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## Religion and the rise of magic in Urdu print culture: the case of *Chīn aur Bangāl kā Jādū*

Markus Daechsel

Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London, London, United Kingdom  
Email: [Markus.Daechsel@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Markus.Daechsel@rhul.ac.uk)

### Abstract

This article offers a first survey of a novel genre of grimoires published in Urdu-reading India in the early twentieth century. It contained a wide selection of magic material from Islamicate and Tantric sources as well as Western parapsychology and spiritualism. Its applications ranged from remedies of last resort in illness, relationship troubles, and other life problems to common household cures and magical tricks performed for pleasure alone. Produced and read by members of all religious groups in North India, this material indicates important changes in popular attitudes towards magic. Magic by no means declined at the beginning of the twentieth century, but flourished as a viable commercial print genre that became increasingly detached from religion.

**Keywords:** Colonial India; magic; print culture

A novel genre of cheaply produced books gained prominence in the world of Urdu-language publishing in the late 1920s and 1930s. Referring in their titles to the ‘magic’ (*jādū*) of ‘*Chīn*’ (China) and ‘*Bangāl*’ (Bengal), of ‘*Misr*’ (Egypt), ‘*Yūnān*’ (Greece), ‘*Fars*’ (Persia), and even ‘*Ifriqah*’ (Africa), these South Asian grimoires included a startling range of material.<sup>1</sup> There were magic formulas and diagrams of Indic (*jantar–mantar–tantar*) and Islamicate provenance (*tilism*, ‘*amāliyat*’, ‘*nuqūsh*’, etc.) aimed at a wide variety of life situations—from protecting one’s house from fire and keeping it free from rats, to harming one’s enemy, winning somebody’s love, or retrieving stolen or lost goods. In addition, the reader would find divination tables (*fāl nāmah*) and interpretations of dreams, household remedies and miracle cures, animal omens, ways of communicating with ghosts and spirits, and even short introductions to late nineteenth-century European-style seances, hypnosis, and ‘mesmerism’.<sup>2</sup> Copious borrowing of material from the work of competitors was the norm and turned the often-prominently placed

<sup>1</sup> There are two separate titles named ‘*Ifriqah kā Jādū*’ advertised in Maulvi Ghulam Mustafā, *Chīn Aur Bangāl Kā Jādū* (Lahore, 1927), p. 64; J. N. S. Wali Bangah, *Bangāl Kā Jādū Ma’rūf Khel Bangālah* (Ludhiana, 1929), p. 104. For a history of the grimoire in Europe and the United States, see Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford; New York, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The latter were discussed, among others, in Ramlal Firozpurī, *Masmarizm: Misr Kā Jādū* (Lahore, 1925); Hakim Azhar Dihlvi, *Chīn Aur Bangāl Kā Jādū Lauh-i Tilsim* (Lahore, 1930?); Wali Bangah, *Bangāl Kā Jādū Ma’rūf Khel Bangālah*, p. 91.

copyright declarations into pious incantations in their own right. Among the ‘conjuring tricks’ (*shoʿbadāt*) included virtually everywhere was the ability to produce the effects of fire without actually setting anything alight or, conversely, to protect clothing or body parts from burning when exposed to an open flame. Equally common were ‘tricks’ involving invisible ink or methods to turn humans temporarily into a range of animals, including the following favourite found in several compilations:

MAKING A MAN APPEAR LIKE A MONKEY: Search for the head of a dead monkey, collect it and in the month of Bhadon during the *Bharāni Nachhattar* [a lunar constellation] sow in its mouth white sand with black soil [*safed char mitti siāh mitti ke sāth*], keep watering it until a tree begins to grow. After fruit appears, pluck it on a Sunday and carefully set aside. Then make a necklace out of it, which, when affixed to the neck of a man will make him appear like a monkey. But after taking it off he will look human again.<sup>3</sup>

The connection to the countries mentioned in the titles was, at best, loose and suggestive. To include as great a variety of material as possible and from as many sources as possible appeared to be the main selling points. The following title included no less than three, apparently interchangeable, exotic locations, before also promising a Punjabi version—‘The Ring of Ghosts’—of a tantric treatise on the power of *yakshinīs*, a type of powerful and sometimes malevolent female spirit beings:

THE MAGIC OF EGYPT that is THE MAGIC OF BENGAL or THE MAGIC OF CHINA and *Yakhni Bhairūn* the celebrated *Bhūtān dī Mundri*.<sup>4</sup>

