and politics they inhabit. In the same speech Professor Wasey also said, "*Main sarkar ka nahin, samvidhan ka wafadar hun. Is mulk se mera rishta kirayah-dar ka nahin hai, malik ka hai, aur barabari ka hissah hai*" (I am not loyal to the government, but to the Constitution. My relationship to this country is not one of a tenant, but of a proprietor with an equal share).

Akhtarul Wasey's speech is just one example of what became abundantly clear during the anti-CAA protests, where, as in Akeel Bilgrami's astute observation, Indian Muslims were bringing together the legal secularism of the Indian constitution with an idea of multireligious flourishing that flows from "the pluralist traditions of Indian Islam."[57] The coming together of Islamic traditions and a movement for the defense of a secular constitution has undoubtedly been surprising. When we think of the coming together of religion and politics, we think of conservatism and social control. We think of evangelists pushing for abortion restrictions, we think of the excesses of the "Islamic State" (not just in Iraq and Syria), we think of the Hindu nationalist obsession with policing "love jihad." We do not think of

Adam's descent from heaven as legitimating Muslim belonging in India, and we do not think of the astonishing energies and visions emerging from Shaheen Bagh.

This is in part a problem of the imagination. To stay with Saba Mahmood's argument, the modern state exerts inordinate power on our political and moral imaginations. We cannot imagine what public ethics might look like without its coercive and disciplinary power. What does Muslim politics look like when the Islamic state is not the end goal of political and ethical aspiration? We do not even ask the question. As the global rise of intolerance at this moment shows us, comfortably living with religious and ethnic differences is not a given, even in secular states that mandate a banishment of religion from the public sphere. To live well with others mandates work on the self. Where might we turn then for traditions of coexistence that are not dependent on state fiat but on the cultivation of selves who are comfortable with difference? For Indian Muslims this moment has meant a renewed interest in and return to the political and ethical thought of early twentieth-century Indian Muslim thinkers and anticolonial activists like "Hasrat" Mohani (1875–1951), Muhammad Ali "Jauhar" (1878–1931), Abul Kalam "Azad" (1888–1958), and Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890–1988),[58] to name just the figures engaged with in this book. These are figures whose lives and thought and understandings of Islam were of a plenitude unconstrained by either their colonial contexts, or by the postcolonial nation-state, and whose thought was often concerned with the question of how Muslims in India were to live well with others, in the context of Muslims being minorities in Hindu-majority India and in the absence of Muslim sovereignty.

In this book, I explore the Muslim understanding of democratic politics in India in which minority is not just a governmental category, but also simultaneously a morally agentive category. As I explore in chapter 7, such a moral and agentive understanding of Muslims as minorities can be found in the writings of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), a major Indian Muslim thinker and leader. Through interactions with members of United Against Hate, an activist coalition against Hindu nationalist violence, and with the Muslim Member of Parliament Asaduddin Owaisi, I show that Azad's political theologies and political strategies still serve as a valuable resource for understanding and performing the role of a morally agentive minority.

This has also been a moment of deep Muslim engagement with Hinduism, as I show in chapter 5, not only because many Muslims are deeply familiar with Hindu scripture and mythology—a legacy of Hindustan—but also because they feel an urgent need to engage in a conversation with Hindu ethics. This is a conversation they feel is necessary for shared *Indian* public life. There is a growing understanding among Indian Muslims that it is not the impartial arbitration of a supposedly "secular" state that acts as a safeguard for minority communities in India. Rather, it is the *dharma* (in the sense of ethics) that communities choose to act by that determines the nature of Indian society. As the majority community,

the *dharma* that Hindus choose to adopt—the ethical choices they make as a collective—is understood as crucial to the future of the country, and to Muslim belonging in it. Many Muslims, from Deobandi scholars to Bollywood filmmakers, are thus urgently engaged in conversations with and about Hindu *dharma*. These conversations are profoundly important not just for imagining a nonmajoritarian practice of pluralism in India, but given the global failure of secularism as a statist project in bringing about religious equality, important for all of us to move past what Mahmood characterizes as "Our (not just Egyptians') collective incapacity to imagine a politics that does not treat the state as the arbiter of majority-minority relations."[59]

. . .

Where in this book, it might be asked, is there room for those Muslims who are not interested in the political theology of Hindustan? Where is there room for those who are suspicious of the invocation of *Ganga Jamuni Tehzib*—the civilization of the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, a long-standing shorthand for shared Hindu-Muslim culture and civility—as barely disguised majoritarianism that offers Muslim inclusion only through the erasure of Muslim difference? Where is there room for those who find the "secularism" of Muslim protestors welcoming non-Muslims to their protest sites as "cringe," to borrow the phrasing of one disillusioned Muslim student participant in the anti-CAA protests? Where is there room for someone like Sharjeel Imam, the Muslim student activist who was one of the pioneers of the Shaheen Bagh protest (though he left the protest site after its initial weeks)? Imam was vocally critical of Abul Kalam Azad for his politics of friendship and conciliation toward Hindus during the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement of the 1920s, particularly on the issue of cow-slaughter, which he sees as paving the way for Hindu majoritarian sensibilities policing Muslim lives today.[60]

In this book, especially in its first chapter—by focusing on a moment where different Muslim activist groups with different sensibilities converged on the scene of a hate crime—I show the convergence and divergence between different strands of Muslim thinking and action in contemporary India. In thinking through the differences between Muslim political activists and ideologies in the contemporary moment, I do not wish to tell a narrative of "good" versus "bad" Muslim.[61] The hinge of difference I find is between those who emphasize the state and its institutions as the guarantor for religious equality, and thus address the state and its failures, versus those who emphasize the self and social relationality as the grounds for pluralist flourishing, and thus emphasize harmonious social relations and the cultivation of selves comfortable with difference.[62] Neither do I see these modes of political imagination and action as necessarily oppositional. They are complementary and often overlapping; those concerned with the self, for instance, are not unconcerned with the nature of the state, and vice versa.

Nevertheless, in this book, I privilege those who I see as engaged in the political theologies of the self, and relatedly, of Hindustan as a traditional place of multireligious flourishing. I do so for the following reasons. One, as an ethnographer I found that ideas of *muhabbat, watan*, and *Hindustan*—and the political and ethical orientations that arise from these dense concepts—were very widespread across a diverse spectrum of Muslim subjects. Not enough ethnographic attention has been paid to the everyday operation of these concepts, and the Muslim contribution to the creation and continued flourishing of India's lived pluralism has often been sidelined by invoking an essentialized Hindu tolerance. Second, I am a person deeply committed to multireligious flourishing and equality in India. This commitment comes from my childhood experience of growing up with Muslim friends and neighbors and classmates in Lucknow, of growing up in Hindustan, as it were. I also viscerally felt the cracking of this world by the politics that led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. Given all of this, I believe that the repair of intercommunal and interpersonal relations *grounded in religion* is far more durable ground for the recovery of lived pluralism, a conviction I have come to not just through my interlocutors, or through critiques of state secularism such as Saba Mahmood's, but also through witnessing the ways in which the (Indian) state deals with those who would "hail the state" as Muslims/religious minorities. This is not a tactical argument as much as it is a conceptual one, based on the inherent instability of state sovereignty as the grounds for moral flourishing for plural communities.[63]

Sharjeel Imam was arrested, and at the time of writing continues to be in jail, for a speech in which he called for a *chakka jam*, the stoppage of vehicular traffic, on the highway connecting Assam and the other Northeastern states to the rest of India through a narrow corridor or "chicken's neck" between Nepal and Bangladesh. The idea expressed in the speech was that the *chakka jam* would force the Indian state to listen to Muslim demands and stop the National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise in the state of Assam, which had already rendered millions of people stateless, and to repeal the CAA. In invoking the idea of a *chakka jam* as a way of getting the state to accede to the demands of its Muslim citizens, Imam was working within the accepted playbook of practices that Lisa Mitchell has characterized as "hailing the state,"[64] collective practices of occupying and obstructing public spaces by minority and/or marginalized groups for public recognition and voice, "working very much *within* accepted political structures and processes of engagement with the state and its elected representatives."[65] And yet, Imam was declared to be seditious and arrested as an enemy of the state. As one observer noted, he was jailed for being Muslim.[66]

The rendering of a Muslim citizen working toward recognition by the state through accepted processes of engagement with the state as an enemy is a fairly banal example of the sovereign exception of Schmittian political theology, which renders entire populations precarious and killable, without any normative

restraints.[67] As Hallaq notes, the exceptionality of modern state sovereignty is characteristic of the entire interrelated epistemology of modernity, based on the unbounded sovereignty of the will, which "exclude[s] external restraints or higher moral or ethical considerations."[68] It is no wonder then that as, SherAli Tareen notes, the seductive promises of modern secular power and state sovereignty are "frequently sour." He emphasizes the importance of imagining a horizon of interreligious and Hindu-Muslim friendship beyond state sovereignty and beyond what he terms the "pathological inheritances of imperial political theologies."[69] To imagine and make real such a horizon requires privileging work on the self and the social, not to the exclusion of the state but as the basis of its reimagining, and engaging with political theologies that privilege the self and the social in the promotion of pluralism, such as those that arose in the Mughal context.[70] As I have already indicated with reference to the Mughal *akhlaq* (ethics) tradition, these theologies worked through political and moral constraints even in contexts of domination.[71] They continue to be operative as part of the lived practice and political possibility of Hindustan, especially through the legacy of Urdu poetry.

SINGHAR-MEZ: OR, WHAT IS THE WORK THAT URDU DOES?

dekhna taqrir ki lazzat kih jo us ne kaha
maine yeh jana kih goya yeh bhi mere dil men hai
See the pleasure of his discourse that whatever he said
I felt as if this too is in my heart
—GHALIB (1797–1869)

In September 2018, a documentary screening was held in a small basement theater in an elite neighborhood in South Delhi. The documentary was about resettlement in the wake of the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots, and the screening marked the fifth anniversary of the riots, which saw the mass displacement of Muslims in the Western Uttar Pradesh countryside, where they had hitherto lived peaceably with their Hindu Jat neighbors. One of the discussants commenting on the movie was Apoorvanand, a professor of Hindi at Delhi University and one of the most vocal critics of Hindutva politics writing and speaking in Hindi. In his commentary, he moved from the eloquence of the testimonies of the riot survivors to the persistence of Urdu in India: "What they were saying was a kind of literature, it was poetry. They were speaking poetry (*voh shaʿiri bol rahe the*). The purpose of the violence—which was to snatch their humanity from them—remained unfulfilled. . . . In India Muslims have given refuge (*panah*) to Urdu and for this we should be grateful to them because Hindus have abandoned Urdu (*hinduon ne urdu ka sath chhor diya hai*)."

Urdu and Hindi are virtually identical at the level of everyday speech—they share the same grammar and largely overlapping vocabularies. However, the scripts are radically different, Urdu written in a modified form of the Arabo-Persian script and Hindi in Devanagari, as are the higher literary registers, vocabularies, tropes, and even affects invoked by the two languages. Even in an oral setting, like a *mushaʿirah* or a *kavi sammelan* (assemblies where poets read their poetry to audiences), it is easy to distinguish "Urdu" from "Hindi." Since the violent partition of the subcontinent on religious lines in 1947, Urdu has largely been identified with Muslims in India and has systematically been marginalized and treated with suspicion, as have Indian Muslims. Apoorvanand's comments mark a shift from thinking of Urdu as exclusively Muslim to thinking of Muslims as the custodians of a shared heritage that Hindus have forgotten but have the potential to reclaim.

When I asked the writer, translator, and literary historian Rakhshanda Jalil why Urdu poetry was becoming so popular again, she responded with the verse from Ghalib quoted at the beginning of this section, implying that people were becoming interested in Urdu poetry because it gave them a vocabulary to speak of their interiority, what was in their hearts. Jalil's observation was astute, for as I detail in chapter 2, many of those who were learning Urdu and writing in it spoke of how Urdu poetry gave them a new way of understanding, expressing, and inhabiting the complexity and subtlety of emotions. The erasure of Arabic and Persian words from official Hindi, and the absence of Urdu from most mainstream education, has rendered young North Indians inarticulate, deprived of an affective and philosophical vocabulary in which to speak of the self.[72] And so young people are flocking to *mushaʿirah*s, to programs celebrating and propagating Urdu, to workshops that teach the basics of Urdu script and vocabulary.

In May 2019, I attended a weekend Urdu learning workshop organized by Karvaan India in the Ghaffar Manzil neighborhood near Jamia Millia Islamia. When I was asking participants in the workshop about their reasons for attending, a woman student from Ambedkar University said: "*Mujhe aisa lag raha hai jaise urdu dil ki* language *hai* (It feels to me like Urdu is the language of the heart). Like from the few *ghazal*s or *nazm*s I've read, the words related to the heart, closeness, *qurbat* . . . and the names are endless . . . so you can understand human relationships through Urdu. *Insaniyat urdu men hai* (Humanness is in Urdu)." In her account, we get a sense of Urdu—particularly Urdu poetry—providing a vocabulary for understanding the complexity of human relationships, a vocabulary unavailable to her before in either English or Hindi. Urdu allowed her to understand and express the complexity of being human.

. . .

Anthropologists and linguists have long known that language affects cognition, cardinality, even our relation to time.[73] But can language transform our emotional landscape? Can language make us process and understand and respond to affect,

usually understood to be prelinguistic, differently? Ghalib's *shʿer* and (as I explore in chapter 2) Ghalib's reception in contemporary Delhi both resonate with emergent neuropsychological research that finds that language does not just communicate emotions but rather "that emotions occur when sensations are categorized using emotion category knowledge supported by language."[74] This research finds that increasing language accessibility enhances emotion perception and impairing language ability impairs emotion perception. What would it mean to think of the history of the loss and rediscovery of Urdu in contemporary India with this interpretive lens?

If Urdu and Hindi are grammatically, and to a very large extent lexically, the same language, then what is it that distinguishes Urdu from Hindi? There is, of course, the script, which connects Urdu to shared intelligibility (even if to a limited extent) with written Arabic and Persian, and to the language of Islamic revelation. There are the conceptual and affective vocabularies that Urdu inherits from Persian literary traditions, as well as Persianate poetic forms such as the ghazal. There is also the sound of Urdu, or in the words of the poet Farhat Ehsas, Urdu *dhvani*—a term which in Indian aesthetic theory also means suggestion, resonance, and deeper meanings beyond the denotative[75]—which he characterized in a conversation in August 2018 as "*desi apabhramsha pe farsi. woh farsi jo bilkul hamari ghutti men par gayi hai*" (Persian on native Apabhramsa. That Persian that's been part of our constitution from infancy). In describing Urdu as *dhvani*, Farhat Ehsas was also describing it as a mimetic archive that carries a certain linguistic and conceptual history: that of the evolution of Indo-Aryan languages away from Sanskrit into the literary Apabhramsa languages that preceded the rise of modern Indo-Aryan languages, and the addition of Persian to this mix through the history of administration by Persian-speaking groups, never exclusively Muslim, who indigenized much Persian vocabulary over centuries. In Sanskrit, *apabhramsha* means "corrupt" or "deviant," and in the Hindu nationalist imaginary, both the indigenized Persian vocabulary and the *tadbhava* sounds of words that deviated from *tatsama* Sanskrit originals—like *barkha* instead of *varsha* for rain—were seen as signs of corruption and impurity.

After Partition and Independence, when Hindi was chosen over Urdu as the official language of India in the Constituent Assembly, official Hindi—which became the language of government and of literary education—was increasingly marked by the extirpation of both Persian and *tadbhava* words and their wholesale replacement by *tatsama* words borrowed directly from classical Sanskrit.[76] What has this re-engineering of a language that has evolved over centuries meant for both public culture and inner life? In the name of recovering the purity and glories of a lost linguistic past, Hindi nationalism greatly inhibited the expressive potentialities of language in the present.[77] If language is crucial not just to the expression of emotion but for the experience of emotion itself, what were the individual, interior, emotional consequences of the political extirpation of language?

In the notes of my meeting with Rakhshanda Jalil, the word *singharmez* stands out. She was talking about the difficulty of bringing up her daughters in Gulmohar Park in posh South Delhi, where the default language of aspiration, social interaction, and reading is English. Hindi is the language you use to speak to those who serve you, mostly to give orders. "My elder daughter grew up speaking only Urdu at home. She used to call a dressing table *singhar-mez*, which is what we call it at home. And the kids in Gulmohar Park would laugh at her: What did you say?" Having grown up much like the kids in South Delhi that Jalil was referring to, the children of the country's anglophone elite, my school and college education and my exposure to literature being almost entirely in English, I had never heard the word *singhar-mez* before. But once I heard it, I was immediately struck by its beauty and power. Words make meanings not only denotatively but also connotatively, and a *singhar-mez* is affectively and conceptually a much richer object than the utilitarian English "dressing table." It combines the *tadbhava* word *singhar*, derived from the Sanskrit *shringara*—one of the nine primary *rasas* or aesthetic "flavors" in Indian aesthetic theory, the *rasa* associated with beauty and erotic love—with the Persian *mez* or table. Jalil's story was about the difficulty of being an Urdu speaker in a society largely estranged from Urdu. But here I want to think with her account of the difficulty of living without Urdu in a society where only two generations ago Urdu was the primary repository of emotions and concepts. To live in a world that only has dressing tables and no *singhar-mez* is to live in a world impoverished of *rasa*: a world drained of inherited aesthetic theory and emotional concepts, and hence experientially poorer.

One would thirst for language in such a world, and along with the rise of English as an Indian vernacular,[78] the desire to engage with Urdu poetry continued in North India, despite the absence of the ability to read the script. In Farhat Ehsas's account,

> A vacuum was created, and man wants *shaʿiri*. Fifteen or twenty years ago, Vani and Rajkamal [major Hindi publishers] translated a lot of Pakistani poets into the Devanagari script. At that time what was being presented as poetry in Hindi, it wasn't poetry, it was prose. So when people started reading ghazal poetry then they said, what is this? Your heart is pleased, and your mind is too. The way you are passing through situations in life is also being narrated. Through reading these transliterations, a path was opened, that language and speech can be used like this. There were many people in whose homes Urdu had been spoken, in a very large number, in Delhi till the 1980s and '90s, there's someone who has a grandfather who doesn't know anything but Urdu. In this atmosphere if even a hundred people emerge that's enough to bring about a change.

And with the coming of the internet, with the vast expansion of Urdu's mimetic archive beyond print publishing, and the vastly expanded networks of poets this has created beyond regional and national boundaries, far more than a hundred

people are now seriously writing Urdu poetry and finding audiences in the hundreds of thousands.[79]

AN ISLAMIC LANGUAGE OF THE UNIVERSAL SELF

There is a video which has been watched over 250,000 times on YouTube—and circulated even more widely through social media—of an event from May 7, 2017, a twenty-five-minute talk by a young theater artist named Ankit Gautam to a packed room with only standing room at the back, about the philosophy of Jaun Elia (1930–2002), the most popular poet in Delhi in the years that I was doing fieldwork.[80] Gautam quotes "*kun fa-yakun*" (Be, and it is), a phrase often repeated in the Quran to speak of God's creative power—and translates it for his audience to explain Jaun Elia's famous *shʿer*:

> *hasil-e kun hai yeh jahan e kharab*
> *yahi mumkin tha itni ujlat men*
> This ruined world is the result of "Be"
> Only this was possible in such haste

To explain a popular couplet by one of the most popular poets in Delhi necessitates a return to the Quran. This is not an exceptional example but a common one. Urdu poetry is full of references that are Islamic, and not just Islamicate—to think with Marshall Hodgson's distinction[81]—because they are meaningful in relation to central religious texts and themes, such as the Quran, or the narrative of the battle of Karbala. And yet, as the historian Irfan Habib observed while giving a talk on secular and radical trends in premodern Persian poetry, which he sees as a precursor to the same trends in Urdu poetry, "Muslims can say in poetry what they cannot say in prose."[82] In poetry Jaun could write the couplet that Ankit cited, in which it is strongly implied that God's creation was botched in haste. Such a sentiment would be impossible to find expressed in any other genre of Urdu literature addressing God, at least not without drawing serious condemnation.

The Prophet is known for his great love for and appreciation of poetry.[83] The late Urdu critic Shamim Hanafi, who passed away during the COVID pandemic, quoted a Prophetic hadith to me to explain why poets could get away with *jurraʾt* (audacity) in the ways they spoke of religion. In the story he recounted, the Prophet was asked about the poetry of the famed pre-Islamic poet Imruʾ al-Qais. The Prophet replied, "*Imruʾ al-Qaysu ashaʿaru al-shuʿaraʾ wa qaʾiduhum ila al-nar*" (He is the greatest among poets, and he will lead them toward the fire [of hell]).[84] "This is a very significant and profound statement," Shamim Hanafi said. "For it means that we cannot judge the quality of poetry by whether it leads us towards goodness or evil, but you judge poetry by its own merits . . . so in Imruʾ al-Qais's poetry, there is a lot of erotica and many things of this sort." And as Lila Abu-Lughod has observed, speaking of the *ghinnawa* poetry of Bedouin tribes in

the desert, "Sentiments of attachment to a loved one that violate the moral code, which for women centers on sexual modesty, find expression in poetry."[85]

When such sentiments are expressed in poetry, they are met with empathetic listening. Expressed outside of poetry, they are met with censure. And so, Abu-Lughod finds, what is expressed in everyday modes of speech and the performance of the self is very different from what is expressed in poetry, for both men and women. "How is the fact that individuals express such utterly different sentiments in poetic and in nonpoetic discourse to be understood?"[86] She argues that poetry has such a powerful and valued social role in Bedouin society because it is a valued discursive mode of expressing "vulnerability, weakness, and dependency."[87] This discursive mode of vulnerability is crucial to a society that values honor and independence because "by admitting the existence of an attitude toward others and a range of sentiments that lie outside the confines of the system of honor, individuals demonstrate their conformity to the code in everyday actions is voluntary. This voluntary action is crucial . . . to honor . . . and to modesty."[88]

We could extend Abu-Lughod's analysis to think about Urdu ghazal poetry as well, and why its utterances are understood, as it were, beyond good and evil. Abu-Lughod's analysis of the *ghinnawa* depends on a split between inner and outer selves. The inner self can expose its vulnerability and its immodest desires to its intimates through the poetic form, and yet the outward self must conform to the social norms of independence and honor. Urdu ghazal poetry too, as Priya Satia notes, is premised on a split or multiple subject.[89] In conversation Farhat Ehsas has characterized this poetry as *andarun ka akhbar* (the newspaper of interiority). The inner self can be wild, *wehshi*, complaining about and questioning the existence of God; none of this draws censure. Poetry is the culturally valued mode in Islamic societies for expressing the ways in which an inner self challenges and questions social conventions, even if it outwardly conforms to them. Poetry is the preeminent mode of exploring and articulating the complexities of the inner self, an exploratory mode of self-knowledge given short shrift in usual ideas of the discursive tradition of Islam, and yet one of great importance.[90]

For many young Urdu poets, and their audiences, Urdu poetry is exciting precisely because it gives them a language to explore their interiority, to express the complexities of the self. The poets of Delhi understand Majnun as a figure of exploring *andarun ka sehra* (the wilderness of the self). Precisely because it is an exploratory rather than a prescriptive mode, Urdu poetry is popular across sectarian, religious, and gender divides: one of the best-selling Urdu poets in Delhi remains Parveen Shakir (1952–94), who made the expression of a specifically feminine interiority—the voice of the *larki*, the young girl/woman—an indelible part of the ghazal tradition.

I have spoken of Urdu poetry as something that brings Muslims together across sectarian divides. But during the time I was in Delhi, Urdu poetry was also immensely popular among non-Muslims, as has historically been the case. Jashn-e Rekhta, an annual celebration of Urdu literature and culture, became a major

cultural event in the life of the city, with hundreds of thousands of people flocking to it. Hindus and other non-Muslims began making their way to Muslim neighborhoods like Jamia Nagar to learn Urdu. Many of the young Urdu poets in Delhi are not Muslim, and yet their poetry is filled with Islam: Images and themes from Karbala, for instance, are prominent in the poetry of many of the poets with identifiably non-Muslim names. And this poetry was immensely popular in Delhi far beyond the limits of (Muslim) religious identity or (Urdu) script.

Shahab Ahmed has pertinently observed that you don't need to be Muslim in order to make meaning in Islamic terms.[91] To understand the disjuncture that Ahmed poses between Islamic discourse and Muslim identity, we need to understand that Islamic discourses as diverse as jihad and poetry can be *universal* in their address and intent.[92] The poets in Delhi—in discourse and praxis—insist on the universality of their poetry. In *musha'irah*s, poets usually greet the audience with an *adab* rather than *salam* or *namaste*: an *adab* requires no assumptions about the religious identity of the addressee. In a private conversation, Farhat Ehsas critiqued Muhammad Iqbal for making Muslims (as a communal/political identity) the subject of poetry: "*ghazal ki sha'iri men kabhi hindu-musalman ki bat hi nahin hui hai, bataur insan baat hui hai. Iqbal ne musalman ho kar sha'iri ki jo naqabil-e m'afi gunah hai*" (Ghazal poetry speaks of the human, not of Hindu and Muslim. By doing poetry as a Muslim, Iqbal has committed a sin that cannot be forgiven). The reason that Urdu poetry is the common discursive mode in which diverse Muslim subjects can speak of the self and speak to each other is also the reason that it is a discursive mode shared by Muslims and non-Muslims. The subject of Urdu poetry—the I that speaks its couplets—is a universal subject, one who explores and makes meaning for him/herself in terms that are Islamic and yet is not constrained by exclusively Muslim identity.

Yet the idea of universality espoused in Urdu ghazal poetry is crucially different from the universality of liberalism, marching through space and time to usher everyone into the universal project of liberal self-governance. It is a universality of interior, rather than exterior space, and it is a universality that insists on the arrest, rather than the march, of time.[93] Whereas history marches toward the novelty of the yet unrealized future, ghazal poetry insists on eternity, or, in the more prosaic words of a conversation about poetry I was part of in Old Delhi: "Look, there is no problem/issue (*maslah*) that is new. All the problems are the same, they're just happening to new people." The ghazal takes on a deliberately archaic vocabulary, a vocabulary tied to Islamic religious themes and a medieval Islamic habitus, to talk of a twenty-first-century inner self:

> *darte hain meri khanah kharabi se mere log*
> *yeh shakhs kahin qafilah salar na ho ja'e*
> My people are afraid of my ruination of my home:
> What if this person becomes the leader of the caravan?
> —Pallav Mishra (b. 1998)

The young poets of Delhi are programmers and salesmen, graduate students and consultants, teachers and Metro employees. They are respectable, enterprising, upstanding middle-class citizens of India. Their inner selves, as expressed in poetry, are wild, romantic, rebellious, lustful, philosophical, disconsolate, and also crucially, are emplaced in and speaking from a premodern Muslim cityscape. They also have local and transnational audiences of tens of thousands of people through live *musha'irah*s, and through YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. What potentials does this moment of (re)discovering a mode of inner self-expression and inner self-articulation deliberately indexed to a medieval Islamic habitus hold for *public* life?

The figure of Majnun, who abandons society in his frenzied wandering, is in some ways the opposite of the ideal self of the authoritarian Hindu nationalist imaginary, an obedient follower of social hierarchies and commands, sincerely committed to the defense of sacred cows. The poets instantiate a certain vision of human freedom, unconstrained by the social conventions that increasingly have the force of law in contemporary India. In a time of religious polarization, they gather without any concern for who is Hindu and who is Muslim. All that matters is the poetry. The young poets of Delhi embody Ghalib's *sh'er:*

> *ham muwahid hain hamara kesh hai tark-e rusum*
> *millaten jab mit ga'in ajza-e iman ho ga'in*
> We are monotheists, our practice is the renunciation of customs
> When religions were erased, they became parts of faith

ANTHROPOLOGY IN/AS MIDLIFE CRISIS: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

When I landed in Delhi in January 2018 to begin research on this book, I was about to turn thirty-eight. My first book was already out and doing well, but I needed to demonstrate "significant progress" on a second project to qualify for the job security of tenure. I was dealing with the classic stress of being on the tenure track and not doing a very good job of handling it. I was often miserable and angry in ways that I couldn't explain or justify to myself, and I failed regularly as a husband and a father.

Compared to the problems—and the existential threat—my Muslim friends and interlocutors were dealing with, my problems were a joke. For one, with my American institutional salary and research funds, and my upper-caste Hindu name and social identity, I could afford to live in one of the greenest, most spacious parts of South Delhi, whereas many of my Muslim friends, even those who were economically prosperous, lived in places where there was not a single tree for tens of thousands of people. And yet, while no one was optimistic that things

were about to change for the better any time soon, most of my Muslim friends acted cheerful, remained busy with their lives, and were deeply engaged in conversations and actions that tried to imagine and enact a different future for Muslims in India. Feelings were not suppressed: I was struck by the eloquence with which my friends would speak of their disappointment, their fears, their anxieties. But while anxiety was rife, no one was succumbing to either rage or despair, both of which I thought were legitimate responses to the moment. In my first few months in India, I was humbled and awed by the "courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude" I saw among my Muslim friends.[94]

On March 31, 2018, which corresponded with the 13th of Rajab in the Hijri calendar—the birth anniversary of ʿAli ibn Abi Talib—a friend took me to a Sufi *dargah* in Delhi. The visit was for fieldwork. I sought to ask my friend's contact there, a *khadim* (servitor) at the shrine, about the problems that people brought to him, whether people's concerns had shifted since the coming into power of the Modi government, and what advice he gave to people who brought their anxieties to him.

Sufi *sahab*, as I will call him, was fasting to commemorate the birthday of Maula ʿAli, as he addressed him. Before I could ask him any questions, he told me: "*pareshani men shukrguzar hona chahiʾe, kih Allah ne ap ko qarib bulaya hai, ap ka imtihan le rahe hain*" (One should always be thankful in times of trouble, that Allah has called you closer, that he is trying you).

When I asked about how the atmosphere (*mahaul*) had changed, he said, "I already answered your question." Our conversation wandered through the Quranic story of Abraham, which in Sufi *sahab*'s telling was paralleled by Indian mythology, the Puranic story of Prahlada.[95] These were not the straight answers I wanted. I was both fascinated and frustrated, and in this state, I asked a question that, while relevant to the larger situation I was observing, was in fact deeply personal.

Mutmaʾin kaise hua jaʾe? I asked. How does one be content?

Sufi *sahab* looked at me. The term I had used, *mutmaʾin* (to be content) is Quranic, referencing Surah 89, where God commands the *nafs al-mutmaʾinah*, the soul at peace, to enter the Garden.[96] Sufi Sahab's look was one of exasperation. It suggested that if I knew the language to ask the question, I already knew the answer.

"*Namaz parhen*," he said. "*Main ap ko dʿawat deta hun*" (Pray. I'm giving you an invitation). In the silence that followed, the call for the sunset *maghrib* prayer rang out, and Sufi *sahab* got up and walked rapidly toward the mosque. I hesitated for a few seconds, then walked toward the taps on the other side of the shrine courtyard to do *wuzu*, to bring myself into the state of ritual cleanliness required for prayer. I didn't know the proper sequence, but somehow, I fumblingly washed myself, and then I didn't pray.

. . .

shikast-e mantiq-e adam ka hai sabut Khuda
voh tha yaqin se pehle voh hai guman ke baʿad
The proof of the defeat of man's reason is God
He was before certitude, He is after doubt
—Abbas Qamar (b. 1994)

In my first book, *Jinnealogy*, I included myself in the "trans-geographical community of secular, modern subjects."[97] At the time of writing, this was largely true. Growing up in Lucknow with Muslim neighbors and classmates meant that I never internalized the discrimination against and fear of Muslims that often gets ingrained among upper-class, upper-caste Hindus, who rarely encounter Muslims as equals and intimates. But growing up in India in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the riots and violence that followed, I was also distrustful of religion, seeing it as violent and atavistic, the root of the conflict I was seeing all round me. Becoming an ethnographer, however, began to change my relation to religion. While doing research for a paper on the history of the urban village of Lado Sarai in 2005, I interviewed an old Hindu Jat man and was struck by how his humanism and lack of discrimination seemed to come from his religious values rather than from outside of them. I knew then that I wanted to think critically about religion—not in the ordinarily negative sense of criticism, but in the more nuanced sense of critical inquiry—and this is part of what led me to a PhD program in the United States. The heavily Marxist environs of higher education in Delhi, at least in my experience, didn't seem to have the room to do the kind of work I wanted to. The research I did for my dissertation and my first book, the deep immersion in the beliefs, stories, and experiences of devotees coming to a Muslim saint-shrine, deeply attracted me toward Islam. But like many of my non-Muslim interlocutors at Firoz Shah Kotla, I was content to be in Muslim space, physically and conceptually, perhaps even spiritually, without committing to Muslim religious practices or a Muslim identity.

Over thirty years ago, Katherine Ewing noted that the anthropological taboo against "going native" results "from a refusal to acknowledge that the subject of one's research might actually know something about the human condition that is personally valid for the anthropologist: it is a refusal to believe. This refusal constitutes a hegemonic act, an implicit insistence that the relationship between anthropologist and 'informant' be shaped by the parameters of Western discourse."[98] By inviting me to pray, Sufi *sahab* was inviting me to acknowledge—to accept the truth of what he knew about the human condition, that it was only an orientation beyond human horizons,[99] an orientation to God, that brought peace and contentment, even in troubling times. Amira Mittermaier understands the Arabic phrase *Allahu Akbar*, God is Greater, not as a matter of fixed belief but a matter of orientation, "toward a world where the human is decentered and made smaller."[100] In Islamic *tarbiyat* (paideia) and ethics, it is this decentering of the human that,

perhaps paradoxically from a humanist standpoint, leads to becoming a better human, moving from *admi* to *insan*. Sufi *sahab* was inviting me toward the embodied practice of prayer that is the first step in the cultivation of such an inner orientation. In his view, this orientation also answered my ethnographic questions.

Even though this book is not an "ethnography of God"—a project that Mittermaier called for in her 2021 Rappaport lecture—it would be amply clear to the reader, from this introduction and the chapters that follow, that Islamic theology and ethics are crucial to the ethical and political choices that Indian Muslims were and are making in the face of oppression. As for me: while I did not pray when Sufi *sahab* first invited me to, paralyzed by what accepting that invitation would mean for my privileges as an upper-caste, Hindu-identified man and for my identity as an anthropologist, I did start praying shortly after, and ever since, I have been on a journey to orient myself toward the truth of *Allah hu Akbar*, to a horizon beyond the human. While the details of this journey are far beyond the scope of this introduction, and far beyond my capacity to put in words, I know that I am a little bit closer to being an *insan* than I was when I started the research for this book.

. . .

What did this shift in my inner orientation mean for my fieldwork, which was spent almost entirely with Muslims? My social identity was of an upper-caste Hindu man, a prosperous NRI, who suffered no discrimination. I felt embarrassed about claiming a Muslim identity in front of my Muslim interlocutors, for I did not share their lived experience of discrimination and othering. Nor did I need to: as someone who was actively interested in the question of Muslim wellbeing and ethical striving, as someone who understood and tried to speak Urdu, as someone with a Hindu social identity who showed no blatant signs of being infected by *tʿassub* (discrimination),[101] most of my Muslim interlocutors welcomed me and spoke with me quite openly, especially as I primarily came to them through networks of trust. I remember how at the end of my first meeting with K, in which he spoke openly about his frustration and disappointment with Hindus in general and his own Hindu friends in particular, he gave me a bear hug and said, "*aj nind achchhe se aʾegi*" (Today I will sleep well). For many of my Muslim interlocutors, like K, I was a stand-in for all the Hindu friends they could no longer have intimate conversations with, no longer complain to about the things they were hurt by.

Only the people I grew really close to during fieldwork initially knew about the shift in my inner orientation. Others I was interacting with found out during the month of Ramadan, when they offered me food and drink, assuming that I wasn't fasting, and I refused. Some people were, of course, happy. What was surprising to me were the attitudes of resistance and disappointment that I also encountered, attitudes that were rooted in the valorization of and the mourning

for the plurality that was central to many Muslims' idea and experience of India. One of my interlocutors tried to convince me of the virtues of Hinduism as a good religion that I should follow and not abandon. Another friend expressed his disappointment in terms of what it said about the prospects for Indian pluralism: "I'm sad, Anand *bhaʾi*, because this means that there's one less Hindu who stands with us. They're already so few."

1

Wehshat

buzurgon ne kabhi buniyad ki janib nahin dekha
natije men ham apne ghar ke asaron se darte hain
The elders never looked toward the foundation
As a result we are afraid of the remains of our home
—SHAHID ANWAR (B. 1965)

I first encountered this *shʿer* in *Inqalab*, an Urdu newspaper I subscribed to while living in Delhi. *Inqalab* often reported on *mushaʿirah*s, or poetic symposia, and printed selected couplets from each of the poets in attendance. This *shʿer* captivated me because it seemed to capture the *mahaul*, or the affective particularity of the atmosphere, which was increasingly one of Muslims living in fear. The much-vaunted secularism of the Indian republic, the supposed guarantee for Muslim belonging in India, was in ruins. Many young Muslims were critiquing the very beginnings of postcolonial India, finding signs of Hindu majoritarianism and discrimination not just in recent years but baked into the very foundations of the Republic.[1]

In October 2018, through the network of Old Delhi poets, I made contact with the poet Shahid Anwar. To explain the background of the *shʿer*, he told me a little bit about his life. He was born in 1965 and grew up in Old Delhi, in the locality of Kalan Mahal. He grew up deeply religious, and wrote several *nʿat*s, poetry expressing love for and praise of the Prophet. He was the eldest of several brothers and worked for his father's refrigerator engineering business, which had started failing. Then riots happened in Old Delhi, and everything was shut down for three days. There was no access to meat or vegetables for cooking fresh food, so on the third day, when the curfew was lifted for a little bit, someone managed to go and get some cooked food from the market. The food came wrapped in a newspaper, which carried an ad for a job in Medina, Saudi Arabia, for a refrigeration technician. His father said, "*Jinke liʾe tumne itni nʿaten likhi hain, voh tumhen bula rahe hain*" (The one you have written so much poetry for [i.e., The Prophet Muhammad], he is calling you).

"I met all the qualifications," he said,

> except that I was three weeks too late. My father told me to apply anyway, and I did, and I got the job, gave them my passport, and moved to Saudi Arabia for fifteen years. I kept sending money home to help my father and family, but my father never told anyone where the money was coming from and kept spending it. When I returned home after my father's death, I assumed that all the money I had sent would have been well invested, and I would have a firm foundation, but I came back to a home in ruin, with no capital with which to start a new life or business here, and I had to start from scratch. My brothers still live in Old Delhi, but I moved here, to Batla House.[2] And it is reflecting on this state of affairs that I wrote the *shʿer*:
>
> *buzurgon ne kabhi buniyad ki janib nahin dekha*
> *natije men ham apne ghar ke asaron se darte hain*
> The elders never looked toward the foundation
> As a result we are afraid of the remains of our home

. . .

One of the hallmarks of a good *shʿer* is that it turns the personal into the universal, *ap biti* (what happened to the self) into *jag biti* (what happens to the collective/world). In this case, the personal emerged from a collective context already marked by violence and loss. Delhi had already seen massive anti-Sikh violence in 1984, and as the emboldened Hindu right wing coalesced around the demand for recognizing the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya as a temple marking the birthplace of Rama, Old Delhi was the scene of Hindu-Muslim riots in 1986, 1987, and 1990. As always in post-independence India, these riots disproportionately affected Muslim lives and livelihoods. It was this context that necessitated the food from outside, wrapped in a newspaper that carried, in Shahid Anwar's telling, a miraculous sign as interpreted by his father: an invitation from the Prophet to come closer to him; an invitation to leave behind a home falling apart. It is perhaps this context which gave the *shʿer* its stark and fearful imagery, which resonated so much in the contemporary.

"He could have said, 'We are afraid of the walls of our home' (*ham apne ghar ki divaron se darte hain*)," a friend who is an aficionado of Urdu poetry said, admiring Shahid Anwar's word choice. Instead of *divaron* (walls), he chose *asaron* (ruins or remains), a word that conveys a sense of a place haunted, already destroyed.

. . .

Memories of the dark period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s—when the politics of Hindu revivalism associated with the Ram Janmabhoomi movement led to a nationwide series of anti-Muslim riots and pogroms, often aided and abetted by the police and state agencies—became fresh again for Muslims in the period after 2014, even among those who were too young to remember the actual events. Zeeshan Hasan Akhtar, a Bombay-based screenwriter and theater practitioner,

born in 1989, wrote a piece called *Gobhi ke Patte ki Chutney* (Cauliflower Leaf Chutney), which he performed in several small community spaces in 2018 and 2019. I attended a performance in October 2018 in Jamia Nagar. In a darkened room, a woman's voice played through the speakers. She spoke in Urdu, so softly that one had to strain to hear. It soon became clear that the voice was the testimony of the survivor of a massacre, describing how the clothes of the perpetrators were red with blood, describing how she had survived, with a foot hacked off, by jumping into a pond to hide among the dead bodies that had been thrown in. The voice was interspersed with, and sometimes overwhelmed by, the sound of Zeeshan sobbing on the floor with his face covered, a shadowy figure weeping in the dark. Then, illuminated by a makeshift spotlight, he began to speak.

Zeeshan sat behind a table, on top of which was a *sil-batta*, a flat rectangular stone base with a smaller curved stone on top of it, traditionally used for grinding spices and herbs in Indian kitchens. As he spoke, Zeeshan methodically stripped the leaves from a head of cauliflower and ground the leaves into a chutney. He told the story of how this cauliflower chutney had come into the life of his family: "This chutney came to our house in 1989, and it was given to us by that wind of 1989. We got this chutney and this country . . . got the punishment of constantly being ground . . . (*har dam pisne ki saza*)."

Zeeshan narrated to the audience how the cauliflower leaf chutney was improvised in his home in 1989 in his home state of Bihar, a time of pogroms and riots, lockdowns and curfews that, as in Shahid Anwar's story, led to a lack of fresh food. To make plain rice palatable, the women of his household ground the leaves of the hardy cauliflower from nearby fields, mixed with spices, into a chutney that passed into family lore, a gift of "that wind of 1989."

This was a poetic way of describing the series of anti-Muslim riots and pogroms that preceded, accompanied, and followed BJP leader L. K. Advani's *rath yatra* (chariot procession) across India in 1990, as it mobilized Hindus on the issue of demolishing the sixteenth-century Babri Mosque in Ayodhya and building a temple to Rama in its place. The worst of these pogroms happened in the Bhagalpur district of Bihar in October and November 1989, with over nine hundred Muslims killed and more than fifty thousand displaced. In Logain village, the bodies of over a hundred Muslims were buried under a field of cauliflower and cabbage saplings and were discovered only months later, with the spring harvest.[3]

> *khet to pat gaʾe hain lashon se*
> *ret men sabziyan ugata hun*
> The fields have been filled up with corpses
> Now I grow vegetables in the sand
> —Rehman Musawwir (b. 1972)

It is these buried histories that emerge in the play, histories of violence that happened right around when Zeeshan was born. Though he is too young to remember,

they were part of the texture of his life, like the bitterness of crushed cauliflower leaves. And suddenly, these histories re-emerge, as the Modi years bring up the memories of a previous generation, memories that had been suppressed to imagine a different future for young Muslims in India.[4] In the performance, Zeeshan kept grinding the leaves, with increasing vehemence, and then tasted the paste and said,

> Sometimes I wish to taste blood. That it wasn't leaves here but someone's head, and I crush it. Put someone's finger here and grind it. [Picking up the knife] . . . that I stick this into someone. That's where the true enjoyment is . . . blood, red, warm . . . cut someone and it starts to flow . . . someone told me buy a punching bag, someone says buy a drum-kit, take it out on that . . . I said that's like a mixer . . . the true enjoyment is in the blood. Even though I can't stand the sight of blood. On Eid-al-Adha, when they sacrifice the goats I go sleep in my room, I can't watch . . . but I do wish that it wasn't a goat but a human, and he be slaughtered . . . no care or preparation, no prayer, no bathing, no feeding, no water, just merciless . . . [Zeeshan picks up the knife and brings it violently down on the grindstone with both hands and then sits down heavily] . . . a fountain of blood comes out, on my face, on my clothes, then it'll be enjoyable.

My friend Saba, who was also born in the early nineties and grew up in Jamia Nagar, was recording Zeeshan's performance that evening. Later that night she posted on Facebook:

> Watching Zeeshan descend into intricately detailed and almost tactile memories, that he has not lived or actually doesn't remember, was a deeply personal experience. The weight of this collective experience, weighing us down, slowly cracking us up, like dry arid land. In a really morbid manner, this *wehshat* feels like homecoming. It is reconciling with the darkness we have carried within us, long after we have left our "homes" and their "histories," we come back to them in search of ourselves. It feels like we can no longer hold out the wail that has been incubating in our chests. It feels like we can no longer forsake that which we thought was not ours but the burden of our parents and their parents.

Every word in that post is in English except *wehshat, wehshat* that feels like homecoming.

. . .

> Wahshat: A desert, solitude, dreary place;—loneliness, solitariness, dreariness;—sadness, grief, care;—wildness, fierceness, ferocity, savageness; barbarity, barbarism;—timidity, fear, fright, dread, terror, horror;—distraction, madness.[5]

> What does it mean to be the subject of trauma, of calamity, of the passions of the soul? And to welcome the event as an "ordeal" (*ibtila'*) that at once seizes and addresses one? This is a question that when asked and engaged may shift the coordinates of the real.[6]

Zeeshan's play resonated with Saba, with the audience, because it embodied a collective sense of *wehshat*—a word that captures the particular mix of fear, sorrow, alienation, and the desire to respond with savage violence—that was all too familiar to North Indian Muslims. A few days after the Northeast Delhi pogroms of February 2020, I was sitting with friends in Old Delhi late at night when one said, referring to the videos circulating on social media after the riots of the brutalities committed against young Muslim men: "These videos make my blood pressure go up. I think I too should pick up a [metal] pipe and kill three or four just like this. I don't do it, but I definitely think about it." In 2018, a friend, speaking of the situation in his village, described how young men would say things like, "Let the Maulana just say it once, and then we'll kill four or five of them before we die."

And yet, despite this widespread affect of *wehshat*, there has been very little public violence committed by Muslims in the years since 2014. Instead, the dominant modes of collective Muslim public expression have been extraordinarily creative, inclusive and peaceful, as exemplified by the Shaheen Bagh protests. How do we understand this difference between how Muslim selves are feeling, and how they act in the world? Rather than the extant paradigms of security studies or psychology, for me it has been useful to think about *wehshat* through the language of Urdu poetry and its inextricable connection to the language of Islamic spirituality. In Islamic spirituality, the affect of *wehshat* is inextricably connected with the experience of affliction, trial, or ordeal (*bala'* or *ibtila'*).

For Stefania Pandolfo's interlocutor, an imam who practices Quranic spiritual cures, the point of his therapeutic interventions is

> not just the fact of trauma, the registering of a personal and collective calamity; nor is it simply the mitigation of its effects. It is how we relate to the event as an "ordeal," and what a person becomes capable of being in relation to that experience. This is captured by the Quranic concept of *ibtila'* (divine "testing" or "trial"). . . . The ordeal is not just what falls upon us, what breaks our lives and hurls us into bereavement or disablement; it contains an address, the sign of a divine interpellation, even when we don't understand its meaning. It is an encounter with an event that summons us to what the Imam calls a "decision" as for the actualization or the annihilation of an inner potential. . . .[7]

The Quran characterizes Abraham's command to sacrifice his son, his son's willing participation in the process, and God's ultimate stopping of the sacrifice as "a manifest trial" (*al-bala' al-mubin*).[8] *Wehshat* is what the soul feels when undergoing the suffering of divine trial, *bala'* or *ibtila'*. In the Moroccan imam's understanding, deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition, such suffering, and how one chooses to respond to such suffering, as in the example of Abraham and his son's willing acquiescence, is essential for spiritual transformation and growth. Similarly, in the Islamic tradition as it is transmitted through Urdu poetry, *wehshat* is a *maqam*, a spiritual stage of the soul's journey, a stage that comes before *junun*,

divine love madness. It is *balaʾ*, or affliction/trial, that makes the soul undergo *wehshat* and prepares it for *junun*. Calling someone a "*balaʾ ka shaʿir*" (a poet of affliction) is the highest of compliments because it implies that their poetry gives profound insight into the trials and resultant states of the human soul.

It is this interrelated understanding of *balaʾ* and *wehshat*, present in the poetry of young poets in contemporary India, that helps me understand how in the face of unrelenting violence and stigma, Muslims have responded with love and beauty.

In the rest of this chapter, I will first discuss how contemporary poets understand *wehshat* as a condition of the inner self. Then I will turn to the distinction, in the poetic understanding, between inner and outer selves, and how this split-ness of the subject of Urdu poetry, to use Priya Satia's terminology, creates a distinction between self-knowledge and sincerity, the difference between how one feels and how one acts. Finally, I will turn to the discourse of Muslim religious leaders and activists in Delhi, in the face of acts of anti-Muslim violence, and how they counsel patience and peace in outward comportment even when the inner self is in turmoil.

THE *WEHSHAT* OF THE INNER SELF

namaz-e ʿasr na parh saki meri wehshat
junun-e ishq ko maidan-e karbala to mila
My *wehshat* could not pray the afternoon prayer
At least the madness of love found the [battle]field of Karbala
—ABHINANDAN PANDEY (B. 1988)

Abhinandan Pandey's *shʿer* invokes the battle of Karbala, and its powerful ethical and spiritual resonances in Islamic memory. (I say Islamic rather than Muslim to indicate that the field of meaning-making associated with Karbala, as with all of Urdu poetry, exceeds the boundaries of Muslim identity, as is the case with Abhinandan.)[9] Hussain, the son of Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, refused to swear allegiance to Yazid, who had claimed the caliphate as an inheritance from his father Muʿawiya. Yazid sent a military force to either force Hussain to swear allegiance to his rule or to kill him. The large army besieged Hussain and his family and followers in the desert plain of Karbala, even cutting them off from water for three days, according to tradition. Despite the overwhelming odds, Hussain refused to swear allegiance. The battle took place on the 10th of Muharram, after the dawn prayers. Hussain and his companions fought bravely, but they were seventy-two against thousands. As the time of the mid-afternoon *ʿasr* prayers grew close, only Hussain remained alive, with multiple wounds, fighting against impossible odds, having witnessed the deaths of his brothers, sons, nephews, and faithful companions. Finally, surrounded by enemies, he too was killed, and decapitated.

Abhinandan's use of *wehshat* invokes the savagery of the battlefield of Karbala. Surely, *wehshat* describes how Hussain and his followers were feeling when, after three days with no food or water, they faced inevitable death at the hand of a cruel enemy. And yet, Hussain did not swear allegiance to Yazid, and his companions did not desert him. They battled bravely and chivalrously, making Karbala a cosmic, resonant symbol of the fight against injustice. Karbala was an event of *junun*, divine madness. It ignored the calculus of expediency, shifting forever the paradigm of what it meant to live and die in submission to God. In the *shʿer*, there is a close, even teleological relationship between *wehshat* and *junun*: The former precedes the latter. Without the *wehshat*—the fear, the thirst, the courageous fighting—of the martyrs, who died before the *ʿasr* prayers, Karbala would not be the epitome of *junun-e ishq* (divine love-madness).

Wehshat, as we see with Abhinandan's *shʿer*, is a prominent motif in the Urdu poetry of today's young poets. Given Urdu poetry's deep links to Sufi traditions of self-knowledge and self-cultivation, discussed in the Introduction, what does such intimate acquaintance with this state of the soul mean for both self and society?

• • •

When I asked him about *wehshat*, the poet Vipul Kumar said, "*Wehshat to insan hone ki lazimi shart hai. Andar ka dasht, andar ka Majnun, vahi sab chala a raha hai shaʿiri men*" (*Wehshat* is a necessary condition of being human. The wilderness inside, the Majnun [the madman] inside: that's what's been going on in the poetic tradition). In his explanation, Vipul made a clear distinction between inner self and external manifestation. "Look at [the poet] Farhat Ehsas, he doesn't look like a *wehshi* on the outside. This is all about the inside." Indeed, the young poets I hung out with in Delhi were extraordinarily gentle in their outward behavior and comportment, and yet *wehshat* suffused their poetry.

> In Sufi self-imagination, the self has an outward aspect and an inner dimension. Such an understanding of the person means experience itself has two dimensions: one that is sensory and the other intuitive. The sensory experience is easy to gauge, whereas inner experience can only be 'tasted' (*dhawq*). In Sufi discourse, inner experience is a *dhawq*, usually translated as taste, a direct experience. *Dhawq* is given precedence over other physiological senses. Both experiences of *hiss* (sensory perception) and *dhawq* are mutually co-constructed. . . .
>
> Why would they want to go inward, into an unknown, when an external world offers dreams and aspirations? The glitter of the modern world keeps us busy with what we see and hear. We do not even have an understanding that we need to take care of an inner self.[10]

In poetic understanding, Majnun is a figure of the exploration of the vastness of the interiority of the self that Noman Baig writes about in the extract above, and not its external manifestations. In an age of social media, obsessed with surfaces, the young poets of Delhi bring another dimension to the self and its expression.

Like other millennials, the poets post pictures of themselves on social media—the ultimate manifestation, we could say, of the self as external surface—and pair these pictures with couplets that add a depth and complexity to the portrayal of the self. For instance, the poet Shahbaz Rizvi posted a picture of himself on Instagram, surrounded by empty benches, looking at his phone. The second line of the couplet accompanying the photo read,

> *voh tamasha hun ke jo nazron se nihan reh jaʾe*
> I am that spectacle that stays hidden from gazes

On Instagram, the most visual social media platform, the use of which is correlated to growing bodily dysmorphia,[11] the poet insists that beneath the outward image, there is an inner self that remains invisible.

Social media can make its users more aware of the distinction between inner and outer selves, what one feels inside and what one performs for the world. In cultures that think of the self as unitary and value sincerity, a moral category "naming the overwhelming and sometimes even violent desire to bring one's inner life into harmony with its outward norms or surface appearance,"[12] social media use can, and does, lead to crisis. The subject of Urdu poetry, however, is a split self,[13] and as more and more young Indians started using social media, and more consciously navigating the divide between public performance and inner affect, Urdu poetry became increasingly popular. In a widely viewed talk on "The Philosophy of Jaun," the theater artist and poet Ankit Gautam talks, among other things, about Jaun as a figure of self-knowledge, and of the distinction between his inner and outer selves:

> Somewhere we are all looking for ourselves within ourselves. *We are searching for ourselves* (in English). And when we cannot find ourselves, we get agitated. And in Jaun this agitation was because he had found himself. . . . Listen to this *shʿer* friend, no one has accepted [their inner truth] with such honesty. Jaun *sahab* says:
>
> > *apne andar hansta hun main, aur bahut sharmata hun*
> > *khun bhi thuka sach much thuka aur yeh sab chalaki thi*
> > I laugh inside myself, and I am embarrassed
> > I spat blood, I really did, and all this was clever deception
>
> Who will admit this? Who has the courage? We just remain embroiled in this that our book sells, that we get some money, that we get [invitations to perform at] four *mushaʿirah*s. Does anyone have the time to admit that, "I spat blood, I really did, and it was all clever deception."[14]

The couplet of Jaun Elia's that Ankit quotes highlights the difference between self-knowledge and sincerity. An approach of sincerity demands a constant harmony, a unity, between the inner and outer dimensions of the self. Otherwise, the self is insincere, hypocritical. Jaun embodies a self-awareness of the split, the distinction between his inner and outer dimensions, laughing inwardly as he splits blood outwardly. The distinction that Jaun embodies cynically, in an inimitably

Jaun fashion, is more soberly speaking a crucial dimension of widespread Islamic notions of the self, and of Islamic ethical pedagogies.[15] One starts wearing the hijab, as Saba Mahmood's work shows us, not necessarily to outwardly express an already extant inner piety, but rather, through the cultivation of the outer habitus of modesty, to gradually also cultivate this virtue in the inner self.[16] One makes the outward movements of prayers to ultimately cultivate serenity in the *wehshi* inner self. The desire for the harmony between the inner and outer selves is a goal for traditional Islamic pedagogies too, but the dissonance between inner and outer dimensions of the self does not constitute a crisis, or insincerity, but rather is the very ground, as it were, for the constant work of self-cultivation.

Priya Satia writes, "The split self is a self that can watch itself; this is the foundation of most understandings of conscience. Whether as an inner observer, inner voice, internal messenger, or simply the absence of a sense of unitary self, across most religions and ethical systems, we understand conscience as a capacity to disrupt selfhood in some way, as a splitting of the self into observer and observed."[17]

Jaun observes Jaun spitting blood, and laughs. But Jaun also opens up the potential for his readers to be the kind of selves who may be spitting blood inwardly but laugh outside, not as a form of hypocrisy, but as an aspirational form of ethics, of maintaining the distinction between inner feeling and outer manifestation in the hope of bringing them, once again, into harmony, through transforming the self, but also through transforming the world. The inner self may be feeling *wehshat* in the face of relentless oppression and othering, but instead of sincerely expressing this *wehshat* and acting with savage violence, the outer self responds with love and beauty, hoping that the inner turmoil will come into harmony with these outward potentials.

"YOU DO NOT EVEN HAVE PERMISSION TO CURSE": THE *WEHSHAT* OF THE OUTER WORLD

On Thursday, October 25, 2018, an eight-year-old boy named Mohammad Azeem, a residential student at Madrasa Jamia Faridia in Begampur village in South Delhi, was killed in a scuffle involving a few older boys from the Balmiki[18] settlement abutting the madrasa. The fight happened on a small plot of land just to the south of the madrasa's buildings, which housed the grave of Farid Bukhari, the seventeenth-century Mughal noble for whom the madrasa is named. This plot was used as a common space, accessed by both the Muslim children who attended the madrasa and people from the surrounding settlements, mostly Dalit. In the years of the Modi regime, relations around this shared land had become increasingly tense. People from the Balmiki *basti* started using the Islamophobic political atmosphere, the "lynching *ka mahaul*" as it was described to me at the madrasa, to try and take over the land, and people from the *basti*, including children, had regularly started harassing and bullying the students from the madrasa. This harassment

took a tragic turn with this altercation, when Azeem was thrown against a parked motorcycle with sufficient force to cause traumatic injury and death.[19]

The news of the death came to me late on Thursday night, through Facebook. The next morning, I went to visit the madrasa. Azeem's father was there, standing in a corner, hugging his son (he had two other sons, older than Azeem, also studying in the madrasa). The turban on his head was somewhat askew, and he was looking fixedly ahead at a point in the distance. He spoke in fragments, sometimes separated by several minutes.

