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suggestion that knowledge, patience and kindness are necessary in the matter of recommending right and forbidding wrong. For this, he quoted the Prophet of Islam, who said: 'He who is not patient in enjoining good and forbidding evil and has got no understanding of what is wrong and what is right should not take upon himself the task of *amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi anal munkar*'.⁶²

Violating Norms of Conduct

Moving on from our discussion on the recommended norms of conduct, *akhlāq/adab*, in Sunni Islam, forms of Islamic religiosity, pretensions of the orthodoxy to piety and devotionalism and contestations between rulers, ulama, and Sufis over what was identified as Islamic or non-Islamic, we will now explore the actual possibilities of defying these parameters of moral conduct. For this, we will focus on the works of Mir Muhammad Jafar Zatalli as literary articulations of 'improper' acts in Mughal India.¹ Jafar Zatalli, who lived in the second half of the seventeenth and the first decade of the eighteenth century, is often dismissed or ignored by modern scholars for his alleged vulgarity. Nevertheless, he enjoys the distinction of being the first major Urdu literary figure who attempted to redraw the boundaries of what was considered permissible in literature. Belonging to a Sayyid family of Narnaul, now in Haryana in northern India, Jafar Zatalli addressed issues of morality, particularly among the Mughal elite, including the princes and nobles. His writings have often been overlooked as mere *laḥẓāzī* or facile eloquence of little value. He even represented himself as a *zātallī* or idle talker, as we can see from his *takhallus* or nom de plume. Yet, no historian of Urdu language and literature can afford to ignore Zatalli and his work.² Jamil Jalibi, a leading scholar of the history of Urdu literature, has noted that Zatalli has generally been ignored as a jester who wrote nonsensical

verse, and a proper evaluation of his work from the historical, cultural and linguistic perspectives has not been attempted. Jalibi himself locates the themes of Jafar's corpus in what was perceived as the moral decline and hypocrisies of late Mughal India. Instead of joining the dominant trend or withdrawing like a Sufi, Zatali opted for critiquing the prevailing attitudes through satire, as we shall see below.³

Contrary to the indifferent attitude of the historians of medieval India towards him, it is important to note that Zatali heralded a linguistic turn of sorts by publicly exposing the rampant duplicities of Mughal society through his satire and poetry of protest, which were in a no holds barred language—an idiom that was hitherto restricted to the oral domain. He wrote of love and sex in a way that no one had done before him in Mughal India. His oeuvre also pre-dated the poetry of love and/or self-flagellation over unfulfilled desire, *ghazal*, which subsequently emerged as the dominant form in the next generation,⁴ though satire in Urdu also grew into an important trope for resistance and protest in north India in the first half of the eighteenth century.



Zatali, however, wrote during a period when the poets were still mixing Persian and Urdu expressions in their compositions. Their language was called *rekhta*—gibberish or mixed language. The eighteenth-century sophistication of Urdu language had not yet come about and an accomplished *ustad* (master) like Siraj-ud-Din Ali Khan-i-Arzu (1687–1756) was yet to emerge. Khan-i-Arzu corrected and polished the language of many Urdu poets who flocked to Delhi, and some of them went on to be counted amongst the all time greats—Mir Taqi Mir, Muhammad Rafi Sauda and Khwaja Mir Dard come to mind immediately.⁵ Later, Khan-i-Arzu and many of his pupils left Delhi for greener pastures in the wake of the turmoil at the Mughal court, which will be detailed later in this chapter. To his credit, although the

learned scholar died in Lucknow, his body was transported to Delhi and buried there in accordance with his last wishes.

The larger processes in the history of Urdu literature also need to be kept in mind here. The latter half of the seventeenth century witnessed the growth of Urdu language and literature in Delhi, though Persian continued to dominate politically, culturally and intellectually. The subsequent arrival of Wali Dakani in north India and the impact of his works in Deccani Urdu are often referred to in the context of the growth of Urdu.⁶ More importantly, political and social changes were transforming the linguistic sphere as well, a process that received a significant boost in the eighteenth century.⁷ As mentioned earlier, Jafar Zatali's compositions, both prose and poetry, are amongst the earliest examples of *rekhta* or early Urdu. Even as he used established Persian literary conventions, he often departed from tradition to showcase his mastery of Urdu.⁸ Therefore, in many instances, his work reads like a mixed language. Sometimes, a couplet in Persian is followed by another in Urdu. In yet another case, one line of a couplet is in Persian, and the next in Urdu. Also, Persian and Urdu expressions are sometimes used in the same line, providing a spectacular example of literary and cultural appropriation.

Though Zatali excelled in such bilingualism or in preparing a '*lisani khichri*'⁹ (linguistic hotchpotch), this form has, in fact, a longer history that goes back to the Sufi fraternities of the Delhi Sultanate. Seen in this context, these works reveal the engagement between the Perso-Arabic form and lexicon, and Indic syntax and diction.¹⁰ Yet, extant examples are few and far between as they were circulated orally for a period before being written down and are limited in terms of the range of genres. As mentioned earlier, though the Urdu that has come down to modern times took its mature shape only in the early eighteenth century during the period of Mughal decline, Zatali's Urdu prose and poetry serve as interesting early examples of literary exercises in this language, executed with considerable finesse. His juxtaposition

of a large vocabulary of Indic words, phrases and proverbs with Persian expressions shows the ease and flair with which he was able to transcend the barriers of language and culture.

