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Research Article

'The Somnath of My Imagination': The Indo-Persian Pluralistic and Cosmopolitan Urbanity of Mirza Ghalib's Banaras

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Banaras is often recognized today through popular media and even scholarly discourse as a metonym for Hindu India, ignoring its substantial Muslim presence and socio-cultural contributions to the city. My translation of Mirza Ghalib's (1797–1869) Persian long poem in praise of Banaras, *Chiragh-e-Dair* (1826), as *Temple Lamp* in 2022 represents an attempt to showcase a 19th-century Turkic-Indian Muslim poet's representation of the Hindu holy city. In this close reading of the poem, alongside historical contextualization, I elucidate how Ghalib's Banaras is both real and symbolic, and transcends the *shahr-ashob* tradition of Persianate poetry on the city. Ghalib is shown to present readers an outward looking view of the city, linking it to the Persian cosmopolis stretching from the Balkans to Bengal, as well as the Silk route—drawing connections to China—connecting Hinduism to Islam and the Hebraic, and seeing the city of Kashi/Banaras as comparable to the Kaaba and Paradise. Ghalib also uses vocabulary that emphasises the city as one's country or locus of cosmopolitan belonging and as the place for civilisation, society, and friendship. The city's close connections to river/ water, forests, spirituality, and the vivacity of its people's bodies and lives are all highlighted. Ghalib thus provides us with a unique Indo-Persian, composite view of this singular city, albeit from a largely elite perspective. The cross-religious translation of concepts works almost like a kind of conversion, giving this distinctive Hindustani cosmopolitanism a most interesting gloss.

Banaras, Ghalib, poetry, cosmopolitanism, Persian

Introduction

> *ibādatkhāna-e-nāqūsiyānast*
> *hamānā ka'aba-e-hindostānast*[1] (Verse 47)
>
> The (supreme) place of worship for
> the conch-blowers,
>
> surely, (Banaras) is the Kaaba
> of Hindustan. (Ghalib 2022, 49)

The above verse from the Persian *masnavi*[2] or long poem *Chiragh-e-Dair* (1826), or *Temple Lamp* (2022), by Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869), has come to define the holiest Hindu city, variously

[1] For key to transliteration refer to (Ghalib 2022, ix–x).
[2] The *masnavi* is a long narrative poem written in beits or distiches made up of two equal hemistiches called *misra*. Each of these has an internal end-rhyme, so the poem has an aa, bb, cc . . . rhyme scheme… The form of the *masnavi* originated in the Middle-Persian period (roughly from the 3rd century BCE to the 9th century CE) and later was adopted in Arabic (where it is also called *Muzdawij*), Turkish, and Urdu. It has been used mainly for romantic, heroic, and didactic themes, and it became one of the

known as Banaras, Kashi, and Varanasi, in the great poet's imagination. To represent Banaras as 'the Kaaba of Hindustan' is illustrative of varied synergies. The fact that Ghalib sees it foremost as the Kaaba of Hindustan, the focal point for devotional obeisance, signifies the town's holiest status in India in the early-19th century in all of its religiosity. Moreover, the fact that Ghalib calls Banaras the Kaaba of Hindustan and not the *ka'aba-e-hinood* or the Kaaba of Hindus points to Ghalib's pluralistic[3] and cosmopolitan[4] view of Banaras and its urbanity, as was first pointed out by Khushwant Singh (Ghalib and Nijhawan II). This view is pluralistic and inclusive in far greater ways than the narrow secularism of the West, especially the French laïcité, which asks its citizens to leave their religion out of the public domain, especially when they are a minority (refer to Asad 2003 for more detailed discussions on the limits of laïcité).[5]

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most popular genres of Persianate cultures, including in India. The most popular *masnavi* globally is probably the *Masnavi-e-Ma'anavi* or 'The Spiritual *Masnavi*' by Rumi. Convention dictates that the metres employed do not exceed eleven syllables in a poetic line. Appropriate metres and diction are also chosen in accordance with the theme of each *masnavi* (Bilal 2022: 43).

[3] Pluralism is "a form of society in which the members of minority groups maintain their independent cultural traditions" (Oxford English Dictionary). Such, pluralism was common during Mughal rule in India, albeit Ghalib lived in the reign of the last Mughal king, Zafar, and his political influence was declining. However, the residual cultural import continues to an extent till date, as it has been enshrined in Indian ideas of secularism in the constitution. Kinra has recorded this pluralism from the time of Akbar in the 16th century, seen in Akbar's *sulh-e-kull* which can be variously translated as 'peace for all' but also universal reconciliation/arbitration, and seeing India as *dār-ul-sulh*, or land of reconciliation. Akbar's ideas, which related to his inclusive religion, *dīn-e-ilāhī*, arise from within Islam, possibly from Mansūr-al-Hallāj's *wahdat-ul-wajūd* or the unity of being (of God and his creation). Hence, *sulh-e-kull* meant an acceptance of different kinds of Islamic beliefs, including the Shia and Sunni, their individual sects or *mazhab*s, as well as various other religions (Kinra 2020). Ghalib, as is also clear in his Urdu writing as well, which is not discussed here for reasons of brevity, but displayed in *Chiragh-e-Dair* in this paper, is quite evidently a pluralistic person who believes in a society of multiple traditions.

