

ARTICLE

Quarantined histories: Sindh and the question of historiography in Colonial India—Part II

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Abstract

This essay examines histories of colonial British India and the annexation of Sindh in 1843 from two perspectives. The first is the colonial historiographic project that frames the history of Islam in India, creates an archive for its study, and produces the political and military dominance of Sindh. Fundamentally, it argues that Muslims in India cannot produce their own histories for they lack the language and archives for scientific objectivity. In response, a set of Indian intellectuals take on the project of writing histories of Sindh from the 1890s to 1950s. These histories are written in direct dialogue with the colonial archive and insist on their engagement with social scientific methodologies and tools. In re-thinking this past, the essay argues that vernacular historiography was itself deemed un-scientific by modern South Asian historians and abandoned as not “proper history.” This essay thus reflects on the after-effects of a truncated conversation on history for both anti-colonial thought and histories of anti-colonialism.

1 | INTRODUCTION

As the British colonial project of collecting the archive for, and writing the history of Islam in India, matured in the late 19th century, there was a serious response that emerged from Muslim historians writing in Urdu, Persian and in vernacular languages, such as Sindhi. In this second part of the essay, I turn towards these historians and show how they incorporated the modes of history writing (positivist and empiricist) and formal elements (footnotes, bibliographies). Finally, I reflect on the ways in which these vernacular histories remained undigested and quarantined within the field of South Asia historiography.

2 | A SCIENCE FOR THE HISTORY OF SINDH

The foundation of the science of history was firmly established, by the late 19th century, in Berlin, Paris, and London—by luminaries such as Edward Gibbon, Leopold von Ranke, Thomas Carlyle, and Gustave Le Bon. The works of these thinkers—influential as it were on the colonial regime—also circulated widely among the colonized Indian intellectuals and shaped their responses to the synthetic works of British historians. As already discussed, European thought held

little regard for the Indian mind as bearing historical consciousness. The organizations, colleges, and journals unveiled in the late 19th century were not welcoming to Indian historians—though they did publish in them—once they had mastered English language.

This second point is worth pausing over for its epistemological significance. While German, French, Italian, or English languages were organically “scientific”—the Oriental languages had to create vocabularies for scientific and social scientific thought (Elishakry, 2013). With Persian, we can trace some shift in colonial understanding—tied as it were to the status of Persian as the administrative language of the Mughal regime. Persian was understood as a language capable of containing history at the beginning of the 19th century. James Mill concludes as such after a lengthy discussion on the inferiority of Hindus in his 1817 *History of British India*: “But the grand article in which the superiority of the Mahomedans appears is history... Of this most important branch of literature the Hindus were totally destitute. Among the Mahomedans of India the art of composing history has been carried to greater perfection than in any other part of Asia” (Mill, 1820, p. 648). This conclusion by Mill rested upon his examination of Alexander Dow's 1768 translation—from Persian into English—of Firishtā's *Tar'ikh* written in 1610 CE. Mill had famously declared in his preface that he did not know any Oriental languages or felt the need to visit India to write his history—for the evidence of the past could only be disinterred at some distance by disinterested minds.

By the mid-19th century, the assessment was different. Elliot, introducing his translations of Persian histories, warned:

against the blunders arising from negligence and ignorance; the misquoting of titles, dates, and names; the ascriptions to wrong authors; the absence of beginnings and endings; ... Besides which, we have to lament the entire absence of literary history and biography, which in India is devoted only to saints and poets. Where fairy tales and fictions are included under the general name of history ... full of “set phrases and inflated language” (Elliot, 1867, p. xviii-xxi).

The case against Persian, and Urdu, as languages imprecise, superfluous, and un-scientific grew stronger for colonial observers as more translations were published. Postans, Eastwick, and Burton—mentioned earlier—all published translations where they declared that the texts had to be corrected to get rid of such expressions.