Jafar Zatalli compiled his compositions from across a variety of literary genres in his *Kulliyat* (collected works), *Zatal-nama*, during the latter half of Aurangzeb's reign, that is, the last quarter of the seventeenth century. It is possible that Zatalli put together his *Kulliyat* some time between the twenty-ninth and thirty-ninth years of Aurangzeb's reign, that is, between 1687 and 1697.¹¹ A large number of manuscripts of Zatalli's work have survived, including a text from 1791–92. Notwithstanding modern historians' reluctance to engage with Zatalli's work, the popularity of the text in Urdu circles, though somewhat restrained and surreptitious, can also be ascertained from the fact that at least half a dozen printed editions have appeared in the 150 years from 1855 to 2003. For our purpose here, we will use the latest edition of *Kulliyat*, prepared by Rashid Hasan Khan, who has also written a detailed and important evaluation of the ten manuscripts and four previous editions.¹²

It is possible that Zatalli's work was subsequently edited and updated by the poet himself or by some later poets and writers. Rashid Hasan Khan has identified certain verses and prose compositions that are attributed to Jafar Zatalli in the text, but which seem to have been composed by some other writer(s) with lesser abilities. Khan has selected and included the potential later additions—both of doubtful authenticity and or those that seem to be outright false attributions—in separate appendices at the end of the *Kulliyat* edited by him.¹³ Even if some portions of the work were possibly falsely ascribed to Zatalli, it is significant that the themes covered by the poet as well as his language and form were of interest to the Urdu-reading public. In addition, he was clearly imitated by his contemporaries and certainly by later poets, including several well-known literary figures from the first half of the eighteenth century. However, none can surpass Zatalli in crudeness and in his carefree knitting together of phrases from backgrounds as diverse as theological and

virtuous Arabic, polished and deceptive Persian, and rustic and direct Hindustani. Many examples of such usage will be noted below in the samples of his compositions.

It is important to keep in mind that Jafar Zatalli was not an ordinary, frustrated public intellectual of the bazaar with nothing else to do. Nor was he a regular hoodlum loafing around the streets and passing comments on pedestrians. Also, his writing is not that of an ordinary soldier who maintained a diary in crude language.¹⁴ In the opinion of an early biographer, but for his nasty cracks, his literary abilities were of the level of a malik-us-shuara (poet-laureate).¹⁵ From time to time, he was employed in the service of some influential Mughal princes. For instance, he was for some time in the army of Aurangzeb's son, Kam Bakhsh, which was engaged in Mughal campaigns in the Deccan. Known for his not care a damn approach to life and work, Zatalli wrote a vulgar satire on his own generous employer, Kam Bakhsh, as well. The poet accused the prince of screwing a pet goat he loved. The satire begins with the couplet where Kam Bakhsh is charged of attacking the little opening (*ghachchi*) of the goat with so much force that it gets damaged (*pakhsh*) and is transformed into a gaping hole (*pichchi*):¹⁶

*zah-e shah-e wala guhar kam bakhsh
ke ghachchi buz kard pichchi wa pakhsh*
(Well done! Jewel of the prince, Kam Baksh
The little opening of the goat is ruptured into a gaping hole.)

Note the poet's deployment of phrases in the *radif* (last words of the couplet), which highlight the contradictory qualities of the prince: bakhsh (generosity and forgiveness) counterpoised with pakhsh (bestly suppression and disfigurement). Further down in the verses, Zatalli becomes more explicit and declares that the prince's repeated penetration (*'ghusera ghuseri'*, shoving and thrusting) causes the goat (called Manohar) to begin silently moaning in pain (*'ghusera ghuseri ke mi-kard shah/manohar pari khufiya mi-kard aah'*).¹⁷

Understandably aghast with Zatalli's charge of bestiality, imagined or real, Kam Bakhsh, who reportedly had a lot of affection for the untamed poet, sacked him from service. The resultant poverty, as the poet writes in his verses, reminded him of the comfortable life he led under the patronage of the prince—all the delicacies (*faluda*, *firni*, *shirni*) he savoured, the comfortable bed he slept in and the time he spent in the company of women (*faluda wa firni che shud, pan bhatta wa shirni che shud / aan bistar wa balein kidhar, ke jafar ab kaisi bani*).¹⁸ Following his sacking, Zatalli was forced to leave Deccan and, mercifully, Kam Bakhsh spared his life. He wrote that God saved his head, despite the fact that he antagonized the ruler (*ba badshah tayin bayr ki, sar par khuda ne khayr ki*).¹⁹ Zatalli writes he regretted his utter lack of tact in provoking the prince, though he had done it for the fun of it. He says he realized that it was too late to undo the damage and lampoons himself in the poem '*hasb-e haal-e khwud gufta*' by asking in the radif, '*jafar ab kaisi bani*' or 'Jafar, how does it feel like now'.²⁰

Banished from the Deccan, the poet chose to stay in Delhi and was engaged, for a period, in the service of Aurangzeb's second son, Prince Muhammad Muazzam, who succeeded his father to the Mughal throne and was subsequently known as Bahadur Shah I. It is possible that Zatalli ended up antagonizing his patron once again by writing a scandalous spoof called *Gand marauiwa nama*, or *Gandu-nama* ('An Account of a Catamite'),²¹ though it is not clear whether he wrote this before or after his dismissal from Bahadur Shah's service. One couplet of this satire was too explicit to leave any doubt about the character of the king:²²

badshahi hai bahadur shah ki
ban banakar gand marauiwa kheliye

Literally, this couplet translates as, this is the kingdom of Bahadur Shah, make yourself up for the fun of anus-sex. The religious condemnation of homosexual love apart, Muslim

societies make a distinction between the 'subject' and an 'object' of male homosexual love, demeaning 'passivity' in men and making the 'exchange' pederastic, that is, hierarchical, non-mutual and controlling. The relationship then has a victorious 'male' and victimized 'female'. Following this binary, a *laundehaz* (pederast; literally, boy-player; sodomite) is not as emphatic a term of abuse as *gandu* (catamite; literally, anus-defined; coward).²³ Thus, to address Aurangzeb's son and successor as a *gandu* is the worst kind of abuse that only a Zatalli would dare to hurl.²⁴ More so, because the Mughals were supposed to be mature men, not going around removing their trousers for men or boys as they had harems comprising women of all kinds, available for meek subjection and for bearing sons.²⁵