[4] Cosmopolitan from the original Greek literally translates as 'citizen of the universe' or more commonly 'citizen of the world'. A city or any place may be also called cosmopolitan as "including or containing people from many different countries" (Oxford English Dictionary), or a person is also called so when they are "familiar with and at ease in many different countries and cultures" (ibid.). Cosmopolitanism traces its roots to Greek philosophy where it began to be used to emphasize human belonging beyond their city-state toward all other humans as co-belonging. In modern Western philosophy Immanuel Kant in *To Perpetual Peace* extends cosmopolitan belonging to all citizens of the world (Kant and Humphrey 2003). However, his philosophy has been critiqued for not extending to non-citizen humans such as refugees. Immanuel Levinas has extended responsibility in responses to the other, and Jacques Derrida in *Politics of Friendship* and elsewhere has proposed hospitality as a basic (cosmopolitan) requirement (Hand 2001, Derrida 1994). In contrast to these moral philosophies of cosmopolitanism, Richard Eaton emphasized the lived cosmopolitanism of the Islamic, Persian-speaking world between the Balkans and Bengal as the Persian Cosmopolis (Eaton 2015). Seema Alavi focuses on "the age of Empire" to "show how the cultural universe of Muslims was actually shaped," and how "British, Ottoman, and imperial networks encouraged the creation of a pan-Islamic global public sphere." She calls this "the new Muslim cosmopolis" (Alavi 2015: x). Ghalib's cosmopolitanism in *Chiragh-e-Dair* and elsewhere in his poetry, prose writings, and life, is known to be consistent with all these different definitions and meanings of cosmopolitanism given above. As a citizen of Delhi he hobnobs with Mughal and British elite, his friends include Muslims such as Fazl-ul-haq Khairabadi, Christians such as the Delhi Resident William Fraser (who was possibly killed because he was going to rule in Ghalib's favour over his 'pension' case), and Hindus such as Hargopal Tufta, who was also Ghalib's disciple. Ghalib is greatly appreciative of the diverse ritual and spirituality of Banaras, seeks to pitch and valorise it in the Persian cosmopolis by writing on it in Persian, and he is at ease there as earlier in Delhi and later in Calcutta.

[5] Ideas of laïcité are born following the French Revolution of 1789. They continue to develop and get more established. Secularism had already begun to develop from the French Third Republic of 1870. Laity and later laïcité after 1789 came to denote the separation of religion from the state. From the end of 19th century laïcité came to denote the separation of state from religion in other catholic countries as well. The Mughal pluralistic state in contrast patronised different religions, and maintained law in

Religiosity and spiritualism suffuse Ghalib's perception and representation of Banaras, yet they are not partisan, and retain a cosmopolitan and pluralistic purchase.

This essay close reads Ghalib's *masnavi Chiragh-e-Dair* in conjunction with its historical context to elucidate Ghalib's ascription of a pluralistic religious urbanity to Banaras. I begin by introducing Ghalib and then contextualizing the historical conditions of the writing of *Temple Lamp*. Next, I place *Temple Lamp* in the longer tradition of Persian poetry writing on the city, the *shahr-ashob* tradition, particularly on the South-Asian city, as well as other writings, and recent slants of scholarship on Banaras. This helps to shed light on the unique characteristics of the poem, as I then give the detailed close reading of the poem. I illustrate that Ghalib's Poetic Banaras is 1. real and metaphorical, 2. diverse, pluralistic, and cosmopolitan, 3. spiritual, 4. sensuous and physical, 5. a garden/forest city, natural and ecologically sensitive 6. devotional and transcendental, and 7. a locus of cosmopolitan belonging.

On Mirza Ghalib: The Classical-Modern Poet of Urdu and Persian

Mirza Ghalib was born in Agra of Turkic ancestry, of which he was proud throughout his life. While his father and uncle had fought for the British under Commander Lake against the Marathas, for which Ghalib's family had been granted an estate, Ghalib had moved to Delhi at a young age, where he sought patronage as a poet at the Mughal Court, which was itself under the tutelage of the Delhi Residency of the East India Company. At Delhi, Ghalib managed to establish himself gradually as a leading light among the galaxy of poets gathered there, such as the Royal Tutor to the King, Sheikh Ibrahim Zauq (1790–1854) (whom Ghalib replaced as Royal Tutor upon the former's death), Momin Khan Momin (1800–1852), Mufti Sadruddin Aazurdah (1804–1868), Imaam Bakhsh Sehbaai (c.1806–1857), Nawab Mustafa Khan Shefta (1809–1869), and Dagh Dehlavi (1831–1905).

Ghalib is, arguably, the greatest poet to have written in Urdu. In early 19th-century North India, he was writing at a transitional moment when the Mughal regime that had sustained Ghalib's Indo-Persian poetic culture was dying, and the new colonial power of the British was ascendant. This reached its climax in his later life as he witnessed the 1857 revolt and the post-mutiny retributions by the British, which took away his brother (who was killed), his editor-friend, Fazl-ul-Haq Khairabadi (who was imprisoned at the Andamans, where he died), his king, Bahadurshah Zafar II (who was exiled to Rangoon, where he died), most of the court and all Mughal Princes (who were killed), and many other friends and family, who either migrated or died. In his poetry, Ghalib has been seen to have been "the last of the classicists and the first of the modernists" in the Urdu tradition (Narang xix). Ghalib's first biographer and protégé, Altaf Husain Hali (1837–1914), had argued that Persian poetry and prose in India saw its final heyday with Ghalib (Hali 1897).

Ghalib wrote twice the amount in Persian as compared to his Urdu writings, but it is due to the gradual replacement of Persian by English (and Hindi) as the language of the federal state in India that Ghalib's Urdu poetry and prose received most attention, as Persian as a spoken or even read language had largely died in South Asia. However, it is especially Ghalib's Persian writings that sought to interact with the larger world or the Persian Cosmopolis that stretched from the Balkans to Bengal (Eaton 2015). Even the diary that Ghalib wrote as an eyewitness account of 1857, *Dastanbuy*, that he also had printed and bound as a gilded copy and sent to Queen Victoria, was written in Persian, since Persian was still the court language. This account

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arbitration with multiple religious laws and actively as permissively inclusive. Thus, it is possible and viable to compare these different but synchronous views and socio-legal orders of multi-religious coexistence in different societies. Moreover, Ghalib is born in 1797 making his life and the evolution of laïcité roughly contemporaneous as well.

was largely in favour of the British, as opposed to his private condemnation of the violence meted out by them to the locals, which he expressed in his various letters to friends, mainly in Urdu.

