A Persian Hymn to Vārāṇasī: Preliminary Notes on the Poetics of "Idolatry" in Matan Lāl Āfarīn's *Kāshī istut* (1778-9)

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Hâl kâfir zülf kâfir çeşm kâfir el-aman
Ser-beser ıklîm-i hüsnün kâfiristân oldu hep

An unbeliever the mole, an unbeliever the curl and the infidel eye:
the entire kingdom of your beauty has become a land of idolaters

Nedîm (d. 1730)[*]

According to Osip Mandel'štam (1891-1938), the eighteenth century could be compared to a dried-up lake, where what was lying on the bottom became apparent on the surface (Mandel'štam et al. 1990: 161). The great Russian poet was thinking of Neoclassicism and of the "vertigo" caused by the "transparency and emptiness" of the whirlpool-like concepts ("la Verité, la Nature, la Vertu", etc.) used by European intellectuals of the Enlightenment and, quite certainly, he had no particular idea of the literary dimensions of North India at the dawn of British colonisation. Alien as it may be, the apodictic image can nevertheless be easily adjusted to portray some central aspects of the contemporary intellectual landscape of Persianate South Asia, and indeed of the Persosphere[1] as a whole: a vast Eurasian seabed of "homeless

1   The term should be understood not only in its vague geographical meaning, but also in its theoretical dependence – as a critical declination – on Jurij Michajlovič Lotman's notion of *semiosfera* (Lotman 1984).

texts"[2] which, against any simplistic narrative of the decline,[3] show a still little-understood transregional vitality in recasting centuries-old concepts and relocating ancient protocols and ideas, "redrawing boundaries" from philology to comparative poetics, from *adab* to doxography and so on,[4] including, of course, the production of poetic texts. Among the several vertiginous ideas that the Persian-writing intellectuals of the long 18th century had to confront with one must include, no doubt, the powerfully productive binary conceptual field of "Islam" and "idolatry".

At the core of Persian poetic codes since the very formation of Persian literary culture in the multireligious contexts (Zoroastrian, Manichaean, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, etc.) of ninth and tenth century Central Asia,[5] the rich dialectics, semiotics and aesthetics of this dyad had already become an articulate hermeneutic tool at least by the time Sanā'ī of Ghazna (d. 1131) grafted the discourses of Sufism onto the tree of Persian courtly poetry. From then on, in the extremely diverse historical and geographical contexts of the expanding Persianate world, where poetry served as the primary tool of linguistic, literary and conceptual education and acculturation, the extensive field of images and tropes relating to "idolatry" was consistently reproduced and reshaped as a main framework for the textualization of historical experience. This is to say, briefly, that in the socio-textual dimensions of Persian, where poetic metaphors were the main lenses through which the "real" was codified and de-codified, the lavish conventions related to *but*s (idols), *ātashkada*s (fire temples), *chalīpā*s (crosses), *jaras*es (bells), *kinisht*s (synagogues),

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2 I draw once again on an almost abused expression of Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, in reference to the philological "elephant in the room" of entire textual traditions purged from modern national-exclusive canons, historiographies and taxonomies (Tavakoli-Targhi 1998 and 2001). We are talking about texts which have not only been progressively excluded from the "transregional library" described by Kevin Schwartz (2020a), but literally removed from any serious philological scrutiny (not to speak about critical editions) until very recently.

3 A recent discussion on the deficiencies of this narrative in literary history can be found in Schwartz (2020b: 35-80).

4 For some heterogeneous case studies and general considerations in the mentioned fields, see, for instance, Sharma (2009), Ernst (2013), Pellò (2016), Keshavmurthy (2016: 127-150), Kia (2020: 163-194). I mutuate the expression "redrawing boundaries" from Sharma (2012a).

5 The case of Buddhist iconography in Samanid and Ghaznavid Persian verse, very relevant for the early codification of several persistent aspects of "idolatry" (the very word *but*, as it is well known, is originally the Neopersian term for "Buddha"), has been discussed almost fifty years ago (unfortunately with no later developments) by Melikian-Chirvani (1974).

*rāhib*s (monks), *barahman*s (Brahmins) etc. had acquired, well before the eighteenth century, the magnitude of a phenomenology.[6] Through "idolatry"[7] and the vast related metaphorical field, a *longue-durée* poetic discourse on identity/otherness is built, as the evocative image of the *barāhima*, the "Brahmins" of Abbasid doxography used to symbolise the "opponent" in religious debates (Calder 1994), foreshadows with the vividness of an early icon. A discourse, to be sure, where polarities are perfectly reversible and, as it is well-known, commonly reversed, with the "fire-worshipper", the "idol", the "pagan belt" and so on becoming, in the conventional antinomian atmosphere of Persian Sufi poetry, the depositaries of sincere belief, absolute beauty and divine truths, and a mirror of the inner world of the poetic persona. Just to mention a couple of iconic cases from the 18th century, the Iranian poet Hātif of Isfahan could naturally bring to the scene, in his often-quoted strophic poem, a Christian boy, a Zoroastrian priest and a wine-drinker to explain the fundamental truths of Islamic *tawḥīd* to his own Muslim self (Hātif-i Iṣfahānī 1968: 18); and one of the main *taẕkira*s of the period could collect the biographies of contemporary poets in a virtual *ātashkada*, or fire-temple.[8] But any stability or predictable structure of the canon is, as the canon itself, in the eye of the beholding literary historian (and *taẕkira*-writer), and things become much less linear and reassuring as soon as we look elsewhere. Differently from Hātif of Isfahan, whose *tarjī'-band* was even translated by Edward Browne in his *Literary History of Persia* (Browne 1959: 292-97), the rich and diverse Persian poetic production of the emerging intellectual class of 18th-century Hindu *munshī*s in North India makes for a macroscopic example of what has never found its way in any later canon. Which is quite a philological disgrace, not only because the vitality and newness of their poetic output is by itself sufficient to crumble the above-mentioned narratives of decline: it also provides the textual scholar with an array of case studies where the theory and practice of interpretation through the

6   Well into the 1830s, these literary paradigms were consistently used to *ethnologically* interpret, for instance, the customs and beliefs of the non-Muslim peoples of the Hindukush (significantly known as the *"Kāfirs" tout court*), in a Persian ethnography of the area commissioned by a French general working for the Sikhs (see Holzwarth 1994; a monographic work on the subject by Alberto Cacopardo and myself is forthcoming).