Since no detailed and authoritative biography of Zatalli has survived, it is difficult to ascertain the exact chronology of his career. Therefore, samples of his exploits and rewards, on the one hand, and punishments, on the other, can be given here only to highlight the extent of his literary transgressions, which eventually turned out to be a fatally flawed course of action in the prudish society of the time. It is important to remember that Zatalli was violating norms at two levels: first, he deviated from the norms of the literary culture of Mughal India in the latter half of the seventeenth century, especially compared to the sophisticated writings of figures like the Persian poet, Mirza Bedil, who did not utter a word in public not allowed by the norms of comportment, *adab*; second, Zatalli not only wrote in a language and form not acceptable in 'high' Mughal literary culture, but also committed transgressions by writing about what were construed as misdemeanours on the part of Mughal princes and nobles. While his literary transgressions ensured for a time that Zatalli was not taken seriously by literary purists, especially when Urdu literature was coming to be identified as a form of *adab* itself, his consistent pointing to the violations of Mughal norms by the upholders led to serious consequences.

Zatalli was killed following the emperor Farrukh-Siyar's order in 1713, ostensibly for commenting on the ruler's brutal

method of eliminating rivals and opponents by strangling them to death using a leather belt (*tasma*), that is, instead of lashing or beating, which was the usual practice to chastise criminals and sinners; the whip was generally used for throttling the offenders till they died.²⁶ According to some reports, the nobleman Nawab Zulfikar Khan Bahadur and his father were asphyxiated with a leather belt. Zatali was also strangled in the same way for pointing out this innovation in a verse (*badshah-e tasma kush farrukh-siyar* or 'Farrukh-Siyar, the king who kills by the leather-belt'). It is possible that the ruler was affronted not so much for being condemned as a '*tasma-kush*', but for the poet's mocking his unjust rule. As one early biographer of Zatali recorded, '*mizaj-i padshah barham gasht, ishan ra ba-jannat farastad*' ('The emperor was outraged; he, the poet, was dispatched to heaven!').²⁷ The wordsmiths derived the date of his death from the hemistich:

'haveli' chhod, yu bola zatali

'andheri gor mein latkan lage paag'

Computing the numerical equivalent of the second line (*andheri gor mein latkan lage paag* or 'the legs were hanging in the dark grave') as well as leaving out the numbers derived from the word *haveli* (mansion; *haveli chhod*: a mansion which was to be vacated), the year of Zatali's execution is poetically arrived at AH 1125 (1713).²⁸ Incidentally, the second line was provisionally composed by Zatali himself in his poem, *Budhapa-nama*, where he laments his deteriorating condition in old age.²⁹

Since one of his couplets refers to his age as sixty years, Zatali was possibly born during the reign of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and was a close witness to the reign of Aurangzeb, for whom he shows a deep personal respect. Therefore, speaking in the language of conventional history, Zatali's writings are an important contemporary historical source for Aurangzeb's reign, and, as we shall see later in this chapter, he has praised the rule of the emperor.

Many of his satires, letters and a number of other compositions in a variety of genres, reveal Mughal culture as one that provided significant space for deviance from recommended norms of conduct that derived either from shariat-driven *adab* or from the elitist sophistication of Persianate society. (It may be pointed out that the term 'Persianate' is being used here and throughout this book in the sense of a society that is influenced by what is identified as Persian language and culture, but which is not necessarily one that directly originates from Persia or Iran. Similarly, the term 'Islamicate' is deployed to represent a set of ideas, beliefs or practices broadly identified with Muslim culture and civilization, but which does not blindly conform to any strand of Islamic theology with a constricted framework.) As James Grehan has written with reference to the norms of conduct for public officials in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Damascus, ideally, a good Muslim was expected to carry himself with an air of serenity, dignity and patience. Laughing and jesting were out of the question. Gossip, lies, insults and all kinds of unbridled speech were considered abhorrent and dishonourable; so too were displays of anger, haughtiness and bravado. Pious men, whether ulama or Sufis, were supposed to always be in command of both body and soul, accomplished in what is referred to as 'arts of impression management'. The ideal man of learning was to be adept at sprinkling various pleasantries in his everyday speech along with appropriate citations from the Quran and other scriptural sources.³⁰

In contrast, Zatali was direct, impolite and frivolous. However, it is important to remember that he was careful enough to not antagonize any guardians of Islam who could retaliate with charges of heresies. He also did not mock the Prophet and his companions—symbols of virtue and infallibility—as we shall see later. Only some rulers managed to go as far, especially those who were able to subdue the ulama and Sufis under their authority, sometimes by generous grants and sometimes by force. The main targets of Zatali's attack, in turn, were the rulers, mainly Mughal princes and nobles, as well as a number of

elite women whose escapades were public knowledge. The transgressions of his subjects were well known to people in chowks, bazaars and army camps in Delhi and other major Mughal locations, but Zatalli was courageous enough to put them in writing and invite trouble for himself. As he wrote in his outrageous *Gandu-nama*:³¹

hukm-e qazi, muhtasib za'il shuda
dil badhakkar gand marauwa kheliye
pir se aur baap se, ustad se
chhup-chhupakar gand marauwa kheliye