Ghalib's Persian *Masnavi* on Banaras: *Chiragh-e-Dair*, and its Context

Ghalib wrote the Persian *masnavi Chiragh-e-Dair* on Banaras well before the violence of 1857, in c. 1826–1827. From 1826 to 1829, he undertook the return journey from Delhi to Calcutta (now Kolkata), to petition the British for the reinstatement of the correct amount of the pension that was due to his brother and him in lieu of the estate endowed to his uncle, for his services in the British army, that was now managed by a distant relative. Ghalib was in debt for most of his life and was desperate for the increased allowance. While he had not intended to stop for long in Banaras, Ghalib ended up spending over a month there and recreated the city that he beheld upon arrival in this magnificent *masnavi*.

Ghalib felt immense joy upon reaching Banaras at the end of a tortuous short stay in *Ilahabad* (now Prayagraj) where he had taken ill and had been forced to flee the city because of the fans and followers of Qateel, a rival poet. He described at length in a letter written to his friend, the Sadr-e-Amin or the civil magistrate of Banda, Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan, a notable poet of his time, the misery he experienced in *Ilahabad* and the joys he discovered in Banaras once he reached it after the boat ride from the former to the latter, quoted in the Introduction to *Temple Lamp* (Bilal 2022: xxvii–xxix). *Chiragh-e-Dair* subsequently takes a largely adulatory view of the city of Banaras, valorising it in terms of the Persian Cosmopolis. Ghalib employed the *hazaf musaddas mahzuf bahr* (metre) in *Chiragh-e-Dair* and the upbeat and melodious metre, pleasant to the ear, was appropriate for the immense happiness, joy, admiration, and fondness that Ghalib felt for Banaras. It served as the perfect vehicle for his poetic paean to the city.

Persian (and subsequently Rekhta/ Hindavi/ Urdu) *masnavi*s have had a long tradition of focusing on the city and its various attributes in the subgenre of the *shahr-ashob*, which can be variously translated as the 'tumult' or the 'lament of the city'. As has been well explained by Sunil Sharma, among others, the *shahr-ashob* tradition in its early phases praised the vivacity of the city, celebrated it, and catalogued its people by their various professions and trades, with a focus on the beauty of the young men (Sharma 2004). This is well evident in the South-Asian context in the famous Rekhta *masnavi* by Wali Muhammad Wali on Surat. In its later articulations, by the 18th century, especially in poems by Delhi poets, such as Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Muhammad Rafi Sauda, the *shahr-ashob* tradition showed greater elements of lament for the city following Delhi's plunder by Ahmed Shah Abdali and Nadir Shah (Sharma 2004: 77, Petievich 1990: 99). This only gets accentuated after the losses of the revolt of 1857 and the British mutiny-retributions of 1857–58, incorporating the *marsiya* tradition of collective mourning into the *shahr ashob*. This came to include a mourning for buildings and monuments as opposed to the people of the city (Tignol 2017). Further down the line, the festive vignette develops as genre that developed other dimensions of the *shahr ashob*, but all of this followed the 1857 revolt (Dubrow 2018: 29–30). Ghalib's *Chiragh-e-Dair*, which precedes the revolt by a good 30-odd years though, represents Banaras by celebrating it. Yet, it neither presents us with a catalogue of the city's professional people, as other earlier authors of this genre had done such as Afrin on Banaras (discussed below) or Wali on Surat, nor does it lament its decline like the Delhi poets. Instead, Ghalib focusses on larger thematic details, such as spirituality. The work therefore exceeds the *shahr-ashob* genre, providing a quite unique *masnavi* on a city, even as the work evokes the broader genre.

Close Reading *Chiragh-e-Dair* and its Representation of Banaras as a Real and Metaphorical Garden City

Image 10.1: [Kupuldhara Tulao, Benares Drawn on Stone by L. Haghe from Sketch by James Prinsep Esqr]

Temple Lamp may be understood to be comprised of four sections. The first section is indeed a lament, first expressing the restlessness of Ghalib's heart, possibly at having left his beloved city of residence, Delhi. It continues as a complaint or lament against Ghalib's Delhi friends for having forgotten him (verses 1–19). In the next section, the longest of the poem (verses 20–81), Ghalib praises Banaras for its spiritual and transcendental qualities, the beauty of its people and monuments, the mighty cleansing river Ganga, its salubrious climate, and verdant flora. In the third section (verses 82–102), Ghalib expresses guilt at having enjoyed Banaras while abandoning his family and expresses a desire to break his bonds to the city. The final section (verses 103–108), is a Sufi dialogue that Ghalib has with himself on *fanā* or self-annihilation to care for others and be one with God, and appears to quit Banaras, "extinguish(ing) the rest" (verse 108) (Ghalib 2022: 110). Section two is, therefore, the key section that is analysed in this paper. Ghalib renders Banaras as a paradisical, garden or forest city here. Thus, the openings verses of this section, 20 and 21, reveal (Ghalib 2022: 22–23):

sipas dar lālah zāre jā tawāñ kard
watan rā dāgh-e-istighna tawāñ kard
bakhātir dāram ainak gul zamīne
bahār āīñ sawād-e-dil nashīne

One can, thus, make place
in a garden of Tulips.

and turn the home-city
into the mark of renunciation.

I welcome now
a flowering land,

spring settles here
on the horizon of the heart.

Image 10.2: [Benares from the Mundakinee tulao; drawn on stone by J. D. Harding from a sketch by James Prinsep Esqr. [Originally] printed by C. Hullmandel]

Representing Banaras as "a garden of tulips" where "spring settles" is at one level metaphorical and in keeping with the *masnavi* and *shahr-ashob* traditions in praising the city. However, much of this was also real in the case of Banaras, as Ghalib experienced it upon his arrival at the city. Banaras in 1826 was a city with stability and peace, ruled by the vassal king, Raja Udit Narain Singh, who ruled under the aegis of the supreme authority in the land, the British East India Company. With the decline of Mughal power in the previous century, it was the Marathas who had patronized the construction of various ghats on the Ganga at Banaras. But the city retained its green and leafy nature until the early 19th Century. The thick green cover of the Banaras of the early 19th century, in stark contrast to today's cluttered city, is evident from James Prinsep's *Benares Illustrated*, which was first published in 1833 from sketches Prinsep made during his posting in Banaras in the 1820s, probably just a couple of years before Ghalib's arrival. I reproduce but two of the prints here, for illustrative purposes (Prinsep 1996). As one can see in these images, Banaras upon Ghalib's arrival would have been a green haven. Ghalib also informed his friend, Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan, of his quick recovery from illness upon arrival in Banaras in a letter (Bilal 2022: xxviii-xix):

> On Thursday, a heavenly, life-affirming breeze arose from the east that energized me and refreshed my soul. The miracle of this breeze cleared the haze I was enveloped in and lifted my spirits like victory banners. The waves of the cool breeze swept away all weakness from my body. What can I say about the city of Banaras!... It would be proper to call it heaven on earth because of the foliage and flowers that are in bloom in their full glory. Its breeze blows life into dead bodies. Its every fleck of dust has the qualities to pull thorns and needles away like magnets from the feet of travellers.