I was cutting sorghum . . . when the call came . . . my wife was with me . . . I was a hundred kilometers away in Mewat. . . .

Azeem's father was a portrait of what Faiz phrases as *zabt-e-hal*, exercising powerful restraint in his outer comportment so that his inner emotions wouldn't overwhelm him. He was a daily wage laborer, working on someone else's fields. And yet, when I offered him money—the only thing I could think of at the moment to make things easier for his family—he refused.

He soon left for the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, where Azeem's body had been taken for autopsy. I sat with some of the other mourners. *Bahut taklifdeh hai yeh*, one of them said. This is very painful. Another mourner, who had come from Jamia, said, "My children play in the park which lies between Jamia and Jasola (a Hindu-dominated urban village), and when the news came yesterday evening I immediately told them not to play cricket there anymore. What if the ball hits someone . . . after all kids are kids . . . I didn't sleep all night." Then he went on to talk about where he lived before, somewhere in Haryana, where he used to sleep well to the sound of machines. "It was a Hindu Jat's workshop next door, but there was love (*pyar-muhabbat*), there was harmony (*mel milap tha*), so I slept really good."

It was getting close to the time for the Friday afternoon *jumʿah* prayers. Instead of staying at the Jamia Faridia, I decided to take the train north to Old Delhi, to attend Friday prayers at the Fatehpuri Masjid, and to listen to Mufti Mukarram's *khutbah*. Part of the reason that I left was because I needed to cry, and to get a respite from that place of intense grief. I too, was a father of young children, and I did not have Azeem's father's *zabt-e hal*.

. . .

I had first encountered Dr. Mufti Mukarram in the pages of *Inqalab*, the most widely read Urdu newspaper in Delhi, which weekly reported a summary of his Friday sermons. Mufti Mukarram is unusual among *ʿulema* in India in that his Friday sermons openly address political issues. Mufti Mukarram belongs to the Naqshbandi Mujaddidi Sufi order, along with allegiances to the Chishti, Qadiri, and Suhrawardy *silslilah*s (spiritual genealogies). As the title of Mufti suggests, he is also a scholar of Islamic law, authorized to give fatwas, or authoritative legal opinions, to Muslims who seek advice. A friend who is a Deobandi imam at a mosque

in Old Delhi spoke admiringly of him despite Mufti Mukarram being associated with the Barelvi *maslak* (school of thought) and told me that both Deobandis and Barelvis pray behind him, implying a wide acceptance of Mufti Mukarram as a figure of religious authority beyond the usual *maslak* divides.[20] He also holds a PhD in Arabic literature, thus embodying both secular and religious knowledge. A Sufi and a scholar of sharia, a PhD and a religious leader widely accepted beyond usual *maslak* divides, Mufti Mukarram, while belonging to a traditional family of Sufis and scholars, also embodied a new mode of Muslim religious authority in the politics of postcolonial India.

As Irfan Ahmad notes, "For most Muslims in postcolonial India, the ideology of the secular, democratic state became the master framework for almost all mobilizations they undertook, whether it was the issue of Urdu, Aligarh Muslim University, the Babri Mosque, the Muslim personal law, communal riots, their marginalized presence in government services, and so on."[21] Invested in the state, Abdullah Bukhari (1922–2009), Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, used his hereditary religious authority as a platform to intervene in national politics, including issuing "election fatwas" telling his congregation which party to vote for.[22] Mufti Mukarram espouses a very different sort of political intervention. He openly supports no political party. His speeches are political: He has strongly condemned the government for the spate of mob lynchings, has openly supported the peaceful protests of the students of Jamia Millia Islamia against the Citizenship Amendment Act, and constantly speaks of the Constitution of India (using the Hindi word *samvidhan* more than the Urdu *aʾin*) in his sermons, emphasizing its importance as a fine foundational document whose values must be implemented. But he espouses a Muslim politics that, deeply disappointed by the failures of state secularism, moves away from the state.

As a case in point, I quote his sermon before *jumʿah* prayers on December 14, 2018, which came a few days after the ruling BJP had been defeated in three major state elections, leading to a lot of cheer among the opposition and among Muslims, who were hopeful that this meant that the BJP would be defeated in the general elections in May 2019. Mufti Mukarram addressed this in his sermon: "The ones who win should be joyful, the ones who lose should be sad, but we shouldn't be happy or sad because neither the ones who won are ours, and neither the ones who lost (*na jitne vale hamare hain, na harne vale*)." Mufti Mukarram's statement could be read two ways. One possibility was an "apolitical" stance, in which "we" (both him as an individual and Muslims as a community) do not side with any political party. But there was also a more sobering political reality he referenced: In 2018 no secular political party stood with or spoke for Muslims. There was no need to rejoice in the opposition's victory.

At Fatehpuri Masjid on that October Friday, I was struck by the somber tone of Mufti Mukarram's sermon. Even though he didn't explicitly mention Azeem's death for the first half of his sermon, it was clear that he had been deeply saddened

by the incident. He spent a lot of time talking about *huquq-al-ʿibad* (the rights of individuals, more specifically, the rights that Muslims owed others in their interactions with them); the rights of other Muslims; and the right of neighbors.[23] He brought up the Babri Masjid title suit, which had been recently taken up by the Supreme Court with the full expectation that the court would decide in favor of Hindus. He said that this was all about creating controversy and spreading *fasad* (moral corruption and disrupting public order).[24] In such a situation, he said, Muslims have to exercise extreme restraint. It was then finally that he brought the sermon to the incident of Azeem's death and emphatically said, "*Islam men apko gali dene ki bhi ijazat nahin hai*" (In Islam you do not even have permission to curse). This was an implicit criticism of the madrasa students, who had reportedly been aggressive in their initial response to baiting by the Balmiki kids, opening the possibility of escalation.

. . .

"In *wehshat*, don't you feel that we are passing through a time in which there is a kind of moral fear, the fear that anything ethical makes us weak? In a manner of speaking this is a time of ethical savagery (*akhlaqi farasingi*). *Wehshat* in this entire atmosphere means anxiety, restlessness, madness. . . . We can say that these are all the meanings of *wehshat*."

The renowned Urdu critic Dr. Shamim Hanafi, who passed away in the COVID pandemic in May 2021, said this in December 2018. We were in his apartment near Jamia, discussing the prevalence of *wehshat* in contemporary Urdu poetry. He saw *wehshat* as a response to what he characterized as the moral savagery of the age of Hindutva: *wehshat* as the fear that acting ethically, in such an age, makes one weak.

How does one respond to such *wehshat, wehshat* that arises—as in Dr. Hanafi's astute reading—from the moral savagery of the age? Does one become a moral savage oneself, like the protagonist of Arvind Adiga's *White Tiger*, turning to murder and corruption to make oneself successful in a corrupt and grossly unequal society? Or does one espouse the path of violent jihad to protect Muslims as the Student's Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) did in the 1980s and 1990s in response to rising Hindutva, mass killings of Muslims (like in Bhagalpur), police brutality, and especially, the demolition of the Babri Masjid?[25] What does one do with the *wehshat* that the age bestows to us?

During the time I was doing fieldwork, "Why have Indian Muslims not been radicalized?" was a question posed by think tanks like the Policy Perspectives Foundation and the Observer Research Foundation.[26] Irfan Ahmad, working with the Islamist Jamaʿat-e Islami and the breakaway SIMI in the early 2000s, found that when secular democracy is responsive to the traditions and aspirations of its Muslim citizens, Muslims embrace pluralism and democracy, but when democracy becomes majoritarian and exclusionary, Muslims turn radical (in the sense of drawing sharp boundaries and espousing political violence). Writing about

SIMI's radicalization, Ahmad contends that "whether or not and how much a movement in a given political formation will change (toward moderation or militancy) depends not only on its own desire but equally on the extent to which the practices of the state are moderate or militant and the contours of its structure as it concerns its inclusivity or exclusivity."[27] In the years of the Modi regime, Islamophobic discourse ratcheted up to unprecedented levels in public life, and Indian democracy could quite honestly be classified, using Ahmad's words, as "a high-tech theater of entertainment and violence against Muslims."[28] And yet, very few Indians joined ISIS in its call for transnational jihad,[29] seductive to many Muslims in minority contexts in Western democracies. Rather, the most prominent mobilization of Indian Muslims was for the largely peaceful, and extraordinarily creative and inclusive, protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act. How has this come about?

My contention is that the difference in how the *wehshat* that the age bestows on us—similar in the early 1990s and the late 2010s—is managed and acted upon has to do with a difference in moral emphasis. SIMI's discourse, like that of the Jamaʿat-e Islami, focused on the state, and on the nature of state secularism. Contemporary Muslim discourse, long disappointed with the state, has largely disavowed state secularism and focuses instead on the self.

In her book *Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan*, Naveeda Khan quotes Wilfred Cantwell Smith's statement, "The demand that Pakistan should be an Islamic state has been a Muslim way of saying that Pakistan should build for itself a good society." She critically interprets this as: "In other words, the demand for a state may be equally a demand for a society or a self."[30] Khan sees a continuum between forms of ethical aspiration for state, society, and selfhood. What I want to suggest is that aspirations for the state and aspirations for the self—and relatedly, the social, how the self relates to others—have radically different conceptual and affective valences, especially within the larger Islamic tradition, and cannot be treated as equivalent. The management of the same affective state of savagery or *wehshat*, for instance, looks very different when it involves an aspiration for the state and when it involves the self. To elucidate, I will turn to Mufti Mukarram's speeches, and the competing visions of Muslim politics that played out in the aftermath of Azeem's death.

• • •

In late June and early July 2019, things got very tense in Old Delhi. A parking dispute between two men escalated into a wider conflict, and stones were thrown at a Hindu temple in the Muslim-majority Hauz Qazi area of the Old City, allegedly by Muslims.[31] The BJP government had returned to the center with a renewed majority, the member of Parliament representing Old Delhi belonged to the BJP, and Hindu right-wing groups started spreading rumors on the street and on social media to increase tensions. A riot seemed imminent. In this situation, Abu Sufiyan

of the popular Old Delhi–based Facebook page Purani Dilli Waalon ki Baatein (see chapters 2 and 3), approached Mufti Mukarram to make a video, which PDWKB then circulated, largely to Muslims but also to Hindus. This video played a big part in de-escalating the situation and averting what had seemed to be an inevitable tragedy. In the video, shot vertically on a phone for easy shareability on social media, Mufti Mukarram says:

> If there has been any damage then the Muslims of the area, members of the RWA [Resident's Welfare Association] of the area should stand up and make up for the damages, and whoever has done this mistake there should be action taken against them, but what is better is that if the elders in the community, members of the RWA, the responsible people (*zimmedar log*) in the community should sit people from both sides down, and get them to reconcile (*milap kara den*). You would remember that when Advani *ji*'s [*rath*] *yatra* was passing by Fatehpuri Masjid, then some people rained stones and glass on the Fatehpuri Masjid, a lot of stoning happened, and the *naib* (deputy) imam of the mosque at that time was stabbed with a *trishul*. All of these things are available in the record with the Delhi administration and the Delhi police. But we did not take too much action on that matter, we compromised, and no case was registered against anybody, no one was accused of anything, we sat down together and solved the issue. It should happen in the same way in every area.[32]

In his address, meant for a largely but not exclusively Muslim audience, Mufti Mukarram brought up the violence that his own mosque had faced during L. K. Advani's *rath yatra* in 1990 that had inaugurated a spate of anti-Muslim violence across North India, and then reminded his viewers that "we sat down together and solved the issue." While the Delhi police and administration were aware of the incident, in Mufti Mukarram's telling, it was not the state and its punitive power as enforcer of the law that mattered. What mattered was how people in a locality related to each other, how they reconciled in the aftermath of violence to make sure that shared sociality remained possible rather than breaking down into violence. This echoes Mufti Mukarram's response to Azeem's death in his sermon. While acknowledging all the troubles that Muslims were facing from a Hindu nationalist government and from media busy in spreading discord, he put the moral responsibility for the incident squarely on Muslims: "In Islam you do not even have the permission to curse." For Mufti Mukarram, it was how people related to each other that ensured the nature of social harmony, and hence it was the self, and how this self was cultivated to respond to others, that was the guarantor of social harmony.

I want to return here to Irfan Ahmad's statement about SIMI's radicalization: "Whether or not and how much a movement in a given political formation will change (toward moderation or militancy) depends not only on its own desire but equally on the extent to which the *practices of the state* are moderate or militant and the contours of its structure as it concerns its inclusivity or exclusivity" (my emphasis). Ahmad emphasizes the role of the state because while SIMI had

disassociated itself from the Jamaʿat-e Islami, and the Jamaʿat-e Islami in India had itself embraced secularism and democracy, the state as a guarantor of social order remained crucial to the thinking of both Islamist organizations. We could say that Mufti Mukarram shared the same disappointments with the secular state that the activists of SIMI did, disappointments he spoke about explicitly, and yet those disappointments did not lead him, or many others among the *ʿulema* in Delhi, to preach or condone violent jihad: a legitimate Muslim response, in Islamic legal thought, to oppression.

For Mufti Mukarram as well as for other *ʿulema*, it was the self that was the locus of jihad, where the soul struggled against acting upon the *wehshat* that the world generated in the self.[33] A story I became very familiar with through attending a wide variety of Friday sermons in Delhi was one in which the Prophet, while still residing in Mecca, repeatedly had garbage thrown on him by a Jewish woman and never responded with anger. One day, when the woman was sick and hence did not come to throw garbage on him, he visited to ask after her health, and, amazed by his kindness and character, she converted to Islam.[34]

In the case of the Madrasa Jamia Faridia in Begampur, the garbage being thrown by neighbors was very real, along with the bullying and harassment that the madrasa students faced. It was all part, in their telling, of the campaign to take over the plot around Farid Bukhari's grave. What to do, now that things had come to a head with the death of Azeem? Representatives from two different Muslim organizations based in the Jamia area—Khudai Khidmatgar and Jamaʿat-e Islami—were present at Jamia Faridia on Friday morning while I was there, and they had very different answers.

Khudai Khidmatgar, or the Servants of God, was originally a movement led by Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a.k.a. Bacha Khan (1890–1988), in the North West Frontier Province of British India, which organized the Pathans (classified as a "martial," warlike race in colonial governance) into peaceful civil disobedience in the face of brutal colonial violence, and worked toward a composite nationalism opposed to Muslim separatism.[35] In 2011 Faisal Khan, a Muslim Gandhian social activist, revived the Khudai Khidmatgar movement in India. Despite being a Muslim-led movement committed to creating a Muslim leadership in the social work and NGO sector where it is glaringly absent,[36] they added a rule ensuring a minimum non-Muslim membership of 35 percent.[37] Their slogan is *Ham Rab ke hain, Rab sab ke hain, sab hamare hain* (We are the Lord's, the Lord is everyone's, everyone is ours). In the mostly Muslim neighborhood of Ghaffar Manzil, part of the larger Muslim conurbation of Jamia Nagar, they created a space called Sabka Ghar (Everybody's house) in 2017, which functioned as a space where people from different faith backgrounds could live together.

That morning, Faisal Khan was at Jamia Faridia along with Muslim and Hindu members of Khudai Khidmatgar and a Tamil Christian lawyer. As I chatted with Faisal Khan, he said, "The way out of this is to reach an understanding with the

local Hindus. The Hindus who are part of Khudai Khidmatgar will reach out to the other side, work out a settlement (*samjhauta*). Police *se ap kab tak kam chalaenge* (How long will you use the police to maintain order)? If there is hatred in the heart of the other, you have to make the effort to remove that." The idea of rapprochement was echoed by an emissary of Amanatullah Khan, a Muslim member of the Delhi Legislative assembly from the ruling Aam Aadmi Party, who represented the Jamia Nagar area. *Jo ranj hai dono taraf usko mil ke khatam karo*, the emissary said: Come together and finish the grievances on both sides. A lawyer representing the madrasa agreed and said, "*ranj koi itna hai bhi nahin, agar hai to sarkar se hai ki unhonen itna sab hone diya*" (There aren't that many grievances, if there is a grievance it is with the government that they let things get so far).

Then the people at the madrasa, through the emissary and the lawyer, started working out what they were going to ask of the police and the government. It came down to two demands: one, to close the passageway which connected the Dalit *basti* to the empty plot of land and the madrasa, and two, compensation for Azeem's family. There was no demand for punishment for the perpetrators.

The next evening, I ran into a member of the Jamaʿat-e Islami who'd also been present at Jamia Faridia on Friday morning. I asked him about how things had gone, since I had left to go to Old Delhi for *jumʿah* prayers. He recounted events to me as a story of failure and disappointment, and in his story, rather than the local actors, the protagonists were the police and members of Delhi's Legislative Assembly. "Case compromise *ho gaya*" (The legal case [against the perpetrators] has been compromised), he said to me. The people in the Balmiki camp, he said, are solid supporters of Somnath Bharti, the area MLA who also belonged to the Aam Aadmi Party, and he couldn't afford to antagonize them. This, in his understanding, was why the case against the perpetrators had been deliberately weakened. "The case the police have filed is a *suo moto* FIR [first information report], which doesn't name anyone. Which means that they don't have to admit another FIR related to the same incident which you might wish to file."[38] The implication was that the juvenile perpetrators who had been taken into police custody after Azeem's death would not stand trial. "But we will keep pushing for justice," he said.

For the Jamaʿat-e Islami member justice was to be found in the actions of the state, making sure that the perpetrators got their due legal punishment. He wanted to hold Azeem's funeral prayers at the Jamia Faridia after the *jumʿah* prayers there, which would have made for a strong outside Muslim presence in Begampur village, making an already tense situation even more volatile, but would also, in his calculation, put pressure on the administration to ensure due legal process for the perpetrators. He seemed disappointed, as I spoke with him, in Azeem's father's decision to take his son's body back to Mewat for burial, away from the easy reach of news cameras and crowds, which would have televised the funeral and potentially made it a national political issue.

In the vocabulary of the Khudai Khidmatgar, of Amanatullah Khan's emissary, and the maulanas of the madrasa, *insaf* (justice) did not come up. Their concern was not with legal justice but with emotional healing, with making sure that hatred and grievance (*nafrat* and *ranj*) were removed from the locality so that people could live together in relative harmony without the state needing to intervene. The question of punishing the young boys who had killed Azeem never came up, because sending them to prison would only increase ill will. The member of the Jamaʿat-e Islami saw this as weakness, as Muslims choosing to live with injustice in the face of being relatively powerless in the area's electoral calculations.

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps the local Muslims did choose compromise and reconciliation because they were powerless, and rendered more so by growing Islamophobia, by the *lynching ka mahaul*. But I would like to believe that this is not the only explanation. It seems to me that Mufti Mukarram, and Faisal Khan, and the folks from the Jamia Faridia were drawing on an ethical and political tradition far older than the privileging of the state in modern (not only) Muslim political theory.[39] The need to work on selves and the emotions they felt: *nafrat, ranj*—and to work toward social harmony: *milap, samjhauta*—strongly echoes Mughal political traditions where sovereignty over the self was far more important for the maintenance of social order than the sovereignty of the state.

• • •

Sulh-i kull is a political philosophy associated with the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605). *Sulh-i kull* has been understood as a political philosophy of tolerance for all, an openness to religious pluralism that many have seen as a precursor to the distinctiveness of "Indian Secularism."[40] However, as Rajeev Kinra shows, to understand *sulh-i kull* only as a philosophy of governance is to not understand it at all.

> This emphasis on the self, self-examination, and a kind of self-fashioning brings us to the third distinct sense in which Abu al-Fazl [a minister and major thinker in Akbar's court] . . . uses the term *sulh-i kull*: namely, as an aspirational state of consciousness that the individual must strive to cultivate within him or herself. In this sense, *sulh-i kull* was not a policy to be implemented, or even a philosophical basis for intellectual debate and dissent, but rather a state (or more precisely a stage) of being that one needed continually to work toward, and in fact ultimately transcend in order to achieve an even higher stage of consciousness. . . . Other roughly contemporary sources speak of *sulh-i kull* as being, in fact, a lower station of spiritual attainment than "universal love" (*muhabbat-i kull*), because, while the former merely "constitutes a recognition of diversity and calls upon one to be benevolent to all," the latter actually transcends difference altogether and enters into a higher state of consciousness in which "only unity remains." This privileging of love over *sulh* has an interesting parallel in the *akhlaqi* (ethics) tradition, specifically in the *Akhlaq-i*

Nasiri, in which Nasir al-Din Tusi avers more than once that in the ideal society love (*muhabbat*) would be even more important than justice (*ʿadl*).[41]

"If love among the people were available," Nasir al-Din Tusi wrote, "justice would not have been needed."[42] In this tradition of ethics, the harmonious governance of society arose from selves that worked upon themselves to cleanse themselves of religiously motivated prejudice or partiality (*tʿassub*), whether it be in relationship to other Muslims or other-than-Muslims. It was such religious cultivation of the self that was seen as integral to the functioning of a plural society. Going by normative texts of Mughal political theory as explored by Muzaffar Alam and others, Mughal government could be characterized as self-government, if I can use that sense of Gandhian *sva-raj* in an anachronistic context.[43]

The notion of *sulh-i kull* did not disappear either with Aurangzeb, or with the formal end of the Mughal empire in 1857. It continued into nineteenth- and twentieth-century Urdu literature, where we find major figures in Indian Muslim cultural and religious life using the phrase as a shorthand for both social practices of promoting pluralism, as well as the spiritual self-cultivation necessary to embody the embrace of such pluralism. A fine example would be the famed Urdu and Persian poet Mirza Asadullah Khan "Ghalib" (1797–1869), poet laureate at the court of the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah "Zafar" and considered to be one of the greatest of Urdu poets. Ghalib wrote:

azadah rau hun aur mira maslak hai sulh-e kul
hargiz kabhi kisi se ʿadawat nahin mujhe
I am free countenanced, and my way is peace with all
I never at any time have enmity with anyone

. . .

"I never at any time have enmity with anyone." In Schmitt's political theology the core of the political is not enmity per se but the distinction of friend and enemy.[44] What might the political look like without this distinction? A lack of distinction that the speaker of Ghalib's *shʿer* insists on, a speaker who insists that his school of religious conduct (maslak) is *sulh-i kull?* To not have enmity with anyone requires, as we've seen with Kinra's exploration of *sulh-i kull*, an extraordinary spiritual cultivation of the self, of self-governance, especially when faced with the kind of unremitting hostility that Indian Muslims endure today. It is in Urdu poetry that we see most clearly the continuity of such premodern forms of self-governance into the contemporary: the soul aware of the tribulations it faces, the distinction it needs to maintain between its inner *wehshat* and its outer comportment, the need to rid itself of *tʿassub*, the need to cultivate *muhabbat*. We see the traditions of self-rule become "technologies of the self" readily available once more

at a massive, popular level, through the mimetic archive of Urdu poetry, widely available through mobile internet. In the remaining chapters of the book, the poetry I encountered during fieldwork will be our guide through the engagements with self, other, and belonging without which any account of "Muslim politics" in contemporary India is hollow and incomplete.

2

The Ghost of Ghalib

Or, How to Be a Self

baskih dushvar hai har kam ka asan hona
admi ko bhi muyassar nahin insan hona
It is so difficult for any work to be easy
Even to man becoming human is unavailable
—MIRZA ASADULLAH KHAN "GHALIB" (1797–1869)

On the evening of March 12, 2018, South Delhi's Siri Fort Auditorium, which has a capacity of about 1800 people, was nearly full. The packed audience had come to see a play about the life of famous nineteenth-century Urdu poet Mirza Asadullah Khan "Ghalib," as told through his wife's point of view. The play included some of Ghalib's ghazals set to music, staged by Ustad Iqbal Ahmad Khan, a prominent musician of the Delhi *gharanah* (lineage of music). At the beginning of the program, one of Ghalib's ghazals was performed as a *qawwali* (a genre of music traditionally sung at the shrines of Sufi saints). Before the rest of the program commenced, Ustad Iqbal Ahmad Khan came on stage and said:

> This is the first time Ghalib's ghazal has been sung as a *qawwali*.[1] The reason [for singing it as a *qawwali*] is that Ghalib was a Sufi of the Nizami *silsilah* (Sufi order). He had pledged allegiance (*bai'at*) to Pir Nasr ud-Din Shah Kale *sahab*. . . . I consider Ghalib a Sufi even though he himself says,
>
> > *yeh masa'il-e tasawwuf yeh tira bayan ghalib*
> > *tujhe ham wali samajhte jo nah badah-khvar hota*
> > These matters of Sufism, this discourse of yours, Ghalib
> > We would consider you a saint if you weren't a wine drinker[2]
>
> But we consider him a saint anyway (*Ham log to wali samajhte hi hain*).[3]

The audience responded with slow and hesitant applause. At least since *Mirza Ghalib*—the poet and director Gulzar's TV serial on Ghalib's life—was

shown on national TV in the late 1980s, Ghalib has been portrayed in Indian popular culture as a figure who chose to be outside the sphere of religion.[4] The TV show begins near the end of Ghalib's life, portraying him as unable to enter a mosque. Among many contemporary Muslims, and in the academic study of Islam and Muslim societies, poets and poetry have often been understood as being distinct from the larger Islamic discursive tradition.[5] To publicly claim Ghalib as a Muslim saint, as Ustad Iqbal Ahmad Khan did, is to challenge the assumed boundary between poetry and piety. What might be at stake in troubling this boundary in contemporary India?

As Sean Pue writes, "Urdu literary tradition has been a fertile ground for the discussion of Indo-Muslim selfhood in the postcolonial period," and the reception of Ghalib has provided a "particularly rich ground for cultural politics."[6] This continues to be the case in the twenty-first century, not just in literary discourse but also in the ways that literature interfaces with broader streams of popular culture, religion, and ethical life. To claim Ghalib as a saint in contemporary Delhi is to make a claim for the poet as "a creative maker of meaningful space,"[7] a figure not marginal to the Islamic tradition but rather at its critical edge. To use "edge" instead of "margin" is to understand being on the edge, experimenting with the limits of tradition as not being outside of or irrelevant to the tradition but as embodying potentialities of critique and innovation *internal* to the tradition.[8] To claim Ghalib as an authoritatively Islamic figure and hence claim his life and poetry as Islamically authoritative and legible, at this historical moment of normalized Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bias in India, is then profoundly radical. It gestures toward a Muslim—and crucially, also non-Muslim—reclamation of precolonial lifeways and intellectual, literary, and spiritual traditions as an antidote to the poisonous discourses of modern religious nationalism and sectarianism.

As I aim to show in the rest of this chapter, Ustad Iqbal Ahmad Khan's proclamation of Ghalib as *wali* (saint) was not singular but part of a larger trend within both authoritative Islamic discourse and Urdu public culture in North India that transcends the boundaries of religious identity. Ghalib holds open very different potentials for people in contemporary India than those hitherto celebrated and affirmed in postcolonial nationalist modernity: a different relation to language, and hence to selfhood; a different relation of the citizen to the nation-state; and a different relation of the individual to religious authority.

"THE SCRATCHING OF THE PEN IS THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL"

After attending a talk on the effects of Karbala on Urdu literature, given by the prominent Indian Shia *ʿalim* (scholar) Ayatollah Aqeel-ul-Gharavi, a young man got up to ask a question:

> What would you say about Mirza Ghalib's salvation (*Mirza Ghalib ki nijat ke bare men ap kya kahenge*)? Why does it happen that poets and litterateurs [are characterized by] irreligiousness (*la-diniyat*) and complaining against God (*khuda se shikwah*), and drinking wine inside the mosque . . . Why is it that despite knowing that their . . . intellectual capabilities are so large, why despite this do we see [this] from Mirza Ghalib . . . to the poets of the present day?[9]

Aqeel-ul-Gharavi answered,

> Poetry (*shaʿiri*) has its own language. What is sad is that if this is not understood, there can be misunderstandings. For example, when in poetry the term "sin" (*gunah*) is used, do you understand it as sins of *shariʿat* (Islamic legal and ethical prescriptions)? For example, in poetry, when the word "sin" is used, it refers to steps taken with audacity and boldness (*jurraʾt- aur jasarat-mandanah iqdam*). For example, if Ghalib says, "In my breast there is much desire to sin," it means, "There are yet potentials within me; I can still be bold, but society won't let me do it." It is in the meaning of *jurraʾt* (audacity), and the expression of daring that the word "sin" comes up. Or the pious one who truly has an ascetic (*zahidanah*) temperament: we call him a nonconforming libertine (*rind*). And the one who acts pious merely to fool the world: we make fun (*tanz karte hain*) by calling him *shaikh* (preacher) or *zahid* (ascetic).[10] This is the language of poetry. For example, someone says,
>
> *Mera hamraz hafiz-e shiraz*
> *Rind hun maulawi ki surat men*
> Hafiz of Shiraz shares my secrets
> I am a nonconforming libertine in the guise of a maulvi
>
> What is desired to be expressed here by *rind?* Does *rind* mean that he truly, literally wishes to go and drink wine? *Rind* here means one who doesn't give any concern to worldly etiquette and protocol, [who is unlike] those who sin while inside the home but not in front of society because tomorrow they will not pray behind us. That is, that they do not fear God, but fear the creations (*khalq*) of God. Such figures have always been targets of critique of poets, great poets, and they should be targets of critique. And . . . do you think what is being expressed by wine is this wine? The daughter of the grape (*bint-eʿinab*)? And was Ghalib so worthless that in this verse—
>
> *kal ke liye kar aj nah khissat sharab men*
> *yeh su-e zann hai saqi-e kausar ke bab men*
> For the sake of tomorrow don't be stingy with the wine today
> This is an evil idea with regard to the cupbearer of the fountain of paradise
>
> —it is grape wine that Ghalib is mentioning when he speaks of the cupbearer of *kausar*?[11] By wine here the desired meaning is gnosis (*maʿrifat*), knowledge (*ʿilm*). The desired meaning of wine here is gnostic knowledge (*ʿirfan*), the desired meaning of wine is the wine of love. Do you understand? Poetry has its own language. Those poor maulvis who do not understand this knowledge [massive laugh here from the audience], they started giving out fatwas. Mir is a *kafir* (unbeliever), Ghalib is a *kafir*, this one is a *fasiq* (impious person). . . . If they had their way, these esteemed maulvis, every one of them is ready to become *Daʿish* (an ISIS member). They are not

intimate with the Mercy of the Worlds [Prophet Muhammad]. They are not intimate with the Lordship (*rububiyat*) of the Lord of the Worlds. These poor ones are merely embroiled in some issues of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). These are matters of affliction, these are matters of sorrow. So poetry has its own language. There remains the question of whether [he] will be saved or not, this is a matter outside the limits of my authority (*yeh mere daʾirah-e ikhtiyar ki bat nahin*).

. . .

How do we understand the student's questions and the religious scholar's response? The student's question is not isolated in its anxieties about the place of poets in general and Ghalib in particular in religious life in South Asia. Anas Faizi, a popular humorous poet in contemporary Delhi, told me in a conversation how the very mention of Ghalib often brought about the imprecation *voh sharabi* (that drunkard) in everyday conversations. When I spoke of Ghalib to one of the hereditary *khadim*s (servitors) of the *dargah* (shrine) of Nizam ud-Din Auliya, close to which Ghalib is buried, he dismissed Ghalib as a *tuta huʾa admi*, a broken man. These dismissals of Ghalib come perhaps from the very discourses that brought Ghalib into prominence in the twentieth-century South Asian imagination.

Through his biographer Altaf Husain Hali, the poet gained entry into the South Asian secular imagination. Syed Akbar Hyder writes that "Hali identifies Ghalib's true religion (*asl mazhab*) as *sulh-i kull* (absolute peace), an idea that finds popular expression in discourses linked to the religious policies of the Mughal emperor Akbar."[12] According to Hyder, Hali's recasting of Ghalib as a secular, ecumenical figure (as his *sulh-i kull* was understood by them) allowed members of the Progressive Writer's Association (PWA), who were largely Marxist in their political and ideological commitments, to claim Ghalib as a literary predecessor who bestowed legitimacy upon their own literary and political endeavors, and they "recast Ghalib as a harbinger of ethical modernity and a spirit imbued with forward-looking cosmopolitanism."[13] Members of the PWA had an outsize role in the ways that Ghalib was portrayed in postcolonial Indian popular culture. Saadat Hasan Manto wrote the story for the 1954 biopic *Mirza Ghalib*, directed by Sohrab Modi. As Hyder notes, "Manto helps Ghalib enter the canon of modern progressive/liberal politics by projecting him as a rebel figure."[14] Gulzar, who wrote and directed the 1988 TV series, and Kaifi Azmi, who is credited with the historical research, were also both associated with the PWA. In their widely popular portrayal, too, Ghalib is a figure who remains outside the space of religion to the very end of his life.

Ayatollah Aqeel-ul-Gharavi's response to the question of Ghalib's salvation draws on a very different understanding of poetry and its relation to religious life. Audacity and boldness, as expressed in Urdu poetry, are, in Aqeel-ul-Gharavi's account, legitimate, even desirable, qualities of religious life.[15] And poets play a vital role in lampooning religious hypocrisy. Poetry thus expresses and embodies audacity and critique as valued modes of being Muslim.[16]

When I met Aqeel-ul-Gharavi in Wembley, London, in early November 2019, we talked about Ghalib, among other things. "Ghalib is a very great poet," he said. Then he quoted this *shʿer:*

baskih dushvar hai har kam ka asan hona
admi ko bhi muyassar nahin insan hona
It is so difficult for any work to be easy
Even to man becoming human is unavailable

This, he said, is a prophetic statement (*paighambari bayan*). All the prophets from Buddha to the Prophet Muhammad have come with the same message: *ap bani-adam nah banen, ap insan banen* (Don't become [merely] a child of Adam, become a human).

In ascribing a revelatory, even prophetic, status to Ghalib's poetry, Aqeel-ul-Gharavi is drawing on a long genealogy of understanding Ghalib in Urdu literature, which we can date back to at least 1920 when ʿAbd ur-Rahman Bijnauri's *Mahasin-e Kalam-e Ghalib* (The virtues of Ghalib's discourse) was first published. For Bijnauri, "There are two divinely revealed (*ilhami*) books of India: the Holy Vedas and *Divan-e Ghalib* (Ghalib's collection of Urdu ghazal poetry)."[17] A little more than a decade later, the influential Indian Muslim poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal also gave Ghalib an exalted space in his account of his heavenly journey, the *Javed-Namah* (The book of eternity), first published in 1932.[18] For poets to claim to be (and be understood as) prophetic is not unusual in the Islamic tradition. Poetry has a long history of being considered as meaningful Islamic discourse because of its ongoing relation to the potentialities of revelation, or what Shahab Ahmed characterizes as the *Pre-text* of the revelation to Muhammad.[19] As Ahmed writes,

> The canonical Hadith that "The good dream of a faithful person is one forty-sixth of prophecy" . . . expresses at the most quotidian . . . level the concept of the potential direct revelatory accessibility of the Truth of the Unseen to each and every human being: that we are all partakers in the Revelatory process—that we are all fractional prophets. . . . It is this very logic that we have seen operative in the idea of the inspiration of the poet as a simulacrum of Divine Revelation—a concept summed up by the great Nizami [1141–1209] . . . who wrote, "Poetry is the mirror of the visible and the invisible . . . the curtain of mystery, the shadow of the Prophetic veil."[20]

This is an idea that Ghalib himself expresses in his published Urdu *divan*, most famously in the following couplet:

ate hain ghaib se yeh mazamin khayal men
ghalib sarir-e khamah nava-e sarosh hai
They come into the mind, these themes, from the invisible
Ghalib, the scratching of the pen is the voice of an angel

In speaking of Ghalib, Ayatollah Aqeel-ul-Gharavi emphasized that he was the greatest poet of his time (*apne daur ke sab se bare shaʿir the*), which is to say that Ghalib's poetry was prophetic *for his age*. In a radically different but historically parallel context, regarding the ontological vulnerability of the Crow nation when faced with the end of their traditional way of life in the late nineteenth century, Jonathan Lear writes of the poet as "a creative maker of meaningful space."[21] This has also long been understood as the role of poetry in the Urdu tradition, where Ghalib has famously stated of his own poetry, "Poetry is meaning-creation, it's not the measuring-out of rhymes (*shaʿiri maʿni-afrini hai qafiyah-paimaʾi nahin hai*)."[22] When we think of Ghalib's age—an age of revolutions, and age of rapid technical development, an age of the rapid growth of predatory capitalism and its destruction of the life-world of Mughal Delhi—how might Ghalib's poetry be prophetic, in the sense of telling us how to make meaning, how to think and feel and be and act in this new world?

Admi ko bhi muyassar nahin insan hona. As Frances Pritchett notes in her commentary on this verse, "These two complex words, both derived from Arabic, are sometimes used almost as synonyms, but Ghalib emphasizes their differences; although the nuances may be hard to pin down, it's clear that to be *insan* is a superior achievement."[23] If Ghalib is the greatest poet of the early and mid-nineteenth century, we can understand his verse as prophetic, because through his verse he makes one think about the gap between being man and becoming human, between *admi* and *insan*, a gap made more difficult to navigate by massive and violent changes in lifeways that unrestrained corporate capitalism and colonialism (embodied in Ghalib's life and times by the East India Company) brought to the world and to Delhi.[24] Thinking about this gap has been profoundly meaningful for young Muslims—and others—in an India ruled by an increasingly authoritarian regime committed to an ideology of exclusionary religious nationalism.

"I AM NOT PAST TIME THAT I CANNOT RETURN"

During a conversation at the Walled City Café in Old Delhi in February 2018, Abu Sufiyan said, "When I recently went to Ghalib's *haveli* and read the couplets that are written on the walls there, some of them were so true for corporate life that I went crazy, and I totally became a fan (*main pagal hi ho gaya*, fan *ho gaya*)." The Ghalib verse that contained deep insight into corporate life for Abu Sufiyan was the one that Ayatollah Aqeel-ul-Gharavi had cited as prophetic:

> *baskih dushvar hai har kam ka asan hona*
> *admi ko bhi muyassar nahin insan hona*
> It is so difficult for any work to be easy
> Even to man becoming human is unavailable

I first met Abu Sufiyan in February 2018. He was in his mid-twenties, working for Google in Gurgaon and running a Facebook page called Purani Dilli Walo Ki Baatein (the speech/affairs of the folks of Old Delhi), which he had started in 2013. Abu Sufiyan is from a family which has long belonged to Old Delhi, and apart from a few years in Chandigarh to do a bachelor's degree in engineering, he has always lived in the Old City. The Facebook page had started with a bout of homesickness in Chandigarh, as a repository of the ways in which the folks of Old Delhi spoke, the sharp humor and peculiar usages of the *begamati* (women's) and *karkhandari* (working-class) dialects of Old Delhi's Urdu. In the years since he started the page, it had gained a large and dedicated audience. Abu Sufiyan had also embarked upon an unprecedently detailed 3-D photo-documentation of the Old City's built heritage, including Jain temples and derelict *haveli*s (mansions), which he was making available online. Purani Dilli Walo ki Baatein (henceforth PDWKB) had also started doing "heritage walks" through the Old City, led by locals rather than by professional historians.

Abu Sufiyan was busy organizing all of this and creating, coordinating, and posting content on his Facebook page and website in addition to his full-time job working night shifts in a corporate office in Gurgaon as a computer engineer, his timing there in sync with the American workday half a world away. A few months after I first met him, he had quit the corporate job to focus on PDWKB with a renewed focus on citizen journalism, photo-documenting the built heritage of the Old City, and digital marketing and publicity for selected clients, including secular political parties.

> Corporate world *men ap ko insan nahin samjha jata* (In the corporate world, you are not considered an *insan*, a human). What is seen is your productivity. Or how well you play office politics, only then can you survive. You have no real friends, nor do you have any religious values left. . . . It is also disconnecting you from your people. . . . While staying in India, you cannot celebrate Diwali, cannot celebrate Eid . . . corporate life has affected our lives in such a way. Suppose it is Diwali, then I have to work on Diwali. If it is Eid, then one of my colleagues who is Hindu is working on Eid. We've forgotten what it's like to mingle together and talk to each other, to celebrate each other's festivals and religions. This all now stops at exchanging sweets.

Abu Sufiyan is an engineer by training, who was working for one of the most renowned tech companies in the world. And yet his vision of being an *insan*, of human flourishing, was rooted not in the corporate world, but in Old Delhi's narrow, winding lanes, and the modes of human sociality they continue to embody.

> We go to the grave of Raziah Sultan through the narrow, narrow alleys of Bulbuli Khanah. They say, how do people live here? People live here and live happily. *Mil ke reh rahe hain* (They live together). Even if my enemy lives in my neighborhood and he gets to know that a mishap has happened to me and there is no one to take care

of me at home, he will be the first to rush me to the hospital. So in times of trouble at least people here come together and stand with each other. In these narrow alleys people get a sense of how lives are being lived and lived happily.

Abu Sufiyan was talking about the walks that PDWKB had started conducting in Old Delhi. The focus of these walks was not just historical but rather on the lives and culture of the people who continue to live in the Old City. Given the poor reputation that the Muslim-dominated parts of Old Delhi had in the larger city—as a den of terrorists—this was vital and important work.[25] But Abu Sufiyan saw this work as important not just for those who came from outside the Old City, but also for those who lived within it. He was greatly concerned about the interconnection between the rapid destruction of the Old City's built heritage and the loss of its particular lifeways. The density of history was inextricably linked to the density of social interactions, of care for each other, which for Abu Sufiyan was fundamental to a life well-lived.

Yahan ka insan mar chuka hai ek tariqe se (In a way, the human of [Old Delhi] has died). He doesn't know, he thinks let things go on the way they are going on. And it is really important to wake them up. . . . Through the page they get to know what the Old City used to be, how we used to live, and how we live now. . . . My motive is not to make money through heritage walks; it is to make people aware of where you are living, and how you are living. What are the things you need here, and how do you learn to demand them? When I carry my stories from the Old City on the page, people realize that things are wrong. . . . People who didn't speak earlier, now they have started speaking openly.

A persistent theme in all my interactions with Abu Sufiyan was the constant move between the city's past and its present: what happened in 1857 and what survived, how nostalgia for the past could serve as a springboard for political action in the present. This was particularly intriguing to me because Abu Sufiyan is an engineer and a coder, a demographic that is usually considered to be concerned primarily with the future. Much as he loves poetry, he doesn't remember it like older generations and has to look it up on his phone. Even the community of like-minded people that Abu Sufiyan had found in Old Delhi was through the PDWKB page. And yet Abu Sufiyan persistently used the English word "nostalgia" in our conversations, which were conducted primarily in Hindi-Urdu.

AVT: When we talk, you often mention nostalgia. Why?

Abu Sufiyan: I am often lost in nostalgia, and nostalgia is a thing that connects us to our existence. If we're lost in nostalgia, it means we're living a life we don't want. A human only remembers the thing that he wants to live. . . . When I remember these things, however troubled I am, I get mental peace (*zehni sukun*). That is what nostalgia is about. When you are going through a bad time in your current era (*daur*), or

> going through a time when you are really troubled, then nostalgia gives you moral support, it gives you motivation. It leaves a sparkle and a ray of light that yes, you too have seen an era which still gives you happiness today. . . . It is more like a time machine. They say that if you travel faster than the speed of light, you can travel in time. At that moment you're traveling faster than the speed of light.

The word "nostalgia" appeared in Western Europe as a diagnosis, the name of a disease.[26] The ways in which Abu Sufiyan uses it are very different. For one, it is a diagnostic, not a diagnosis. Nostalgia connects you to the truth of your existence. If you're nostalgic, it means you're living a life that you don't want. Second, it is a cure, not a disease. Being lost in nostalgia brings a sparkle and a ray of light in the darkest and most troubled of times; it gives moral support, it gives motivation. Abu Sufiyan was speaking of nostalgia at both an individual and collective level. "*Jin logon ko purani Dilli ki fikr hai*," he said later, "*woh sab kisi nah kisi* nostalgia *men khoʾe huʾe hain*" (All those who are concerned about Old Delhi are lost in some nostalgia or the other). But the nostalgia he described was not melancholic, as we often imagine nostalgia to be, but something more like its opposite. It was happiness and light and speed that he used to talk about nostalgia: a ray of light, traveling faster than the speed of light. What about the history and location he inhabits might give his nostalgia its particular coloring?

"Our walks are more focused on the people living in Old Delhi, not just what happened in 1857, or in ʾ47, *aj kya hai* (what [old Delhi] is today). . . . I want to preserve and show the Delhi that remains." The dates that Abu Sufiyan mentions are significant. Both 1857, the bloody defeat of the rebellion against the East India Company and the end of the Mughal court, and the Partition of 1947 and its continuing legacies of violence and displacement have deeply marked and affected Old Delhi, especially its Muslims.[27] And in Old Delhi, nostalgia for the lost world of pre-1857 has long been a productive emotion, as Margrit Pernau observes, one that makes possible different interpretations of the present and the future, "because the past experiences still are a guide leading toward possible horizons of expectation."[28] In Abu Sufiyan's understanding, nostalgia is productive because it enhances the importance of the fact that despite Old Delhi's traumatic history, some of the lifeways of the precolonial Mughal city, including its traditions of different communities living together more or less harmoniously, still persist. Despite all that Old Delhi had gone through, by living and growing up here you still carry remnants of precolonial urbanity within you; the past is never quite "history" because you embody it.

> With heritage walks, my motive has always been that it is not authors or historians or tour guides who should lead them, but local people from here. . . . We may feel that we're not historians, we're not anything, and we don't know that much, but because we've been living this life for the past thirty or forty years, it has settled in our blood. We may not be aware of it, but when people interact with us, they get a new story that they won't find in a textbook or in William Dalrymple [the historian and popular author].

In October 2018, I went on a heritage walk organized by PDWKB in Old Delhi. The tour started from Ghalib's *haveli* in Ballimaran in Old Delhi, now a memorial to him run by the Delhi government. The walk was being led by Anas Faizi, who is an Urdu poet well-known for his *mizah*, or humorous poetry. Anas has an MA in Urdu literature from Delhi University and works as a teacher in the Delhi government school system. In addition to leading heritage walks, he does occasional work for Urdu radio and television as well as hosting *musha'irah*s. One of the first questions asked after his introductory remarks was, "What about the use of wine in Ghalib's poetry, and isn't this against Islam?" Anas answered by giving some details of the metaphorical uses of wine in Urdu poetry. Then he smiled and said, "*Mulla se ham kehte hain kih jannat men sha'ir hi zyadah pa'e ja'enge*" (We tell the mullahs that poets will outnumber them in heaven).

As we continued on the walk, enjoying the relative quiet of the city on a Sunday, the narrative and conversation moved seamlessly between the Delhi of Ghalib's era and the contemporary condition of the Old City. As we were walking past Ahata Kale Sahib, the home of the Sufi where Ghalib had taken refuge after being sprung from debtor's prison,[29] now a girl's school operated by a Muslim charitable foundation, Anas talked about how there was no science-stream high school for girls in the Old City, pointing toward the history of the neglect of education in Old Delhi in postcolonial India. In the Hamdard *dawa-khanah* (house of medicine) complex, Anas talked about the foresightedness of *hakim* (practitioner of traditional Unani medicine) 'Abd ul-Majid, who restarted the *dawa-khanah* from scratch by selling Rooh Afza, a popular cooling drink. When everyone was afraid for their lives during the tumult of Partition, he had the foresight to plan ahead, to buy plots of land in what was then a jungle near Tughlaqabad, which became the future site of Jamia Hamdard (Hamdard University).

As we neared the Chawri Bazar metro station and Hauz Qazi police station, Sikandar Changezi, who has a treasure trove of historical documents related to the Old City, pulled out a color illustration of what he said was *Dilli ka akhiri musha'irah*, the last great poetic gathering of Delhi before the end of Mughal rule, remembered by literary convention as having happened in 1846.[30] The illustration showed a beautiful, chandelier-illuminated hall full of the nobility of Old Delhi. This, he said, happened right where the Hauz Qazi police station now stands.

The contrast between the image of that hall, lit by chandeliers and filled with some of the best Urdu poets of the nineteenth century, and the brutalist concrete architecture of the contemporary police station was what I carried with me as I walked into the Chawri Bazar station and took a train heading south. Was this juxtaposition an image of despair? The *musha'irah*s and poetic *nashist*s (sittings) were still going on, and PDWKB was now organizing them in the courtyards of traditional-style homes that remained in the Old City, livestreaming them on Facebook and archiving them on YouTube. Despite all the destruction that Old Delhi had gone through, it had not yet been destroyed: "Culture" had not yet become "history." Conversations about

and with Ghalib continued to unfold in homes and tea shops and libraries in the Old City and beyond. The persistence and revival of the lifeways of Old Delhi in the face of overwhelming destruction brought to mind Ghalib's *shʿer*:

> *Meherban ho ke bula lo mujhe chaho jis waqt*
> *Main gaya waqt nahin hun kih phir a bhi nah sakun*
> Be kind and call me whenever you wish
> I am not past time that I cannot return[31]

"LET SOMEONE CURE MY SORROW"

In July 2018, Ghalib went on trial in contemporary Delhi. In Danish Iqbal's absurdist play *Anti-National Ghalib*, staged at the Ghalib Institute's Urdu Drama Festival, a filmmaker desperate to delay the release of a rival's film files a suit against it. He alleges that the yet-to-be-released film features lyrics that a) hurt the religious sentiments of a particular community, and b) are inimical to national security. The offending lyrics are from a famous ghazal by Ghalib:

> *Ibn-e maryam hua kare koʾi*
> *Mere dukh ki dawa kare koʾi*
> Let someone be the son of Mary
> Let someone cure my sorrow
> . . .
> *Nah suno gar bura kahe koʾi*
> *Nah kaho gar bura kare koʾi*
> Do not listen if someone says something bad
> Do not speak if someone does something bad

The latter *shʿer*, the suit alleges, goes against the interests of national security—if you see something, say something—and the former, by being somewhat frivolous about Jesus, "hurts the religious sentiments" of the Christian community. Hurting religious sentiments is a criminal offence under the Indian Penal Code due to a colonial-era ordinance that has increasingly been used to curtail both artistic and academic freedom in postcolonial India.[32] Instead of being dismissed, the suit is given cognizance by the court, and Ghalib is summoned to defend himself. For much of the play, Ghalib's spirit possesses a subaltern court clerk. When possessed by Ghalib, the bumbling clerk, a figure of colonial and postcolonial abjection, becomes a figure of royal grace and swagger and ready wit, a figure who by the end, both the other characters in the play (none of whom know literary Urdu) and the audience can't get enough of.

A month after seeing the play, I met Danish Iqbal, the playwright, in his office at the Mass Communication Research Center at Jamia Millia Islamia. We spoke about the ways in which the figure of Ghalib in the play seemed so radically different from the contemporary figures he encountered in the courtroom.

> AVT: In watching the play, one thing that came across very clearly was that Ghalib's personality is very different from that of contemporary people. And if I might use contemporary vocabulary, he has a lot of swag.
>
> Danish Iqbal: Yes, he has swag. And he was more modern than today's modern people. *Our modernity is only about outwards appearances; it is not inner modernity* (emphasis mine). He is wearing a tall hat, he is wearing a cloak, there is an orthodox look to him, but he was a modern man. . . . His personality that comes through [in the play], a lot of lawyers appear stupid before him, in fact our society looks stupid before him. Because you feel like he is a man from olden times (*purane zamane ke admi*), but he was not a man from olden times, he was a free thinker, and he was very enlightened, and within him there was not the faintest trace of orthodoxy.

He looks like a man from olden times, but he is more modern than today's modern people. How do we understand this seemingly paradoxical sentiment, which was certainly not isolated in its assessment of precolonial Urdu poets being more tolerant and freethinking than contemporary Indians?

Such an understanding of Ghalib does not seem so paradoxical if we understand Ghalib as an early modern anti-absolutist figure. In *The Black Hole of Empire*, Partha Chatterjee gives us a picture of the early modern not as a "period" but as elements of thought and practice characterized by "innovations that question previously held beliefs and practices, recognize their passing because of the unstoppable sway of the new, or represent novel ways of comprehending or coping with the unfamiliar."[33] Chatterjee also shows us the transitional, contingent nature of the early modern, demonstrating that there is no teleological inevitability in the transition from the early modern to the characteristically coercive forms of colonial modernity. He distinguishes between absolutist and anti-absolutist tendencies within the early modern, and shows that the questioning, anti-absolutist tendencies emerged from discursive spaces of indigenous debate that were not shaped by the forces of colonial education. Ghalib is, as it were, the platonic ideal figure of Chatterjee's characterization of the anti-absolutist early modern,[34] and following Chatterjee, we could say that Ghalib embodies the anti-absolutist and unorthodox potentials of a South Asian and Islamic early modern formation "seeking to assert the freedoms of the subject" whose "historical significance is lost by forcibly dragging it into other historical narratives of liberalism or nationalism."[35]

The freedom of the subject was vividly on display in the actor who played the court clerk possessed by Ghalib. Danish Iqbal went on to say, describing his performance:

> The good thing is that the actor interpreted it this way, there's a change that comes inside him, he gets that swag, the way he conducts himself, the kind of confidence that he displays, that's very good. You might have noticed that the actor was so much in character that when some people in the audience heckled him, in the same way that he was answering the lawyers, and the judges, because he had internalized the character, in the same flow he answered those people. He knew what kind of role he

> was playing. So, he basically snubbed two hecklers without breaking a sweat. This is quite a big thing that he didn't feel disturbed, otherwise an average person would have flubbed his lines, would have forgotten them, but no, he had made the character his own. . . . Ghalib had come upon him (*Ghalib un par aa gaʾe the*).

It had indeed been amazing watching the actor playing Ghalib swat away the hecklers with the ready wit for which Ghalib is remembered. And it had been wrenching watching the end of the play, when the spirit of Ghalib, absolved by the court, departs from the clerk, leaving him as a stooped, befuddled, and pathetic figure, still dressed in Ghalib's regalia. But for a while there, our absurd and abject postcolonial present was ennobled by embodying a precolonial poet. Iqbal's play caught something of the air in Delhi in 2018. People in the city wished to be possessed by the ghost of Ghalib.

Ghalib is ubiquitously present in contemporary Delhi, far beyond the limits of the Old City or Muslim identity. Couplets attributed to him flood social media, he appears as a character in popular stage plays, and his image adorns new art being made in the city. The ubiquity of Ghalib in the landscapes of contemporary Delhi is part of a larger phenomenon, strange and wondrous even to those who are active participants in it: the sudden rise and popularity of Urdu literature, especially poetry, in Delhi over the last few years, coinciding almost exactly with the coming to power of the Hindu nationalist BJP.

Since Partition in 1947, Urdu has largely been identified with Muslims in India and has systematically been marginalized, especially in primary education. But the past few years have seen young people in urban North India, not so long ago identified with anglophone call center jobs and the English novels of Chetan Bhagat,[36] not only filling auditoriums to standing-room-only capacity to listen to Urdu poetry, but also writing Urdu poetry of very high quality.[37] Posters of Urdu poets—a genre of pop art that did not exist till a few years ago—are so popular now that they are being pirated. How do we understand these two intertwined phenomena of the prominence of Ghalib and the popularity of Urdu in contemporary Delhi? By being inextricably linked to the precolonial past and its intellectual, ethical and affective traditions, Ghalib—as a synecdoche for the Urdu poetic world—continues to question the dominance of the "normative horizon" of the nation-state, as Ali Khan Mahmudabad characterizes it, and holds open other potentials of being, selfhood, and belonging than those demanded by postcolonial nationalist modernity.[38]

THE WONDER OF THE HUMAN

bandagi men bhi voh azadah o khvud-bin hain kih ham
ulte phir aʾe dar-e kʿabah agar va nah hua
Even in servitude, we are so free and self-regarding that we
Turned back from the door of the Kaaba if it did not open

> *Khvud-bin, adj. 'Regarding self'; self-conceited, vain, proud, arrogant, presumptuous.*[39]
>
> *Our received habits of conceptualizing Islam as discourses of prescription rather than as discourses of exploration have considerably obstructed us from recognizing the place of discourses of the Self as central to and constitutive of human and historical Islam.*[40]

In a conversation about poetry in September 2018, the lawyer Saif Mahmood, a public promoter of Urdu and author of a book on Delhi's Urdu poets, cited the above couplet to illustrate the high self-regard of the Urdu poets of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Delhi, usually understood as arrogance. *Khvud-bin*, the word that Ghalib uses in the couplet, does usually imply arrogance, as in this editorial preface to my copy of Ghalib's *divan*: "*Ghalib balaʾ ke khvud-bin aur khvud-parast the*" (Ghalib was extremely arrogant and self-worshipping).[41] But as Saif strongly suggested both in his prose[42] and in conversation, *khvud-bini* can also mean (and can be literally translated to) "self-regard." It is a term which implies not just arrogance, but literally, looking at oneself, self-knowledge. *Khvud-bini* implies a certain self-scrutiny and not finding oneself wanting in the face of such scrutiny.

Ghalib, after all, lived in a culture where a complex understanding of human interiority and selfhood was the norm. Consider the following *shʿer*:

> *hai admi bajaʾe khvud ik mahshar-e khayal*
> *ham anjuman samajhte hain khalwat hi kyon nah ho*
> Man, in place of a (singular) self, is a teeming multitude of thoughts
> We understand it as an assembly even if it be solitude

Instead of a singularity, the self is a teeming multitude of thoughts; even in solitude, the inner self is multitudinous enough to be an assembly so dense as to be akin to the assembly of souls gathered on judgment day (*mahshar*). This is poetry that reports, with a great deal of self-awareness, a complex inner self irreducible to a simplified singularity. Ghalib explicitly links his discourse to "the problems of Sufism" (*masaʾil-e tasawwuf*), and Sufi discourse in Delhi in the century before Ghalib, the work of Shah Waliullah (1703–62) for instance, was characterized by a profound exploration of the subtleties (*lataʾif*) and multidimensionality of the self.[43] Knowledge of the inner self was an essential ground for the "pedagogy of interiority."[44] Poetry's link to self-exploration, and hence to Sufism as a mode of self-knowledge, is a tradition that continues into the contemporary moment.

The poet Azhar Iqbal was asked, for a TV interview in August 2018, "What is poetry?" (*shaʿiri kya hai?*)

He replied, "Poetry is connected to spirituality, to Sufism. It is a journey to meet one's self" (*Shaʿiri ka tʿalluq ruhaniyat se, tasawwuf se hai. Yeh apni zat se milne ka safar hai*).