Examples with similar titles were frequently and prominently advertised in publishers’ catalogues and in the Urdu-language press. The Lahori publishing firm Munshi Aziz ud-Din Najam ud-Din listed more than 50 ‘magic’-related titles.<sup>5</sup> Magic must have at least promised easy financial returns, as small bazaar publishers and established larger companies all tried to get in on the act. The potential to make money was not confined to those who produced these books. Their readers and purchasers, too, were often invited to supplement their livelihoods with the help of magic pursuits, be it as performing magicians (*jādūgarī*) or through the sale of the miraculous powders, oils, matchsticks, or candles described with more or less practical instructions in the text.<sup>6</sup>

This complex, fascinating, and so far largely neglected body of source material opens up new perspectives on the cultural history of late colonial India. Offering copious space for future exploration, the *Chīn aur Bangāl kā jādū* genre marks the intersection of medical history and consumer culture, knowledge of the body and cosmology, science, and religion. Outside a small and highly specialist field of occult enthusiasts,<sup>7</sup> very few historians and only a handful of ethnographers and anthropologists have incorporated this material

<sup>3</sup> Dihlvi, *Chīn Aur Bangāl Kā Jādū Lauh-i Tilsim*, p. 5. Also in Muhammad Abdullah, *Bangāl Kā Sahr* (Lahore, 1893), p. 21; Mustafa, *Chīn Aur Bangāl Kā Jādū*, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Hakim Mirza Abd al-Qadir Beg, *Misr Kā Jādū Yaʿnī Bangāl Kā Jādū ʿurf Chin Kā Jādū Aur Yakhni Bhairūn Al-Maʿrūf Bhūtān Dī Mundri* (Amritsar, 1927).

<sup>5</sup> See the back page of Mustafa, *Chīn Aur Bangāl Kā Jādū*.

<sup>6</sup> Among many examples, see Firozपुरi, *Masmarizm: Misr Kā Jādū*, p. 1; also Wali Bangah, *Bangāl Kā Jādū Maʿrūf Khel Bangālah*.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, John Zubrzycki, *Jadoowallahs, Jugglers and Jinns: A Magical History of India* (New Delhi, 2018); Peter Lamont, *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick: The Biography of a Legend* (London, 2004); Christopher S. Goto-Jones, *Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism, and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, 2016); Lee Siegel, *Net of Magic: Wonders and Deceptions in India* (Chicago, 1991).

into wider analyses.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, however, the study of vernacular magic also invites us to revisit some ‘big’ questions about the meaning of ‘modernity’ and its relationship to ‘religion’, which speaks directly to the research agenda that Francis Robinson has helped to define over the last five decades. Some exciting recent departures in the global history of magic offer an ideal opportunity to revisit the theme of popular magic in South Asia within a larger analytical framework. Returning to this material a long time after some first explorations as part of my doctoral research, supervised by Francis Robinson,<sup>9</sup> I wish to offer this short article as a departure point and as an invitation for more extensive research in the future.

The veritable line-up of places and traditions of the title quoted above already indicates little sense of religious exclusivity, even if the provenance of much of the magic material itself remained easily recognisable. An initial Islamic ‘*hamd*’ and ‘*salāt*’ [praise for Allah and the Holy Prophet], which prefaced the same booklet, or the careful invocation of the name of God as numerical formula ‘786’ on magic squares, did not mean that its Muslim author—a practitioner of *Yūnānī* or Greco-Islamic medicine by the name of Mirza Abdul Qadir Beg—would not also include material from religious backgrounds other than his own, such as an exploration of tantric wisdom. Another compilation entitled more simply ‘The MAGIC of China and BENGAL’ [*Chīn aur Bangāl kā Jādū*] by one Munshi Muhammad Din Sarwar even starts with the explicit hope that it would be of use for ‘any ordinarily well-versed readers of Urdu whether they be Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Muslim or belonging to another religious group of community’.<sup>10</sup> The vernacular book collections of the India Office Library and the British Museum contain two further examples with the same (or a very similar) title by other compilers, which also make direct appeals to readers, regardless of religious background, on their frontispiece.<sup>11</sup> A compilation entitled ‘THE MAGIC OF EGYPT or Mesmerism’ by Professor Ram Lal Firozपुरi, published by B. R. Labharam of Lahore, was dedicated to all ‘fellow countrymen’ [*mulki bhā’iyon*], which in this context seemed to refer specifically to the people of Punjab, regardless of religion. Not to share the great magician’s knowledge, it was argued, would be no less than a ‘national crime’ [*qaumī jurm*].<sup>12</sup> Yet another example, which I bought from a flea market in Lahore a few decades ago, and similarly entitled ‘THE MAGIC OF CHINA AND BENGAL or The Magic Tablet [*Lauh-e Tilism*]’ by the Hakim Azhar Dihlvi was published by J. S. Sant Singh and Sons, a well-established, Sikh-owned publishing house specialising in commercial literature with a cross-communal appeal.<sup>13</sup> It, too, contained material of ‘Muslim’, ‘Hindu’, and ‘Western’ origins, as far as such labels are adequate to capture the sheer diversity on display.