The net effect of this paradigm—as well the infrastructure of colonial knowledge machinery—meant that Indian intellectuals moved by the 1860s into writing in English. Cynthia Talbot notes the case of Kavi Raj Shyāmal Dās who was one of the very few historians whose work was translated from Hindi into English and published in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1886–88. Dās, Talbot notes, “highlights his engagement in the most fundamental task by the standards of modern historiography: the verification of source material” ... with an emphasis on facts, dates, and usage of epigraphic and archeological evidences (Talbot, 2015, p. 223-229). However, figures such as Dās remain rare—for these are individuals writing histories in Persian, Urdu or Hindi—generally were not picked up by colonial scholarly apparatus.

It is against this intellectual background that a genealogy of techniques of history writing as a modern discipline start to take shape in vernacular languages like Urdu and Sindhi. Scholars of Urdu literature generally comment on Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898)'s 1839 *Jam-i Jam* and his *Asar al-Sanadid* (1847 and 1854) as likely candidates for the transition from the tradition of Persian historical writing to that of the new disciplinary history (Naim, 2010; Lelyveld, 1978).

Where *Jam-i Jam* was a genealogical table of Mughal rulers, the second was a massive account of archaeological and biographical history of Delhi before and after the 1857 revolution. Explicit in Khan's texts is the profound work of historical inquiry—the amassing of Persian and Arabic primary sources—to understand Delhi's landscape. Khan went on to publish critical editions of key Persian histories—from Abul Fazl's *Ai'n-e Akbari* to Ziauddin Barni's *Tar'ikh-i Firuz Shahi* (1862). However, Khan remains less interested in the formal characteristics of social-scientific work, and it is only in the next generation of scholars and intellectuals (many of them Khan's students from Muhammadan Anglo College founded by him in 1875) that we can trace the birth of this social science.

Thus, I wish to present a set of Indian intellectuals here who produced histories of Sindh as historians. These intellectuals had vast and diverse types of productions in fields such as theology, poetry, literary criticism, social reform, philology, and fiction. However, I am not interested in recuperative gestures—either for the personalities or their histories. Instead, I am looking for the development of a social scientific knowledge that critically reflects historical consciousness as a response specifically to the colonial project.

Let me begin with Shibli Naumani (1857–1914). Naumani was a colleague of, and studied with, the Arabist Thomas Walker Arnold at Aligarh. In 1892, at the prompt of Syed Ahmad Khan, Naumani began to research and write correctives to the European scholarship on Muslim histories—and until 1898, Naumani produced a plethora of articles directly engaging various questions on Muslim historical past. Naumani wrote solely in Urdu and Arabic. In 1910, he institutionalized this effort under the “Department to Correct Errors in History” (*seeghey tashih aghlat-e tari'khi*) with his student Syed Sulaiman Nadvi (1884–1953). Naumani, largely in a response to W. W. Hunter's writing, took on the historical period of early Islam, and the historical geography of Arabia and India as his domain for history writing. He produced a set of historical biographies on figures from early Islam—on the Prophet Muhammad and the Caliph 'Umar, for example—taking as his cue Thomas Carlyle's 1841 “On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History” that he accessed via an Arabic translation. The history of Sindh was an important part of Naumani's task, and he wrote numerous articles on it. More importantly, he was instrumental in provoking a set of his students, as I will detail below, in writing on Sindh.

Alongside Carlyle, Naumani also read Arabic and Urdu translations of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, Silvestre de Sacy's *Relation de l'Égypte*, and Louis Sédillot's *Histoire Générale Des Arabes* (Nadvi, 1989, p. 114–117). In his 1899 preface to his study of the second Caliph of Islam 'Umar bin Khattāb, *al-Farūq*, Naumani laid out the philosophy of history guiding his work. History, he argued, “should be an account of the cultural, social, ethical and religious” events of a particular period and that “cause and the chain of effect must be traced in recounting all events” (Naumani, 1952, p. 29). The lack of such social history, Shibli noted, was the limitation of historical writing by the “ancients”—where only the accounts of the notable and royal were recorded. Naumani credits the 14th century historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) with having introduced a philosophy of history in his *Muqaddima* but Muslim historians failed to taken up a Khaldunian method—though they had robust methods of attestation, source-criticism, and proper attribution. Naumani praises the “greatest historical writer that modern Europe has produced and who is the originator of the current style, Ranke” (Naumani, 1952, p. 36). “A historian who,” Naumani re-quotes someone, “did not use Poetics in History. He was not sympathetic to any country, any religion or any nation. From his narration of the event, one cannot tell what pleases him or what are his personal believes” (Naumani, 1952, p. 36). These sentiments concerning a historian's objectivity, produced with clear admiration, serve as a guiding light to Naumani who condemns colonial historians for their biases. Naumani cautions against “Europe's excesses” where historians “narrate an event in such a matter that it is moulded with their personal judgement” (Naumani, 1952, p. 37).

