The Persianate Intelligentsia in
Precolonial India

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Introduction

In 2008, Jamil Ragep assumed that less than 5% of the available scientific writings
in Arabic and Persian had been studied so far.1 According to Sheldon Pollock, there
are some 30 million Indian language manuscripts scattered around the world that
“represent the merest fraction of what must have been once produced.”2 Hence, at
present, it is obviously impossible to draw a comprehensive picture of the state of

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1 I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the historian of contemporary Iranian history Nasser
Mohajer for his continuous help, advice, support and mentorship. His comments and suggestions
were pivotal in writing this article.
3 Quoted in Prasannan Parthasarathi, Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic
that “Whole libraries of the manuscripts produced” from the mid-16th century, “exist today – and lie
unedited, even unread.” He argues that the incapacity of many scholars to actually read the languages
can be held responsible for that. Sheldon Pollock, “Introduction,” Pollock (ed.), Forms of Knowledge
in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500-

ISSN 0892-4147-print/ISSN 2159-421X online/2016/30.4/CXXVI-CXLIV
middle modern (c. 1500-1800) Central, West and South Asian, as well as North African, scientific, technological and intellectual developments. Nonetheless, enough evidence has been assembled so far to declare that the culture, science, technology and history of ideas of these areas were far from being stagnant. For the Ottoman domains, Khaled El-Rouayheb has illustrated that logic, dialectic, semantics, philosophy, mathematics and astronomy were vibrant fields of study during the 17th and 18th centuries, stimulated by the increase in institutions of higher learning, as well as the migration of Sunni Persian, Azeri and Kurdish scholars coming from different regions of the Safavid Empire. The increased number of Persians immigrating to India during the Mughal period was also a great stimulus to the progress of culture, science, technology and thought in South Asia. In the 17th and especially 18th century, one can identify a number of West and South Asian, most notably Ottoman and Indo-Persian, nobles, scholar-bureaucrats or notables (ay’an), merchants and rulers, who, far from being indifferent, showed


5The growing links to Persia introduced new agricultural products, techno-scientific developments, music instruments, eating habits and artistic elements into India. The Mughal Empire attracted scholars, littérateurs and Sufi mystics from Safavid Iran, but also from Turkey and Central Asia. Furthermore, Mughal and post-Mughal India employed a large number of Persian administrators, especially after the fall of the Safavid Empire. In addition, the cross-border travel literature of the Persianate world bore some resemblances to what has been called the 18th century European “Republic of Letters,” as the geographical and cultural sphere of the Indo-Persian culture stretched across Ottoman borders in the west to Iran, Central Asia and India. Alam and Subrahmanyam even write about “a real risk of a form of ‘brain drain’ in this epoch” since the Mughals could afford to pay higher salaries to Persian artisans, painters and calligraphers. Francis Robinson, “Ottomans-Safavids-Mughals: Shared Knowledge and Connective Systems,” Journal of Islamic Studies, 8:2 (1997), 151-84; Irfan Habib (ed.), A Shared Heritage: The Growth of Civilizations in India and Iran (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2002); M. Athar Ali, Mughal Nobility under Aurengzeb (Bombay: Asian Publishing House, 1968); Juan R. I. Cole, Roots of North Indian Shiism in Iran and Iraq (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400-1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Quotation from Alam and Subrahmanyam, 177.
a keen interest in European ideas and innovations.\(^6\) It goes without saying that the increased commercial contact between the two continents in conjunction with the rising military threat of some European powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch and English were at the root of the soaring South Asian interest in Europe. In addition, as Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi argues, there was a parallel process of modernity that can be traced in the realm of numerous “homeless texts” within many different areas of *middle modern* Asia.\(^7\) As Tavakoli-Targhi has recently reiterated, “With the privileged position of poetry in the invented [Iranian] national *mentality*, the prose texts of the humanities are devalued . . . . Thus a large body of historically significant prose texts of modernity have remained unpublished.” Moreover, texts written in India are stereotypically considered either linguistically faulty or as belonging to the corpus of the degenerate ”Indian style” (*sabk-I Hindi*) texts. Consequently Persian-language texts documenting pre-colonial engagement with the modern sciences and responding to colonial European domination have remained nationally homeless and virtually unknown to historians working within the confines of modern Indian and Iranian nationalist paradigms. This has led to several historiographical problems. Exclusion of these homeless texts from national historical canons, on the one hand, has contributed to the hegemony of Eurocentric and Orientalist conceptions of modernity as something uniquely European. On the other hand, by ignoring the homeless texts both Indian and Iranian historians tend to consider modernity only under the rubric of a belated Westernization.\(^8\)

\(^6\)However, Cole is of the opinion that “The Renaissance, the Copernican revolution, the printing revolution, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment all might as well not have occurred for all the cognizance most Muslim intellectuals took of them. . . relatively few indigenous accounts of Westerners survive before the eighteenth century.” Juan R. I. Cole, “Invisible Occidentalism: Eighteenth-Century Indo-Persian Constructions of the West,” *Iranian Studies*, 25:3-4 (1992), 3-16, 4.