Urdu was still used by all religious communities at the time, especially in Punjab where the great majority of printed material in this language was published.<sup>14</sup> Outside the

<sup>8</sup> Some notable exceptions are Venkat Dhulipala, *Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India* (Daryaganj, Delhi, 2015), which opens with a séance calling on Jinnah’s spirit; Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘“In the name of politics”: sovereignty, democracy and the multitude in India’, in *Varieties of World-Making: Beyond Globalization*, (eds) Nathalie Karagiannis and Peter Wagner (Liverpool, 2008), pp. 111–132; Narendra Bokhare, *Religion and Magic in Urban Setting* (Jaipur, 1997). For an application to diaspora studies, see Mikkel Rytter, ‘In-laws and outlaws: black magic among Pakistani migrants in Denmark’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Published as Markus Daechsel, *The Politics of Self-Expression the Urdu Middle-Class Milieu in Mid-Twentieth Century India and Pakistan* (London; New York, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Munshi Muhammad Din Sarwar, *Chīn Aur Bangāl Kā Jādū* (Lahore, n.d.), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Wali Bangah, *Bangāl Kā Jādū Ma’rūf Khel Bangālah*; Mustafa, *Chīn Aur Bangāl Kā Jādū*.

<sup>12</sup> Firozपुरi, *Masmarizm: Mīsr Kā Jādū*, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Dihlvi, *Chīn Aur Bangāl Kā Jādū Lauh-i Tilsim*.

<sup>14</sup> See Walter N. Hakala, *Negotiating Languages: Urdu, Hindi, and the Definition of Modern South Asia* (New York, 2016); Tariq Rahman, *From Hindi to Urdu: A Social and Political History* (Karachi, 2011).

religiously inclusive world of popular magic, however, a shared language by no means implied religious harmony. Tensions between religious groups were rising sharply, precisely at the time when the *Chīn aur Bangāl kā jādū* genre became prominent. Despite the presence across northern India of an official party politics that championed land-owning interests across religious lines,<sup>15</sup> violent confrontations over issues charged with religious symbolism became widespread. The murder of Mahashe Rajpal, the publisher of an reformist Hindu tract denigrating the Prophet of Islam by the Muslim labourer Ilmuddin in Lahore in 1929 shook religious identity politics to the core.<sup>16</sup> Other occasions leading to widespread street violence were the Sikh mass mobilisation campaign over ritual water rights in the village of Kot Bhai Than Singh<sup>17</sup> and, later, the confrontation between Sikhs and Muslims over the mosque/gurudwara of Shahidganj in Lahore.<sup>18</sup> Most Punjab-based Urdu newspapers—which were industry-leading in terms of technology as well as circulation figures—sought to attract readers by exploiting this new climate and took a stridently ‘communal’ stance.<sup>19</sup> Especially among the educated middle classes in the towns and cities, a retreat into separate and religiously homogenous life-worlds became the norm.<sup>20</sup>

So why and in what sense did the rise of popular magic of the *Chīn aur Bangāl kā jādū* genre buck the trend? It was unlikely to be simply the result of a greater sense of religious tolerance among practitioners of magic or their readers, although some famous *hukamā’* of Yunani medicine with their old-world ways did indeed steer clear of an aggressive Muslim nationalism for longer than most journalists or writers. The commercial pressures of the Urdu print market also offer a partial explanation. It was certainly true that the small bazaar publishers with limited distribution networks that were behind some (but by no means all) books of the genre often struggled to find a large enough readership in a world of still fairly limited literacy. In such a context, an appeal across religious lines would mean more potential sales and could offer a commercial advantage. But it was equally the case that some of the best-selling Urdu print products relied precisely on a militant sense of religious identity to be commercially successful. So why did magical compendia seem to have possessed enough intrinsic appeal of their own to flourish without also harnessing a politics of hatred, much like the vernacular softcore pornography sold by some of the same bazaar publishers under the *Kōkshastra* genre (tantalisingly offered in illustrated—‘*bā taswīr*’—editions<sup>21</sup>)? In the final analysis, the intriguing connections between religious inclusivity and magic raises larger questions about the nature and social meaning of ‘magic’ itself, calling for a wider exploration that draws on social theory and global intellectual history.