7   For the amplitude of their theoretical scope, I consider the discussions in Flood (2009) among the most insightful explorations of the visual roots of this subject, at least as far the South Asian context is concerned.

8   Interesting perspectives on the ideas of Āzar's *Ātashkada* on the geography of culture can be found in Kia (2014).

"idolatry/belief" complex acquires unexpected scopes. In a context where, as the greatest of the Indo-Persian writers Mīrzā Bīdil already theorizes in the late 1600s, reality is thought of as *perceived* through (poetic) language and imagination,[9] it is indeed worth asking what it would mean for Hindu *munshī*s writing in Persian in the "new horizons"[10] of the 18th century to handle the vertigo of an almost 1000 years old poetic idea such as *butparastī* ("idolatry") and the related lexicon. The story of the "idolatric" line attributed to Chandar Bhān Barahman and its reception in later *taẕkira*s indicates quite emblematically, as Rajeev Kinra has shown,[11] how this kind of whirlpool-like tropes – to stay with Mandel'štam's image – could serve to discuss and/or vindicate the specific space and agency of Hindu secretaries within the rapid change of post-Aurangzeb Northern India. Other scholars have pointed out how the interaction of an historical "Hindu" subjectivity, a scribal education in Persian and an Akbarian reading of *bhakti* and Vedānta (or vice-versa), could produce extremely original syntheses both in poetical remakes of Sanskrit texts and philosophical descriptions of Indic religions, against a background where the very lemma *hindū* had been conjuring a cluster of literary images for at least eight centuries.[12]

I look here at one of these marginalized texts, the *Kāshī istut* (a phonetically Persianized variant of *kāśī stuti*, "Hymn to Vārāṇasī") by the Kāyastha *munshī* from Allahabad Matan Lāl Āfarīn, to introduce some aspects of the treatment of "idolatry" by a late eighteenth-century Hindu poet of Persian, but above all to present, as far as I know for the first time, an important Persian document on Vārāṇasī hitherto completely ignored by scholars (an unabridged English translation of which, along with a thourough study of the text, is now in preparation). In view of the intrinsic relevance of the material, I will focus, in this preliminary study, almost exclusively on the text, only adumbrating the social-literary context of transitions and experimentations that has recently been tackled by Francesca Orsini (2019), and whose stylistic interactions with *bhakti* have already been discussed, for the Urdu space, by Heidi Pauwels (2012).

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9 In Bīdil's own programmatic words: "Every image that you see is a word that you hear" (Bīdil 1965-66: 193). An articulate and still unstudied theory of language, very much connected to the semiotic dimensions of Persianate early modernity, is indeed contained in Bīdil's autobiography (Bīdil 1965-66: 193-197). A few relevant observations can be found in Pellò (2017).

10 I borrow the expression from a paper by Alam and Subrahmanyam (2012: 397).

11 See the discussion in Kinra (2015: 258-285).

12 I think here of Ernst (2016) and Pellò (2018).

The *Kāshī istut* is a Persian *maṣnawī* (poem in rhyming couplets) of ca. 2200 lines in the *hazaj-i musaddas-i maḥzūf* metre (‿ − − −/‿ − − −/‿ − −), excluding the incipit and the introductory lines of the various sections which are composed in the *sarī* metre (− ‿ ‿ −/− ‿ ‿ −/− ‿ −); it is an original poetic transposition of the Hindu religious landscape of Vārāṇasī in Persian verse, conjuring Sanskrit models such as the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, the *Kāśī-rahasya* or other *māhātmya*s, and containing an impressive amount of descriptions (sometimes very technical) of idols, temples, pilgrimages, devotees, ascetics, the Ganges and so on. The title, as declared by the author in the closing section, is a chronogram expressing the date of completion of the work, i.e. 1192 H, corresponding to 1778-9 CE (Āfarīn 1873: 43). Written around the times Warren Hastings was "asking" for Raja Chait Singh's financial support in the Anglo-French wars, the work was printed in Lucknow in 1873, after being edited by *munshī* Girdharī Lāl Asad, a relatively well-known Urdu poet, as we learn from the colophon of the book (Āfarīn 1873: 44); the latter has also added several explanatory notes in Persian, and the Devanāgarī transcriptions of the very abundant Sanskritic lexicon (generally proper names of places, deities and technical religious terms). We know very little, at present, about the author, Matan Lāl Āfarīn, quickly described by Asad as a Kāyastha *munshī* from Allahabad[13] and conventionally praised as a poet of "sweet expression" (*shīrīnbayān*), champion among those endowed with subtle imagination (*nāzukkhayālān*) (Āfarīn 1873: 44).[14] Āfarīn provides some information about his own personality and the text in the concluding chapter (31 *bayt*s) of the poem. Playing with the centuries-old semantic superimposition of the originally ethnographic image of the *hindū* and the colour black (with all their reciprocally resounding moral/religious implications),[15] he describes himself as a Hindu secretary with "dark beliefs", only superficially acquainted with Persian:

man-i hindūdabīr-i tīrarā'ī
zabān-i furs-rā ḥarfāshnā-ī

ba fann-i shā'irī da'wā nadāram
sar-ī dāram walī sawdā nadāram[16]

13　Āfarīn himself mentions Allahabad as his own birthplace in a celebratory line where the ancient name of the city, Prayāg (*parāg*), is also mentioned, against the background of a description of the main *tīrtha*s of the subcontinent (Āfarīn 1873: 5).

14　On the Persian and Urdu literary milieu of Āfarīn's Allahabad, portrayed in Abu 'l-Hasan Amr Allāh Ilāhābādī's *Tazkira-yi masarratafzā* (1781), see Faruqi (2007).

15　See, on the subject, the general discussion by J.T.P. de Bruijn (2004) and the closer observations by Meneghini (1990).

16　Āfarīn (1873: 43).

I [am] a Hindu secretary with dark beliefs
who knows just a few words of Persian.