Naumani's efforts at creating a “scientific” history was matched by his contemporary Muhammad Zaka'ullah (ca. 1832–1910), a prominent translator, teacher, and writer. He taught mathematics at Delhi College. He later worked in the colonial department of education as a teacher of Persian and Urdu in various cities in the North Western Provinces for 36 years. His *Tāri'kh-i Hindustān* was first published in 1875—and then a revised edition was published in 10 volumes in 1897 and 1898. Zaka'ullah begins with a 64-page *Muqaddima-i Tar'ikh* (Prolegomena for History) where he lays out his case for writing this history. Zaka'ullah discusses medieval Muslim historians like Tabāri and Balādhurī and, especially, Ibn Khaldun and his philosophy of History. He then describes the necessary conditions for being a historian: to be of good faith; to quote accurately from primary sources closest to the event; to avoid praise or condemnation of historical subjects; to write in accessible prose; and to be ethical and honest and not profit from the selling of History (Zaka'ullah, 1998, p. 14–15). It echoes the case laid out by Naumani and is similarly based on Ibn Khaldun's philosophy. This counter to the Hegelian criticism of Indian thought, however does not come with a complete damning of all European intellectual history. Instead, after his discussion of Muslim historians, Zaka'ullah turns to discussing the philosophy of history since Herodotus through Francis Bacon, Hegel, Carlyle, Freud, Voltaire, and Mill. Each are presented with critical engagement and both the benefits and pitfalls discussed.

With regards to British colonial historiography, Zaka'ullah makes a point to meditate on their condemnation of Muslim historiography as lacking objectivity or having highly ornate and “unscientific” language—both claims that Zaka'ullah counters. Towards the first objection, Zaka'ullah points out that the colonial historians excerpt, digest, and de-contextualize Persian sources such that they conform to the bias of the colonial historian *himself*. Further, as the object of inquiry is made to be “Islam” or “Muslim” in the abstract, it is rhetorically impossible for the colonial episteme to take any Muslim history as “objective.” With these two counters, Zaka'ullah, turns to the claim for History as a “science.” This, Zaka'ullah notes, is not as straight forward as the colonial writers have argued—for history as a social science cannot replicate or reproduce from data (Zaka'ullah, 1998, p. 39). Zaka'ullah's answers to the colonial critique are both incisive and illuminating. They provide a clear window into the grim reality of a Muslim intellectual, even one employed by the colonial state, to think outside of the systems of colonial knowledge formation.

The central concern animating Zaka'ullah, however, was Elliot's *History*. Zaka'ullah translates and reproduces a large section from Elliot's introduction's where Elliot criticizes historical thought in Islam and replies: the task of criticism cannot simply be pointing out lacks; rather, it must be to engage directly and honestly with the other perspective (Zaka'ullah, 1998, p. 40–45). On this ground, Zaka'ullah condemns Elliot and states that the project itself—the writing of Muslim history of India using Muslim sources—needed to happen in Urdu. Hence, Zaka'ullah takes Elliot's chronology, re-reads the primary Persian sources, frames his source-criticism, and writes with the generalized historical voice of Hunter and Smith. Zaka'ullah begins his history of India with the history of the region of Sindh—relying largely on Persian histories such as *Chachnama* and *Tari'kh-i Masumi*—and emphasizes the social and cultural milieu of the eighth century by telling stories gathered from various contemporary accounts. Zaka'ullah's universal history, taking up Elliot and Hunter, did not share the philological and archaeological techniques of his contemporaries. This task was taken up by Khudadad Khan (1841–1903), Mirza Kalichbeg Fredunbeg (1853–1929) and later, U. M. Daudpota (1897–1958) and Nabi Baksh Khan Baloch (1917–2011).