Some of the magic materials included in the new popular Urdu grimoires had veritable cultural histories of their own. In fact, some had appeared in manuscripts or printed books for centuries or more and were of central importance to what one could describe

<sup>15</sup> Classic accounts for Punjab and the United Provinces are: Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849–1947* (New Delhi, 1988); Peter Reeves, *Landlords and Governments in Uttar Pradesh: A Study of their Relations until Zamindari Abolition* (Bombay; New York, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Gene R. Thursby, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in British India: A Study of Controversy, Conflict, and Communal Movements in Northern India 1923–1928* (Leiden, 1975), pp. 40–71; Julia Anne Stephens, *Governing Islam: Law, Empire, and Secularism in Modern South Asia* (Cambridge; New York, 2018), pp. 132–154.

<sup>17</sup> Javed Iqbal Wani, ‘Sikh-Muslim confrontation in colonial Punjab: court as a theatre of politics’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 55 (2020).

<sup>18</sup> David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> Daechsel, *The Politics of Self-Expression*, pp. 130–145.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146–151.

<sup>21</sup> Beg, *Misr Kā Jādū Ya’ni Bangāl Kā Jādū ‘urf Chīn Kā Jādū Aur Yakhni Bhairūn Al-Ma’rūf Bhūtān Dī Mundrī*, p. 54.

(with due caution) as ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ high culture. The communication with and influence over a wide range of spirit beings, from ghosts and demons to gods and goddesses, have underpinned Hindu cosmology throughout history.<sup>22</sup> The Muslim case is less well-acknowledged, especially by contemporary religious purists, but no less clear. The British Library collection of Urdu printed books includes more than a dozen titles in the fields of divination and magic from the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> One—*Banglah kā Sihr* [‘The Magic of Bengal’] published in Lahore in 1893—even shares a similar title (as well as some magic material) with the later examples. Most of these older books, however, differ in significant ways from the 1920s and 1930s *Chīn aur Bangāl kā jādū* genre. Often better produced and more expensive, the nineteenth-century compendia were more likely to originate from the former Muslim princely centres of North India—Lucknow and Delhi—than from commerce-oriented Punjab. More importantly, they appear to be more specialist representations of ‘traditional’ divination practices than magpie collections of everything and anything related to ‘magic’ in some form. Here, references to *Yūnān* [Greece] are not simply the evocation of some exotic place but deployed to specifically point to a genre of divination associated with Alexander the Great. Other sections refer to Islamic religious figures long associated with divination such as the Shia Imams Jafar al-Sadiq and Ali.<sup>24</sup> The lavishly lithographed *Tilism-i ‘Ajā’ib* from the 1870s includes many prophetic and mythological images also found in the expensively produced and illustrated *fāl nāmāh* manuscripts of early modern times, when prophetic divination and even ‘magic’ had been of central importance for the political legitimacy of early modern Islamic rulers, and was seen as deeply rooted in Quranic scripture and Muslim theology.<sup>25</sup>

This does not mean that the early twentieth-century re-emergence of magical themes at the mass market end of vernacular print culture was quite simply a final flowering of some kind of cultural leftover from a pre-modern and pre-colonial past. Instead, there is good reason to interpret these magic compendia as cultural artefacts fully ‘of their time’. Far from being bound for the metaphorical scrapheap of ‘modernity’, they were becoming more, rather than less, prominent under the impact of British colonialism.

One signature feature of the complicated modernity of the *Chīn aur Bangāl kā jādū* genre was the quiet, and fleeting, transformation of some of the magical material from a cosmic to an entertainment context. The boundary between the kind of magic that depended on

<sup>22</sup> Among a vast literature, see Paul Thomas, *Incredible India* (Bombay, 1966); Margaret Stutley, *Ancient Indian Magic and Folklore: An Introduction* (Boulder, CO, 1980); Gavin D. Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion* (London; New York, 2006); Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy Politics, and Power in the Study of Religions* (Berkeley, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> The pamphlet volume VT845 alone includes the following titles: *Naqsh-i Rūhānī* (Lahore, 1879), *Naqsh-i Rahmānī* (Delhi, 1879), *Ta’bīr-nāmāh-i Khwāb* (1877), *Fāl-nāmāh* (Lucknow, 1874), *Naqsh-i rahmānī* (Meerut, 1877), *Tilism-i rūhānī* (Lucknow, 1877), *Tilism-i ‘Ajā’ib* (no date), *Sihr-i sāminī* (Delhi, 1878), *Tuhfah-yi Tilismāt* (no date), *Majmū‘a-yi Indrajāl* (no date), and *Jawāhar-i Khamsah* (Delhi, 1877).