Moreover, the city was filled with ponds and rivulets such as the ones shown above, the second of which was drained not many years after Ghalib had left the city. Today, this second pond, Mundakinee Tulao, is a square and a *bazar* called Maidagin, as the city of Banaras is a crowded concrete jungle. However, Ghalib's Banaras was green and well-watered. Thus, when in 1826–27, Ghalib writes in verse 27: *bayābāñ-dar-bayābāñ lālah-zārash*/ *gulistāñ dar gulistañ nau-bahārash*, or "Its forest after forest/ is filled with beds of tulips,/ its garden after garden/ blooms with perpetual spring" (Ghalib 2022, 71), Ghalib is not just following Persianate convention in describing a verdant city, but also representing what his eyes beheld. Going further, Ghalib often calls Banaras 'paradise', such as in verse 25: *ta'ālallah banāras chashm-e-bad dūr*/ *bahisht-e-khurram-o-firdaus-e-ma'mūr*, or "May God keep Banaras/ from the evil eye,// it is heavenly bliss,/ paradise established" (Ghalib 2022, 25). The term paradise here originates from the Avestan or Old Persian *pairidaēza* meaning 'enclosure, park' (Oxford English Dictionary) that originally refers to the royal park or orchard of the king (Meisami 1985: 231). Thus, to call Banaras paradise was both Persianate convention, but also a response to the verdant garden-like quality of the holy city, proving both the real and metaphorical nature of the garden city seen in Mirza Ghalib's depiction of Banaras in *Chiragh-e-Dair*.

The Cosmopolitanism of *Chiragh-e-Dair*: In Relation to Shahr-Ashob Tradition and Other Writing on the City

Ghalib, a Muslim of Turkic ancestry, wrote the *masnavi Chiragh-e-Dair* in praise of the holiness and spirituality of Banaras in 108 verses. 108 is the number of beads in the Hindu rosary *rudraksha*, and has various other significances in Indic traditions (for details see Bilal 2022: xlviii). We know that Ghalib had written more verses on Banaras that he did not include in the published poem, but included in letters he wrote to friends.[6] Keeping the number limited to 108 was a clear act of homage to the sacred number. Yet, Ghalib feels this was not simply the Kaaba of Hindus, but the Kaaba of the country of Hindustan that was open to all, including himself. The allusion to the Kaaba, moreover, makes a shared claim to the divinity of the Kaaba at Mecca and at Banaras, introducing a pluralistic approach to religion.[7] The first hemistich of the verse following the 'Kaaba' verse, verse 48, makes a claim that would elsewhere be sacrilegious to orthodox monotheistic Islam: *butānash rā hayūlā sholā-e-tūr* or "The idolatrous beauties (of Banaras) are made of the fire of Tur". Mount 'Tur' or Sinai from the *Bible*, connects Hebraic divinity with the Hindu, presenting a pluralistic approach to theism in the holiness of Banaras. Divinity for Ghalib is, therefore, transcendental of any one expression of formal religion. He creates an organic hybrid of different religion influences in his life as a cosmopolitan Turkic-Indian.

[6] For example, refer to verse in the 'Introduction' (Bilal 2022: lxviii), also quoted later in this essay.

[7] 'Divinity' is used in this paper as a noun to imply: "the state or quality of being divine" (Oxford English Dictionary). This can be further understood as sacred, transcendental, creational power. It does not refer to God as defined by a single religion, but instead to the sacred force that pluralists and cosmopolitans may see apparent or at least acceptable in different religions.

Ghalib also brings out the cosmopolitan character of Banaras through the above analogy as well as other comparisons to 'world' cities from the Persian Cosmopolis. Banaras's synonym Kashi lends itself to an easy comparison with the Persian city of Kashan, for example, as Ghalib "collapses spiritual, poetic, and cultural differences between Hindustan and Iran" (Bilal 2022: lxiii) in verse 86: *junūnat gar ba-nafs-e-khud tamāmast/ ze-kāshī tābeh kāshāñ nīm gāmast*, or "When your madness reaches/ the perfect frenzy,// Kashan from Kashi/ is just a half-step journey" (Ghalib 88). Elsewhere, in verses 26 and 70, he compares Banaras to China, and finds Banaras superior. Consider verse 26, for example: *banāras rā kase guftā ke chīn ast/ hanūz az gang chīnash bar jabīn ast*, or "Someone once compared the beauty/ of Banaras to China,// and since that day its brow is wrinkled/ with the bend of the Ganga" (Ghalib 28). The verse puns on *Chīn* which means both China and a 'frown' in Persian. Even Delhi, the erstwhile capital of Hindostan, is said to come pay its homage to Banaras in verse 22: *keh mī āyad be-da'wa gāh-e-lāfash/ jahānābad az bahr-e-tawāfash*, or "For this (city) has such pride/ of place// that even Delhi comes/ to circle around it" (Ghalib 24). Banaras is therefore at par with the best of the cities of the Persian Cosmopolis and the Silk Route, going as far as the hyperbole to say the Mughal capital Delhi pays it homage. Not only is Banaras absorbent of so many different traditions, its various qualities make it worthy of comparison with any of the best cities of the (Persianate) fabled cities of the world.