The Sindhi intellectual Khudadad Khan came from a long established Afghani family in Sukkur. At the very young age of 15, while studying at a seminary, he caught the eye of Major Goldsmid, the Inspector of Schools in Sindh and was employed as a munshi in the Judicial court of Shikarpur in 1856. A Second Class Extra Assistant Collector' in 1880, he retired in 1899 after more than 40 years of service. In this official capacity, he was asked to record the histories of various cities and places in Sindh and environs. Under the orders of the Commissioner of Sindh, he compiled histories of Jesalmir, Makran, Persian Gulf, Khairpur, Makli, Khaliq, Mangho Pir, Shah Bilawil, Lahoot, Karachi, Lal Otero, Mir Masum's Minar, Shah Khairuddin, Bakhar Fort, Rahmaki Bazar, Khairpoor, and many more. These were written in Sindhi, translated into English by the Government translator, and both versions were published and distributed among the British officials in Sindh and elsewhere. Khudadad Khan excavated new Persian histories to compile his accounts. His contemporary history of Sindh, *Lub Tari'kh-i Sindh* was published in 1900. It aimed to incorporate material history into dynastic history with the use of extensive walks, visits to ruins and tombs, and engagements with local Sindhi and Baluchi histories. The usual histories available, Khan notes, do not focus their entire attention on Sindh, and a detailed political and cultural history of the land is needed for students and enthusiasts. Khan's innovation was to bring the epigraphic and material history of Sindh and to reframe the pre-British history alongside the British colonial state. In re-situating geography to history, Khan's history becomes an important model for the subsequent generation.

Another Sindhi intellectual, Kalichbeg Ferdunbeg, was employed, like Zaka'ullah and Khudadad Khan, by the colonial state. He retired in 1909 as a Deputy Controller. In addition to his translations of Shakespeare, Dickens, Doyle, Carnegie into Sindhi, he produced the first English translation of *Chachnama*, the 13th-century Persian history of Sindh, in 1900. He opens his preface thusly: “There is a real need for a good history of Sind. As it requires an abler hand to write such a history, I thought of furnishing materials for it, in the form of bare historical facts, collected and translated from some Persian manuscripts which are mostly unknown to the public, and often difficult to obtain” (Fredunbeg, 1985, p. i). His colleague, Dayaram Gidumal, assessed the previous works by Postans and Elliot as well in the introduction: “The so-called translation by Lieutenant Postans is no translation at all, as Sir H. Elliot has pointed out ... Elliot's own extracts, though copious, are a very small part of the book. The present translation, therefore, is really the first, and in order to make it completely independent, the translator has not even looked at Postans' work

or Elliot's" (Fredunbeg, 1985, p. v). Kalichbeg's markedly "independent" translation formed the first volume of his *Tari'kh-i Sind* and in the second volume he provided fuller accounts from medieval and early modern Persian histories, in order to re-create the archive for doing the history of Sindh.

The synthetic history of Sindh came from 'Abdul Halim Sharar (1860–1926). Sharar is commonly understood to be the first writer of Urdu historical novels. Though he was much more: he wrote a total of 25 historical novels, eight social novels, 24 biographical works, 21 histories, 2 dramas, 4 collections of poetry, 8 translations into Urdu, and steered 10 different journals at various points of his life.¹ One of his key publications was the journal *Dil Gudaz* which he started in 1887. Sharar's writings in *Dil Gudaz* ranged from essays to translations to commentaries on historical matters. Sharar's intention was to both create new genre forms and to distill history into various forms as a critical resistance to the social scientific archive arrayed against him. As he writes, introducing his first historical novel in 1888:

Up to this time in Urdu, many original novels as have been written, none have attempted anything based on any historical events and they have only made use of fantastical stories... But, in this novel, great care has been taken so that history will not in any way leave our grasp. For this reason the difference between this novel and other original Urdu novels is basically the same difference between truth and lies. I do not claim that everything written in it is true, but there is also no doubt that whoever looks at this novel will become intimately familiar with one part of history (Sharar, 2011, p. 141).