<sup>24</sup> *Majmū‘ah Indrajāl* includes a ‘Fāl-nāmāh-yi Hazrat Jafar Sadiq’. *Bangāl Kā Sihr* (Lahore, 1893), a ‘Fāl-nāmāh-yi Hazrat Amir al-Mu‘minin Ali ibn Abi Talib’, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> For the historical background of divination in the Islamic tradition, see T. Fahd, *La divination arabe: Études religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l’islam* (Leiden, 1966). Jean-Yves L’Hopital, ‘Du Coran à certaines pratiques magiques actuelles: l’exemple de la Syrie’, in *Magie et divination dans les cultures de l’Orient*, (eds) J. M. Durand and A. Jacquet (Paris, 2008); Sebastian Günther and Dorothee Anna Maria Pielow, ‘Die Geheimnisse der oberen und der unteren welt: Magie im Islam zwischen Glaube und Wissenschaft’, in *Islamic History and Civilization*, vol. 158 (Leiden; Boston, 2018). For ‘late medieval’ (or ‘early modern’) developments, see Massumeh Farhad and Serpil Bağcı, *Falnama: The Book of Omens* (Washington DC, 2009); Jean-Charles Coulon, ‘Magie et politique événements historiques et pensée politique dans le *šams al-Ma‘ārif* attribué à al-Būnī (mort en 622/1225)’, *Arabica* 64 (2017); Asatrian Mushegh, ‘Ibn Khaldūn on magic and the occult’, *Iran and the Caucasus* 7 (2003).

the artful creation of illusion with the help of scientific knowledge, and another kind of magic that worked with the help of a supernatural mechanism remained remarkably fluid and lightly drawn. Let us pick a random portion from a grimoire from a small Ludhiana publishing house for illustration.<sup>26</sup> It belongs to a long section entitled *Khel Bangāla* [‘The Bengali Game’] consisting mostly of conjuring tricks [*sho’badāt*]. Glancing through the pages, the reader would have encountered the following bewildering list of themes and instructions: how to make a glass bottle dissolve, how to make a snake out of sulphur, how to keep a candle burning under water (by soaking a piece of cotton in the sap of the *khirnī* tree and drying it before using it as a wick), how to make an enemy ill (by planting the bone from a dead body found in the forest on a Sunday in their house), how to reconcile friends (using their hair and toenail clippings), how to confound an enemy (using an amulet made from parts of the neem plant picked on a Sunday during a particular lunar constellation), how to ward off black magic (with the help of the left eye of a cat), how to make sleep come on rapidly (using a donkey’s tooth and cow-dung), how to make a snake blind, how to make a woman’s breasts firm and small (by rubbing them with menstrual blood), how to shoot a bullet through cloth without ripping it, how to heat a metal cup without flame (using caustic soda and water), how to make a pot of herbs grow suddenly within half an hour (by burying a carefully dried-out pot in the soil and sprinkling it with water), how to prevent a lamp from smoking (by soaking the wick in vinegar), how to make a rupee coin disappear (this sleight-of-hand trick, we are told, required a lot of careful prior practice), how to construct a magic bottle, and finally, how to congeal water in a jar.

While the sheer range of applications of magic may appear quite random here, there was in fact one unifying feature worth noting. According to the instructions given, each of these ‘tricks’ depended solely on the careful execution of a series of actions at the correct points in time and a correct list of ingredients. There is no explanation offered for why these instructions work, and also no reference to the intercession or manipulation of spirit beings which underpin most other forms of amulets or magic diagrams and incantations. Whether or not modern scientific readers found the underlying mechanism fully comprehensible had no impact on the inclusion or exclusion of a certain ‘trick’ as ‘magic’. Some were fully explicable, like the examples involving household chemistry, others less so. This sense of uncertainty over how precisely magic worked—or, indeed, in what sense it was ‘magic’ in the first place—compelled the compilers to add an additional element. Instead of telling us very much about why these prescriptions worked, they would often marvel at what a great spectacle (*tamāshā*) a trick would produce, and what strong feelings of wonder (*hairat*) it would arouse among spectators. At this point, the magic of Bengal ceased to be an occult mechanism to control the world and became a form of showmanship but without ever fully laying down a clear discursive boundary line between these alternatives.