\(^8\)Tavakoli-Targhi, ‘Early Persianate Modernity’, in Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Forms of Knowledge*, 274-5. In this context, it is worth noting that in India much more books were written in Persian than in Persia. Storey’s (Persian Literature) incomplete list cites 476 items under the History of India and merely 178 items under the History of Persia. Irfan Habib, *Medieval India: The Study of Civilization* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2008), 225. Moreover, as late as the Qajar period 44% of all history manuscripts written in Iran were about India. Juan R. I. Cole, “Iranian Culture and South Asia, 1500-1900,” in Nikki R. Keddie and Rudolph P. Matthee, eds., *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 31.
Critical Thinking and Indo-Persian Curiosity vis-à-vis Europe

As Parthasarathi observes,

Indian rulers, as did their European counterparts, took a keen interest in attracting skilled and knowledgeable workers to their territories, exploiting foreign sources of knowledge, whether embodied in individuals or texts, and codifying information for study and dissemination.9

Various examples exist of the cultural, scientific, technological and intellectual dynamism, critical thinking, the spirit of curiosity, as well as the adoption of, or preoccupation with, European innovations and ideas in pre-colonial India. Highly influential scholars like Irfan Habib and Toby Huff have claimed that Mughal India (and other parts of Asia) lacked intellectual curiosity during the middle modern period. There is sufficient historical evidence to counter this hypothesis and show that it cannot be easily generalized.10 According to Sheldon Pollock, “a new and dynamic era of intellectual inquiry” can be traced back to mid-16th century South Asia.11 The philosopher Raghunatha Siromani (c. 1460-1540) for instance, attached great importance to reason and evidence-based critical enquiry. Although he did not entirely break with the ancient tradition and leaned on traditional sources, he, nonetheless, pursued novel philosophical terrain. To give an example, he told his readers that his arguments “should not be cast aside without reflection just because they are contrary to accepted opinion.”12 Jonardon Generi points out that those in the core areas of the West, Floris Cohen has correctly pointed out that Huff “fully ignores the quite substantial resistance, rooted in Christian values, that they quickly met with in Europe itself.” He mentions Galilei’s trial and the French and Dutch resistance vis-à-vis the works of Descartes. H. Floris Cohen, “Review Essay: From West to East, from East to West? Early Science between Civilizations,” Early Science and Medicine 17 (2012), 339-350, 346. See also H. Floris Cohen, How Modern Science Came into the World: Four Civilizations, One 17th-Century Breakthrough (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), chap. 12.11

who followed Ragunatha’s work – from the mid-16th to the end of the 17th century – sparked a “fundamental metamorphosis” in epistemology, metaphysics, semantics and philosophical methodology. Although arguing to the contrary, Abu’l-Fazl (1551-1602), the vizier of the Mughal Emperor Akbar is himself a suitable example for the presence of progress-oriented individuals within 16th century Mughal elites. He wrote from time immemorial, the exercise of enquiry has been restricted, and questioning and investigation have been regarded as precursors of infidelity. Whatever has been received from father, director, kindred, friend or neighbour, is considered as a deposit under Divine sanction and a malcontent is reproached with impiety or irreligion. Although a few among the intelligent of their generation admit the imbecility of this procedure in others, yet they will not stir one step in the practical direction themselves.

Sheldon Pollock and Lawrence McCrea have recently argued that during the 16th and 17th centuries, the tendency to question authority and traditional sources of knowledge – by both Sanskrit and Persianate thinkers – became an increasingly visible part of Mughal India’s intellectual debate. Furthermore, the 17th and 18th centuries can be regarded as the beginning of an Indian “age of discovery” with respect to the preoccupation and acquisition of European knowledge and skills. In the early 17th century, Emperor Jahangir’s confidant and later provincial governor of Gujarat, Muqarrab Khan, who had written several medical treatises, was interested in horticulture and fond of European technology. He built a hospital in Agra based on the Portuguese example in Goa. Around the same time, the French navigator

13 Ganeri, 4.
14 Quoted in Eugenia Vanina, Urban Crafts and Craftsmen in Medieval India (Thirteenth-Eighteenth Centuries) (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers 2004), 68.
15 Lawrence McCrea, “Playing with the System: Fragmentation and Individualization in Late Pre-colonial Mimamsa,” Journal of Indian Philosophy, 36:5-6 (2008), 575-585; Sheldon Pollock, “Is there an Indian Intellectual History?,” Journal of Indian Philosophy, 36:5-6 (2008), 533-542.
16 Jorge Flores, “The Sea and the World of the Mutasaddi: A profile of port officials from Mughal Gujarat (c. 1600–1650),” Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 21:1 (2011), 55-71, 70. For general information on Muqarrab Khan, see Flores, 57-64. No information is available on the particulars of the hospital such as the class, religion and caste of the patients, etc. However, during the 17th and 18th century, those who could afford it were generally treated at home by private doctors, whereas mostly the poor, vagabonds, pilgrims and soldiers went to hospitals. Fabrizio Speziale, ed., Hospitals in Iran and India, 1500-1950s (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 6. According to Rezavi, “Darush-shifa or shifakhanas (hospitals) were also run by the government, which employed physicians for the purpose (...) these places were buildings (makan) established by the rulers and nobles for treatment of the poor and needy (ghurab wa masakin).” Furthermore, “Jahangir ordained the establishment of hospitals in all the
François Pyrard de Laval claimed that Indians “readily learn the manufactures and workmanship, being all very curious and desirous of learning. In fact Portuguese take and learn more from them than they from the Portuguese.” François Bernier (1625-88), the French traveler and physician – who resided in India during the late 1650s throughout the late 1660s – also gives evidence to support the fact that some prominent individuals in 17th century Mughal India were interested in European knowledge and philosophy. Bernier served as the personal physician of the Mughal ruler Aurengzeb for 12 years. According to his own account, he told the Mughal official of Persian origin, Daneshmand Khan (Molla Shafi’a’i), about the discoveries of Harvey and Pecquet in anatomy and translated Gassendi and Descartes into Persian, which Khan is said to have read “with avidity”. Significantly, in the early 1660s the translation of Descartes was already available to the learned men of Varanasi, hardly ten years after the death of the French philosopher. Interestingly enough, the 17th century scholar Kavindra Sarasvati was well schooled in “Cartesian” ideas. Astonishingly, Bilal Krishna Matilal and Ganeri have argued that currents within middle modern Indian philosophy anticipated the linguistic turn and bore resemblance to 20th century analytical philosophy in Europe. According to Ganeri, the “new reason” philosophy of middle modern India consisted of three ideas:

The first was that methods of enquiry have to be evidence-based and collaborative, relying on proof-strategies that are open to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation and involving reasoned decision-making mechanisms in multi-agent environments. The second idea was that of a stratified or layered conception of the world, in which atomism at the lowest level is compatible with the reducible or irreducible reality of other categories of entity, including

François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, vol. 2 (London: Willliam Pickering, 1826), 87, 192. According to Rizvi, he was a native of Yazd, who arrived in India with Persian merchants after having finished his higher education. Around 1658, he was appointed governor of Delhi. Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Shah Wali-Allah and his Times* (Canberra: Ma’rifat, 1980), 67.

