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AIPS Post-grant report

Thanks to an old colonial policy of shipping to the metropole at least one copy of every work published in British India, the India office of the British Library in London is a treasure trove of colonial-era documents. When I proposed to visit the archive with the support of AIPS, I expected to find dozens of travel works relevant to my dissertation research dating from as early as the 1850s (the vernacular holdings of the India office are not catalogued electronically, making a visit essential even to ascertain what is available.) What I found, instead, were hundreds of accounts, the majority of which I have not found referenced in any existing literature on travel writing or Urdu literary history. The entirety of my two months' time in London found me engaged in exploring this massive collection.

The nature and quantity of the material I collected while in London had a profound impact on the initial findings of my research. In my application, I proposed that Urdu travel writing, despite the odds, continues to exist as a thriving branch of Urdu literature, and that an exploration of this corpus and the ways in which Pakistani authors engage with the world and present it to readers would reveal the softer side of that country's negotiation of its national identity and place in the world. That it would allow the researcher to trace out new models of cultural and political connections between Pakistan and India, the Middle East, and beyond. And finally, that it would point to an enduring, yet ignored, nexus between Urdu literature and socio-cultural history of Pakistan.

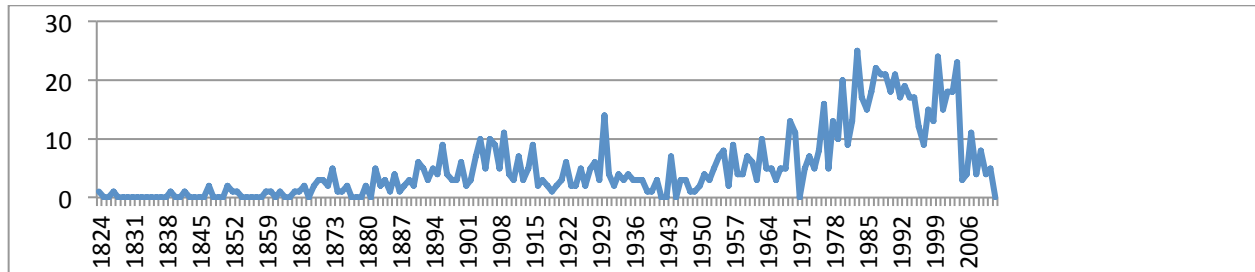
Of course, the tradition of travel writing greatly predates the creation of Pakistan. By 1947, an increasingly popular, even fashionable, inclination to write down the experiences of one's journeys and present them to an avid reading public had morphed from being perceived as an 'unliterary' exercise appropriate to the needs of a geographical society to becoming a recognized *sinf-i adab*, a literary genre.

During this slow transformation, travel writing in Urdu acquired its own unique characteristics and conventions, as well as a history that would emerge as a source of intertextuality and as an anchor or reference point for later authors. For this reason, the story of contemporary Pakistani travel writing must be told with reference to the evolving and involved tradition of travel writing which constituted it. Lamentably, this history is non-existent in academic literature, in English, and to a slightly lesser extent, Urdu. My work at the British library in London was a crucial first step in writing that history.

As I noted above, the historical and literary record I found in London greatly exceeded my expectations, and could not be exhausted within a limited two-month time frame. A brief reference to the numbers will provide a sense of the opportunity – as well as the challenge – that this collection provides to the researcher. Taking into account only pre-partition works, the British Library contains 145 travelogues in Urdu, the earliest of which was written in 1827. Of these works, I was able to see over one hundred, and to read sixty in detail. In addition to these Urdu works, there are also some dozen works in Indo-Persian. The languages of Gujarati, Hindi and Panjabi are also represented, with some two hundred works between them (an important data point, given that in the colonial period the division between languages was far less pronounced than today; it should eventually be asked how these various traditions of travel writing interacted with one another, or responded to the same stimuli.)

In short, by the figures alone, it became clear that I would need to reevaluate and expand our current understanding of the scale and the timetable of the production of travel writing in Urdu. Using the information I collected during my time at the British Library, and integrating it with previously collected data on the publication of travel writing in Urdu by year, I have been able to plot the production of travel writing base on a data set of nearly 2,000 works (due to the nature of my sources, data after 2004 is incomplete.) Previous to this research trip, the number of known works produced before 1920 that I could find available in online catalogues, reference and academic works, and

American archives was around 30-40. The current number, then, (~200) represents a significant increase in the amount of information at my disposal as I conduct my research.



Quantitative statistics, while to some extent useful for tracking patterns in the development of a literature, are of course only of limited utility in a field that is inherently qualitative. The above, then, is provided primarily to convey a sense of the amount of material and the scale of its relevance to the study which I outlined in detail in my proposal. The popularity of destinations, the number of copies printed, years when the field of travel writing was most prolific, which areas produced the most travel writers: all of this can be statistically analyzed, but the ideas and ideologies inherent in travel writing remain impervious to statistical models and are the heart of my work. I turn to them now.

While it would be difficult to go into great detail regarding all of the travelogues that I read while in London, it may be interesting to draw out some of the tentative conclusions that I have reached regarding the development of the *safarnama* as a literary genre. In the first place, it seems that one must throw out, or at least invert, the idea that a ‘Muslim tradition of travel writing’ consonant with the likes of Ibn Battuta, Ibn Jubair or Nasir-i Khusrau provides a significant inspiration to write travel literature in Urdu. As my reading of both the Indo-Persian and Urdu corpus in London now suggest, the majority of that impetus does seem to come from colonial incitement or prescription. Indeed, I found that many, if not all, of the earliest travelogues available in Urdu either 1) recount the travels of an Indian in the employ of a British Patron, 2) were written at the behest of a British friend, or 3) were translated from various languages by British men stationed in India to “lighten the damage done” by

“religious and cultural traditions that discourage travel.”<sup>1</sup> It is in fact only later, in the 1880s and beyond, that you begin to find references to classical Arab and Persian travelers, or citations of *ahadith* and *ayaat* in favor of, *dar fava'id-i*, travel.

One must also reconsider the modes and routes of travel, as well as the purposes of writing. Based on the works available in the US, it seemed that there was a tendency for travelers to write primarily about Europe and to do so for an audience that would be unlikely itself to ever go. The new data I have collected suggests that in fact the tradition of travelogue-cum-guidebook emerged much earlier than I had understood, and that the destinations of travelers varied far more widely than initial studies seemed to suggest. In fact, travelogues about Arabia predominate, and China and East Asia, along with Burma, also quickly emerged as sites of interest. But there is also a preponderance of travel writing on India itself, much of which seems to do the work of creating and unifying a nation that was struggling to assert itself during the independence movement. This would come to have interesting corollaries in post-47 Pakistan. There is also a quick turn from providing geographical information to material of a more cultural nature. Finally, during the 1930s and 40s, the truly literary elements of travel writing as a site of creative expression emerged to cater to the tastes of those who read for aesthetic pleasure.

The massive amount of material and the limited amount of time I had to go through it meant that the two months that I was in London were dominated by the rush to access and take extensive notes on as many works as possible. Since my return from London, and for the near future, I have been and will continue to work systematically through the notes that I took, to begin to extract a more nuanced narrative from the data. This will form the basis of my dissertation, and will provide the

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<sup>1</sup> *Safarnama Mungo Park Sahib ka*, Agra Orphan Press, 1842.

necessary literary and historical information to conduct a further analysis of travel writing in the post '47 period. Were I able to know that the archive in the British Library was so immense, I would have planned to spend several more months there to have the time to read into more documents in greater detail.

Luckily, I am still at the beginning of my research and I will surely return to London again soon to further the work that I began this summer.