A similar ambiguity affected the self-representation of Ram Lal Firozपुरi, the source of the grimoire in which mesmerism features prominently alongside the usual list of amulets, tricks, and incantations.<sup>27</sup> Unlike the *yūnānī hukamā’* who authored several other pamphlets, he proudly owned the titles of both ‘professor’ and ‘magician’ (*jādūgar*), and posed in a sharply tailored suit and tie manipulating a hypnotised levitating youngster on the front cover. Making direct reference to Italy and China as centres of the magic arts in the introduction (but oddly not even mentioning Egypt [*Misr*] which is directly named in the title of the book itself) he made it his mission to locate Punjabi magic art within an international framework. This never meant a clear-cut distinction between

<sup>26</sup> Wali Bangah, *Bangāl Kā Jādū Ma’rūf Khel Bangālah*, pp. 76–80.

<sup>27</sup> Firozपुरi, *Masmariẓm: Misr Kā Jādū*.

the natural and supernatural, nor between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, however. Not only did Firozपुरi’s pamphlet contain the same mix of material as all the other examples of the *Chīn aur Bangāl kā Jādū* genre, he also took pains to link the workings of mesmerism back to ancient Indian yogic practices, which, given the convoluted history of ‘Western’ occultism, was not even particularly far-fetched. An unacknowledged model and reference point for this refashioning of magic must have been the Bengali circus performer and magician Ganapati Chakraborty, who, by the time the pamphlet was published, could already look back at a glittering international career.<sup>28</sup> Born in 1880 into an upper caste and *zamīndārī* family, Chakraborty was one of the founding fathers of a particularly Bengali tradition of magical showmanship, brought to worldwide fame by his even more famous successor Pratul Chandra Sarkar (also known as P. C. Sorcar). Years before Firozपुरi, Chakraborty had already specialised in mesmerism and levitation tricks and posed in the black tuxedo of a distinctly modern master magician. Reportedly, this never stopped him from believing in the power of the supernatural, and he fittingly spent his retirement in a temple.<sup>29</sup>

Francis Robinson’s celebrated contribution to the intellectual history of Islam is not known for its appreciation of the ‘subaltern’, or low-brow. Cultural elements to do with ‘magic’ appear at first sight marginal to the larger story of how Muslim traditions of learning changed in response to colonial modernity. But the world of cheap Urdu grimoires not only relates directly to Robinson’s conceptual framework, it also suggests fascinating possibilities for how this agenda could be taken further in the future. Robinson’s larger storyline could be described as a broadly Weberian modernisation narrative. As Muslim scholars had to ditch their close connection with Muslim political power after the onslaught of Western imperialism, they had to turn to mass appeal and print culture to defend their relevance and authority.<sup>30</sup> The new circumstances also privileged the importance of individual faith and independent reasoning, and redrew the boundaries of what belonged and did not belong to ‘religion’ in a much more narrow fashion. Although this new ‘Protestant’ Muslim identity by no means jettisoned all of Islamic ‘tradition’, it would be acutely embarrassed by certain aspects of it. Early nineteenth-century ‘Wahabi’ tracts—the pioneers of a new religiosity rooted in print culture—condemned as idolatry (*shirk*) (in the strongest possible terms) precisely the kind of mystical folk customs and rituals associated with popular magic.<sup>31</sup>

Later Muslim reformists in the wake of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan insisted on the ‘scientific’ validity of Holy Scripture, which similarly reduced the legitimate space for the kind of magic that had been considered integral to ‘mainstream’ Islam in the past.<sup>32</sup> It is important to note at this point that this direction was not endorsed by all varieties of

<sup>28</sup> Zubrzycki, *Jadoowallahs, Jugglers and Jinns*, loc. 4998.

<sup>29</sup> See Ajit Krishna Basu, *Jadu Kahini* (Calcutta, 1955); Samirkumar Ghosh, *Jadusamrat Ganapati O Banglar Jaducharcha* (Kolkata, 2016). I include these references at the suggestion of the editorial team as further readings, as I am not Bengali-literate myself, and could not find any suitable alternatives or translations.

<sup>30</sup> The classic formulation of this argument is Francis Robinson, ‘Technology and religious change: Islam and the impact of print’, *Modern Asian Studies* 27 (1993).

<sup>31</sup> See Mir Shahamat Ali, ‘Translation of the Tahwiyat-ul-Imán, preceded by a notice of the author, Maulavi Isma‘il Hajji’, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 13 (1852).