In the first couplet, the poet exposes the extent of sexual transgressions (in this case, '*gand marauwa*' or 'anus-sex') that occurred despite the presence of the qazis (Muslim judges) and muhtasibs (censor officials), whose powers were in decline (*za'il shuda*). In the second one, he points out how this was done, playfully, away from the gaze of (*chhup-chhupakar*) the father (*baap*), teacher (*ustad*) or the religious guide (*pir*). The poet also refers to the locations for and postures of homosexual intercourse—*ban banakar* (after a make-up), *dil badha-kar* (with an open heart), *bagh ja-kar* (in the garden), *dhol baja-kar* (over the trumpet), *darmiyan-i-khas-o-aam* (amidst the elite or the commoner), *paan chaba-kar* (while chewing *paan*), *ghar bula-kar* (through invitation at home), *chit laga-kar* (while lying on the back), and *taang utha-kar* (by raising the legs), to name a few.³²

In this context, it must be noted that in his *Najat-ur-Rashid*, Abdul Qadir Badauni, whose critique of heresies in Islam has been discussed earlier in this book,³³ has quoted the Quran (al-Araf, verse 81) where it is stated that those who go to men instead of women for sexual purposes cross the limits of decency. Therefore, Badauni felt relieved when he was punished for his crime of homosexual love in this world itself. He was subjected to nine sword-wounds by the family of the 'beloved' youth with whom he was caught in a compromising position in a bush. This

punishment was in keeping with the Quran (An-Nur, verse 2), which states that any man or woman who is characterless and indulges in what are identified as immoral acts should be administered one hundred lashes.³⁴ So, what we are dealing with here is apparently a longstanding concern in medieval Muslim societies and even in modern times, if oral reports that occasionally spill out of the closed and segregated seminaries are any indication.

Before proceeding with this discussion, however, it must be clarified that homosexuality is a matter of choice or preference and does not necessarily stem from situations of sexual segregation and nor should it be viewed as a general decline in moral standards. An investigation into this matter involving low-grade theologians and their pupils, and cases of sodomy and non-consensual love, is out of the purview of this work and such reports should be taken as aberrations unless proved by conclusive evidence as an established practice. Discussions on homosexuality and religion also tend to be riddled with sensitive issues. In fact, the most vehement opposition to homosexuality might come from religious leaders of different hues.

In general, however, what a study of Zatalli's work shows is that same-sex love was not unheard of despite the lashes or sword-wounds, as in the case of the punishment meted out to Badauni. The scholar, it would seem, was a habitual 'offender', despite the fact that he was otherwise considered one of the conscience-keepers of Islam in an age of unbelief or heresy under Akbar. Lest scholars and activists dealing with contemporary politics of sexualities have problems with some of the above formulations, it may be clarified that the intention here is not to privilege any normative form over the 'alternative' heterosexuality over homosexuality, or the moral over the titillating. Much of the emotional debates in the literature on sexuality are with reference to modern or contemporary issues and contexts, and needless to say, interested parties are extremely touchy about the issues.³⁵

There are not many good studies on seventeenth-century Mughal India that foreground alternative sexualities and displaced heteronormity as the supreme form of sexual behaviour. Instead, it would appear that a conservative sexual morality condemned as misdemeanour forms and expressions of desire that were perceived as unnatural, unprocreative, or effeminate; *gandu* was one such derogatory characterization. Increasingly asserting themselves in modern times are a variety of categories such as queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, third gender, transsexual, and transvestite, as well as sexual relationships like adult and consensual, pre-marital, extra-marital, non-marital, group/orgy, promiscuous, paid-for and spouse-swapping sex.³⁶ In the language of the theologians and the moral brigade, most of these forms of sexual behaviour and conduct are fit to be suppressed till nothing remains of them. Also, while the moralist position on lesbians and homosexual men is discriminatory, it remains ambiguous on the sorry figures of the impotent as well as the neutered, that is, the castrated eunuchs, or *mukhannās*, who guarded harems.

Returning to Zatlali, it is entirely possible that he was externalizing his frustrations over his miserable financial condition in the service of Bahadur Shah I, as he complained in another poem, *Qināt-nama*, 'A Report on Contentment', where he mentions the name of the ruler. He mockingly deploys the phrase '*ghanimat asī*' in the *radif* of this poem to highlight his poverty and claimed that whatever little he received can be considered a boon or blessing (*ghanimat*). He concludes the poem by recommending contentment (*qināt*) and submission to the will of God (*sabr*).³⁷ It is also possible that the poet was reflecting as much on his own despicable state as on the deteriorating grandeur of sections of Mughal nobility. This theme recurs in the satirical Urdu poetry of the early eighteenth century, as in that of Sauda; in the same vein, Zatlali suggests that if you do not get a horse of good quality, having a mule (*khachhar*) or donkey (*gadhəri*) from Palam (near Delhi) should be satisfying enough.³⁸ Further, when he was punished for taunting Kam

Bakhsh, he realized the hazardous terrain he was traversing and wanted to stay away from censuring others:

dil ko thikane lao ab, kar sabr mat pachhtao ab
har giz mago bar-e digar, ke jafar ab kaisi bani!

In the above couplet, the call for self-restraint (*sabr*), exhortation for discretion (*har giz mago bar-e digar*, 'never utter a word about others') and suggestions to keep one's emotions in check or come to your senses (*dil ko thikana lao ab*) are backed by the observation that there was no point in regretting after the harm was done with the reminder, *ke jafar ab kaisi bani*, 'how does it feel to be punished for your follies'. However, the warning is just a trope in his sense of poetic justice, for the poet would resume targeting people with his acerbic compositions soon enough. In particular, he attacked their sexual licentiousness, mainly fascination for homosexual love, and the alleged unrestrained libido of their womenfolk, both in *pardah* and out of it.