I do not pretend to excel in the art of poetry:
I would like to, but there's no market for me.

The interwoven rhetorical self-humiliation of Āfarīn's poetic abilities
and moral virtues will continue for the next 11 lines, where the author
calls himself *badandīsh* (ill-thinker) and speaks about his ignorance (*jahl*),
yet, at the same time, states that understanding poetry is better than
composing it, because "being able to evaluate pearls is better than to
pierce them" (*buwad guharshināsī bih zi suftan*). While it should be pass-
ingly observed that the discourse on authority and connoisseurship
adumbrates the heated contemporary debates about the place of Hindu
*munshī*s (and Indian writers of Persian) within the rapidly transforming
Persosphere, the insistence on the "darkness" of Āfarīn's ideas, as well
as on his alleged "inability" to speak, rests on a diffused *topos* in the (self-
)representation of Hindus in late Indo-Persian texts.[17] In this context,
even the reference to his *jahl*, which is itself deemed black as "ink"
(*murakkab*), conceals a *talmīh* (allusion) to the correlated Arabo-Islamic
historical concept of *jāhiliyya*, the "age of ignorance" of pre-Islamic
Arabia, and contributes to introducing the *resumé* of the intents and
tones of the book occupying the final 16 lines. Āfarīn praises God (*khudā*)
for having ameliorated his *karman* (*kār*) by showing him the way to the
"circumambulation of the idols" (*ṭawf-i aṣnām*), i.e. the practice of the
pradakṣiṇā, and then explains his work as a textual visit of the sacred city:

nigāristān-i kāshī sayr kardam
ṭawāf-i har maqām dar dayr kardam

zadam naqsh u nigār-i dilnishīn-ī
ba nām-i har but-i nādirnigīn-ī

zamīn-i ḥusn-rā bunyād kardam
ki īn baytulṣanam ābād kardam[18]

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17 Just to name an example, the nineteenth-century *Tazkira-yi makhzan al-gharāʾib*
comments on the early Hindu poet of Persian Manohar Rāy Tawsanī's (16th c.)
accomplishments in Persian as follows: "that a babbling (*kajmajzabān*) Hindu could
sing melodies comparable to those of the Iranian nightingales is a very strange and
rare fact" (Sandīlawī 1968-1994: I, 425). The social history of this *topos*, adumbrating
rivalries and competitions among North Indian scribal classes at the dawn of British
colonisation, is still to be written (a few relevant observations can be found in Pellò
2016).

18 Āfarīn (1873: 43).

I have traversed the gallery-like city of Vārāṇasī,
in its temples I have circumambulated every station.[19]

I have drawn beautiful images and shapes,
in the name of every preciously engraved idol.[20]

I have laid the foundations of a land of beauty,
I have rendered delightful this 'House of Idols'.

Vārāṇasī, described through an accumulation of "idolatrous" lexicon
(the image of the *nigāristān-i kāshī* is modeled, for instance, on the
venerable *nigāristān-i chīn*, the mythical "portrait gallery of China" of
Buddhist-Manichaean memory, etc.), reproduces Mecca in the above
mentioned times of the *jāhiliyya*:[21] a pilgrimage there corresponds to a
pilgrimage to the capital of Ḥijāz in pre-Islamic times, when the Ka'ba,
the *bayt al-ḥaram* or *bayt allāh* ("House of the Inaccessible" or "House of
God"), was a "House of Idols".[22] Looking even more closely, Āfarīn is
actually saying that he has shown how the "House of Idols" of Vārāṇasī
means indeed the Meccan temple: in his own words, he has rendered it
ābād, an amphibological term literally meaning "cultivated", "peopled"
(here: "delightful") but also alluding, as one of her classic Persian
epithets, to the Ka'ba herself.[23] As a matter of fact, the pages of the poem

19 The term I translate with "station", *maqām*, obviously resounds with Sufi overtones,
    being technically the "stage" reached on the path of research; however, in this con-
    text, it is also a way to allude, with an interplay of technicalities, to the locative
    meaning of the *pitha* as the receptacle of the *mūrti/lingaṃ*, and, ultimately, of the
    garbhagrha, the inner sanctuary (and thus the "highest station") of the place of
    worship.

20 The line contains an interesting equivoque (*īhām*), used by Āfarīn also in other
    occasions in the text (see *infra* in this essay): *har* "every" can also be Har, "God", thus
    implying the alternative reading "in the name of Har, the preciously engraved idol".

21 The connection between the Indian idols of Vārāṇasī and the Ka'ba at the time of
    "ignorance" is, of course, a configuration of the rich poetic semiosis related to the
    foundational event of the sack of Somnath by sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna, famously
    textualised by his panegyrist Farrukhī, who identified the "idol" of Somnath (*sūma-
    nāt*) with pre-Islamic goddess Manāt (mentioned in *Qur'ān* 53:20). A summary with
    relevant bibliography can be found in Shokoohy (2012: 297-301 and *passim*).

22 Interestingly enough, the transformation here implied closely resemble the one de-
    scribed in a verse mentioned by Afżal al-Dīn Sarkhwush at the end of 17th century,
    and ascribed to "a Hindu author", in the context of the above seen discussion on
    Chandar Bhān Barahman's "idolatric" expression (see Kinra 2015: 264).

23 On the persistence of the image – here only adumbrated – of Vārāṇasī as the "Ka'ba
    of Hindustan", famously used by Ghālib in his *maṣnawī Chirāgh-i dayr* "The Temple's
    Light" (on which see Hyder 2006 and especially Zākirī and Ṣādiqī 2010: 106-115) and

are described a few lines later as virtual "temples" (*dayr*), giving joy to the soul of the Brahmins (*rawān-i barhaman*), and inhabited by the "idols of concepts" (*butān-i ma'ānī*); reading the *Kāshī istut* can, consequently, even substitute a pilgrimage, as is cleverly stated in two of the final *bayt*s:

> *nadīdastī agar shahr-i banāras*
> *ba sayr-i īnchunīn rangīnbanā ras*

> *ṭawāf-i ū ba mard-i pāk kirdār*
> *ba pāy-i dīda-yi ḥaqbīn sazāvār*[24]

If you have not seen the city of Vārāṇasī
come to the visit of this colourful construction!