• • •

The proliferation of smartphones, cheap data plans, and the uploading of Urdu poetry in Roman and Devanagari scripts by websites such as urdupoetry.com and most successfully, since 2012, by rekhta.org, as well as the proliferation of *mushaʿirah* recordings on YouTube, made a vast embodied archive of this tradition of speaking of and speaking to the self widely available to young people in India. This had not been possible for an earlier generation, due to the virtual disappearance of Urdu from school education in India after Partition and Independence. The new technology in turn has led to a resurgence of Urdu poetry in the popular culture of North Indian cities, with new poets writing ghazal poetry of astonishing originality and quality.

Vipul Kumar is one of these poets. Growing up in the small town of Hanumangarh, in the western state of Rajasthan, like many people in India his main exposure to Urdu poetry was mostly through ghazal recordings and Bollywood music. After finishing high school in 2010, he moved to Kota for a year to prepare for engineering entrance exams. Kota is a city (in)famous in India as the place where Indian teenagers are under extreme stress as they devote years of their life—and their parents' financial resources—enrolled in coaching centers to spend day after day, often for years, slogging to prepare for the insanely competitive entrance exams for the Indian Institutes of Technology, or IITs.

For many young people Kota is a city of anomie, of suffocating discipline, a city with a suicide rate for young people that is off the charts.[45] But Vipul, away from home for the first time in a big city, also found it to be a space of freedom. In the bookstores of Kota, he discovered Urdu poetry as printed text, and he discovered Ghalib. Initially, he picked up cheap paperback editions, in Devanagari script, of the selected poetry of the classical Urdu poets, published by Sajan Peshawari. He read urdupoetry.com and got hold of Ghalib's Urdu *divan*. That whole year in Kota, he told me, "*maine lagatar shaʿiri parhi*" (I continuously read poetry). While all around him young people were cracking up under pressure, Vipul was reading Ghalib and becoming so engrossed in poetry that he forgot to turn up for the second part of the IIT entrance exam.

Poetry and engineering are often considered to be antithetical careers, but when I met Vipul in 2018, he was one of the most well-known of the younger generation of Urdu poets in Delhi. He had completed an engineering degree and was working as a software developer for a company that made cellphone apps. In our conversations, however, his training and career never came up. It was Ghalib who had educated him, a crucial teacher in the pedagogy of interiority that is almost entirely missing in the higher education considered desirable for professional success in contemporary India. How had Ghalib affected him? "Before I read Ghalib, I did not know that experiences and emotions could have so many colors (*tajribat aur ehsasat ke itne rang ho sakte hain*)." Reading Ghalib, he said, helps you confront your emotions, it produces in you the strength to be sensitive (*ap apne* emotions *se do-char hote hain, ap men* sensitive *hone ki quwwat paida hoti hai*). Vipul's poetry, deeply influenced by

Ghalib, celebrates the depth and complexity and wonder of being human, as in this couplet:

Mujh ko aʾinah dikhati hai farishton ki nazar
Aur main hairat-e insani men duba hua hun
The gaze of the angels shows me a mirror
And I am drowned in the wonder of the human

"I AM FREE COUNTENANCED AND MY WAY IS PEACE WITH ALL"

A couple of weeks after the heritage walk, I met Anas Faizi one evening at a small tea shop in Old Delhi, an informal hangout for local poets. I brought up what he'd said about Ghalib at the heritage walk and he smiled and said, "*Pehle mujhe Khuda se khauf ata tha, Ghalib parh ke mujhe iman aaya*"(Earlier I used to be afraid of God, after reading Ghalib I [truly] came to faith). This was, Anas said, because of the way he could address God. To illustrate, he quoted the same *shʿer* of Ghalib's that Saif had earlier shared with me:

bandagi men bhi voh azadah o khvud-bin hain kih ham
ulte phir aʾe dar-e kʿabah agar va nah hua
Even in servitude, we are so free and self-regarding that we
Turned back from the door of the Kaaba if it did not open

As for Ghalib's drinking, Anas said, "None of us is *parsa* (pure). But thanks to Ghalib I now study the Quran closely in a study circle with an older friend because I don't want a third party interpreting its meanings for me. For instance, in the Quran, there are the Sabeans.[46] It is unclear who they are, and yet they are promised heaven. I want to think about these things on my own."

Reading Ghalib's poetry transformed Anas's relation to religion from one of fear to one of exploration. To the idea of *bandagi*, being a servant of God, which is to say, Islam, Ghalib's verse adds two ideas: being *khvud-bin* (self-regarding) and being *azadah* (free). While both ideas are part of the Urdu poetic universe, and of the conceptual terminology of potentialities for selfhood in Sufism,[47] the sense in which Ghalib uses the idea of being free has a distinctly anti-absolutist sensibility, one of a self unconstrained by authority, particularly religious authority. Another verse that uses the term *azadah*, in a ghazal from 1852 that was not included in his final authorized *divan*, is this:

azadah-rau hun aur mira maslak hai sulh-e kull
hargiz kabhi kisi se ʿadawat nahin mujhe
I am free countenanced, and my way is peace with all
I never at any time have enmity with anyone

Sulh-i kull (peace with all) is of course a political and ethical concept with a long Mughal history, going back over two centuries before Ghalib's era to the time of

the emperor Akbar, as previously mentioned. That, Ghalib says, is my *maslak*, my way or school of religious conduct. But before telling us his *maslak*, Ghalib says, "I am *azadah-rau*" (of a free countenance). Could we see this as a dimension of novelty added to the Mughal conceptual world that Ghalib inhabited? For while Ghalib indeed embodied the ethics of *sulh-i kull* in his everyday life, with deep friendships cultivated across religious and ethnic boundaries, he also added a dimension of actively refusing to be defined or limited by a sectarian identity. Much consternation continues for instance as to whether he was Sunni or Shia. "In general he would not allow his religion or the lack of it to become a cause of friction in any of his personal relationships with men whom he liked and respected, and he evaded making it an issue either by refusing to be serious, or else by saying whatever he thought the other wanted to hear."[48]

It was a form of freedom from religious identity that would soon become constrained by the coming of colonial forms of knowledge and power such as the colonial census and its construction of religion as a primary marker of political identity. But the early modern formation that Ghalib embodied, "seeking to assert the freedoms of the subject against arbitrary and absolute power,"[49] while it may have been short-lived, did not just meet an unsung end. Rather, that early modern formation continues to hold open potentials for ethical life in the present, potentials that have been revived in contemporary Muslim life in India, faced with the existential threat of regnant Hindu nationalism.

In the last few years when I have visited Ghalib's *mazar* (grave), I have found it covered with flowers and *chadar*s (decorative sheets), like those offered at the shrines of Sufi saints. Ghalib, for those who are rediscovering him in contemporary India, holds open the potentials for the exaltation of the self, the questioning of convention, and of freedom—of *azadi*[50]—from absolutist authoritarianism and restrictive social mores. To understand Ghalib as a Muslim saint (*wali*) at this historical moment—when *azadi* has become the slogan of various anti-authoritarian movements in India, including the protests against the CAA—is then a rebroadening of the Islamic tradition, its reclaiming of the tradition's critical edge. To insist that Ghalib is a Sufi and a saint is to insist that the lifeways he embodied, an attitude of openness toward radical (religious) difference as well as a spirit of defiant philosophical inquiry, is Islamically legitimate and authoritative. And it is to insist that this anti-absolutist figuration of Islam, which embodies such open disdain of worldly power,[51] and embodies such an elevation of the self—*bandagi men bhi voh azadah-o-khvud-bin hain kih ham*—is particularly relevant at a time when Muslims in India are assailed by majoritarian Hindutva and its drive to crush and eliminate minority and dissenting voices. That Ghalib as a *wali* holds open potentials for many non-Muslims as well, with Vipul as an exemplar, also presents us with a characteristically Ghalibian paradox, one that confounds our usual divides of religion and literature, sacred and secular. It illustrates Shahab Ahmed's argument that you do not need to be Muslim to make meaning in terms of Islam.[52]

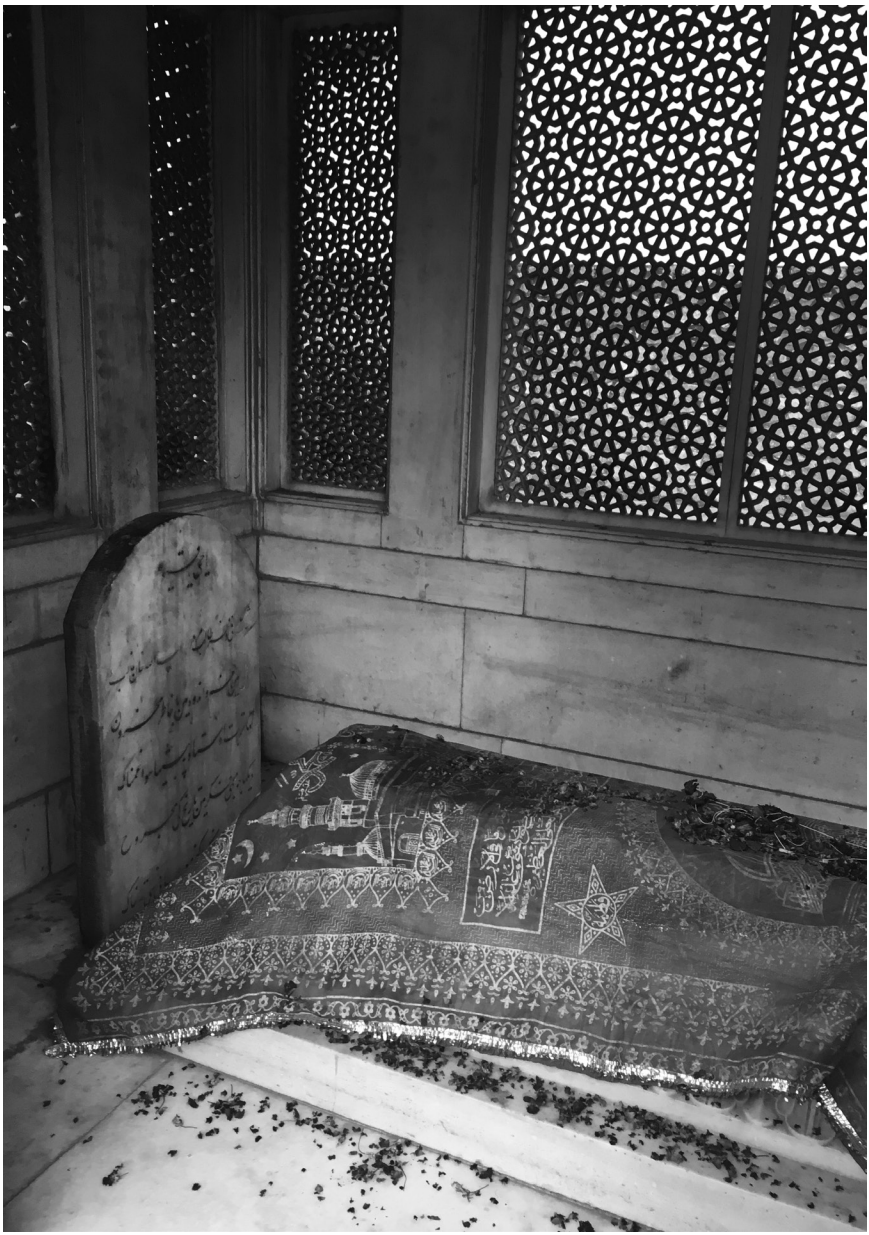

FIGURE 2. Ghalib's grave adorned by a *chadar* and rose petals, September 2018. Photo by author.

It also confronts us with the radical possibility that the kind of self-cultivation that allows an individual to live comfortably and even hospitably with religious difference without privileging the agency of the state, usually glossed as "secular," especially in South Asia, can be religious—particularly, *Islamic*—in its origins. Ghalib as *wali* allows us to see prophetic potentialities for South Asian selfhood and society as they once were and may yet come to be.

> *Huʾi muddat ke ghalib mar gaya par yad ata hai*
> *Voh har ik bat par kehna kih yun hota to kya hota*
> It's been an age since Ghalib died but [we] remember him
> That saying about everything, "If it was thus, what would be?"

3

This Is the Woman's Miracle

The Networked Public Sphere and the Remaking of Gender Relations

yeh ʿaurat ka karishmah hai teri wehshat ke pani ko
badan ki sip men rakh kar use insan banati hai
This is the woman's miracle, placing the water of your frenzy
In the oyster shell of [her] body, makes it into a human

—SAMINA TABASSUM

Late one night I was drinking chai in a teashop in Old Delhi with a few male poets when Anas recited the above couplet by the poet Samina Tabassum. *Wehshat ka pani* (the water of frenzy) is an unambiguous reference to male ejaculation. In the Urdu poetic tradition, it is raindrops—if they make it intact to the bottom of the sea and into the shells of oysters—that become transformed into pearls. Drawing on this trope, and its associated ideas of the trials of gaining knowledge and spiritual refinement, in Samina Tabassum's poem the miracle of women is the ability to take in a drop of ejaculate, emitted in the animalistic frenzy of male orgasm, and transform it into an *insan*, the highest potentiality of the human condition.

Anas said, "My friend called me from Saudi Arabia: Brother, whose *shʿer* is this? I couldn't sleep all night! *Mard samaj ko is shʿer ne jhinhor ke rakh diya* (This couplet shook up male society)." As the poem circulated online, the comment section filled with abusive messages. Anas said these reactions exposed the deep disquiet that this poem elicited among men. "One gentleman said, what is this, she should have used *muhabbat ka pani* (the water of love) instead. I said the *shʿer* would have died (*maine kaha shʿer mar jata*), if she'd used anything apart from *wehshat*. I mean however much you love your partner with whom you are getting intimate, at that last moment if you are given vows, if you're grabbed and pulled away you won't move . . . at the time of discharge it is *wehshat*. Whether you abuse it or like it, the *shʿer* has done its work."

What is the work that this *shʿer* does? By associating men with savagery and feminine biology with the *tarbiyat* (ethical cultivation) that makes humans into *insan*, the couplet inverts the long-concatenated binaries of female and male, nature and culture.[1] It performs the shock of philosophy[2] in public, making us question assumptions about the nature of gender relations that still constitute our world. Samina Tabassum is a prolific Pakistani Urdu poet and prose writer now based in Canada, a feminist Muslim thinker who sees no contradiction between Islamic traditions, gender equality, and other progressive values. Because of these qualities, her work has often had a hard time finding a publisher.[3] But through the medium of Facebook, where she has over 30,000 followers, her Urdu poetry now circulates—and disquiets—far beyond national boundaries or the distribution networks of print publishing.

In this chapter, I discuss how social media has led to a new porosity between the often-segregated discursive spheres of men and women. This has allowed a greater reach for women's voices into male spaces like the gathering at the teashop where Anas recited Tabassum's *shʿer*. It has made possible new forms of friendship and relationality between men and women and the formation of new networks and forms of solidarity both between men and women and between women. These new networks and forms of solidarity have led to the emergence of novel forms of poetic expression, political mobilization, and the renegotiation of gendered relationships and gendered forms of labor—all of which came together in Shaheen Bagh, where a sit-in protest led by Muslim women became the nucleus of a radical zone of free expression and experimentation and the moral and symbolic center of the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) (see chapter 4).

In a sense, this chapter can be seen as a prehistory of Shaheen Bagh. Much of the literature on social media and society has focused on how social media has enabled "movements," such as #metoo, and protests such as Occupy Wall Street and Gezi Park.[4] Writing about the #metoo movement, Sarah Jaffe comments, "You never can tell where a social movement is going to come from. They're built of a million injustices that pile up and up, and then suddenly, spill over."[5] What I want to show in this chapter is that maybe you *can* tell where a movement is going to come from, because it arises not just from the piling up of injustices, but also from the piling up of societal transformations that build up the potentials for a movement, for the imagination of a different future.

The story of Shaheen Bagh as a movement is inextricable from the transformations in gender relations and the new audibility of women's voices and experiences in the public sphere that began in the years before. These transformations may have been small and individual, but their accumulation was exponentially multiplied by social media, bringing an unprecedented rapidity to transformation. I will first show how different media platforms—particularly Facebook and WhatsApp—have served as tools for bringing women's voices into the public sphere and enabling networks

across gender and generational divides. I will then turn to the poetry of some contemporary women poets in India whose work became visible through social media networks and show how their poetry anticipates the political forms and social potentialities that were articulated in spaces like Shaheen Bagh. In doing this, I return to Jonathan Lear's argument that poets are the creative makers of meaningful space. Lear defines *radical hope* as that which "anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it."[6] Poets anticipate and provide these emergent concepts for a future yet to be.

WHATSAPP AND LOCAL POLITICS

"WhatsApp University" is the pejorative term for the tidal wave of disinformation disseminated through this texting app. WhatsApp groups, sometimes groups of locality, such as Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), and sometimes groups of extended family or friends, often reproduce the hierarchical, patriarchal, and toxic dimensions of such real-life groups, including forwarding the hateful "*gyan*" ([gnostic] knowledge, here used pejoratively) generated by the BJP IT Cell. Not surprisingly, WhatsApp groups, which can authorize and spread disinformation with unprecedented rapidity, with messages reaching hundreds of thousands of people virtually simultaneously, have led to lynchings. Not surprisingly, there are advice columns in more liberal English-language publications on how to exit your family WhatsApp group.[7]

What the WhatsApp group chat makes possible, the creation of intentional communities which can converse through text and images simultaneously across disparate geographies, without people needing to be in the same room, is as useful for the creation of counterpublics as it is for the weaponizing of dominant public opinion. The poets chatted with each other through WhatsApp groups throughout the week and then met in physical spaces over the weekends. And in the Ghaffar Manzil area of Jamia Nagar, a neighborhood WhatsApp group allowed for women to politically organize and clean up their neighborhood in a manner that would have been much harder—if not impossible—before, with men dominating physical public space and discourse.

Ghaffar Manzil is an area that was originally developed as residences for professors who worked at Jamia Millia Islamia, and though it has become a much denser neighborhood with an influx of Muslims from UP and other parts of India, a significant core of its population are second and third generation residents, those whose parents and grandparents originally built homes there.[8] These residents, who had lived there a long time, remembered how beautiful Ghaffar Manzil used to be, bordered by the green open spaces of the university campus, the Jamia Ridge, and farmland, and how dirty and congested it had become. A sense of crisis was precipitated for women who were "old time" residents by two interconnected factors, both related to the health and well-being of their children. The first was

the massive dengue outbreak in the neighborhood in 2015. "And nothing changed between the last year and the next year," Bilal Zaidi, who is a second-generation resident of Ghaffar Manzil, said to me when I spoke to him in August 2018. "And then the women were like, 'are we doing this all over again?'"

The other big reason was that garbage, along with the health hazard it posed, was having a negative effect on their children and their sense of belonging to the neighborhood. K, who teaches at Jamia Millia Islamia, and who grew up in and continues to live in Ghaffar Manzil, said, "The landmark for Ghaffar Manzil was the *kuredan*—the garbage dump—it was really affecting the kids. The kids wanted to leave the area. We can't call our friends here because there is garbage right at the entrance. Anyway, people have very negative thoughts about Muslims that they are dirty. But the kids are all studying in good schools, their mentality has changed."

The children of Ghaffar Manzil, born to highly educated and increasingly affluent parents—as Bilal characterized them, "Everyone has a big car now"—and sharing the same aspirational horizons as their Hindu classmates from posh South Delhi colonies, were no longer okay with living in a space marked by the presence of garbage, a sign of the civil neglect of Muslim areas and a visual and olfactory marker of Muslim exclusion. K characterized the activism that she and other women began not only as inspired by but also carried out in collaboration with the children of the neighborhood. "Once we established a link with the children, now whenever we want to do something we push the kids forward, so that they feel yes, we children are doing the work, and once the kids are involved and they do good work, then their parents get involved too."

In her story, the change began with a WhatsApp group consisting mostly of women who'd grown up in Ghaffar Manzil: a "ladies welfare group" concerned with the state of the neighborhood, consisting of *purane log* (old people) of the neighborhood. "These things were in everyone's minds, but nobody could start anything." The WhatsApp group and the conversations on it led to a get-together over tea, and then to a plan of action to tackle the myriad problems that had developed in the area: road maintenance, garbage, the lack of space for children to play. It also created a group parallel to the existing local governance structure of the Resident Welfare Association or RWA, dominated by men. In K's account, this was a manifestation of the liberal culture of Jamia (*jamiʿa ki tehzib*) which the "old people" embodied, having grown up in it:

> Ours is a Muslim atmosphere . . . but here there was never a differentiation in our upbringing between boys and girls. . . . We grew up socializing and playing with boys . . . so in us there aren't those feelings that if you're a lady you have to sit inside. . . . We started by distributing dustbins to shops in the market because garbage used to be lying outside the shops. So many people took this positively, but many made fun of us: that ladies have decided to clean up the neighborhood. In the evenings, after we came back from work, after the Maghrib prayers, around 7:00–7:30 p.m., a team of ten to fifteen of us women would walk around the neighborhood and put any trash that was lying on the streets into the dustbins. Then as a second step . . . we decided

> to move the garbage dump at the entrance of the colony, and we looked around for an alternative location for the dump.

They reached out to the local MLA, Amanatullah Khan, who belonged to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), for help with the removal of the garbage dump. But nothing came of it. So in 2017, with the elections for the Municipal Corporation for Delhi coming up, the women campaigned against the AAP candidate for their local municipal ward. In Bilal Zaidi's account:

> These women went out standing on top of open jeeps. Traveling like that all over the area they campaigned, 'Don't vote for AAP, this time vote for the Congress.' So our area ended up voting for a Congress corporator, who is Hindu and lives in Sarita Vihar [an area just south of Ghaffar Manzil, and part of the same municipal ward] . . . because they wanted that garbage dump removed. Now this never happened, you'd always get a Muslim corporator from our neighborhood. Sarita Vihar is a small colony, we have a neighborhood with a bigger population, [but] the women said, let's vote for their candidate this time. The women went to Sarita Vihar, met the folks from the RWA there, met the candidate. The AAP candidate for corporator was a local and she'd been doing a lot of work and was quite prominent, but she was defeated. The women pulled it off. . . .

With help from the new corporator, who was grateful for their votes, and working with the UP Irrigation Department, which owned much of the open land abutting Ghaffar Manzil, the women found an alternative site for the dump. One weekend day, with help from the children and men of their families, and with some hired labor, they moved the garbage dump and started transforming its former site into a green space now called Bird's Corner. The area just to the north of Ghaffar Manzil, which used to be avoided because of the garbage dump, was transformed into a children's park.

"Through the children, through our selves, and through the local corporator we cleaned that area up, and now children have started playing there, we also often go there in the evening." In K's account, the changes pushed by the women, which radically improved the quality of life of the neighborhood, were initially met with a lot of hostility by the Resident Welfare Association, including physical violence and vandalism:

> The Resident Welfare Association felt that this is our work, how can these women do it? We're the authority. We asked them for permission ten times . . . and they said we'll let you do this work . . . but they were the ones who raised the most objections. . . . The sad thing is that in Ghaffar Manzil the people who're teaching at the level of senior professors at Jamia and who live in Ghaffar Manzil, they're the ones who stood against us. Which is why I say that education doesn't mean that your mind is open. . . . they raised the most objections, why have women come out . . . the ladies of Muslim society stepping out? We didn't give them the authority.

But the women kept doing their work, which K characterized as "cleaning dustbins and cleaning minds." By 2019, there were news stories about Ghaffar Manzil as an "area without garbage in Delhi."[9] All of the interviewees quoted in the story were women.

On November 6, 2019, a post appeared on the Facebook page for "Ghaffar Manzil Colony." The post included the scanned text of a three-page letter addressed to the General Secretary of the Ghaffar Manzil Resident Welfare Association:

> It has been brought to our knowledge that Ghaffar Manzil Resident Welfare Association was formed sometime in 1978–79. . . . It is indicated as per the byelaws and rules of the RWA, an election of the Execution [sic] Committee was to be conducted every two years, however for the past about 10 years no election has been conducted and as such you all have violated the Bylaws and Rules of the Association. . . . In this period of 8–10 years no concrete and satisfactory work was done by the existing RWA. . . . We request you to please call upon a General Body Meeting in Children Park as soon as possible for terminating the existing committee of RWA and to appoint Election Officer for conducting the election and to announce the election dates for the formation of new Execution Committee of Ghaffar Manzil RWA.

In our conversation, K had indicated that earlier the elections for the RWA used to happen in people's houses. Members were elected through connections (*t'alluqat*), and most residents wouldn't even know that elections were happening. Now the RWA was being pushed to hold a meeting in the children's park, a public space (and public sphere) that had been nonexistent a few years ago, brought into being by the efforts of women, in alliance with and in the interests of their children. The next month, after the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed by Parliament and the protests began, the same dynamics played out in Shaheen Bagh on a much larger scale.

MOTHER TONGUES (ON FACEBOOK)

Neither my mother nor me
Had a tongue

Tongues were given to men
As a masculine heritage

That they could use
To invent slurs,
To use,
In their anger
In their laws
In their loud voices,
In hollow love letters,
Graffitied on the walls,
To forge histories . . .

. . . Our mother tongues are unique
Distinct
in effectiveness
in performance
in emotions
in iteration

Dipped in love,
Smoked with sage
And choicest incense
Damped in the struggling rivers
Earthen pens have been carved
And kept
Hidden
In between layers of worn saris
Inside trunks
Safely
Then taken out at the right time
To write,
on our palms, in bloodied ink
With earthen pens
our mother tongues. . . .

. . . We have inherited them all
Collected their words
And now
We are writing
Novel
Our own
Sharp, quick, courageous, strong,
swift, loud, really long
Mother tongues
From *Madari Zabanen* (Mother tongues) a spoken word poem in Hindi-Urdu by Sabika Abbas Naqvi first performed in 2020, translated by the poet.

Abu Sufiyan told me the story of how he started Purani Dilli Waalo ki Baatein in 2013:

> In the last year of college, my mother called me to scold me: why aren't you coming home? I wouldn't go home for a year at a time, on my breaks I would go camping or trekking in Himachal. And my mother's manner of speaking [*lehja*], that *begamati zuban* [women's language] . . . that was it. I was free, I made the page, Purani Dilli Walo ki Baatein, started status updates. . . . I keep recalling things coming in from the ambience, some old woman is passing, what is she saying. . . . When I started posting in the beginning people were shocked . . . what is happening? What are these stories of grandmothers doing up on social media, these ended thirty or forty years ago. So that attracted people a lot.

The nostalgia for his mother's particular way of speaking—the *begamati zuban*, or women's register of colloquial Urdu, markedly different from masculine "standard" literary Urdu (because of women's historic lack of access to formal education), "earthy, graphic, and colorful" in its idioms[10]—prompted Abu Sufiyan to start posting snippets from his remembered soundscapes of Old Delhi, attracting online engagement with a world that many thought had vanished. Gail Minault writes of *begamati zuban* as an autonomous realm of feminine discourse, "since men are not party to the conversation,"[11] but as Abu Sufiyan's example shows, the realm of *begamati zuban* extends beyond the world of women to their male intimates, husbands, brothers, and children who may not speak *begamati zuban* but are intimately familiar with it as it is, quite literally, their mother tongue. Minault, focusing on the print history of *begamati zuban* in lexicons and literature, also characterizes it as a possibly "fleeting and endangered linguistic phenomenon,"[12] imperiled by the spread of education, and hence standard Urdu, among Muslim women. As Sarah Waheed has noted, a crucial aspect of the erasure of women from literary canons in South Asia has been overlooking the "possibility of participation through orality, a little-respected form of historical source material."[13] While it is true that *begamati zuban* has nearly vanished from the realm of printed Urdu literature, it continues an aural life in Old Delhi, and even educated young women from Old Delhi can code-switch into *begamati zuban* when speaking to their aunts, mothers, and grandmothers.

One of these young women is Sadia Syed, who discovered PDWKB in 2014. She characterizes it as a Facebook page in which the posts were in the "*karkhandari* and *begamati* dialects of Old Delhi."

"I started commenting on these posts," she told me when I interviewed her in October 2022, "because they seemed very relatable to me. I started talking to Sufiyan online too, and he told me that more than the posts themselves, my comments on the posts got likes." She had not known Abu Sufiyan before they met online and became Facebook friends. One day, he told her that he was going on a camping trip from college and wouldn't be able to post content online. She jokingly said, "Make me the admin while you're gone, and I'll create a sensation." Abu Sufiyan gave her the admin rights and the handle Winki Phuppo (Aunt Winki).

The persona of Winki Phuppo did indeed create a sensation among the followers of PDWKB, with her extraordinarily catty posts in *begamati zuban*, which both reflected the realities of social life in Old Delhi—the patriarchal, sexist dynamics of family life, often enforced by homebound older women—and poked fun at them, in a hitherto domestic language now being written (in Roman, Urdu, and Devnagari), spoken, and interacted with in the networked public sphere. Of her online persona, Sadia said:

> *Phuppo* [father's sister] in Old Delhi is considered a difficult character, she gets upset easily, you must appease her. Initially this was just meant to be humorous, but then I

> started realizing that through this humor, the fundamental problems of our society can be addressed, and so I started talking on these topics. Because there were two things: I had a problem with the things that people in Old Delhi said, with their thinking; but not with how they said things, with their dialect, or their manner of speaking. No one is inferior because of their accent or dialect. However, if they say something wrong in that accent or dialect, you can criticize that and call it wrong.

PDWKB combined a pride in the feminine, domestic dialects of Old Delhi, hitherto looked down upon by people both within and outside Old Delhi as backward, with a humorous critique of the social worlds of Old Delhi. Three of the four major contributors to the PDWKB page between 2014 and 2018, including Sadia/Winki Phuppo, were women. Together, they elevated the intimate language of the women of Old Delhi and its innate humor into a public language of social and cultural critique.[14]

Sadia said, "The character of Winki Phuppo enhanced my circle within Old Delhi and connected me to organizations like DYWA [the Delhi Youth Welfare Association], and to people older and more experienced than me, and to Shah Waliullah Library." This is something that Abu Sufiyan had shared with me as well. The Facebook page had connected him to like-minded people, concerned with Old Delhi's heritage, whom he might not have met or encountered otherwise. In densely packed and largely pedestrian Old Delhi, these online connections easily spilled over into real-life meetings and regular hangouts, as most people lived within a fifteen-minute walk of each other. Shah Waliullah Library in Pahari Imli, set up by members of the Delhi Youth Welfare Association in the early '90s in the aftermath of the 1987 riots,[15] became a nightly real-world hangout for those who had met first through the PDWKB Facebook page. It was an intergenerational connection, bringing together people in their twenties with people in their forties and fifties, not through the usual hierarchies of *rishtedari* (familial relations), but as friends.

This was, perhaps, even more revolutionary for Sadia than it was for Abu Sufiyan. The mobility of women in public space in North India is complicated by surveillance, curtailment, gossip, sexual harassment, and worse, and continues to be a cause for patriarchal anxiety. This is also the case for Old Delhi, where the density of *phuppo*s and the dominance of Muslim norms of gender segregation make it very hard for unrelated men and women to meet in a sustained fashion. Despite the small physical distance between them, a kilometer or less, it was the online space that made friendship possible between Sadia and Abu Sufiyan, and then between Sadia and the other members of the PDWKB community, both male and female. Transitioning this friendship from online into the real world was far more challenging for both.

"One of the challenges we faced," Sadia said, "is that in Old Delhi it is hard for people to see a man and a woman as friends. We've both suffered this. Sufiyan and I are still very good and close friends, but society could not accept it, because I was still unmarried then. So I used to get this question a lot, 'Sufiyan is your

[boy]friend, right?' And I had to say 'Yes, he is only a friend.' There's always this mindset of suspicion. If you're coming and going to each other's houses, it is hard to convince people that it's only friendship, nothing is going on. Fortunately, both of our families understood and didn't make us uncomfortable, but this is also something people have to face, what we could call character assassination." In Abu Sufiyan's account, getting his family to be comfortable with his close friendships and collaborations with women had already taken some work:

> To see a boy and a girl standing together and talking is an uncommon sight for everyone [in Old Delhi]. Which I have also faced in my home at one time. They all kept saying that his interactions with girls is increasing. But I kept doing that, and I'd do it by telling them, by showing them (*bata bata ke, dikha dikha ke*). So this opened their minds on my father's side of the family, that this is a common thing. If a girl and a boy are talking, they're not necessarily in a relationship. It broke the stereotype they had.

MY FIRST GURU IS FACEBOOK

While compering the *khawatin ka musha'irah* (women's poetic symposium) at the Jashn-e Rekhta festival in December 2018, as part of his introduction to the poet Siya Sachdev, the poet Shakeel Jamali said, "It was my opinion that the poetry that is seen on Facebook is absolutely lame poetry. . . . An endless chain of bad poetry. But [through social media] we've had the good fortune of meeting such great people [*bare log*] whom there would not have been the possibility of knowing without Facebook and social media."[16]

Aleena Itrat is one such poet whose poetic career, in her own estimation, is inextricably linked to the visibility and connections enabled by Facebook. She belongs to a literary family—her three sisters are also well-regarded Urdu poets—but she herself was not writing poetry seriously till the end of 2010. Describing her poetic career to the audience at an event named Aaj ke Shayaron ki Baatein Farhat Ehsas ke Saath (Conversations of today's poets with Farhat Ehsas) that was also part of Jashn-e Rekhta, she began with an account of an illness that kept her confined to her room for eight months.

> I've been in the teaching profession, I had a coaching center, and in the midst of all this work I was also taking care of my home and my family, and in the family I was married into there wasn't really an atmosphere of poetry and literature. There were too many responsibilities, hence my attention didn't turn this way [toward poetry]. . . . in 2010 December, something happened. . . . I fell ill, I had to leave my job, for eight months I was on bedrest. . . . In that time I became so idle (*khali*), and I was so used to being busy. . . . Facebook and the internet gave me a lot of help. That time, when I was on bedrest, I took one of my poems (*nazm*), which I had left incomplete, a very long time ago, I completed it and put it on the internet . . . and whoever saw it liked it very much and *'Alami Sahara* [the Urdu newspaper] sent an offer that this poem is very good, please give it to us and we'll publish it in the magazine. . . . And then something clicked and then I started writing

> copiously and so much poetry happened that I had a lot of material . . . and the biggest medium I have [to share] my poetry is Facebook and the internet. Many people say that social media wastes time, but I don't believe this. It is actually because of Facebook and the internet that I entered the world of poetry, people recognized me so quickly . . . and I should say my first guru is Facebook and the internet, because it made connections with lots of people that were not very long [in duration], but still people gave lots of indications, lots of gestures toward how this poetry is, where it is lacking . . . and then when I had a lot of material, many people advised me that you should publish a book.[17]

It took severe illness to relieve Aleena from the burdens of maintaining home and family that still disproportionately fall on women, especially in South Asia. While confined to her bed, a world opened up to Aleena through social media and the internet. Rather than the hierarchical and singular relation of master and apprentice, *ustad* and *shagird*, through which aspiring Urdu poets are traditionally trained, she saw her art as being honed by the diffuse and widespread networks of advice and conversation made possible by social media. Her first collection of poetry, *Suraj Tum Jao* (Go away sun) was published in December 2014, only a few years after she started writing poetry seriously.

GO AWAY SUN

udasi sham tanhaʾi kasak yadon ki bechaini
mujhe sab saunp kar suraj utar jata hai pani men
Sadness, evening, loneliness, ache, the restlessness of memories
Handing everything to me, the sun descends into the water
—ALEENA ITRAT

Farhat Ehsas: Your book is called Go Away Sun. What is this sun, and why should it go away?

Aleena Itrat: When I collected all the material for the book and looked over it, I saw there was a lot of mention of the sun. I felt that the sun is something in my life (laughs). . . .

FE: . . . a disturbing factor . . .

AI: . . . so I called the book *Go Away Sun*. But we also can say that the sun is a reference to a male, a metaphor for the relation between a woman and a man. . . . Go Away Sun is not negative, the reason for keeping this title was that in the way a woman and a man are complete only with each other, but if they are not getting along, there is no harmony between them, and this is because the man in his ego and his pride is not giving us support, then a woman can live by herself too. . . . God in His universe has given the quality of creation in our being, so I consider that a strength of women . . . even in the dark of night the responsibility of creation is given to woman. So if the sun is [burning] in his pride, then she can live without him too.

FE: So is the sun a metaphor for male domination? Ordinarily, the sun is a metaphor for light, of giving life, but this adds a new side to it. That the qualities that of giving light and life sometimes become their opposite. . . .

AI: They do become their opposite and even if they don't, sometimes to safeguard our being we can stay alone, and make life move forward too, it's not like we'll die without him. . . . See, the sun completely presents, in my view, a man's attributes. When any love begins, when after night there is day, then the sun brings light beautifully at dawn, softly. It lights up life entirely. But as time goes on the sun doesn't empathize, if in its burning it starts scorching you and troubling you, then that shouldn't happen.[18]

• • •

At the launch of Aleena Itrat's book at the Jashn-e Rekhta in 2016, the Urdu professor and critic Dr. Najma Rehmani (who passed away in March 2025) was the first speaker. She said:

> One of the things I feel again and again, and I will say to the organizers of Jashn-e Rekhta with apologies, is that the representation of women here is very low. Right now I'm seeing that in this crowd of poets there are only two women poets. . . . When I was doing my MA I had heard of Kishwar Naheed, then I read some of Parveen Shakir's poetry, and that's the age when you like fragrances, you like trees, you like the breezes, and all of these essentials were present in her poetry, so I really liked her poetry. And I liked it so much I decided to do a MPhil on it. When I reached out with my proposal to the [Urdu] department, they said, "Couldn't you find a useful topic? You want to work on Kishwar Naheed and Parveen Shakir, on these people? Nothing there, find a decent topic!" Anyway, I persisted, and I did the work too,[19] but from then to today, at least on this side of the border no big name [of a woman poet] has come forward, God only knows the reasons, and perhaps we also know the reasons. . . . I am also happy to meet her because one of my students mentioned Aleena Itrat last week, and said she writes very good poetry, and today on meeting her and reading her book . . . the reason I mentioned Parveen Shakir is that I saw the shadows of Parveen Shakir in her poetry.[20]

Parveen Shakir (1952–94) was an original and prolific voice in Urdu poetry. She remains best known for her first collection of poetry, *Khushbu* (Fragrance). *Khushbu* was published in 1976, when she was in her early twenties. Shakir introduced an unapologetically feminine voice into Urdu ghazals and *nazm*s, writing frankly and sensuously of the desires and dreams of a young girl (*larki*), as she calls herself in the preface of the book.[21] The book earned Shakir a reputation as a "poetess of seasons, flowers, and fragrance,"[22] and added *Khushbu*, in Shakir's own words in prelude to a second edition in 1990, "to the traditional gifts of love."

According to one of the owners of the Kutubkhana Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu in Old Delhi, the most well-stocked shop for Urdu literature in the city, to whom I spoke in June 2022, Parveen Shakir is their third-bestselling poet, after Jaun Elia and Faiz Ahmed "Faiz."

And yet, despite her immense popularity even three decades after her death, Parveen Shakir does not have the kind of posthumous fame and public adulation that Jaun and Faiz command in contemporary India. For some her poetry was too frivolous, a criticism that Shakir already anticipates and addresses in the preface to *Khushbu*: "Some who don't hear so well say that in this girl's poetry there is nothing apart from the laughter of the rain, the smile of flowers, the songs of birds and her own whispered secrets. If loving life is a crime then this girl confesses to her crime with pride."[23] Despite a prolific and highly successful literary career that brought into being new possibilities of expression in Urdu poetry, Shakir continued to be treated as an insignificant little girl by the (largely male) Urdu literary establishment in India, such that Najma Rehmani was urged to pick a more appropriate topic for her graduate work.[24]

But the patriarchal literary establishment and social milieu are not the only ones who have dismissed Shakir's work; they have been joined by feminists. In the introduction to *We Sinful Women*, the first major collection of Urdu feminist poetry translated in English, Rukhsana Ahmad characterizes Shakir's work as "apolitical, sentimental, and conformist"[25] to justify excluding her poetry from the collection. "Parveen Shakir," she writes, "has explored themes such as physical love in her poetry, but the acceptance of sexist values and the absence of a social context makes her writing distinctly unfeminist."[26]

Part of Ahmad's dismissal of Shakir comes from Shakir's literary reputation being centered on her first book, a centering that ignores much of her later oeuvre, in which Shakir wrote, with her characteristic combination of poetic craft and frankness, of multiple dimensions of the feminine experience, including being a working woman, the disappointments of married life, and the sorrows of being an intelligent, thinking woman constantly confronted by the presence of patriarchy in all domains of her life.[27] Shakir's life as a highly successful poet, civil servant, and public figure who raised her son as a single mother after the end of her unhappy marriage was undoubtedly one of feminine achievement in a patriarchal social milieu, increasingly so at the time due to military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization campaign.

In the preface to *Sad-Barg*, her second collection of poetry, first published in 1980 during the reign of Zia-ul-Haq, Shakir wrote, "My sin is that I was born in a tribe where to think is numbered among crimes. But the people of my tribe made a mistake when they didn't bury me in the ground when I was born (and now bricking me into a wall is not so easy for them ethically!)"[28] Here Shakir invokes the *jahiliya* or age of ignorance of pre-Islamic Arabia, in

which girl children were buried alive. This is an example of the ways that Shakir, like many other "Urduphone feminist intellectuals," in the words of Sarah Waheed, was "[drawing] from within the cultural lexicon and religious idioms to challenge patriarchal ideas about women. In doing so, they directly confronted and wrestled against religion being weaponized to stifle women's voices and self-expression."[29]

A more important reason for Ahmad's dismissal of Shakir's oeuvre as "unfeminist" comes, I believe, from Shakir's fidelity to the ghazal form, with which her enduring popularity is linked even though Shakir wrote many, many *nazms* as well. The ghazal form, as we have seen earlier in the book, is primarily a vehicle for the expression of interiority. Similar to the *ghinnawa* poetry composed and recited among Bedouin women and men in Egypt, the poetic discourse of the ghazal can be one of "vulnerability, weakness, and dependence,"[30] expressing what the inner self endures rather than what the outer self enacts.[31] Despite Shakir's public achievements as a pathbreaking poet, public servant, and single mother, her ghazal poetry expresses the vulnerability, disappointment and shame of a *larki* brought up to idealize love and marriage confronted by her husband's leaving. Two of her most popular *shʿer*s capture these emotions:

kaise keh dun ki mujhe chhor diya hai usne
bat to sach hai magar bat hai rusvaʾi ki
How do I say that he has left me?
The news is true, but it is a matter of disgrace

mumkinah faislon men ek hijr ka faisla bhi tha
ham ne to ek bat ki usne kamal kar diya
Among the possible decisions was also the decision of separation
We just said one thing, what he did was astounding

The shadows of Parveen Shakir, as Najma Rehmani said, are found in the poetry of Aleena Itrat and her sister Nusrat Mehdi, in whose ghazal poetry we also find a discourse of the "vulnerability, weakness, and dependence" of a (feminine) inner self as it lives with patriarchy and toxic masculinity. The "I" of one of Aleena's couplets effaces her existence to survive, mirroring the absence of poetry from her early marital life:

zindah rehne ki yeh tarkib nikali maine
apne hone ki khabar sabse chhupa li maine
This is the strategy I came up with to stay alive
I hid the knowledge of my being from everyone

Nusrat Mehdi's poetry introduces an inner self constantly disappointed, exasperated, and worn down by a partner who forgets promises, doesn't listen, and has a narcissistic ego that demands constant soothing:

naqsh hain dil pe mere ab bhi tumhare wʿade
khair chhoro voh tumhen yad nahin hone ke
Engraved on my heart, still, are your promises
Anyway, leave it, you're not going to remember

na kucch kaha na suna aur muztarad kar di
baghair samjhe meri bat tumne radd kar di
You did not speak, or hear, and rejected it
Without understanding what I said you opposed it

voh sath aya to meri uran baith gaʾi
na jane kya hua mujhme thakan baith gaʾi
He came with me and I couldn't fly any more
Who knows what happened that I was filled with weariness

main kya karun kih teri ana ko sukun mile
gir jaʾun tut jaʾun bikhar jaʾun kya karun?
What should I do that your ego finds peace?
Should I fall, should I break, should I scatter, what should I do?

And yet, Nusrat Mehdi's poetry also speaks of an inner self who chooses not to break away, despite these disappointments:

hamnen khud pehni hai nusrat yeh wafa ki zanjir
ham to khud hi kabhi azad nahin hone ke
We ourselves have put on these chains of fidelity, Nusrat
We ourselves are never going to be free

But in the same *mushaʿirah*s, using the same ghazal form, younger women poets were also expressing an interior self that was quite all right with leaving, refusing, not being defined by relationships. Pooja Bhatiya, one of the newer generation of Urdu poets, is well known for her couplet:

ek isi bat ka tha dar usko
mujh me inkar ki bhi himmat thi
This is the one thing he was afraid of
I also had the courage to refuse

Bhatiya's poetry reflects the rapid changes in social life in India, which have also led to changes in the nature of selfhood and relationality. In urban India in the decades after liberalization, there has been both an overall reduction of women in the urban workforce,[32] and the creation of a class of highly educated professional working women living independently, away from their families. They are also women navigating a world of relationships and dating very different from even a generation before; companionate marriage is now not the telos of every romantic relationship even in Indian popular culture. The "I" of Pooja Bhatiya's poem reflects these transformations. Not only

does this self have the courage to refuse, but she also longs to break away from relationships:

kitna ʿarsah ho gaya hai sang tere
ab main tujh se ub jana chahti hun
What a long time I have been with you
Now I want to be bored of you

The freshness of Pooja Bhatiya's poetry lies not in its being sui generis, but precisely in its engagement with the long Urdu poetic tradition and its vocabulary of interior selfhood. Take the word *be-niyazi* (unconcern), a word often used to indicate the cruel indifference of the (female) beloved to the pain and travails of the (male) poet. The female speaker of Pooja's couplet takes this trope and, to use the parlance of our time, owns it:

be-niyazi jo meri ʿadat thi
Woh meri zat ki zarurat thi
The unconcern [in relationships] that was my habit
That was a necessity for my self

One of Parveen Shakir's most famous couplets, in widespread understanding, uses the metaphor of fragrance to speak of a man's infidelity, his inability to stay:[33]

voh to khushbu hai havaon men bikhar jaʾega
masʾlah phul ka hai phul kidhar jaʾega
He is fragrance, he will scatter in the winds
The problem is the flower's, where will the flower go?

Pooja Bhatiya has a couplet that echoes Parveen Shakir's, except here it is the woman who is the fragrance, and it is the man who is afraid of her loss:

ab voh darta hai kho na jaʾun main
us ne khushbu bahut likha hai mujhe
Now he is afraid that I may be lost
He has often written me as fragrance

The resonances and inversions between Parveen Shakir's poems and Pooja Bhatiya's make me return to Rukhsana Ahmad's description of Shakir's poetry as "conformist" and "unfeminist." In the sense that Shakir's poetry conformed to the ghazal tradition, and that her most popular poetry expressed the vulnerability and weakness of a feminine inner self when confronted by hurt and disappointment in intimate relationships, rather than angrily attacking the patriarchy, Ahmad's characterization is perhaps true. But Shakir made the expression of a specifically feminine interiority, the voice of the *larki*, the young girl, an indelible part of the ghazal tradition. Shakir thus allowed this interiority, and its dissatisfactions with life and relationships in a patriarchal society, to be expressed in public, in a highly

valued (and hitherto almost entirely male) form. Shakir added new potentials to the mimetic archive of the Urdu ghazal tradition and made the tradition capable of expressing specifically feminine disappointment, and with changing times, feminine empowerment too.

"THIS IS NOT YOUR PERSONAL WILDERNESS"

Ghazal men apnapan mehsus nahin hua (I felt no intimacy, no belongingness with the ghazal), Sabika Abbas told me when we spoke about her poetry in June 2022. Having grown up in a Shia family in Lucknow, with the poetic tradition of Mir Anis's *marsiya*s, Sabika is not a stranger to the rhythms and patterns of traditional Urdu poetic forms, including the ghazal. But she does not feel at home writing in the ghazal form. I quoted from her poem to introduce and name the section on Mother Tongues; her poems are meant to be free-form spoken word, encountered as performances on the street and via recordings on the internet, through video uploads on Instagram live and YouTube, where she posts as Bolti Aurat (the speaking woman).

In many of her poems, such as "Mera kajal" (My kohl) and "Meri sari" (My sari), she takes elements of feminine adornment fetishized in poetry and cinema, and in her theatrical style, turns them into critiques of misogyny and a reclamation of feminine agency and desire. In 2017, after the killing of Junaid Khan on a train for being visibly Muslim, she started a program called Sar-e Rahguzar (Poetry on the streets) to perform poetry in public spaces. As a young Muslim and as a woman, she felt the need to reclaim the street from the majoritarian masculine bullies who were increasingly dominating public space.

> And that is when I saw how the public, how the streets are actually stages of violence and oppression that unfolds every day. We do not realize that the streets and the publics are basically designed for cis, upper-caste, upper-class, able-bodied heterosexual men only. Sometimes it takes a lot of strength just to stand on the streets at a particular time of the day, or the night, to just exist . . . and to hide your identity and to hold on to it, and I was like, if they can spread hatred on the street why can't I perform poetry on the streets and spread love and harmony and talk about resistance?[34]

Why does Sabika, with her feminist and antimajoritarian politics, feel a lack of belonging and intimacy to the ghazal? For one, the ghazal is still a male-dominated form. Sabika recounted her experience of being one of just two women out of fifteen poets at the storied Shankar-Shad *mushaʿirah* in 2017, and how all the senior male poets were very uncomfortable around her, with only one being encouraging. And hers is not an isolated story. The Grand Mushaira at the 2018 Jashn-e Rekhta, the capstone event of the festival, had eight male poets and a male master of ceremonies, and only one woman poet.[35] The women's *mushaʿirah* was held at a non-prime hour in the morning, competing with other events taking place

simultaneously, and had a much smaller space allotted to it. This male domination is not just statistical but also found in the content of the poetry.

All of the poetry quoted in the previous section would fail the Bechdel test, for all of it is about women relating to men. This is not to imply that all contemporary women's ghazal poetry is about this—far from it—but it is a dominant theme, at least going by the poetry recited at the Jashn-e Rekhta by women poets in 2017 and 2018. This is not in itself "unfeminist," if we understand feminism using the OED definition, the "advocacy of women's right on the basis of the equality of the sexes," for the renegotiation of intimate relations between men and women is an integral part of the work of achieving substantive equality. Intimate relations, by contrast, are not as dominant a theme in the ghazal poetry of the young male poets of Delhi. Their oeuvre was generally far more philosophical, as we have seen with Vipul, far more open to metaphysical speculation. For the male poets, Majnun the lover was not as important as Majnun the explorer of the vast wilderness of interiority. This split too reflected the burden that women have to bear in an overwhelmingly patriarchal society. It is they who are preoccupied with the burden of tending to and remaking relationships, while the men are free to wander their interior deserts.

A *shʿer* by the poet Mudita Rastogi, recited at the *Khawatin ka Mushaʿirah* (Women's mushaira) at the Jashn-e Rekhta in 2018, captures the exasperation caused by this imbalance in the literary (and interpersonal) sphere:

> *are majnun saliqe se junun kar*
> *yeh tera* personal *sehra nahin hai*
> O Majnun do your madness with some decorum
> This is not your personal wilderness

• • •

It is not surprising then, that some women prefer to write *nazm* as their preferred form of poetic expression. Coming from an Arabic root that indicates order and arrangement, a *nazm* paradoxically means not a particular form of poetry but rather an absence of form and its constraints.

In an interview with Farhat Ehsas the Kashmiri woman poet Shabnam Ashai explained her reason for eschewing the ghazal form: "I wrote ghazals a long time ago, but then I wasn't interested in it, because my relation to life became such. I am from Kashmir, the scenario of life is different there, there are new issues of the kind that cannot fit into the ghazal but fit easily into a *nazm*."[36] A ghazal, along with the limits of its precise metrical form and conventions, abolishes *historical* time, the sense of the march of events making the present very different from the past. Nothing new is supposed to happen in the ghazal universe, for the ghazal insists on the universality of its subject across time: What is happening to the self that speaks the ghazal is what has happened to selves across time, the ghazal is uninterested in the particularities of the now. Hence the deliberate

anachronism and archaic nature of the ghazal vocabulary: the caravans, the enemy's arrows, the fastenings of the *qaba* of the beloved. Oppression is still oppression, whether the oppressors carry swords or machine guns; heartbreak is still heartbreak.

How then to speak of the militarization of one's homeland and the constant dehumanization that accompanies it? How to speak of what it means to live with the rise of nationalism—a modern ideology unknown to the ghazal universe—and the astonishing cruelty it engenders in human beings toward those rendered "anti-national"? How to speak of experiencing sexual harassment on the street and in online spaces as a woman when the vocabulary of the ghazal, the vocabulary of yearning lover and cruel beloved, cannot begin to accommodate such experience? How to speak of the dizzying experience of "modern time and the melancholy of history," to use Peter Fritzsche's characterization of the experience of time in Europe after the upheavals of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic campaigns?[37] How to speak of the sense of living in an unstoppable flow of time and events, in which the present is unrecognizably different from the past? How to write of the transformations in everyday life brought about by something as everyday—and revolutionary—as the addition of an elevator to a multistory building?

"I ONLY WRITE ABOUT INANIMATE OBJECTS"

THE HANDOVER OF THE STAIRS (TRANSLATED FROM HINDI-URDU)

I am leaving in your care the faint sound of footsteps, take care of them.

Be very respectful of the walking-stick, which every time climbing up, has instead of its arthritis, cursed me.
Now it will give you blessings for your service. Don't get annoyed at the tap-tapping of that old wood.
It will soon be entrusted to the earth.

Take care of the little shoes that once used to play the up and down game on me.
Now they will press all your buttons and make you get stuck on every floor. Don't stare balefully at their guffaws.
One day they will become serious.

Give some freedom to the restless feet, drowned in love, which leaning on my railings, had to be considerate of the age.
Now behind your closed doors their love will flourish. Don't be embarrassed by those intimacies.
One day they will transform into distances.

Support those stumbling steps that have often slipped on me in a state of inebriation.
Now you alone listen to the grief in their heart and become their boon companion. Don't reproach them.
One day ruination will sober them up.

Give some tranquility to those hard-working slippers that will come to you after washing the clothes and utensils of every home. Through you, they will also see how to avoid toil. Don't make them feel small.
One day they will be worn down by poverty.

Be careful of the thief toes that will come to loot homes silently. They always stayed away from me because their companionship was with the pipes. Now they will use you. Don't curse them.
One day their sins will swallow them up.

And if you ever see despondent dragging heels coming toward you, then stop them, don't let them go up. Because with your support they will go up but they won't stay dependent on anyone to come down. They will fall, they will scatter, they will be smashed to dust. Don't think of them as cowardly. One day their death will inspire the will to live in many.

I am leaving in your care the faint sound of footsteps, take care of them.
—Gouri Chugh

Upon hearing Gouri Chugh's poem "*Siriyon ka* Handover" (The handover of the stairs) at an event at Oxford Bookstore in Central Delhi in the summer of 2018, I was incredibly moved, on the edge of tears. Something about the melancholic tone of the poem, barely captured in my translation, made the transition in the life of a building from the use of stairs to the use of the elevator heartbreakingly sad. I wasn't the only one who felt it. Gouri Chugh's poem cropped up in many conversations about Urdu poetry I had that year. What was truly remarkable was that this was the second poem Gouri ever wrote in Hindi-Urdu. (I use that locution deliberately, because while the vocabulary of the poem is recognizably Urdu, Gouri and others still write mostly in the Devnagari script, with which they are more comfortable.)

Gouri identifies as a Delhi Punjabi, with grandparents who moved to the city during Partition, and who used to read and write in Urdu. While she was greatly influenced by the poet and lyricist Gulzar, she writes primarily in English, for like many others, she found the "pure" Hindi taught in school too rigid and inflexible. She was working as a professional in the field of education when she attended Jashn-e Rekhta in 2017, and inspired, started taking Urdu classes at Rekhta, where the instructor was a professor of linguistics from the Department of Urdu at Jamia Millia Islamia. While attending that class, she wrote her first poem, *Darvaze* (Doors), but she was unsure about it, as it didn't fit any of the traditional forms of Hindi and Urdu poetry she was aware of. Her instructor, Professor Abdul Majeed, read it and said that the poem fit well within the Urdu tradition of *nasri nazm* (prose poem). This, she said, gave her confidence and then, over the course of two nights, "*Siriyon ka* Handover" came to her. "I was struggling with depression over two nights and I didn't write the poem, it

happened." She recalls that when she first read it out in her Urdu class, people were crying.

Attending Jashn-e Rekhta and the Urdu classes helped Gouri connect with and belong to a literary tradition that had been part of the inheritance of her grandparents but was lost in postcolonial India. Once connected to the tradition, a poem came forth, as if of its own volition. Gouri also added a new element to the tradition of Urdu prose poetry. Many of Gouri's poems, like this one, are written from the point of view of inanimate objects: doors, sweaters, and footpaths, as well as stairs. She came to understand the reason why long after writing the poems, in the aftermath of the heightened political tensions and rising jingoistic nationalism that followed the Pulwama attack[38] and created a near-war situation with Pakistan in February 2019.

> I was invited to a *mushaʿirah* in Patna in 2019. It was just after the Pulwama attack, and the other poets, like Hussain Haidry, were becoming more and more aggressive [against the government]. As the *mushaʿirah* went on, I was thinking, "We're going to jail, we're going to jail." When the media came to talk to me after the event, I said "*Main sirf bejan chizon ke bare men likhti hun*" (I only write about inanimate objects). When I told a friend about my fear, my friend said, "You're a poet who gets paid 10,000 rupees for a *mushaʿirah* and you're afraid?" So that's when I realized that this writing about inanimate objects was a way of writing I had evolved in response to the circumstances of growing repression so that I could speak out without being pinned down.