Thus, Zatlali assailed, apart from Kam Bakhsh and Bahadur Shah I, Khan-i-Jahan, Sabha Chand, Fateh Ali Khan, Mirza Zulfikar Beg (the kotwal of Delhi), Mirza Khudayar Beg and Muhammad Yar Beg, among others. For instance, he warned Sabha Chand, using the Indic epithet 'ji' after his name (that is, Sabha Chandji) to follow his wise counsel (*nasihat*) and spend time in remembering God (Ram) and chanting his name (*hamari nasihat rakho gosh bich/japo ram mala, raho hosh bich*).³⁹ The poet also threatened Sabha Chand of dire consequences for his craftiness (*chatur-dhiti*). Accusing him of being a back-biter, Zatlali warned that he was capable of jumping on his back and subduing his buttock (*chughal ki uchhal gand pharun pachhar*).⁴⁰

The well-known women he targeted included Ismatun Nisa Begam (maternal grand-daughter of Mughal noble, Mamur Khan) and the wives of Sabha Chand. The latter's two wives have been portrayed as *makkara* (cheats), *badkara* (sinful, sexually immoral), *ayyara* (cunning) and *dhlial* (whores), not to mention

a host of other invectives. The alleged delinquency of Sabha Chand's wives is discussed in Zatali's tirade against him. The gendered nature of assaults can certainly destroy a man's reputation and honour in many social and political contexts, as was the case in Mughal India. Though there might have been other reasons, Sabha Chand was ostensibly abused not only for being aware of what was going on in his family, but also for taking advantage of the exploits of his womenfolk to advance his own interests. Thus, he was projected as a *bhaduva* (pimp or cuckold) and *chandal* (low-caste wretch).⁴¹ Also, even though Zatali has given many examples of sexual licentiousness of various kinds, sometimes with approval and sometimes in rabid opposition, his diatribe against female sexuality is, in a measure, typical of the assumptions of a male-dominated society—always scrutinizing and controlling female behaviour which may not conform to the required standards of subordination.⁴² In fact, imputations about a woman's sexual morality could be freely deployed even in arguments or disputes which were not about women and sex at all.⁴³ Characteristically then, Zatali claimed, in another composition that highlights a traditional saying, that the penis can never subdue the vagina, despite all the controlling powers of society (*sunī baat mayen pīr fārtut se/ke lauda na jīta kabhi chūt se*).⁴⁴ (Polite company calls for purity of tongue and to block out offensive speech, a normative text would recommend plugging your ears with your fingers.⁴⁵)

On account of the abusive language used by Zatali in many of his poems and other writings, scholars who sing paeans about the sophistication and sobriety of Mughal culture tend to dismiss the poet as a writer of obscenity who should better be ignored. However, it is important to remember that not all of Zatali's writing represented a vulgar expression of an uncultured and frustrated man unable to fit into an urbane, Mughal scheme of things. As shown above, Zatali was associated with many princes and nobles of his time. Moreover, making fun of others was serious business, even as the poet also castigated himself for his own failures and lack of prudence. In doing so, however, he was

basically commenting on the culture of his time. Jafar's non-conformist utterances exposed the tantalizing difference between the acceptable standards of moral conduct and contemporary social realities, religion and deviance, and importantly, piety and sin.

To clarify, terms such as religion, heresy, piety, sin and transgressions are being used in this chapter and elsewhere in this book in the sense in which they are done in the established tradition of scholarship on medieval Islam, much of which will be unintelligible to those who have been trained to think only in terms of Christianity and Western modernity, which is a major limitation of modern Western education. The problem becomes particularly acute when influential modern Western theories are imposed on the very different empirical or historical context of medieval Muslim societies. There is a veritable epistemological disconnect that causes many misunderstandings regarding Islam and Muslim traditions, which is one of the outstanding problems in the relationship between Islam and the West, but this should not prevent us from pursuing our own inquiry.

To return to Zatali, since he had lived through roughly the entire reign of Aurangzeb, his compositions are a reflection of the society and culture of the period of pre-modern/pre-colonial, Mughal India, as has been pointed out earlier. He was also a witness to the political flux that eventually shook the Mughal empire under Aurangzeb's successors in the early eighteenth century. The events in the last years of Aurangzeb's rule were a portent of the *hara-kiri* about to happen soon after his death. The rumours about the wide gap between accepted norms and the moral conduct of his sons and nobles made them lose the legitimacy to rule the huge empire they had inherited. They were also accused of being so incompetent as to be unable to govern the empire efficiently. Thus, Zatali's comments are not out of place—he was a close witness to the unfolding saga of the decaying Mughal army, camps and forts.

The fratricidal warfare following Aurangzeb's death further weakened the Mughal imperial household and the grandeur and awe was also eventually lost with the emergence of successor

states and independent principalities. Though historians have advanced a number of reasons such as agrarian crisis, backwardness of the Mughal army, and, more importantly, the religious policy of Aurangzeb for the decline and fall of the Mughal empire, Jafar Zatali had considerable respect for Aurangzeb and the Mughal dominion, if not for the imperial household. The emperor not only escaped the poet's lethal attacks, but was actually, for a change, a subject of Zatali's praise, which was a rare honour. In his eulogy (*Dar tarif Aurangzeb*), the poet extolled the extraordinary bravery and steadfastness of Aurangzeb, which created a flutter (*khalbali*) in the Deccan (*zahe dhak-e aurangshah-e bali/dar aqlim-e dakkhan pari khalbali*).⁴⁶