Circumambulating it with the foot of truth-seeing eyes
is a suitable thing for men of proper conduct.

Āfarīn's above-mentioned reference to his own work as a place where the "House of Idols" becomes (equivalent to) the "House of God" can be read, indeed, as a significant historical statement on a specific poetic method: a discourse on identity (in the two diverging senses of "sameness" and "[self-]identification") is promoted through the linguistic and rhetorical means of comparison, superimposition, double entendre, allusion etc. This is, indeed, a political attitude of style very much in line with that shown by contemporary Hindu *taẕkira*-writers to locate their own socio-religious class in the heart of the literary community, namely "discovering" the pre-codification of "Hinduism" (scilicet "idolatry") within the Persian canons, which are thus enlarged and transformed. After all, Āfarīn is writing ten years after the completion of Lachhmī Narāyan's *Gul-i ra'nā*, the first Persian *taẕkira* including a separate volume for "idolater" (*aṣnāmī*, i.e. Hindu) authors and three years before the first edition of Mohan Lāl's *Anīs al-aḥibbā*, where the disciples of a famous master are divided among Muslim and Hindu (*az firqa-yi hunūd*), just to name two macroscopic examples of late 18th century "political" application of the trope of paganism.[25] Against this background, the programmatic laudatory incipit of the *Kāshī istut* leaves

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already explicitly present in Āfarīn (cf. *infra*), as well as several of the images analysed in this paper, see Lee (2012).

24 Āfarīn (1873: 43).

25 Various observations on these two *taẕkira*s and the relevant use of the "pagan" tropes in the textualisation of "Hinduism" by Hindu subjectivities in the long eighteenth century can be found in Pellò (2012: 152-161; 183-202).

little doubt about Āfarīn's ambitious attempt to thoroughly explore, and exploit, the vertiginous abyss of Persian poetic "idolatry":

ḥamd-i but-i butkada-yi lāmakān
ānki numūd īn hama nām u nishān

bāng-i nukhust-i jaras-i ān maqām
kun fayakun pardakash-i khāṣ u 'ām

farsh-i zamīn ṭālib-i pābūsī-ash
'arsh-i barīn rāhib-i nāqūsī-ash

barhaman-i 'ishq parastār-i ū
kawn u makān ḥalqa-yi zunnār-i ū

qashqa ba rūy-ash khaṭṭ-i lawḥ-i qadīm
bismillāhirraḥmānirraḥīm[26]

Praise be to the idol of the idol-temple of Placelessness,
who expressed all these names and these signs.

The first toll of the bell of that supreme station
is the "Be! And it is",[27] tearing the veil of high and low.

The carpet of the Earth is a student kissing his feet,
the highest Throne is a monk attending his bells.

The Brahmin of love is his devoted servant,
the existing universe is the loop on his *zunnār*[28]

The dot on his face is the inscription of the ancient tablet:
in the Name of God the Most Compassionate, the Merciful.[29]

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26 Āfarīn (1873: 2).

27 The sound of the idolatric bell of Āfarīn's "cosmic temple" is a famous Qur'anic expression (36:82 and other *loci*), *kun fa-yakūn*, describing God's creative power, or, better in our Suficate ontological context, his "putting into existence" (*ījād*) of realities.

28 The *zunnār*, originally the belt (ζωνάριον) worn by Byzantine monks and a conventional sign of "unbelief" in Persian conventions, is here, as common in Indo-Persian contexts, the Brahmanical thread (*yajñopavīta*).

29 An earlier, different translation of the first four lines can be found in Pellò (2018: 98). In particular, I prefer to translate *ṭālib* as "student" (lit. "the student of his feet-kissing"), instead of interpreting it primarily as part of a phrasal verb (*ṭālib* [-*ast*] "wishes") as in my previous translation, in view of the evident parallelism between this character (clearly evoking a *brahmacārin*, in a larger brahmanical metaphorical field) and the monk of the second emistich.

The resemblance of these lines with earlier poetic declarations of "idol-atry" from the 18th century, such as the opening section of Amānat Rāy's Persian *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, has already been emphasized (Pellò 2018: 96-98) and it is not necessary to return on it here, nor it is the case to insist on the complex metaphorical field – strangely familiar, or even uncanny (*unheimlich*, in Sigmund Freud's well-known terms) – plotted on the image of the cosmic idol.[30] Āfarīn's *bayt*s serve, at the same time, to signal the philosophical background of the poem – the usual Sufi-Vedantic declination of *bhakti* – and to mark an utterance of subjectivity, very much in line with the slightly later (1800) verse celebration of the *but*s by Sītal Singh Bīkhwud, writing on Hindu sects in Vārāṇasī and calling himself in a *ghazal* "the slave of the love of the idols", as already highlighted by Carl Ernst (2016: 466). After the incipit, the first line of the *maṣnawī* dedicates the poem to God (the cosmic *but*) calling him Hari and Rāma (*Har* and *Rām*), through the omnipresent technique of the *īhām* (equivoque, ambiguity):

> *ba nām-i ānki nām-i ū-st har nām*
> *ba farmān-ash zamīn u āsmān rām*[31]

> In the name of the one whose name is every name (or: whose name is Har)
> the earth and the sky are at his command (or: Rām)

The two double entendres are not at all new to North Indian literary cultures, but it is worth observing here that by the second half of the eighteenth century the second one had already even been exploited by another Hindu poet of Persian to describe his own poetic persona in his *takhalluṣ*.[32] More important than going into further details is, at this point, to recognize that this is a steady creative procedure all along the more than 2000 lines of the *Kāshī istut*: a continuous discovery of equiv-alences, correspondences, interplays, overlappings, evocations, allu-sions, etc., which is probably the most oustanding stylistic and concep-tual feature of Āfarīn's work. A continuous discovery, through lexical

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30 Āfarīn's reading of the *basmala* as the semantic content of the *tilaka* depicted on the forehead (*qashqa*) seems to imply a response to the contemporary critics lamenting the absence of the *basmala* itself from the Persian works of Hindu writers (as in Iftikhār's 1776 polemic against Siyalkotī Mal Wārasta: Iftikhār 1940: 5-6).