THE REVOLT OF THE SWEATERS

Who knows when they will come out of this life of indecisive unraveling
and knitting
When they will raise their voice against the overcoat's arbitrary wishes
This time if the dictator winter unleashes his tyranny again
It's possible that they will resort to revolt

The balls of wool are yet innocent
But the nurture of the knitting needles will teach them a lot
Like if one political stitch is left out then how many holes appear
in the knit of peace
The day the innocent sweaters learn this lesson
It's possible they will resort to revolt
—from Gouri Chugh's "Sweater *ki baghavat*" (The revolt
of the sweaters), translated from Hindi-Urdu

That Shaheen Bagh is unique becomes apparent when one receives an invitation to come to Shaheen Bagh with knitting needles and wool. Turns out, the women have decided to knit even as they protest against the CAA. In a corner of that very public space, women gather with their knitting needles, and are available for anyone who wants a sweater knitted. (Ziya us Salam and Uzma Ausaf[39])

A woman I will refer to as Baji (elder sister), who lives in Shaheen Bagh, told me her story of how she came to join the protests at Shaheen Bagh in December 2019. A very bare summary of our long conversation is as follows:

> On the 15th of December, my daughter, who was then a second-year student at Jamia, had gone to the university, and then that afternoon she and her friends went to the tea-shop at the triangle where one road goes to Holy Family Hospital and one road goes to CC [the New Friend's Colony Community Center]. That's where she got caught up in the police *lathi*-charge [police baton charge on protestors] and was beaten black and blue. She and her friends, bleeding, and with broken phones somehow made it back to Shaheen Bagh that night. It was that night in anger that the road was blocked. Initially it was men, remnants of a rally that included Amanatullah Khan and other politicians, but women started coming out too to join—like me—because we were angry about what had happened to our kids. Initially, on Saturday night, men were sitting at the barricades and had created the protest zone and the women were on the margins, but two things changed that. One, for *jumʿah* prayers on the next Friday, women were invited to pray on the road. And two, to prevent men from fighting over the mike to address the gathering, Abid Shaikh [one of the men who was associated with the Shaheen Bagh protest from the beginning] handed over the mic to a woman, and that changed everything. Once they saw that a woman had the mic more and more women started coming out and occupying the central space. . . .
>
> I had no idea about the CAA-NRC till my daughter told me about what was going on while lying in pain with her injuries. It was because of her and her friends, and because of what was said on the stage at Shaheen Bagh, that I learned about articles of law, about the constitution, about rights, about strategies. Now I pay attention to the news. I know that you can't understand what's going on here without understanding what's going on in Assam [where the NRC exercise led to millions of people being declared illegal immigrants and held in detention camps].
>
> Before Shaheen Bagh women here used to cook in the morning, pack the husband and children off to school, clean the house and then switch on the TV. Then they would cook again in the evening, get the children to tuitions, and then put the children to bed. After the Shaheen Bagh protests began women would come home after the dawn prayers, make breakfast and send the kids and husbands off, sleep for a few hours, cook food, and leave for the protest again. They would tell the husbands, make sure you're home by this time, take care of the kids and getting them to their tuitions, make sure that everyone is fed and get everyone to bed. They say that Shaheen Bagh was a women's protest, but it wouldn't have happened without the support of the men.

It was mothers and grandmothers who spoke *begamati zuban* and hitherto had stayed largely within domestic spaces who became the collective leaders of the Shaheen Bagh protests. The protests led to, and in Baji's account were made possible by, a restructuring of domestic labor responsibilities between women and men. If earlier the entire responsibility of running the household was on women, during the protests the women were only doing housework in the mornings and were out of the house the entire night as part of the collective protests. Homes ran

because men took over domestic responsibilities in the evenings, while the women kept a revolutionary space going.

Baji remembers going to give tea to the young men patrolling the far barricades of the protest site at 3:00 a.m., and saying to her friend, "Could you even imagine that we would be leaving our homes at 3 o'clock in the morning?" In Baji's own account, there was nothing in her experience that anticipated the incredible movement in which she was suddenly an active and influential participant. Did poetry, then, anticipate the transformations in the relations between men and women that the Shaheen Bagh protests made possible and that made the Shaheen Bagh protests possible? Did poets create the meaningful space, articulate the emergent concepts for those who hoped for a future goodness that transcended their current ability to understand it? I would like to think so. For as in Sabika Abbas Naqvi's poetry and poetic practice, in Shaheen Bagh Muslim women took over a road, a public space dominated by "cis, upper-caste, upper-class, able-bodied heterosexual men," and made it a far more equitable and inclusive space, a space where, echoing Gouri Chugh's poem, the knitting of sweaters became a sign of revolt.

This radical reimagination of public space also resonated in intimate relations, in the greater role of men in sharing the burden, including the prosaic burden of domestic labor, for which the "I" of Aleena Itrat's poems yearns. Gouri marched in the initial protests against the CAA while pregnant with her first child, Aleena was one of several women poets who recited their poetry at the Shaheen Bagh protests, and Sabika was part of the Fearless Collective who drew the mural at Shaheen Bagh described in the Introduction.

What can you call a space that makes concrete, tangible, a futurity very different from current social reality? A space of radically different and egalitarian gender relations, and of radical inclusivity across differences of religion, class, caste, gender, and sexual orientation? For many people, Shaheen Bagh was a sacred space. Baji talked about the first time she saw traffic on the road after the protests had to shut down because of the coronavirus lockdowns. She said she was in tears as she thought to herself, "*is pak zamin par* tire *chalenge?*" (Will tires roll on this sacred ground?)

The tires may be rolling over sacred space now, but if the sacred is understood as the possibility of transformation, of opening the world to being radically different and better than it is, then the sacrality of Shaheen Bagh continues in the potential it holds open for imagining and inhabiting the world differently. Mosque doors that had long been closed to women were now opened for women to offer prayers,[40] young women who had seen their own capacity to organize and speak in public radically rescaled their ambitions. Shaheen Bagh opened a space to imagine a very different India and a very different place for the relationships between women and men in India.

Whether all of this comes to pass is a different question, but the potentiality now exists for all those who spent time at Shaheen Bagh and the tens of thousands

of other women who led protests that flourished across the country in emulation.[41] In the words of Aleena Itrat:

> *abhi to chak pe jari hai raqs mitti ka*
> *abhi kumhar ki niyat badal bhi sakti hai*
> Now the dance of the clay on the wheel continues
> Now the intention of the potter could still change

4

Jaun Elia from Heaven

Or, How (Not) to Belong to Hindustan

mujh ko diyar-e ghair men mara watan se dur
rakh li mere khuda ne miri bekasi ki sharm
[He] killed me in an alien country, far from [my] *watan*
My God kept intact the honor of my friendlessness
—MIRZA ASADULLAH KHAN "GHALIB" (1797–1869)

The Citizenship Amendment Act passed Parliament in mid-December 2019, a few months into Narendra Modi's second term as Prime Minister of India. Modi's first term was marked by increasingly vicious Islamophobia in public life, including the lynching of over forty Muslims, actively condoned by members of the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). During the campaign for the 2019 parliamentary elections BJP President (now Union Home Minister) Amit Shah publicly spoke of passing the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) in conjunction with bringing into force a National Register of Citizens (NRC), which would place the burden of proving citizenship on all denizens of India, with potentially devastating consequences for millions of people. In the state of Assam, as a result of the NRC exercise, nearly two million people were excluded from the list of state subjects.

Wherever BJP governments had control of local police, as in Delhi, protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act were met with brutal state violence. On the night of December 15, 2019, in response to largely peaceful protests by students of Jamia Millia Islamia, a top-ranked central university and storied Muslim institution,[1] the Delhi Police, in full riot gear, entered the central campus library, thoroughly vandalized it, lobbed tear-gas shells, and beat students reading at desks with batons before arresting them. Many students were hospitalized with broken bones. One lost an eye.[2]

Against this "Nuremberg moment" in India's political life,[3] at a protest in Delhi against the CAA, Amir Aziz, an alumnus of Jamia Millia Islamia, articulated his reason for protest as the defense of a dream, a dream called Hindustan which

is also a *watan*, a homeland, in which there is space for everyone. In an interview with the journalist Samdish Bhatia at a protest site in Delhi in December 2019, he said:

> My grandfather, who is illiterate, used to say that Hindustan is a dream, and it is for that dream that we are staying here. In this dream there is no space for Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. . . . In a dream there is space for everyone. When you see a dream can you tell who is in it? . . . In my dream you could be sitting with my mother. Could this happen in reality? No, it could not. But it can happen in a dream. So Hindustan is a dream, and this dream is being messed with . . . so we are standing here for our Hindustan, for our *watan*.[4]

The idea found resonance with other protestors. Among the artworks that blossomed all over the Jamia campus after the Delhi police attack was a tree fluttering with slogans instead of leaves. At its base were two metal plaques in Urdu that read *Hindustan ek khvab hai* (Hindustan is a dream).

What is Hindustan? Why is it a dream? Why is this dream also a *watan*, a homeland? Manan Ahmed Asif writes, "Today in the subcontinent, Hindustan is colloquially understood as a synecdoche for a particular set of customary practices tied to north Indian languages, or as an attitude towards interfaith relations and social decorum. . . . Yet today's colloquial understanding is not the history of Hindustan as a political and historical entity that endured for centuries."[5] Contesting the truism that South Asia did not have a shared regional identity before the arrival of Europeans, Asif has shown that Hindustan, the name by which the Indian subcontinent is referred to in the Indo-Persian historical tradition, "was a geographic, social, and cultural construct . . . [that] created a public, an affect, a desire, a set of characteristics—in territory and in the individual self."[6] This idea of Hindustan, "as a concept, an idea, and a place that contains multitudes of faiths and polities" that was also a beloved Muslim homeland, was violently erased and remade by the colonial historiographic project that rendered Muslims outsiders, with enormous and continuing political consequences, including the Partition of India.[7] But Hindustan, in this thick sense that Asif explores, "flashes up" in contemporary Indian Muslim discourse, at a moment of danger when all forms of Muslim belonging to the Indian nation-state are under assault.[8]

In this chapter I show how Hindustan, as a concept and idea, a sense of self and of place, is activated and reimagined as the potential for Muslim belonging in a future India. I look at the senses in which the terms "Hindustan" and "Hindustani" are used in poetry associated with the anti-CAA protests. To give some sense of the contours of the mimetic archive of Hindustan, and of the contexts in which it is redeployed and redreamed, I then tell three stories.

First, I explore the life and writing of Jaun Elia (1931–2002), currently the most popular Urdu poet in urban North India. Through his popular biography and his works, I show how his life and poetry embody both a mourning for the loss of Hindustan and also potentials for its recovery and reimagination. Jaun's life and

FIGURE 3. *Hindustan Is a Dream* artwork, Jamia Millia Islamia, March 2020. Photo by author.

poetry exemplify *watan* as an idea of localized belonging and topophilia that embraces intimacy with radically different others with whom one shares a home. I then describe a conversation with a Muslim Deobandi scholar whose critique of Hindu nationalism, based on both Hindu scripture and folklore, centers on Hindutva's effects on intimate relations. Finally, I turn to contemporary experiments

in relation that generate often transgressive reimaginations and articulations of Muslim belonging in India: anti-CAA public protests and spaces where the young Urdu poets of Delhi hang out. The dreamwork of remaking intimate relations is happening not just at public protest sites, but also in the ways people inhabit rooms together.

"I AM A HINDUSTANI MUSLIM": DISJUNCTIVE RELATIONS AND THE HETEROGENEITY OF THE SELF

On December 27, 2019, at a massive open-air gathering in Azad Maidan, Mumbai, to protest the Citizenship Amendment Act, two poets, upon reciting their poems, were cheered wildly by the crowd. One was scriptwriter, lyricist, and stand-up comic Varun Grover, whose poem "*Ham kaghaz nahin dikhaʾenge*" (We will not show papers) became one of the signature slogans of the anti-CAA protests. The other was by Hussain Haidry, a poet, lyricist and scriptwriter. Haidry recited "*Hindustani musalman*" (Hindustani Muslim).[9] That the two poems were recited in sequence is not incidental, as they articulate interlinked understandings of the political moment. "*Ham kaghaz nahin dikhaʾenge*" rejects the state's desire to have people prove their citizenship through documentation. This rejection understands belonging to place based on different and stronger claims than paperwork: through the recognition of being deeply formed by Hindustan, which is articulated in the second poem.

. . . main hindustani musalman hun
main dakkan se hun UP *se hun*
bhopal se hun dilli se hun
bangal se hun gujarat se hun
har unchi nichi jat se hun
main hi hun julaha mochi bhi
main daktar bhi hun darzi bhi
mujh men gita ka sar bhi hai, ek urdu ka akhbar bhi hai
mera ek mahina ramzan bhi hai maine kia to Ganga snan bhi hai . . .

. . . I am a Hindustani Muslim
I am from the Deccan I am from UP
I am from Bhopal I am from Delhi
I am from Bengal I am from Gujarat [crowd cheers]
I am from every low and high caste
I am a weaver and also a cobbler
A doctor and also a tailor
In me is the essence of the Bhagavad Gita and also an Urdu newspaper [crowd cheers]
One of my months is Ramadan, and I have also bathed in the Ganges [crowd cheers] . . .

The largely Muslim crowd cheered when the poem spoke of a Hindustani Muslim self that is from Bengal, from Gujarat. They cheered for a Muslim self that belongs not to the abstraction of the nation-state, but to a particular homeland (*watan*) that has shaped him in distinctive ways: in language, in cuisine, in friendship. They cheered for a Muslim self informed and formed by both the Urdu press and Hindu scripture. They cheered for a religious Muslim self that both fasts for Ramadan and bathes in the Ganges, an iconically Hindu act. They cheered for a Muslim self that is not only comfortable with the constitutive diversity of Hindustan but embodies it.

"*Hindustani musalman*" first went viral as a spoken word video circulated on social media, in February 2017, and had a renewed moment of popularity in December 2019 around the CAA protests. In October 2018, I spoke to Haidry about his poetry. In our conversation, he characterized "*Hindustani musalman*" as an "introspective poem." "The reason I am so conflicted in my identity and my religion," he said, "is because of the diversity of the country, and of my own experience." He spoke of the geographical diversity of all the places with which he was intimate: Indore (where he grew up), rural Gujarat (where his mother's family is from), rural Madhya Pradesh (where he went on audits as part of his corporate job before he quit), Kolkata/Calcutta (where he briefly worked), and Mumbai/Bombay. "I learned the Quran because I went to a madrasa. I sang *bhajan*s because I went to the Sri Sathya Sai Vidya Mandir. Reading the work of Suketu Mehta and Rohinton Mistry in English brought me to Mumbai. Three out of my ten best friends are Muslim, the rest are not. *In sare logon ke alag alag* viewpoint *aur alag alag soch mere andar aa ga'i hai* (All the different viewpoints and all the different thoughts of all these people have come inside me). If I belonged to a small town or village in France or Egypt, there would not be such diversity inside me."

Haidry focuses on a Hindustani Muslim self that is constitutively diverse, containing a plenitude, a subject-formation only possible through the idea and lived experience of Hindustan. His examining and articulating a *heterogeneity of the self* came not from a continuous experience of harmonious coexistence, but from his own, and the Muslim community's, marginalization. He began recounting the poem's origin story, beginning with newspaper headlines from November and December 2016 about the lynchings of Muslims and the normalization of Islamophobia. Haidry had moved back to Mumbai to try his luck in films after quitting a lucrative corporate job and treating himself to a vacation in New York City, staying at the Sheraton in Times Square, with his savings. But despite his affluence and his professional and personal connections with non-Muslim friends, the only place he could find to live was a ten-by-ten-foot room in a *chawl* (tenement) with a shared outdoor toilet in the Muslim ghetto on Mohammed Ali Road. He had to be discreet even about smoking cigarettes for fear of community disapproval. It was while defiantly smoking on the street that the poem came to him.

. . . main babri ka ek gumbad hun, main sheher ke bich men sarhad hun
jhuggiyon men palti ghurbat main, madrason ki tuti si chhat main
dangon men bharakta shoʿlah main, kurte pe khun ka dhabba main
main hindustani musalman hun
. . . I am one dome of the Babri [Mosque], I am the border within the city
I am the poverty raised in shantytowns, I am the broken roof of the madrasa
I am the ember flaring in riots, I am the blood stain on the *kurta*
I am a Hindustani Muslim

Since the ascendancy of Hindu nationalist politics in India in the late 1980s, the demolition of the historic Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 and the anti-Muslim pogroms that followed, Indian Muslim experience has been marked by growing othering, marginalization, and increasingly, exclusion. Muslims are underrepresented in elected government at national and state levels as well as in the bureaucracy and police forces and are at or near the bottom of socioeconomic and development indicators.[10] The collective condition that the "I" of Hussain's poem experiences is one of disjuncture. The disjuncture between the different stanzas of the poem is the disjuncture between one's sense of self—as deeply formed by this place and its diversity—and how one is perceived and treated by others. If I am so deeply formed by my relations with this land and with the others who make up this land, then why am I socially isolated, why am I treated unequally, why am I targeted in riots and lynchings? It is the disjuncture between being a Hindustani Muslim and being Muslim in India.

"HINDUSTAN DOESN'T BELONG TO ANYONE'S FATHER"

How do you become Hindustani—of Hindustan—when Hindustan has been lost?[11] How do people learn the ethical and affective stances to be the kind of self who lives, and desires to live with, different communities and diverse and challenging others? If nationalism is necessarily exclusionary, how do you perform belonging in a different mode? How do you do all of this when official discourse, rather than promoting harmony, promotes a chauvinistic and exclusionary notion of a Hindu India? While doing ethnographic fieldwork in India, my answer to these questions was in Urdu poetry.

The Constitution of the Republic of India, adopted in 1950, names the country in its first article: "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of states." Bharat was chosen as an official "indigenous" name because it is found in ancient Sanskrit literature, thus linking the modern nation-state to an ancient Hindu Golden Age. Despite widespread and historical usage, Hindustan was not mentioned as one of the names of India, being too closely associated with the Mughal/Muslim past.[12] But in the popular vocabulary of the anti-CAA movement, ostensibly in defense of the Indian Constitution, the excluded term "Hindustan" plays an outsize

FIGURE 4. Rahat Indori's *shʿer* written on a wall, Jamia Millia Islamia, March 2020. Photo by author.

role. For instance, in this *shʿer* by Rahat Indori (d. 2020), often encountered at anti-CAA protests:

> *sabhi ka khun hai shamil yahan ki mitti men*
> *kisi ke bap ka hindostan thori hai*
> Everybody's blood has mingled in the soil here
> Hindustan doesn't belong to anyone's father

The ways in which the Indian Constitution, and its emancipatory and egalitarian potential, has been lived and interpreted by diverse actors cannot be confined to the political vision of its framers.[13] We see this in the ways that the legal secularism of the Indian Constitution has been brought together in the anti-CAA protests with an idea of multireligious flourishing that flows from "the pluralist traditions of Indian Islam," or in other words, the memory of Hindustan.[14]

Manan Ahmed Asif turns to the archive of Indo-Persian history writing about Hindustan "as a prompt to imagine ways forward that do not yield to the majoritarian present."[15] My contention is that an archive of Hindustan, as a political, theological, and ethical idea of Muslim belonging rooted in the diversity of South Asia, has long been part of lived Muslim (and non-Muslim) discourse through the archive of Urdu poetry.

Ali Khan Mahmudabad understands Urdu poetry and the *mushaʿirah* (poetic gathering), as an archive of being and belonging, a domain in which Muslim religious and political ideas of selfhood and belonging were, and continue to be, thought through and negotiated.[16] With deep connections to orality and musicality, and links to prophetic traditions and the authority of revelation, Urdu poetry, particularly in the ghazal form, constitutes a *mimetic* archive, in the sense used by William Mazzarella, an archive of past not as past, but past as *activatable*, past as potential for becoming.[17]

Consider Rahat Indori's *shʿer*. It evokes many histories and many affects in imagining an India which is not solely a Hindu patrimony. It challenges and subverts the metaphor of "blood and soil" so central to imaginaries of national purity.[18] It reminds the listener of the shared sacrifices that people of all communities made for India's freedom from colonial rule, and it invokes the mingling of bodily fluids like blood, an image of mixing that viscerally challenges notions of purity that are central to the upper-caste Hindutva worldview and its exclusionary nationalism.[19] It also gestures toward an argument for Muslim belonging made by Indian Muslim scholar Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, that Hindustan was a Muslim holy land because Muslims had buried their dead in its soil.[20]

I first heard this couplet at a conference of Deobandi *ʿulema* in February 2018.[21] It gained widespread newspaper coverage when Mahua Moitra, a Hindu Bengali member of Parliament from the Trinamool Congress, used this *shʿer* to illustrate her opposition to the government in Parliament in June 2019.[22] That both Deobandi scholars and Mahua Moitra quote Rahat Indori's *shʿer* tells us something about the expanse of Urdu poetry as political and affective speech in Indian popular consciousness. Urdu poetry, unconstrained by the horizons of the nation-state and the forms of belonging it considers legitimate, is a mimetic archive of different potentials of being and belonging. This archive has been activated not just by technology and philanthropy but by the active desires of many people to find other ways of being, and of being Indian, than those deemed legitimate by a majoritarian nationalist culture.

POETRY AND PROPHECY

When Hussain Haidry recited "*Hindustani musalman*" at Azad Maidan, he wore a T-shirt with the image and words of Jaun Elia (1931–2002), the most popular poet in contemporary urban India. Jaun's popularity is not restricted to Muslims or to those who can read the Urdu script. As Gabriel Dattatreyan shows, the proliferation of cellphones and cheap data plans has given young people in India access to global flows of information and culture to creatively explore their gendered, classed, and racialized subjectivities.[23] There has also been vastly increased access to an embodied archive of Urdu poetry. Recordings of Jaun Elia's *mushaʿirah*s from the late 1980s and 1990s are widely available on the internet, and young Indians in

unprecedented numbers are encountering Jaun's poetry as Urdu poetry has always been meant to be encountered, as an oral, performative form. Jaun Elia is the most popular poet in Hindi and Urdu in contemporary India and Pakistan, and there is a flourishing market for Jaun Elia–inspired art and merchandise.[24] This is because Jaun, we could say, is a figure of the loss and recovery of the Hindustani self under postcolonial nationalism. His life story embodies the devastation caused by subscribing to logics of religious nationalism, as well as positing alternate forms of community and belonging.

"In my environment (*mahaul*), poetry was not considered to be merely a part of prophethood (*paighambari*), it was considered to be all of prophecy," Jaun writes in the preface to his first collection of poetry, a long essay titled "Niyazmandanah" (Acknowledgments) that serves as a manifesto in which Jaun tells us how to read his life and his poetry as prophetic.[25] As has already been explored, the idea that poetry is related to prophecy (in a fractional sense) is relatively uncontroversial in Muslim societies. What is worth noting is that the idea of a prophetic *Urdu* poet is articulated in Urdu literary criticism in early-twentieth-century British colonial India, with the publication of Abd ur-Rahman Bijnauri's *Mahasin-e Kalam-e Ghalib*, referenced in chapter 2, in which Bijnauri gives Ghalib's poetic *divan* the status of divinely revealed scripture (*ilhami kitab*). The prophetic nature of Urdu poetry, deeply entwined and in dialogue with the colonial modern, is similar to Jonathan Lear's idea of the poet as a "creative maker of meaningful space" for a society faced with ontological vulnerability, when its traditional ways of being in the world become incoherent. Writing about the Native American Crow Nation faced by the end of its long-standing way of life, Lear writes, "What would be required . . . would be a new Crow poet: one who could take up the Crow past and—rather than use it for nostalgia or ersatz mimesis—project it into vibrant new ways for the Crow to live and to be."[26]

Jaun Elia was—and knew himself to be—such a new poet for postcolonial, post-Partition South Asia. His life, poetry, and wild *mushaʿirah* performances created a space for mourning the loss of Hindustan and also the potential for reimagining and reinhabiting a space of flourishing diversity. Jaun wrote:

> Before Partition and for a few years after, I only knew two groups of religious scholars closely, Shia scholars and Deobandi scholars. . . . The scholars of Deoband were supporters of a politics of loving the *watan*/homeland (*watan-parsatanah siyasat ke hami the*). . . . I have had the honor of sitting at their feet and learning from them. They were people who were in no way worldly. They spent mendicant-like lives, and they had voluntarily chosen a life of poverty and hunger. I have been a worthless student of theirs in Arabic literature and philosophy. . . . I know how many days in a month these scholars went hungry. When I used to hear about them that these people are sellouts, then my whole body would catch fire. You may oppose those with opposing perspectives with your full efforts but at least do not hurl abuse.[27]

Jaun was born and raised in Amroha and died in Karachi as a Pakistani citizen, having left India in 1957, a decade after Partition. He was, by his own account, an unsuccessful man. His first collection of poetry wasn't published until he was almost sixty. Until the end of his life, he pined for Amroha, a town in Western Uttar Pradesh renowned as a center of *adab*, of literature and culture.

Jaun came from a Shia family but spent time with scholars from Deoband, a Sunni reformist school that has several doctrinal and political differences with Shias. This was very much in keeping with the ethos of Amroha, which is renowned for "communal harmony," an increasingly rare place where large-scale violence between religious communities has not yet happened. This reputation has been maintained in part through an ethos of accommodation of and respect for religious difference. That ethos is bound up with the idea of *watan*, a conception of homeland that significantly differs from the *nation*. Where the nation is an abstracted and mass-mediated imagined community,[28] *watan* carries an idea of emplaced belonging, and of topophilia,[29] cultivated not just through birth, or ancestry, but through relations with the sometimes radically different others with whom one shares space. It suggests *propinquity through dwelling*, to use a felicitous phrase employed by Zahida Jatt and Erin Riggs.[30]

Jaun characterizes the political leanings of the Deobandi scholars as support for *watan-parastanah siyasat* (watan-worshipping/loving politics). It was the Deobandi scholar and leader Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani who argued, against the position of the Muslim League, that nations are made of territorial homelands (*awtan*, pl. of *watan*), not religion (*mazhab*).[31] It would be easy to translate *watan-parasti* as patriotism and even nationalism. Watan is often used interchangeably, in everyday Urdu-Hindi, with the idea of the nation-state. But the ways *watan* is used by Urdu-speaking Muslims connote a very different idea of place and belonging.[32] Watan is used in a much more proximate or localized sense. For instance, Jaun Elia may have chosen to become Pakistani, but Jaun's *watan* is Amroha. Watan is a place of origins, but it is not reducible to birthplace. Watan is the local web of relations that connects you to a place and forms you as a person. *Watan-parasti*, love for or worship of the *watan*, carries a very different set of meanings, as a political vision, than nationalism. For Muslims in Old Delhi, as Kalyani Menon shows, belonging to the *watan* includes "religious practices and narratives that defy exclusionary visions of nation and community, historical accounts that blur such boundaries, and constructions of identity and accounts of self that privilege alternative understandings of self and belonging . . . [to] build cultural commons within Old Delhi, disrupting existing hegemonies that operationalize hierarchies of self and 'other' and position Hindus as the normative national subject."[33]

Jaun's deep attachment to and formation by his *watan* of Amroha similarly challenges the exclusion of Muslims from the idea of India, or as he expresses it in his poetry, the idea that "*jane wale yahan ke the hi nahin*" (the ones who left were never from here). In "Niyazmandanah" Jaun writes:

> I was born in Amroha, the heart-attracting city full of secrets in the *doab* of the Ganga and Jamuna rivers. In Amroha since who knows when a saying has been popular: *Amroha shehr-e takht hai, guzran yahan ki sakht hai, jo chhore voh kambakht hai* . . . (Amroha is the city of the throne, it is hard going here, one who leaves is an unfortunate wretch). I do not know whether the first writer of the *masnawi* in north India Syed Ismail Amrohvi, Shaikh Ghulam Hamadani Mushafi, Naseem Amrohvi, Raees Amrohvi, Syed Muhammad Taqi, Syed Sadequain Ahmed, Muhammad Ali Siddiqui and Iqbal Ahmed felt themselves to be unfortunate wretches after leaving Amroha, but I . . . *beherhaal* (anyway).[34]

The ellipses that Jaun Elia leaves in his narrative are more than filled up by the stories told about him. In these stories, Jaun is haunted by his choice to move to Pakistan. In one story, Jaun meets some acquaintances visiting Karachi from Amroha and eagerly asks them for news from home. "And what's up with Chhote Miyan?," Jaun asks the visitors. "Oh, he's dead. There was a scuffle on the street and he got hit on the head by an *addha* (half a brick) and died." Jaun starts weeping. His visitors assumed he was grieving Chhote Miyan's death. "It's not that," Jaun says. "It's just that it's been years since I heard the word *addha*. No one says it in Karachi."

In another story, when Jaun goes back to Amroha after years away, he cannot stop kissing the walls and doors on every street he passes in his old neighborhood. In the play *Jannat se Jaun Elia* (Jaun Elia from Heaven), based on a humorous essay by Pakistani satirist Anwar Maqsood, written by Azhar Iqbal, Swapnil Tiwari, and Ankit Gautam (all of whom belong to the new generation of Urdu poets), and first staged in Delhi in 2017, the arc of the hitherto comic play ends with Jaun in heaven, weeping for the banks of the Ban river and the childhood he left behind in Amroha.

> *ab to yahan ke mausam mujh se aisi umiden rakhte hain*
> *jaise hamesha se main yahin hun ganga ji aur jamna ji*
> *amrohe men ban nadi ke pas jo larka rehta tha*
> *ab voh kahan hai, main to vahin hun ganga ji aur jamna ji*
> Now the seasons here have such expectations of me
> As if I have always been here, o Ganges and o Yamuna
> The boy who used to live in Amroha by the Ban river,
> Where is he now? I am still there, o Ganges and o Yamuna

By addressing the rivers Ganges and Yamuna by the honorific *ji*, Jaun signals his relation to the agentive nonhumans who populate his *watan*, and his longing for and belonging to the lost animate geography of Hindustan, where these rivers are considered sacred. Jaun's poetic portrayal of his selfhood and his popular biography, both which he actively curated and explicitly linked to a political stance, offers a lesson in political theology and a response to the moment of majoritarian nationalism: "Don't be Jaun." Don't be the unfortunate wretch who chose the promise of religious nationalism—in Jaun's case the promise of a Muslim nation—over the relations of

watan. For Jaun, unlike others, had a choice. He left ten years after Partition from a city which never saw communal riots. No one knows quite why, but a failed love affair is often hinted at. A breakdown in lived relations precedes the exile.

• • •

When Jaun describes his period of mental illness in Karachi, the description is of isolation, of an inability to form bonds and live relationships.

> This is a memory of 1986, my condition in the past ten years had deteriorated. I would sit shrunken, contained in the corner of a half-dark room. I was afraid of light, of voices, of people. One day my esteemed brother Salim Jafri came to meet me. He had come from Dubai to Karachi a few days before. He said to me, brother Jaun, I will not let you live the life of a fugitive. . . .[35]

Salim Jafri came with an invitation to participate in *musha'irah*s in Dubai and the other United Arab Emirates, now home to a large South Asian diaspora, with Urdu speakers from both India and Pakistan. This invitation was the turning point for Jaun. He reestablished himself in the network of Urdu poets and published his first collection in 1990. In Dubai, a space outside the nation-state, and thanks to a boyhood friend from the *watan*, Jaun starts flourishing again. Many of Jaun's most famous and well-known performances, the ones recorded on grainy VHS that show up first on YouTube, are from these Dubai *musha'irah*s.

In one from 1995 Jaun addresses the audience: "You are not an audience, you are a family, you are my family, so listen to the upside-down things I say."[36] Halfway through reading the first couplet of his first ghazal, he drinks alcohol from a teacup, and then calls someone called Javed to come and kiss him on his forehead. He then says, "I am reading like this, with this informality, because this is Dubai. This is my neighborhood, this is my Lahore, this is my Lucknow, this is my Amroha, this is my Karachi. So whatever foolishness I get up to, please forgive me. I am a poet, not the director of a bank."

For Jaun, Dubai is not the transnational space of social theory, but a deeply intimate, local, and diverse space unlike the nation-state with its logics of exclusion, where once again he can enter the networks of language and relationships that create a neighborhood, a city, a home, a *watan*. Dubai brings together geographies sundered by national boundaries: Lahore and Lucknow, Amroha and Karachi. Dubai allows you to dream of Hindustan.

LET US COMPARE MYTHOLOGIES

Through the popularity of Jaun's poetry and persona, a Deobandi theological position for territorial belonging in Hindustan has become part of secular North Indian public culture. I now want to turn to a conversation with Deobandi scholar and thinker Maulana Abdul Hameed Nomani to think about how a spiritual and

intellectual tradition that long espoused the idea of Hindustan as a Muslim homeland has responded to Islamophobic majoritarianism in contemporary India. This conversation illustrates how deeply an ethics of relationality underlies the Muslim understanding of belonging in India. Maulana Nomani's critique of Hindu nationalism was based on the harm it did to interpersonal relations in a constitutively diverse country.

The Indo-Persian historical tradition that wrote of Hindustan was deeply engaged with Sanskrit intellectual traditions and texts such as the *Mahabharat*. Maulana Nomani's critique of Hindu nationalism, informed by this tradition, was grounded in close engagement with Hindu scripture; he teaches classes on Hinduism at the Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband seminary. It began as a critique of Rama, the Hindu god-king who happens to be a centrally iconic figure in the Hindu nationalist imagination, through the story of Sita, Rama's wife. In the Ramayana, Sita is abducted by the demon king Ravana. Rama defeats and kills Ravana, but before taking Sita back, he makes her undergo an ordeal by fire to prove her chastity. But a few years later, after overhearing some bazaar gossip, Rama sends a pregnant Sita into exile again.

Maulana Nomani explained that on the world level (*vishva star par*) three women are considered *adarsh*, exemplars of piety and morality: Maryam (Mary), Ayesha (one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives), and Sita. Accusations were made about the moral character of all three. In the cases of Mary and Ayesha, matters were cleared up. This didn't happen with Sita. When hypocrites spread rumors about Ayesha's dalliance with Safwan, the Prophet was greatly troubled, but he did not reject her, and a verse of the Quran was revealed. In Sita's case, even though people knew she was innocent, Rama, whom we consider the *maryada purushottam* (the man of ideal conduct), *un ki taraf se mʿamlah saf nahin hua* (matters couldn't be cleared up from his side). Quoting anthropological research on Indian folksongs, Nomani explained that nowhere in India have women accepted Rama as an ideal husband.[37] They want a husband like Lord Shiva. Even if he smokes pot, he loves his wife a lot. There is no such love for Rama in any folk song. He reiterated that the ethical example of Rama has to be replaced by the example of the Prophet because there is no *samadhan* or solution in Rama's ethics. Instead of forgiveness and rapprochement, there is only suspicion, and separation. This is why we have to act according to the example of the *akhiri sarkar* (the last sovereign/prophet), Prophet Muhammad. *Nahin to ap alag-thalag reh jaenge. Koi matlab nahin reh jata hai raj-gaddi ka* (Otherwise you stay alone, cut off. No meaning remains to the throne of state).

Nomani grounded his critique of Rama in folklore, the local point of view of relationships and affect, because the maintenance of intimate relations is central to the localized relationality that underlies the notion of *wataniyat*, of belonging to a place. The moral example of Rama needs to be replaced because no Indian woman considers Rama an ideal husband. That a learned Muslim perspective in

contemporary India empathizes with Sita is not surprising. Like Sita, Muslims have to keep proving their faithfulness through repeated ordeals, but it is never enough. As Sita can never purify herself in Rama's eyes because of her abduction by Ravana, so Muslims cannot ever free themselves from the taint of Partition and the creation of Pakistan, which has saddled Indian Muslims with the constant suspicion of being secretly more loyal to the "enemy."

The BJP government has made things worse, including making anti-Muslim bigotry more mainstream and acceptable. The most grievous consequence for many of my Muslim friends and interlocutors was the breakdown of relationships in the Modi years. "*Rishte kharab ho ga'e hain*" (Relationships have been broken/ruined) was a refrain I heard often. Someone you have known since childhood suddenly starts asking strange questions about why all Muslims haven't gone to Pakistan and then ghosts you. People stop calling on your kid's birthday like they did for years. They stop wishing you a happy Eid. People told me stories of facing violence with equanimity, but during the stories of frayed relationships their voices would catch and tears would start brimming. Belonging to the *watan* has been deeply frayed by the spread of belligerent ethnonationalism. It is to repair and reimagine these relations that the Prophet's example needs to supersede the exclusionary ethos of the kingdom of Rama.

WHAT IS OUR RELATIONSHIP?

In December 2019 a short video started trending on Twitter and Facebook. It was made in Gulbarga, northern Karnataka, during the countrywide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act. Young men energetically march down a street at the head of a large crowd, rhythmically clapping their hands and chanting slogans in a call and response pattern:

> Say it on the barricades
> *la ilaha il Allah* (There is no God but God)
> Say it in the tear gas
> *la ilaha il Allah*
> *tera mera rishta kya?* (What is our relationship?)
> *la ilaha il Allah*[38]

Much media attention focused on the phrase "*la ilaha il Allah*," which is part of the Muslim confession of faith. This caused consternation even among protest supporters, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, who saw this as bringing religious identity to prominence in protests which were about maintaining the secular character of India. The politician Shashi Tharoor from the secular Indian National Congress tweeted, "You can't fight Hindutva communalism by promoting Muslim communalism."[39]

In all the commentary about this video, little attention was paid to the interrogative phrase *"tera mera rishta kya?"* (What is our relationship?) While sharing

its cadences with a slogan that was part of Muslim separatist discourse—*Pakistan ka matlab kya? La ilaha il Allah* (What does Pakistan mean? There is no God but God)—it asks a new question, not about the meaning of a state, but about the nature of intimacy. It points us to an important aspect of Muslim activism in contemporary India: the radical reimagination of relationality across divides and differences in both intimate and public life.[40]

"New norms emerge in experiments with life, in spiritual self-creation."[41] Veena Das writes this reflecting on the life of a woman she calls Asha (hope), a life she sees as making habitable a space of destruction. Asha, a widow, experiments with life and relationships in the aftermath of Partition, manifested within intimate relations of care and obligation as the poisonous knowledge of the possibility of betrayal. The patient work of living with this knowledge, of repairing the torn shreds of relations, and of inhabiting the world in a gesture of mourning it, is work that Das characterizes as "a descent into the everyday," as opposed to an ascent into transcendence.[42]

As in Asha's story, the mourning of relationships is emphasized in contemporary Muslim discourse, and new norms are emerging in experiments with life, in spiritual self-creation. In the fragments that follow, I try to give a sense of these experiments, and the reimagining of relationships that is central to them. Here we see, however, that the transcendent and the everyday are not opposed but deeply linked, for the poetic and prophetic play an important role in the remaking of both public and intimate relationality.

• • •

voh jinki maʾon ki adhi dʿua qubul hui
voh jinka jism to ghar aya sar nahin aya
Those whose mothers' prayers were only half accepted
Those whose body came home but their head did not
—Imtiyaz Khan (b. 1989)

In the fragmented evocations and the dark imagery of this 2018 *shʿer* by poet Imtiyaz Khan, there is something of the dread and anxiety that Hindutva, as a regnant political ideology, has folded into everyday life, particularly in the relationship between mothers and sons. Mothers pray constantly for the safety of their sons because young Muslim men are particularly vulnerable in Modi's India. There are mothers whose sons have disappeared from college campuses, mothers whose sons have been lynched while transporting cattle, mothers whose sons have been stabbed to death on commuter trains for being visibly Muslim. Publicly mourning these losses became a powerful mode of questioning and challenging the government. Shared participation in grief became an occasion for building new relationships.

On October 15, 2018, I was at a march in Central Delhi organized by United Against Hate, a broad-based coalition of Muslim and non-Muslim groups and individuals ranging from the "Islamist" Jamaʿat-e Islami to left-wing student

groups. The rally marked the second anniversary of the disappearance of Najeeb Ahmed, a student at Jawaharlal Nehru University, who vanished from campus after an assault by Hindu right-wing students. Najeeb's case remained unsolved, but the police and university administration were widely understood as complicit in a cover-up. The march was advertised as "On the Call of Fatima Nafees and Radhika Vemula." Fatima Nafees is Najeeb's mother; Radhika Vemula is the mother of Rohith Vemula, who was driven to suicide in January 2016 because of his suspension from Hyderabad University, with the active abetment of Hindutva groups, for his activism in Dalit political groups on campus.

As we marched among thousands of students, political workers, activists, and ordinary people, Ovais, a human rights activist and critical thinker of pluralism who became one of my closest friends and interlocutors in Delhi, reminded me to pay attention to the significance of what was going on, that the opposition to the BJP had come together to march behind two mothers, one Dalit and one Muslim, both of whom had lost their sons, both first-generation college students, to the politics of the current regime.

A third mother joined Fatima Nafees and Radhika Vemula at the front of the march. It was Saira Khan, the mother of Junaid Khan, who had been stabbed on a train just before Eid ul Fitr in 2017 for being visibly Muslim and thrown out onto a station platform to bleed to death. Lifting the veil of her burqa to address the crowd, she called her son "*shahid Junaid rahmat ullah ʿaleh*" (the martyr Junaid upon whom be God's mercy), an honorific used for saints. Then she addressed the motley gathering by saying, "*Yeh mat samajhiʾe kih sirf musalaman insan hain, yahan har koi jo aya hai, haq ke liʾe, woh insan hai*" (Don't think only Muslims are *insan*, everyone who has gathered here, to stand for the truth, is an *insan*). *Insan*, as has already been explored, has an exalted sense that the English "human" doesn't quite convey, implying a humanity of ethical and spiritual accomplishment. All of us, Hindus, Muslims, Dalit activists, atheists, communists, anthropologists, had been exalted by our kinship in shared grief.[43]

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A widely circulated TV clip features an interview with three "grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh." Women from Shaheen Bagh and adjacent Muslim neighborhoods started occupying the stretch of highway just south of Shaheen Bagh after news of the brutal police attacks on the students of Jamia Millia Islamia. Shaheen Bagh is one of several interconnected Muslim neighborhoods, collectively known as Jamia Nagar, that have grown around the campus of Jamia and are connected to it through multigenerational ties of education, employment, patronage, and pride. The sit-in at Shaheen Bagh became a symbol of resistance to the CAA. Hundreds of thousands of people joined in solidarity and this continued for one hundred days, despite concerted state opposition, until it was called off in late March due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"Why do you have to demonstrate outside in Delhi's coldest recorded winter?," the anchor asks. Asma Khatoon, a ninety-year-old *dadi* (grandmother), answers:

> Ask Modi why he has made [his] mother sit out on the street. Is this why we kept him in the womb for nine months and fed him with milk? People rear children so that they can take care of them in their old age, but he comes with a completely different message. This is why I am sitting in the street, so that Modi, who is my child, takes the CAA back.[44]

Even with the poisonous knowledge that the government is targeting Muslims through the CAA and the NRC, and the blatant Islamophobia and viciousness of the Delhi Police attack on the students of Jamia, a relationship was asserted rather than foreclosed. This assertion of filial kinship flew in the face of the anxieties of caste and religious purity that inform the ideology of Modi's BJP. This transgressive assertion of kinship allows for a claim of filial responsibility, a demand to be cared for. Modi is *our* child, *we* kept him in the womb for nine months. We are sitting out on the street because rather than serving us, as a child should do with his parents, he is harassing us and abjuring our relationship. We are sitting outside so that he will come and speak with us. We await him.

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> Shaheen Bagh is a sit-in, it's a candlelight march, it's a women's space, it's a library, it's a metro station we had never been to. It's a hangout zone, it's a bus stop, it's a night market, it's an outpost. And it's got parents with children and children with parents, it's got teenagers and grandmothers, it's got Sikh farmers from Punjab, it's got Defence Colony, Mayur Vihar, and Amroha. It's got musicians, moongphali wallas, democracy wallas, and family-outing wallas, it's got the south Delhi wallas and the east Delhi wallas and the selfie wallas, it's got Musalmans and Hindus, hipsters and dharam wallas, secularists and postsecularists, photographers and filmmakers. It's got feminists and born-agains, skeptics and believers, it's got Shias and Sunnis, it's got Jamia and AMU. Even the Japanese came on some days. It's got elites and super-elites, communists and welders, traders from Seelampur and poets from Kashmir, actors and dancers, it's got working women, schoolteachers, beauticians and historians. It's got Ambedkar and Gandhi speaking from the same dais.[45]

In my dream you could be sitting with my mother. Could this happen in reality? No, it could not. But it can happen in a dream. "There are people who might never have encountered each other without coming here," Saba tells me. It is the end of February 2020. As we walk down High-Tension Road toward the sit-in at Shaheen Bagh, a zone of potentiality radiates from the nucleus of the protest site into the neighborhood. A rainbow flag painted on the wall of a tea shop in the conservative end of the ghetto marks an unlikely friendship made possible by the solidarities generated in this space. If you have chosen to be here, you are an ally.

Saba talked about the exhaustion of constantly living with anxiety. She talked about the losses people were incurring by just being here, by supporting this movement, by keeping this place running, in terms of employment and money. The film she was making before this began had been stuck in edits for two months, and the funders were demanding their money back. And yet, there was the exhilaration of being here, in a place where strangers you would never have met become the best of friends, that kept people coming back night after night. Saba shot an entire other film here, a love story of two people re-encountering each other in the middle of the Shaheen Bagh protests. The film's working title was, of course, *Tera Mera Rishta Kya?*

Ovais called Shaheen Bagh "Protest Sharif," the exalted protest, an honorific more commonly used for Muslim shrine spaces. *Dargahs* are also zones of potentiality, spaces where people across religious and caste divides meet, spaces where strangers become friends, where the self can be remade through the reconfiguring of intimate relationships.[46] *Dargahs* are also spaces marked by the presence of women, where the usual gender dynamics of public spaces are inverted.

The murals and iconography emerging from the Shaheen Bagh protest communicate love and relationality. "*'Ishq, muhabbat*" enframed the Constitution. Posters drawing on long histories of a cultivated dialogue between religious traditions pointed out the similarities between the Gita and the Quran.[47] This space was exhilarating and welcoming, even in the face of existential anxiety and dread. In a moment of ontological vulnerability, does the vector of descent allow us to see the work of the transcendent, of the poetic and prophetic, in the remaking of relationships and hence the remaking of the self?[48]

CONCLUSION: HINDUSTAN IS A DREAM

> My eyes, and the eyes of my companions have been smoldering, burning for an age. I want to cool my eyes by seeing those who come after me, I want to kiss their foreheads and then close my eyes.
>
> They have come, you came! I am Jaun Elia, okay, now I will go, you made me wait a lot, and yes, I have something that belongs to you that has remained with me. These are my crude and incomplete words, that is, my couplets. Those couplets of mine that I could not say. Maybe David will say them or Ahmed, or Kailash or maybe Manuchehr. . . . And now I finish.[49]

Jaun ends "Niyazmandanah" with a vision of (male) poets to come, inheritors of the Urdu ghazal tradition who would not be limited by national or religious identity. Performing at a packed event to celebrate Jaun held in May 2017 helped, in their own account, bring a new generation of Urdu ghazal poets of Delhi to prominence. When I hung out with these poets, I encountered forms of community and intimacy I'd never known.

The young male poets of Delhi came together over the last few years through poetry events that started burgeoning in the city. They conversed across disparate geographies through WhatsApp groups. They spent weekend evenings in each other's homes and bedrooms, in one- and two-room apartments across the sprawl of Delhi and the National Capital Region. Some were Muslim, some were Hindu. Some ate meat and some didn't. Some drank alcohol and smoked pot, and some did neither. None of it mattered, and none of it mattered at a time when people were afraid to have bones in their trash for fear of violence. What mattered was language and poetry: The poets would gather, ten or twelve in a tiny room, and talk about poetry all night, four or five often snuggled tight together on a bed. It was a place of bodily intimacy. It was male intimacy that was neither aggressive, nor sexualized, nor homophobic. Yet it was sensual and full of care. It was totally unremarkable for one of the poets to be getting a head massage, as he lay with his eyes closed in the lap of another poet, while the rest smoked and talked and recited poetry.

Hindustan is a dream. In a dream, what is not yet can also come to be. New and unlikely forms of relationship can emerge, like those in the intimate spaces where the poets gathered, like public spaces premised on intimacy across differences, like Shaheen Bagh. Hindustan is a dream, and it is also a *watan*, a home one is densely tied to and formed by through relations across difference. In the face of the poisonous knowledge that nationalism has brought, that of exclusion and marginalization on the basis of religious affiliation, belonging to Hindustan is also dreaming up new relations: . . . *Come kiss me Javed. I am reading like this, with this informality, because this is Dubai, this is my neighborhood, this is my Lahore, this is my Lucknow, this is my Amroha, this is my Karachi, so whatever foolishness I get up to, please forgive me. I am a poet, not the director of a bank.*

> *. . . bedili kya yun hi din guzar jaʾenge?*
> *sirf zindah rahe ham to mar jaʾenge*
> Despondency, will days just pass like this?
> If we only stay alive, we will die

5

"In Me Is the Essence of the Gita"

Contemporary Muslim Engagements with Hindu Dharma

jise ap ginte the ashna, jise ap kehte the ba-wafa
main vahi hun momin-e mubtila, tumhen yad ho kih nah yad ho
The one you counted as an intimate, the one you said had fidelity
I am still that Momin[1] embroiled in afflictions, whether you remember or not

—MOMIN KHAN "MOMIN" (1800–52)

During the monsoon season of 2022, T and I took a rideshare cab from his apartment in NOIDA to south Delhi. T had ordered the cab, and I noticed that his name was missing a vowel on the cab driver's phone display, mounted on the windshield. The dropped vowel made the name sound more generic, more Hindu. We'd been talking in Hindi-Urdu between ourselves and to the driver, but now I switched to English and asked T, "Is that misspelling deliberate?"

"Yes," he said, deadpan, and then added playfully, "I am T Tiwari, Brahmin from Banaras." He then told me a story about the dark days of the year before, when the "delta wave" of the coronavirus had killed millions of people in India almost overnight, and there was no space in the cremation grounds to accommodate bodies. It was a time of fear, and panic, and confusion, and corruption; there was a shortage of oxygen, of wood for funeral pyres, of space in cremation grounds, now only available to those who could pay a premium. T is a lawyer practicing at the highest levels, a position of considerable clout, and his bereaved Hindu friends, whose father had just died and whose body now needed to be cremated, asked T for help. T managed to arrange the transport and get the body to the cremation grounds, but there the priest in charge brusquely said, come back tomorrow, no more funerals today. T, who was born and raised in eastern Uttar Pradesh, instantly said to him, "I'm a *Sarayu Parin* Brahmin,[2] and if you're not going to do it, I'll conduct the funeral rites myself."

"I could have done it too," T told me. "I have that much knowledge having grown up in Banaras, and I am proud of it too."

Taken aback by T's assertion, and the authenticity of the eastern Uttar Pradesh accent and Sanskrit ritual vocabulary that T had code-switched into, the priest became much more amenable to conducting the funeral, some money changed hands, and last rites for the deceased were performed.

As T told me this story, he navigated between two distinct emotions. The first was pride in the knowledge he had of Hindu rituals, and the second despair (even if muted and matter-of-fact) at the necessity of having to pass as Hindu just in order to access a basic service like hailing a cab through a rideshare app and ensure his safety in transit. Many Muslims in India oscillate between these two affective poles. Their intimate knowledge of Hinduism comes, in part, from being minorities in a Hindu-majority country whose public culture is increasingly dominated by displays of Hindu religiosity.[3] But more importantly, it stems from long traditions of "engaging the life of the other"[4]—through everyday life, conversations, and textual traditions—that have been integral to the formation of Hindustan as the political, social, and affective idea of a place of radical diversity that is also a beloved Muslim homeland.

In South Asia, relations between neighboring groups have been characterized by both conflict and cohabitation, what Bhrigupati Singh has characterized as agonistic intimacy.[5] While this intimate agonistics has often turned into outright antagonism and violence, especially since the "construction of communalism in colonial North India,"[6] there have also been long-standing attempts by Muslim thinkers to reduce the possibility of antagonism through the cultivation of understanding and love.[7] These traditions manifest in everyday life, even when, *especially* when, confronted by the relentless othering and demonization of Muslims by Hindutva: Even though he had to pretend to be Hindu just to book a cab, T was still proud of the intimate knowledge that allowed him to pass as a Brahmin, so his Hindu friends could successfully perform their father's last rites in the midst of mayhem.

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Hindu right-wing discourse is obsessed with "Love-Jihad," the febrile fantasy of Muslim men systematically seducing gullible Hindu women in order to make them Muslim and produce more Muslim children, thus weakening Hindus demographically.[8] Love-Jihad discourse and its vilification of interreligious sexual intimacy has not only dominated the Indian public sphere and media in recent years but has also gained legislative and punitive force, with the Uttar Pradesh police, for instance, deploying "Anti-Romeo squads" to intercept and police young couples.[9] For most of my Muslim interlocutors, Love-Jihad was a concern only inasmuch as it had the potential to further criminalize and affect the safety of young Muslim men in public. The form of intimacy with Hindus that they most cherished,

and missed, and mourned, was friendship. Friendship was crucial to T's story, for instance. It was the obligation placed on him by friendship that made him help with the funeral, and it was the knowledge he had gained through the intimacies of friendship that allowed him to pass as Brahmin at the spur of the moment. Friendship is not just "light-touch intimacy" with limited transformative political potential.[10] In South Asia in particular friendship is a deeply valued form of intimacy,[11] one that allows for a great deal of independence and elasticity in relationships[12] and challenges extant social hierarchies.[13] There is a clear correlation between interreligious friendship and the reduction of prejudice: Having close Muslim friends is empirically proven to reduce prejudice toward Muslims in contemporary India.[14]

In *Perilous Intimacies*, SherAli Tareen defines friendship as "a relationship or encounter of intimacy, collaboration, cooperation, or hospitality with the other that, while affording particular benefits, opportunities, and forms of power and pleasure, also renders untenable exclusive claims to purity and sovereign ownership of the self. Friendship is an invitation that cannot be embraced without forgoing the claim to sovereign mastery. . . . Friendship, especially interreligious friendship, while holding the promise of engaging and accessing the other, also invites peril by signaling the inextricable entanglement of the self with the contingencies of the other."[15] The encounters and conversations with Hindus and Hinduism that I detail in this chapter, unfolding in a postcolonial India foundationally (and increasingly) conditioned by the impossibility of Muslim sovereignty,[16] are grounded in such inextricable entanglement.

In this chapter, I will highlight two broad streams of Muslim engagement with Hinduism and Hindus in contemporary India: inheritance and advice. Hindu mythology, theology, and ethics, such as the structuring of social relations through caste, are part of the *inheritance* of Indian Muslims, an inheritance that they often inhabit as an unselfconscious mode of being, but also consciously and critically engage with. The engagement is vital to access the Indian Constitution's potentials for equality and affirmative action, structured by and in response to the "Hindu" caste system. It is also necessary to allow for dialogue with radical and pluralistic traditions of Hindu thought to secure a future for Muslims and other minorities in Indian public life in the face of exclusionary Hindu nationalism. There was a very clear understanding among many of the Muslims I spoke with that it was not the impartial arbitration of a supposedly "secular" state that acted as a safeguard for minority communities in India. Rather, it was the *dharma* (in the sense of ethics) that communities chose to act by that determined the nature of Indian society and its pluralism. As the majority community, the *dharma* that Hindus chose to adopt—the ethical choices they made as a collective—was understood as crucial to the future of the country and to Muslim belonging. Hindu *dharma*, in other words, was too important to be left solely to Hindus. Many Muslims felt the need to engage in conversations with and about Hindu *dharma*, leading to original

and unexpected forms of *nasihat* (advice) as manifestations of friendship, of Muslim care for and investment in the future of Hinduism as an ethical tradition. In the last part of the chapter I examine the history of Muslim engagements with Hindu traditions of radical love and how such engagements now run aground on the increasingly nationalized and exclusionary contemporary expressions of these traditions.

INHERITANCE: THE MUSLIM RAMAYANA

In Muslim spaces, I frequently overheard references to Hindu mythology, often with political references. In June 2018, during the month of Ramadan, I visited a major Sufi shrine in Delhi. One of the *khadim*s (attendants/servitors) was ushering a Hindu visitor into the inner tomb chamber. Despite the heightened tension between communities, Hindu visitors were still very common at Muslim shrine spaces, as they have been for centuries. What was different, as another *khadim* had told me, was that now members of the government no longer came to the shrine for blessings. "Even Advani used to come," he'd said to me, indicating that even L. K. Advani, the Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister during the previous BJP regime (1998–2004), had been a regular visitor to the shrine, continuing a long tradition of Indian rulers, irrespective of religion, seeking the blessings of Sufi saints.[17] Modi and members of his government broke with this tradition, thus hewing much closer than Advani (who grew up in religiously plural pre-Partition Sind) to the visceral hatred of Muslims that is central to ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological parent body of various Hindu nationalist organizations, as found in the works of Savarkar and Hegdewar.[18] Perhaps all of this explained the sarcastic enthusiasm with which the *khadim* ushered in the Hindu visitor, saying, *aʾiye, Modi-ji, aʾiye!* (Come, Modi-ji, Come!). Presumably, the visitor's surname was Modi, just like the prime minister's. As the visitor entered the chamber around the grave of the saint, the *khadim*, who stayed outside, turned to another *khadim* and said, "*Aj to sab jagah unka nam hai. 'Har Har Modi, Ghar Ghar Modi'*" (Today his name is everywhere. 'Glory to Modi. Modi in every home'). The other *khadim* replied, "*Ravan ka bhi bahut nam ho gaya tha marne se pehle*" (Ravana too had become very famous before his death.)

Har Har Modi, Ghar Ghar Modi is a slogan used by Narendra Modi's election campaign in 2014. It is a modification of the chant *Har Har Mahadev*, which invokes Shiva, and has historically been used as a battle cry by many Hindu groups. The slogan was deft in both deifying Modi and associating him with Hindu martial traditions. The demon king Ravana, the main antagonist in the Ramayana, is remembered in Hindu mythology as a great devotee of Shiva and was given his invincibility as a boon by Shiva. The other *khadim*'s invocation of Ravana, to respond to Modi's fame and seeming invincibility in the electoral sphere, was astute in both its knowledge of Hindu scripture and in drawing out its moral

lessons. Despite all his wisdom and his boons of invincibility, Ravana's arrogance and his deviation from morality—his abduction of Rama's wife Sita—ultimately led to his downfall.