Another couplet projected Aurangzeb as an exceptional warrior who could stand on the battlefield like an unmoveable mountain (*mahasur joddha, bali be-badal/chu al-burz qaim, chu parbat atal*).⁴⁷ Notice the use of aggressive phrases from the language of warfare of the Indic tradition here. The emperor is referred to as a great warrior-hero, using the following Sanskrit/Hindi synonyms: *bali*, *mahasur*, *juddha*, *atal*, *hanumant* and *balbir*. In contrast, his rivals in Deccan such as Sikandar Hasan, ruler of Bijapur, Abul Hasan Tana-Shah, ruler of Golconda and Shivaji's son, Sambhaji, among others, are belittled as insignificant creatures. Zatali reserved his worst comments for Sambhaji's agent, Pratap, whom he addressed with the rhetorical remark, *che jhant ast partab ibn-ul-hammar*, which refers to Pratap as an ass or son of a donkey and dismisses him as male pubic hair. Further, in the concluding part of his eulogy, the poet extolled Aurangzeb's virtues such as *uafa* (faithfulness), *haya* (modesty, shame) *baqa* (everlasting), *ghina* (wealthy), *marawwat* (kindness), *fatuwat* (generosity) and *daya* (mercy).⁴⁸ The poet eventually declared that in all his experience of travels and pilgrimages (*tirath*, including a visit to Dwarka), he never met a more merciful person (*dayawant*) than Aurangzeb (*phira mayen bahut tirath aur dwarka/na dekha dayawant tujh saarka*).⁴⁹

In sharp contrast to the generous tribute paid to Aurangzeb, Zatali attacked the incompetence and hypocrisies of his sons,

which, according to him, not only complicated the proper and efficient management of the Deccan campaigns, but also spoiled the whole project (*hama kar-o-baar-e pidar bhand kard*).⁵⁰ In particular, the poet pointed out their relentless propensity towards sex and wrote that chatting and fantasizing about the wet vagina or anus were a round-the-clock obsession for them (*rahe raat din gaand ke ziker mein/ba lahu luab chut ki fikr mein*).⁵¹

In another set of compositions, *Akhbarat-e siyaha-e darbar-e mualla*, written on the lines of a daily record of imperial orders, Zatali also pointed out how the emperor's long stay in the Deccan, for roughly the whole of the second half of his reign, weakened the Mughal administration in north India.⁵² Yet, Zatali maintained his respect for Aurangzeb and wrote a *marsiya* or elegy on his death.⁵³ Referring to the terrible struggles between the sons of Aurangzeb for the Mughal throne and revealing the anxieties caused by the political crisis, Zatali concluded his elegy by warning himself of the consequences of his remarks in the changed scenario: *baya, jafar, sukhan ra mukhtasar kun/ze daur-e mukhtalif dar dil hazar kun* (literally, come on, Jafar, cut short your utterances; the time has changed, keep it to your heart).⁵⁴

Zatali's celebration of the reign of Aurangzeb is in line with the later image of the ruler in traditional Muslim circles—an efficient and pious badshah, who led a simple life. This portrayal is different from the charges of fanaticism and bigotry attributed to Aurangzeb that occurs in sections of later scholarship. This also does not require any apology and nor does it involve any embarrassment that one notices in another set of writings on the emperor. Drawing on a previous attempt to use some modern Urdu scholarship on Aurangzeb and medieval India generally,⁵⁵ unlike the uncomfortable liberal/secular scholars, writers like Allama Shibli Numani and Syed Sabahuddin Abdur Rahman do not fight shy of talking about the reign of Aurangzeb. For instance, Abdur Rahman points out that non-Muslim writers generally refer to Aurangzeb as a biased ruler, but his policy of recruitment of his officers belies such a characterization.

According to him, the king believed that religion should not interfere in matters of governance, and nor should biases have any place in such things. In support of this position, the ruler even cited the Quranic instruction: *lakum dinakum uia liya-din* ('To you your religion, to me mine'). Abdur Rahman even speculates that if Muslim rulers had not adopted such a policy towards non-Muslims, perhaps their government would not have lasted for so long.⁵⁶

Abdur Rahman contests Jadunath Sarkar's views on Aurangzeb's religious policy and largely extends Shibli Numani's older and more established position in Muslim intellectual circles. He questions Sarkar's motives in projecting Aurangzeb as a villain and Shivaji as a hero. He is particularly outraged by Sarkar's suggestion that the Mughal monarch behaved in the light of the Quran and the teachings of Islam, which condone violence, and thus, alienated non-Muslims from the Mughals, leading to the emergence of Shivaji as a saviour of the Hindus, and the subsequent fall of the Mughal empire.

For Abdur Rahman, Aurangzeb's orders to destroy some temples were not aimed at suppressing Hindus in general. For, if that was the case, he would not have given so many land grants to Hindu temples. The author asserts that the attacks on places of worship should be understood in their localized context and that such examples should not be used to provoke one set of people against another. According to him, scholars like Sarkar contributed to the divisive agenda of the British and were rewarded with honours in return.⁵⁷ Abdur Rahman's work is a rare example of a detailed critique of Sarkar's writings, when the liberals have now given up on both Aurangzeb and Sarkar.⁵⁸ Sarkar's contributions also do not figure in two recent collections of classic historiographical interventions on the eighteenth century.⁵⁹ On the other hand, taking a liberal Muslim position, Syed Jamaluddin rebukes Abdur Rahman and Muslims in general for 'unnecessarily' making a ruthless ruler like Aurangzeb an academic 'liability' and for according saintly status to him.⁶⁰

However, Aurangzeb is indeed venerated in the devotional

Muslim milieu and counted amongst the pantheon of pious figures, mainly Sufis—a list that also includes a despotic Sultan like Mahmud of Ghazna. The names of all of these so-called pious men are uttered or inscribed with the suffix '*rahmatullah-alaihi*' ('God's mercy be upon him'). This is not only true for oral traditions, but also for popular literature that circulates around Sufi centres. Rashid Hasan Khan has pointed out that the replacement of the respectful phrase *zill-e subhani* (Shadow of God) with *zill-e shaitani* (Shadow of Satan) for Aurangzeb in some versions of Jafar Zatali's composition, *Akhtar-e shayha-e darbar-e mualla*, is a later interpolation by the copyists,⁶¹ which also means that there were people, possibly Shi'ites, who, unlike Sunni/Sufi circles, did not venerate the emperor.

