Introduction: Seeing the World in Urdu

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The translations in this special section of the Journal of Urdu Studies build on a small but growing scholarship in English on Urdu-language historiography and treatments of global or international topics. As Javed Ali Khan makes clear in his comprehensive study of early historical writing in Urdu, the global focus of the translations in this section is anticipated by earlier texts like the Tārīḵ-e Nādirī (1809–1810, prepared at the College at Fort William by Haidar Baksh on the history of Nādir Shāh, with sections devoted to battles with the Russians and Turks)¹ and the numerous translations prepared in the middle decades of the nineteenth century for the Delhi College. These include Tārīḵ Barrī aur Bahri (History of Land and Sea, author and date uncertain), on the history of navigation and maritime discovery, and the various translations prepared by Munshi Shiv Prasad, such as Tārīḵ-e Inqilābn (History of England, 1849), on the history of England, and Tārīḵ-e Rūm (History of Rome, 1845), on the lives of Roman emperors.² The growing number of publications appearing throughout the nineteenth century suggests intense interest among the Urdu-language reading public in a range of topics associated with what we would now call “world history” and a recognition by colonial educational authorities of their importance within curricula. Recent monographs by Megan Robb and Jennifer Dubrow consider the sophisticated and often creative ways in which Urdu print entrepreneurs were able to meet reader interest in international topics.³ The essays collected by James L. Gelvin and Nile Green in Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print (2014), particularly Homayra Ziad’s study of a 1929 Urdu-language narrative of a pilgrimage to Mecca,⁴ focus on the role that technologies such as the railroad, oceanic steamships, and lithography played in

¹ Khan, Early Urdu Historiography, 107–9.
² Khan, Early Urdu Historiography, 140–44.
³ Dubrow, Cosmopolitan Dreams; Robb, Print and the Urdu Public.
⁴ Ziad, “The Return of Gog.”
framing “a larger, global history told from a non-Western perspective, albeit
one that must recognize the transformative impact of Western technologies
and the power they lent their controllers.”

Read together, these recent publications support Partha Chatterjee’s provocative assertion (articulated in the
immediate aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001) that “the historical
evidence shows ... that in several aspects and at least in quantitative terms,
globalization was actually more advanced in the period before World War I
than it is now.”

What differentiates the translations presented in this special section from
much of the historical scholarship from which we have drawn inspiration is
that we are more interested in giving pride of place to the source texts them-
selves than mining them to frame larger arguments about the nature of what
Nile Green terms “vernacular intellectual history.” The translations in this sec-
tion will complement Rahul Sagar’s recent sourcebook of essays, speeches,
and pamphlets on Indian responses to international politics in the nineteenth
century. His sources illustrate how South Asian authors were both invested
in and deeply knowledgeable about global politics well before the advent
of the independence movement in the 1920s. By drawing primarily from
English-language materials, however, his readers may develop the incorrect
impression that authors writing in South Asian “vernaculars” were unaware
of or unconcerned with similarly global matters. Nor do we wish to suggest
that the work of these authors, though often aided by new technologies of
print and travel as well as easily accessible translations of texts originally pub-
lished in European languages, represent an entirely “derivative discourse.” Nile
Green describes Urdu as an “exemplary vernacular ... used to record and react
to manifold experiences of difference.”

He has argued Urdu-language travel-
ogues and other sources can help historians “conceive travel as an intellectual
process that historians can study to capture the Indian Ocean’s multiple men-
tal ‘horizons’ ... without joining them into a single flat line.”

The recently published collection Three Centuries of Travel Writing by Muslim Women is a
model for how understudied and unexpected voices can contribute to a richer