Bernier, *Travels*, vol. 2, 32, 47, 87. It is not clear which of Descartes’ books were translated into Persian.


Ganeri, 6.

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17 Albert Gray and H.C.P. Bell, eds., *The Voyages of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maledives, the Moluccas and Brazil*, vol. 2.1 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1888), 249.

18 According to Bernier, he was the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Grand Master of the Horse. He described him as a person “whose thirst for knowledge was incessant”.

19 Bernier, *Travels*, vol. 2, 32, 47, 87. It is not clear which of Descartes’ books were translated into Persian.


21 Ganeri, 6.
composite bodies, at higher levels. The third was that a new philosophy needs a new language, one in which the underlying logical form of philosophical claims is exposed and transparent, and which can therefore serve the needs of demonstration in a calculus of relations. These key ideas – and the concomitant reworking of the ancient tradition they presumed – were all essentially in place by the middle of the seventeenth century.22

In the 17th and 18th centuries, there were a number of Indian travelers who found their way to Europe. Nabil Matar points out that:

No other non-Christian people – neither the American Indians nor the sub-Saharan Africans nor the Asiatics – left behind as extensive a description of the Europeans and of bilad al-nasara (the land of Christians), both in the European as well as the American continents, as did the Arabic writers.23

In this context, we also need to add texts written in Persian.24 In the late 18th century, we know of six Indo-Persians who wrote travel narratives about Europe. Among these, five were Muslims and one was an Armenian Christian.25 However, a number

22Fisher, 247.
24During the early Mughal period, Chagati was displaced by Persian, which became the language of the state and administration and also served as an important literary form of expression of the Mughal and post-Mughal courts well into the 19th century. While the majority of the Indian population spoke (and wrote) in vernacular languages or in Sanskrit, in the 17th century, the Persian language was a lingua franca, being used by a substantial number of elites and merchants throughout Central, West and South Asia and even as far as south-east Europe. Although in India Persian ceased to be the official language in the 1830s, it continued to serve as a lingua franca till the late 19th century. Arnold J. Toynbee, A Study of History, vol. 5: The Disintegration of Civilizations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 514–6; Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography (New York: Palgrave, 2001), x. For the significance of Persian in Mughal India, see Muzaffar Alam, “The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics,” MAS, 32:2 (1998), 317–48; Idem, The languages of political Islam: India, 1200-1800 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Probably the first Indo-Persian travel account of Europe was written by Mutamad Khan Badkhshi, a bureaucrat of Aurengzeb who went to “Portugal, where he learnt Latin and translated Clavius’s Eight Books of Gnomics into Arabic.” Gulfishan Khan, Indian Muslim Perceptions of the West during the Eighteenth Century (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 270.
25Michael H. Fisher, “From India to England and Back: Early Indian Travel Narratives for Indian Readers,” Huntington Library Quarterly 70:1 (2007), 153-172, 159. Interestingly, two of these accounts were written in English. One of these books (The Travels of Dean Mahomet, a Native of Patna in Bengal) was penned by Dean Mahomet (1759–1851), a Muslim who converted to Anglican Christianity, published in Cork (Ireland) in 1794. The other book, Life and Adventures of Joseph Emin, An Armenian, Written in English by Himself, was written by
of Indo-Persian scholars also wrote about Europe without having traveled to the continent. At least three of the Muslims writing about Europe were Shi‘as and as Juan Cole points out, “Despite the numerical predominance of Hindus in the population and of Sunnis among the Muslims, the post-Mughal era had witnessed the emergence of important Iran-linked Shi‘ite elites in northern India, particularly in Bengal and Awadh.” Some of these writers partly idealized English society for various reasons including their collaboration with the British and also the fact that they leaned heavily upon the varnished self-images of British contemporaries. At any rate, they were aware of phenomena such as the (Protestant) Reformation and French Revolution. They were fascinated by London’s uniformly designed houses, street lamps, smooth, well-paved and brightly lit roads and some (e.g. Abu Taleb) depicted English institutions like the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the Royal Society and the Bank of England.

At that time, English supremacy was not a foregone conclusion and, in contrast to the 19th century, British elites did not yet perceive a sense of overall superiority over others. It is noteworthy that, as late as the end of the 18th and even beginning of the 19th century, certain British contemporaries like Robert Bruce and Thomas Munro (1761-1827) – who had actually lived in India – or thinkers like John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) did not believe that Britain’s economy

Joseph Emin (1726-1809), an Armenian Christian born in Persia (Hamadan) but raised in Calcutta, published in London in 1792. Similar to Cole, Fisher notes that “Only after the English East India Company began its dramatic military, political, and cultural aggression in India, from 1757 onward, did even a few educated Indians begin to exhibit interest in exploring England and recording their discoveries for their peers”. Fisher also reminds us that none of the Indian travel books about Europe “gained a circulation comparable to the hundreds of European contemporary accounts of India that spread through European society.”