<sup>32</sup> For recent discussions of Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s argument, see David Lelyveld, ‘Naicari nature: Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the reconciliation of science, technology and religion’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, (eds) Yasmina Saikia and Raisur Rahman (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 69–86; Shaafey Qidvahi, *Sir Syed Ahmad Kha: Reason, Religion and Nation* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, 2021), p. 4. For similar approaches among the al-Manār circle in the Arab Middle East, see L’Hopital, ‘Du Coran à certaines pratiques magiques actuelles’, pp. 207–208. For later developments of a ‘scientist’ notion of Islam in India, see Markus Daechsel, ‘Scientism and its discontents: the Indo-Muslim “fascism” of Inayatullah Khan Al-Mashriqi’, *Modern Intellectual History* 3 (2006); Markus Daechsel, ‘The civilizational obsessions of Ghulam Jilani Barque’, in *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission*, (eds) Harald Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann (London, 2004).

Muslim thought in colonial India. Exponents of a ‘modernised’ traditionalism like the Barelvis have continued to endorse magical practices as integral to Islam, which accounts for the fact that facsimile copies or digital reprints of *Chin aur Bangāl kā Jādū* can still be found advertised by certain South Asian Islamic booksellers.<sup>33</sup> The reformers, however, were deeply troubled by the happy conflation of the material and spiritual worlds in magical thinking. Such a rejection of Weber’s ‘disenchantment’ of the empirical world undermined the key strategy with which modernists sought to protect a continuing relevance for religion: the assertion that ‘science’ and ‘faith’ each found independent justification in hermetically separated realms.

Similar assertions of the ‘decline of magic’, its gradual denigration to ‘subaltern’ cultural milieus, and eventual disappearance in favour of ‘science’ have become a staple of most grand narratives of modernity around the globe.<sup>34</sup> But historians of religion more sceptical of Weberian and other modernist mythologies have begun to challenge this received wisdom. In the first instance, historians of both science and religion have rejected easy notions of ‘secularisation’ in the sense of a gradual replacement of ‘religion’ by ‘science’.<sup>35</sup> Religion did not decline when a separate field of ‘science’ gradually emerged from the seventeenth century onwards—rather, it became purified, rationalised, and cleared of ‘superstition’. And this process by no means eliminated ‘magic’.<sup>36</sup> The prominence of magic may have had its ups and downs but it did not decline, even in Great Britain, until well into the twentieth century, only to be revived again from the 1960s onwards.<sup>37</sup> In a theoretically sophisticated intervention, Jason Josephson-Storm argues that the very process of separation between ‘science’ and ‘religion’ so often invoked in the standard modernisation narrative necessarily led to a reinforced presence of magic and superstition.<sup>38</sup> He sees this as broadly similar to Foucault’s famous argument that the allegedly ‘repressed’ Victorians actually invented modern ‘sexuality’ by constantly talking about what they wanted to repress.<sup>39</sup> Just as the carving of wood produces chippings, the discursive purification of science and religion actually *produced* magic and superstition as a highly visible and separate discourse in public life. Rather than withering away, this new discursive field became an often-embarrassing—but, equally, often-positively coveted—presence in the modern world view. In consequence, ‘magic’ or magical elements actually crop up much more frequently in the story of modern science and religion than standard histories have acknowledged: magic and the paranormal were highly fashionable in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the prominence of figures like Madam Blavatsky, Arthur Conan Doyle, or the infamous Aleister Crowley demonstrate. Nobel laureate physicists believed seances to be real, and new scientific approaches—from Marx to Freud—frequently turned to magical mechanisms and tropes for their

<sup>33</sup> On the Barelvis, see Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His Movement, 1870–1920* (Delhi; New York, 1996), pp. 121–126. for modern sales of this material, see <https://quranwahadith.com/product/chin-aur-bangal-ka-jadu/> (last accessed 10 May 2022).

<sup>34</sup> The classic debate in the British context goes back to Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971). For critical landmark interventions, see Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York, 2004); Edward Bever and Randall Styers, *Magic in the Modern World: Strategies of Repression and Legitimization* (University Park, PA, 2017). For an overview of the literature, see Michael Saler, ‘Modernity and enchantment: a historiographical review’, *American Historical Review* 111 (2006).

<sup>35</sup> See José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1994); Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Michael Hunter, *The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Thomas E. Waters, *Cursed Britain: A History of Witchcraft and Black Magic in Modern Times* (New Haven, 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago; London, 2017).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.



explanation.<sup>40</sup> Magic, in short, was *both* the outcast ‘other’ of modernisation *and* its central ingredients.