31 Āfarīn (1873: 2).

32 Lacchmī Nārāyan Shafīq talks about Lāla Rām Parshād, a poet who used the *takhalluṣ* "Rām", in his *Gul-i ra'nā*, emphasising the amphibological nature of the term, at the same time "a Persian word whose meaning is well-known" and "the name of a famous individual worshipped by Hindus" (Shafīq n.d.: 79).

choices and metaphorical constructions, of "idolatry" everywhere in the landscape of Vārāṇasī, which is here transposed on the textual level of relevant Persian poetic conventions: as explicitly stated in another *bayt* of the introduction, the sacred city is for Āfarīn a "palace-garden" (*bustānsarā*) where every "rose bud" (*ghuncha-yi gul*) is the bell (*nāqūs*) of the "temple" (*dayr*) of the "nightingale's love" (*'ishq-i bulbul*).[33]

Against this rhetorical background, the whole poem is informed by a remarkably technical approach: Āfarīn is very precise and even didactically philological in presenting the Hindu religious material at the centre of the *Kāshī istut*. The work is indeed, according to the above seen intentions of the author, a detailed poetic guide to the sacred city, and at the same time a long reflection on the phenomenology of devotion in a urban environment. The conventional approach, a standard in Indo-Persian ethnographic descriptions (Sharma 2012b), does not prevent Āfarīn to build what one would call a true dictionary of religious people, places, practices and beliefs in Persian verse. On the contrary, along with a consistent use of rhetorical figures of accumulation such as *murā'āt-i naẓīr* (congeries), *ishtiqāq* (polyptoton), *ḥusn-i taʿlīl* (fantastic etiology), *jinās* (paronomasia), *īhām* (ambiguity) etc., the *taḥayyur* (astonishment) of the observer is actively used as a strategy for the accomodation of a myriad of details in the text, very much in line with the poetic requirements of *tāzagūyī* (the "modern style" of Persian poetry) and its characteristic *khayālangīzī* (i.e. the "stream of consciousness" of the imagining Self). Thus, for instance, the prevalent etymology for Kāśī (< *kāś-* "to shine") is elaborated in a series of *bayts* where the "luminous" city is described as a "palace-garden of light" (*sarābustān-i nūr*), a "shining morning" (*ṣubḥ-i rawshan*) and contrasted to the dark "evening" (*shām*, also phonetically alluding to dark-skinned Kṛṣṇa as Śyāma) of the black land of kṛṣṇaite Vṛndāvana (*bindrāban*); the Durgākuṇḍ (*tālāb-i durgā*, the "pond of Durgā" where the Durgā temple was built in the 18th century), surrounded by "inebriated idols" (*butān-i mast*), becomes a blessed "mirror showing the world" (*āyīna-yi jahānnumā*) and transfigures into the Truth-revealing "cup" (*paymāna*) of the Jamshīd of Iranian mythology and Persian literary tradition;[34] the pure (*pāk, ṣāf*) waters of the

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33 Āfarīn (1873: 3). The search for analogies, as is well exemplified by the locus here mentioned, is realised first of all through the detection of rigorous isomorphisms in the cognitive experience, translated into the reproducible space-time of the *bayt*: the bell *is* the rose for its round shape, the "nightingale of love" *is* the invisible *bhakta* worshipper whose singing/praying is heard in the night.

34 The image of the prodigious mirror of Alexander/Iskandar is here superimposed,

Gaṅgā, where Āfarīn hopes his ashes (khākistar) will be dispersed to guarantee his mokṣa (the "purity of the pearl of the heart", ṣafā-yi gawhar-i dil), pass on the head of Mahādeva (mahādīv) showing the "first effervescence of the ocean of manifestation" (jūsh-i awwal-i baḥr-i ẓuhūr).

Almost every single line of the poem is built on this kind of procedures, including several quite technical sections such as the 91-bayts chapter devoted to the Brahmins of the city (Āfarīn 1873: 10-12) and the 114-bayts chapter devoted to temples and gods (Āfarīn 1873: 6-8). In the latter, the number of whose lines notably corresponds to that of the suras of the Qur'ān, Āfarīn incorporates more than forty names and epithets of deities (common ones such as Gaṇeśa, Śiva, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, but also more specific ones like Tarakeśvara, Bhairava, Lalitā, Rājeśvara etc.), often by hiding them in the Persian graphic layout. Such is, just to name an example, the case of Mahāmāyā, the name of one of the aspects of the Goddess, readable in the graphic layout of از او بس نامها ما یاد داریم (az ū bas nām⁽ᵃ⁾hā mā yād dārīm) "we have several names for her". This kind of complex rhetorical expediences can be found scattered all over the book[35] and clearly imply an audience highly trained both in Persian conventions and Hindu traditions. Similar considerations can be made for the interplay between the protocols of Persian urban poetics (descriptive strategies of buildings, gardens, markets, inhabitants etc.) and the sacred geography of traditional yātrās, as in the various chapters devoted to the pañcakrośī (panjkūs), the nagarapradakṣiṇā (nagarpardachhanā), the "forty-two liṅgas of Mahādeva" (bayālis liṅg-e mahādīv), the antargṛha (antargarhī) etc. (Āfarīn 1873: 23-26).[36]

In this context, the constant reference to the shahrāshūb genre of Persian poetry (the celebration of the "beauties" and characters of the urban professions and non-courtly environments)[37] stands out among the dominant notes of the Kāshī istut cityscape. While the whole poem abounds with references to typified urban characters, two important sections of the Kāshī istut are indeed technical shahrāshūbs, enumerating

following a common pattern, to the cup of Jamshīd, in view of their equivalent "revealing" nature, which is thus ascribed to this particular "mirror of water" in Vārāṇasī's topography.

35 Even the names of the Sūrsāgar collection and other connected cultural items, for instance, are introduced in the text with the technique of the "hidden word" (Āfarīn 1873: 15). On this kind of little studied rhetorical procedures see Meneghini (1987), who however deals exclusively with the influential poetry of Ṣā'ib-i Tabrīzī.