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The Walled City Café, located in a historic Old Delhi building just south of the Jama Masjid, hosted an event for Saif Mahmood's book *Beloved Delhi: A Mughal City and Her Greatest Poets*. Sheeba Aslam Fehmi, the host, was speaking of Urdu's *Hindustaniat*, its Indianness, its embeddedness in the cultural matrix of India. By way of illustration, Saif Mahmood responded with a *shʿer* by the Indian American poet Salman Akhtar (b. 1946):

> *itna kab azad hai jo chahe kar le jab kaho*
> *dil ke dashrath ko mili hain kaʾi kaʾi majburian*
> When is it so free that it can do what it wants whenever
> To the Dashrath of the heart have been given many many constraints

The audience gasped and laughed at the *shʿer*, one whose cleverness and wisdom is only apparent through a knowledge of the Ramayana. Dashrath is the father of Rama. When he is about to get Rama, his eldest and favorite son, crowned as the king of Ayodhya, his wife Kaikeyi, invoked in the *shʿer* by the homonymy of *kaʾi kaʾi* (many many), goes into a sulking rage and invokes two boons that Dashrath had given her many years ago, asking her husband to exile Rama and crown her own son Bharata as king. Helpless in the face of the rage of his most beloved wife, and the favors that he had promised her, Dashrath dies broken-hearted, and Rama leaves for fourteen years of exile to keep his father's word.

After sharing this couplet with the audience, Saif said, "*yeh jo* inclusiveness *hai zaban ki, yeh* inclusiveness *mʿaf kijiʾega ap ko sirf urdu men hi milegi*" (This inclusiveness of language, I am sorry to say, this inclusiveness you will only find in Urdu).

What is the nature of this inclusiveness? How do we think of what inclusiveness means when a Muslim poet and psychoanalyst, writing in Urdu, invokes the Hindu epic tradition not to tell a Hindu or even Indian story, but as a profound meditation on a universal truth, on the constraints that bind the tragic Dashrath that is the human heart? Here the epic tradition is not marked as Hindu or Muslim, but as part of a continuing and still relevant meditation on universal human nature and human morality.

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In October 2018, I was in Northeast Delhi, sitting in the Unani and Ayurvedic medicine shop owned by K. This was my second meeting with K, who mourned the rupture of intimate and business relations with Hindu friends and partners that the Modi years and the rise of Hindutva had brought. K understood me as

a Hindu willing to engage with Muslims, a stand-in perhaps for all the Hindu friends he could no longer talk to, and he quickly steered our conversation to an argument that he'd been mulling over.

It began with him pointing toward some Ayurvedic medicines stocked in the shelves of his store. Didn't Charaka and Sushruta [foundational figures of ancient Ayurvedic medicine] make medicines that still benefit the world? From invoking the wisdom of ancient Indian sages, he segued to asking how they [Hindus] have strayed so far from the wisdom of their own traditions.

I responded by saying that Hindutva was just toxic German ethno-nationalism in the garb of Hindu identity for the sake of controlling the state. K then brought up the ethics espoused in the Ramayana, ethics that in his reading were about the abjuring of power rather than its attainment. "Didn't Rama go into exile for 14 years just to keep his father's word? Didn't his brother Lakshmana follow him into exile? Didn't his other brother, Bharata, refuse to sit on the throne in Rama's absence and instead placed Rama's sandals on the throne? Why don't they teach this?" He gestured toward the muscular militarized iconography of Rama espoused by the Hindu right wing, the lies and deceptions and destruction that had been committed to take over state power, and asked, "How is this *maryada purushottam*?" (the honorific used to indicate that Rama is the paragon of exemplary conduct).

It was in this conversation with K that I understood the significance of the phrase *ahl-e kitab*, people of the book. K was thinking of Hindus as *ahl-e kitab*, people with an ethical tradition that had come down to them in scripture. This scriptural tradition, if properly followed, told you how to act well in the world. K, as a practicing Muslim, could understand this. What he could not abide was the abjuring of tradition in the name of reinvigorating that tradition, the turning of Rama into an icon of Hindu rule while completely jettisoning the ethical teachings of Rama's life.

. . .

In November 2018, I had a long conversation with Maulana Abdul Hameed Nomani. In the previous chapter, I suggested that his engagement with the Ramayana illustrates how relationality, the maintenance and repair of intimate relations, is central to the Muslim understanding of belonging in India. During the conversation I mentioned that his knowledge of Hindu traditions indicated a great degree of *ashnai* (intimacy). He agreed and said, "All around when I was growing up were mostly Hindus. And from above somewhere that lineage continues, my paternal and maternal ancestors were Bhumihar Brahmans.[19] *Ham koi ʿarab se thori aʾe hain* (We haven't come from Arabia)," he said, and laughed. "Indian society is based on the *parampara* (tradition) system and on stories. I had heard so many things from my paternal and maternal grandparents in my childhood. By the age of four and five I already knew a lot about Ram and Lakshman and Krishna."

Maulana Nomani also saw himself as the inheritor of—as well as part of the revival of—a long Muslim tradition of engaging with other religions. "Earlier

others used to study Islam, and Muslims used to study other religions. To know how to act and behave with others, this is still the case. Especially among Muslims there has been a lot of mind to know others (*dusron ko janne ka zehen bahut raha hai*). Among Hindus the big group keeps itself cut off from others. Now this tradition [of studying/knowing the other] has [also] become weak among Muslims. But conditions became such that people felt that this should be revived, hence Dar-ul-Uloom started it, it's been twenty-two or twenty-three years."

Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband, one of the largest and most influential Islamic seminaries in India, has been teaching regular classes on Hinduism since the mid-1990s, after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the subsequent worsening of communal relations in India. What does Maulana Nomani's engagement with Hinduism, as a representative of and contributor to the Deobandi tradition, tell us about the engagement of this tradition with Hindu religion and Indian public life?

Recall that in telling the story of the Ramayana, Maulana Nomani named Sita, Rama's wife, as an *adarsh* (ideal pious) woman on the world level (*vishva star*), on par with Mary and Ayesha within the Islamic tradition. To say that these different mythologies and histories, and the ethical lessons carried by them, are comparable on a "world level" is to think of humanity as being, as it were, on a shared, and evolving, universal moral adventure. In different parts of the world, at different points of time, the same scenario plays out. Aspersions are cast on the sexuality and moral character of pious women. Scripture, at each point, tells society how to behave. The later scriptures—the biblical and Quranic accounts of Mary's purity, the Quranic revelation coming down in the case of Ayesha that castigates those who accuse chaste women without proof—are much kinder to women than the earlier Ramayana, in which a pious woman is ultimately abandoned despite undergoing a trial by fire to prove her chastity. In some Muslim understandings, the latest scripture—the teachings brought by and the moral example of the last Prophet—abrogate, make *mansukh*, the moral shortcomings of earlier revelation.[20] While Maulana Nomani gestures toward this, this is not mainly how he chooses to critique the story of Rama and his moral choices. His critique of Rama's actions is based on the moral precedent it sets for collective contemporary Indian public life, beyond sectarian or religious identity. And the bases of his critique are not his own exegetical readings of Hindu scripture but rather influential twentieth-century Indian scholarly and activist engagements with Hindu scripture and traditions.

> While still believing that Rama is *adarsh purush* (an ideal man) what we have to bring into action is the example of the last sovereign, of Muhammad. The shortfall that remains [in public life] cannot be filled without this [the example of the Prophet in accepting his wife despite public suspicions]. And without it you cannot be *purna* (complete). Here you find the solutions to the suspicions and doubts in your mind. Valmiki [considered the author of the Sanskrit Ramayana] has written that we exiled

> Sita to keep our *kshatriya dharma* (warrior/ruler ethics) above [personal considerations]. This is why B. R. Ambedkar has picked up this issue. He says that this was done to establish dominance. Now this is a long debate in the context of India: Whether this was done to establish the dominance of Aryans over non-Aryans, this is where the matter starts. Rama as an Aryan and Ravana as a non-Aryan. If you look at Periyar's book, he has shown Ravana to be superior to Rama: Despite kidnapping Sita, he never forced himself on her, whereas on the other hand we see that they cut off the ears and nose of Shurpanakha [Ravana's sister], and Ravana did nothing like this. So how do we understand which of them takes better care of women . . . this is one of many issues Periyar has raised in the book.

In critiquing Rama, a figure central to Hindu nationalist mobilization and activism, Maulana Nomani drew not on traditional Islamic apologetics, or his own exegesis of the Ramayana, but rather on studies of folklore (as we saw earlier) and on criticisms of the Ramayana by two major Indian anti-caste activists, B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) and E. V. Ramasamy Periyar (1879–1973). In doing so, he was practicing what he preaches, because as he told me in an earlier conversation, "I always tell people to never give references straight to the Hindu *dharma shastras* (scriptures) when engaged in debate. Now the severity of the critique that Ambedkar has done, and Osho has done, and Periyar has done, and Jyotiba Phule has done, no one else can match these critiques. Speak with reference to them."

When I asked him why, he said, "If you offer your own translations of the Hindu scriptures, then they will turn it into a Hindu-Muslim issue. But if you turn to the translations and the commentaries *they* have done, speak based on those, because they accept them (*usko man rahe hain*). So a debate can happen only on the basis of what they accept. What they don't accept cannot be the basis of debate: Then it is just conflict."

The *they* I italicized in Maulana Nomani's speech includes nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-caste activists like Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar, along with guru Osho Rajneesh, usually associated with new age spirituality. While Ambedkar renounced Hinduism to become Buddhist, and Periyar was noted for his atheism, they were all in critical conversation with scriptural Hinduism, and they were all authors and public figures whose books and views are widely popular in Indian (and Hindu) public life, shaping and changing much of the public conversation around what it means to be Hindu, and hence how to relate to others. They all open potentials for making Hindu ethics more radically inclusive, more able to carry everyone with them (*sabko sath le ke chalna*), in Maulana Nomani's phrasing. Maulana Nomani's desire to draw on the authority of these figures in Muslim critique of Hindu nationalism—which is based on an idealized lost golden age of Hinduism and a privileging of Brahmanical and male authority[21]—is not just a matter of safety for Muslims, of not making things into a Hindu-Muslim issue. It is also an understanding of Hinduism as a dynamic and evolving field of ethics (the sense in which *dharma* is translated here). Modern

interlocutors are thus far more important to understanding the *futurity* of Hindu (and hence also, Indian) public life and ethics than directly turning to the *dharma shastras* would be.

. . .

The engagement with Ambedkarite and other critiques of the caste system was not just an external critique—Muslims critiquing Hindus and Hinduism—but increasingly, also internal critique for Muslims engaging with their own legacy of caste-based inequalities. During Ramadan in May 2019, I had a long conversation with S, a prominent activist and campaigner for Muslim causes and human rights. Our conversation turned to what he called "Sayyid supremacy":

> All the big madrasas, like Deoband, everyone is a Sayyid [a high-caste Muslim group who claims descent from the Prophet], all the *sajjadanashin* at the *mazar*s (sacred graves of Sufis) are Sayyids. All the *imambara*s [Shia spaces for ritual mourning], they are Sayyid, all the educational institutions, whether it be Tablighi Jamaʿat or Jamʿiat ʿUlama-e Hind, they are all run by Sayyids. Even though Jamaʿat-e Islami has elections, all the office bearers are Sayyid. So this Sayyid supremacy, what they have done, is that they have not let lower-caste Muslims progress in education (*ʿilm*). As a result, Muslims have been able to understand neither Islam, nor the world. Even today you won't see a lower-caste Muslim at a big post in a religious institution. We're Dalit too, we are carpenters [by traditional caste occupation]. If a lower-caste Muslim becomes an *ʿalim* (religious scholar), he will become one who carries the Shaykh *sahab*'s spittoon.

In November 2022, the Jamʿiat ʿUlama-e Hind filed a petition in the Supreme Court seeking Scheduled Caste status for Dalit Muslims, so that they could benefit from reserved government jobs and admission to educational institutions.[22] While caste-based identities and inequalities have long been part of subcontinental Muslim life,[23] as with other religious communities in South Asia, the 1951 Scheduled Caste Order, which recognized caste as the basis of historical inequalities and hence requiring affirmative action, states, "No person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste."[24] This order effectively barred Muslim and Christian Dalits from governmental affirmative action, the normative egalitarianism (and implicit foreignness) of these religions ostensibly rendering them outside the caste-based hierarchies that structure inequality in India.[25]

The demand for caste-based reservation, long a part of *Pasmandah* (backward) Muslim politics and activism,[26] has now been taken up by religious organizations like the Jamʿiat ʿUlama-e Hind, which until recently did not formally or publicly engage with caste, despite its influence on Muslim social norms, including marriage and friendship. But in the Republic of India, where caste is the basis of the recognition of and attempts to ameliorate historic injustice, the Islamic value of

equality is well-nigh impossible without engaging with the Muslim inheritance of "Hindu" caste inequalities.

NASIHAT: OR, THE POSSIBILITIES OF CRITICAL LOVE

In February 2018, in the courtyard of a home in Old Delhi, five of us sat around talking in Hindi-Urdu. Three of us were Muslim, two were Hindu. Two were women, three were men. Three were from Old Delhi, two lived in other parts of the National Capital Region. Everyone was English-educated, part of the professional classes, and self-identified as liberal. As the conversation proceeded, it swiftly turned to politics, as was often the case in those days. One of the Muslim women from Old Delhi disagreed with one of the Hindu men present, also a resident of Old Delhi, about the nature and strength of the Indian Constitution, and then heatedly began an eloquent, sarcastic monologue that first posed questions and then answered them:

> Forget about Hindu-Muslim issues. Who is being killed in this country these days? It is Hindus who are being killed. The Muslims that have been killed in lynchings, what level of Muslims are they? Those whose life and death, I am sorry to say, does not matter. Now tell me who has been killed among the Hindus? Judge Loya was killed, Pansare was killed, Kalburgi was killed, Gauri Lankesh was killed. . . . What level of Hindu is being killed? It's not *jahil* (uneducated/ignorant) Hindus that are being killed. It's this country's human resource. And what are you doing? Is any Hindu standing up to defend another Hindu? What a dead community (*mari hu'i qaum*) this is. Nobody sees anything. . . . You people think that Hindu-Muslim [problems] are going on in this country. It's not Hindu-Muslim, it's something else entirely. Whoever speaks of rationality or questions them will be killed. And now that you've said to Muslims that you don't have any claim in this state, then okay, it's yours. Do whatever you want with it. Take it back into the Vedic age. In the whole world Hindus have one country. You're taking it backward. Better news is coming from Saudi Arabia these days. Whenever Mohan Bhagwat [chief of the RSS] gets a chance, he says how many children a Hindu woman should have, how she should serve her husband, how she should call her rapist her brother. This is the kind of nonsense these people are doing, and no one says anything. All the Hindus are happy that our government is in power. A miraculous Hindu government. It's amazing.

Justice Brijgopal Harkishan Loya was the presiding judge in the Sohrabuddin Sheikh case, in which Amit Shah, a close associate of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and newly appointed BJP president, was accused of orchestrating Sheikh's extrajudicial killing. Judge Loya died on November 30, 2014, in mysterious circumstances, a few months into Modi's tenure as prime minister. The judge who succeeded him in the Sohrabuddin Sheikh case found Amit Shah not guilty within a month of taking it over.

Govind Pansare was a politician belonging to the Communist Party of India and the author of a popular Marathi booklet on the history of Shivaji,[27] the

seventeenth-century Maratha ruler who challenged Aurangzeb's Mughal empire and established an independent Maratha kingdom. Shivaji has become an icon of the Hindu right wing and of Marathi chauvinism, and Pansare's booklet challenges the right wing's depiction of Shivaji as a Hindu warrior against Islam and protector of the Brahminical order. It shows how he supported, and was supported by, various groups including lower castes and Muslims, many of whom fought in his army against Mughal forces. Pansare and his wife were shot by unidentified assailants while returning from a morning walk near their home in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. He succumbed to his injuries on February 20, 2015.

M. M. Kalburgi was a major scholar of Kannada devotional poetry, and "a progressive voice among the Lingayats, the middle-caste group that dominates [Karnataka] state politics."[28] He was shot to death in his home on August 30, 2015. Gauri Lankesh, also a Lingayat, was a journalist and editor of a popular Kannada weekly, known for "speaking against right-wing Hindu extremism, campaigning for women's rights and opposing caste-based discrimination."[29] She was shot to death outside her home in Bangalore on September 5, 2017. While reciting his ghazal *Acche dinon ka marsiya* (The elegy for good days) to a packed crowd in the center of Delhi in February 2018, Iqbal Ashar dedicated a *shʿer* to Gauri Lankesh:

> *unki murad hai yahi khatm na ho yeh tiragi*
> *jisne zara barhaʾi lau usko bujha diya gaya*
> It is their wish that this darkness does not end
> Whoever increased the flame a little was extinguished

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In September 2018, during the month of Muharram, Ovais and I were in Mahmudabad, near Lucknow, to attend the Muharram commemorations there. Our friend Ali, whose family were the erstwhile rulers of Mahmudabad, was leading the procession for the 8th of Muharram, which is traditionally accompanied by martial drums and battle flags (*ʿalam*), marking the battlefield deaths of Abbas, Hussain, and the other martyrs of Karbala.

Later that afternoon, as we were returning from the procession to Ali's home, one of the shopkeepers whose shop the procession had passed stopped Ali and put a folded note into his pocket. Upon returning to Ali's home, we read the note. Written in Urdu and addressed to "Ali *miyan sahab*," the note was a *shʿer* asking Ali to desist from this procession with drums, which the note likened to *firaun* (Pharoah), whose pomp and glory in the Quran are a sign of rebellion against God. Ali is Shia, and from the shopkeeper's dress and beard and message, it was clear that he was a Sunni of Salafi persuasions. As we stood looking at the note, some of Ali's staff got visibly upset. They read it as sectarian, an anti-Shia provocation. They asked Ali if they should file a police complaint against the shopkeeper.[30] Ovais, at that moment, said that while he disagreed with the shopkeeper, he thought that he

had written the note and placed it in Ali's pocket with a certain sense of claim—of right, of love. This was *muhabbat*, he insisted: The man had reached out. We all laughed at Ovais then, and I said, *Ap ko to har chiz men muhabbat dikhti hai* (You see love in everything). The matter ended there.

Many years later, as I remember and write about that incident, I do so with the realization that Ovais was right. Sometimes there is love even in what seems to be sectarian polemics. The shopkeeper wrote a respectfully addressed note and handed it to Ali to read confidentially, intimately. The request was in the poetic form of a couplet (indicating that some thought and craft went into that note). He need not have done so. He could just have decided that Shias were *kafir* (unbelievers and hence beyond redemption), as much anti-Shia polemic, which is also widely prevalent among Sunnis in India, would have it. He could have chosen not to engage. Instead, using a shared Islamic idiom, he was giving *nasihat* (advice), following the Quranic dictum "to urge what is good and oppose what is reprehensible," a duty that the Egyptian Islamic scholar Shaykh Usama Al-Sayyid Al-Azhari ties to the virtue of friendship. Talal Asad understands it as "as a matter of responsibility and concern for a friend rather than simply of policing," through which "pastoral care is here diffused among all Muslims in relation to one another."[31]

What of the conversation in the courtyard in Old Delhi? A Muslim woman spoke to a Hindu man with biting sarcasm, calling Hindus a morally dead community (*mari hu᾽i qaum*). Following Ovais's insight, can we see *muhabbat* even here?

By 2018, such frank expressions of Muslim feelings—of frustration, and disappointment, and anger with what Hindutva was doing to the social fabric of India—were relatively rare in mixed company. Hindu supremacist discourse and the valorization of Narendra Modi were widespread among urban Hindus, especially those from the professional classes, with whom most of my Muslim interlocutors had relations with varying degrees of intimacy. Whether it be casual office conversations, WhatsApp friends' groups, or Facebook posts, the celebration of Modi and Hindu pride was rampant, as were casual expressions of Islamophobia. Being Muslim in this networked public sphere was fraught.

"Post-May 2014 school became extremely weird," Rushnae, then a first-year college student in Delhi, told writer Nazia Erum.

> It became awkward discussing current affairs. Most of the people started behaving as if everything was like an OK thing or no big deal. . . . They used to say to me, why do you care so much about the [Gujarat] riots? . . . I was just angry, basically. That no one even bothered to think about what kind of person was coming to power and what it means for many Indians. . . . Things started getting communalized in class. It was like everyone was talking like this, from classmates to teachers. . . . There was one teacher who was from Jasola, and when Delhi elections happened, she was like "My constituency is a Muslim constituency; it's a criminal constituency, so Kejriwal is bound to win." People suddenly simply did not care that some will be very badly affected by such words.[32]

A journalist friend told me, on the eve of India's Republic Day in 2018, "Any comment on social media is [now] just judged by community. For example, if I were to say something about the Republic Day Parade, the response will be, 'You are Muslim, of course you won't like the floats from BJP ruled states.'"

What many Muslims were feeling in this time is perhaps best expressed by Faiz's *shʿer*:

> *na sawal-e wasl na arz-e gham na hikayaten na shikayaten*
> *tere ahad men dil-e zar ke sabhi ikhtiyar chale gaʾe*
> No question of union, no expression of grief, neither stories, nor complaints
> In your reign all the rights of the wounded heart went away

This situation greatly affected friendships and the possibilities of intimate discourse. "*Kucch dil men rehta hai*," a student at Aligarh Muslim University told me in April 2018. "Something stays in the heart. What am I going to say with my tongue [to Hindu friends]? There were some words you could say openly before but now you cannot say them. . . . *Vo mithas nahin rahi* (That sweetness is gone)." In friendship, as bell hooks reminds us, "We are able to hear honest, critical feedback. We trust that a true friend desires our good."[33] For the student from Aligarh, this was the sweetness of intimacy. In such sweet intimacy, there was the possibility of saying things without having to think about how one's friend might respond, of speaking one's mind with the expectation of being heard with no offense taken.[34] The expression of grief and of complaints, to use the language of Faiz's *shʿer*, was part of a range of possibilities of intimacy, palpable in the poem—and now in people's actual relationships—only through their negation.

Friendship, as SherAli Tareen reminds us, "frustrates sovereignty and is a reminder of its impossibility."[35] As the Hindu friends of my Muslim interlocutors turned to Modi as a figure of Hindu sovereignty and to the idea of India as a Hindu-dominated ethnic democracy, interreligious friendship, with its potential to challenge and frustrate claims to sovereignty, was the first casualty. For some Muslims, this meant not just discomfort and estrangement, but the end of long-standing friendships. One friend told me that he hadn't met up with any of his Hindu school friends since returning to his hometown of Lucknow after some years away. "You realize that some friendships are not worth keeping," he said. "My Muslim school friends don't talk about politics with my Hindu school friends because they don't want to jeopardize the friendship. But I feel that if you've voted for people who endorse and do not condemn lynching, then you're actively putting me in harm's way, and I cannot be friends with you."

It is in this context that I want to return to thinking about the conversation in the courtyard. The expression of sarcasm and anger in that scenario was not an act of hostility but an act of intimacy: Before you, I can express what I'm truly feeling. After all, the two Hindu men had come in with two Muslims with whom the woman was already friends. We were pre-vetted, as it were, and the conversation

had already established that none of us was a fan of Modi or Hindutva politics. And in that moment the Hindu man, a fellow Old Delhi resident, became a stand-in, as it were, for all the Hindu friends with whom Muslims could no longer engage in conversation. All those friends to whom you could no longer express your anxiety about where the country was heading, your sorrow about what was being said about and done openly to Muslims, your fear about your own life and the lives of your loved ones. What Muslims also could not express to their Hindu friends was their bewilderment at how their friends had changed, seemingly overnight, and their moral revulsion at the way so many Hindus seemed to be covertly or openly supportive of atrocities done in the name of teaching Muslims a lesson.[36]

There was a genuine concern, also, with the future of Hinduism as an ethical tradition. This pushed many Muslims, from religious scholars to Bollywood filmmakers, to engage in *nasihat*, in conversations of critical intimacy with and about Hindu *dharma*.

BAJRANGI BHAIJAAN: A BOLLYWOOD MANUAL ON HOW TO BE A BETTER ALLY

Bajrangi Bhaijaan, directed by Kabir Khan and released in July 2015, is one of the biggest box-office hits ever produced by the Bombay film industry. In the film, Shahidah (a name meaning "witness"), a mute little Muslim girl from Pakistan, known for most of the film by the religiously unmarked "Munni," is separated from her mother and ends up alone in India. She is befriended by Pawan Kumar Chaturvedi, a.k.a. Bajrangi. Bajrangi is a staunch Hindu devotee of the monkey god Hanuman, an important character in the Ramayana and in contemporary Hindu devotion, and a high-caste Brahmin, with a brief past in the Hindu nationalist movement. A great love develops between him and this little girl, and this love leads him to a series of "transgressive acceptances": of meat consumption, of Muslims and Muslim shrine spaces, of the land and people of Pakistan.

The film came out a little more than a year after the Modi-led BJP government came to power in Delhi, and that context makes it an even more subversive text. In this film Pakistanis (and by extension Muslims) are shown not as enemies, but as everyday folks who are sympathetic to the travails of a Hindu man who illegally crosses the border to get a Pakistani girl home and actively aid him to evade capture by Pakistani security forces. His allies on the other side of the border include a Pakistani *maulana* who greets him with the Hindu greeting "*Jai Shri Ram*" (Victory to Rama) and a Pakistani journalist called Chand Nawab.

"As I was writing the script of the film, I figured that Chand Nawab would call Bajrangi *bhaʾi-jan* at some point, and that would be a great title for the film," Kabir Khan, the film's director and producer, said when I met him in his office in Mumbai in October 2018, over three years after the film's release. *Bhaʾi-jan*, bringing together the Hindi/Indic *bhaʾi* (brother) and the Persian/Urdu affectionate suffix

jan, is a markedly, one could say stereotypically, Muslim way of saying "brother." The very title indicates a claim of kinship, of brotherhood, made by a Muslim subject for a clearly Hindu, Hanuman-worshipping protagonist. "But when I first told my mother, her reaction was, Why Bajrangi? The moment you say Bajrangi, I think of Babu Bajrangi."

Kabir's mother was repulsed by the name Bajrangi because it reminded her of Babubhai Patel, alias Babu Bajrangi, a member of the Hindu nationalist militant organization Bajrang Dal, who was found guilty of masterminding the Naroda Patiya massacre of ninety-seven Muslims during the 2002 Gujarat pogroms. "I was really struck by that," Kabir said. "Bajrangi is the affectionate term you use for a devotee of Hanuman. And Hanuman was the fun god. When I was growing up in Pandara Park [a neighborhood of central government employees in New Delhi], every year all the kids would do *Ram Lila* [the dramatic reenactment of the story of Rama, performed during the autumn Dussehra festival], and everyone wanted to be Hanuman. The test [to choose who would be Hanuman] was who could climb a tree the fastest, and since I was very good at climbing trees, I would always be Hanuman. We've lost the name and the ethos of Bajrangi to the right wing, and *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* is an attempt to win Bajrangi and Hanuman back from the right wing."

The genius of *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* lies in being political without being heavy-handed. Responding to my constant harping about the subversive nature of *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, Kabir Khan said, "I could have made the film really emotionally heavy, but I know that what will hit home is humor. The politics has to be in the layers beneath. 'Chicken Song' has to be entertaining, and something that kids can hum along to, without the politics being in the forefront. And yet it's the most political song in the film."

"Chicken Song" comes at a pivotal moment in the film. Munni, the mute Muslim, is dying to eat meat while stuck in a vegetarian upper-caste Hindu household. Because of his love for her, Bajrangi, despite all his concerns about the pollution of "non-veg" food, takes her to Chaudhry Dhaba. Yet he can't sit at the same table with the bewildered child. The six-year-old Munni, forced to sit apart, starts weeping. His fiancée Rasika, whose name means aesthete, the one rightly attuned to the *bhav*, the affect of the moment, goes and sits with the child and makes up a song. Bajrangi picks up the refrain and starts singing a song—the Chicken Song—that gleefully celebrates the power of meat to destroy the dharmic rules of caste purity:

thori biriyani bukhari thori phir nalli nahari
le ao aj dharam bhrasht ho jae
de kitchen se avaz chicken kukuruku . . .
Some Biryani from Bukhara, then some marrow *nahari*
Bring 'em on, today let dharma be corrupted
The chicken calls from the kitchen cock-a-doodle doo

At the end of the song, Munni runs into Bajrangi's arms, and her adoptive Hindu vegetarian family in Delhi all gather around as she tucks into her chicken.

Why is a song about chicken the most political song in the film? Let us remember that chicken is not usually offered as sacrifice to Hindu gods (goats are), and chicken was, until quite recently associated primarily with Muslims.[37] Yet today chicken is the most ubiquitous form of "non-veg"—as consumption of non-dairy animal protein is characterized in India—available in Indian cities. The turn of the chicken, from a meat associated with Muslims to a universally consumed meat both semiotically and economically disassociated from Muslims through their association with beef, alerts us to shifts in the bodily alignments of Indian democracy, the ways that embodied exchanges of bodily substance—allowing oneself to be ritually polluted by another, in the parlance of an older anthropology[38]—allow for the realization, the making real of kinship bonds across various caste, class, and sectarian divides.

In this context, the song's cheerful imperative to corrupt dharma today—*aj dharam bhrasht ho jae*—is a call not so much for the *corruption* but for the *transformation* of Hindu ethics toward greater inclusivity. Brotherhood—Fraternity—is, of course, one of the foundational promises of the French Revolution and the democratic ideals it espoused, along with Liberty and Equality. But in India, kinship isn't real unless you eat together. The much-studied anxieties of purity and pollution that govern food transactions in India[39]—what you can eat, with whom you can eat—stem precisely from the potency of substance transactions to transfer aspects of the other's agency and personhood, and thus to make real a brotherhood across caste, class, or sectarian divides through the transgression of eating together.

The widespread availability of chicken in the restaurants of urban India signals the widening of the democratic public sphere, which in turn embodies the potential for social alliances and kinship across various divides. The coming of the "broiler chicken" and the relative cheapness of this meat obviously has much to do with this story.[40] But I would like to think that the choice of chicken stems partly from its highly polluting quality, which comes from it being seen as a maximal transactor of personhood attributes, and hence of kinship. Chicken thus becomes the ideal food of the democratic public sphere in India, a sphere of the building of kinship which by its radically polluting nature must occur outside the domestic kitchen. This public sphere includes the demographic majority of Indians that eat meat but are relatively absent from the usual understanding of India as being a largely vegetarian—and (upper-caste) Hindu—country.[41]

In an interview with *The Indian Express*, Kabir Khan said, "The Chicken Song . . . is the most political song of the film because it came in the face of the beef ban. And that song is basically saying—this is Chaudhary Dhaba, which is a metaphor for India. *Adha hai non-veg, adha hai veg* (half [the] *dhaba* is meat eating, half is

vegetarian). You decide what you want to eat and all of us can sit together and eat. So that's the way you slip into politics."[42]

In 2015, two visions of Hindu-Muslim relations in India were presented to the Indian public. One, which unfolded through newspapers, WhatsApp forwards, and television news, was the story of Muhammad Akhlaq, who was killed by a lynch mob on September 28, 2015. In this story, a Muslim was killed because he was said to have beef in his fridge. Beef meant his immediate exclusion from the bonds of fraternity. And so he was rendered *Homo sacer*—he who could be killed by anyone with impunity.[43] At the same time, in a Bollywood film released widely two months before Akhlaq's death, a protagonist named Bajrangi articulates a vision of a public sphere in which love can bloom across the divides of caste and community through the transgressive eating of chicken. At the point in the film where he sings the Chicken Song, he does not yet know that her name is Shahidah. She has come to him bereft of all identity, unable to even speak her name. And so it is possible for him to sanctify the sheer contingency of being brought together,[44] to make this love stronger than the anxieties of pollution.

The next day, he discovers she is Muslim. Were it not for the guidance of Rasika, the one who is well versed in aesthetic theory, in Indic traditions of affect, one who is not entangled in the masculinist anxieties of Hindu nationalism,[45] he would have abandoned Shahidah after this discovery. The anxieties of [nationalist] purity would have won out over the transgressive pull of love. But, thanks to her intervention, he makes a different choice and enters the highly polluting realm of chickens and Muslims. And because of this love, he has to perform the ultimate exclusion from the Indian nation-state. To bring Shahidah home, using the catch-phrase bandied about by right-wing politicians and the Indian news media at the smallest sign of disagreement or criticism, he must #GotoPakistan.

. . .

In a pivotal scene of the film, Bajrangi and Chand Nawab, the journalist who becomes his closest friend and ally in Pakistan, have their first conversation atop a bus. Chand Nawab, with the active cooperation of a whole busload of sympathetic Pakistani passengers, has just orchestrated Bajrangi and Munni's escape from the Pakistani police who are pursuing them.

"How will you find her parents?" Chand Nawab asks Bajrangi.

Bajrangi replies, "Bajrangi Bali [Hanuman] will help."

Chand Nawab retorts, "Even in Pakistan?"

Bajrangi looks nonplussed. Chand Nawab starts laughing. The question is left hanging, and the sequence ends. But the rest of the film unfolds, as it were, as an answer to that discursively unresolved question. To be a truly effective (and affective) ally to his Muslim ward, Bajrangi has to leave Hindu normativity behind. He has to encounter Muslims, and Muslim spaces, on their own terms. *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* is a cinematic bildungsroman in which we see Bajrangi moving from

ghrina of Muslims and Muslim spaces—an embodied affect of disgust, revulsion, and fear—toward a relationship of *muhabbat*.

Whereas in Old Delhi, Bajrangi is deeply uncomfortable and hesitant about entering a Muslim shrine space after Munni/Shahidah has gone in, by the time he gets to the northern areas of Pakistan, he asks Chand Nawab to direct him to the shrine of Hazrat Amin Shah so he can pray for Munni to be reunited with her parents. His body language changes too, through the course of the film. When saying goodbye to the *maulana*, early in his sojourn in Pakistan—here a synecdoche for Muslim space—Bajrangi is taken aback by his right hand rising to his eyes, palm inwards, in the gesture of *adab*, which is a gesture of universal greeting but increasingly stereotyped as exclusively Muslim, and brings up his other hand to transform his greeting into the characteristically Hindu form of *namaste*.

As he leaves Pakistan at the end of the film, through a *punctum* in that iron border opened by the goodwill he has earned in Pakistan through Chand Nawab's reporting of his story, Bajrangi, entirely unprompted, turns to the assembled, cheering crowd, bows, and raises his right hand to his eyes in *adab*. He is about to return to India, to his waiting Hindu family, transformed by his sojourn in Muslim space. He is still Bajrangi, still a devotee of Hanuman, but now he is a Hindu who accepts Muslims on their own terms. Perhaps it is fitting that only after this transformation in Bajrangi can Shahidah finally speak, in the climactic moment of the film that is a caesura rather than an ending. Their *muhabbat*, so long based on Bajrangi's projections onto the mute figure of Munni, finally has the possibility of being a dialogue.

. . .

Bajrangi Bhaijaan was given the clearance needed from the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC, a.k.a. the Censor Board) for countrywide commercial release just a week before its scheduled release date, which, as Kabir Khan noted, is very late for a big-budget film. The film was surrounded by controversy for about a year before its release. Much of the controversy was generated by members of the Hindu right wing and had a great deal to do with the identity of the film's star and director, both men with Muslim names. First, there was a rumor that this was a film celebrating Love-Jihad, as interreligious romances and marriages involving Muslim men and Hindu women are characterized by right-wing discourse. Even after it became clear from the previews that Salman Khan was playing a Hindu character, the CBFC chair Pahlaj Nihalani (appointed in January 2015 by the BJP government) refused to watch the film. He finally watched it shortly before the deadline under legal pressure. Kabir Khan thinks that the delay "came from above" to put pressure on the producers, himself included, to accept the cuts the censors suggested because of the financial hit that could be caused by a delayed release.[46]

One of the cuts that they suggested was a scene in which the Pakistani *maulana* who has given shelter to Bajrangi and Munni is saying goodbye to them. In

the scene, Bajrangi hesitates to speak the Urdu equivalent of "goodbye," *Khuda Hafiz* (God protect you), and the *maulana* says, "*Ap ke yahan kya kehte hain, Jai Shri Ram?*" (What do they say where you come from, Victory to Rama?) and then says "*Jai Shri Ram*" to Bajrangi as a goodbye. "The Censor Board officials said, the *maulana* character can't say *Jai Shri Ram*, it will create a problem. I told them, in my village in UP, which is a village of very conservative Muslim Pathans, people routinely say *Jai Shri Ram* to their Hindu neighbors, no problem." The scene stayed in the film.

"When the film released," Kabir Khan said, "I went to see it in the theater on the opening weekend," which coincided with the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr, traditionally a big day for Bollywood releases, especially for films starring Salman Khan. "I went to a cinema near Victoria Terminus. The audience there is 70 percent Muslim blue collar—mechanics, carpenters, taxi drivers—who're big fans of Salman Khan. And the roar of approval in the hall that went up when the *maulana* character says 'Jai Shri Ram'. . . . people responded so positively to the thing that the Censor Board thought would be problematic."

Why would a Censor Board ideologically committed to the domination of India by Hindu mores have a problem with Muslim characters saying "Victory to Rama"? Why would a largely Muslim crowd cheer for a Muslim religious figure invoking the name of the Hindu deity most associated with the Hindu nationalist project of marginalizing Muslims? I believe that the discomfort of the Censor Board, and the assent of the Muslim public, are rooted in the same question of *affective sovereignty*.[47] The Hindu nationalist would like the Muslim to say "*Jai Shri Ram*" only through coercion, as a sign of Muslim defeat and subjugation, as Tabrez Ansari was made to do when he was lynched.[48] That's not how it plays out in the film, when the *maulana* says it as a Muslim figure comfortably inhabiting Muslim space. In the film, the *maulana*'s "*Jai Shri Ram*" is a gesture of hospitality, an offering to accommodate a guest who is ill at ease. It is an autonomous gesture of Muslim generosity, uncoerced and joyful. This is a "*Jai Shri Ram*" that the Hindu nationalist cannot accept, but for which a Hindustani Muslim cheers. This is the "*Jai Shri Ram*" with which Shahidah greets Bajrangi at the end of the film, in no-man's-land between barbed-wire fences, in a space, however fleetingly, outside the majoritarian logic of the nation-state.

THE MUSLIM KRISHNA: IMAGES OF LOVE'S POSSIBLE KINGDOM

Kabir Khan's paternal ancestral village is in Kaimganj, Farrukahbad District in the Lower Doab region of the state of Uttar Pradesh, on the banks of the Ganga. It is a *qasbah*, a rural market and manufacturing town established in the early eighteenth century by the Afghan/Pathan nawab of Farrukhabad, and it served, as *qasbah*s historically have, as a seat of Muslim culture and learning.[49] Kabir's paternal grandfather,

Ghulam Akbar Khan (1876–1957), migrated from Kaimganj to Hyderabad State to establish himself in the legal profession. He was appointed judge of the Hyderabad High Court and also served as the Home Secretary of the Nizam's Dominion during the Prime Ministership of Maharaja Sir Kishen Parshad Bahadur.

> He was given the honorific title of Nawab Akbar Yar Jung Bahadur, by which name he was generally known. He was a person of deep religious convictions and adherence to Sufi traditions of *wahdat-al wujud* and *sulh-e kul*. He was a committed promoter of Hindu-Muslim unity. On 11 August, 1936, he was invited by the Young Men Kayasta[50] Union to be the main speaker in a public meeting organized to celebrate *Krishna Janmashtami* (the birthday of Krishna). The title of his address was "Sri Krishna: The Prophet of Hind." Excerpts from this address are given below:
>
> > . . . Sri Krishna, whom in my religious phraseology I would call Krishna *alaihis-salam* (upon whom be peace). I have no hesitation in regarding this great personage whom the Hindus regard as an avatar of God, as a *nabi* (a prophet of God). I therefore add the salutation due to the prophets. . . . So the commemoration of the birth of Shri Krishna is not only a blessing for the Hindus but also a blessing for the Musalmans. According to the teachings of the Quran, a Musalman can make no distinction between the prophets. . . . A study of the Gita makes it clear that it is God who is addressing Arjuna. The fact is that when a prophet speaks on behalf of God, and in His name, his soul does not act as a mediary. He becomes merged in God (*fana fillah*) as the iron which, when put into the fire, becomes fire. Owing to this merging of the one into the other the Divine word flows even as God speaks through the tongue of the prophet. This is the style of the Gita also. . . . A comparison of the teachings of the Gita and the Quran reveals a wonderful similarity. The Gita teaches action (*Karma*). It lays so much stress upon the performance of man's duty that it calls it *ibadat* (service: worship). . . . Service is to be performed without regard to consequences, with a sincerity of purpose which thinks of no self, no recompense. . . . The actions of a believer, all his movements, his activities, his sacrifices in life must be solely for God, without any thought to self. This great teaching of both the Quran and the Gita forms the basis of the highest morality. . . . The Gita also trains reason and sentiment, and this is its philosophy. The person therefore who delivered the Gita deserves all honor and glory. . . . This great philosophical book, whose philosophy is always fresh and practicable, the Musalmans would do well to study and comprehend and thus draw the Hindus closer to themselves, in order that, by a mutual understanding of one another, they might learn to respect each other's religion.[51]

This long extract about Ghulam Akbar Khan, a.k.a. Nawab Akbar Yar Jung Bahadur, with its extensive quotation of his engagement with the Bhagavad Gita and the figure of the Hindu god Krishna in his address to a group of young Hindu Kayastha men, is from *Bewildered India*, the last book written by his son Rasheeduddin Khan (1924–96). Rasheeduddin was a political scientist, one of the founders of the progressive Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi (1969), and a humanist greatly committed to the idea of a pluralist India. In 1965 he married a fellow Hyderabadi, Leela Narayan Rao, who is Hindu, and settled down in New Delhi, where his children Kabir and Anusha grew up. He wrote *Bewildered India* after the destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992.

"I could see my father's heart break," Kabir Khan said when I brought up the book. "Their world came apart." It was in response to that heartbreak that Rasheeduddin Khan wrote a book that was a stirring defense of India as a "Federal-Nation," a concept that he distinguished from the homogeneity of the European (and Hindu right-wing) ideal of the nation, characterized by a "unity of polity and plurality of society."[52] In his exploration of the social plurality of India, the central chapters of the book are concerned with the question of Indian-Muslim perceptions of India as a sacred land—contra the Hindu nationalist idea of Muslims having their sacred geographies exclusively outside India[53]—and the engagements of eminent Muslims with Hindu texts and traditions.

Rasheeduddin Khan writes about his own father at the end of a very long chapter on Muslims who have engaged with Hinduism. The list begins with Abu Raihan Al-Beruni (973–1050), and includes such figures as Amir Khusrau (1253–1325), Shaikh Abdul Quddus Gangohi (1456–1537), Abdur-Rahim Khan-i Khanan (1556–1627), Shaikh Muhibullah Allahabadi (1587–1648), Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan (1699–1780), and Khwaja Hasan Nizami (1878–1955), as well as figures already mentioned in this book such as Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib and Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani. (It also includes Maulana Hasrat Mohani (1877–1951) and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), whom we will meet later.) It is as if Rasheeduddin Khan is presenting us with a thousand-year lineage of Muslim engagements with Hindus and Hinduism, and hence with creating a plural society, and places himself—and all Indian Muslims—as an inheritor of this lineage. It was Ovais who first mentioned *Bewildered India* to me: "When I am very confused, and very dejected, I pick up this book and read it."

Rasheeddudin Khan's son Kabir (b. 1968) made a film in which national borders, borders based on the imagined homogeneity of religious communities, borders both external and internal, become porous, open (even if temporarily) in the face of love. "People ask me," he said, "'Why are all your films so political?' As an audience member I always had a problem with the vacuum in which our romantic films are set. I wanted more background, and that's what my films provide. I write based on what I feel, what I've observed. Every single name in my films is someone I grew up with. . . . I'm a product of a mixed marriage, I grew up shuttling between my *nani*'s (maternal grandmother's) house and my *dadi*'s (paternal grandmother's) house and enjoying the cultural aspects of both religions and seeing how well they blended together."

A Sufi who became a judge, a humanist academic, a Bollywood filmmaker: An intellectual biography of three generations of Khans would perhaps find nothing much in common. But looking at how the theology espoused by Ghulam Akbar Khan influences *life*—the potential of openness to the other that found (perhaps unexpected) expression in his son's marriage, and in the ways his grandson moved back and forth between Hindu and Muslim households with a sense of intimacy and familiarity with both cultural worlds—shows us a continuous tradition, alive and vital in challenging the divisiveness of nationalism through "engaging the life of the other."[54]

. . .

Nawab Akbar Yar Jung Bahadur was not an isolated Muslim in his respect and admiration for Krishna. His contemporary Maulana Hasrat Mohani (1877–1951), noted poet, editor and politician who brought together Communist political thought with deep Muslim devotion, regularly used to go on pilgrimage to Mathura, the birthplace of Krishna in Hindu mythology, along with going on Hajj eleven times.[55]

Hasrat was a *murid* of Abdul Bari Farangi Mahali (1876–1926), and the Farangi Mahali family of scholars were *murids* of the eighteenth-century Qadiri Sufi Shaykh Abdur Razzak Bansawi,[56] who not only emphatically stated that Rama and Krishna were prophets sent to India, but also showed visions of Krishna to both Hindu and Muslim followers.[57] Muzaffar Alam has understood Abdur Razzaq Bansawi's theology and miracles in the context of "the Sufi effort to maintain social order"[58] in a fractious eighteenth-century landscape.

Hasrat Mohani, as his spiritual descendant, lived at a time when the Bhagavad Gita, the book revealed to Krishna as a prophet sent to India in Muslim understanding, was becoming a part of Indian political discourse through figures such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920), whom Hasrat greatly admired, and Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948).[59] In 1923, while imprisoned in Yeravada Jail by British colonial authorities because of his radical political speeches, Mohani wrote several poems expressing his love for Krishna. Mohani's devotion, which was expressed in poetry in both "standard" and feminine/vernacular versions of Urdu, gives us a vision of a political theology of radical love anchored not in the Bhagavad Gita, but in *Ras-Lila*, divine love-play, the popular tradition of eroticized devotion to Krishna as an exemplar of love. In a poem dated 26–30 September 1923, Mohani writes:

kucch ham pi bhi ʿata ho ke ai Hazrat e Kirishn
iqlim e ʿishq ap ke zer-e qadam hai khas
Hasrat ki bhi qubul ho Mathura men haziri
Sunte hain ʿashiqon pe tumhara karam hai khas
Revered Krishna, bestow something on me too
For under your feet lies the entire realm of love
May you accept Hasrat's attendance to Mathura—
I hear you are especially kind to all lovers[60]

In a poem dated 30 October 1923, Hasrat writes:

Braj-mohan jab se man base
Ham bhulen sab kam kaj
Kuraj-suraj sab bhul ke Hasrat
Ab mangat hain prem-raj
Since the Braj enchanter entered my heart
I have neglected all my tasks
Hasrat forgot "bad raj" and "good raj"
He now seeks only the "raj of love"[61]

In 1923, as Hindu-Muslim animosity and conflict grew in in the aftermath of the joint Khilafat Non-Cooperation Movement being called off by Mahatma Gandhi in February 1922, Hasrat Mohani turned to Krishna to seek "prem-raj," the rule of love. This was not rule concerned with the nature of the state—be it good rule or bad rule—or *svaraj* (spelled the same as *suraj*/"good rule" in Urdu script), the desire for self-rule as articulated by the Indian National Congress.[62] For Hasrat, Krishna, celebrated in popular devotion as an exemplar of love, opened up a political theology of radical love very different from the political theology found in the example of Rama, where love has to be sacrificed for the sake of the propriety demanded by *raja-dharma*. Krishnaite political theology finds its expression in the carnivalesque festival of Holi—beloved of Hasrat Mohani—which people in Braj say has been taught to them by Krishna. In a classic essay anthropologist McKim Marriott characterizes it as a "Feast of Love," in which "boundless, unilateral love of every kind flooded over the usual compartmentalization and indifference among separated castes and families."[63]

In March 2025, Holi coincided with a Friday, the day of Muslim congregational prayer, in the month of Ramadan. Holi became yet another occasion to assert Hindu dominance in public. Mosques were covered with tarps to prevent them being sprayed with Holi colors, the time of *jumʿah* prayers was delayed to later in the afternoon, and there was massive police deployment around mosques to prevent violence.[64] At least one Muslim man was killed by a mob for objecting to color being sprayed on him on his way to the mosque.[65]

• • •

"My family are Krishna *bhakts* (devotees)," Ustad Iqbal Ahmed Khan said to me when I mentioned the small idols of Krishna and Sarasvati placed in his room in Old Delhi where we were meeting in May 2018. When he prayed, he would have his back to these idols, but they were not hidden or obscured in his room. "I think of Krishna as a prophet, the same way I consider Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, as a prophet, because *Huzur* [the Prophet] said that the way you accept me, is the same way you should accept him. If you don't accept him, you are not a Muslim. Krishna *Janmashtami* has been celebrated at my home for a long time. My father, who died while in a state of prostration during the *ʿisha* prayers . . . he once told me . . . I constantly hear the playing of a melodious flute in my ears."

Ustad Iqbal Ahmed Khan was a *murid* of Khwaja Hasan Sani Nizami (d. 2015). The latter's father, Khwaja Hasan Nizami (d. 1955), along with being a major figure in the twentieth-century Chishti order, was also a prominent Urdu writer and public figure who both actively combated the rise of Hindu communalism (as exemplified in his time by the Arya Samaj) and promoted dialogue between the two religions in the tradition of the Chishti *silsilah*. One of his most famous books, *Nizami Bansari* (The Nizami flute), first published in 1935, is ostensibly based on a Persian manuscript written by a Hindu prince of Devgiri, Rajkumar Har Dev, who

first became a *murid* of Nizam ud-Din Auliya of Delhi (d. 1325) and later embraced Islam. In the book, Har Dev describes a vivid scene where Nizam ud-Din Auliya shows him a multisensory vision of Krishna playing the flute.[66]

In the Chishti tradition that developed in India, as exemplified by the author Abdul Wahid Bilgrami in his 1566 text *Haqaiq-e-Hindi*, in Hindi/Hindavi texts and songs "Krishna and his other names are used to indicate the perfect man or *insan-e kamil*. According to him, all the symbols and names used in Krishna songs are indicative of some Sufi theme: . . . the flute indicates the appearance of existence out of void."[67] In meeting Ustad Iqbal Ahmed Khan, I saw this long Muslim tradition of engagement with Krishna vital and alive, transmitted down the generations.

On December 17, 2020, Ustad Iqbal Ahmed Khan passed away due to cardiac arrest while praying his morning prayers.

. . .

As I described in chapter 1, Khudai Khidmatgar (the Servants of God) was a movement led by Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a.k.a. Bacha Khan (1890–1988) in the North West Frontier Province of British India, which organized Pathans into peaceful civil disobedience in the face of brutal colonial violence and worked toward a composite nationalism opposed to Muslim separatism. In 2011, Faisal Khan, a Muslim Gandhian social activist, revived the Khudai Khidmatgar movement in India.

I first met with Faisal Khan and other members of the Khudai Khidmatgar in April 2018. In our first conversation Faisal Khan, more than speaking of Bacha Khan or Gandhi, anchored the philosophy of Khudai Khidmatgar in the history and ethics of the Chishti Sufi order. As he spoke animatedly, he asked his colleague Inam to bring a book from his room. The book was *Tarikh-e Mashaikh-e Chisht* (The history of the saints of the Chishti order) by Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (1925–97), a prominent historian based at Aligarh Muslim University who was himself descended from a major Shaykh of the Chishti order in India. The book was first published in 1953. Faisal opened the book and said, "In this book there is a chapter on Hindu-Muslim relations. Why did the Chishti *silsilah* spread in India, you tell me? The Naqshbandis came to India, the Qadiris came to India, but they call Muinuddin Chishti the Emperor of India, because the Chishtis were more practical. In the Sufi tradition the purest Sufis are the Naqshbandis, but why were the Chishtis successful? . . . In this book, in the *Tarikh-e Mashaikh-e Chisht*, there is a principle of the Sufis, as to what our relations with the Hindus should be like."

The chapter Faisal Khan mentioned begins:

> In India an important principle of the Chishtiya *silsilah* has been that relations with the Hindus should be *shaguftah* (open, blossoming). In the *Nafʿa as-Salikin* it is written:
>
> > Hazarat Qibla Quds Sarah used to say that it is the principle of our *silsilah* that we should maintain *sulah* (harmony) with both Muslims and Hindus, and used to recite this couplet:

hafiz gar wasl khvahi sulah kun ba khas o ʿam
ba musalman Allah Allah, ba birahman Ram Ram
Hafiz if you desire union make peace with the elite and the ordinary
With a Muslim [say] "Allah Allah," with a Brahmin [say] "Rama Rama"[68]

It cites verses from the Quran and Hadith of the Prophet that inform the ethics of the Chishti order and goes on to tell further stories about them as recorded in the *malfuzat* literature: "A person gifted a pair of scissors to Baba Farid (Fariduddin Ganj-e Shakar). He said, 'Give me a needle. I don't cut; I join.' This sentence serves as a perfect example of his thinking and is an excellent mirror-bearer for the principles of the Chishti order."[69]

In October 2020, Faisal Khan and three other members of Khudai Khidmatgar went on a bicycle pilgrimage in Braj, the area sacred to Krishna that Hasrat Mohani himself visited many times.

> In October, four Khidmatgars—Faisal Khan, Chand Mohammed, Alok Ratan and Nilesh Gupta—undertook the traditional 84 *kos* (150-mile) *parikrama* of Braj at Mathura, considered the birthplace of Krishna. As always, the Khudais engaged in dialogue with local priests, ate with them and made friends.
>
> On October 29, they reached Nand Baba Mandir, and were warmly received and given prasad by the temple priest. Faisal Khan, in his distinctly Muslim cap, recited from the Tulsidas Ramayana [*Ramcharitmanas*] and both men spoke about shared values in religion. When namaz time came, Khan asked if there was a mosque nearby, but the priest said they could offer namaz within the temple compound.
>
> One of the Hindu Khudais photographed this moment signifying the harmony they deeply believe in. In their enthusiasm they posted it on Facebook, which has been one their tools for spreading amity. As the photo went viral, all hell broke loose. The priest of the temple was pressured to lodge a police complaint. Khan was arrested and brought to a Mathura jail under various charges, including one of destroying communal harmony.[70]

As Mahmood Mamdani noted in the context of the discourse around the War on Terror, "good Muslim" and "bad Muslim" are political constructs, with no inherent theological bases.[71] In an earlier political moment, Faisal Khan's knowledge of Hinduism and outreach to Hindus would have marked him as a "good Muslim," one whose faith and activism aligned well with Indian state secularism, as opposed to the "bad" Muslims who were not so accommodating of Hindu mores. But the interfaith dialogue in which Faisal Khan engaged promotes the possibility of Hindu-Muslim friendship, and interreligious friendship, as SherAli Tareen's work shows, challenges and frustrates the claims of (Hindu) sovereign mastery.[72] In Modi's India, there can be no good Muslims.

6

Islam Comes Alive After Every Karbala

Shifts in the Nature of Islamic Authority in Hindu Nationalist Times

qatl-e hussain asl men marg-e yazid hai
islam zindah hota hai har karbala ke bʿad
The killing of Hussain is actually the death of Yazid
Islam comes alive after every Karbala
—MOHAMMAD ALI "JAUHAR" (1878–1931)

In February 2018, I met with a group of Muslim women who worked for an NGO in Lucknow, posing questions and listening as they spoke about how the growing Islamophobia since 2014 had affected them. My last question to them was, "How has all of this changed your relation to your religion?" Below are excerpts from the answers, translated from Hindi-Urdu, anonymized, and edited lightly for clarity:

> One thing I will say is that in the past three years there's been a great desire to learn more about religion. In all issues that have been raised, whether it be the matter of Triple Talaq or whether it be terrorism . . . all of this has led to a greater desire to learn one's religion. Whether these things are really a part of religion or whether they've been [wrongly] imputed to the religion . . . to learn what religion is and the way the world is showing it. . . .
>
> . . . Like this question about *jihad*. This question always used to rankle in my mind as to what *jihad* is. This word is also mentioned in the Quran. But in the Quran it doesn't mean go and kill people. . . . When in every way oppression on you increases, then when you fight for your rights, that is *jihad*. This is what I learned when I made an attempt to know this word. I mean when I went toward my religion then I found these things and it also gave a kind of satisfaction that what people say about *jihad*, that it means you will go and kill people, this is not what *jihad* means.
>
> AVT: Did you read about it, did you speak with people?
>
> . . . Through books, like this word has come in the Quran multiple times so I'll read it and look at its meanings multiple times and then understood that this is what

the word means, and also through talking to people . . . and like among Muslims there's always talk about the Prophet, *may Allah send blessings upon him and peace*, so an attempt to know his life . . . what is the truth . . . so reading from one's religious books, also via the internet. . . .

[Another woman, A, joins in. She wears a *hijab*, and her father is a muezzin at a mosque] . . . and talking at home . . . like my father . . . he did not know any Arabic, he too had to learn everything, but today he's read the Quran so that without studying he shows us, tells us, explains to us. But . . . the things that are in his heart, we try to change them. . . . We explain those things to him . . . so this has increased a little bit, this attempt to know religion . . . like there was this question that H [coworker who is also present] asked me, that I don't understand whether Muslims have been around since the world was made or whether Muslims have only been around since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, *may Allah send blessings upon him and peace*. . . .

H: when people mention Islam, even if it's a Muslim group, they say 1400 years, and Hindu group says it's only 1000 years old. When we talk of 1000 years ago or 2000 years ago and then we talk of Grandfather Adam and Eve, *peace be upon her*, when the world was being settled, so I was very confused between them. So that's what I was asking her. . . .

Many people have said to me that Islam is 1400 years old. So then Noah, *peace be upon him*, and all the other prophets, in what era were they?

. . . Against this when we see Mr. Modi is in the quest of building *Akhand Bharat*[1] [undivided India] . . . but this is a matter worth noting that when Islam came 1400 years ago it spread to many, many countries, but the Hindu religion, which is said to have been around since the settlement of the world, why did it remain limited only to a few countries . . . why did it stop? Why was it not transmitted and spread widely? Why does Modi-*ji* have to take this over? Why does he have to take over this entire leadership? So this is a matter to think about, that there are so many Muslim countries and we're [now] in the process of making one Hindu country . . . that if all of these countries come into the fold then we'll have *Akhand Bharat*.

. . . . And you're the one who's prepared us to think like this.

