INTERROGATING “THE EAST,” “CULTURE,” AND “LOSS,” IN ABDUL HALIM SHARAR’S GUZASHTA LAKHNA’U

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Abdul Halim Sharar, born in Lucknow in 1860, spent several boyhood years in Matiya Burj, outside Calcutta, where his father was in the service of Wajid Ali Shah, the deposed King of Awadh.1 As an adult, Sharar lived in Hyderabad at various times, working in different capacities for either the Nizam or one of his nobles. He also traveled to England as a tutor to the noble’s son, a student at Eton. Sharar remained in England for less than two years; the bulk of his life, however, was spent at Lucknow, where he died in 1926. By then, he had become an exceptionally famous literary figure in Urdu.

Sharar’s oeuvre consists of at least twenty-one biographies, twenty-eight historical novels, fourteen social novels, fifteen books of popular history, six plays, much poetry, and innumerable essays, only some of which were collected and published in eight volumes. He also receives credit for introducing blank verse in Urdu. During his life Sharar edited and published several journals that he also entirely wrote, the most famous being Dilgudaz (“Heart-Melting”). Most of Sharar’s writings were initially serialized in his journals.

Sharar’s outstanding study of Lucknow’s arts and culture at the middle of the 19th century was originally serialized in Dilgudaz from 1913 to 1920, under the title “Hindustan Men Mashriqi Tamaddun Ka Akhiri Namuna” (“The Last Example of Eastern Culture in Hindustan”). When, some years later, the articles were put together in a volume in the multi-volume edition of his selected essays, it was either the publisher or Sharar himself who expanded the title by adding “ya’ni Guzashta Lakhna’u” (“i.e. Lucknow of the Past”). Since then the book is simply referred to as Guzashta Lakhna’u, and has never been

1 I found the following useful on Sharar’s life and work: (1) Ja’far Raza, Abdul Halim Sharar (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988); (2) Mumtaz Manglori, Sharar ke Tarikhī Navīl aur un ka Tahqīqi wa Tanqīdi Ja’izah (Lahore: Maktabā-i-Khiyāban-i-Adab, 1978).

As one reads the original Urdu title—*Hindustan Men Mashriqi Tamaddun Ka Akhiri Namuna* (“The Last Example of Eastern Culture in Hindustan”)—one is immediately impelled to ask, “Was Hindustan not a part of the East, or Indian culture of Sharar’s time not Eastern?” What follows below is an attempt to understand that puzzle of a title by exploring the key words in it. The exercise, it is hoped, would also throw some light on the overarching narrative of cultural and political “Loss” or “Decline” that so much dominated Urdu literary and socio-cultural writings in the late 19th and early 20th century, and to some extent still does in some quarters.

The first word in the title, *Hindustan*, is now generally translated as “India.” We must, however, recall that not too long before Sharar’s time, *Hindustan* equally commonly, if not more so, referred to a smaller, culturally defined area of North India, namely the doaba or the Gangetic plain of Uttar Pradesh. The area was perceived as culturally and linguistically distinctive—frequently, even normative—not only by its residents but also by many other people across India. The narrower meaning of *Hindustan* was functionally prevalent in both Hindi and Urdu throughout the 19th century. One quotation from Syed Ahmad Khan can exemplify both uses:

“The Bengalis, our brothers in Hindustan, are the pride of all communities [qaum]; they have struggled and produced a dozen ‘civilians’ [i.e. civil servants]. But their brothers, be they of any country [mulk]—

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4 For some useful information on how the British historians and cartographers struggled with the two meanings of *Hindustan*, see Ian J. Barrow, “From Hindustan to India: Naming Change in Changing Names,” in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 26:1 (April 2003), 37-49.