36 All in all, the Kāshī istūt offers a close poetical treatment of several of the practices related to pilgrimages dealt with, for instance, by Niels Gutschow (e.g. 1994: 197-205), with whose analyses the Persian text should be carefully paralleled and compared.

37 See, for the Indo-Persian context, Sharma (2004).

and describing in an orderly manner a quite impressive number of figures inhabiting the city streets. One, relatively conventional, focuses on Vārāṇasī's artisans, sketching not less than thirty-two different jobs, from the painter (*muṣawwir*) and the doctor (*ḥakīm*) to the milkman (*shīrfurūsh*) and the cobbler (*kafshdūz*); the other, very original and, to my knowledge, of unprecedented scope, portrays as much as twenty-three specific categories of Hindu ascetics (Āfarīn 1873: 13-16). In analogy with the strategies and the situations seen above, the *shahrāshūb* of the Hindu ascetics should be interpreted as an occasion to textualise an array of very precise devotional, philosophical and religious *realia* through the lenses of self-distancing exoticism and projected idolatry: in particular, the conceptual whirlpool of Persian poetic idolatry is here tackled by enlarging a particular declination of it, i.e. the very common "idolater" characters of Persian poetry, from the Zoroastrian *mūbad* to the Buddhist *shaman*, from the Christian *rāhib* to the *barhaman* himself, including of course a number of liminal Islamic figures such as the *qalandar* and the *darwīsh*.

A total of 148 *bayt*s, including 13 lines of introduction, are used to describe the various types of *faqīr*s (pl. *fuqarā*), as Āfarīn customarily calls them at the beginning of the chapter. The ascetic types (sometimes personified practices) studied include everything from the particularly revered *Rāmānandī* (see *infra*) to the *Ūrdhvabāhu* (*wurdabāhū*), the *Digambara* (*diganbar*) and the *Jaṭādhārī*. The lenght of the individual sections is not homogeneous: the longest one, containing the description of the masters of *samādhi* (*arbāb-e samādh*) has 20 lines, while several sections consists of just 3 *bayt*s. While deferring a detailed analysis of the whole chapter to a dedicated study, I limit myself here – before going to the conclusion – to a brief look at an exemplary case of poetic accommodation of Hindu ascetics and their very specific distinctive traits, doctrinal and performative, along the compositional lines discussed so far.

In the introductory lines (Āfarīn 1873: 13), the ascetics, preliminarily defined with formulas such as "truth-thinking" (*ḥaqandīsh*) and "pulp without peel" (*maghz-i bīpūst*), are collectively described with a long series of laudatory expressions embedding them into the well-known panorama of Persian poetic gnosis (*'irfān*): they are "the colour of the garden of Oneness" (*rang-i bahār-i bāgh-i tawḥīd*), "the smell of flowers in the rosebed of Purity" (*būy-i gul-i bustān-i tajrīd*), "the polishers of the mirror of the heart" (*rawshangar-i āyīna-yi dil*) etc. The inextricable interconnections with the perspective of Sufi aesthetics are very clearly visible and also quite predictable, in a context where, several decades before, another Hindu poet of Persian (he himself an ascetic, the *vairāgin*

Swāmī Bhopat Rai Bīgham), had already composed a long poetic work completely devoted to the Muslim and non-Muslim *fuqarā-yi hind* ("The ascetics of India", as it is also generally known), and the already mentioned Amānat Rāy, a disciple of the *qādirī* poet and philosopher Mīrzā Bīdil, had even written a Persian *bhaktamālā* in the shape of a *maṣnawī*, informed by a recognizable Akbarian approach.[38]

However, whereas both Bīgham and Amānat show a tendency to intertwine, in a linear fashion, the discourse on their *bhakta* saints with the omnipresent classical Sufi notion of *'ishq*, "love" – Bīgham, in particular, devotes the whole 114 *bayt*s of the opening section of his *maṣnawī* exclusively to describe *'ishq* (Bīgham 1868: 1-7) – Āfarīn's ascetics quickly take the specific colour of the above-described religious cityscape. Accordingly, the emphasis at the end of the introductory *climax* is placed on two crucial defining aspects: *saṃnyāsa* (renunciation), which is transposed on the Persian poetic level in a series of images where the Hindu *faqīr*s are described as having cut off "the image of avidity from their heart" (*naqsh-i āz az dil sutūrda*), untouched by worldly pleasures as "men who have not known the company of a woman" (*mard-ī k-ū nadīda ṣuḥbat-i zan*); and, especially, the *aṣṭasiddhi*, the "eight perfections" of classical tradition, called *hasht naw'* "eight types" in Āfarīn's Persian *bayt* and philologically described as the "perfections" (*kamālāt*) that are "described in the Veda" (*ki dar bīd-and masṭūr*). In this context, the first group of *faqīr*s, the Rāmānandīs, are introduced:

> *nukhust ān partaw-i nūr-i ilāhī-st*
> *ki bayrāg az wujūd-i ū mubāhī-st*

> *namīdānam ki insān yā malak būd*
> *kaf-i khākī-yi muḥīṭ-i nuh falak būd*

> *ṣifat-i ẕāt-i ū tā chand gūyam*
> *ki bī mānand-rā mānand gūyam*

> *ṭirāz-i qashqa bar rūy-ash huwaydā*
> *numūda nafy-i ghayr az ṣūrat-i lā*

> *kasī k-az khādimān-i ū ṣaghīr-ast*
> *kabīr-ast u kabīr-ast u kabīr-ast*

> *ba dast-ash dānahā-yi subḥa yaksar*
> *shumurdam dar 'adad ba ḥaq barābar*

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38 The significance of the *maṣnawī* by Bīgham had already been noticed by Sayyid 'Abd Allāh in his seminal book on the Hindu contribution to Persian literature ('Abd Allāh 1942: 313-349). On Amanat's *bhagatāmāl* see Pellò (2018: 75).

khudā-rā az rah-i ḥaq magzar ay shaykh
buwad tasbīḥ az vay kamtar ay shaykh[39]

First is that ray from the divine light
whose existence makes *vairāgya* proud.

I don't know if he is a man or an angel,
or the dusty foam of the ocean of the nine skies.