In general, however, Zatali used words as weapons,⁶² and he could be devious in his use of phrases. Many abusive epithets were deployed by him; expletives of the kind that one still hears, with varying degrees of improvisations, in many parts of north India and possibly in the Deccan, and other regions as well. Some examples are *gaand se dosti*, *punchh se bayr* (friendship with the buttock, animosity with the tail);⁶³ *sipahi ka maal*, *jhaanth ka baal* (soldier's property, pubic hair).⁶⁴ Stand-alone expressions of disgust such as *chut* (vagina), *gand* (buttock), *lauda* (penis), *bhonsri* (vagina) and *jhaanth* (pubic hair) were also thrown in freely.⁶⁵ Several other proverbs used by Zatali are still deployed in Urdu-Hindi circles with little or no embarrassment: *unt ke munh mein zira* (a cumin seed in a camel's mouth);⁶⁶ *naach na janun angan tedha* (when you do not know how to dance, [don't] blame it on the crooked courtyard/floor);⁶⁷ *kutta tedhi punchh hai*, *kabhi na sidhi ho* (a dog has a crooked tail that can never be straightened).⁶⁸

Projecting himself as the object of sarcasm, Zatali also wrote a poem, *Dar bayan-e dilawari* ('Description of Bravery'), in which he ridiculed the hollow claims of the greatness and bravery of Mughal nobles and warriors. Zatali's critical comments on the pretensions and insincerities of the Mughal elite once again anticipate similar remarks by the next generation of Urdu poets

in Delhi such as Sauda, and, thus, connect him to the tradition of sorrowful *shahr-e ashob* poetry in Urdu, which laments the decline of the Mughal empire and with this, its purportedly refined culture and unmatched aura.⁶⁹

It is also important to note here that Zatalli's critique substantiates and corroborates the accounts of contemporary and near-contemporary chroniclers and historians. In the opinion of one modern writer, since the age was one of political decline and economic distress, there runs a thread of gloom through much of the contemporary historical writing.⁷⁰ It is suggested that the degenerated nobility reduced the king to a hapless pawn in the game of politics. The deposition and death of Farrukh-Siyar demonstrated the final triumph of ministers and nobles over the emperor. It is also noted, though erroneously, that the later Mughals had received no thorough education in the art of government and, therefore, they proved unequal to the task of dealing with the crises that continuously threatened Mughal dominion.⁷¹ The contemporary writers, who saw the empire caught in the turmoil of civil strife and its vast structure ultimately breaking down in the wake of political threat both from within the empire and outside, condemned the unwise policies of the later Mughal rulers and their inefficient administration.⁷²

The reported degeneration of the nobility, mainly through corruption and, what was perceived as immorality, further compounded the problem. However, these reports of the chroniclers and historians are to be studied with caution as their assessments of Mughal politics at this time are invariably coloured by their own ethnic and sectarian backgrounds as well as professional interests. For instance, opinion was divided on the role of the Sayyid brothers, influential nobles in Mughal court politics. While Khafi Khan condemned the Sayyid brothers, Qasim Lahori defended them.⁷³ Court politics, struggles amongst the nobility and the weakened personal authority of Mughal princes transformed Mughal sovereignty into a useless parade of rulers, which did not make any difference, and, by implication,

contributed to the political decline of the Mughals. The awe and grandeur of the Mughal household, led by the emperor, had diminished and the imperial image was dented.

Yet, modern scholars are aghast at Zatalli's coarse expressions and uncouth remarks on the state of affairs. This could be because Zatalli basically affects their own sensibilities and disturbs the usual understanding of Mughal culture as being 'polished', an idea acquired through both academic tomes as well as popular literature. Even if we ignore that portion of Zatalli's account which is identified as vulgar for his exposure of what was perceived to be sexual misdemeanours—especially of rampant homosexuality amongst the Mughal nobility—his work provides an important commentary on Mughal society in a period of political flux. The alleged acts of transgressions were probably not unheard of under Akbar or for that matter under Shah Jahan, but it was now possible for Zatalli to talk about it in writing, and in Urdu, the language of Mughal camps and bazaars. The personalities of the rulers and chiefs could now be questioned in public as norms of decorum and propriety in the Mughal court culture underwent a considerable change.

Also, Zatalli's poems, *Dar bayan-e tawakkul* ('On the Declaration of Trust [in God]'), *Dar ahwal-e istaghna* ('On Conditions of Content') and *Qinat-nama*, reveal his attempts to withdraw from a world he was uncomfortable with, and to take refuge in religion. Therefore, this set of writings brings out another dimension of the poet's strategy—renunciation of the world and trust in God. Such self-righteousness brought about a sense of arrogance as well. As he says in *Dar bayan-e tawakkul*, 'How does it matter if you cannot afford a pyjama? Stand alone proudly flaunting your loin cloth' (*agar shalwar na bashad, kis ko ghum hai/langota khainch kar sab se akad rah*).⁷⁴ Zatalli further proclaimed in *Dar ahwal-e istaghna*:⁷⁵

na zar na zewar-o-naqad wa na kotha ajnas
na jashn-e 'id na sair-e dashara daram mun

That is, deprived of wealth (*zar*, *zewan*: gold and jewellery), he was unable to enjoy the festivities of 'Id and Dussehra, yet he no longer cared about his poverty and lack of interest in good things in life (*gharib-o-ajiz-o-miskin zatalli am jafar/hazar shukr, na zor-o-na zahra daram mun*).⁷⁶ This emotion is typical of Muslim men aiming for *buzurgi* or saintliness in old age. Zatali himself wrote a pietistic and parsimonious *Budhapa-nama*, as mentioned earlier. His decreasing strength and failing health in old age was contrasted with the beauty and grace of youthfulness in his *Joban-nama*, which in turn was presented as a temporary phase in life. The poet wondered how could he preserve his youth by coaxing or cajoling it not to go (*ise pher kiyun-kar mana-kar rakhun/jawani gayi, kiya rijha-kar rakhun*).⁷⁷

Not surprisingly, the poet also composed a *na't* or eulogy for Prophet Muhammad. The *na't* includes the following couplet:⁷⁸

muhammad paar utaran haar sab ka
muhammad sarwar-o-salar sab ka

(Muhammad is the liberator of all

Muhammad is the commander of all.)