Cole, Invisible Occidentalism, 4. Cole draws attention to the fact that “notables often received patronage from European consuls or agents to write Persian chronicles about the local political events of the day, from a point of view that flattered the British … In India Muslim notables frequently served in the courts of Hindu potentates, and Shi‘ite courtiers routinely served Sunni rulers. In keeping with this tradition of cosmopolitanism, Shi‘ites felt that there was nothing wrong with taking service in the British East India Company, so long as they did nothing contradictory to their religious principles.” Cole, 6. Bayly suggests that an important influence on many of these Shi‘a notables “appears to have been the usuli tradition of Shia legalism which emphasized the rational sciences and conceded the need to debate matters of custom in the light of reason.” Bayly, Empire and Information, 80.

Khan, Indian Muslim Perceptions, 161, 179, 181-2, 278; Charles Stewart (trans.), Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe..., vol. 2 (London: 1814), 178-181, 277, 281, 289; Hosein Khadive-Jam, ed., Masir Tabibi fi Bilad Afranji [Travels of Talib in the Lands of the Franks], Tehran 1983. The English translation was published in 1810 (London) and the Persian original was first published by the EIC in 1812 (Calcutta). It was co-edited by his son Mirza Husain ‘Ali and Mir Qudrat ‘Ali. Fisher, From India to England, 170. Abu Taleb’s “Travels” was very popular throughout Europe and was translated into French, Dutch and German.
was more advanced than India’s.  

However, colonialism, de-industrialization and orientalist discourse led to a blurred vision as to the transitional dynamics of 17th and 18th century Mughal India and post-Mughal India.

Certainly, one of the most important 18th century writings on Europe by an Indian was penned by Mirza Shaikh I’tesam al-Din (c. 1730-c. 1800) – a Bengali scholar-bureaucrat and a rather religious and conservative Muslim. He became a Persian munshi of the EIC in 1762, and traveled to Europe sometime between 1766 and 1768 as a delegate of Mughal emperor Shah Alam II. As Partha Chatterjee sums up, I’tesam al-Din appreciated streetlights and garbage removal in London, and a new proposal for the piped supply of clean drinking water. He understood the benefits of “labour-saving inventions” such as the water mill, windmill, and “spinning mills where a single operator turns a large wheel whose motion is automatically transferred to about twenty other wheels”. Ihtishamuddin was impressed by the public entertainment offered in the theaters, where unlike private concerts in wealthy homes in India, people from all classes could buy tickets and enjoy performances fit for royalty.

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29According to Raychaudhuri, the Bengali intelligentsia was “the first Asian social group of any size whose mental world was transformed through its interaction with the West.” Tapan Raychaudhuri, Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1988]), xxi.
30I’tisam al-Din was the earliest Indo-Persian traveler who wrote about his journey to Europe. He wrote his Shigarf-namah-i Vilayat (Wonder-book of England/Europe) in 1784/85. See James Edward Alexander, trans., Shigurf Namah i Velaët, Or, Excellent Intelligence Concerning Europe: Being the Travels of Mirza Itesa Modeen in Great Britain and France... (London: 1827); Kaiser Haq, trans., The Wonders of Vilayet (Leeds, Peepal Tree, 2001). According to Khan, the Shigarf-namah was “the first attempt to comprehend and assimilate the western ideas within the framework of indigenous traditions.” Khan, Indian Muslim Perceptions, p. 78. Besides I’tisam al-Din, Munshi Isma’il who traveled to Britain in 1771-73 wrote his brief Tarikh-i Jadid (New History) around 1773. Another Muslim traveler, Mir Mohammad Hussain ibn Abdul Azim Isfahani visited Britain in 1775-76 and wrote, first in Arabic and later in Persian, a short treatise called Risalah-i Ahwal-i Mulk-i Farang wa Hindustan (Letters/Essays about the Conditions of the Land of Europe and India). However, I’tisam al-Din’s work was the only one that was published. Michael H. Fisher, “Early Asian Travelers to the West: Indians in Britain, c.1600–c.1850,” World History Connected 10.1 (2013), note 2. For biographical information on the latter, see Khan, Indian Muslim Perceptions, 72-8. For his religiosity, see Khan, 162, 167.
The Lucknow-born scribe, poet and expert in *unani* medicine, Mir Mohammad Husain ibn Abdul Azim Isfahani (d. 1790), who had served under both the Awadh and Bengal governments, also traveled to England in 1775–76 in order to work as a Persian teacher. He wrote the following words, bearing testimony to his pronounced thirst for European knowledge:

> During my long social interaction and discourses, meetings and conversations [with European officials in Bengal] I discovered about new thought and fresh discoveries, about celestial mechanics, heavenly bodies, the nature of terrestrial globe, and life on earth, discoveries of innumerable, hitherto unknown islands in the southern quarter of the globe, New World of America. Therefore, I attempted to elaborate upon some of these, such as the nature of the fixed stars and of the planets…At first sight, this knowledge might cause immense amount of bewilderment, especially to those who were steeped in Greek traditions of philosophy and Greek cosmology…Since the mysteries and principles of the new sciences were not yet diffused in India, consequently, to satisfy mental curiosity, I undertook a trip to the countries of Europe in order to enjoy direct access to the mines of ideas and knowledge.\(^\text{32}\)

Another Muslim traveler, Mirza Ahmad Khan from Broach (Gujarat) visited Paris in 1794 and learned French in three months. He was the first to translate the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* into Persian.\(^\text{33}\) The most impressive “scientific” figure of 18th century India was probably the Shi’a Tafazzul Hussain Khan (c.1727-1801) from Sialkot (in Punjab at the foot of the Kashmir hills) who came from a family of Mughal administrators. This scholar, who was born in the year of Newton’s death, studied rational subjects (*ma’qulat*) and mathematics from eminent scholars in Delhi and also studied logic at the famous madrasah of

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\(^{32}\)Quoted in Fisher, “From India to England and Back,” 165-6. Mir Mohammad’s father had emigrated from Persia to India at the beginning of the 18th century. Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 92.