Syed Akbar Hyder has discussed the cosmopolitanism of *Chiragh-e-Dair*, which he calls *The Temple's Lamp*, to point out how critics have read Ghalib according to their own predilections, where Ghalib's cosmopolitanism has been completely ignored. He writes, "I am drawn to this poem for the synergy of cosmopolitanism that is harnessed in it. By cosmopolitanism, I mean a mode of existence in which difference is not only accommodated or tolerated but also cherished and fostered" (Hyder 2006, 463). Thus, not only is Banaras comparable to cities of many different regions and cultures, and cosmopolitan, as shown above, but, as Hyder argues, it is cosmopolitan in its pluralism and ecumenism. Banaras, ruled by a Hindu king, and considered the holiest of Hindu cities today, was nonetheless inhabited since many centuries by Muslims numbering over a quarter of the population. James Prinsep had conducted a survey of Banaras, soon after Ghalib's visit, in 1828–29, where he found 121,446 Hindus and 31,248 Muslims in the city (Prinsep 1996: 14).[8] In fact, Sheikh Ali Hazin was a prominent Persian poet who came to Banaras from Iran c. 1750 and lies buried there, with his shrine visited today by many devotees of different backgrounds. He praised Banaras, thus: *az banāras na rawam ma'abad-e-'aam ast īñjā/ har brahman-e-pisar-e-lachhman-o-rām ast īñjā*, or "I will not leave Banaras for it is holy everywhere,/Every Brahman here is a son of Lachhman or Ram (Bilal 2022: xxxiv)." Hazin, therefore, preceded Ghalib as a Muslim in praise of the Hindu religiosity of Banaras. His presence also shows the city's international cosmopolitanism, besides its religious ecumenism. The Buddha had also visited Banaras as it was already a great centre of learning, and delivered his first sermon only about 10 kilometres away at Sarnath. Banaras was also home to the anti-caste poet-saints, Kabir (fl. 15th century) and Ravidas (fl. 15th–16th centuries). Kabir appealed to both Hindus and Muslims, often from lower castes and backward classes, especially the strong weaving community of Banaras that Kabir himself is said to have come from, as he advocated the quest of a formless divinity within and without. Ravidas, who came from the leather tanners caste, *chamar*, has many devotees among Sikhs and lower caste Hindus. Kabir math and Ravidas temple in Banaras continue to be important centres today for a very diverse set of devotees. Clearly, the city has been a centre of a diverse

[8] The 2011 Census of India, the last official census, records the demographics of Banaras as follows: Hindus: 840,280 (70.11 per cent) and Muslims: 345,461 (28.82 per cent).

set of religious traditions, apart from Shaivite and Vaishnavite Hinduism, exemplifying the millennia-old pluralism.

Yet, despite the city's multi-religious, pluralistic, and cosmopolitan composition, Banaras is often painted as a Hindu city in contemporary popular media discourse. In fact, Muslims particularly are seen as aggressors who destroyed some of the city's temples, and much of the city is sought to be described or interpreted through a discourse focusing on Sanskrit and solely Hindu sources. This can also be seen in colonial sources such as Prinsep's views on Banaras (Prinsep 1996). As Madhuri Desai has argued, "colonial representations of the city simultaneously rendered it static and Hindu" (Desai 2003: 29), thus making such colonial-scholarly writing on Banaras an Orientalist discourse in a true Saidian sense that keeps knowledge about the colony (and post-colony) static. Diana L. Eck's most popular book on Banaras may also be argued to follow a similar approach, where it focusses almost solely on Hinduism and goes back to myths to explain the holy city, while it largely ignores the medieval and early-modern agents and multiple religious influences that shaped modern Banaras (Eck 2015). Her later important work on the sacred geography of India also focuses primarily on Hinduism, although it brings in conversations with other religions such as Islam and Sikhism and corrects the preponderance of the first to an extent (Eck 2012).[9]

In contrast, Ghalib's *masnavi* is all the more resplendent for giving us a testament to the city's cosmopolitan culture. On the other hand, we have another Persian *masnavi* on Banaras, *Kashi Istut*, by Matan Lal Afrin, a Kayastha Hindu from Allahabad, written in 1778-79. While some of *Kashi Istut*'s ways of praising Banaras are similar to *Temple Lamp*'s, the narratorial positioning is quite different. This appears to have to do with the locations and identities of the two poets, Ghalib and Afrin, but probably also to do with their individual temperament. As Kinra has shown, Brahmin and other upper-caste Hindus, often working as *munshi*s or clerks in Sultanate and Mughal courts in India, had to engage in complex ways with the Islamicate tradition of Persian poetry, where idolatry was viewed as blasphemous but also as seductive and desirable (Kinra 2015: 258–285). Pello builds on this in his essay on *Kashi Istut* to clarify how Afrin opens the poem by writing in 'self-humiliation' at not knowing great Persian as a Hindu: "I [am] a Hindu secretary with dark beliefs/ who knows just a few words of Persian," (Pello 2020: 129). I would like to posit that there is some disingenuity on Afrin's part here, which is in continuation with the assumed humility of many Persian writers of the period, but acquires a double (religious) irony in Afrin's case as he claims to be an inferior Persian writer on account of his religion, but soon claims superiority for Hinduism. Moreover, Afrin soon exploits the traditional Persian ambiguity and irony in its poetic relations to idolatry to present Banaras as a gallery of images, describing its various communities including the Brahmins at length in the *shahr-ashob* tradition.