H: Yes, we never thought this . . . what you're asking, how things have changed for us, so we're able to see things with great depth now, otherwise we were not looking at how many countries Islam is prevalent in, what is the situation there, what is the situation of women there, how women are treated there . . . all these details (*barikiyan*) . . . we've [now] had many opportunities to look at them . . . and not just from the point of view of Islam, also from the point of view of Dalits, we've also seen the situation of Christians, and also the depths of these matters, when we raise our voice then [what we're saying] is it in our Book, or did Ambedkar say it, or did the Prophet, *may Allah send blessings upon him and peace*, say it, we're able to look at everything . . . we're able to look at everything, and we're able to analyze it within ourselves and understand that okay, this is what it is. . . . come into the [battle]field, mister, we're already way ahead of you. . . .

You're the one who's prepared us to think like this. One of the consequences of the obsession of the Hindu right wing with Islam and Muslims has been the

unprecedented presence of Islam, even if negatively, in common public discourse in India. Paradoxically, by obsessively demonizing all signs of Muslim difference in the public sphere, the Hindu right wing mirrored what happened with the Islamization of Iran in the years after the revolution, where, "By locating Islam in the public sphere, the new constitution . . . transformed Islam from an *a priori* source of legitimacy into a contested body of discourses."[2] "Laypeople began formulating questions that had not been asked because the stakes were so low before the revolution—or that had been discussed only among clerics and intellectual elites. Such questions multiplied and extended far and wide. . . ."[3] The constant presence of Islam in the Indian public sphere, through its vilification, meant that many Muslims who might have remained indifferent to questions about their religion were now deeply invested in engaging with such questions.

This meant increased conversations about Islam in diverse spaces, including homes, where children tried, as in A's account, to change things in their parents' hearts, their inherited views on Islam. The debate about what Islam is, and what role it has to play in Indian and Muslim life, has become, as in Niloofar Haeri's observations of postrevolutionary Iran, "more vital and plural."[4]

For instance, I encountered nuanced Muslim responses to the Supreme Court of India's August 2017 judgment that found the practice of "instant triple talaq" unconstitutional. This practice holds that a marriage can be dissolved by a man saying the world *talaq* [divorce] three times in one sitting. The bringing of this issue into the public sphere made many Muslims research it on their own and realize that the three pronouncements of *talaq* as they are mentioned in the Quran are meant to give time for a couple to reconcile. Therefore, they learned that the three pronouncements of *talaq* at one time, even though enshrined in Hanafi jurisprudence, went against the spirit of the Quran.[5]

However, there was a great deal of resistance across the spectrum of Muslim subjectivities to the passing of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, which was introduced in the Indian Parliament after the Supreme Court decision. This bill, which was enacted in 2019, goes beyond rendering triple *talaq* legally null and void. It criminalizes it, with a three-year jail term for any man found guilty of practicing it. This bill was seen as another way of criminalizing Muslim men and also understood as going against the spirit of reconciliation that imbues the Quranic injunctions on divorce.[6] People were paying attention to details, as H said in her account, but the word she used, *barikiyan*, is better translated in this context as "subtleties." People were now paying attention to subtleties.

In his book on the formation of religious authority and the cultivation of Islamic communities in Indonesia, Ismail Alatas draws attention to the role of labor in the construction and maintenance of religious authority. "The formation of authority," he writes, "demands ongoing labors of (re)producing and maintaining such a relationship [to the Prophetic past]. A relationship is an achievement, an outcome of contingent and precarious labor, and not a given."[7] He continues, "One becomes a

religious authority because one is engaged in the labor of articulating the *sunnah* and the community, thereby garnering the recognition of those who make up the community."[8] What does it mean for the nature of religious authority in contemporary India that many more young people are engaged in the contingent and precarious labor of connecting to the Prophetic past and (re)defining what it means to be a Muslim? And what it does it mean for the nature of religious authority when much of this labor takes place in and through an increasingly networked public sphere?

MAULVI AND MISTER, SHIA AND SUNNI COME TOGETHER

In 2018, I participated in two large collective public prayers in which Sunnis and Shias prayed together. One, organized by a group who call themselves Shoulder to Shoulder, was held in August, on Eid-al-Adha, in Lucknow, a city infamous for its history of Shia-Sunni conflict. The event was organized under a large tent outside the Shah Najaf Imambara, one of the major Shia prayer halls in Lucknow. As I stood with a (Sunni) friend to pray, on either side of us were *sajdah-gah*s (round clay tablets) at the head of the prayer rugs. We were praying in the same *saf*, and shoulder to shoulder, with Shias.

These collective prayers began in Delhi and Lucknow in 2015, and how remarkable and once unthinkable these prayers were can best be illustrated by a conversation I had with a friend who is an imam of a mosque in Delhi, educated at the Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband seminary. When we met a few days earlier, and I told him that I was going to Lucknow and that I would be praying the Eid prayers in a mixed Shia-Sunni congregation, his response was not very encouraging. "If Shias are Muslim, then there is no problem [praying with them]. But if they do not believe in the authority of the *sahabah* [the companions of the Prophet],[9] how can we consider them Muslim? . . . My prayer is invalidated if I pray behind an unbeliever, so I have to protect my prayer, even if that means praying alone."

Nor was he alone in expressing skepticism about the other's claim to Islam. When I spoke with journalist Ali Rizvi, one of the founders of Shoulder to Shoulder, he said that one of his motivations of organizing joint prayers was the continuing biases that Shias held against Sunnis, and vice versa.

> In private gatherings if you're with Shias you can see they have some biases, it's the same with Sunnis. In fact, if you see some organizations here, you'll see entire organizations that are entirely filled with Shias and entire organizations that are exclusively Sunni, so there is very little interaction between the two communities. Earlier people were related to each other [through marriage], but now there aren't those kinds of relationships either. I used to find this bad, and I think somewhere there is the role of the BJP coming into power too. . . . I used to feel that we need to put our own house in order first.

Ali wanted to bring unity to a Muslim community antagonistically fractured into Sunni and Shia and started talking to friends about it.

> We felt that we should do something and then we saw that there was a campaign going on in Delhi too, where people were praying together, they were calling it Shoulder to Shoulder, so we felt why don't we do it here [in Lucknow] too. First we made a WhatsApp group, then a Facebook page. On the WhatsApp group if I tell you honestly in the beginning I added people who were kind of outcasts. . . . [laughs] People to whom religion made no difference, people who were not very well-settled in the community, because in this kind of thing people won't want to pick a fight (*panga*). So in the beginning we had those kind of people, two, four, five, and then we reached the point that at the time WhatsApp had a limit of a hundred people, so we had to create a second group. And people seemed excited about the idea. Then we thought that we should do it in Sibtainabad, since we had the space as the *mutawalli* of Sibtainabad was already on board.

When I met Ali the day before our conversation, just before the collective Eid prayers commenced on the grounds of Shah Najaf, he said, "The difference between Maulvi and Mister is now disappearing." In Urdu convention "maulvi" indicates a figure of traditional Islamic education, largely associated with conservatism, whereas "Mister" indicates someone with a Westernized education, who lives and works in a largely secularized sphere. Their worlds are conventionally understood to be incommensurate. The coalition that Ali assembled to make the joint Shia-Sunni *namaz* happen brought these worlds together. It included maulvis like Haidar *sahab*, the *mutawalli* (trustee) of a major Shia religious endowment, and figures who in Ali's own words, were "outcast." The former was important to provide religious legitimacy and the infrastructure of religious space; the latter were needed because they weren't afraid of the conflict (*panga*) that would result from challenging a conventional taboo against praying alongside the other.

> Then we thought about where all the opposition can come from. The first thing we thought was that it shouldn't look like an event which only people who are way too liberal about things, people who don't have any . . . faith as such . . . because brother your faith isn't getting hurt you'll do anything, so we thought that everything should be technically correct. So we wrote to the people in Iraq and Iran and we got things in writing from them, that if you pray in this kind of mixed congregation there is no problem, and the leader of the prayer congregation should be Sunni, because we started with the idea that the *imam* should be Sunni, so these fatwas came from [Shia leaders in] Iran and Iraq and we put these up on social media. Then we met the local [Shia] *maulana* here, Maulana Kalbe Jawad, he gave us his written opinion, we met Maulana Kalbe Sadiq, he gave us his opinion in writing . . . because mainly the problem could be with Shias so we spoke mostly with Shia *maulana*s. . . . Apart from that we met Sunni *maulana*s. . . . We had discussions with several people and after that we put photos etcetera on social media, that we met these people and they are supporting us.

*Fatwa*s, authoritative answers to questions posed by lay Muslims on matters related to religious and social mores, have long been a tool of incorporating growth and change into Islamic substantive law.[10] The images of such *fatwa*s posted online,

authorizing the legitimacy of prayers by mixed congregations, brought rapid social legitimacy to an unconventional idea. Photographs of members of Shoulder to Shoulder meeting with religious leaders became an indexical sign of their support. The use of Facebook, when combined with the "technically correct" form of approaching religious authorities, led to an unprecedently rapid acceptance of a change in conventional ritual practice. But this wasn't without its challenges.

> In the first year (2015) we had some problems too because we used to get hate messages from people that they [Shias] abuse Hazrat Aisha, how can we pray behind them? This kind of thing. . . . So we had to be very vigilant about it. In the beginning we had to be up till 2:00, 3:00 a.m. at night deleting messages [posted on the Facebook page]. . . . I think one very important thing that happened was that when we met Maulana Kalbe Sadiq *sahab* during the course of these things, he said one thing that's really stuck with me, and it's very important to take that kind of approach. . . . He said that if you're doing something like this, *to dari'ega mat aur lari'ega bhi mat* (then don't be afraid, and also don't fight)—meaning don't do either thing. . . . So therefore we wouldn't discuss anything with those people [who posted abusive messages] or do anything with them, we'd just delete their messages and block them, no need to pointlessly engage with them . . . but then we saw that some people were doing it too much . . . on WhatsApp too they were spreading things here and there. . . . so eventually the matter got to a FIR [First Incident Report] filed with the police. . . . See I'm a journalist and if you keep persisting in this then we'll have to do something . . . because they kept abusing the *sahabah* . . . then this *maulana*, who is infamous for such things . . . he calls me, and says that these are children, they are with us, they get emotional sometimes . . . I apologize on their behalf.

Don't be afraid, and don't fight. The advice that the late Maulana Kalbe Sadiq (who passed away in 2020) gave to Ali shows his awareness of the networked public sphere. The nature of the labor that needed to be done to create and maintain religious authority and hence bring about positive transformation in ossified religious attitudes had to be different. Whereas our conventional understandings of the labor of religious authority have centered on debate and discussion as centrally constitutive of the discursive tradition of Islam,[11] debate and discussion can rapidly degenerate into conflict in an era of trolling and weaponized identity politics. How was the labor of creating religious authority to navigate these challenges?

SILENCE

shauq se ab janab-e man meri zaban tarashi'e
bole baghair bolna mujh ko sikha diya gaya
Now slice my tongue as you want, my dear sir
I've been taught to speak without speaking
—IQBAL ASHAR (B. 1965)

In the Lucknow joint Eid prayers, the mixed Shia and Sunni crowd prayed behind a Sunni imam. As the conversation with Ali Rizvi indicates, this was a practice authorized by religious authorities, both Shia and Sunni, but especially and formally—"in writing"—by Shia authorities. No less a figure than the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who is based in Najaf, Iraq, had authorized the legitimacy of joint Sunni-Shia prayers, in part to challenge the rise of sectarianism in Iraq in the aftermath of the American invasion and the subsequent rise of ISIS, which could not have been defeated without Iraqi Sunnis and Shias fighting together.[12]

The revered Shia religious authority Maulana Kalbe Sadiq joined the first joint Eid prayers that Shoulder to Shoulder organized in 2015 and prayed behind a Sunni imam. The first joint Shia and Sunni prayer that I was part of in 2018 in Delhi, during the month of Ramadan, was led by a Shia imam. This was not a practice that had any public authorization by any religious authorities. How then did it become possible?

The joint *maghrib* prayer held in Delhi, followed by an *iftar* (communal fast-breaking meal), had been organized at short notice in response to a news story that had been given much air by TV channels. The segments showed a stamped, handwritten fatwa from the Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband opining that it was not advisable for Sunnis to eat at *iftar*s hosted by Shias.[13] This reflected a continuing Deobandi skepticism toward Shias' status as Muslims that I had encountered in my conversation with my friend the imam. Two days after the story broke, on a Sunday, a joint Shia-Sunni *iftar* was announced, organized by a coalition of Muslim journalists, media professionals, community leaders, and young social activists. They made it a point not only for Shias and Sunnis to break their fast together but also to collectively pray behind a Shia imam.

It was the location that gave the clue to where the religious authorization for this practice was coming from. The *iftar* was hosted on the rooftop of the Aiwan-e Shahi Hotel, overlooking the domes of Old Delhi's grand Jama Masjid. The hotel belonged to the family of the Shahi Imam of the Jama Masjid, one of the most significant Sunni religious authorities in Old Delhi. Hosting the program at this venue meant that the practice of joint Shia and Sunni prayers behind a Shia imam had the tacit support of the Shahi Imam, which was telegraphed to all Muslims through the highly publicized *iftar* and prayers,[14] without the imam making a public statement that he could be pinned down on. Here silence served as a mode of authoritative Islamic discourse.

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A brief story of the Shia-Sunni *namaz* efforts in India was narrated to me by Ovais Sultan Khan, a devout young Muslim from a Sunni Deobandi family with a deep commitment to progressive political activism and unity among Muslims as well as between all faith communities in India. In 2015, Shias and Sunnis in Kuwait

held joint prayers as a sign of unity after the bombing of a Shia mosque in Kuwait by members of ISIS.[15] After 2014, and the coming into power of the BJP, many young Muslims like Ali Rizvi felt the need to unite Muslims. Two such young Muslims in Delhi were Mazin Khan—a Sunni, editor of an online English newspaper dedicated to Indian Muslim issues called the *Milli Gazette*, and founder of the "Muslims of India" Facebook page—and Asad Haider Zaidi, a Shia social media strategist. The pair wanted to follow the example of the joint Shia-Sunni prayers in Kuwait. They reached out to Dr. Zafarul Islam Khan, Mazin's father, then head of the All India Muslim Majlis-e Mushawarat and founder-editor of the *Milli Gazette*, and to editor and historian Maulana Ata-ur-Rahman Qasimi, who in turn reached out to the imam of the congregational mosque attached to Jamia Millia Islamia. The imam agreed, and for the next two years some Shias joined Sunnis in praying behind a Sunni imam at the Jamia mosque during Eid prayers.

"We kept it as a process, rather than an organization," Ovais, who was involved in the effort from the beginning, said. It was #ShouldertoShoulder, rather than an organization called Shoulder to Shoulder. But Ovais said, "The organizational effort that the Lucknow Shoulder to Shoulder put into it really brought the whole issue of joint Shia-Sunni *namaz* a lot more prominence."

It also led to Ovais's dissatisfaction with what they were doing. If a respected scholar and a prominent voice for Shia-Sunni unity like Maulana Kalbe Sadiq could pray behind a young Sunni imam, why couldn't Sunnis pray behind a Shia imam? Ovais reached out to Shia organizations and religious leaders in Delhi, and the next two Sunni-Shia Eid prayers in Delhi were held in a Shia masjid in Jor Bagh, led by a Shia imam, with many Sunni Muslims participating. Ovais spoke of how he garnered support for the idea of Sunnis praying behind Shia imams from various Sunni leaders. Many of them said, "We cannot come forward, we cannot support you openly, but this is a good thing, and this should happen. We won't raise any objections, and we will support you silently."

In the Shia-Sunni Eid prayers that continued in Delhi and Lucknow from 2015 through 2019, a five-year period before the coronavirus lockdowns, we can see shifts in the nature of how religious reasoning and religious authority work. Despite the inherited Sunni skepticism toward Shia Islam—reflected in my conversation with the imam, and in the *fatwa* issued by Deoband—many Sunni religious leaders believed that religious unity between Shias and Sunnis was a good and necessary thing, given the circumstances of an Islamophobic regime and the existential threat it posed to all Muslims. In the interests of unity, they were willing to suspend their skepticism and treat Shias as equally Muslim, symbolized by their embrace of Shias leading prayer. But this suspension of skepticism could not happen through public pronouncements, because it risked, as Ovais laughingly put it, *murdabad ke nʿare* (death chants). Skepticism toward Shias was still too ossified in the inherited textual tradition, there were still many people whose worldview was shaped by this inheritance, and in the social media landscape that

everyone was learning to navigate, any statement could be misinterpreted and blown out of proportion. Instead of making authoritative statements that would risk undermining their own legitimacy, (Sunni) Muslim leaders maintained strategic silence and allowed young people to do the visible labor of reimagining and unifying the community through social media. But without their strategic silence, the new forms of social media labor that worked to create religious authority could not have been successful. Here we see religious labor being performed intergenerationally as well as the interaction of two different modes of religious authority working together: strategic silence and networked hyper-visibility.

MIMESIS AND AUTHORITY

The news of the joint Shia-Sunni prayers in Kuwait, spreading through the internet, led to the institution of joint Shia-Sunni prayers in at least two major Indian cities. As the previous sections have highlighted, this was accomplished through much religious labor, which does not take away from the fact that the impulse to start joint Shia-Sunni prayers in India was *emulative*. Emulation is, in a sense, quite central to Muslim ethics. We only have to think of the labor that goes into reconstructing the *sunnah*, the habits or ethical example of the Prophet, and the different modes of authoritative connection to the Prophetic past current in Muslim life. But the emulation that has traditionally been central to Muslim ethical life has been, first, hierarchical, in that you are attempting to emulate figures, such as the Prophet, his family, and his companions, who are remembered as being of superior moral virtue; and second, about connecting to a temporally distant past. In the desire for emulation of the Shia-Sunni prayers in Delhi we see neither hierarchy, in that it was not Prophetic example or the example of the *sahabah* (the Prophet's companions) or the *ahl al-bait* (the Prophet's family) that was being followed. Neither did the participants look to a temporally distant past. The joint Eid prayers in Kuwait happened during Ramadan in 2015, and the first joint Shia-Sunni Eid prayers in Delhi happened within weeks, at the end of that sacred month. Following the example of those prayers, in Lucknow the joint Shia-Sunni prayers for Eid al-Adha were held a little over two months later.

A through line in this book has been thinking of social media as creating mimetic archives, not just of discourse, but of embodied practice and bodily dispositions. What do such mimetic archives mean for religious authority, especially when we think of religious authority, following Alatas, as resulting from (often contingent and precarious) religious labor? If, through the virtue of friendship, "the urging of good and the opposing of the reprehensible" is diffused among Muslims in relation to one another, as Talal Asad has noted,[16] what does such diffuse pastoral care look like in the era of Facebook friendships? With social media as one of the domains in which religious labor is now performed, novelty and virality are now a growing part of religious life.[17] The images and descriptions of

FIGURE 5. Joint Shia-Sunni prayer, Old Delhi, June 2018. Photo by Asad Haider Zaidi.

religious life that circulate on social media have mimetic potential, the power to set the precedent for morally desirable action. Events geared toward social media, and social media posts, thus become a domain for contestation over the limits and possibilities of "good" religious practice.

Such was the case with the Shia-Sunni *iftar* and *namaz* that was held on the rooftop of the Aiwan-e Shahi Hotel in 2018. It was meant to be an event promoted on both conventional and social media, laboring through these channels, along with the active silence of religious authorities such as the Shahi Imam, to promote a more inclusive picture of the *ummah* than one allowed by the inherited Sunni Deobandi legal tradition. Or rather, to promote more inclusive *pictures*. The photos showed worshippers with their hands crossed across their stomachs (Sunni Hanafi) and worshippers with their arms held at their sides (Shia) standing behind an imam dressed in distinctly Shia robes and turban, with the illuminated domes and minarets of the Jama Masjid in the background. Given the power of viral circulation through social media channels, these pictures were worth a thousand fatwas.

Other pictures of the event, however, were not so welcome in some quarters. Bilal Zaidi, who was one of the participants in the iftar and namaz, and whose social media posts about issues facing the Muslim community were both thought-provoking and boundary-pushing, told me, "I got lots of abuses. I put out a post [on Facebook]. Women were also praying in that congregation, I don't know if you noticed. They were praying behind . . . that doesn't happen often. They insisted that we will also pray. And so, they prayed. And I took a photo, and I posted it on Facebook. I got twenty calls: remove the picture. I was like if women don't say

FIGURE 6. Joint Shia-Sunni prayer, Old Delhi, June 2018. Photo by Asad Haider Zaidi.

remove the picture, why would I remove the picture? They're like but we can't allow this, women can't be offering prayers with men. From where? How? It's happening all over the world." Bilal didn't delete the post, and these photos too circulated through social media. These images too set an authoritative precedent; for the joint Shia-Sunni Eid-al-Adha prayers in Lucknow two months later, the media reported that "the organizers had made special arrangements this year for women to offer prayers."[18]

UNITED AGAINST HATE

The murder of Junaid in a crowded train on the eve of Eid in June 2017 served as a catalyst that brought together many Muslims (and non-Muslims) across all kinds of sectarian and ideological divides to protest. One such coming together resulted in the birth of a movement called United Against Hate, often abbreviated as UAH. Some of the founders of United Against Hate met in June 2017 when they were all taken into police custody at the Parliament Street Police Station after attending a protest at New Delhi's central vista. They included Khalid Saifi, who is a member of the Tablighi Jamaʿat, an organization considered to be politically quietist, concerned only with the spiritual life of Muslims; Nadeem Khan of the Jamaʿat-e Islami; and Umar Khalid, a student leader from JNU who is ideologically Marxist. The protest had been held at the call of Shehzad Poonawala, who was then a member and spokesperson of the Indian National Congress and is now a

spokesperson for the BJP. While other people remained in detention, Poonawala, according to Nadeem Khan, was giving soundbites to the cameras, making the protest about himself rather than the larger sense of Muslim anger, fear, and disaffection that had led to hundreds of people coming out onto the streets in the face of hostile police.

"When we came out of the police station, Shehzad was standing there, and he thanked everyone, *aap hamare liʾe ae, yeh kiʾe voh kiʾe* . . . (you came out for us, you did this, you did that). . . . I snapped at him right there. We're concerned with the issue of mob lynching, for this issue we will come out again too if we need to, we didn't come out and won't come out because of you." The next day many of the protestors gathered in the Jamia area, and there was a clear understanding articulated that siding with any political party meant being used for their agenda, rather than Muslim concerns. (Khalid Saifi himself had been part of the anti-corruption Aam Aadmi Party, but he too had become disillusioned by the party's lack of concern for what was happening to Muslims due to their fear of alienating their Hindu voters).[19]

United Against Hate worked to create a platform where diverse voices could come together to speak against the growing tide of hate and anti-Muslim and anti-minority violence that the coming of the BJP government had unleashed. It was they, for instance, who organized the October 2018 rally described in chapter 4, where thousands of people marched behind Radhika Vemula and Fatima Nafees, Dalit and Muslim mothers who had lost their first-generation college-student sons to the politics of the current regime. Nadeem Khan saw this very diversity as giving United Against Hate its legitimacy, because it made it very hard to dismiss UAH by linking it to a particular agenda or ideology. "A lot of people can categorize me because I'm a practicing Muslim but not United Against Hate because of the presence of the left; and they can categorize it because of the presence of the left, but then there are practicing Muslims like me and Khalid [Saifi]. . . . This is the beauty of United Against Hate. We can work together despite ideological differences, but only because we're not building an organization, it remains a movement against hate-crimes. There are four or five points we all agree on and work on. . . . If we go much to the left or right of that we will end up fighting with each other."

In the years between 2017 and 2020, United Against Hate made possible an alliance between the liberal-left, Dalit groups, and a spectrum of pious Muslim subjectivities ranging from the Tablighi Jamaʿat to the "Islamist" Jamaʿat-e Islami. Creating such alliances needed all groups to suspend skepticism for the other. Nadeem Khan made it a point to invite activists and scholars considered "ultra-left" to speak at the Jamaʿat-e Islami's weekly forums. "'But these people don't believe in God,' people would say to me," Nadeem said. "And I would tell them, God will deal with their accounts, you look at what benefit you can get from them in this world. And I'd tell the left people [who were skeptical about addressing an Islamist audience], you're getting a huge audience for your message."

The alliance with the left drew on long-standing Indian Muslim traditions and "elective affinities" between Marxism and Islam—primarily on the question of social justice—that saw many young Muslims become part of the Communist party and the Progressive Writers Movement in colonial and postcolonial India.[20] It was also made possible by the ideological transformation of the Jamaʿat-e Islami, which has moved, as Irfan Ahmed notes, from refusing to collaborate even with Muslim groups to forging alliances with its "former 'other'—secular, atheist, even Hindu pontiffs who blow a conch at its meetings."[21]

But such alliances did not banish suspicion, especially with the theological legacy of the Cold War *jihad* against the "godless communists" in Afghanistan, as we saw with the question posed to Nadeem Khan. The avowed atheism and disregard for religion of many leftist activists was a cause for suspicion and concern for many Muslims. And while their skepticism could be suspended, it could not be entirely disavowed, as such skepticism, often manifested in religious disputation, is, as Naveeda Khan notes, the obverse of the aspiration to become better Muslims.[22] Young Muslims felt the need to articulate their own language of protest and defiance, and to articulate this language they turned back to the legacy of anticolonial Muslim thinkers like Mohammad Ali Jauhar and Hasrat Mohani.

JAUHAR STUDY CIRCLE

In October 2018, on the lawns of Jamia Millia Islamia, forty-odd students gathered for a meeting of the Jauhar Study Circle. At this meeting, they were introduced to the history of Jamia Millia Islamia and how the foundation of the university was intimately linked with the history of the struggle for Indian independence. The students applauded when H, the meeting leader, told them, "This was the first nationalist university in the country, but not nationalist like the RSS."

H, who was then a graduate student at Jamia, said that the purpose of the Jauhar Study Circle was to excavate and make present the history and ideas of the founders of Jamia Millia Islamia—Mohammad Ali Jauhar was the first vice-chancellor—in order to ground the contemporary activism of Jamia students in a long Muslim tradition of patriotic dissent. This was manifested in the slogan that Jamia students chanted during protests: *Jauhar Salam!* (Jauhar Salute!) The story of how the slogan came about, as narrated by H, illustrates how Muslims students got rapidly politicized after 2014, and how they began searching for a distinctly Muslim tradition of protest with which to link themselves.

> H: From 2015 onwards, whenever we went for a protest—the protests after Rohith Vemula's death, for example—the biggest group of protestors would be students from Jamia.
>
> AVT: More than JNU [Jawaharlal Nehru University, a central university in Delhi known for its tradition of radical thought and politics]?

> H: Yes, the leadership would be theirs, the numbers would be ours. . . . whenever we went for a protest, the Communists would use the slogan *Lal Salam* (Red Salute). . . . We were not comfortable with this. We did not want to accept all of their ideas. We come to these protests in the hundreds, and as soon as we say *Lal Salam* we become followers of their group. So we wanted our own slogan, and it would be a slogan that reflects our cultural secular ethos . . . and at last through consultation we came to *Jauhar Salam*. . . . We wanted a slogan that was associated with struggle. . . . Mohammad Ali Jauhar is the name of a person about whom it is said that he was the best educationist, he was the best freedom fighter . . . and his life is filled with struggle . . . including the making of Jamia . . . sacrifice was part of his composition . . . so our slogan should be such that it should make us part of that struggle, that sacrifice . . . and it is that entire paradigm that we are going to take forward . . . we started using the slogan at the end of 2015.

Through the slogan *Jauhar Salam*, the students of Jamia connected their political agitation in the present to the struggles against the British Empire in the years immediately following the First World War, when the passing of the repressive Rowlatt Act in 1919 led to growing protests and agitations throughout India.

> Jamia's creation was the direct result of the Non-Cooperation and the Khilafat movements. In August 1920, Gandhi had given a call for non-cooperation, asking Indians to boycott the then British government's educational institutions, courts, government services, foreign goods and elections and to refuse to pay taxes. In response to the call for non-cooperation and to break away from an education that was funded by the British government, Muslim nationalist leaders such as Maulana Mahmud Hasan, Maulana Mohammad Ali Jauhar, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Dr Mukhtar Ahmed Ansari, Abdul Majeed Khwaja rescinded their association with the AMU [Aligarh Muslim University] and founded Jamia.[23]

Mohammad Ali Jauhar became the first vice-chancellor of Jamia. His life, as H noted, could reflect both the "composite secular ethos" of Jamia—Jauhar had actively worked with Gandhi to bring the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements together—as well as continual struggle. Repeatedly jailed by the British for his consistently strident anti-British stance, Jauhar was a remarkable figure of dissent and refusal, who does not easily fit into a smooth, progressive teleology of the national movement. Disillusioned by Gandhi's calling off the Non-Cooperation movement after the violence of Chauri Chaura in 1922, Jauhar left the Indian National Congress. He opposed the Nehru Report of 1928 for its omission of separate electorates for religious communities or weightage for religious minorities, which Jauhar saw as a precursor to Hindu majoritarian rule in India. In 1926 he publicly broke with his spiritual advisor (*pir*) Abdul Bari Farangi Mahalli over Abdul Bari's support for Sharif Husayn of Mecca.[24] Jauhar supported Ibn Saud, who had driven Sharif Husayn out of Mecca, because he was anti-British. Later he opposed Ibn Saud too, because the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that Ibn Saud

formally established in 1932, the year after Muhammad Ali Jauhar's death, went against the ideas of the internationalist Meccan republic that Jauhar and others espoused.[25]

Jauhar's poetry also celebrated principled dissent against oppression as a foundational Islamic ethic. Perhaps his most famous *shʿer*, one I encountered in quotation and online circulation repeatedly over the last few years, celebrates the dissent of Hussain, which led to his death at the battle of Karbala, as an ever-repeating principle of Islamic renewal.

> *qatl-e hussain asl men marg-e yazid hai*
> *islam zindah hota hai har karbala ke bʿad*
> The killing of Hussain is actually the death of Yazid
> Islam comes alive after every Karbala

Jauhar's *shʿer* is rooted in a long Indian Muslim tradition of valorizing Hussain's dissent in the face of the oppressor as a foundational Islamic value, which can be traced at least as far back as Muinuddin Chishti Ajmeri (1143–1236), the founder of the Chishti Sufi order in South Asia, whose Persian quatrain celebrating Hussain can be found inscribed on the walls of most Chishti shrines in the subcontinent:

> *shah ast hussain badshah ast hussain*
> *din ast hussain din panah ast hussain*
> *sar dad nadad dast dar dast e yazid*
> *haqqa kih bina-e la ilah ast hussain*
> Hussain is the king, Hussain is the king of kings
> Hussain is religion, Hussain is the refuge of religion
> He gave his head but did not give his hand in the hand of Yazid
> Truly the foundation of "There is no God [but God]" is Hussain

The link between these two invocations of Hussain is not incidental. Muhammad Ali Jauhar may have sided with Ibn Saud's Wahabi-aided conquest of Mecca and Medina, but he was a Sufi himself, connected to the intellectual, spiritual, and ethical legacy of the Farangi Mahall tradition, which brought together Islamic rationalist traditions of scholarship and mysticism, particularly the Chishti-Sabri and Qadiri *silsilahs*, in a remarkable synthesis.[26]

Connecting to this inheritance of dissent was, in H's account, the job of the Jauhar Study Circle. "It is important to nurture intellectualism along with politics," H said. "You might become as liberal and progressive as you want but remember the ideas that you are a product of." The attempts of the Jauhar Study Circle and other young Muslims to excavate a Muslim tradition of patriotic dissent to which they could link their contemporary struggles led to the rediscovery of some remarkable figures. These people, despite the havoc that colonialism wreaked on many forms of life, led lives of astonishing intellectual and spiritual plenitude, bringing together Indo-Islamic and Western intellectual traditions in extraordinary creative

syntheses without any sense of inferiority or needing to "catch up." Perhaps the most remarkable of these figures was Hasrat Mohani.

A SUFI BELIEVER AND A COMMUNIST MUSLIM

In H's account there were explicit and implicit divides between the politics of the liberal, progressive left and the politics of many Jamia students, even though both came together as allies against the Hindu right wing on many, many issues. I questioned him on this by bringing up the example of Hasrat Mohani, remembered as the person who coined the Indian revolutionary slogan *inqalab zindah bad* (a translation of "Long Live the Revolution"), and who called himself "a Sufi Momin and a Communist Muslim," in a *shʿer* that expressed his understanding of his ethical self:

> *darveshi o inqilab maslak hai mera*
> *sufi momin hun, ishtiraki Muslim*
> Unworldliness and revolution are my path
> I am a Sufi believer, a Communist Muslim[27]

H replied, "His communism was different. There is a difference between religious communism and social communism. The left is every person who is opposed to [this] regime. But there are other aspects of the left. . . . Drink alcohol, smoke, become an atheist. This wasn't the case back then, then it was a fight over class. . . . Today it's a fight about culture and civilization."

H echoed what a lot of Muslims who had been involved with leftist parties and politics had said to me: That they had faced a lot of pressure to disavow religious beliefs and practices, as these were considered backward and against the "scientific atheism" of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Someone like Hasrat Mohani, H told me, could navigate these pressures because "back then" the struggle was about class, in which Marxist analysis and praxis to combat inequality were invaluable, and in no way contradicted Mohani's deeply held faith. But at a time when Islam was under attack, subscribing to or even seeming to be adjacent to Communist ideology was not an option for a believer.

Bringing up the example of Hasrat Mohani led to a remarkable intellectual clarification in my conversation with H, a difference between "religious" communism (atheism) and "social" communism (the class struggle). Over seventy years after his death in 1951, Hasrat remains a figure who holds open the potential of being a believer (*momin*) and a Muslim in the most capacious way possible, bringing together the seemingly contradictory identities of Sufi, Communist, and Krishna devotee in his self without any sense of dissonance. And in doing all of this, he also remained a figure of principled refusal and dissent. The Urdu critic Rakhshanda Jalil noted how, as a member of the Progressive Writer's Association, Hasrat Mohani singlehandedly quashed a proposed resolution to ban "obscenity" in literature. Mohani insisted that obscenity was very hard to define, especially

since *latif havas-nigari* (refined sexual writing) was part of Persian and Urdu literary traditions, and his principled dissent led to the proposal being withdrawn.[28] As Rakshanda Jalil said to me in conversation, "He is responsible for avoiding a black spot in the history of Urdu literature." Mohani's dissent with the Progressive Writer's Association echoed an earlier moment of dissent, when

> A few months before the graduating exams, Hasrat organized a *mushaʿirah* (poets' gathering) for the annual "Old Boys' Day" at the college. The following morning, when some old boys complained to the English principal, Theodore Morrison, about the "obscene" nature of some verses recited that night, a confrontation ensued. Morrison claimed that what was considered "obscene" in England had to be considered obscene in India; Hasrat insisted that each culture independently defined what was obscene. As a result, Hasrat was expelled from the hostel; however, his admirers among the elders at Aligarh managed to convince the principal to let him take the exams.[29]

Thinking about Mohani's consistent dissent against the concept of "obscenity" is a good entry point to think about where his defiant stances came from. As C. M. Naim's remarkable sketch portrays him, Mohani was seen, even in his youth, as an anachronistic figure, a figure displaced in time. "When he arrived at Aligarh's Mahommedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1899, he reportedly got down from the *ekka* (horse carriage) wearing flared pajamas and his wedding sherwani and holding a *pandan* (betel-leaf container) in one hand. The smartly turned-out boys of the college immediately nicknamed him *khalajan* (aunty)."[30] His objection to the imposition of Victorian ideas of obscenity on Indian literature and poetry came not from a modernizing, liberal perspective but as a staunch defense of tradition; for Hasrat, writing with subtlety about sensuality was a part of Indian and Muslim tradition, and concerns about obscenity were an English imposition. All of the seeming contradictions in Mohani's life become coherent when we understand him as a figure deeply shaped by Indo-Islamic tradition, who navigated the colonial world in the light of that tradition. He was, like Mohammad Ali Jauhar, a *murid* of the Farangi Mahalli family, initiated into both the Qadiri and Chishti-Sabri *tariqas*, and thus part of a lineage of scholarship and piety representing the finest precolonial synthesis of Islamic rational sciences and spirituality. As explored in the previous chapter, his devotion to Krishna, while at odds with contemporary understandings of the hard identarian boundaries between religions, makes perfect sense if we understand him as the inheritor of the spiritual outlook of Abdul Razzaq Bansawi, which he was as a *murid* of the Farangi Mahallis. It was the ability to embody tradition while consistently dissenting against the status quo that now makes Hasrat Mohani an aspirational, exciting figure for young Muslims like Ovais Sultan Khan.

. . .

I first met Ovais in 2018, during the course of my research. What I found remarkable about him was his desire to think creatively about how to tackle the growing

distance between religious communities in India and to find the resources for communal harmony within India in already extant Indian and Muslim traditions. Ovais had found out about Hasrat Mohani through his connection to Maulana Mohammad Ali Jauhar, who he greatly admired. In Ovais's account, Hasrat Mohani's participation in and contributions to the struggle for Indian independence can also be understood as being deeply rooted in the Indian Muslim tradition as it responded to the cataclysm of 1857 and the violent end of Mughal sovereignty:

> I read a book on the Khilafat Movement by Adeel Abbasi in which Hasrat Mohani is mentioned. He was the political heir of Bal Gangadhar Tilak [1856–1920, the leader who first pushed the Indian National Congress toward demanding *purna swaraj* or complete independence from the British and imagined India as a federal democracy] and the spiritual successor of Maulana Abdul Bari Farangi Mahali and Abdul Razzaq Farangi Mahali. . . . He even wrote a *marsiya* for Bal Gangadhar Tilak . . . and I thought to myself, what a delightful person, then I started finding out more about him and I very clearly understood that a lot of things that Gandhi did or the Congress did, the blueprint for a lot of them was given by Maulana Hasrat Mohani. . . . I was arrested for the first time when I was at a protest with my father when I was in sixth grade, and even back then I felt that there is too much homogeneity in our protests, that you try to make people like yourself, and you don't enable them to protest diversely, in your own way . . . but you see Maulana Hasrat Mohani and the diversity of protest, the pedagogy of protest, and you look at the creativity of protest that both he and his wife Nishat-un-Nissa did: it is astonishing!

In his career, Hasrat Mohani switched professions and modes of livelihood as part of living a dissenting life so often that Shibli Nomani famously said of him, "Are you a man or a jinn? First you were a poet, then a politician, and now you are a trader."[31] The famous quip omits the diversity of Mohani's political affiliations; he was simultaneously a member of the Khilafat Committee, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League, and he was one of the founder-members of the Communist Party of India in Kanpur in 1925. It also omits his career as a publisher of the journal *Urdu-e Muʿalla*. When his printing press was confiscated by the British due to his publication of an anonymous article in the journal considered seditious, he started running a shop selling only *svadeshi* (Indian-made) goods. He chose to live his entire life in poverty, on the meager earnings from his shop and writings. For Ovais, it was this very plurality—which had so exasperated Shibli Nomani—that was the most laudable thing about Hasrat Mohani.

> That you can be an *insan* in so many different ways, it would be hard to find in all the world. In today's world perhaps people would have thrown bricks at him. Nobody would understand him; people wouldn't be able to accept him. . . . How can this be?

> By forgetting him India has refused its own being, it's an attempt to forget itself, to forget what we can be like, what are the potentials of our being, how vast our purview can be.

. . .

On the 10th of Muharram/September 21 in 2018, I was in Lucknow with Ovais. Along with some friends, we decided to go look for the grave of Maulana Hasrat Mohani, so we could tangibly, physically connect to his memory and offer prayers for his soul. In the car, A. J. asked, "Why are there no national Muslim leaders?" Ovais replied that there was a defensiveness because of which no Muslim leader of any stature, especially a *topi darhi wallah* [one with a traditional cap and a beard, which indicates a commitment to Islamic piety], was allowed to grow or be remembered after 1947.

"Our parents didn't tell us anything," Ovais said, "This didn't exist as an oral tradition. We had to find all of this ourselves by searching through books." It was apt, then, perhaps, that we had a hard time finding the place where Hasrat Mohani was buried. Ali's father, Sulaiman *sahab*, had told us that he was buried in Maulvi Anwar ka Bagh, the Garden of Maulvi Anwar, but no one in the vicinity seemed to know where this was. Amnesia is, after all, a defining fact of postcolonial urbanism in India/South Asia.[32]

As we kept driving through the congested streets, looking for the Garden of Maulvi Anwar, A. J. told us how he had come to know about Hasrat Mohani through reading about Bhagat Singh, the famed revolutionary who popularized Hasrat Mohani's slogan, *inqalab zindah bad*, through his speeches and writings. A. J. had been a communist during his college days, and in his account, when Bhagat Singh became a communist, his father sent him to Hasrat Mohani. Ovais talked about how his interest in questions of communalism, the Hindu-Muslim question, led him in 2008 through a question by Vijay Pratap, the noted Gandhian and socialist thinker, to investigate the life and thought of pre-Partition Muslim leaders and thinkers. He kept collecting and reading, and when he shared some information about these people through brief posts on social media, other people started reading, discovering people like Mohammad Ali Jauhar and Hasrat Mohani, and began claiming them as their own.

Our path to finding Hasrat Mohani was also indirect. We reached another graveyard, where the keeper did not know the name of Maulvi Anwar ka Bagh, but knew about the *mazar* of Abdul Bari Farangi Mahalli, where he said those possessed by spirits "play" (*jahan bhut-pret vale khela karte hain*). We followed his directions, and just before *jumʿah* prayers, found the entrance to Maulvi Anwar ka Bagh, which is the family graveyard of the Farangi Mahallis.

The graveyard was home to the stately marble tomb of Abdul Bari Farangi Mahalli, the spiritual guide of Hasrat Mohani. Abdul Bari's spiritual presence and its *barakat* was seen as efficacious in the granting of wishes, in making the

spirits who possessed people speak up and act out—"play"—to enable dialogue with the spirits, and hence the beginning of the rehabilitation of afflicted persons. While there were no active cases of spirit possession "play" while we were there, there were many plastic threads tied to the marble filigree screens around Abdul Bari's tomb, the material traces of wishes made.

Hasrat Mohani had been buried a few meters to the south of Abdul Bari's tomb. On his smartphone, Ovais sent a location pin to his friend in Delhi to geo-tag the site for future seekers who wanted to pay their respects to of one of the most interesting anticolonial Muslim thinkers and activists of the twentieth century. Standing by his grave, we offered flowers and recited the *fatihah*. We, too, were here to exorcise some demons.

7

Nest upon Nest

Maulana Azad, Political Demonetization, and Muslim Persistence in India

nasheman par nasheman is qadar tʿamir karta ja
kih bijli girte girte ap hi bezar ho jaʾe
Build nest upon nest in such a fashion
That the lightning itself loses its strength as it falls
—SAEED SHAHIDI (1914–2000)

Sunday, March 25, 2018. On Ram Navami, a day that marks the birth of the Hindu god Rama, a crowd pulled down a statue of Maulana Abul Kalam "Azad" (1888–1958) in Kankinara, a small town in West Bengal about half an hour north of Kolkata. Azad was a major figure in the Indian national movement, the first education minister of independent India, a respected and highly original Muslim thinker and theologian.

A video of the event started circulating shortly after on social media. In the video, shops are shuttered, fires are burning, and a crowd of young men in saffron headbands mills around, spewing profanities in Hindi. The participant observer gleefully records the carnage while exhorting the crowd to raise the chant of "Jai Hindu" (Victory to Hindus), then zooms in on a scene a little bit further down the road. Young men have converged on a statue on a plinth under a canopy at the side of the road. They shake the statue back and forth, loosening it from the plinth, then wrench off the top half of the statue—Azad's bronze head with its distinctive tall cap, shoulders and left arm holding a book—and hurl it into the street.

A few months later, in August 2018, I visited Kankinara. My interlocutors there told me that that the statue was attacked during the Ram-Navami procession that was led by the local MLA (member of the state Legislative Assembly) Arjun Singh, who belongs to the secular TMC (Trinamool Congress), and who had assured people that no violence would happen. Some BJP people, in their account, broke from the procession, attacked the mostly Muslim shops in the main bazaar, and

toppled the statue. "Nobody knows who did it," I was told more than once, as well as, "These people were outsiders." Still, the locals were unsettled because of Arjun Singh's involvement. Most insisted that things are back to normal, that everyone in the community thought that what happened was wrong, that the statue has been rebuilt. (When I visited it stood under transparent tarpaulin, fresh cement affixing it to the plinth, awaiting inauguration.)

Yet things in Kankinara had shifted, as A informed me. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Hindu nationalist paramilitary voluntary organization that serves as the ideological font for the BJP and other Hindu nationalist political organizations, didn't have a presence in Kankinara before the riots, and now they had several *shakhas* (branches). The TMC, he said, is abetting their presence and the violence because they believe that creating an atmosphere of fear will help to consolidate the Muslim vote with them. And as for Arjun Singh, A said, "He was with the Congress before, now he's with the TMC, and he could very well be with the BJP next time." (Indeed, in the 2019 general elections Arjun Singh became a member of Parliament from Barrackpore constituency as a member of the BJP.)

The statue was erected in September or October 2017, I was told, an addition to the pantheon of statues of national leaders already present in the area: Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar. What struck me as I was told this was the belatedness of Azad's addition to the local pantheon. Azad's statue was added only in 2017—seventy years after independence—and was attacked within six months.

"Who was Maulana Azad?," I asked my local interlocutors, most of whom belonged to a leftist political party marginalized in Bengal politics by both the TMC and BJP. "What do you know about him?" They said they really didn't know. "This is a town of working-class people, what will we know? We just know that he was one of the great freedom fighters, that he spoke against the Partition of the country, that he stopped many people from going to Pakistan." One of the comrades, who was Muslim, said that Azad was "the person who convinced our forefathers to stay—*is mitti ke ho, yahin pe raho* (you are of this earth, so stay here)"—otherwise many more people would have gone to Pakistan. Later when we met S, who worked for the local municipality, the same sentiment was repeated: "Maulana Azad is the one who convinced our forefathers not to go to Pakistan." It became painfully clear, while speaking to my interlocutors in Kankinara, why Maulana Azad's statue had been attacked. He was seen as a symbol of Muslim persistence in India, a persistence for which the BJP's vision of a Hindu India had no space.

• • •

On October 24, 1947, Maulana Azad gave the *khutbah*, the sermon before the Friday prayers, at the Jama Masjid, a grand building dating back to the time of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, and one of the most important mosques of India. "It was a very special event as also were the circumstances in which the invitation

had been extended to Azad [to deliver the sermon]. The Muslims of Delhi had been huddled in their homes with fear of the Hindu backlash. Thousands of them had been killed or forced to migrate to Pakistan in the wake of the massacres which had occurred on both sides of the new border. The leaders of the Muslim League had fled from India to their newly born country. In that desolate autumn of 1947, the Indian Muslims felt that they had been deserted and abandoned."[1]

It was in these circumstances that Maulana Azad, serving as education minister in the government of newly independent India, a man who considered the idea of a separate Muslim homeland as a mistake on theological, ethical, and political grounds, addressed the battered and fearful Muslim community at the grand and historic Jama Masjid, a symbol of Mughal sovereignty and a glorious Indian Muslim past, and convinced many of those who were considering migrating to Pakistan—largely out of fear—to stay in India.

> I do not say to you that you should obtain a certificate of loyalty from the school of the ruling authority or choose the very life of beggary that was your custom in the age of foreign rulers. I say that these shining designs and patterns that are visible to you in this Hindustan as a memory of the past, that was your caravan, do not forget them. Do not forsake them. Live like their worthy inheritors and understand that if you are not ready to run away, then no power can make you flee. Come, pledge that this country is ours, we are for it, and any fundamental decisions about its destiny will remain incomplete without our voice.[2]

In Indian Muslim memory, Azad's speech serves as a landmark, the moment when, despite the bloodshed and intercommunal hatred of Partition, Indian Muslims were convinced to remain in, and to imagine a future in, a Hindu-majority India, despite being greatly weakened as a political community by the creation of Pakistan. Azad's speech is a decisive moment in the Muslim picture of the past, a moment when the parents and grandparents of today's Indian Muslim youth made a choice to stay in secular India and rejected the idea of Pakistan as a Muslim homeland. In this picture, without Azad, and the collective decision of millions of Muslims to not opt for Pakistan that his person and his speech embodied, the much-vaunted ethos of Indian secularism would not exist.

This makes it particularly galling for Indian Muslims that Azad has been marginalized and largely forgotten in the popular history of the Indian nation-state. The event to commemorate Maulana Azad's birth anniversary held at the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi on November 11, 2018, was marked by the absence of major politicians, including leaders of Azad's own party, the Indian National Congress, several of whom had been invited but had not responded. Any public involvement with or endorsement of Muslims was now seen as an electoral liability in an age when Hindutva dominated public discourse.

"No one remembers Azad. Not even the Congress, the party to which he committed his life. He has been relegated to a corner of political hoardings, a man

with a topi and beard, a Muslim caricature," wrote Syeda Hameed, a former member of the Planning Commission of India, and a scholar of Azad's life and work, in an opinion column published shortly after the demolition of Azad's statue in Kankinara.[3] In Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi*, which, dubbed in Hindi and broadcast every year on national television on Gandhi's birthday, served as the semi-official hagiography of the Indian national movement during my childhood, I don't recall the Azad character even having a speaking part, despite being "the elegant, erudite statesman who towered next to Gandhi and Nehru during the tumultuous days of the freedom struggle."[4]

A politically astute visionary who foresaw how Partition would weaken India's Muslims politically, Azad also articulated a vision of Muslim belonging in a multiconfessional India that continues to be relevant for Indian Muslims today, a vision that is being revived along with Azad's memory at a time when Muslim belonging in India is yet again being questioned. Crucial to Azad's vision was a revaluation of the term "minority." In Azad's understanding, India's Muslims were not a disadvantaged demographic category but held a position of social and moral leadership. Azad's understanding of minority beyond demography, as a morally agentive category rather than one that is the recipient of the majority's noblesse oblige, was largely articulated in colonial (and as yet un-Partitioned) India. But it has enormous resonance and relevance in postcolonial India, given the ways in which its Constitution and its first-past-the-post electoral system have evolved to make it possible for demographic minorities and disadvantaged groups to make developmental demands of the state and to attain power through strategic electoral alliances.

In this chapter, I will first revisit a moment of the revival of Azad's memory in Jamia Nagar, Delhi's preeminent Muslim-majority area and Muslim intellectual center. Then I will turn to Azad's writings in his last book published in pre-Partition India, *Ghubar-e Khatir* (a polyvalent title that has been translated both as *Dust of Memories* and *Vapor of the Soul*). Finally, I will think with current Muslim understandings of democratic politics, and the idea of ethical worthiness or *auqat*, which is understood as being central to electoral success, rather than just raw demographic numbers.

THE STORY OF THE SPARROWS

On the afternoon of January 13, 2018, an event remembering Maulana Azad drew over a hundred and fifty people, young and old, to the lawns of Syeda Hameed's home near Tikona Park at the heart of Jamia Nagar, the vibrant and diverse collection of Muslim settlements that has grown around Jamia Millia Islamia University. The event, titled *Maine Tumhen Pukara* (I called to you), was a dramatized presentation of Maulana Azad's writings, organized by Team Dastangoi, a collective dedicated to reviving traditions of Urdu oral storytelling. The title itself alluded

to Maulana Azad's 1947 sermon at the Jama Masjid, where he said to the gathered congregation, alluding to his unheeded warnings against the perils of the two-nation theory, "*maine tumhen pukara tumnen meri zaban kat di*" (I called to you, you cut off my tongue).[5]

One of the speakers was the famed historian Shahid Amin, who read a letter from *Ghubar-e Khatir*, a collection originally written as a series of unposted letters to Maulana Azad's friend Habibur Rehman Khan Sherwani while Azad was being held as a political prisoner in Ahmednagar Fort in central India from 1942–45, at the height of World War II. *Ghubar-e Khatir* is considered a classic of Urdu *belles lettres*. Though often viewed as literary rather than religious or political, it also embodies the genre of letter-writing as an important mode of articulating and cultivating an ethical selfhood in precolonial Muslim societies.[6] Shahid Amin read out a letter titled *Chiriya Chire Ki Kahani* (The tale of the she-sparrow and he-sparrow), which elucidates an ethical lesson on how majorities should live with minorities.

• • •

The letter is dated March 17, 1943. The protagonists of this story are sparrows who have made their nests in the eaves of Azad's room and are dropping plaster, twigs, and other nesting material all over his clothes, his desk, and washbasin. "Last August, when we came here, the nest-making of these sparrows had troubled [me] a lot."[7] Azad describes the havoc the sparrows and their construction debris caused in his room in humorous detail, and then gives a mock-heroic account of his "war" with the birds: "For a few days I was patient, but after a while [my] tolerance categorically gave up, and the decision had to be made that now there is no solution without a fight. . . . Among my possessions here, an umbrella has also come along. I picked it up and made a declaration of war. But in just a little while I found out that a short reach [of the umbrella] is no match for these swift enemies atop arches."[8]

Azad then finds a long bamboo pole used to clean spiderwebs in the veranda outside his room and manages to chase the sparrows away. Satisfied that he has the room to himself, he sits down to write. "But not even fifteen minutes must have passed, and the sounds of the enemy's battle songs and the fluttering of their wings arose again. When I raised my head to look, every crevice in the ceiling was occupied by them. I immediately got up and bringing the bamboo pole I again joined battle. . . ."[9]

This time, the sparrows are quite obstinate in holding their ground, but ultimately, they retreat and leave the room to Azad. Since they seem scared of the bamboo pole, which Azad, continuing the mock-heroic tone of his account, calls a *nezah* (spear), he decides to keep it in his room, and props it in such a way that the tip of the pole is close to the opening of the oldest nest in the room. He then leaves his room for lunch. When he returns a little while later, he finds that the sparrows

are back in all the crevices in the room and seem to be entirely unaffected by the incident. "And the most notable thing was that the weapon whose terror I had trusted to such an extent had become an instrument of the enemies' activities. The tip of the bamboo pole, which was touching the opening of the nest, has started serving as a threshold. They choose their twigs and come sit on this newly erected threshold and with ease and comfort they lay them out in the nest."[10]

Witnessing this state of affairs, Azad realizes that he cannot chase the birds away. "And now I thought that I should choose such customs and ways with which one can live together in one house with uninvited guests."[11] First, he moves his bed away from the wall so that the debris from the birds' nest construction won't fall onto his bed. He orders dust cloths to cover the surface of the table with the washbasin. Contrary to the still quite prevalent taboos against men of high stature doing menial work, especially the polluting work of sweeping, Azad hides a broom in his room and discreetly sweeps a few times a day, when his neighbors in adjacent cells can't see him.

> See how in being hospitable to these uninvited guests I even had to sweep.
>
> *ʿishq az in bisyar kardast o kunad*
>
> Love has done a lot of things of this kind, and will do more
>
> *Ek din khayal hua kih jab sulh ho hi gaʾi hai, to chahʾie kih puri tarah sulh ho. Yih thik nahin kih rahen ek hi ghar men aur rahen beganon ki tarah.* One day the thought came that when an accommodation has happened [between us], then the peace should be total. It is not right that we live in one home, but we live as strangers.[12]

I have translated the word *sulh*, which Azad uses twice in the passage above, as both "accommodation" and "peace." This is in keeping with the multivalent meanings of the word in Islamic legal and ethical traditions, and its uses in Mughal discourses of governance and selfhood. As I discussed in chapter 1, the concept of *sulh-i kull* (peace for all), as it was developed in the time of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) and continued to be used well into twentieth-century Urdu discourse, was not just a strategy of governance, but also a *habitus* one aimed to embody, an aspirational state toward which one fashioned the self.[13] This was a spiritual state of dealing with one's fellow (human) beings, irrespective of their radical differences, religious or otherwise, with equal consideration and respect, and without any bigotry, discrimination, or anger. This was a state one ultimately had to transcend "in order to achieve an even higher state of consciousness."[14] It is this thicker sense of *sulh* that Azad seems to be gesturing toward when he uses it the second time.

Azad desires to move from the tolerance of the truce-like *sulh* between him and the birds into something deeper and more intimate. This is what he wishes to call a complete accommodation or total peace (*puri tarah sulh*). Bringing this collective condition about, this fostering of intimacy, requires, as Azad recounts, a transformation of the self.

> You know that far more than the hunted it is the hunter who must keep watch upon the self. As soon as their feet turned toward the grains [that Azad had scattered on the rug], I held my breath still, turned my gaze in the other direction, and turned my entire body insensate and inert like a stone, as if it's not a man but a stone idol (*murti*) placed there. Because I knew that if the gaze of passion, becoming agitated, hastened things even a little bit, then the hunted [birds], having come closer and closer to the net, would fly away. This is but the first stage in the matters of the coquetry of beauty and the sacrifices of love. . . . Anyway, I passed this ordeal akin to [the beloved's] neglectful behavior by repeating God's name, and an idol-mocker (*but-tannaz*) [from among the birds] clearly made his way to the grains. . . .[15]

Azad then describes in detail the approach of the birds to the grain and starts introducing us to individual sparrows within the flock. Enamored by their distinct characters, he wishes to have closer, deeper relationships with them: "This male sparrow's confident step was such a heart-pleasing happening, that at the very moment I resolved that I had to have more and more frequent relations with this man of action. I named him Qalandar,[16] for in the acts of his heedlessness and freedom, there was also a gallantry that added a luster to his antinomian ways."[17]

Azad starts feeding the birds regularly, two or three times a day. After a few days, instead of scattering the grains of rice on the rug, he puts them in the inverted lid of a cigarette tin and sets it on the rug. The next day, he places the lid a little closer to himself. On the third day, he sets the lid down even closer. "On seeing such closeness (*qurb*) at first the guests were hesitant. They came close to the rug but there was a hesitant flinch in their steps, and a wavering spoke in their eyes. But at the very moment Qalandar appeared, crying out his Qalandaresque slogans. And seeing his libertine (*rindana*) audacities, everyone's hesitation vanished, as if they had all become followers of Qalandar on this path."[18]

Azad keeps filling the lid of the cigarette tin with grains of rice and moving it closer and closer to himself. As before, the birds would hesitate until Qalandar took the first step, and this "stage too opened on all the other birds."[19] One morning, Azad sets the lid right by his side and then becomes so engrossed in his writing that he forgets about it. After a little while he hears the loud sound of a bird hitting its beak on something.