\(^{33}\)Indo-Iranica 25 (1972), 173; Mushirul Hasan, “Resistance and Acquiescence, in North India: Muslim Responses to the West,” in Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta, eds., *India’s Colonial Encounter* (Delhi: Manohar,1993), 52-3; Idem, *Islam in the Subcontinent: Muslims in a Plural Society* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), 27; Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb et al., eds., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 7, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 130. Broach was about 73 km north of Surat (on the bank of the river Narbada). The traveler Mandelslo who visited Broach in 1638, reported that the *baftas* were “finer than any made in the province of Gujarat.” The lands around the city were very fertile, yielding rice, wheat, barley and cotton in great abundance. M.S. Commissariat, ed., *Mandelslo’s Travel in Western India* (1638-1639) (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995 [1931]), 15.
Firangi Mahal in Lucknow which was founded during the reign of Aurengzeb (r.1658-1707). Later on he mastered the works of Ibn Sina (Shifa) and studied philosophy at Benares. He was appointed as mentor and tutor (ataliq) at the court of Shuja ud-Daulah, the Shi’a nawab-vazir of Awadh, served as vakt of the court of Hyderabad and Awadh and also resided in Calcutta as Asaf ud-Daulah’s ambassador, where he came into scholarly and diplomatic contact with British officials. He was not only proficient in Persian and Arabic but also had a command of Greek, Latin and English. Significantly, he not only wrote commentaries and treatises on mathematical matters, but also translated a number of European scientific works with the help of the English mathematician Reuben Burrows into Arabic (and perhaps Persian). Amongst these works (handed over to Tafazzul by Burrows) there were Newton’s Principia; Emerson’s Mechanics (a book on Galilean kinematics and rational analysis, printed in 1769); Simpson’s Treatise of Algebra (printed in 1745); a work on conic sections by Guillaume Francois, Marquis de l’Hopital (printed in 1707), Edmund Halley’s redaction of the De sectione rationis of Apollonius (printed in 1706) and treatises on logarithms, curve lines, etc. As a result of his “scientific” knowledge and erudition he was held in high regard by his Indo-Persian and European contemporaries. Most significantly, Tafazzul’s translation of Newton’s Latin treatise into Arabic (which apparently began in mid-1789) was the third language into which the Principia had been translated after English (1729) and French (1759). This is notable insofar as it circumstantiates the scientific curiosity and potentiality of some members of the Indo-Persian intelligentsia. In this vein, Kapil Raj has argued that Indo-


35Agents or residents sent by the princes to the different courts and cities of the country in order to take care of their business and forward messages. Mathias Christian Sprengel, Leben Hyder Allys: Nabobs von Mysore: Aus dem französischen mit Anmerkungen und Zusätzen, Halle 1784 [translation of Maistre de la Tour], 195, note a.

36Purnendu Basu, Oudh and the East India Company, 1785-1801 (Lucknow 1943), 22-24; Khan, Indian Muslim Perceptions, 27-8, 270-6; Mir ‘Abd al-Latif Shushtari, Tuhfat al-‘Alam va Zil al-Tuhfah (Tehran: Tahuri, 1984), 363-7; Robinson, The ‘Ulama of Farangi Mahall, 223; Simon Schaffer, “The Asiatic Enlightenments of British Astronomy,” in Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj, James Delbourgo, The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770-1820 (Sagamore Beach: Science History Publications, 2009), 53, 57-60 and 89. While the above-mentioned scholars write that Tafazzul Khan translated Newton’s Principia into Arabic, the following authors note that it was translated into Persian: Mulk Raj Anand, Is there a Contemporary Indian Civilisation? (London: Asia Publishing House, 1963), 67; Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, A
Persian bureaucrat-scholars like Tafazzul and Isfahani dreamed “of regenerating a Persianate savant élite around European learning.” It is not surprising that the interest for European knowledge and skills peaked at this juncture in history as, in the 18th century, more Indian and Indo-Persian travelers visited Europe than ever before. They wrote down their experiences and also came into contact with many Europeans. At the same time, the intellectual exchange between Europeans and Indians on the subcontinent steadily increased in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries and created fertile contact zones in cities like Calcutta.

*Middle modern* India equally possessed a vibrant indigenous tradition of history writing. According to Bayly, “Ali Ibrahim Khan “along with other contemporary administrators in both Bengal and north India . . . was an unacknowledged founder of a consciously modern Indian history.” More recently, Rao, Nārāyaṇarāvu, Shulman and Subramanyam have detected modern characteristics such as sequence, temporal and causal modes, as well as linear time within the 17th and 18th century South Indian historical prose genre of “karanam” (in Telugu). On the basis of one of these texts, written in the 16th century ("Prataparudra Caritramu"), they argue that it delineates the point of transition from a divinely pre-ordered framework to one in which the active human protagonist is fully responsible for his or her choices.