By the end, Afrin has begun to claim the superiority and rightness of Hinduism, such as in claiming the primacy of the Hindu mala's 108 over the 100-bead Muslim rosary, *the tasbīh*, and exploiting the Arabic *abjad* system to show that 108 is the numeric value of *haq* or Truth (8 for *hā'* + 100 for *qāf*, the letter representing the q sound), and so tries to prove that 108 is superior to 100 both numerically and in value. While making similar analogies and using similes comparable to Ghalib's, Afrin proceeds in a different mode from the former, concluding by ascribing a superiority to Banaras and its Hindu religiosity over Islam and the rest. Ghalib, instead, simply finds the same divinity here too, with a much deeper pluralistic and cosmopolitan attitude, and is not bothered by competitive religiosity. *Chiragh-e-Dair* itself

[9] In more recent times, there has been some sensitive scholarship on the Muslim weaver community of Banaras by social scientists and historians such as Philippa Williams (Williams 2015) and Nita Kumar (Kumar 2017). In literature, Christopher R Lee has studied 20th-century Urdu poetry by two Muslim poets of Banaras (Lee 2012), while others have also examined Ghalib's *masnavi Chiragh-e-Dair*.

therefore is a far-more cosmopolitan poem on Banaras than its predecessor *Kashi Istut*, taking a more pluralistic view of Banaras's greatness without running down any other.

Ghalib had, thus, written the Persian Qata or four-line poem elsewhere (Bilal 2022: lxii)::

> *masanj shaukat-e-'urfi keh būd shirāzī*
> *mashū asīr-e-zulālī keh būd khwansārī*
> *ba-somnāt-e-khayālam dar āī tā bīnī*
> *rawan faroz bar dūsh-hāe zunnārī*
>
> Do not be awed by Urfi even if he is from Shiraz,
> Don't be taken by Zulali though he comes from Khwansar,
> Come into the Somnath of my imagination and see:
> Soul-stirring forms adorned with the janéu on my shoulders.

Firstly, here too, now with Somnath, we see Ghalib's desire to put India on the Persian Cosmopolitan map and to rank important centres such as Somnath as high as any Persian city. Furthermore, Ghalib was proud of the Somnath (temple) of his imagination, while also affirming his monotheistic beliefs even in *Temple Lamp* as elsewhere in his Urdu poetry. Both could exist simultaneously for him. By contrast, Afrin concludes his poem: "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'aba/kiss **this** black stone: **this** is the perfect *hajj*" (Pello 2020: 142) (my emphases). Clearly Banaras is the perfect Haj and pilgrimage for Afrin, superior to Mecca or anywhere else. In contrast, to Ghalib, Banaras carries the same divinity, it is 'the Kaaba of Hindostan' even as there may be another Kaaba elsewhere. Ghalib appears to see the same divinity operative at these major centres of devotion, whereas Afrin appears to set out to establish a more chauvinistic viewpoint.

Ghalib is far more generous to the 'other' in his work, immersing himself in the process of writing this poem and, in doing so, undertaking a kind of conversion. The writing of the Hinduism, spirituality, and devotion of Banaras in the Banaras poem by a Muslim author maybe considered an act of translation, where the translation itself begins to amount to conversion/ immersion (especially in the Ganga, as is shown below). This is described in a letter Ghalib wrote Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan that acts as a paratext to *Temple Lamp* (Bilal 2022: lxiv):

> Such an important matter is at hand that if the heart wasn't to be wounded by enemies and foes, I would have given up my religion. I would have broken the rosary and painted a tilak (on my forehead). I would have worn a janéu and sat for so long at the banks of the Ganga that all filth would have been washed off me and I would have joined the river like a drop.

The poet Ghalib clearly chooses a pluralistic piety where he wishes to adopt ritual as it pleases him in Banaras.

The Piety of Banaras

By writing his *masnavi* in Persian on Banaras, Ghalib is putting forth the views of a Muslim poet of Turkic ancestry attached to the Delhi court on a city of multifarious (Hindu and other) holiness and presents them with a cosmopolitan and pluralistic perspective to the whole of the Persosphere. Ghalib further ignores the convention of the *shahr-Ashob* tradition to list professional communities and describe them in detail, unlike Afrin on Banaras or Wali on Surat. Instead, Ghalib focuses on the spirituality of Banaras while ignoring any detailed catalogue of ritual. Thus, embracing a sense of visceral experience. Ghalib (verse 33, 34, 36 respectively)

may thus have written the following verses while looking at the everyday piety of its citizens and pilgrims or gazing upon the burning cremation pyres of Banaras (Ghalib 2022: 35, 36, 37):

zahe āsūdgī bakhsh-e-rawānhā
ke dāgh-e-chashm mī shūyad ze jānhā
All praise to this city
that grants contentment to souls,

it removes the evil eye,
makes whole.
shagufte nīst az āb-o-hawāyash
ke tanhā jāñ shawad andar fazāyash
It is no wonder
that from its climate,
in its ambience,
one should become pure soul.

hamah jānhāe be-tan kun tamāshā
nadārad āb-o-khāk īñ jalwah hāshā
Behold: the tamasha
of these souls without bodies,
their spectacle bears no concern
with water or dust.

It is as if Ghalib encountered and thus represents pure souls in Banaras, without feeling the impediments of creed, identity, or overt ritual, to behold and showcase the human soul itself. Spirituality here is framed as *moksha*, the ultimate release of souls from the cycle of recreation or metempsychosis, referencing various Indic traditions including various ideas of Hinduism as well as the Buddhist and Jain: *ke harkas kāndarāñ gulshan bimīrad/digar paiwand-e-jismān-e-nagīrad* (verse 31) or "All captive souls that quit their prisons/from this garden//never again find union/with their bodies", and *chaman sarmāya-e-ummīd gardad/ba-murdan zindā-e-jāvīd gardad* (verse 32) or "The garden becomes/the wealth of their hopes (of *moksha*),// The dead (from here)/are eternally alive" (Ghalib 33–34). Banaras is also, thus, a place of redemption for the poet. Even as the concepts remain far from orthodox Islam, Ghalib is able to appreciate them with nuance.