To be intimately familiar with history, was to re-think the ways in which Indian past was asserted. Sharar's efforts were multi-valenced and wide-ranging. He read, and quoted, the research published in the Royal Asiatic Societies of Bengal and Bombay. He directly engaged with Hunter and with Smith. His text used standard practices of footnoting, block-quotes, commentary and responses. To assert his perspective, he returned to sources both cited in the original and others from his own research. In 1907, Sharar began to serialize *Tarikh-e Sindh* in *Dil Gudaz*. Why write about Sindh? Sharar frames it thusly in his introduction:

It must be strange for the readers to see us leave aside all of Hindustan and focus on a unknown region of the country; one to which one may never have visited nor know much contemporary news. But the truth is that Sind is the only place in Hindustan to which we must focus. Because no other part of this country has been more abused by British authors than this one (Sharar, 2011, p. 141).

Sharar's effort to correct this history of Sindh relied on the personal archives and libraries of the Muslim nobility—such as the Nizam of Hyderabad, who also sponsored this text. Sharar combined Arabic and Persian sources for his history and also focused much more significantly on political world of Iraq and Iran. His footnotes capture his efforts to engage with both European and Muslim histories, and while he strives to maintain readability, he takes on Naumani's call for source-criticism and an effort to understand causality in history. He thinks against the sources, such as by criticizing *Chachnama's* version of a key event as wrong. He then denounces the British historians for not being critically engaged with the primary source-material and spreading the wrong history:

This account, found only in the Chachnama, became so popular in eastern and Persian histories that nearly every author reported it. It is even found in Firishta's Tar'ikh—an author who can be relied upon for his strenuous research. English historians, who rely only on Persian histories, have also re-produced this account. Elphinstone writes in his history that "all Muslim historians support this." The History of Elphinstone was taught for decades in courses and this account was so dearly propagated by the English historians that every child in Hindustan can recite it (Sharar, 2011, p. 141).

Sharar's speaking back to the English historians was echoed by Naumani's student Sulaiman Nadvi in his introduction to Abu Zafar Nadvi's *Tari'kh-i Sindh* published in 1947:

Rare are the histories of India written by the English which are free of political bias. Their purpose is to spread distrust between the Hindus and Muslims; to cause the Muslims to degrade their feelings about

their own past in this country; and to valorize the British state. In these English histories, there is much confusion for Muslim readers, and small details are made into paradigms of hate. These histories have entered the school curriculum and shape the minds of children such that even Indian historians are reproducing these biases and mistakes. It is true that no state is free from fault, nor any history free from bias, but we still require a careful study of the Muslim past reveals the strengths and the weaknesses of Muslims in India (Nadvi, 1970, p. 13).

Later, Sharar's two volume *Tarikh-i Hind* was commissioned in 1918 to become the standard textbook for Osmania University students. Nadvi's efforts resulted in a significantly new histories of India written with Arabic and Persian sources and without any engagement with the British sources.

The struggle against the colonial effort was then to present a history able to build upon the primary sources of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit. New philological projects were launched to create archives for re-thinking the history of Sindh. The Sindhi historian 'Umar bin Muhammad Daudpota made a critical edition of *Chachanama* in 1939 and work began on assembling critical editions of other Arabic and Persian works. Another Sindhi historian Nabi Baksh Baloch worked with the Sindh Adabi Board (founded in 1951) and published over 40 translations from Persian into English or Sindhi alongside critical editions of Sindhi, Persian and Arabic texts. In the main, these new histories re-argued the arrival of Islam in 712 CE and used historically contemporary sources to demonstrate that the Muslim practices of warcraft or statecraft were nuanced and beneficial; they produced both a history which was understood within social scientific discourse, and that engaged the imagination of the readers.