*Socio-Intellectual History of the Isna ‘Ashari Shi’is in India: 16th to 19th Century A.D.,* vol. 2 (Canberra 1986), 228; Christopher Alan Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge, 1999 [1996]), 85; Mushirul Hasan, *Islam in the Subcontinent: Muslims in a Plural Society* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), 27. However, this seems to be unlikely since even in the Persianate world scientific texts were usually written in Arabic. As Gibb has pointed out, “until the Safavid period Arabic remained, even in Iran and India, the language of theology and science” and “Persian was used almost exclusively for poetry, belles-lettres and court chronicles.” H.A.R. Gibb, Ta’rikh, in E.J. Brill’s *First Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1913-1936: Supplement,* vol. 9, (Leiden: Brill,1987), 243. Moreover, Khan notes that “By translating the scientific literature of Europe into Arabic instead of Persian, Tafazzul was attempting a task both innovative and original, as Arabic was to remain the language of science in India and other parts of the Islamic world.” Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions,* 274. Schaffer even provides archival evidence from British contemporaries that Tafazzul translated Newton and other scientific works into Arabic. Schaffer, *The Asiatic Enlightenments,* 59-60. Kapil Raj, *Mapping Knowledge Go-betweens in Calcutta, 1770-1820,* in Schaffer et al. (eds.), 147. Interestingly, Raj points out that – though to no avail – Isfahani “proposed a large-scale project to Hastings, similar in scale to the one on Islamic and Hindu law, to translate Newtonian physics and recent European other works in astronomy and medicine into Persian.” Raj, 132.


According to the above-mentioned scholars there existed a “large, remarkably rich historiographical literature” that marked “the arrival of a certain kind of ‘modernity’ in the far south”. 40 Similarly, Kumkum Chatterjee points out that 18th century “English writers arrived at the consensus that the Persian tarikhs containing chronological records of past kings and their governmental accomplishments constituted “history”. The term “history” – and not fable or myth – was actually used repeatedly to describe these Persian language materials. 41 The Scottish Orientalist, writer, playwright and army officer in the EIC, Alexander Dow (c. 1735-1779), for example, described the late 16th century history of India (Tarikh-i Firishta) – written by the Indo-Persian chronicler Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah (1560-1620) from Astarabad (Persia) – “as paying scrupulous attention to truth that manliness of sentiment which constitute the very essence of good history.” 42 Indeed Chaterjee identifies “striking similarities in the concept of history entertained by eighteenth century English authors and the Persianized Indian aristocrats who composed tarikhs.” 43 However, in spite of the existence of a number of vital currents within the middle modern Indo-Persian tradition of historiography, philosophy, science and technology, it is, nonetheless, striking how widely European intellectuals appear to have exceeded their Asian counterparts of the 17th to 19th centuries in terms of quality and quantity especially in fields like secular philosophy, natural sciences (see below), political economy and law.

Late 18th century Indo-Persian preoccupation with the British Political System

It has been argued that – along with Qing China and Ottoman Turkey – the pre-colonial Indian intelligentsia does not seem to have conceptualized nor demanded a kingless or republican polity, as did certain European “intellectuals” during the Age of Enlightenment. 44 However, while the proponents of a modern political system were certainly few, both Ottoman Turkey and post-Mughal India had elites who partly advocated modern concepts of governance such as parliamentary

40Rao, 264.
42Quoted in Chatterjee, 207-208.
43Chatterjee, 209.
democracy and rule of law. In the Ottoman Empire, for instance, the Transylvanian-born Muslim diplomat and polymath Ibrahim Müteferrika (c.1674-1745) approved of Dutch and British democratic forms of government in 1731 and although he officially felt constrained to the shari’a, he was aware that the Christian countries, having no shari’a “to settle their conflicts, their orders are entirely based on laws and rules invented by reason.” It is true that in the late 18th and early 19th century, a few members of the Indo-Persian intelligentsia believed that Europe’s ascendency was related to West and South Asia’s moral degradation and the neglect of religious duties (e.g. the Shi’a Ahmad ibn Mohammad Behbahani) and almost all of the elites who have left written accounts seemed very religious and conservative. Mirza Abu Taleb Khan Isfahani (1752-1806), for instance, the Indo-Persian Shi’a scholar-bureaucrat and poet from Lucknow – who lived in Bengal for some years and spent almost 2 ½ years in London between 1800 and 1802 in order to teach Persian at an institute of higher learning – opined that, “The first and greatest defect I observe in the English, is their want of faith in religion and their great inclination to philosophy (atheism).” At the same time, the scholar-administrators at hand like the Shi’a ‘Abd al-Latif al-Musawi al-Shushtari (1758-1806) - who emigrated from Persia to India at the age of 30 – supposed that under the reign of Asaf ud-Daulah (r. 1775-1797). He also served as a revenue official under Colonel Alexander Hanny in Gorakhpur. He had a considerable network of British acquaintances spanning from EIC officials, literary figures and members of the intelligentsia, portraitists and historical painters to orientalists, book traders, auctioneers and porcelain manufacturers. Charles Stewart, *The Travels of Mizra Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe*, vol. 1 (London 1814 [1810]), x and 11; Hasan, “Resistance and Acquiscence,” 46 and 60 note 25; Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 96, 234 note 4; Syed Ejaz Hussain, “An Encounter with Occidental Technology: An Indo-Persian Prince in England and Europe,” in Ishrat Alam, Syed Ejaz Hussain, eds., *The Varied Facets of History: Essays in Honour of Aniruddha Ray* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 244. Charles Stewart, *The Travels of Mizra Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe*, vol. 2 (London 1814 [1810]), 128. Abu Taleb’s desire to teach Persian never came to fruition.