The Body of the City: Sensual and Vivacious Banaras

In fact, going beyond spirituality into Persian convention and poetic universe but also referring to Brahminical attire, Ghalib draws imagery for the city in his poem through the *zunnar*, or the sacred thread, which in the Persian tradition has pre-Islamic, probably Zoroastrian, origins: *bah-taslīm-e-hawā-e-āñ-chaman-zār/ zemauj-e-gul-bahārāñ bastah zunnār* (verse 43), or "Bowing in respect to the very air/ of this garden (that is Banaras),// the spring breeze wears/ a janéu made of flowers" (Ghalib 45).[10] This beautiful image alerts us to Ghalib's liberality in identifying and transposing beauty from the piety of the people to their city. This appreciation of the beauty of the city and its people further extends to greatly sensual bodily images as well. Here is Ghalib admiring many of the bodies (possibly) bathing or taking a ritual dip in the Ganga, in the sequence of verses 58–62 (Ghalib 60–64):

[10] While I have translated *zunnar* as *janéu* in the Indian edition, for an Indian audience that is quite familiar with the Sanskrit-originated word for the Hindu sacred thread, the Persian word *zunnar* for the sacred thread straddles more traditions.

qayāmat-qāmatāñ mizhgāñ dar āz āñ/ ze mizhgāñ bar saf-e-dil nezah-bāzāñ// ba tan sarmāyah-e-afzāish-e-dil/sarāpā muẕhdah-e-āsāish-e-dil// ba-mastī mauj rā farmūda ārām/ze-naghzī āb rā bakhshīda añdām// fatādah shorish-e dar qālib-e-āb/ ze māhī şad dilash dar-sīnah betāb// ze-bas arz-e-tamannā mī kunad gang/ze-mauj āghosh-hā wāmī kunad gang

Their height, their eyelashes/ will cause (our) doom.// these lashes cut,/ they spear the frontlines of the heart.// In body, the capital/ of the heart's gladdening,// from head to toe—/relief for the heart.// Their joy stuns the waves/ (of the Ganga) to stillness.// their newness grants/ shape to the body of water.// Embodied by water,/ they cause a storm in the river,// a hundred fish hearts/ beat in the chest (of the lover).// (As they step into it),/ the Ganga reveals its desires;// each wave rises,/ opening its arms in embrace.

Unlike the traditional *shahr-ashob*'s descriptions of each class of people and, most often, the bodies of men, Ghalib is describing the beauty of the bodies of Banaras without discrimination, and in idealized and celebratory terms.

The early Ghalib critic, Malik Ram has argued for the possibility of Ghalib having a paramour or object of admiration during his short sojourn in Banaras (Firaqi 2012: 75). This, it is argued, provides a personal reason for Ghalib's lush descriptions of beloved bodies in the poem. Ram cited Ghalib's following Persian verse (not included in *Chiragh-e-Dair* by Ghalib, but available through a letter to a friend) as evidence (Bilal 2022: lxviii):

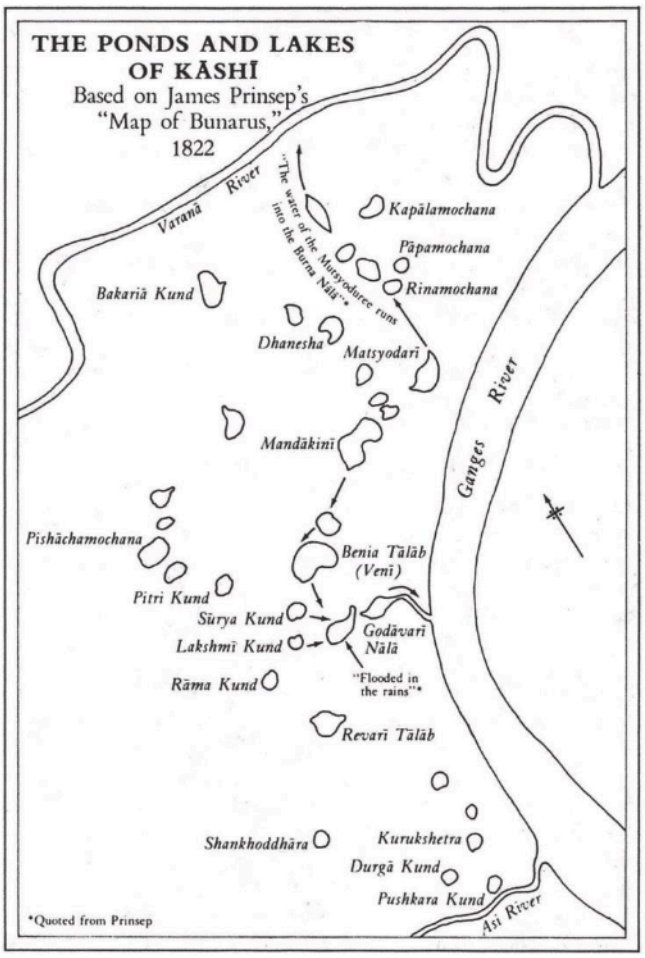
kāsh kāñ but-e-kāshī dar pazer dam
Ghālib bandah tawām goyam, gavīdam, zanāz, ārī.
I wish that idol of Banaras would accept Ghalib,
I would say I am your slave, and they'd respond proudly, yes!

Banaras as *Watan*, Hospitable Home, Locus of Belonging

While we cannot verify such academic conjecture, we know from Ghalib's extension of his stay for a month in Banaras, and his rich descriptions in *Temple Lamp,* that he relished the hospitality he received in Banaras, even as there is no evidence that he visited anyone of note, and rented accommodations from an old woman (Mahuli 2010: 16). Thus, he comes to see Banaras as an alternative abode or *watan*, after Delhi. *Watan* has the multiple meanings of "native country, country, home, abode, residence, dwelling" (Platts 1884). Subsequently, Ghalib asserts to making a perfect home in Banaras in verses 20–21, after lamenting how his Delhi friends' have forgotten him: *sipas dar lālah zāre jā tawāñ kard/ watan rā dāgh-e-istighna tawāñ kard// bakhātir dāram ainak gul zamīne/ bahār āīñ sawād-e-dil nashīne* or "One can, thus, make place/ in a garden of Tulips,// and turn the home-city/ into the mark of renunciation// I welcome now/a flowering land,// spring settles here/on the horizon of the heart" (Ghalib 22–23). This also juxtaposes exceptionally well with the first section of the poem, where Ghalib expressed his restlessness, pain at having had to leave Delhi and his Delhi friends, who it seems to him, have already forgotten him.