> When I looked out of the corner of my eye, I saw that our old friend Qalandar has reached and is using his beak without any hesitation. As the lid was placed right next to me, his tail was touching my knee. In a little while, the other swift-moving friends also reached, and then the condition was such that at every moment a group of two or three friends would be jumping around at my side without any hesitation. . . . In their unceremonious prancing it so happened many a time that thinking of my shoulder as the low branch of a tree they thought of making it a target of their exploration but then turned back startled, or touched my shoulder with their wings and passed over. . . .
>
> Anyway, these deer of the air slowly came to the belief that this visage that is always seen on the sofa, while being a human, is not dangerous like humans

> are. See the enchantment of love, which does not tame humans, but tames wild birds. . . . Many times it happened that I am lost in my thoughts, engrossed in writing. Suddenly, a heart-pleasing phrase came to the tip of my pen, or the appropriateness of some lesson made me remember a *shʿer* full of moods and meanings, and without conscious control my head and shoulders started moving in the mood of the *shʿer*, or I exclaimed "ha," and all of a sudden, loudly, I heard the sound of flying wings. When I looked, I saw that a group of those friends without any formality had been busy with their prancing at my side. Suddenly, they saw that this stone has started moving, so they were afraid and flew off. It would not be strange if they said to themselves, that on the sofa here a stone is placed but sometimes it becomes a man.[20]

. . .

On finishing reading the letter, Shahid Amin commented upon it: "[In] this *Panchatantra*-like[21] story, Aamir Mufti has spoken of it as an allegory for the relationship between minority and majority. You are more powerful, the other is in a corner, trying to make his nest. The nest is not in your living-space (*rihaish*), it is not taking land from you, there is no Partition/division (*batvara*). He is above, you are below . . . three tier two tier one tier . . . whatever it is, you can make it work, but since this house is yours, even though you are imprisoned within it, you will take your enmity out on the other (*ap us se apni dushmani nikalenge*). . . ."[22]

In his choice of this particular letter and in his commentary on it, Shahid Amin was drawing on the literary scholar Aamir Mufti's book *Enlightenment in the Colony*, in which Mufti has read Maulana Azad's account of sharing his room with birds as an allegory. Mufti reads the letter, written four years before Partition, as "a politico-ethical critique of the escalations and political failures that were hurtling society towards its own disintegration. . . . The allegory is about the relative alignment of forces that structures the life of society into majority and minority domains, and the adjustments called for from the majority in order to achieve an ethical practice of coexistence."[23] This interpretation is given weight by the coding in the story of the birds as Muslim—the religiously marked terms for them include *qalandar* and *but-tannaz* (idol-mocker)—and the human in the story as a Hindu idol (*murti*).

But to read the story as calling for adjustments only from the majority is to miss the profoundly agentive role that the birds play not only in this letter, but in the subsequent letter Azad addressed to his friend on the next day, March 18, 1943. This agentive role of the birds in creating *sulh* makes the extended allegory not only about the adjustments called for from the majority, but equally about the agency that minorities can and should wield in remaking the relationships that constitute "an ethical practice of coexistence" across radical differences, including power differentials. This latter reading is much more in line with both Azad's

broader idea of Muslim agency in an undivided India as well as with contemporary Indian Muslim political thinking.

. . .

"The story that began yesterday, it hasn't yet finished! Come, today let me tell you another chapter of this 'Conference of the Birds' (*Mantiq at-Tair*)."[24]

Thus begins Azad's March 18 letter. *The Conference of the Birds* is, of course, the famous allegorical poem by the Persian poet Farid-ud-Din "Attar" (c. 1145–c.1221), in which thirty birds go on a quest to find the legendary king of the birds, a complex avian allegory for the human soul's journey to find the divine. Azad's invocation of *Conference of the Birds*, while humorous on the surface, reflects a deeper meaning.

Throughout the initial letter, he refers to the receding fear of the birds, and their growing closeness to him, as different stations (*maqamat*) of a spiritual quest, stages in the transformation of the soul. He writes of the transformations that his desire for intimacy with the birds have wrought on him. He abjures interspecies violence, he takes up the low-status work of sweeping, and he embodies a stillness that turns him into a "stone that sometimes becomes a man." But the journey is not yet complete; more stages remain.

> Between these friends of the roof and arches and me, there remained a light veil of fear and agitation, but in a few days even this was lifted. To come from the ceiling to the sofa, they needed a few intermediate stages. For the first stage they would use the blades of the ceiling fan, for the second my head and shoulders. . . . From the fan they would descend directly onto my shoulder, chirrup for a little while, and then jump to the sofa. Many times it also happened that they would leap from my shoulder and sit atop my head. . . . When matters reached this point, then I thought, why not have another experience?[25]

One morning, Azad is late in feeding the birds and decides to place the lid of rice grains on his open palm. As before, Qalandar is the first sparrow to unhesitatingly jump onto his fingers to peck at the grain.

> Now I lifted my palm with the container on it so it was hanging in the air. Only a little while had passed when another sparrow came. . . . Her name is Moti (pearl). Moti circled my palm once or twice. . . . Then she landed on my elbow and made straight for the wrist . . . and started pecking at the grains without any hesitation. . . .
>
> But this last experience put this experiment-loving (*kavish pasand*) temperament into a different train of thought altogether. I was ashamed of this shortcoming in the flavor of [my] love that my palm is available, and I am wasting the lancet-blows of these beaks on a tin lid. The next day I removed the tin lid and placed the grains of rice on the palm of my hand, and I placed my hand, palm open, on the sofa. Moti was the first to come, and she kept raising her neck to see why the lid wasn't visible

today. She is the most beautiful sparrow of this settlement. . . . If we follow the way [of beauty pageants] for Moti, then we can call her Madame Qila Ahmednagar. . . .

[She has] a lean body, a graceful neck, a tapering cone-like tail, and in her round eyes a strange kind of innocence speaking. When she comes to peck at the grains, with each grain she will keep looking at me. Both our tongues remain silent, but our eyes have begun to speak. She has begun to understand the language of my glances, I have learned to read her gaze. . . .

Anyway, at this moment too her spontaneous gaze said something to me, and then without any hesitation, she leapt onto the base of my thumb and started pecking at the grains with her beak. This was not a beak, this was the tip of a lancet, which if she had wanted could have gone clean through my palm, but she would eat the grains giving me only scratches. . . .

Every time she would also turn her neck and look at me, as if she was asking me, "You're not in pain, are you?" What answer could I give, I who could give my life for the pleasure of that pain?[26]

. . .

Nasheman ke li'e tinke chununga phir gulistan men
Jala hai ashiyan ab aj se fursat hi fursat hai
I will choose twigs again in the garden for my nest
My home has burned, from today I have all the time in the world
—Mahbub (1914–73)

A friend recited this couplet to me in the waning days of the Ramadan of 2019. It was a few days after the results of the parliamentary elections, held earlier that summer, had been declared. The BJP, despite shock demonetization and other economically disruptive measures, had won a resounding majority in Parliament and a larger percent of the vote than in the previous elections that had first brought Modi to national power. The anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan sentiment fanned by the BJP had proved to be incredibly popular. Any hopes Muslims had that the fundamental tolerance of their fellow Indians might lead to them severing ties with Modi and his party were extinguished. The secularism of the Indian republic seemed dead in all but name.

In the tradition of *ghazal* poetry, poets often spoke in the interior voice of birds, as in the above couplet by Mahbub, or the following famous couplet by Ghalib:

Qafas men mujh se rudad-e chaman kehte na dar hamdam
Giri hai jis pah kal bijli voh mera ashiyan kyon ho?
In the cage, don't be afraid of telling me the events of the garden, friend
The one on which lightning fell yesterday, why would it be my nest?

In the Urdu poetic universe, identification with birds is strongest when expressing one's inner state confronted by calamity: lightning striking the nest, destroying everything that you have painfully built up. This is what gives Azad's epistolary tale of the sparrows such resonance for its readers in the postcolonial and

post-Partition subcontinent. Azad brings together Urdu and Persian poetry, symbolically and metaphysically rich with the language of birds, and his experience of the very real birds with distinct personalities that he becomes intimate with in their shared dwelling space. Through their mutual experiments in intimacy across differentials of power and species boundaries, Azad and the sparrows then craft an allegory that is far more hopeful.

If we are to read Azad's letters, following Mufti, as an allegory about the relation between majorities and minorities, then the birds-as-minorities play a surpassingly agentive role in Azad's account. First, by refusing to cede their ground despite the hostility showed by a larger and much more powerful adversary, they compel the adversary to give up hostilities and make adjustments and compromises. Then, as the adversary resolves to make overtures toward the minorities he cannot get rid of, the birds win him over with their actions and character, with what we can characterize as their ethical practice: "This male sparrow's confident step was such a heart-pleasing happening, that at the very moment I resolved that I had to have more frequent relations with this man of action." And ultimately, there grows between the minorities and their adversary not just admiration but what can only be called love: "Both our tongues remain silent, but our eyes have begun to speak." The remaking of relationships has needed an askesis, or ethical adjustment, not just on part of the more powerful adversary, but also on the part of the minority; for them the journey moves from fear to courage to love. This was a journey that Azad repeatedly asked Indian Muslims to make, both before and after Partition. He asked them to not think of themselves as minorities in the sense of being powerless and at the mercy of the majority.

WHO IS A MINORITY?

> *Politically speaking, the word minority does not mean just a group that is so small in number and so lacking in other qualities that give strength, that it has no confidence in its own capacity to protect itself from the much larger group that surrounds it. It is not enough that the group should be relatively the smaller, but that it should be absolutely so small as to be incapable of protecting its interests. Thus this is not merely a question of numbers; other factors count also.*
>
> —MAULANA AZAD, PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO THE FIFTY-THIRD SESSION OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS AT RAMGARH (1940)[27]

"This is not merely a question of numbers; other factors count also." Azad's idea that "minority," in the sense of a relation to political power, was not just determined by demography, has widespread currency among contemporary Indian Muslims. One afternoon in March 2018, I was talking with a friend, an imam in a mosque in Old Delhi. We were lying down in his small chambers in a corner of the mosque, in the postprandial afternoon lull between *zuhr* and *ʿasr* prayers. Our conversation was wide-ranging, from the quality of Maulana Azad's prose to the

end of Muslim rule in Spain to the current political situation. The imam was not particularly optimistic about the latter—the fate of the Rohingya Muslims being violently chased out of their homeland in Burma weighed on our conversation—but he was not pessimistic either. Part of this was faith—nothing can happen without Allah's *hukm* (command), he said—but part of it came from an understanding that demography was not destiny. "*Aqliti aur aksari ka koi matlab nahin hota*" (Minority and majority have no meaning), the imam said.

> *Ab sardaron ko dekh liji᾽e, pandrah bis sardar* railway station *men a ja᾽en to pura jattha lagta hai—lagta hai sara ka sara* station *bhara hua hai sardaron se. Par musalman to aise dikhte nahin hain*, invisible *hain. Agar sare ke sare musalman topi pehen len, to lagega ki musalman hi musalman hain* (Now look at the Sikhs, if fifteen or twenty Sikhs enter a railway station, it looks like a troop, it feels like the station is full of Sikhs. But Muslims don't look like this, they are invisible. If all Muslims were to put on caps [like the Sikhs wear turbans], then it will look like there are Muslims everywhere).[28]

Despite the imam's contention that minorities and majorities did not matter, he was explicitly comparing Muslims to another group recognized as a religious minority in the governmental parlance of the contemporary Indian republic. In conversations with Muslims, comparisons to other religious minorities were quite frequent, with the Sikhs being the most often invoked. Sikhs were invariably spoken of admiringly, as figures of emulation for Muslims, as in the imam's example. Sikhs are a much smaller minority than Muslims, being about 2 percent of the Indian population, but with a visibility and a public presence far beyond their demographic weight, as the imam's anecdote revealed. Sikhs had also been associated with terrorism and vilified in the recent past, having suffered from horrendous state-sponsored pogroms in 1984. But (according to many Muslims) they had overcome their stigmatization through their ethic of *seva* (selfless service). And while it was hard to find positive media portrayals of Muslims, positive portrayals of Sikhs were everywhere. A Sikh man had even held the office of the Prime Minister of the country for ten years.

Azad's assertion that Muslims were not a minority, quoted in the epigraph to this section, was part of a speech he made against the vision of the Muslim League's Pakistan Resolution, passed in the same month, that formally demanded an independent Muslim state to safeguard the interests of Muslims as a minority in the Indian subcontinent. Contemporary Muslims' comparison of themselves to other religious minorities and the implicit and explicit understanding of themselves as a minority might seem, on the surface, to contradict this idea. But contemporary Muslim understanding brings together the constitutional and governmental category of minority as it developed in postcolonial India, a category of enumeration that comes with constitutional protections and developmental promises, as the work of Hilal Ahmed shows,[29] along with Azad's sense that a demographically less numerous group is not

inescapably disadvantaged. This widespread Muslim sense of "minority"—as both a necessary and important constitutional category and a morally agentive and not disadvantaged category—can be seen as an extension rather than a contradiction of Maulana Azad's thought, one which has developed through the Indian Muslim experience and understanding of postcolonial Indian democracy.

• • •

On May 5, 2018, at a meeting of the Guftgu Jamia Collective to commemorate the life of Justice Rajendra Sachar (1923–2018), who had passed away the previous month, the journalist Iqbal Ahmed gave introductory remarks.[30] These included a memorable line: "I believe that God sent Sachar *sahab* to this world just so that he could write the Sachar Committee Report, and only because of writing this report, God will forgive him."

Sachar had been the chair of a government committee appointed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, which presented to Parliament in 2006 a report on the *Social, Economic, and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India*, usually known as the Sachar Committee Report. Why would being the author of a governmental report lead to God's forgiveness of Justice Sachar's soul and hence an assured place in Paradise? Why would the death of the author of a bureaucratic report lead to the widespread public mourning among Muslims that I witnessed in April and May 2018?

Justice Sachar was venerated and mourned by Muslims because the Sachar Committee Report opened up the potential to redefine what it meant to be a "Muslim minority" in India, by shifting the very terms of discourse. Muslims as a cultural and religious minority fit uneasily into the idea of the "nation-state." The Sachar Committee Report redefined it as a population that needed the state's developmental aid in order for the state to hold true to its constitutional promise of equality for all citizens. In doing so, the report also shifted the moral valence of being Muslim in India, transforming Muslims from suspicious enemies of the nation to wards of the state entitled to equal care. Partha Chatterjee has argued that "it is morally illegitimate to uphold the universalist ideas of nationalism without simultaneously demanding that the politics spawned by governmentality be recognized as an equally legitimate part of the real time-space of the modern political life of the nation."[31] The Sachar Committee Report was a moment in which the politics of governmentality held open the potential to challenge the logics of homogeneous nationalism that have been the basis of Muslim exclusion from the idea of India.

• • •

In his account of the origin of the nation-state as a modern political idea, Mahmood Mamdani begins the story not with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, as is usually the case, but with the Christian conquest of Granada, the expulsion of Spanish Jews, and the beginning of the colonization of the Americas in 1492.

> The nation-state was born of two developments in Iberia. One was ethnic cleansing, whereby the Castilian monarchy sought to create a modern homogenous national homeland for Christian Spaniards by ejecting and converting those who were strangers to the nation—Moors and Jews. The other development was the taking of overseas colonies in the Americas by the same Castilian monarchy that spearheaded ethnic cleansing. . . . Modern colonialism and the modern state were born together with the creation of the nation-state. . . . Tolerance had to be imposed on the nation-state long after its birth to stanch the bloodshed it was causing.[32]

In other words, nationalism, in its origins, was always ethnic nationalism. Mamdani describes tolerance, as it evolved in Europe, as legitimating the permanent separation of majority and minority:

> Locke's regime of tolerance institutionalized the relationship between a national majority on one side and a national minority on the other, each cast permanently in its political identity . . . a distinction without which the nation-state collapses. This distinction is a product of the essential incoherence of the nation-state, which joins the nation, a political community whose boundaries are determined by its numbers, to the state, a legal form in which membership (citizenship) is determined by law. These two objects, state and nation, are necessarily incompatible, for the purpose of the state is to apply law equally to all members, while the purpose of the nation is to protect and valorize only members of the nation. If the state does the bidding of the nation, it will instantiate in law the national prejudice, which is antithetical to the rule of law. Locke's compromise was toleration, whereby the state agrees not to enact the national prejudice against the inhabitants of the state who are not also of the nation, as long as these minorities accept their minority status. Minority status boils down to the forgoing of sovereignty.[33]

. . .

"What if it is possible for the religious minority, from its obviously disadvantaged subject-position, to nonetheless think not only of its own liberation, but of its belonging to an inclusive, supra-majority in which it coexists with the religious majority?"[34]

Amar Sohal asks this question in the introduction to his book *The Muslim Secular*, which examines the political possibilities created by the anticolonial activism of Maulana Azad, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and Sheikh Abdullah. These opened up, in his reading, a distinctive third way of thinking about minority belonging, different both from the Muslim separatism of Jinnah (where Muslims would gain sovereignty by becoming a majority in a circumscribed territory) and the majoritarian tolerance of Hindu Congress leaders, for whom Muslim belonging was premised on renouncing Muslim claims to sovereignty. The three thought, acted, and wrote in the aftermath of the First World War, acutely aware of the problem of minority belonging in post-Versailles

nation-states and of the failure of pan-Islamic politics, while continuing to be inspired by its universalist ideas.

> It was impossible for Azad and Ghaffar Khan, wedded as they were to Islamic universalism, to accept an unadulterated version of the nation. . . . These two Congressmen chose instead to bring Islamic universalism to bear on the national idea in order to "reform" it. Writing in 1927 . . . Azad claimed that the problem with nationalism was that its European thinkers and statesmen had elevated affiliations of race, color, language and culture to hierarchical "distinctions" that had perpetuated their own violence in an unequal, colonized world. . . . So the task for figures like Azad and Ghaffar Khan was to find a "middle course" between a "large-hearted" Islam, and the "given circumstances" of a post-war era in which any serious claim to political freedom had to adopt the almost unanimously endorsed language of national self-determination. . . . In a stark example of how received examples were remade by Indian thinkers, he [Azad] wanted Muslims to instead instantiate the humanist ambitions of Islam in the nation itself. That alone would allow them to uphold the universal truth of *insaniyat* (humanity) *without politically disenfranchising themselves* in a new age (emphasis mine).[35]

Azad's ideas were not just theoretical but also had practical applications for power-sharing between communities. His ideas, as espoused in the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946, would have made for a weaker central government—a sacrifice of sovereignty by the Congress, as a representative of the Hindu majority—in order to include Muslim-majority provinces in a much more federal, but unified India, with sovereignty shared between communities rather than exclusively belonging to the majority.[36] History played out differently, as Nehru led the Congress into pushing for a much more "orthodox" national form, with a strong central government and de facto majority rule, Partition along religious lines, and the long history of religious violence that has followed. However, Azad's thought remains important for the democratic experience of postcolonial India, which holds open the potential for nonnational and nonmajoritarian sovereignty.

. . .

Mahmood Mamdani comments, "If Locke's compromise ensured a degree of peace in Europe, it had the opposite effect in Europe's colonies."[37] Political violence indeed exploded rather than diminished after political independence in postcolonial states, as the political imagination of postcolonial elites, formed deeply by European epistemologies, tried to construct new national majorities in plural and fragmented societies where permanent national majorities and minorities were not a given. The means they tried to build these often included extreme violence meant to humiliate, engineer demographic shifts, and otherwise make

impossible any minority claims to participating in state sovereignty.[38] For a South Asian(ist) reading Mamdani, this is a textbook description of what has happened in Britain's former Indian colonies, with the ostensible failure of the third way of politics and shared sovereignty espoused by Azad and Ghaffar Khan: the rise of competing Hindu and Muslim nationalisms, the "two nation" theory, the violence accompanying Partition, the dismal state of minorities on both sides of the border, and the ongoing Hindu nationalist project in India for the complete disenfranchisement of Muslims.

Mamdani argues that the true decolonization of the political community requires sundering the nation and the state. "By establishing the nation as the permanent majority, the nation-state renders the political process moot. . . . Only by decoupling the nation from the state can there be democracy, a scenario in which *shifting coalitions of interest*, constructed through persuasion, hold sway. As it is, power in nation-states lies always with those who identify with the nation, not with coalitions that assemble through a political process (emphasis mine)."[39]

In India, such a process of political decolonization had been underway through what Partha Chatterjee has described as "the politics of the governed."[40] In Chatterjee's account, in South Asia colonial governmentality long predated the formation of modern sovereign nation-states. For instance, "the classification, description, and enumeration of population groups as the objects of policy relating to land settlement, revenue, recruitment to the army, crime prevention, public health, management of famines and droughts, regulation of religious places, public morality, education, and a host of other governmental functions has a history of at least a century and a half before the nation-states of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon were born."[41] In postcolonial South Asia, as Chatterjee describes through vivid ethnographic detail, the enumeration and classification of populations as targets for governmental intervention continues, but what makes the politics of the governed different is that it "*give(s) the empirical form of a population group the moral attributes of a community*."[42] Not only do populations, enumerated as *subjects* of governmental classification, become recipients of governmental largesse, in postcolonial democracy they can also become morally agentive communities, working to build cohesion and moral uplift within the community, as well as staking claims to a share in state sovereignty through "coalitions of interest."

This is precisely why the Sachar Committee Report mattered. It rhetorically shifted the Muslim minority from a cultural other whose markers of distinctness (language, personal law) made it an outsider to the nation to a *population* subject to the Constitution of India, which was now statistically understood as underserved by the state, and allowed Muslims to recognize themselves as a community that needed to work toward its own developmental and moral uplift. But from 2013 onwards, mass media, social media channels and the BJP government at the center and state levels, as well as their nonstate ideological allies, have once again made

"the (Hindu) nation" the dominant mode of belonging to the political community, leading to "the political demonetization of Muslims."

THE POLITICAL DEMONETIZATION OF MUSLIMS

Ek ʿumr se bazar men bikta hi nahin hun
Tuta hun main mehnga hun main sasta hun kih kya hun?
It's been an age since I haven't sold in the market
Am I broken, am I expensive, am I cheap, what am I?
—AQIB SABIR (B. 1994)

On an August weekend in 2018, a group of Muslim professionals that included doctors, journalists, academics, lawyers, new-media professionals, and religious scholars came together for a meeting in a basement legal office in Southeast Delhi. The meeting was meant to discuss organizational tactics and strategies for the 2019 parliamentary elections, which were then anticipated to take place in about eight months. This meeting felt urgent and unprecedented to the people participating in it. "Never have I seen meetings like this, like the ones I have seen in the past five years," said a woman professor at a central university in Delhi. "We can create these safe spaces and say things that our parents couldn't say, and for that we should thank Modi-ji."

The coming to power of the Narendra Modi government in 2014 brought a sense of existential threat to Indian Muslims. In the words of another meeting participant, a senior journalist with an international news organization, "The community is under siege, under threat, under attack. *Apki* physical existence *ke upar* direct *hamle ho rahe hain* (Your physical existence is being directly attacked)." The journalist went on to say, "I have coined a term—actually I have borrowed it from Mukul Kesavan[43]—*the political demonetization of Muslims*. . . . There is no value now to the Muslim vote. We should look inwards into how Muslim politics has unfolded in the last fifty years, how it has helped the Hindu backlash, first from the Congress, and from the nineties onwards, from the BJP. How much are we as a community responsible for this? And how do we change this?"

He then told a story from his home state of Bihar, a story that became a front-page cartoon, in his telling, in the Patna edition of the *Times of India* in the early nineties. The cartoon showed two Muslim politicians from Bihar, Fatmi and Anwar Alam, cleaning up the tea that Laloo Prasad Yadav, then the chief minister of the state, had spilled. In the journalist's account, this cartoon was based on something that actually happened. Yadav, who became chief minister in part because of the coalition of Yadav and Muslim voters who supported the Janata Dal, insulted a Muslim minister of his cabinet by flinging the tea he was drinking at the minister's face. The other Muslim minister present in the room did not say anything but started cleaning up the mess, interpreted as a servile gesture. "*Is qaum ki halat*

yahi hai kih ek ke munh pe chai phenki aur dusra use saf karne men lag gaya" (The condition of this community is just this: that when tea is thrown in one's face, the other starts cleaning it up [without protest]), the journalist said.[44]

He then spoke about his interview with Azam Khan, a senior Muslim minister in the Samajwadi government of UP, shortly after the Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 and the mass displacement of Muslims. His first question was, "How are you feeling in the cabinet of little Modi?," that is, the young Akhilesh Yadav, the chief minister under whose watch the riots happened. His second question was, "What are you doing as a minister when 50,000 Muslims are living in displaced persons camps?" Seven minutes into the interview, he said, he was thrown out. "We have to stop making political parties into gods," he said. "*Ap* constitutional rights *ki*, as a citizen, *bat karen. Jab tak ap apni qimat khud nahin laga'enge, to yeh Azam Khan waghairah apko bech denge*" (You have to speak of constitutional rights, as a citizen. Unless you set your own price, these Azam-Khan[s]-etcetera will keep selling you [short]).

What do we make of the journalist's association of the concepts of dignity (or the lack of it), citizenship rights, and market price? For one, it points us toward an understanding of Indian democracy as a marketplace. That electoral democracy is a market was something I heard articulated quite often, not just in this meeting. What does the metaphor of democracy as marketplace illuminate about a minority understanding of Indian democracy? Here your vote, like money, is a transactional commodity, which can be traded for other commodities. Your vote can be exchanged for the promise of goods and services and social welfare, protection from harassment from state and nonstate actors, and access and proximity to power. The exchange value of your vote, its rate of conversion in the marketplace of democracy, is determined not just by its individual value—one vote is not just one vote—but by the potential of your vote to deliver its recipient to power. That is, the value your vote can command in the marketplace of democracy is determined by the perception of electoral strength of the community you belong to, the political capital of your vote-bank, as it were. This strength is determined not just by demographics but by the ability of your community to enter winning electoral alliances, especially in a first-past-the-post system where you do not need an absolute majority to win a particular seat, merely the strongest numerical alliance in a particular electoral grouping.

In the 2012 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, for instance, the electoral alliance of Yadavs and Muslims did extremely well, with 29.15 percent of the vote gaining them an absolute majority of 224 seats in an assembly of 403. Muslim MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) had 69 seats, which meant that for the first time since independence, the number of MLAs was proportional to the demographic population of Muslims.[45]

Two years later, in the parliamentary elections that brought Narendra Modi to power, there was not a single Muslim MP from Uttar Pradesh, and the BJP won 71

out of 80 parliamentary seats. In 2017, the consolidation of voters behind a Hindu identity in the UP Assembly election, which led to the BJP's vote share rise to 40 percent, saw Muslim representation in the state assembly reduced to 6 percent from 17 percent five years before.[46] Even in the campaigning for the 2017 state elections, Muslims had become untouchables for the opposition parties. The BJP had shown that you could win elections without Muslim votes. Muslim votes had in fact been rendered not just value-less, but a liability; political parties began to believe that association with Muslims could cause you to actually lose Hindu votes.

The story of demonetization or *notebandi* is well known. On the night of November 8, 2016, Narendra Modi announced that 500- and 1000-rupee notes, which made up about 85 percent of the total value of all Indian currency in circulation, would no longer be legal tender come midnight. The extension of the metaphor of demonetization to the electoral fortunes of Indian Muslims is remarkably telling. It gives us a sense of the shock of the 2014 parliamentary elections and 2017 assembly elections in UP, held three months after demonetization, where the representational gains that Muslims had made over the past two decades through social alliances and strategic voting were undone. But unlike the 500- and 1000-rupee notes, which had no say in their own demonetization, the senior journalist kept turning to the question of Muslim agency, as in the story of the tea. Even when Muslims were part of a social and political coalition that shared power, he was saying, they acted abject. In his rhetoric, the political demonetization of Muslims came not just from the political machinations of the Hindu right wing, as in Mukul Kesavan's analysis, but from the behavior of Muslims as political actors in the preceding years.

"Numbers aren't everything," the senior journalist said during his address to the gathering. "We had seventy MLAs in Uttar Pradesh and there were fifty thousand Muslims in the Muzaffarnagar camps." Later, as some of us were talking after the meeting over tea and shawarma at the New Friends Colony Community Center, he continued talking about Bihar politics. "Muslims are 18 percent of the Bihar population, Yadavs are 11 percent, of which half vote BJP. We need a Muslim leader who can go up to Tejashwi [the son and political successor of Laloo Prasad Yadav], and say, you're 11 percent, we're 18 percent, *CM-ship hamari hai* (The chief minister position is ours), and we may consider you as a deputy. *Par ap ki auqat nahin hai*. (But you don't have the status [to make that demand])."

The journalist consistently articulated the idea that the Muslim electorate had been sold short in the marketplace of democracy by a servile Muslim leadership, unwilling to stand up to Hindu politicians and unwilling to bargain hard to get a fair price for Muslim votes in terms of patronage, protection, and the development and dignity of the community. In this analysis, the low price of Muslim votes, which resulted in the abysmal socioeconomic situation of the Muslim community as documented in the Sachar Committee Report, came from a failure of Muslim leadership. But this in turn ultimately comes from the failure of the Muslim

community to produce a leadership that can drive a hard bargain in the market of democracy, because *ap ki auqat nahin hai*—because the community did not have the social, economic, and moral status in contemporary India.

. . .

The majority of those who participated in the meeting were professionals hailing from Delhi, Bombay, and Hyderabad, major urban centers. In other words, they were recognizably members of what we could call *civil society*. And yet, much of the conversation was about how Muslims *as a population* could and should strategize and negotiate with political parties to get both social services and citizenship rights. This sounded to me much like Partha Chatterjee's notion of *political society*,[47] where it is precisely by organizing or recognizing themselves as *populations* that communities turn the logic of governmental classification into not only a moral imperative for care by the state, but also a much *thicker* claim to citizenship rights, including a stake in the shared exercise of sovereignty, of political power.

In this, many Muslims draw their inspiration from the Dalit movement, which has been able to turn the enumerative category of Scheduled Caste, a marker of their historical oppression and resultant socioeconomic marginalization, into a powerful political force, nationally as well as in the electorally crucial state of UP. Conversely, an often-articulated Muslim grievance is that the Sachar Committee Report, an exercise in governmentality to determine accurate statistical measures and which found Muslims to be among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged populations nationally across various indicators, has not resulted in any government move toward care or the betterment of the population.

Partha Chatterjee argues that a crucial part of the politics of the governed is *to give to the empirical form of a population the moral attributes of a community*.[48] However, the question of *auqat*, as raised by the senior journalist, inverts this formulation. It posits that the community should already develop a certain moral and social status, independent of the state, *before* it can properly bargain with the state for the welfare and citizenship benefits that come from being enumerated as a population. How is this *auqat* to be found or developed?

"POLITICAL MINORITY" VS. "RELIGIOUS MINORITY"

"The Parliament elections are coming," the Muslim politician Asaduddin Owaisi said in an interview in April 2019, "and you will see that the Muslim mind is a highly trained mind. For fifty years we have been trained that whenever the election comes, it is a life-or-death matter for you. And a lot of stress is given on the life-or-death part. And we happily vote because it is a matter of life or death. And then when the election is over, we die every day and nobody comes to our funeral."[49]

One of the reasons for the self-diagnosed lack of *auqat* of the Muslim community has been the national narrative that saddles Muslims with the responsibility

for Partition and is constantly suspicious that they are secretly more loyal to the enemy state of Pakistan. This has been made much worse in the years since 2013, in the lead-up to Narendra Modi's election, with the intensification of Islamophobia in public discourse through both news channels and social media, and particularly the spread of vitriolically Islamophobic accounts of Muslim villainy in Indian history on what is sarcastically referred to as "WhatsApp University." This has made the place of the Muslim in the national political imaginary even more tenuous than it already was. In the phrasing of sociologist Ghazala Jamil, they are "treated normatively as non-citizens at the minimum, and as *homines sacri* in the extreme,"[50] which has made social alliances with them much cheaper. No need for Muslim presence in your campaigns, let alone sharing power or offering development, when merely offering survival will get you the Muslim vote. Alliances with them are devalued by the original sin and resultant stain of Partition and are thus much easier to break and betray. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the SP-BSP *gathbandhan* (coalition) failed colossally in part because while Muslims voted for the alliance, Yadav voters significantly shifted to the BJP.[51]

Asaduddin Owaisi has been an MP since 2004 and is president of the All India Majlis Ittehad ul Muslimeen (All India Council for the Unity of Muslims, known usually by its initials, AIMIM), a Muslim-led party based in Hyderabad with an increasing national presence, "dedicated to protect and promote the rights of Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, Other Backward Classes, Other Minorities and all other underprivileged communities in India."[52] Owaisi and his party are often accused of "communalizing" Muslim minority voters by emphasizing and foregrounding Muslim identity. They are also often accused of being the BJP's "B-Team," helping the BJP to win by taking away Muslim votes from secular opposition parties.[53] Owaisi's political rhetoric has, however, been characterized by Rochana Bajpai and Adnan Farooqui as "non-extremist outbidding."[54]

> His insistence on the recognition of Muslim identity devalued or rendered invisible in dominant Hindu-supremacist as well as secular-liberal narratives, contrasts with so called moderate nationalist Muslim representatives, who seek either to minimize their religious identity, or otherwise align it to secular parties. . . . At the same time, the underlying principles invoked in [his] rhetorical attacks on the BJP and other mainstream parties are standard liberal protections for individual life and liberty, equal citizenship, and non-discrimination enshrined in the Indian Constitution. . . . Owaisi has emphasized general principles of universal application, rather than special protections for Muslims. . . . Unlike an older generation of Muslim leaders weighed down by nostalgia for the past glories of Islam in India, and the trauma of cultural losses such as the destruction of the Babri Masjid, Owaisi's approach has been pragmatic and focused on Muslims' rights as equal citizens of India. . . . A long-standing critic of the *Hajj* subsidy for Muslims, he has termed it a "criminal waste" and called for its funds to be transferred to scholarships for Muslim girls.[55]

Owaisi's emphasis on education as a valuable part of community uplift mirrors that of Indian Muslims at large. Education has been hugely emphasized as vital for the community's future. Reflecting on her fieldwork in the Muslim localities of Delhi, sociologist Ghazala Jamil writes, "A most striking attitudinal change that I observed was that *every single* participant of this study, without any exceptions, stressed that it is important for Muslims to get educated. This is a far cry from the laments heard around 10–12 years ago among Muslims—'What's the good of getting an education; it's not as if a job is waiting for us.'"[56] In December 2018 I attended a rally in Old Delhi in which the recurring chant was "*adhi roti khaʾenge, bachchon ko parhaʾenge*" (We will eat [only] half a bread, but we will educate the children). As a popular, and popularly elected leader, Owaisi both reflects extant attitudes among Muslims as well as shaping these attitudes. His "non-extremist outbidding" can be understood as deeply invested in raising the status, the *auqat*, of the Muslim community—and hence its ability to bargain harder for benefits in the marketplace of democracy—through a politics of futurity, of concern with the status of future Muslims (including future Muslim leadership), and not just of ameliorating the current situation.

When I met Asaduddin Owaisi in July 2018, the first question I asked him, at a friend's request, was this: "How can Narendra Modi be defeated?" He responded immediately, "*nahin hara sakte*" (He can't be defeated). That, he clarified, wasn't the goal of his politics, even though he prayed every day for Modi and Hindutva to be defeated. The question of defeating Modi returned us to the survivalist mode of Muslim politics in which development and dignity became secondary to the primary goal of defeating the BJP. "It doesn't matter if the BJP wins 400 seats, let them win, let them make a joke out of India on the world stage. But we [Muslims] have to assert ourselves. It's the kids who are twenty years old today who will make a difference in the years to come. I don't see a change in my generation, my lifetime, we're too tired."

At a moment when most opposition parties remained largely silent on "Muslim issues" in order not to alienate their potential Hindu voters—despite daily ongoing attacks on Muslims—Owaisi kept talking about Muslim self-assertion. "We have to come out on the streets, like the Dalits, like the Marathas. It doesn't matter if they shoot ten, fifty, one hundred of us. We have to come out. *Ab takalluf nahin chalegi* (Politesse will not do now). Otherwise this is going to be another Rwanda, or another Bosnia."

Owaisi does not see a contradiction between Muslim self-assertion, including voicing the injustices and discrimination that Muslims have faced in independent India over the past seventy years, and the promises of the Indian Constitution. In fact, his politics draws on the shift in the understanding of the constitutional category of minority as *developmental* rather than identitarian, which makes Muslims, as a deprived socioeconomic group, natural allies of other developmentally backward groups such as Dalits, Other Backward Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. Owaisi

uses the term "political minority" for Muslims, seeking to distance the latter from the separatist connotations of "religious minority" associated with Jinnah's claims. Like Dr. Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders, he has argued that political representation for a group is a means for addressing its socioeconomic disadvantage, that a political minority "needs to be represented if they are to realise their constitutional rights . . . which have been denied to the community for too long."[57]

In an interview in April 2019, just before the parliamentary elections that year, Owaisi said, "It is imperative for Muslim communities to understand that trusting these people [Hindu 'secular' political leaders], taking their support, thinking of them as a crutch, is the biggest mistake of your life. Get this out of your mind and become a political power yourself, produce your own voice, send your own representatives [to Parliament and other legislative bodies], and only then are conditions going to change, these people are not going to do anything for you."[58]

When I met with him in July 2018, it was a few days after Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the opposition Indian National Congress, had made news by hugging Narendra Modi in Parliament. The hug, Gandhi had said, was a gesture of affection to counter Modi's anger and hate. Commenting on this, Owaisi said, "You embraced a fascist. A classic fascist. You don't end hate by giving a hug. *Nafrat to insaf se khatam hoti hai* (Hate ends through justice). Give us justice. Or make a Truth and Reconciliation Commission like South Africa's in which we can cry our tears in front of the world and speak openly of what has been happening with us for seventy years."

Despite emphasizing Muslim political leadership and being outspoken on Muslim issues, neither Asaduddin Owaisi nor his party are exclusionary in terms of Muslim identity. They are a Muslim-led party, but not an exclusively Muslim party. "The party has fielded several candidates of Dalit and lower caste background in elections at all levels, municipal, state, and national. For instance, of the five Lok Sabha seats contested by AIMIM in 2014, Asaduddin Owaisi was the lone Muslim member. In the 2015 Aurangabad municipal elections, the party fielded thirteen Dalit candidates, of whom five won in reserved seats with substantial margins. Owaisi has often spoken about forging social coalitions with Dalits and lower OBCs, and while critical of other claimants of Muslim votes, has been supportive of the Dalit party, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and its leader, Mayawati."[59]

With its strategy of electoral alliances with other marginalized groups, and a choice to contest elections at all levels (parliamentary, state, and municipal) in order to get marginalized communities a seat at every table, AIMIM has had electoral success far beyond its core constituency in the Muslim-majority areas of Hyderabad city, including a parliamentary seat from Maharashtra in 2019 and seats in the legislative assemblies of Maharashtra and Bihar. It has also won seats in municipal elections in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, and Gujarat.

"The national footprint of the AIMIM, however, is not to be measured in terms of election results alone. The large audiences that Owaisi's public meetings attract throughout the country are indicative of his appeal to Muslim youth, whether or

not they go on to vote for the AIMIM. . . . Owaisi's speeches and pronouncements are put up promptly on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter accounts, enabling these to reach millions across the country, projecting his image on a national scale."[60] In 2018 and 2019, when hanging around in public areas in Jamia Nagar and other Muslim dominant areas in Delhi, I would often come across young men watching Owaisi's speeches on their cellphones. Perhaps it is not surprising that when the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed in December 2019, Muslims came out on the streets in large numbers, just as Owaisi had said they must in his conversation with me. These Muslim-led protests, in India and around the world, rallied around the Indian Constitution, reading from its preamble, with its promise of justice, liberty, and equality to all citizens, in locations as diverse as Shaheen Bagh, Delhi, and Nashville, Tennessee.

OF FALCONS AND SPARROWS

I spent several nights at the Shaheen Bagh protests at the end of February and the beginning of March 2020, just days before the spread of the coronavirus pandemic shut down much of the world. Shaheen Bagh was full of avian imagery, drawing on the name of the development, which itself was inspired by Iqbal's frequent use of the imagery of the falcon in his poetry:

> Shariq Ansarullah, 61—the man who bought the 80 bigha land in Jasola village in 1984, where the colony first came up—said he chose the name of the area from a famous poem of Allama Iqbal. . . . "I was very inspired by Iqbal's poetry. His couplet *'Tu Shaheen hai, parwaz hai kaam tera / tere samne asman aur bhi hain*' (You are a falcon, flight is your work / There are yet more skies ahead of you) inspired me a lot. I then named my small colony as Shaheen Bagh," he said.[61]

Ham is bagh ke shahin hain was a phrase that appeared in graffiti and posters all around Shaheen Bagh and on social media. *We are the falcons of this garden*. A large canvas made by the Fearless Collective, proudly used as a backdrop to the sit-in at Shaheen Bagh, showed the craggy profile of one of the protest's *dadis* (grandmothers) embraced by the spread wings of a falcon and the words "*Main Shahin Hun*" (I am a falcon). It was easy to see the resonance; the falcon is a symbol of bravery, and not just in Iqbal's poetry.

And yet, Iqbal's vision of the falcon is arguably somewhat at odds with the collective ethos of Shaheen Bagh, where people came together across radical differences of age, gender, religion, and ideology to create a space that imagined alternate futures. In another oft-quoted couplet, Iqbal writes:

> *Nahin tera nasheman qasr-e sultani ki gunbad par*
> *Tu shahin hai basera kar paharon ki chattanon men*
> Your nest is not on the dome of the sultan's palace
> You are a falcon, dwell in the mountain cliffs

Iqbal's *shahin* goes it alone, migrating away from worldly power. What I saw at Shaheen Bagh reminded me much more of the nest-building of the sparrows that shared Maulana Azad's room and continued to flourish in the face of a much more powerful adversary. This was the bravery of staying put and claiming space in the face of assault, continuing to dwell and imagine a better future in a space of devastation. It was the need to *nurture* future generations, a feminine and maternal aspect of avian life that gets left out of Iqbal's soaring (and masculine) philosophical vision. After all, the mothers and grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh came out in protest after their children and grandchildren were assaulted within the space of the university. They created a new nest, in which visions of a radically different future for India were nurtured not on the cliffs of a faraway mountain but in a space on the side of the road.

Azad's story of the sparrows concludes with this tale: "For a long time from Moti's nest, there was the sound of a child." He describes with loving detail how much effort Moti spent in taking care of the child. He tells us how once he saw her flying back and forth with grains for the chick seven times in one minute.

> And as the wings of the children keep growing the angel of intuition (*wijdan ka farishta*) appears and starts whispering in the mother's ears that now they need to learn how to fly. It appears that this whispering had begun in Moti's ears. What do I see one morning? When she flew down from her nest, with her came a small fledgling half-flying with weak wings, who fell to the ground. Moti would repeatedly go to the child, and gesturing to him to fly, would start flying upward, but the fledgling showed no sign of this having any effect. He was lying without any movement, wings spread wide, eyes closed. When I picked him up, I saw that his wings had not fully grown yet. The trauma of the fall was also still fresh; it had made the fledgling completely out of sorts.[62]

Azad picked up the fledgling and placed him on the rug. Moti kept bringing rice grains to feed him. The fledgling would eat these grains but otherwise remained still and silent, with his eyes closed, for the next two days.

> My thought was that he would not survive, but on the third day in the morning a strange matter presented itself. A line of sunlight had entered deep into the room. The fledgling went and stood in this; his wings were drooping, his legs were bent, his eyes, as usual, were closed. Suddenly I see that he has opened his eyes and his whole body is trembling. Then he lifted his neck and started looking out toward the open air. Then he pulled in his fallen wings, opened and closed them a couple of times, and then when he leapt and flew, like an arrow he reached straight to the maidan outside, and then like a shot fired in the air, he flew into the sky and vanished from my view. This scene was so strange that at first I started doubting my eyes. . . . Where was the condition of helplessness and distress, where the mother anxiously took care of him for two days but he couldn't even fly up a hand's width, and where this revolutionary fervor of reaching the sky's furthest limits, that in his very first flight he breaks all the ties of the world of customs and limitations, and disappeared into its boundlessness?

> What can I say of how this scene put me in a condition of tumult? Without any conscious control, this couplet came upon my tongue and with such enthusiasm and vigor that my neighbors were startled:
>
> *Niroʾe ishq bin kih dar in dasht-e bekaran*
> *Game naraftah im o bapayan rasidah im*
> See the power of love, in this endless meadow
> We have not even taken a step, but we have reached the end
>
> Really, this was nothing but an ordinary spectacle of the miracle-making of life, which passes before our eyes all the time, but we never want to understand it. This fledgling sparrow was filled with the potential for flight. He had emerged from the opening of his nest and was standing in front of the winds and the sky, but his feeling of "self-knowledge" (*khud-shinasi*) had not awoken yet. He was heedless of his own real nature. His mother would gesture to him again and again, the waves of the breeze would repeatedly touch his wings and fly on, the tumult of life and activity would come upon him from all sides and give him encouragement, but his interior oven was so cold that any heat from outside could not ignite it. . . . But as soon as his sleeping "self-knowledge" awoke, and he attained the [interior/gnostic] knowledge (*ʿirfan*) that "I am a bird who flies," suddenly his lifeless form was filled with new life. . . . As if the revolutionary turning from weakness to strength, from forgetfulness to awakening, from winglessness to flying high, and from death to life happened within the blink of an eye. If you think about it this happening of the blink of an eye is the summation of this whole story. . . . His original nature (*fitrat*) sent him with all the means of flying, and his mother's gestures were trying to raise him with every breath toward flying. But till the "self-knowing" inside him awoke, and he did not truly know that he was a high-flying bird, all his wings and feathers remained useless. In exactly the same way, when man's "self-knowing" remains asleep inside him, no tumult from outside can awake him. But as soon as his inner knowledge awakens, and he knows the truth hidden inside him, then within the blink of an eye the revolutionary overturning of his condition reaches its climax, and in one leap he reaches from the dirt to the highest skies.[63]

In Azad's letters the "self-knowing" and soaring flight of the fledgling sparrow comes at the end of a long process; first the birds stand their ground and refuse to abandon their nest, then they overcome their fear to create the possibilities of flourishing while sharing a space with a much more powerful adversary, then they give birth to and nurture their young, through adversities and setbacks, until the young fledglings attain "self-knowledge" of their true potential and are ready to soar.

In many ways, this parallels what happened at Shaheen Bagh and other similar protest sites throughout the country. Created by women in response to the attack on their children and grandchildren, these spaces of protest were also spaces of nurture. Mothers brought their children, including young babies, and informal classrooms, libraries, creches, and art studios soon blossomed alongside the protest. Flocking to these nurturing spaces created by their elders, young Indians, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and others, dared to imagine and create an India radically different from the country they saw around them: a space of radical inclusivity,

of the solidarity of the oppressed, of education for the marginalized, of bus stops turned into libraries.

For many, the experience of being in these spaces was one of the awakening of "self-knowing." Young women and men came out of the experience of Shaheen Bagh knowing that they could organize, that they could argue, that they could convince, that they could lead, that they could be artists and visionaries and politicians and activists, that they could make a better India, and a better world.

"It's the kids who are twenty years old today who will make a difference in the years to come," Asaduddin Owaisi said to me in July 2018, articulating his politics as oriented not toward short-term political victories but a long-term vision of Muslim flourishing in India. In Jamia, in Gulbarga, in Shaheen Bagh, in Aligarh, in Lucknow, in the spaces of nurture created by their elders in the face state violence and adversity—those kids began to fly.[64]

ZINDAH QAUM (THE VITAL COMMUNITY)

In Kankinara, in August 2018, I briefly met with Arjun Singh, then the local MLA and chair of the Bhatpara Municipality. He had been at the head of the procession that turned violent and attacked Muslim shops and the statue of Maulana Azad in the Kankinara bazaar. When I asked him about this, he denied that the statue had ever been destroyed. He insisted that the video I was alluding to was fake and said, "We haven't even inaugurated the statue yet. It's brand new, standing near the station." Afterward I wandered back into the streets of Kankinara till I came to a large mosque, where the imam was standing outside after the early afternoon prayers. When I started talking to him about the destruction of Maulana Azad's statue, he said:

> This all started with the one with the elephant flag [the Dalit leader Mayawati, whose party symbol is a white elephant] who started building statues everywhere. Now everyone wants to have a statue. So, they built a statue of Maulana Azad even though it is not really right [from an Islamic perspective]. But someone must have spoken to the MLA and the council, and so they built it. *Agar nahin banate to shayad aisi be-ʿizzati bhi nahin hoti. Agar Bamiyan ke Buddha toot gaye to yeh kya chiz hai. Par jab unhen imam bana diya to ʿizzat karni chahiʾe* (If they hadn't built it perhaps there wouldn't have been such disrespect shown either. If the Buddhas of Bamiyan were broken then what is this in comparison? But since he [Azad] has been recognized as the leader (*imam*), he should be respected).

The imam then quoted a couplet:

> *nasheman par nasheman is qadar tʿamir karta ja*
> *kih bijli girte girte ap hi bezar ho jaʾe*
> Build nest upon nest in such a fashion
> That the lightning itself loses its strength as it falls

FIGURE 7. Urdu writing on a soot-blackened wall in Auliya Masjid, Shiv Vihar, Northeast Delhi, March 2020. Photo: Anonymous.

The imagery was arresting, and like Azad's allegory of the sparrows, it transformed the usual poetic trope of the destruction of bird's nests by lightning. Here, the birds were exhorted to build nest upon nest so that the lightning itself would lose its force as it fell from the sky, perhaps in dismay at the impossibility of destroying all the nests the birds had built.

I thought of that couplet as I wandered around Shaheen Bagh, a place unlike any that I had ever encountered, an event that transformed the spaces of the city that I thought I knew into something unrecognizably beautiful and hopeful. It was in the days after the Northeast Delhi riots, and while there were fear and trepidation all around, there was also exhilaration.

"This was the first time in my life I have seen riots rather than pogroms," a friend from Northeast Delhi said, indicating that the violence had not been one-sided, with Muslims only as victims, as was usually the case. The violence was extensively destructive, especially in areas of mixed populations where Muslims were outnumbered. But there was pride expressed in the conversations at Shaheen Bagh and in Old Delhi that in many of the Muslim-majority areas of Northeast Delhi, the rampaging Hindu mobs were successfully held off and beaten back, despite their police support.

In the days after the Delhi riots, the collective mood I encountered contained sorrow and fear and anger, but also pride: in the ability of Muslims to make real a radically inclusive and peaceful vision of India, in the ability to physically defend themselves from state-abetted majoritarian violence. For my interlocutors, these were not contradictory impulses but signs of a morally agentive Muslim community, of a *zindah qaum* having woken up to its vitality and its *auqat*, its true stature. On the wall of a mosque in Northeast Delhi blackened and burned by exploding propane tanks thrown by rioters, someone had left a message in the thick soot, written in beautiful calligraphic Urdu, which shone like lightning against the dark backdrop of destruction.

> *Yeh sabaq hai zindah qaum ke liʾe.*
> This is a lesson for a community that is vital and alive.

Conclusion

The Shaheen Bagh protest lasted for a hundred days, after which it was shut down in the interests of public health and safety as the 2020 pandemic rose. In the Hindutva media ecosystem, Muslims were vilified as disease vectors.[1] Many Muslims who were active in the peaceful protests against the CAA were investigated, and several were arrested under the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), an amended law that since 2019 has allowed the Union Government to designate individuals as terrorists and hold them in prison without any due process. The house of Afreen Fatima, a student active in the anti-CAA movement, was punitively demolished by a bulldozer in August 2022 in the state of Uttar Pradesh. This was one of several instances of "bulldozer politics," where Muslim homes and properties were demolished as individual and collective punishment in the states of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat.[2] The harassment of Muslims and the criminalization of Muslim prayers have become routine, especially in states ruled by the BJP. It would seem that the Muslim vision of a vibrant, pluralist, inclusive India, embodied in the Shaheen Bagh protests, has been crushed by the growing authoritarianism of a BJP regime riding high on Hindu majoritarian sentiment, buoyed by its triumphalist inauguration of a grand Rama temple at the site of the demolished Babri Mosque in January 2024.

Writing a year into the global pandemic lockdowns, anthropologist Irfan Ahmad made the case that "Shaheen Bagh is not an event of the past, it is an interrupted future."[3] Ahmad argues that the different imaginaries of ethics and politics that were not only glimpsed but actualized in Shaheen Bagh did not end but continue to hold open potentials for the future. Extending his argument, I believe that the poetry, ethics, and politics recorded in this book are not (just) past but continue to hold open potentials for the reimagination of selves, societies, and

solidarities not just in India, and not just among Muslims, but, in the universalist spirit of the Urdu ghazal universe, for the world. In this conclusion, I will revisit major themes and arguments from the book and follow their resonances and relevance in a more transnational and global context, widening the lens beyond a tight ethnographic focus on India.

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One of the arguments of this book has been that *wehshat*, the feeling of savagery and frenzy generated by the trials confronting the soul, is not a medicalized affliction. Instead, through the Urdu poetic universe and its deep connections to Sufism and Islamic traditions of self-knowledge, it can be understood as an ethical and spiritual station of the soul. *Wehshat*, with all its violence and savagery, can be a prelude to *junun*, divine love-madness, where rational calculation is set aside to imagine a world and all its possibilities anew.

Wehshat has become an intimately familiar emotion for many of us—even the most privileged and cocooned—in the aftermath of the October 7 attacks by Hamas fighters on Israel and the vengeful and disproportionate retaliation by Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip. At least 68,000 Palestinians have died in Gaza since October 2023, a majority of them women and children.[4] Most of Gaza has been reduced to uninhabitable rubble by Israeli airstrikes and artillery. But the death and destruction wreaked on civilians is not distant and abstract, as in earlier televised wars. Through smartphone videos shared over social media networks, we have all seen the human cost of this war with unprecedented intimacy: videos of parents cradling their dead children, homes reduced to rubble, blown-off limbs. The *wehshat* and disquiet that the circulation of videos from the war in Gaza has brought to American and world consciousnesses has led to grief, anxiety, and rage.

For many young people on American college campuses like the one at which I teach, the *wehshat* they were feeling spurred them to *junun*, to act in ways unconstrained by pragmatic considerations, to try and make the world anew through divine love-madness. Fully conscious of the ways in which their protests could be criminalized and punished, adversely affecting their futures, students formed protest encampments on campuses all over the country to push their universities to divest from companies that profit from militarily supporting Israel. These encampments, which like Shaheen Bagh were threatened from their inception by the possibility of brute violence, have, also like Shaheen Bagh, been spaces of celebration and solidarity, with Muslims and Jews, queer and straight students coming together joyfully in forms of collectivity that challenge, by their very existence, the exclusionary logics of nationalism and normativity.

• • •

After a poetry event held in Old Delhi in October 2018, a young man named Ankit stayed behind to speak with the poets. He was originally from Lucknow and now

lived in East Delhi. He was an engineer by training and interested in poetry. He asked Azhar Iqbal and the other poets if they knew who'd written this particular quatrain that he'd heard once, and couldn't get out of his head:

> *ʿajab mizaj-e bahgavat hai ham chiraghon ka*
> *kisi ke rang men rangna hamen qubul nahin*
> *hava ke zulm se bujhna qubul hai hamko*
> *hava ke hukm se jalna hamen qubul nahin*
> Strange is the rebellious disposition of us lamps
> It is not acceptable to us to be colored in another's color
> We accept being extinguished by the wind's oppression
> We do not accept being lit up at the wind's command

No one had an answer then for Ankit, and I still don't, having perfunctorily Googled lines from the quatrain a few times and never having found a good match. But despite its anonymity and perhaps mediocrity, it is part of the *mimetic archive* of Urdu poetry, its repertoire of concepts and dispositions, of ethical stances and ways of being in the world. In a form of transmission that has not been adequately theorized in our accounts of the ethical life of tradition, this indifferent quatrain somehow made its way to Ankit and stuck with him, bringing with it thought-images of rebellious lamps that would rather be extinguished by the wind's oppression than be lit at its command. These were thought-images that were meaningful as a recognition of and a possibility for the self.

I never met Ankit again, but for me he became emblematic of the young Indians turning to Urdu poetry to find languages of and possibilities for the self outside of the homogenizing logics of nationalism and consumer capitalism that have become dominant in contemporary urban Indian life. It is such quests that have led to the renewed interest in the early-modern figure of the poet Mirza Asadullah Khan "Ghalib," who wrote of and conducted himself as *azadah* (free), and his recognition as a Muslim saint in contemporary Delhi, an ethical exemplar for those trying to live a meaningful life within the destructive effects of modern capitalism and nationalism.

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Drawing on the life and poetry of Jaun Elia, the most popular poet in Hindi-Urdu speaking South Asia today, in this book I have argued that Jaun holds open the potentialities for *nonnational belonging*. Jaun is a poet of *wataniyat*, of belonging to a place through intimate ties across radical differences with all others who share the space. Jaun's relation to his hometown of Amroha was constituted by his links to Deobandi scholars, with an orientation toward Islam very different from that of his Shia family, and to agentive nonhumans such as the rivers Ganges and Yamuna, sacred to Hindus. To challenge the exclusionary logics of nationalism, Muslim activism in India has turned to the repair and reimagination of intimate

relationships as crucial and central to belonging. This reminds me of the South Asian immigrants, unwelcome in the imagination of white American nationalism, who "bypassed the nation" and instead put down roots in the cities and neighborhoods where they built their lives—Bengali men marrying African American and Puerto Rican women—while remaining transnationally connected to the villages and families they had left behind.[5]

. . .

To remake and reimagine relations is no easy task, especially given the colonial and postcolonial history of ethnonationalism in the subcontinent that has led to "the loss of Hindustan," made religious boundaries more rigid, and continues to poison communal relations. To reimagine relations within and between communities needs a disavowal of skepticism toward the other, breaking with the ossification of tradition through the cultivation of new modes of authority, and perhaps most importantly, the ability and desire to cultivate *capacities* of living with difference in a profound and meaningful way. In this book, I have explored Muslim engagements with Hindu ethics by figures as diverse as Deobandi *ʿulema* and Bollywood filmmakers and the cultivation of new forms of religious authority among Muslim communities through a combination of the strategic silence of the *ʿulema* and the networked hypervisibility of young Muslim activists on social media. In the remainder of this conclusion, I want to think about how what I observed in India, specifically the reception of poets by religious authorities and the ethics embodied by the women of Shaheen Bagh, holds open capacities of living with difference that have been central to the life of the Islamic tradition but have not been recognized as such in the academic study of Islam. To explore these capacities is important not just for my life as a Muslim (who sometimes struggles with the normative orientations to others that the "mainstream" of tradition would seem to demand), but for all those who wish to live meaningfully with differences without privileging the agency of the secular state.