*Abu Taleb’s father Haji Mohammad Beg Khan was born in Isfahan and was an Azerbaijani Turk by descent. He emigrated from Persia to India in the 18th century. Abu Taleb wrote at least seven books in Arabic and Persian, apart from several articles and treatises (on medicine and astronomy). The topics included biographies of Persian and Indian poets, music, astronomy, a book on world history, a book on the history of Awadh, his travels and poems. Interestingly, he was the first to publish a poetry collection of Hafez in India (1791) and his translator Charles Stewart, Professor of Oriental Languages in the EIC’s college at Haileybury, wrongly noted: “I believe this is the first time the genuine opinion of an Asiatic, respecting the institutions of Europe, have appeared in the English language.” Abu Taleb spent some years in Murshidabad (Bengal) at the court of Muzaffar Jang and was later appointed ‘amildar in some districts of Awadh under the reign of Asaf ud-Daulah (r. 1775-1797). He also served as a revenue official under Colonel Alexander Hanny in Gorakhpur. He had a considerable network of British acquaintances spanning from EIC officials, literary figures and members of the intelligentsia, portraitists and historical painters to orientalists, book traders, auctioneers and porcelain manufacturers. Charles Stewart, *The Travels of Mizra Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe*, vol. 1 (London 1814 [1810]), x and 11; Hasan, “Resistance and Acquiscence,” 46 and 60 note 25; Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 96, 234 note 4; Syed Ejaz Hussain, “An Encounter with Occidental Technology: An Indo-Persian Prince in England and Europe,” in Ishrat Alam, Syed Ejaz Hussain, eds., *The Varied Facets of History: Essays in Honour of Aniruddha Ray* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 244.

*Charles Stewart, The Travels of Mizra Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe*, vol. 2 (London 1814 [1810]), 128. Abu Taleb’s desire to teach Persian never came to fruition.
Europe’s rise was not only connected to military, technical and scientific progress, the state patronage of education and crafts, specialization and the patent system, but also to a well-regulated government, as he was well versed in the proceedings of the British Parliament (shura or khane-yé mashverat), as well as the election of representatives. He knew that the revolutionary changes began in the 17th century. Gholam Husain Khan Tabatabai (1726-1806), the noble and scholar-official of Persian heritage, and the Peshawar-born notable Murtaza Husain Bilgrami (1719-95) also became acquainted with the basic ideas and principles of the British political system. The former was aware of the fact that, in Britain, religion and the church hardly played a role in legislation and that the stability of the state was guaranteed by the consultative procedure. He further argued that the “king could issue no order without a prior discussion of the project in the two Houses of Parliament; this was the underlying reason for the prevailing peace and stability the country enjoyed.” The latter welcomed the benefits of a restricted monarchy, the law of primogeniture and the existence of both the House of Commons (majlis-i 'udmatu'l ro'aya) and the House of Lords (‘Amiran-i mu’azzam). By and large, all these writers took cognizance of the fact that, in Britain, political power was shared by three different bodies and that the king had to obtain the consent of both Houses of Parliament before adjudicating. The devout Sunni scholar-bureaucrat from Bengal, I’tesam al-Din, favored the British constitutional monarchy over absolute monarchies since they did not have any checks or balances. He noted that the “King of England, in matters of government, is not independent, like the Great Mogul of India, but in all state affairs can do nothing without first consulting and advising with his ministers and nobles, and a few men selected from the middle classes.” Indeed, he alleged that the British king merely held representative functions and that the law (qanun) reigned supreme; while British law was not

48Cole, Invisible Occidentalism, 8, 10-1; Khan, Indian Muslim Perceptions, 109-10, 332, 335, 342-4. Quotation from Cole, 350. According to ‘Abd al-Latif, “After the king relinquished some of his earlier power, the founders of the State divided it between the king, the nobility [dignitaries] (Umara’) and the populace (ra’aya) in such a way that whenever it was necessary to attend to a major political matter, no decision could be reached until all the three bodies (firqa) were in agreement.” Quoted in Khan, 335. Behbahani also described the British form of government. He argued that power was shared by the king, the ministers and the members of Parliament (ash-ab-i bar mellat). However, respecting the Parliament (mahall-i mashvarat), he only seems to have known the House of Lords and not of Commons. Furthermore, he appears to have been the only of the writers at hand who favored the absolute monarchies of Persia and Turkey to the British constitutional monarchy. Khan, 335, 359; Cole, 9-10. The House of Lords was sometimes called majlis-i Amiran. I’tesam al-Din used the term khana-i edalat for Parliament, ‘Abd al-Latif khana-i shura and khana-i mashavarat, while Behbahani preferred majlis-i bar mellat. The members were called arbab. Khan, 343.

49Alexander, Shigurf Namah, 137.
based on Christianity. As Gulfishan Khan points out, “According to him, Britain’s prosperity was the result of well-laid rules and regulations which governed the State and were founded on justice and freedom.” \(^5\)

Even a conservative figure such as Abu Taleb – who was aware that the British penal law was not based on the shari’a and divine ordinance (ahkam-i samavi) – did not sound deprecative when he observed that “the British-Christian law (Shariat-i ‘Isawi Ingilish) did not interfere in the affairs of the state and the socio-economic life (mai’ shat) of the people.” \(^5\)

Indeed, he took cognizance of the fact that religion and politics were separated and that the competence of the Minister for Religious Affairs was restricted to religious and social issues. \(^5\)

He not only observed the particular British notion of progress, \(^5\) but was also well aware of British institutional settings (e.g. jurisprudence and fiscal system, including national debt), approved of the limited royal power vis-à-vis the judiciary, wrote a treatise on kingless polities (Heart of History) on the basis of a work by Jonathan Scott and approved of the British parliamentary system and constitution. \(^5\) Regarding parliaments, he was of the opinion that it was “of the greatest service” \(^5\) and with respect to the English constitution, he noticed that it was

\(^5\)Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 337-9, 351. Khan points out that “Although there existed no term equivalent to that of ‘constitutional monarch’ in our authors’ vocabulary, they, nevertheless, succeeded in providing a good description of the above institutions. They defined it as a system where the monarch had no intention or power to override either the law or the will of the Parliament.” Khan, 336-7. For I’tesam al-Din, freedom and social equality were much less developed in India and he attributed the decline of the Mughal Empire to the lack of proper rules and regulations, absolutism and the absence of the law of primogeniture. As a result, India faced “frequent wars of succession, factionalism among the nobility, oppression of the peasantry, rebellions instigated by the chieftains and the rise of regional powers under the provincial governors.” Khan, 339.

