Advance Praise

Voices in Verses takes us into the markets and palaces, brothels and salons of nineteenth-century India to hear women speak of their lives and feelings through poetry. Rare biographical compendia, known as *tazkira*s, are treated to a wonderfully sensitive analysis that reveals women's compositions to be at once exemplary and defiant of their literary and social worlds. An inspired and inspiring book that is a joy to read.

Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, University of Sheffield

Farhat Hasan must be commended for his evocative, nuanced, and multifaceted explorations of women's Urdu and Persian verses – women from public, secluded, royal, and ordinary walks of life – as compiled in a couple of nineteenth-century compendia, the *tazkirat-i zanāna*. These compositions come mediated through male authors and prefaced with biographical sketches that direct and constrict meaning-making. Hasan displays his masterly historian's skills in unpacking layered striations of words, performances, textures, and gestures – the sensoria through which we may grasp their variegated fields of significations. By facilitating access to this as yet 'veiled' literary archive, Hasan opens up 'subjugated knowledge' to assert its insistent and salient presence in shaping literary and cultural praxis in the richly varied world of Persianate Hindustan. *Voices in Verses* tells of the deep and diverse histories of cultural inheritances embedded in South Asian ethos before the complicities and complexities of colonial and national confinements. This volume is a triumph of gendered reading that enriches the discipline of South Asian history.

Anshu Malhotra, University of California

In *Voices in Verses*, Farhat Hasan reads the *tazkira* archive along and against the grain to recover and interpret for us the verses and biographies of Urdu women poets. A wide and rich corpus comes into view that plays with codes of veiling and unveiling and nuances emotions of joy and loss.

Francesca Orsini, SOAS University of London

Voices in Verses

This book opens up an archive of women's verses found in the extant, but overlooked, women's biographical compendia (*tazkira-i zanāna*) written in the nineteenth century. As commemorative texts, these compendia written in Urdu draw our attention to their memories – celebrated and contested – in cultural spaces. In drawing connections between memory and literature, this study contests the commonplace assumption that the literary public sphere was markedly homosocial and gender exclusive, and argues instead that the women poets, coming from a wide variety of social groups, actively participated in shaping the norms of aesthetics and literary expression; they introduced fresh signifiers and signifying practices to apprehend their emotions, experiences, and world views. Women's poetry was a kind of 'subjugated'/'erudite' knowledge that enriched the literary culture, even as it evoked considerable anxieties, and stood in a paradoxical relationship with the dominant episteme, both reinforcing and challenging its cultural assumptions and truth-claims. Their lyrics were forms of self-narratives or an act of 'unveiling', but in order to appreciate their meanings we need to be sensitive to the multi-medial mode of meaning-apprehension. This work suggests that the women's *tazkira*s performed an act of 'epistemic disobedience' contesting not only the British imperial representations of India, but also the Indo-Muslim modern reformers on issues of domesticity, conjugal companionship, and love and desire.

Farhat Hasan is a professor of history at the University of Delhi (New Delhi). His articles on the literary culture, gender relations, state formation, and public sphere in early modern South Asia have been published in reputed journals and edited works. He is the author of *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and *Paper, Performance, and the State: Social Change and Political Culture in Mughal India* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Voices in Verses

Women's Poetry and Cultural Memory in Nineteenth-Century India

Farhat Hasan

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For the women who spoke to power even when the price was considerable!
To their courage, determination, and optimism this book is dedicated.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Urdu is a language on the ventilator today, and even as people in northern India converse in the language, the number of those who can read and write the script is fast dwindling. It is not taught in most schools, colleges, and universities these days, and there are very few job openings for those who, against all odds, still make an effort to learn the language. I should, therefore, begin by acknowledging my parent's love for the language, and the efforts they made to ensure that their children not only know but also appreciate its nuances and niceties. My interest in Urdu literature comes from my parents, but it was continually nourished by the cultural life at Aligarh where I came in contact, as I was growing up, with some of its leading scholars and poets: Ale Ahmad Suroor, Waheed Akhtar, Khalil-ur-Rahman Azmi, Qazi Abdus Sattar, and Akhlaq Shahryar. My brother, Rahat Hasan, is an accomplished Urdu poet, and I have learnt a lot about the fine distinctions in Urdu poetry from my long association with him.

While I was a student at Aligarh, and later Cambridge, History did not gel well with Literature; focused on the 'big issues' in History, historians neglected literary writings and rarely, if ever, made an effort to construct bridges of conversations across the two fields. My own work on the Mughal period was also firmly ensconced within that fold, but while I was doing my Ph.D. at Cambridge, my supervisor, Gordon Johnson, did occasionally prod me to look into the literary sources of the Mughal period, a suggestion that I acted on very late in the day. The drift to cultural history among Mughal historians took a long time to arrive, and in this context, the work of Muzaffar Alam, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Sunil Sharma have been my source of inspiration.