How far can I go with the description of his essence?
I am comparing someone who is incomparable.

The embroidery of the sign on his forehed is clear:
it shows the negation of any alterity, with the shape of a lā.

The smallest among his servants
is great (*kabīr*), is great (*kabīr*), is great (*kabīr*)!

The grains of the rosary in his hand once
I have counted: the same number as that of the Truth (*ḥaq*).

For God's sake, o Shaykh, do not miss the right path:
the *tasbīḥ*, o Shaykh, is less than that.

The seven *bayt*s contain a notable amount of precise information on the Vaishnava sect they celebrate, distributed over (and hidden in) a thick texture of metaphors, allusions and word-plays. The image of Rāmā-nand, the 14th century founder of the *sampradāya* according to tradition, is at the centre of Āfarīn's discourse. In the second hemistich of the third line, his name is conjured following the already mentioned technique of the "hidden word", as can be seen from the letters in bold type in the transcribed verse: *ki bī-mānand-rā mānand guyam*, lit. "I say [a] similar to [a] similarless" (thus, "I am comparing the incomparable"), can and should be read, at the same time, *ki bīmānand rāmānand gūyam*, lit. "I say Rāmānand to the incomparable", i.e. "Rāmānand is the name of that incomparable one".

In the fourth line, masterfully modulating the rhetorical figure of *ḥusn-i taʿlīl* (fantastic etiology) and the strict analogical procedures of Persian poetry, the author is able to integrate the distinctive sign on the forehead of the Rāmānandīs, the two white lines converging from the top downwards, not only in the conventional environment of the Persian *masnawī* but even in the Arabic-Persian graphic system, by recognizing in them the shape of the Arabic negation *lā* (‎لا). This goes far

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39 Āfarīn (1873: 13).

beyond a simple iconographic parallelism, but carves out a true concep-
tual identification, and simultaneously a paradoxical provocation: the
Arabic negation denies the existence of any other God then God (*lā ilāh*
illā allāh, as in the Islamic profession of faith), be his name Allāh or Rām,
but also alludes, in harmony with the integrative poetics of "idolatry"
seen so far, to the "negation" (of the belief in God) inherent in *kufr* or
"miscredency"; in this case, however, the *kāfir* – the one who negates –
is no other than the true believer, saying no to any *ghayr* (extraneous), in
a looping logical deadfall.

A double entendre is also at the foundation of the line where Kabīr,
the 15th-century Sant from Vārāṇasī and disciple of Rāmānand, makes
his appearance in the text: Kabīr (lit. "great" in Arabic) is the humblest
(*ṣaghīr*, lit. "small") among Rāmānand's followers, a transparent allusion
to his poor caste origins as a weaver (*julāhā*). The last two lines, in par-
ticular, show a notable creativity in using, again, some features of the
Perso-Arabic writing system and common Islamic religious culture to
show the preminence of Ramanandī ascetics over Muslim *shaykhs* (and
inviting the latter to recognize, consequently, the "right path"): Āfarīn
points out that the number of beads in the Rāmānandī rosary (*mālā*), 108,
corresponds to the numeric value of the word *ḥaq* "Truth" according to
the Arabic alphanumeric *abjad* (8 for *ḥā'* + 100 for *qāf*), and exceeds, both
in number and value, the 100 beads of the Muslim *tasbīḥ*.[40] A reference
to the specific denomination of the Rāmānandīs as *vairāgins* is found in
the first line, where the ascetic quality of *vairāgya* itself (*bayrāg*) is person-
ified and says, through a hyperbole (*ighrāq*), that it has been glorified by
the existence (*wujūd*) of the master Rāmānand. The latter, synechdochi-
cally subsuming the qualities of his followers, is ultimately the dedicatee
of the whole passage, which displays peculiar devotional tones.

The very position of the descriptive piece, symbolically preceding in
the text the prestigious hierarchy of the *Daṇḍīs* and the *Paramahaṃ-
sas*[41] is, by itself, an indication of preeminence, underlined by Āfarīn
himself by the adverb *nukhust* "first" in the opening. Moreover, the use
of the expressions "ray of divine light" (*partaw-i nūr-i ilāhī*), reminiscent

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40 On the value of the number 108 for the sacred geography of Vārāṇasī, see Gutschow
(1994: 198-206). Interestingly enough, as it has been noted by Azam Lotfi (2013: 28-
34), this number corresponds to the number of *bayts* in the above mentioned Ghalib's
poem on Vārāṇasī.

41 It should be incidentally remarked thar the hierarchy here proposed by Āfarīn, *Daṇḍī*
(*ḍaṇḍī*) - *Paramahaṃsa* (*paramhans*) - *Nāgā*, is perfectly in line with the order and
subdivision of the fundamental branches of the *Daśanāmī* order studied in Clark
(2006: 28-52).

of other contemporary Indo-Persian descriptions of the notion of *avatāra*, and "angel" (*malak*), a common term to talk about Hindu deities in Indo-Persian literary culture (with its Iranian correspondent *farishta*), leave little doubt about Āfarīn's particular respect for the religious figure under scrutiny.

These details, along with the threefold invocation to Kabīr and a certain insistence on the celebration of Rām as the supreme deity all over the text, may hint to a formal religious affiliation of Āfarīn to the Rāmānandīs and/or the Kabīrpanthīs; after all, the presence of a specific celebratory space for a poetic sketch of the *Nānakshāhī*s a few lines later, just after the high-ranking *Daṇḍī*s, *Paramahaṃsa*s and *Nāgā*s, emphasises a particular attention to the Sants and their doctrines. From this point of view, the strong pro-Brahmanic attitude prevailing in the *Kāshī istut* and the persistent defence of the values of idols and images, may even be read on the background of the contemporary discussions on the harmonization of *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* approaches, idol wordship and caste exclusiveness, as with Paltu Sahib and the Ramaite ascetics (Schomer 1987: 7). To be sure, these are considerations requiring further research on the text, the author and the relevant historical surroundings and backgrounds, and I can't but restrain from any further speculation for the moment.