\(^5\)Quoted in Khan, 165.

\(^5\)Khan, 180, 346, 349. In another passage he writes that “Christians, contrary to the systems of the Jews and Mohammedans, do not acknowledge to have received any laws respecting temporal matters from Heaven, but take upon themselves to make such regulations as the exigencies of the times require.” Stewart, *Travels*, vol. 2, 81.

\(^5\)Abu Taleb noted that, “The English have very peculiar opinions on the subject of perfection [kamal]. They insist, that it is merely an ideal quality, and depends entirely upon comparison; that mankind have risen by degrees, from the state of savages to the exalted dignity of the great philosopher Newton; but that, so far from having yet attained perfection, it is possible that, in future ages, philosophers will look with as much contempt on the acquirements of Newton, as we now do on the rude state of the arts among savages. If this axiom of theirs be correct, man has yet much to learn, and all his boasted knowledge is but vanity.” Stewart, *Travels*, vol. 2, 165-6.

\(^5\)Stewart, 100-7, 117-25, 43-62, 68, 81; Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 340. However, he was also critical of the influential position of the judge compared to the jury and criticized the British judiciary system in Bengal. Stewart, *Travels*, 102-116.

a union of the monarchical, aristocratical, and democratic governments, represented by the King, Lords, and Commons; in which the powers of each are so happily blended, that it is impossible for human wisdom to produce any other system containing so many excellences, and so free from imperfection.  

The following passage gives due evidence to his appreciation of the emerging English civil society:

Liberty may be considered as the idol, or tutelary deity, of the English, and I think the common people here enjoy more freedom and equality than any other well-regulated government in the world. No Englishman, unless guilty of a breach of the laws, can be seized, or punished, at the caprice or from the gust of passion of the magistrate: he may sometimes be confined on suspicion, but his life cannot be affected except on positive proof. . . In England, no gentleman can punish his servant for any crime . . . but must make his complaint before a magistrate.  

However, he also perceived the effects of rising capitalist social relations when he noted that, “After all, this equality is more in appearance than in reality; for the difference between the comforts of the rich and of the poor is, in England, much greater than in India.”  

In short, we can argue that the most advanced intellectuals of the Ottoman and Indo-Persian intelligentsia, even though numbered, did not fail to understand the importance of democratic and secular forms of governance. Concurrently, it is important to bear in mind that despite their approval of aspects of the British political system, the Indo-Persian authors at the time still would hardly have openly advocated a South or West Asian state that was not based on shari’a law. As Chris Bayly points out:

outside western Europe, even in the orthodox Christian lands of eastern Europe and the Near East, older cosmological ideas continued to encapsulate domains of rational and empirical argumentation. In none of those civilizations did a significant number of thinkers render the idea of God’s saving intervention so thoroughly redundant as in eighteenth-century Europe . . . there was relatively little in the way of political or ethical debate around the notion of atheism or agnosticism. Nor did thinkers apparently construct an

56Stewart, Travels, 44.  
57Stewart, Travels, 31.  
58Steward, Travels, 35.
abstract conception of human ‘society’ beyond and outside the community of believers or the harmonious communion of man and the living world.\textsuperscript{59}

However, it can be suggested that, particularly from the second half of the 18th and early 19th century onwards, a transition in the Weltanschauung of a few Indo-Persian elites was discernible. The transformation of the mindset of the Persianate intelligentsia became manifest in the shift in the meaning of language. As Tavakoli-Targhi argues:

Linking the status of a ‘nation’ (qawm) to ‘social cohesion,’ ‘civil benefits,’ and ‘individual tranquility,’ Mirza Abu Talib’s conceptualization transcended the conventional paradigm of Persianate political theory and its overwhelming concern with the stability of state and religion. His articulation of millat, nafs, and favayid-i madani (civil benefits) altered the conventional signification of these concepts. Applied to modern England, his notion of millat no longer signified a religious community. More significantly, his usage of nafs connoted ‘the individual’ or the ‘subject’ and not ‘the soul’ as understood in classical Islamic philosophy.\textsuperscript{60}

Indeed, the extensive and increasing preoccupation with Europe stimulated a new sense of epistemological awareness, critical thinking and self-reflexivity. As a result, segments of the Indo-Persian elites “were endowed with a critical ‘double-consciousness.’” They “critiqued European social settings with their own ethical standards and censured their own society from a European perspective.”\textsuperscript{61}

**Conclusion**

As early as the 16th century, the writings of South Indian scholars like Siromani and Abu’l Fazl demonstrated the emergence of critical thinking as part of the ethos


\textsuperscript{60}Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*, 46.

\textsuperscript{61}Tavakoki-Targhi, 52-3.
of members of the intelligentsia. During the 17th and 18th centuries, this tendency was further enhanced. In the second half of the 17th century, the Persian translation of Descartes was already available and known to segments of the Persianate and Sanskrit reading elites (e.g. Daneshmand Khan and Sarasvati). During the second half of the 18th century, a number of Indo-Persian scholar-bureaucrats were acquainted with and appreciated European developments like the (Protestant) Reformation, French Revolution, British culture (e.g. cultural institutions, manners, etc.), urban development, political and educational institutions, including democratic and secular forms of governance, modern European science (e.g. astronomy) and technological innovations (e.g. labor-saving devices). Despite their allegiance to shari’a law, this simultaneously reflected the transitional frame of mind of certain Indo-Persian elites. Significantly, in this period, important European writings (e.g. Declaration of the Rights of Man and Newton’s Principia) were also translated into Persian. Indeed, between the 16th and 18th centuries, huge quantities of written documents were composed on almost all aspects of social activity, including commerce, science, technology, administration and politics.
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Selected Economic Essays
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