As pointed out earlier, for all his indiscretion, the poet was careful enough not to attack any icons of Islamic religiosity, certainly not the Prophet, though objectionable remarks on qazis, ulama, muhtasib and other guardians of the faith, mainly of the dominant Sunnite strand, are found throughout his work. On the other hand, he paid tributes to the first four rightly-guided caliphs. It is possible that Zatali came from a Shi'ite background or might have been a *tafzili*, one who privileged the fourth caliph, Ali, over the first three (Abu Bakr, Umar and Usman), but unlike the Shias, did not condemn the others.⁷⁹

Jafar Zatali knew that he was treading on a controversial ground, so he reminded himself of the danger of revealing all his secrets—a suggestion of the kind recommended for Sufi mystical experiences or in juristically sanctioned policies of concealing one's belief, *taqiyya*, which are followed by hapless

Shi'ites or other marginal groups, especially when faced with violent opposition.⁸⁰ It may also be pointed out here that the concealment of religious identity, or *taqiyya*, can be a flawed strategy. For the danger is that a silent and weak person, group of people or community might eventually get absorbed in the vocal and dominant community without any resistance. In other words, a vocal majority can subdue a silent minority.⁸¹

Despite deference for politically privileged religious icons, in a political context like that of the early decades of the eighteenth century, and possibly for the whole period of Mughal rule, mocking the rulers could be as harmful as an act of blasphemy in most parts of the Muslim world. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Zatali paid with his life for telling it all in salacious language. It is doubtful, however, that he would have been spared if he were polite in his criticism. We have already discussed earlier how the critics of Akbar's policies, whether ulama, Sufis or, even rationalists, could be eliminated for daring to disagree with the dominant opinion.⁸²

The execution of Zatali, or for that matter, of any other critic or opponent of the Mughals could not hide the fact that their power and legitimacy had taken a beating in many regions of the realm. The Jats, Sikhs, Satnamis and a host of Hindu zamindars and Muslim chiefs were frequently asserting their independence and the Mughal nobles were unable to establish their imperial domination and authority. A detailed analysis of the dismemberment of the Mughal empire is out of the purview of this work, but we will take up the question of the violent Mughal-Sikh conflict and, more generally, the varying, and often turbulent relationship between Islam and Sikhism in the next chapter.

It might be appropriate to end this chapter with Jafar's signature line on a bond paper as a witness (*hazir zamini*), which reads,⁸³ *'Iallu pattu, walad indhan jangli, mutawattn andher nagri, mulazim-e sarkar-e chaupatabad'*. Jafar signed his name as a loquacious sycophant and son of a wild beast, who lived in *andher nagri* (literally, city of darkness) and worked in the service of the ruler of *chaupatabad* (a ruined or despicable habitation). Apart from

the outrageous description of the Mughal capital Shahjahanabad, where he lived, as chaupatabad, Jafar's idiom is reminiscent of the popular Indic proverb for situations of anarchy, '*andher nagri, chaupat raja*' (city of darkness, inefficient ruler). At the end of the document, Jafar also identifies himself as *ahmaq ualad be-waquf* (stupid son of a fool). In the language of the current popular culture, he was simply *bindas* or cool.

Surely, Jafar transgressed all limits of moral conduct in Mughal India in his writings, at least, in terms of the distinction between the elite, refined and measured literary culture of the Mughal court on the one hand, and the crude and popular outpourings of the subalterns and marginal people on the other. Historians generally tend to privilege the former—the formal and onstage performance of the rulers and courtiers. Even though political culture, essentially dominated by the elite, is important for our understanding of Islam in the Indian environment, should literature of the kind that Zatalli produced be swept under the Persian carpet? Should historians continue to blur the distinctions between Mughal self-image and the actual social and cultural practices of the time? Is it illegitimate to counterpoise Zatalli's observations with dominant Mughal ideals? Historians and literary scholars are scared of asking such questions of crucial import that can lead to a more holistic understanding of Mughal India. Much of the scholarship thus remains bound to the framework of official chronicles. Any attempt to break the shackles is dismissed as transgression and vulgarity, which should better be ignored, if not suppressed altogether. To move on, the next chapter will explore religious and literary entanglements at the level of mysticism and religiosity as well as popular literature.

The Sufi-Bhakti Milieu Later Transformations

Islam and Sikhism

Sikhism is generally perceived to be a militant form of Hinduism that emerged as a response to the onslaught of Islam in medieval India. The protracted struggle between the Sikhs and the Mughals through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, more recently, the horrors of Partition have contributed to this perception. This is despite the fact that Sikh leaders have struggled to protect the community both from violent Hindu attacks in the recent past, as well as from peaceful absorption into 'ceremonial Hinduism'. By contrast, those who are oblivious to identity politics involving the Sikhs—such as the general population of the West, whether America or Europe—tend to mistake a Sikh for a Muslim. Indeed, the Sikh man's turban, his beard, the long traditional robe, the community's religious scriptures, the practice of *langar* (community kitchen), the architecture of a gurdwara and the rejection of idol worship are some of the features shared with Islam. No wonder then that Sikhs are under attack from ignorant Americans and Europeans for their alleged 'resemblance' with Osama Bin Laden and other look-alike Muslims who may not necessarily subscribe to violent political Islam.

I will argue in this chapter that the similarities between Sikhism and Islam, both at the level of ritual practices and cultural