What I can do to conclude these preparatory annotations on an emblematic yet incredibly unknown document, is to observe how much we need to meditate a proper set of interpretative tools for reading what we may begin to call, without further ado, the Hindu Persian literature of the eighteenth century,[42] not to speak about its integration into contemporary scholarship on Hindu traditions. This becomes even more compelling when considering that well into late 19th century texts like the *Kāshī istut*, Amānat Rāy's Persian translation of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and several other similar works enjoyed printing and diffusion by a prominent publishers in North India, pointing to a lively circulation and a well informed readership: the editorial work by Girdharī Lāl, a rich paratext of Devanāgarī transcriptions and Persian *marginalia* is in itself a remarkable indication of a non-decorative use of the text at the end of the 1800s. The magnitude of endeavours such as the *Kāshī istut* and the just mentioned *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, just to name two examples, and especially the complexity of their poetic craft – the work of no amateur – bear

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42   A very meritorious endeavour in this direction is the ongoing *Perso-Indica* project led by Fabrizio Speziale and Carl W. Ernst.

witness to an even more involved and responding contemporary audience in the quickly transforming milieu of Northern India in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Āfarīn's words on the purposes of his text, the dedication to and the celebration of the Brahmins, the density of technical/devotional details on a very specific and wide array of Hindu practices and beliefs, the equally refined smoothness of the thick Persian literary texture – are all indicators towards a primary independent (although non exclusive) use of similar works among Persian-educated Hindus of scribal background. This, of course, points to an intellectual vitality of Persian within a certain late eighteenth century Hindu sphere which seems to go beyond the generic "prestige" (or, worse, any anachronistic "nostalgia") explanation, also because of the non-predictability of the "identitary" discourse it shows, once more demolishing the die-hard lines of British *divide et impera* golden rule (cf. Tareen 2017: 455-460). Āfarīn's structured discourse on the Brahmins, which includes even the sketch of a polemic between a *shaykh* and a *brāhmaṇa* (won hands down by the latter, cf. Āfarīn 1873: 12-13), has to be placed in a lively debate on the control over the standards of language and religion *among* Hindu secretaries (Brahmins and non-Brahmins) which goes from Lacchmī Narāyan Shafīq's *Gul-i ra'nā* to Mīrzā Qatīl's *Haft tamāshā*,[43] and should probably be integrated with the above seen socio-theological polemics in the *bhakta* environment. While slightly later examples in doxography, taxonomy and religious debates come immediately to mind, like the *Silsila-yi jūgiyān* by the above mentioned Sītal Singh Bīkhwud and even supposedly better known works such as Rammohan Roy's *Tuḥfat al-muwaḥḥidīn*, it is above all at the Hindu Persian poetic literature of the eighteenth century that we should look at to make sense of texts such as the *Kāshī istut*.

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43 I think of the anti-brahmanical polemic adumbrated in Shafīq's *taẕkira*, where the Brahmins are transparently portrayed in competition with Khatris and Kāyasthas for the hegemony over Persian, in a passage devoted to a secretary named Bāl Mukund: talking about the expansion of the Maratha power, says Shafīq, "another group of Brahmins has entered the regions governed by Islam and has cornered the Kāyasthas and the Khatris, taking possession of the administration of all the offices and the factories, and now even the clerks of the courts of justice are Brahmins: notwithstanding their hate for the religion (*dīn*, i.e. Islam) and their chauvinistic fanatism (*ta'aṣṣub-i millat*), they learn about the details in the Islamic law and take the liberty of explaining them to the ignorant people waiting for a verdict" (Shafīq n.d.: 87-88). On similar lines, I also refer to the debates over the standardization of language and devotion among Persianized Hindus in Qatīl's Haft *tamāshā* (see Pellò 2019).

This would help us to go beyond the assumed internal "tension" perceived by Carl Ernst between the "Hindu status" of our writers and the "Islamic loyalty that permeate Sufi literature" (Ernst 2016: 466): poetic "idolatry" is, in the Persian semiosphere, nothing less than a true conceptual field, and "Hinduism" appears there as a configured selection of tropes reflected in its mirror, finding a political historicity as "Hindu identity" in the active self-projection of the Hindu Persian writers of the long eighteenth century. If any real tension is there, it is a sharply provocative and creative one, carving out a space for the ancient newness of *butparastī* (idolatry)[44] in a rhetorical context where theology resides in metaphors, and the "form" (*ṣūrat*) shows its isomorphic nature with "meaning" (*ma'nā*).[45] The following lines by Āfarīn, where the matter and colour of the black stony idol from Vārāṇasī biunivocally transfigure into the meaning of Qur'anic mount Sinai (*Ṭūr*)[46] and the "black stone" of the Ka'ba (*sang-i aswad*),[47] show from where we will need to resume our investigation on the vertigo of eighteenth-century Persian poetic "idolatry":

but-ī az sang-i mūsā ṭūr-e ma'nā
mubayyān az sawād-ash nūr-i ma'nā
[...]
gar-at ay dil sar-i baytulharām-ast
bibūs īn sang-i aswad ḥajj-i tām-ast[48]

An idol made of the stone of Moses, a Sinai of meaning,
from whose blackness appears the light of meaning.

O heart, if you wish to visit the Ka'ba
kiss this black stone: this is the perfect *ḥajj*.

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44 It is the already mentioned Lacchmī Narāyan Shafīq to provide a genealogy for it, reflecting on the Hindu pupils of Bīdil in his *tazkira* and their apprenticeship as "idolater" (*aṣnāmī*) "parrots of India" (*ṭūṭiyān-i hind*) (Shafīq n.d.: 2).

45 As the Brahmin of the just mentioned polemic tells his opponent: *yaqīn dānam but-i sangīn khudā nīst/wa-līkin ṣūrat az ma'nā judā nīst* "I know for sure that the stony idol isn't God/ but the form is not separate from the meaning" (Āfarīn 1873: 12-13).

46 The reference is to Moses witnessing the crumbling of the immense rock of mount Sinai at the manifestation of God in *Qur'ān* 7:143.

47 The black stone of the Ka'ba (Ar. *al-ḥajar al-aswad*) is kissed by the pilgrims in Mecca as are the idols in Āfarīn's Vārāṇasī.

48 Āfarīn (1873: 6).

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