. . .

I return first to the *shʿer* by Majrooh Sultanpuri that Ain-ul-Haidar *sahab* shared with me, and from which this book takes its title.

> *mujh se kaha jibril-e junun ne yeh bhi wahy-e ilahi hai*
> *mazhab to bas mazhab-e dil hai baqi sab gumrahi hai*
> The Gabriel of madness said to me, "This too is divine revelation.
> Religion is only the religion of the heart, all else is going astray."

In December 2018, I spoke with the late Shamim Hanafi, the famed Urdu literary critic, about this *shʿer*. Like Majrooh, Hanafi hailed from Sultanpur, and it turns out that he knew the poet quite well. "Majrooh *sahab* was a very staunch communist," he said. "Which is to say that he was a Marxist, and he had no belief (*yaqin*)

in God." Hanafi shared this with me as part of his exegesis of the couplet I had shared, the implication being that when Majrooh spoke of madness in the *shʿer*, he could not possibly be speaking of the divine.

And yet, Shah Ain-ul-Haidar had quoted this couplet as giving profound insight into religious truth, insight beyond the ken of exoteric religious scholars (*maulvi*s), insight that to his mind was of importance in response to my question about the political situation, because as he said, madness is the extreme limit of love.

It is very unlikely that Ain-ul-Haidar *sahab* did not know about Majrooh's communism and atheism. The biographies of poets are well known in South Asia and are very much part of the performance, reception and understanding of their poetry, and Shah Ain-ul-Haidar is a profoundly learned man.[6] And yet, this knowledge did not stop Ain-ul-Haidar from quoting Majrooh's *shʿer* as profoundly truth-bearing, as akin to divine revelation. Shah Ain-ul-Haidar's response makes me assert that doubt, rather than being constitutive of skepticism, might well be its opposite. Skepticism, at least in the encounters described in this book, seems to me to be a form of certitude. Our (always inherently limited) knowledge of others fixes them and their motivations in our imaginations and limits our possibilities of learning from and interacting with them. A believing Muslim cannot but be fundamentalist. A communist cannot but be godless. Ain-ul-Haidar *sahab*, on the other hand, with his appreciation of and citation of Majrooh's poetry, gives him the benefit of the doubt. Even an atheist can be a recipient of meaningful divine revelation. Such a relation to poets and poetry is very much part of the traditional culture of Urdu poetry in South Asia. I recall an evening of Farhat Ehsas regaling young poets with an anecdote of Jigar Moradabadi, a poet famed both for his drunkenness and for his mystical verse:

> Even in the 1950s Jigar would show up drunk to mushairas, two people would be carrying him up to the stage halfway through. The audience is all religious, scholarly Muslims (*maulawi musalman*). In our place this was a matter of *rindi* (drunkenness, nonconforming libertinage), *rindi* meaning a supernatural thing. From somewhere the poet is getting something beyond the self (*bekhudi*). this was all part of the picture (*tasawwur*), and there would be pin-drop silence and absolute magic.

In this anecdote, even (or rather especially) for an audience of religious Muslims, drunkenness does not devalue the poet's access to the *pre-text* of divine revelation, to the possibility of the poet's speech being truth-bearing. Does this mean that the *maulwi musalman*s in the audience condoned drinking? This seems highly unlikely, but yet this did not stop them from considering the poetry of a renowned drunk as "a supernatural thing." In these accounts of the reception of poets by religious scholars, I see the benefit of the doubt as a theologically ordained antidote to the corrosive forces of skepticism. Here I understand doubt to be a relation to one's own knowledge and its inherent limitations, and to the ultimate unknowability of God's will. The (divine) truth a person bears has no necessary relation

to their (worldly) political affiliation, external markers of identity, or behavior. Hence Ghalib can be a saint, despite his overt wine-drinking. To think otherwise is to limit the extent of God's mercy. "He forgives whom He will, and he punishes whom He will. And ever is Allah forgiving and merciful."[7] Could such an ethics of radical doubt in relation to the other be extended beyond poetry toward everyday life and political positions, as Shah Ain-ul-Haidar seemed to indicate with his quotation of Majrooh Sultanpuri in response to a question about the *halat*, the circumstances?

. . .

Baji, one of the core group of women who participated in the Shaheen Bagh sit-ins from the very beginning, told me about her reaction to seeing traffic rolling once again over the road where the sit-in had taken place for a hundred days. She wept, she said, thinking to herself, "*is pak zamin par ab* tire *chalenge?*" (Will tires now roll over this sacred ground?) I want to think here with the implications of Shaheen Bagh being a sacred space, a women's space, and a space of radical acceptance. What insights might that give us about the "religion of old women," and what insights might that have for the possibilities of religious (and secular) life for all of us?

"You know who's the most chill with smoking? The *dadi*s (grandmothers). They don't give a fuck." I heard many versions of this sentiment from young, fluently Anglophone, non-Muslim women, broadly of secular-left sensibilities, who flocked to Shaheen Bagh and became part of its social and political life as the anti-CAA protests continued. A student from JNU who had been part of the protest sit-in at the Muslim-majority village of Hauz Rani, which had emerged in emulation of Shaheen Bagh, used the word "organic" to describe the friendships and solidarities that developed in the space.

I asked, "How can friendships develop organically between pious Muslim women and radical left, often queer, folk?" Her answer: "When men showed up with nail polish, the criticism the women gave was not 'Why have you put on nail polish?' But rather, 'Why have you used *this color* of nail polish? This other color will look better.' I smoke, and I would go off to a corner to smoke, and I never ever got told off for smoking. They'd joke about it—oh we saw what you were doing—but nobody ever said don't do it or scolded me."

In North Indian culture, smoking in front of one's elders is seen as transgressive and disrespectful, even more so if the smoker is a woman. This is why the freedom to smoke without being reprimanded kept coming up in conversations with young women as a defining feature of the social life of protest sites whose culture was defined through the authority and presence of older Muslim women, like the *dadi*s who became the face of the Shaheen Bagh protest. The mothers and grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh are, by all accounts, believing Muslim women. The protest space at Shaheen Bagh was a space whose time was punctuated by, and organized

around, the five daily prayers. And yet it was also a space where all kinds of transgressors of normative behavior were welcomed without being chastised.

Was this just because the transgressors were outsiders, and largely not Muslim, and hence the same rules did not apply to them? Was it because the women were not as learned in, or concerned about, the obligations of the sharia as male scholars? Perhaps both questions can be answered in the affirmative. But I would like to consider a third possibility: that the pious women of Shaheen Bagh held open another potentiality and authoritative mode of inhabiting and practicing Islam, a way of being Islamic that we can approach through thinking about "the religion of old women."

The eleventh-century theologian Al-Juwayni is reported to have said near death that, "I die adhering to the same belief that the old women of Nishapur follow when they die."[8] As Kausar Bukhari notes, the Nishapur of Al-Juwayni was "a city in which women's public participation and public piety were welcomed" and where "women played an important role both in imparting the wisdom of Sufi practices as well as in hadith transmission." Therefore, in Al-Juwayni's deathbed declaration, "There is no disparaging or belittling of this faith of old women. Rather, their faith is exalted as faith's soundest form."[9]

Their faith is exalted as faith's soundest form. Following a prompt from the work of the anthropologist Talal Asad, a forum was convened on *The Immanent Frame* website in 2022 to think deeply about the idea of the religion of old women. Asad wrote:

> The act of recognizing a rule, judging how it can be applied in a particular context, and then applying it, reflects a different temporality from one where one acts according to a *capability* that is dependent on a collective form of life that sustains a transcendent vision. This, I think, is what Ghazali [a student of al-Juwayni's] meant when he reputedly said: Oh! If only I had the implicit faith of the old women of Nishapur! Meaning: To live without having to go through the process of verification and application of moral rules, to live at once in the time of this world and the time of eternity.[10]

In her contribution to the forum Katherine Lemons understands the faith of old women as a *capacity* very different from our usual image of religious life, which, especially but not only in Islamic studies, focuses on the words and experiences of male scholars. Lemons asserts, "Attending to the old women opens another perspective on the basis and the limits of scholarly knowledge, both within and beyond the Islamic tradition."[11]

How might these reflections help us think about Shaheen Bagh? There, the religion of old women moved out from private, domestic spaces into a public, collective space in an unprecedented manner. Thinking of Shaheen Bagh as the public expression of the religion of old women, usually minoritized and kept out of the public eye, allows us to think of the very different *capacities* of being Islamic

that are open to us, as believers and scholars, when we move beyond scholarly male normativity in our answer to the question, *What is Islam?*[12] These were women who lived simultaneously in the time of the now—the political moment of protest—and the time of eternity, embodied in the ritual of daily prayers.[13] Their Islam was capacious, able to respond to radical difference with humor and affectionate acceptance, rather than the drawing of boundaries, and the recognition and application of rules. They embodied Islamic (and universal) *virtues* in a rapidly transformed and transforming world—courage, generosity, *gharib-nawazi* (hospitality to strangers)—"without having to go through the process of verification and application of moral rules." The Islam they embodied made Shaheen Bagh a space of radical freedom and acceptance, an Islam that radiated out to a hitherto exclusively male teashop where a rainbow flag got painted on the wall.

• • •

In August 2018, a young Muslim activist in Delhi shared with me some of his thoughts on solidarity and resistance:

> And for me the more you read, the more you join the lines of resistance, you realize others have reasonable demands. When you listen to their demands you realize he's not asking for anything, *voh keh raha hai mujhe* dignity *de do* (he's saying give me dignity). A gay boy is asking the Muslim community for dignity. I can't give him anything, but I can give him dignity. There's no reason why he doesn't deserve dignity. I must do that much. And it resonates with what I'm asking for. *Main bhi keh raha hun* dignity *chahi'e community ko, voh bhi keh raha hai dignity chahi'e* (I too am saying that the community needs dignity, he too is saying dignity is needed). So in that context there should be solidarity between all groups. . . .
>
> On most things there is no contradiction between religion and resistance. As long as you're Muslim you're part of the victimhood. But there will be spaces where there will be contradiction, and that's where the trouble begins, and that's where I find it very difficult to relate to some of the things you encounter. . . . So do I challenge them, or do I shut up? Right now, I shut up. Will I challenge them in the future? I don't know. But I'm just saying that where it's headed, if there is a conversation around free expression, then we should be open to conversations and debates. . . . But right now we've not reached there.

The contradiction that the activist was referring to are the mainstream interpretations of the verses referring to the "People of Lot" in the Quran, which have been understood by most Muslim religious scholars to portray male homosexuality as sinful.[14] This dominant understanding has continued to adversely affect the lives and wellbeing of LGBTQ Muslims, as well as the potentialities of solidarity between the larger LGBTQ community and Muslims as minoritized political identities. This is not just the case in India, as a recent public statement signed by hundreds of American and Canadian Muslim religious scholars attests. This statement makes the case that the peaceful coexistence of mainstream Muslims and

the LGBTQ community "does not necessitate agreement, acceptance, affirmation, promotion, or celebration."[15] This is, at the very least, a very impoverished idea of coexistence, and one that forecloses possibilities of dialogue.

But despite the common view that there are few possibilities of dialogue and solidarity between LGBTQ and Muslim identities, an idea that forced my activist friend and other believing Muslims to "shut up" at the risk of inviting community censure and possibly violence, something very different played out in Shaheen Bagh, less than a year and a half after our conversation. Many visibly queer folks started coming regularly to the protests and became part of its social life. With their documentarians' eyes for details, Saba and her friends described to me how S—with an obviously Hindu name and wearing a traditionally feminine nose stud and dangling hoop earrings while otherwise presenting as biologically male, with lush facial hair—became the darling of the grandmothers and the granddaughters at the protest. These were traditional Muslim women, who justified their protest for the secular nature of India's constitution in entirely religious terms, and they embraced a person who embodied the transgression of conventional norms. One of the women asked them, looking at their earrings, *Aur hain? Main bhi pehnungi* (Do you have more? I'll wear them too). And so the ice was broken.

Saba also took me to a basement teashop in Shaheen Bagh, a few hundred meters from the protest site. This was a traditional gathering place for men in the neighborhood and a location for their late-night conversation sessions. I had been there before, in 2018, but now this open-front basement was a transformed space. There were many women present in the shop too, even late at night. The protest at Shaheen Bagh had made women's occupation of public space in this conservative part of Jamia Nagar, hitherto contested and problematic, everyday and ordinary. And on one wall of the teashop, there was now painted a large rainbow flag. The son of the owner, I was told, had become friends with some of the queer folk who had come out in solidarity to Shaheen Bagh. And as a mark of solidarity, of respect, and of welcome, he had convinced his father to let the wall be painted with a pride flag.

After the Northeast Delhi pogroms broke out in late February 2020, during Donald Trump's state visit to India, the pride flag in the teashop in Shaheen Bagh was whitewashed. This was not the only gesture of solidarity that fell victim to the "epistemic murk" that accompanied the state-sponsored violence unleashed on Muslims for protesting the CAA.[16] The alliance between left-liberal and Muslim activists, already tense and subject to the destructive forces of mutual skepticism, as discussed in chapter 6, also suffered in the prelude to and aftermath of the violence.

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The violence may have brought forward the whitewashing and (masculine) protective need to draw and maintain boundaries, but that is not an end to the story of Shaheen Bagh and the possibilities of religious (and secular) life it opened up for us all. For Shaheen Bagh is not an event of the past: It is an interrupted future. The capacities for a pious life, including living with radical difference, that came

forth in Shaheen Bagh were not new or heterodox but rather made public what had been restricted to the domain of private, feminine life in colonial and postcolonial modernity: the capacity of living with difference embodied by "the religion of old women."

After all, for Ibn ʿArabi (1165–1240), who was a student of the Andalusian women saints Fatima of Cordova and Yasmina of Mashena, and whom tradition remembers as the *Shaykh al-Akbar* (the greatest master), embodied sexual difference between men and women made no difference to spiritual accomplishment and the possibility of women being social and ritual leaders of mixed-gender Muslim communities.[17] As Saʿdiyya Shaikh shows,

> For Ibn ʿArabi, there is a clear recognition that the principles of "maleness" and "femaleness" are not exclusively associated with men and women respectively. Each human being reflects a mixture of activity and receptivity in a variety of areas, through the coming together of various "male" and "female" principles. Therefore, contingent on an individual's nature, spiritual state, personality, context, or relationship, a man can be in a state of receptivity and thus designated "female," while a woman in an active state might be considered "male." Context, relationship, and changing dynamics rather than anatomy determine an active/receptive or masculine/feminine state.[18]

Such an ontology "allows us to theorize beyond simplistic binary formulations of gender and sexuality."[19] In the lived traditions of Muslim South Asia, as Omar Kasmani's work shows, women fakirs make space for themselves in male spaces of prayer, and *khwaja-sara*s—the Urdu term for transgender, intersex, and gender-variant people—are also figures of religious authority, especially in the proximity of Sufi shrines.[20]

Setrag Manoukian thinks of the old women's ways of being Islamic as "living thought," as thought that "escapes theological and scientific biopolitical efforts."[21] And poetry, of course, holds open the mimetic archives of all these capacities of religious life, of being Muslim in the world, that cannot be captured by more "normative" domains of religious knowledge. Here are two *shʿers* by Mir, widely recognized as the first great master of the Urdu ghazal, that ambiguously and playfully convey entire dimension of religious experience inexpressible in *fiqh* texts:

Sare rind aubash jahan ke tujh se sujud men rehte hain
Banke terhe tirchhe tikhe sab ka tujh ko imam kiya
All the drunks and lowlifes of the world remain in prostration to you
The dandies, the bent, the tilted, the sharp; you have been made the leader of them all

Shaikh jo hai masjid men nanga rat ko tha maikhane men
Jubbah khirqah kurta topi masti men inʿam kiya
The shaykh who is naked in the mosque was in the tavern at night
Robe, cloak, kurta, cap; gave them all away in intoxication
—Mir Taqi "Mir" (1723–1810)

In Mir's *shʿer*s we see a queer congregation of drunks in *sujud*, prostration, the central act of the Muslim canonical prayer, and a religious leader so "drunk" on religious ecstasy that he gives away all his clothes, that is, his external markers of respectability. Bringing together Mir's poetry with Ibn ʿArabi's thought and with the experience of Shaheen Bagh, we can say that rather than a binary between male and female versions of being Muslim, the *capacities* of the old women of Shaheen Bagh are ways of embodying living thought and poetic knowledge that we can all aspire to, across divides of gender and belief, as we live through the transformations of the world and ourselves.

In an essay reflecting on his experience of covering the Shaheen Bagh protests, the photographer Mustafa Quraishi wrote, "I still have many questions, few answers, but in Shaheen Bagh I found my country again."[22] This statement resonated with me; in my brief time in Shaheen Bagh, in the presence of affectionate acceptance, hospitality to strangers, and faith's soundest form, I too found the best version of my country, a Hindustan that I thought had been irretrievably lost.

Shaheen Bagh brings to mind a *shʿer* by Faiz I encountered several times as it circulated across the networked public sphere and that gave me hope, as it did to those who shared and circulated it. Like much of Faiz's poetry, it espouses a worldview—a deeply Islamic worldview—in which oppression, whatever its apparent successes, never ultimately wins the day.

> *dil na-umid to nahin nakam hi to hai*
> *lambi hai gham ki sham magar sham hi to hai*
> The heart is not without hope, it is only ineffectual
> The evening of sorrow is long, but it is only the evening

As the long night of sorrow grows darker globally, Shaheen Bagh continues to give me radical hope for a future India, and a future world, that may yet come to be.

NOTES

PROLOGUE

1. This question is not original, but continues to be profoundly generative, and far beyond Shia contexts. See Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*; Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*; Szanto, "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm."

2. The earliest known text that mentions this saying is Sayyid Ibn Tawus, *Al-Luhuf*, 160. I am grateful to Nariman Aavani for this reference.

3. Dutt, "This Hindu Risked His Life."

4. In his Foreword to Das's *Life and Words*, Cavell writes, "A skeptical process towards other human beings . . . results not in a realization of the existence of the other, but in my denial of that existence, my refusal to acknowledge it, my psychic annihilation of the other" (xiii). Das's work, especially *Life and Words*, shows how skepticism renders others vulnerable to suspicion, unsettles social relations, and produces potentialities for suffering and violence in everyday life. Naveeda Khan notes that "skepticism . . . is not the opposite of religious belief but rather a tendency within social and intersubjective relations," and that religious disputation, which she sees as a form of ethical striving, also "runs the risk of destabilizing everyday life through its vulnerability to skepticism" (*Muslim Becoming*, 13).

5. As Rita Felski notes, "The 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is a phrase coined by Paul Ricoeur to capture a common spirit that pervades the writings of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche" ("Critique"). Each of these figures, foundational to critical inquiry in the contemporary humanities and social sciences, was deeply skeptical of the truth-claims of religion. My conceptual and methodological moves away from the hermeneutics of suspicion will be developed in the Introduction and the rest of the book, but for now I would like to indicate the political stakes: As Hussein Ali Agrama notes, in any polity the values of the minority are always more subject to the hermeneutics of suspicion than are those of the majority. Agrama sees this as a feature inherent to the project of state secularism ("Religious Freedom").

INTRODUCTION

1. Dubrow, "Singing the Revolution."
2. Faiz, *Mire Dil Mere Musafir*, 22–25.
3. Quran 55:27 (Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 1313).
4. Waheed, *Hidden Histories of Pakistan*, vii–xvi.
5. On the "enchanted" Islamic elements of Faiz's poetry, particularly *Ham Dekhenge*, see Shahid, "Politics of Enchantment."
6. "Secular" is a word with a contested conceptual history, and not just in India. Here I use "secular" in the *thin* sense of a state that does not discriminate against its subjects on the basis of religion.
7. Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*, 6.
8. See also T. Khan, *Beyond Hybridity and Fundamentalism*, esp. 107–40; Dattatreyan, *Globally Familiar*.
9. See also T. Khan, *Beyond Hybridity and Fundamentalism*, 141–84.
10. Mazzarella, *Mana of Mass Society*, 145.
11. Mazzarella, *Mana of Mass Society*, 147.
12. Coke Studio Pakistan, "Hum Dekhenge."
13. D'Souza, "Composing an Oppositional Discourse," 587.
14. Taneja, "On Intellectual Hospitality."
15. Mahmudabad, *Poetry of Belonging*.
16. The translation of *rind* as "non-confirming libertine" follows Shahab Ahmed's translation of Hafiz in *What is Islam?*, 37.
17. Fadil and Fernando, "Rediscovering the 'Everyday' Muslim"; Deeb, "Thinking Piety and the Everyday Together."
18. Schmitt, *Political Theology*.
19. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 82.
20. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 75.
21. A moving account of both the destruction and transformations wrought by colonialism and the continued thriving of the Urdu ghazal can be found in Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*.
22. Sara Ahmed, "In the Name of Love." For a succinct and provocative account of the imbrication of love and politics, particularly in South Asia, see Mody, "Intimacy and the Politics of Love."
23. hooks, *All About Love*, 76.
24. M. Alam, *Languages of Political Islam*, 55.
25. Bey, *T.A.Z.*
26. See for instance Safvi, *City of my Heart*.
27. Taneja, *Jinnealogy*, 264–66.
28. Shankar, "Asaduddin Owaisi's Bid."
29. Human Rights Watch, "Violent Cow Protection in India." This report is from 2019. There have been many more acts of violence and hate speech in the years since, both documented and undocumented.
30. Ellis-Petersen, "New City, Old Schism."
31. M. Ahmad, "BJP Leader."
32. India Hate Lab documented 668 hate speech events in eighteen states in India in the year 2023. These were just the highly visible, recorded, and documented cases. See Singh, "Anti-Muslim Hate Speech Soars in India."

33. Bebaak Collective, "Social Suffering in a World Without Support."

34. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu*, 1183.

35. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 314.

36. Quran 12:51 (Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 604).

37. Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 604, commentary on verse 12:51.

38. Shafak, "Women Writers, Islam, and the Ghost of Zulaikha."

39. Fernando, *Republic Unsettled*, 23.

40. Guha, "Liberals, Sadly."

41. Socrates says in the *Phaedrus*: "But this at least is worth pointing out, that the men of old who gave things their names saw no disgrace or reproach in madness; otherwise they would not have connected it with the name of the noblest of all arts, the art of discerning the future, and called it the *manic* art" (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 47).

42. Inscriptions meant to be carried on the body, usually folded into amulets.

43. Asad, "Idea of an Anthropology of Islam."

44. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 363. Landmark studies on the importance of poetry in contemporary Muslim societies include Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*; Caton, "*Peaks of Yemen I Summon*"; Marsden, *Living Islam*; N. Ali, "From Hallaj to Heer"; Bush, *Between Muslims*; Haeri, *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires*; Mahmudabad, *Poetry of Belonging*; Manoukian, *City of Knowledge*; Golestaneh, *Unknowing and the Everyday*.

45. K. Ali, *Woman Question in Islamic Studies*.

46. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*.

47. A point resembling Socrates's argument in the *Phaedrus* (invoked below) that love is also a kind of madness sent by the gods to help humans achieve the greatest form of happiness through desire for knowledge of the divine Forms (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 46–49).

48. Similarly, in his study of madness and Black radical creativity, La Marr Bruce also shifts us from a medicalized to a psychosocial understanding of madness as "any person or practice that perplexes and vexes the psychonormative status quo" (*How to Go Mad*, 8).

49. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 47.

50. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 47.

51. Mahmudabad, "Indian Muslims and the Anti-CAA Protests."

52. Foucault, "Technologies of the Self."

53. This rhetoric extends to dominant academic understandings of secularism, focused on the ideology of the postcolonial Indian state. As Taylor Sherman pithily notes, "In these analyses Nehruvian secularism *is* Indian secularism" (*Muslim Belonging in Secular India*, 13).

54. Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 212.

55. Asif, *Loss of Hindustan*, 105.

56. Asif, *Loss of Hindustan*, 24.

57. Bilgrami, "Two Historic Deeds."

58. Abul Kalam Azad and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan are also figures engaged with, in far more detail, in Amar Sohal's account of *The Muslim Secular*.

59. Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 213.

60. Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*, 268

61. Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*.

62. This distinction is akin to the one Fareen Parvez makes between instrumental and noninstrumental politics in her comparative study of Muslim political engagement in Lyon, France, and Hyderabad, India. Instrumental politics, in her reading, "seek institutional

inclusion or resources from the state." Noninstrumental politics, on the other hand, "created community and bonds of reciprocity as ends in themselves" (*Politicizing Islam*, 26).

63. As Darryl Li notes, "The state's expansionary tendencies, demand for absolute loyalty, and monopolization of violence render it suspect as a vehicle for actualizing any moral vision" (*Universal Enemy*, 107).

64. Mitchell, *Hailing the State*.

65. Mitchell, *Hailing the State*, 2.

66. Zaffar and Abdulla, "Indian activist languishes in jail for a speech."

67. Agamben, *State of Exception*; Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

68. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 97.

69. Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*, 272.

70. See for instance Alam, *Languages of Political Islam*; Kinra, "Revisiting the History and Historiography of Mughal Pluralism."

71. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 97.

72. Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*.

73. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*; Boroditsky, *How Language Shapes Thought*.

74. Lindquist, Satpute and Gendron, "Does Language Do More Than Communicate Emotion?," 99.

75. Koul, "Navigating the Space Between Hermeneutics and Aesthetics."

76. Agnihotri, "Constituent Assembly Debates on Language," 47–56.

77. Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*.

78. Saxena, *Vernacular English*.

79. Mashal, "Where Romantic Poetry."

80. Gautam, "Jaun Elia Aur Hum."

81. Morrisey, "Venture of the Islamicate."

82. Irfan Habib, "Secular and Radical Trends."

83. At-Tirmidhi, *A Portrait of the Prophet (Ash-Shama'il)*, 183–89.

84. This hadith with a weak *isnad* is found in Ibn Hajar 'Asqalani's *Lisan al-mizan*, 4:421. I am grateful to Nariman Aavani for the reference.

85. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 227.

86. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 32.

87. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 207.

88. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 244–45.

89. Satia, *Time's Monster*, 93. For a comprehensive and compelling essay on the importance of poetry in the Islamic tradition and its relation to expressions of interiority, see Ogunnaike, "Logic of the Birds."

90. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 303, 334–35.

91. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 435–52, especially 445–46.

92. Li, *Universal Enemy*. See also Moll, "Can There be a Godly Ethnography?"

93. Satia, *Time's Monster*, 245–98; N. Ali, "From Hallaj to Heer."

94. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin writes of how, in the class struggle, refined and spiritual things show up not as the material "spoils that fall to the victor" but as "courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude" that have a "retroactive force" and will "constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers" (*Illuminations*, 254–55). The Muslim struggle in India is not only or entirely a class struggle, but they

are certainly oppressed. Widening Benjamin's concerns from class to other forms of oppression and resistance universalizes his analysis and opens up profound parallels.

95. Prahlada, whose story is told in the *Puranas*, was deeply devoted to God even in the face of oppression, like Abraham/Ibrahim in the Quran, and was thrown into a fire by a cruel king but remained unharmed thanks to divine protection.

96. Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 1512–13.

97. Taneja, *Jinnealogy*, 114.

98. Ewing, "Dreams from a Saint," 571.

99. In the 2021 Rappaport lecture, Amira Mittermaier says, "It is time to move beyond the human horizon that has historically delimited the anthropology of religion . . . the analytical and ethnographic frameworks that seal off the visible, material, and worldly from the invisible, immaterial, and other-wordly. . . . [I]n the anthropology of Islam, staying within the human horizon has more specifically meant writing out God" ("Beyond the Human Horizon," 22).

100. Mittermaier, "Beyond the Human Horizon," 24.

101. Reflecting on her ethnographic work with Muslims in Old Delhi, Kalyani Devaki Menon writes about how her dietary preferences opened some doors for her, despite her Hindu name, as they signaled her lack of embodied discrimination and distrust of Muslims. "In a place like Old Delhi, where some Hindus refuse to drink water at Muslim homes, being a beef eater, a person who has no reason to distance others because of dietary practices, matters" (*Making Place for Muslims*, 24).

1. *WEHSHAT*

1. For instance, see Imam, "The Hindu Republic." On Sharjeel Imam's view on the place of Muslims in Indian history, see also Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*, 265–72.

2. Like Shaheen Bagh, a part of the largely Muslim settlements that have grown around Jamia Millia Islamia.

3. Verma, "Riots & Wrongs."

4. Suroor, *India's Muslim Spring*.

5. Platts, *Dictionary of Urdu*, 1193.

6. Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 18.

7. Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 225.

8. Quran 37:106. Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 1094.

9. Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 445–49.

10. Baig, "Self-Knowledge in the Sufi Tradition."

11. Cohen, Newton-John, and Slater, "Relationship Between Facebook and Instagram Appearance-Focused Activities."

12. Devji, "A Life on the Surface."

13. Satia, *Time's Monster*, 92–93.

14. Gautam, "Jaun Elia Aur Hum."

15. Faruque, *Sculpting the Self*.

16. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

17. Satia, *Time's Monster*, 239.

18. Balmikis are a Dalit community.

19. A. Khan, "Social Autopsy of Azeem's Death"; Kanojia, "8-Year-Old Madrasa Student Dies."

20. On the differences and debates between Deobandi and Barelvi scholars, see Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in Modernity*.

21. I. Ahmad, *Islamism and Democracy in India*, 12.

22. H. Ahmed, *Muslim Political Discourse in Postcolonial India*, 140–91.

23. Emon, "Huquq Allah and Huquq Al-ʿIbad."

24. The Supreme Court's verdict handing over the land of the Babri Masjid site to a Hindu trust to build a temple was issued in November 2019.

25. I. Ahmad, *Islamism and Democracy in India*.

26. See for example Siyech, "Indian Muslims and Jihadist Failures"; A. Alam, "Understanding the Process of Radicalisation."

27. I. Ahmad, "Theorizing Islamism and Democracy," 900.

28. I. Ahmad, "Theorizing Islamism and Democracy," 900.

29. Siyech, "India's Foreign Fighter Puzzle."

30. N. Khan, *Muslim Becoming*, 8–9.

31. Lalwani, "In Old Delhi."

32. Mukarram, "Mufti Mukarram's Appeal."

33. We could say that like the Prophet during his ministry in Mecca, they preached a "reorientation of the self," a "revolution of one's relationship to the meaning of one's life." See Saleh, "The Preacher of the Meccan Qur'an," 100.

34. This story is apparently not found among the collections of authenticated hadith. See Misra, "Is It True That Someone Threw Trash on the Prophet?"

35. Banerjee, *Pathan Unarmed*.

36. F. Naqvi, *Working With Muslims*.

37. Patwardhan, "The Heroism of Khudai Khidmatgars in Today's India."

38. His account of the legal case being compromised by the police echoes the ways in which the everyday life of the law in Indian police and court proceedings obscures, naturalizes, and reproduces structural violence against marginalized communities. See Baxi, *Public Secrets of Law*.

39. I. Ahmad, "Genealogy of the Islamic State."

40. Bhargava, "Secular Ideal."

41. Kinra, "Revisiting the History and Historiography of Mughal Pluralism," 156–57.

42. M. Alam, *Languages of Political Islam*, 55.

43. As Faisal Devji has shown in *The Impossible Indian*, Gandhi too was a thinker interested in the sovereignty of the self, rather than the sovereignty of the state.

44. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*.

2. THE GHOST OF GHALIB

1. Ghalib's couplets have often been used in *qawwali* performances. Iqbal Ahmed Khan's assertion is better understood as indicating that this is the first time that an entire Ghalib ghazal, as opposed to individual *shʿer*s, has been performed as a *qawwali*.

2. For translations and citations of Ghalib's Urdu poetry, I draw largely on Frances Pritchett's website, "A Desertful of Roses." I am grateful for the invaluable resources provided by this extraordinary labor of love.

3. U. Khan, "Ghalib-Begum Umrao Ki Nazar Se."

4. Gulzar, *Mirza Ghalib*.

5. For instance, Dabashi, in *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, distinguishes between feminine subversive Persian poetry and masculine Arab Islam. See also Cole, "Rubaiyat of Omar."

6. Pue, "In the Mirror of Ghalib," 572, 574–75.

7. Lear, *Radical Hope*, 51.

8. I. Ahmad, *Religion as Critique*.

9. Aqeel-ul-Gharavi, "Ayatullah Aqeel-ul-Gharavi Question and Answer Session."

10. The use of *shaikh* and *zahid* as figures of ignorance and mirth rather than figures of respect and veneration has a long history in Persian and Urdu poetry and continues to have a life in Urdu public culture. See, for instance, N. Khan, *Muslim Becoming*, 145–70.

11. In Shia traditions, the cupbearer of *kausar* (the fountain of paradise) is identified as the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, the first Shia *imam* and fourth Sunni caliph, ʿAli ibn ʾAbi Talib.

12. Hyder, "Ghalib and His Interlocutors," 471.

13. Hyder, "Ghalib and His Interlocutors," 469.

14. Hyder, "From Despair to Divinity," 196.

15. See also Naim, "Be Crazy with God. . . ."

16. See also I. Ahmad, *Religion as Critique*, 63–88.

17. Bijnauri, *Mahasin-e Kalam-e Ghalib*, 1.

18. Hyder, "Ghalib and His Interlocutors," 471.

19. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 363.

20. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 339.

21. Lear, *Radical Hope*, 51.

22. Ghalib and Anjum, *Ghalib ke Khutut*, 1:335.

23. Pritchett, "Desertful of Roses."

24. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, 3–30; Dalrymple, *Anarchy*.

25. For a different reading on heritage commodification in Delhi, see Jamil, *Accumulation by Segregation*, 39–57.

26. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 3–18.

27. Zamindar, *Long Partition*.

28. Pernau, *Emotions and Modernity in Colonial India*, 218.

29. And who, in Ustad Iqbal Ahmed Khan's account, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, was Ghalib's Sufi master.

30. While Sikandar Changezi spoke of the *mushaʿirah* as historical, the famous last *mushaʿirah* of Delhi was fictional. The author Farhatullah Beg has written about this *mushaʿirah* in a book called *Dehli ki Akhiri Shamʿa* (The last flame of Delhi). It is important to note that, "Although the *mushaʿirah* he writes about was fictional, Beg was careful in being historically precise. . . . So diligently has every particular and every detail of a traditional *mushaʿirah* been preserved" (Mahmudabad, *Poetry of Belonging*, 49).

31. As Nosheen Ali notes, in the related context of contemporary Pakistani poetry, "'contemporary' poets conceive of themselves in conversation with the living world of poets, deceased or alive. A poet goes back and forth, back and forth, not *across vast swathes of time*—as we often hear—but *within eternal time*, in a manner as freeing and constrained as a child on a swing" ("From Hallaj to Heer," 8).

32. Viswanath, "Economies of Offence"; Scott, *Slandering the Sacred*.

33. Chatterjee, *Black Hole of Empire*, 75.

34. Ghalib's innovations in the domain of poetry and Urdu prose, his aslant relation to conventional piety, and his infamous poetic prologue to Syed Ahmad Khan's new edition of the *Ain-i Akbari* all come to mind. In the prologue he castigates Syed Ahmad Khan for "worshipping the dead," when he could instead be learning from the novel laws and technical innovations of the English. For details, see Indian History Collective, "Worshipping the Dead is Not an Auspicious Thing."

35. Chatterjee, *Black Hole of Empire*, 141.

36. Anjaria, "Chetan Bhagat and the New Provincialism."

37. This is not just my subjective judgement, but one shared by noted figures in Delhi's Urdu public sphere such as the poet Farhat Ehsas, critic Rakhshanda Jalil, and author and translator Saif Mahmood. In a conversation in September 2018, Jalil recounted that her mother and her friends—all of whom had attended Aligarh Muslim University in the 1950s and heard Majaz and Jigar and other luminaries recite their poetry—were marveling at the poetry being recited at the Afreen Afreen literary festival that Jalil had organized that month.

38. Mahmudabad, *Poetry of Belonging*, 8–9.

39. Platts, *Dictionary of Urdu*, 495.

40. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 341–42.

41. N. Naqvi, "Muqaddamah," 34.

42. "Ghalib can appear arrogant and egoistical. But his pride is not unfounded or artificial. It stems from his personal experiences, and his profound understanding of our life as mortals coupled with, almost paradoxically, his equally profound self-belief" (Saif Mahmood, *Beloved Delhi*, 187).

43. Faruque, *Sculpting the Self*, especially 179–86.

44. Baig, "Self-Knowledge in the Sufi Tradition."

45. Poonam, "Why 57 Young Students Have Taken Their Lives in Kota."

46. The Sabeans are mentioned thrice in the Quran. Their identity remains "one of the mysterious and unsolved Quranic problems" (Buck, "Identity of the *Sabi'un*," 172).

47. See, for instance, the entry on Freedom (Hurriya) in al-Qashani's *Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms*, 27. I am grateful to my colleague Richard McGregor for this reference.

48. Russell and Islam, *Ghalib*, 46.

49. Chatterjee, *Black Hole of Empire*, 141.

50. On the multivalent uses of *azadi* in contemporary India, see Wani, "Azadi."

51. Mukhia, "Celebration of Failure as Dissent."

52. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 445–49.

3. THIS IS THE WOMAN'S MIRACLE

1. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?"

2. Lorkovic, "Shock of Philosophy."

3. Nasim, "Meet the Samina Tabassum."

4. Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*.

5. Jaffe, "Collective Power of #MeToo."

6. Lear, *Radical Hope*, 103.

7. Badhwar, "Leaving the Family WhatsApp Group Is an Act of Love."

8. See also Jamil, *Accumulation by Segregation*, 71–84.

9. Ibrar, "Ghaffar's Manzil."

10. Minault, "Begamati Zuban," 157.

11. Minault, "Begamati Zuban," 157.

12. Minault, "Begamati Zuban," 168.

13. Waheed, *Hidden Histories of Pakistan*, 208.

14. The legacy of this elevation of Begamati Zuban as a public language of critique can be seen in the career of the social media influencer Saloni Gaur. In December 2019 and January 2020, during the protests against the CAA, some of the most widely circulated humorous critique videos on social media were by Saloni Gaur embodying the character of Nazma Aapi, a hijab-wearing working-class woman from Old-Delhi, with a wide-eyed, rapid-fire delivery in Begamati Zaban.

15. Raza, "Book Keepers."

16. Jashn-e Rekhta, "Women Poets' Mushaira."

17. Jashn-e Rekhta, "Aaj ke Shayaron ki Baatein."

18. Jashn-e Rekhta, "Aaj ke Shayaron ki Baatein."

19. Dr. Rehmani's first book, *Azadi ke baʿad Urdu Shaʿirat*, first published in 1994, is on postcolonial women Urdu poets.

20. Jashn-e Rekhta, "Suraj Tum Jao."

21. See also Naim, "Parveen Shakir."

22. Jamali, "Life and Poetry of Parveen Shakir."

23. Shakir, *Khushbu*, 19.

24. As Sarah Waheed notes, "the marginalization and the silencing of women's voices from within the progressive literary movement has tended to be overlooked" (*Hidden Histories of Pakistan*, 204).

25. R. Ahmad, *We Sinful Women*, 6.

26. R. Ahmad, *We Sinful Women*, 6–7.

27. I. Khan, "Just a Girl."

28. Shakir, *Sad Barg*, 13.

29. Waheed, *Hidden Histories of Pakistan*, 205.

30. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 207.

31. Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory," 217–23.

32. Frayer and Kumar, "It's a Mystery."

33. Jamali, "Life and Poetry of Parveen Shakir."

34. S. Naqvi, "Reclaiming Public Spaces Through Poetry."

35. As Sarah Waheed notes, there is a longstanding denigration of women's self-expression in mixed-gender settings in Urdu *sharif* culture, a phenomenon with its roots in colonial modernity. "It affected how female poets in Pakistan had a difficult time occupying public spaces and articulating their poetic self-expression in those spaces, often at the risk of being seen as a 'loose woman'" (*Hidden Histories of Pakistan*, 208).

36. Jashn-e Rekhta, "Aaj ke Shayaron ki Baatein."

37. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*.

38. On February 14, 2019, a convoy of Indian military vehicles was attacked by a suicide bomber in Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir. This attack led to a tense military standoff between India and Pakistan, worsened India-Pakistan relations, and a rise of nationalist fervor in Indian public culture.

39. Salam and Ausaf, *Shaheen Bagh*, 26.

40. Salam and Ausaf, *Shaheen Bagh*, 250.

41. Salam and Ausaf, *Shaheen Bagh*, 137–212 .

4. JAUN ELIA FROM HEAVEN

1. Jamia celebrated its centenary in 2020. See Kidwai and Alam, "Jamia at 100."

2. Wikipedia, "2019 Jamia Millia Islamia Attack," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_Jamia_Millia_Islamia_attack.

3. Mahmudabad, "Indian Muslims and the Anti-CAA Protests."

4. Bhatia and Aziz, "Hindustan Ek Khwab Hai."

5. Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan*, 105.

6. Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan*, 105.

7. Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan*, 135.

8. "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255).

9. Haidry, "Hindustani Musalman."

10. For details, see Government of India, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India* (also known as the "Sachar Committee Report"); Gayer and Jaffrelot, *Muslims in Indian Cities*.

11. Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan*.

12. Clémentin-Ojha, "India, That Is Bharat. . . ."

13. De, *People's Constitution*.

14. Bilgrami, "Two Historic Deeds."

15. Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan*, 225.

16. Mahmudabad, *Poetry of Belonging*.

17. Mazzarella, *The Mana of Mass Society*, 145.

18. Banerjee and Copeman, "Hindutva's Blood."

19. I am grateful to Shreyas Sreenath for this insight.

20. Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan*, 230.

21. Deobandi refers to an influential Islamic revivalist movement within Sunni Islam that formed around the famed Dar-ul-Uloom seminary in the town of Deoband from the second half of the nineteenth century.

22. Moitra, "Lok Sabha Speech."

23. Dattatreyan, *Globally Familiar*.

24. Dang and Khanabadosh, "Inhabiting Urdu."

25. Elia, *Kulliyat-e Jaun Elia*, 42. A translation of the entire text of the preface into English has also been done by Hamza Iqbal ("A Translation of Jaun Elia's Preface of Shayad").

26. Lear, *Radical Hope*, 51.

27. Elia, *Kulliyat-e Jaun Elia*, 29–30.

28. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

29. Tuan, *Topophilia*.

30. Jatt and Riggs, "Propinquity Through Dwelling."

31. Metcalf, *Husain Ahmad Madani*.

32. While *watan* has been imbued with multiple meanings over time, the senses of *watan* as a lived concept that I encountered bear substantial continuities with the importance of city and locality to Muslim belonging and identity in precolonial South Asia. See for instance Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, 10–26.

33. Menon, *Making Place for Muslims*, 55.

34. Elia, *Kulliyat-e Jaun Elia*, 22.

35. Elia, *Kulliyat-e Jaun Elia*, 20.

36. Elia, "Jashn-e Kaifi Azmi."

37. This was probably a reference to the work of Nabaneeta Dev Sen. See Sen, "When Women Retell the Ramayan."

38. Gulbarga Online, "Tera Mera Rishta Kya."

39. For a response to Tharoor, and a nuanced Muslim position on the use of Muslim expressions of faith in these protests, see Akbar, "Why I Protest As a Muslim."

40. Kumar, "Nation at Repair, Women at Work."

41. Das, *Life and Words*, 63.

42. Das, *Life and Words*, 62.

43. Similar to how the positing (and lived experience) of a heterogenous community of mourners for Imam Hussain in the month of Muharram, not restricted by sectarian affiliation, is important for Shia Muslims in Old Delhi to "imagine an inclusive community of mourning—one that embraces difference to construct cultural commons" (Menon, *Making Place for Muslims*, 130).

44. NDTV, "At Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, Dadis Unite Against Citizenship Law."

45. Zaidi and Pani, "If on a winter's night, azadi . . . "

46. Taneja, *Jinnealogy*, 89–147.

47. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*; Nair, *Translating Wisdom*; S. Gandhi, *The Emperor Who Never Was*.

48. Conrad, "Dwelling in the Place of Devastation."

49. Elia, *Kulliyat-e Jaun Elia*, 50.

5. "IN ME IS THE ESSENCE OF THE GITA"

1. Momin, the *takhallus* or nom de plume of the poet, means the "one with faith," or "believer."

2. A brahmin subcaste from eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

3. Rajagopal, "Notes on Postcolonial Visual Culture"; Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy*. According to a recent report, 50 percent of Muslims say they know something about Hinduism, whereas only 36 percent of Hindus claim to know something about Islam (Pew Research Center, "Religion in India," 74). "A 2017 survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) revealed that only 33 percent Hindus count a Muslim among their close friends, whereas 74 percent Muslims have a close friend from the Hindu

community. The most obvious consequence of this is that the religious majority grow up knowing little about other religions" (Erum, *Mothering a Muslim*, 49–50).

4. Das, "Engaging the Life of the Other"; Nair, *Translating Wisdom*; Taneja, *Jinnealogy*.

5. B. Singh, "Agonistic Intimacy and Moral Aspiration."

6. Gyanendra Pandey, *Construction of Communalism*; C. Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community*.

7. M. Alam, *Languages of Political Islam*; Sohal, *The Muslim Secular*.

8. C. Gupta, "Hindu Women, Muslim Men."

9. Mody, "Intimacy and the Politics of Love."

10. Wilkinson, "On Love"; L. Gandhi, *Affective Communities*.

11. Desai, "A Matter of Affection."

12. N. Kumar, "Performance of Friendship."

13. Osella and Osella, "Friendship and Flirting."

14. Venugopalan, "Effect of Affect"; Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*.

15. Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*, 4.

16. Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*.

17. Even the British did this; see A. Gupta, *Shrine's City*.

18. Chaturvedi, *Hindutva and Violence*; Asif, "Virulence of Hindutva."

19. An upper-caste group in Eastern UP, Bihar, and Jharkhand states in eastern north India.

20. Fatoohi, *Abrogation*.

21. See for instance, Ilaiah, "Hindutva Is Nothing But Brahminism."

22. Salam, "Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind."

23. G. Ansari, *Muslim Caste*; Falahi, *Zaat Paat aur Musalman*.

24. Government of India, "Constitution (Scheduled Castes) 2 [(Union Territories)] Order."

25. Sikhs and Buddhist Dalits were included through an amendment in 1990. For an insightful understanding of Muslim "decastification" see Umar, "Identity of Language."

26. Anwar, *Masawat Ki Jung*; K. Ansari, "Muslims That 'Minority Politics' Left Behind."

27. Pansare, *Who Was Shivaji*.

28. Karnad, "Murder in the Academy."

29. Coalition for Women in Journalism, "Remembering Journalist Gauri Lankesh."

30. Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code criminalizes the spreading of disharmony and ill-will between different religious, racial, and linguistic groups. Section 295A criminalizes "outraging the religious feelings" of any class. Given the broad and vague language of both sections of the IPC, the note could have been construed as an offence under either.

31. Asad, "Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics," 177.

32. Erum, *Mothering a Muslim*, 152–54.

33. hooks, *All About Love*, 134.

34. I am thinking here of an exchange I was witness to at the *dargah* of Firoz Shah Kotla, where a Hindu Dalit man turned to a Muslim man and criticized something that the imam of the Jama Masjid is supposed to have said. Instead of taking things amiss, the Muslim man readily agreed with him, and the conversation proceeded in fascinating and (to me) unexpected directions. (Taneja, *Jinnealogy*, 134.)

35. Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*, 4.

36. Perhaps the most horrifying of these was the rape and murder of an eight-year-old Muslim girl, Asifa, belonging to the nomadic Bakarwal community in Jammu. Asifa went missing in January 2018, and was raped and murdered in a Hindu temple,in an attempt to drive the Muslim Bakarwals away. A charge sheet was filed and the accused were arrested in April 2018. An organization called the Hindu Ekta Manch (Hindu Unity Forum) held protests in Jammu in support of the accused, and two BJP ministers joined these protests.

37. Govindrajan, "Goat That Died for Family"; Taneja, *Jinnealogy*, 76.

38. See, for instance, the concept of "respect pollution": Harper, "Ritual Pollution," 181.

39. Marriott, "Caste Ranking and Food Transactions."

40. On the rise of chicken consumption in India, and how it complicates the politics of meat, see Staples, *Sacred Cows and Chicken Manchurian*.

41. Sathyamala, "Meat-Eating in India."

42. *Indian Express*, "Kabir Khan."

43. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

44. Das, "Being Together with Animals."

45. Anand, "Anxious Sexualities"; Hansen, "Recuperating Masculinity."

46. This was later corroborated by Nihalani in an interview. See *Scroll.in*, "Smriti Irani Behind My Exit."

47. Khoja-Moolji, *Sovereign Attachments*; Mankekar and Gupta, "Affective Sovereignties."

48. Geeta Pandey, "Jai Shri Ram."

49. Rahman, "Beyond Centre-Periphery"; Robb, *Print and the Urdu Public*; Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History*.

50. Kayastas or Kayasthas are a Hindu scribal service community, historically associated with administrative duties in Muslim courts, who continue to be associated with Persian and Urdu learning.

51. R. Khan, *Bewildered India*, 188–92.

52. R. Khan, *Bewildered India*, 13.

53. Savarkar, *Essentials of Hindutva*.

54. Das, "Engaging the Life of the Other."

55. Naim, "Maulana Who Loved Krishna."

56. Robinson, *'Ulama of Farangi Mahall*.

57. M. Alam, *Languages of Political Islam*, 104–10.

58. M. Alam, *Languages of Political Islam*, 111.

59. Naim, "Maulana Who Loved Krishna."

60. Naim, "Maulana Who Loved Krishna," 39.

61. Naim, "Maulana Who Loved Krishna," 40.

62. M. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*.

63. Marriott, "Feast of Love," 212.

64. R. Singh, "Holi and Ramzan."

65. Muslim Network TV, "Muslim Man Beaten."

66. Khwaja Hasan Nizami, *Nizami Bansari*.

67. Safvi, *In Search of the Divine*, 321; see also Orsini, "Krishna Is the Truth of Man."

68. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Tareekh-e-Mashaikh-e-Chisht*, 1:383.

69. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Tareekh-e-Mashaikh-e-Chisht*, 1:384.

70. Patwardhan, "Heroism of Khudai Khidmatgars."
71. Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*.
72. Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*.

6. ISLAM COMES ALIVE AFTER EVERY KARBALA

1. The Hindu right-wing vision of undivided Greater India, which includes the territories of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.
2. Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran*, 83.
3. Haeri, *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires*, 5.
4. Haeri, *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires*, 5.
5. A position espoused by the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (Indian Muslim Women's Movement), the group who led the legal campaign against the allowance for triple *talaq* in Indian Muslim personal law. See Khatun, *Holy Rights*.
6. Majeed and Rather, "Perceptions Regarding Triple Talaq"; Parveen, "Criminalization of Divorce and Muslim Women."
7. Alatas, *What Is Religious Authority?*, 4.
8. Alatas, *What Is Religious Authority?*, 21.
9. On the importance of the *sahabah* as transmitters of *din* in contemporary Sunni jurisprudence, and the radicalization of Shia and Sunni identities, see M. Zaman, "Sectarianism in Pakistan."
10. Hallaq, "From Fatwās To Furü."
11. Asad, "Idea of an Anthropology of Islam"; Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*.
12. Khatlani, "How Shia-Sunni Bridge-Building Worked."
13. Raju, "Darul Fatwa."
14. *Indian Express*, "Jama Masjid Within Reach, Shias, Sunnis Hold Joint Iftar."
15. BBC, "Kuwait Mosque Attack."
16. Asad, "Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics."
17. While this book focuses on the (to me) positive aspects of growing novelty and virality, this is not always or necessarily the case. Regressive and reactionary religious content (again, in my opinion) also can and does go viral on social media.
18. *Hindustan Times*, "Shia, Sunni Muslims Offer Namaz Together in Lucknow."
19. Ashfaque and Kayyalakkath, "Dissent in His Blood."
20. Jalil, *Liking Progress, Loving Change*; Sidel, *Republicanism, Communism, Islam*; Waheed, *Hidden Histories of Pakistan*.
21. I. Ahmad, *Islamism and Democracy in India*, 8.
22. N. Khan, *Muslim Becoming*.
23. Kidwai and Alam, "Jamia at 100."
24. Robinson, *ʿUlama of Farangi Mahall*, 145–76.
25. Willis, "Burying Mohamed Ali Jauhar."
26. Robinson, *ʿUlama of Farangi Mahall*.
27. Naim, "Maulana Who Loved Krishna," 37.
28. Jalil, *Liking Progress, Loving Change*, 161; Parekh, "Literary Notes."
29. Naim, "Maulana Who Loved Krishna," 38.

30. Naim, "Maulana Who Loved Krishna," 38.
31. Usmani, "Hasrat-Tum Aadmi Ho Ya Jinn."
32. Taneja, *Jinnealogy*, 19–54.

7. NEST UPON NEST

1. Hameed, *Maulana Azad*, 270–71.
2. Azad, *Khutbat-e-Azad*, 342.
3. Hameed, "Abul Kalam Azad."
4. Hameed, "Abul Kalam Azad."
5. Azad, *Khutbat-e-Azad*, 327.
6. Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire*.
7. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 210.
8. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 211.
9. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 212.
10. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 213.
11. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 213.
12. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 214.
13. Kinra, "Revisiting the History and Historiography of Mughal Pluralism."
14. Kinra, "Revisiting the History and Historiography of Mughal Pluralism," 156.
15. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 216.
16. In the sense Azad uses it here, "Qalandar" refers to an antinomian Sufi.
17. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 218.
18. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 219. On the long Muslim tradition of understanding animals as religious, and the philosophical consequences thereof, see McGregor, "Religions and the Religion of Animals."
19. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 219.
20. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 220–21.
21. The *Panchatantra* is a famous and widely translated collection of ancient Indian animal fables which also became popular in Arabic and Persian translations.
22. Guftgu Jamia Collective, "Maine Tumhein Pukara."
23. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony*, 175 and 174.
24. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 222.
25. Azad, *Ghubar-e Khatir*, 222–23.
26. Azad, *Ghubar-e Khatir*, 224–26.
27. Azad, "Presidential Address to the Indian National Congress, 1940."
28. The (Deobandi) imam's argument here seems to echo the postimperial logic of Muslim thinkers in colonial India, both Deobandi and Barelvi, who increasingly located the exercise of sovereign power in everyday life, "and premised on the imperial logic of maintaining superiority over religious "others" through the preservation of embodied difference and distinction" (Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*, 9–10).
29. H. Ahmed, *Siyasi Muslims*, 83–99.
30. Guftgu Jamia Collective, "Tribute to Justice Rajinder Sachar."
31. Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 25.
32. Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native*, 1–2.

33. Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native*, 7.
34. Sohal, *Muslim Secular*, 2.
35. Sohal, *Muslim Secular*, 6–7.
36. Sohal, "Ideas of Parity"; Azad, *India Wins Freedom*.
37. Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native*, 2.
38. Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native*, 2.
39. Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native*, 2.
40. Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*.
41. Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 36–37.
42. Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 57.
43. Kesavan, "Invisible Minority."
44. The journalist's account tracks with the history of India after 1947 where, as Taylor Sherman has noted, because of their anxieties of belonging in post-Partition India, "Muslims and their self-styled representatives often exercised more submissive forms of citizenship" (*Muslim Belonging in Secular India*, 11).
45. Verniers, "Rising Representation of Muslims."
46. Jaffrelot, "BJP's Rise."
47. Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*.
48. Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*, 57.
49. Scoopwhoop, "Off the Record—Asaduddin Owaisi."
50. Jamil, *Accumulation by Segregation*, 125.
51. Bisht, "2019 Elections."
52. AIMIM, "Our Party."
53. The complicated history of the party, which called for (and sometimes violently worked towards) Muslim rule in Hyderabad state in the 1940s, also contributes to this narrative.
54. Bajpai and Farooqui, "Non-Extremist Outbidding."
55. Bajpai and Farooqui, "Non-Extremist Outbidding," 285–86.
56. Jamil, *Accumulation by Segregation*, 173.
57. Bajpai and Farooqui, "Non-Extremist Outbidding," 287.
58. Scoopwhoop, "Off the Record: Asaduddin Owaisi."
59. Bajpai and Farooqui, "Non-Extremist Outbidding," 283.
60. Bajpai and Farooqui, "Non-Extremist Outbidding," 284.
61. Iftikhar, "Shaheen Bagh."
62. Azad, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, 230.
63. Azad, *Ghubar-e* Khatir, 231–32.
64. For details on emergent young Muslim leadership at Shaheen Bagh, and on Shaheen Bagh as an "interrupted future" rather than a past event, see Mustafa, *Shaheen Bagh and the Idea of India*; I. Ahmad, "Shaheen Bagh Is Not an Event of the Past."

CONCLUSION

1. Asif, "Virulence of Hindutva."
2. Rajvanshi, "How India's Bulldozers Became a Vehicle of Injustice."
3. I. Ahmad, "Shaheen Bagh Is Not an Event of the Past."
4. *Al-Jazeera*, "Israel-Gaza War."

5. Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 226.
6. Kugle, *When Sun Meets Moon*.
7. Quran 48:14.
8. Khanjari, Lemons, and Manoukian, "Al-Juwayni, al-Ghazali, and Talal Asad."
9. Bukhari, "Defining and Organizing Masculinities."
10. Talal Asad, cited in B. Iqbal, "Thinking About Method."
11. Lemons, "Capabilities of Old Women."
12. T. Zaman, "An Islam of One's Own"; K. Ali, *Woman Question in Islamic Studies*.
13. Mehdi, "Listening to Refusal."
14. For a summary of traditional commentary, see Nasr et al., *The Study Quran* commentary on 7:80–4 (p. 436–37); see also Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* for variant readings. For the social role and status of "men without desire for women" in the Prophet's time, see Rowson, "The Effeminates of Early Medina."
15. Navigating Differences, "Clarifying Sexual and Gender Ethics in Islam."
16. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*.
17. Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*.
18. Shaikh, "Ibn 'Arabi and Mystical Disruptions of Gender," 484.
19. Shaikh, "Ibn 'Arabi and Mystical Disruptions of Gender," 482.
20. Kasmani, *Queer Companions*, 36–83, 182.
21. Manoukian, "Sensing Without Realizing."
22. Quraishi, "I Found My Country in Shaheen Bagh," 106.

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