3 | QUARANTINED HISTORIES

My interest in thinking about the relationship between history and geography led me to re-assess these set of particular vernacular histories of a particular space. As I read these histories, and noticed their efforts to organize themselves as a science, I began to look at contemporary scholarship. I wanted merely to find in contemporary intellectual history a reading about these texts and the world of these Muslim intellectuals. I have attempted here to provide an intellectual framework to understand how and why these histories came to be written in the colonial period.

The texts discussed here are quarantined histories in the field of South Asia. What happened to this genealogy of Muslim historiography? I say "what happened" for we have seemingly lost sight of them in contemporary historiography. Zaka'ullah, Naumani, Sharrar, Nadvi, Kalichbeg are names relegated to literary, theological or vernacular domains of inquiry. These vernacular texts are rarely, if ever, cited for "being historians"—hence, neither their analysis nor their engagement with the sources is part of the historiography of South Asia. Their provenance condemns them to being seen as "sectarian," or non-disciplinary. The vast archives of Persian and Arabic texts, philologically assembled, at Sindh Adabi Board, Darul Musanafin, and Nadwatul Ulama are rarely called upon. They exist in print—are often reprinted in fact—but rarely consulted.

The study of Sindhi past was relegated as a study of vernacular thought in the vernacular (Sindhi or Urdu). Though immense historians and philologists—Nabi Baksh Khan Baloch (1917–2011) and Mubarak Ali (1941)—continued to produce scholarship on Sindhi history, their work was never integrated into broader histories of South Asia. The history of India, post-independence, has progressed along different geographic lines, and the fate of languages as necessarily "scientific" for historical inquiry is different for different regions. Not without troubles, and not to any grand success, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, and Tamil language histories did find purchase in modern South Asian historiography. However, the point is not to place Urdu or Sindhi histories within a regional, nationalist paradigm. Rather, the effort here is to excavate a genealogy of knowledge production that remains invisible.

What happened to the histories of Sindh? I argue that Sindh is a critical space for the British colonial project and its geography (both medieval and modern) necessitated the writing of its history. Sindh, that major concern of colonial framing of India, was also partitioned in 1947, and the ports and cities ended in Pakistan. Sindh is a geographic space with two millennia long relationship with Arabia and West Asia but sliced alone becomes relegated to the deep medieval past. The

Sindh of Pakistan is theoretically far from the Gujarat of India, the Hadramaut of Yemen and the Musandam of Oman. To study this region, as with any other geographic entity, the historian must move across the space to its neighboring spaces and see the movement of humans and objects and texts and the ways in which it observed even as it was being observed. The modern history of Sindh, however, is driven by the colonial gaze and the ways in which they framed the geography. In the nationalist imagination of Pakistan, it became a troubled, rebellious space post 1971, and though evoked for its connection to Arabia, it is merely the land of Sufi saints and poets—all thought in ahistorical terms.

The framing for the study of medieval history emerge out of contemporary crisis—one recent example is the opening frame of Munis Faruqi's excellent study of Mughal Princes. It opens with the 1992 demolition of the 16th century Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. "I watched my television screen in shock and horror as the violence unfolded," Faruqi writes that the event, "prompted me to wonder" the relationship between the medieval Indian past and the modern violence in front of his eyes (Faruqi, 2012, p. 1). Faruqi's example can easily be supplanted by a large number of scholarly works on South Asian history which were direct responses by the authors to their political present. Yet, thinking about this as intellectual history would raise the necessary query: How did the Indian historians of the late 19th or 20th century respond to their political presents? That history would not include the individuals discussed here for their "Muslimness" would overpower their claims to social scientific knowledge. Zaka'ullah's rebuttal that the colonial epistemé that cannot grant objectivity to what is constituted as a subject of history itself remains unanswered. There are grave consequences to this partitioned past and these quarantined histories. The study of medieval past—the main task of these many historians—has lost its histories of their many presents.

ENDNOTE

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