5 Gelvin and Green, “Introduction,” 2.
7 Sagar, To Raise a Fallen People.
8 Sagar does include works translated into English by Sheikh Jamaluddin Afghani from
French; Rabindranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee from Bengali; and Pandita
Ramabai from Marathi. The other texts in this valuable collection of primary source
materials were originally published in English.
understanding of how the world was and is perceived by challenging expectations and dismantling teleological assumptions.\textsuperscript{11} The potential of localized histories of global events, Antoinette Burton suggests, can “put a brake on homogenizing generalizations and potentially at least gives a certain kind of agency to non-state actors and marginal peoples, making them subjects rather than objects of the world-historical gaze.”\textsuperscript{12} In his study of Muslim South Asian travelers to Japan, for example, Nile Green posits that “Urdu texts were linked to alternative futures imagined in the pre-independence subcontinent and in Asia at large where Japan served as a model for Muslim-ruled polities rather than composite nation-states, such as India would become in 1947.”\textsuperscript{13} We wish to take these programmatic statements by global historians to their logical conclusion by giving the Urdu-language authors collected here the space and respect we feel to be necessary to express their ideas about the world at length. In presenting their work for the first time in English translations, we also hope to facilitate access to and generate interest in the Urdu originals.

The texts presented in this special section were prepared between the 1870s and 1930s. They consist of an interreligious polemic prepared by Qāsim Nānautvī in the 1870s (translated by Tareen), a pamphlet on the history of language first published in 1895 (translated by Hakala), ‘Abd ul-Ḥalim Sharar’s commentaries from the 1910s on historical and contemporaneous events taking place the Middle East (translated by Fatima), Muḥammad Ilyās Barnī’s 1917 textbook on economics (translated by Siddiqui), histories of medieval Andalusia published in 1921 and 1922 (translated by Pandey), and accounts of pilgrimages to the Hijaz published in the 1920s and 1930s (translated by Majchrowicz). Both Pandey and Siddiqui examine works that were prepared under the auspices of Osmania University in Hyderabad, which supported translations from Arabic, English, and other languages into Urdu. As Pandey notes, this was part of a “project of shaping and developing Urdu into a language of modern intellectual discourse capable of knowledge production in response to the demands of a colonial modernity.” The texts translated by Pandey and Hakala both convey what Pandey describes as a “a strong desire to ward off melancholia from the portended death of Urdu” by demonstrating, through the transfer of new kinds of knowledge into Urdu, that it is indeed a “global language of intellectual discourse.” Most of the authors examined here—especially those translated by Fatima, Majchrowicz, Pandey, and Tareen—rhetorically exhort and wheedle

\textsuperscript{11} Lambert-Hurley, Majchrowicz, and Sharma, eds., \textit{Three Centuries of Travel Writing by Muslim Women}.


\textsuperscript{13} Green, “Forgotten Futures,” 627.
the Muslim reading public into appreciating the achievements of the past and engaging forcefully with the present. These works, in short, demonstrate a clear cosmopolitanism, pithily expressed by Muḥammad ʿInāyatullāh in his preface to Khalil ur-Raḥmān’s 1922 Urdu translation of the English-language history, *The History of the Moorish Empire in Europe*: “Every person desires to know the affairs of one’s own as well as others, irrespective of whose voice narrates these affairs” (translated by Pandey). The tone of the sentence that follows this one, however, conveys something of the tension brought about by European colonialism that lies just under the surface of each text reproduced here: “But no one can match the truthfulness and excitement of narrating a story like the one who has experienced it, especially when the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ have had enemy-like relations.”

Four of the translations in this special section (by Hakala, Siddiqui, Pandey, and Tareen) originated as papers presented at the fourth annual Urdu Symposium held in October 2021 at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin. While Fatima and Majchrowicz were not present at the symposium, they had been closely involved with its planning in both 2021 and previous years. In choosing to focus in 2021 on the theme “World History in Urdu,” the panelists began from the premise that most scholarship on Urdu has treated it as a lens through which to examine, and a set of materials from which to construct, a history that is confined primarily to South Asia. The aim of the symposium was to reverse the gaze by considering Urdu as a language in which major events and trends in history, especially those outside South Asia, have been recorded and imagined. The panelists pre-circulated brief English translations of Urdu-language texts, which we then discussed in greater detail over the course of the daylong event. We were encouraged by one of our fellow panelists, Gregory Maxwell Bruce, to submit our revised and expanded translations along with additional introductory essays for publication in the *Journal of Urdu Studies*. We are grateful for the patience and care with which he has shepherded these translations to publication.

**Bibliography**