This record of the natural and spiritual hospitality of Banaras as *watan*, a place of cosmopolitan belonging, in early 19th-century at a time of turmoil in the Persian Cosmopolis with the emergence of Empire is an interesting manoeuvre by Ghalib. It signals the cosmopolitan adaptability of this cultivated man, one can assume as a type of Persianate North-Indian elite of the time, but also the dynamic prevalent in the subcontinent and its cities. Religion clearly does not define belonging, as is evidenced from the Muslim Ghalib moving from the Muslim-ruled Delhi to Hindu-ruled Banaras. Belonging is also not to a nation-state (that is yet to fully

form in its European, colonial state in South-Asia) in early 19th century, but to community and to cities. Symptomatic of this, *watan* can be used by Urdu speakers till date to ask each other of their native town or village. Ghalib had stated his dismay at being forgotten by his friends, the citizen of Delhi, in verse 11: *kas az ahl-e-watan ghamkhār-e-man nīst/ marā dar dahr pindāre watan nīst* or "not one of my fellow citizens/ partakes in my pain,// it is as if I had no country/ in the whole world" (Ghalib 2022, 13). *Watan* here is translated as 'country' in the verse, but it can just easily be 'home', 'residence' or 'abode', as shown above, and in fact extends to the 'city' here. This strain continues in the next verse 12, in which he beseeches the beloved three lords of his *watan*, his friends, whom Ghalib considers the light of his 'nine-garden city', Delhi, who he feels have forgotten him. This loss of one cosmopolitan *watan* is resolved by finding another in Banaras as quoted above in verses 20–21. The furthest extents of Banaras's hospitality are often natural, as suggested earlier in this paper in the section on the importance of gardens in *Chiragh-e-Dair*. This natural quality is extended to remarkable images of the river, and may be read today as providing an important valorisation of the ecology of 19th-century Banaras. Apart from his sketches, Prinsep also gave us a map of the Banaras city of his time which shows us all the water bodies of Banaras from that time that have since been drained, whose further simplified version by Eck is useful here (Eck 2015):



Quoted from Diana L Eck's *Banaras*

The Ganga is a teeming river, unhindered at that time by any major dam, and receives significant description in Ghalib's verses. The city and the river are often personified as a beloved woman adequately reflected in the perfect foil/ mirror that is the river: *magar goī banāras shāhide hast/ze-gangash subh-o-shām āīnā dar dast* (verse 64) or "Or one could behold Banaras,/ perhaps, as the beauty// who preens from dawn to dusk/ with the Ganga as a mirror in their hand" (Ghalib 66). *Ba-gangash 'aks tā partau fagan shud/banāras khud nazīr kheshtan*" (verse 68) or "with its image reflected/ in the Ganga, // Banaras is its own /peerless second" (Ghalib 70). *Chū dar āīnā-e-ābash namūdañd gazañd-e-chashm-e-zakhm az we rabūdañd* (verse 69) or "When it revealed its face/in the mirror of water, // the ritual was completed, / the evil eye avoided" (Ghalib 71). This profusion of water and green imagery takes almost a Romantic joy in nature and reads well today as environment affirmative poetry.

The last reference, to local ritual, again points to Ghalib's pluralistic outlook, which suffuses the whole poem.

Conclusion

Ghalib's *Chiragh-e-Dair* (1827) paints a holistic picture of early 19th-century Banaras through his pluralistic vision of it as a cosmopolitan city with deep spirituality and cleansing natural environs. It is also a city of multitudes of sensuality combined with bodily redemption, with an emphasis on the powerful river. Ghalib is himself seduced in flesh and spirit, and moved to linguistic creativity by the city, as not only is he swayed to write the poem, but, as he says elsewhere in a letter to Miyandad Khan Saiyyid, he wishes to belong here: "Banaras is beyond words. Such cities are seldom created. I happened to be there at the height of my youth. If I were young now, I would go and live there and not return" (Farooqi 2021: 96). Ghalib transcends conventions of the traditional *shahr-ashob* in *Temple Lamp*, where he limits the lament of the city to Delhi, and does not praise Banaras through a list of professions but in its wholeness as a cosmopolitan centre that rivals any of the cities of his Persianate world. The poem concludes as he must renounce Banaras as the woes of his own city, Delhi, weigh on him, and he must continue his journey further. However, if given a choice, Ghalib would stay in Banaras forever, relishing its cosmopolitanism and spirituality. Moreover, he is a pluralistic and cosmopolitan man who appears to have found a city after his heart, and unlike Afrin's *Kashi Istut*, *Chiragh-e-Dair* adopts a generous non-competing pluralistic tone to praise the city and its spirituality. That Banaras is cosmopolitan is also evident by the presence of Persians such as Hazin who have already being embraced by Kashi, as seen in the quotation of his verse above. This paper has shown how Ghalib's poem reflects on Banaras and its various facets as both real and symbolic, going by poetic convention as well as real piety, beauty, sensuality, and greenery that he encounters in the city.

Furthermore, the poem is important today as it shows how easily a man such as Ghalib could move across different cities of South Asia and appreciate their beauty irrespective of whether they were ruled by Muslim or Hindu kings who were in any case under the aegis of the British East India Company in the early 19th century. Ghalib's *watan* could be thought of as multifarious with many concentric or overlapping circles of location. He belonged to *Hindostan*, but also to Agra, and most so to Delhi, but also to a larger Persian Cosmopolis. Poetically, he found the greatest of succour in Banaras for which he wrote his only long poem dedicated to a city, even as he was inspired to write a few *sher*s for Calcutta and Delhi as well. While colonial texts already labelled Banaras as a Hindu city in as early as 1868 (Sherring 1868), Ghalib's *masnavi Chiragh-e-Dair* is a testament to his own pluralism and cosmopolitanism as well as to these values, as he found them, in the city of lights as he set them alight on the world maps of the Silk Route and the Persosphere. Contemporary media discourse which often renders Banaras monolithic, with repeated controversies over Mughal engagement with Banaras, will do well to refer to this *masnavi* by Ghalib.

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