Reading poetry to do History was still a tall order, but my efforts in the direction were facilitated by the development of emotions history, and I found the work of Margrit Pernau, Katherine Butler Schofield, and Imke Rajamani particularly useful. I did have the opportunity of clarifying my confusions with Margrit during one of her visits to India, and I remain ever so grateful to her for that. Of course, the 'cultural turn' has complicated the relations between language and history, and amid issues of

shifting and multiple meanings, it has become far more complicated to read poetry within a historicist frame of reference. In that context, the writings of Francesca Orsini and Anshu Malhotra are particularly instructive indeed. Anshu Malhotra's work on the *kafi*s of Piro, a Muslim prostitute-turned-Sikh-saint, has certainly helped me develop a better understanding of the devotional verses in my sources. I have had long and repeated discussions with her on these issues, and I have benefitted from her immense knowledge in the field.

In introducing the world of Urdu literature to western academia, the contribution of Ralph Russell, Khurshidul Islam, C. M. Naim, and Naimur Rahman Faruqui, among others, cannot be overemphasized. Even so, we should recognize the services of Urdu scholars teaching in different capacities in the universities in India and Pakistan as well; writing as they do in Urdu, their work scarcely gets noticed in more global centres of scholarship and excellence. One of the two sources that I study here, *Bahāristān-i Nāz*, was actually brought to my notice by an Urdu scholar based in Aligarh, Rahat Abrar. His own work was on its author, Hakim Fasihuddin Ranj, in which he studied his poetry, religious compositions, and prose writings. I am very grateful to him for our discussions and his generosity in sharing his knowledge and expertise with me. As I read the Urdu texts for this book, I was not infrequently confronted with difficulties in comprehension and translation. I am grateful to Muhammad Sajjad's prompt assistance in the matter. In situations where I went wrong, my colleagues and friends at Aligarh – in particular, Jabir Raza and S. A. Nadeem Rezavi – were there to promptly correct me.

It took a long time for historians to notice women's work in Urdu, and we are ever so grateful to Gail Minault, Barbara Metcalf, and Carla Petievich for their pioneering efforts. Their efforts have received a huge fillip in the last several years in the work of Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and Asiya Alam, among others. Lambert-Hurley began with studying the lives and work of the Begums of Bhopal, but has recently moved on to Muslim women's autobiographies, culminating in the publication of the fascinating book, *Elusive Lives*. I have closely followed her work and remain ever so grateful to her for her interest in my academic ventures.

In writing this book, I was also assisted by my young friends whose interest in the subject gives me hope and reassurance. Shivangini Tandon has helped me locate a couple of references, and, more importantly, her own study on the literary culture in Mughal India has helped me reformulate some of my arguments here. I would also like to thank Mukhtar Ahmad and Heena Goswami for locating books, articles, and manuscripts for this study. They have also been no less helpful in resolving many of my confusions while I was writing this book.

I would like to thank the staff of the Cambridge University Press, in particular Qudsiya Ahmed, Anwesha Rana, and Koyena Roy, for handling the publication of this book with due competence. Qudsiya was, as always, very welcoming and immediately

got into action when I approached her with my proposal. Anwesha and Koyena have impressed me with their efficiency and diligence, and the interest they have had in the publication of this book.

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In the end, I would like to thank my family – Fauzia, Sana, Hamza, and Mariam – for their patience and cooperation. Without their support, this book would most certainly have not seen the light of day. In my academic ventures, I have always been encouraged and supported by Anwar Jahan Zuberi. When research and writing became exhausting, the much needed digression came from the welcoming home of Nighat and Nurul Abidin, and besides them I would also like to thank Farah, Maryam, and Hira for their kind hospitality.

A Note on Transliteration

For transliteration, I have largely depended on Steingass' *Persian–English Dictionary*. I have kept the use of diacritical marks to the bare minimum. I have used the stress mark/macron to indicate a long vowel. The *hamza* in Persian and Urdu is indicated with an inward apostrophe (’), and the alphabet *ain* is indicated with an outward apostrophe (‘). I have avoided using diacritics in names of people and places.

Abbreviations

BN	Hakim Fasihuddin Ranj, *Bahāristān-i Nāz* (Lahore, Pakistan: Majlis-i Taraqqi-i Adab, 1965 [reprint]).
TN	Durga Prashad Nadir, *Tazkirat-un*-Nisā (Lahore, Sang-i Mil Publishers, 2016 [reprint]).