Colonial connections, particularly in places like India, were crucial for the production of modern magic, as recent analyses of the history of magic point out.<sup>41</sup> The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century project of purifying science of ‘magic’ and religion of ‘superstition’ offered an easy justification for European superiority over the colonised peoples of the Global South, where the persistence of such undesirable world views joined other self-serving colonialist stereotypes around poverty, disease, and lawless despotism.<sup>42</sup> This gave colonial officials like William Crooke, who served in the eastern United Provinces in the late nineteenth century, a ready-made impetus and justification to carry out amateur folklorist research into magical practices and their mythological underpinnings, drawing on the local knowledge of well-educated but largely unacknowledged Indian collaborators.<sup>43</sup> In Crooke’s case, this research eventually culminated in books like *The Popular Religion and Folk-Lore of Northern India*<sup>44</sup> that turned the exotic appeal of the ‘East’ into a major selling point back in the home market. Ethnographic accounts from the colonies intermeshed with ongoing folkloristic research into magical practices in rural Britain itself—Crooke went on to become president of the Folklore Society of Great Britain—and served as a reservoir of material for new adventures in magical thinking among metropolitan audiences who were as much drawn to the secret wisdom of the East as imperialist ideology claimed to abhor it. Crooke, for instance, became a main source on Indian magic for Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert’s path-breaking *Esquisse d’une théorie générale de la magie* of 1904.<sup>45</sup> The work of metropolitan occultists and magicians, in turn, would become successful intellectual exports back to India, like the ‘mesmerism’ and spiritualism depicted alongside indigenous ‘magic’ in the *Chīn aur Bangāl kā jādū* genre. But here imperialism also introduced an ideological asymmetry. Precisely because ‘magic’ continued to be associated with what was wrong with the ‘East’, many (but not all) Indian social and religious reformers and nationalists, desperate to counter colonial self-justification, found it particularly hard to acknowledge the presence of ‘magic’ in their lives, often preferring an ostentatious belief in ‘scientism’ that itself came close to an unacknowledged form of ‘magical’ thinking.<sup>46</sup>

The very fact that we have at our disposal a good number of Urdu tracts in the British Library—all carefully listed in J. F. Blumhardt’s painstakingly produced catalogues under the categories of ‘magic’ and ‘divination’—is, similarly, the direct product of colonial power/knowledge. Well-educated Indians in Lucknow, Delhi, and elsewhere published these tracts because ‘magic’ material had received heightened interest as a result of the pincer movement of Orientalist fascination, on the one hand, and religious reformist condemnation, on the other. This was actively encouraged by the colonial authorities. These books were considered to be worthy of collection at the centre of imperial power itself—albeit (judging by their pristine state of preservation) probably never

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 7, p. 96.

<sup>41</sup> Waters, *Cursed Britain*, chapters 6–7; Goto-Jones, *Conjuring Asia*.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Lamont and Crispin Bates, ‘Conjuring images of India in nineteenth-century Britain’, *Social History* 32 (2007).

<sup>43</sup> Sadhana Naithani, ‘The colonizer-folklorist’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 34 (1997); Sadhana Naithani, ‘To tell a tale untold: two folklorists in colonial India’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 39 (2002). For another example, see also E. A. Leslie Moore, ‘Indian superstitions’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 59 (1911).

<sup>44</sup> William Crooke, *The Popular Religion and Folk-Lore of Northern India*, new edn (London, 1896).

<sup>45</sup> Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Esquisse d’une théorie générale de la magie* (Paris, 2019), p. 53.

<sup>46</sup> For Indian anthropologists like Sarat Chandra Roy, ‘magic’ became the preserve of tribal people. Sarat Chandra Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs* (Ranchi, 1928). For ‘science fetishism’, see Daechsel, *The Politics of Self-expression*, p. 134.

read—precisely because they fitted into a recognised cultural feature that simultaneously proved the historical backwardness and fascinating cultural richness of Great Britain’s imperial possessions. Without the colonial context, and without a wider mythology of ‘modernity’ as an age of ‘science’ and of purified ‘religion’, the gradual emergence of an archive dedicated specifically to ‘magic’ would never have taken place in the form that it did. In fact, it is questionable whether ‘magic’ would ever have been regarded as a single epistemological category at all. Without a foundational juxtaposition to both ‘science’ and ‘religion’, one conceptual term could never account for as wide a variety of esoteric practices as the prediction of the future, the successful manipulation of invisible spirit beings through charms or invocations, and, increasingly, other activities in which ‘magic’ was either entirely metaphorical (oils or powders that worked *like* magic, for instance), or the deliberately created illusion of ‘tricks’.

Colonial ‘modernity’ did not suppress ‘magic’, and it certainly did not make it wither away as a relevant cultural form. It helped to create ‘magic’ as a vast new discursive category that collected and reordered a wide range of beliefs and practices that had become unmoored from their original contexts. As a cast-off from both science and religion, ‘magic’ became an open resource, which is precisely why it was now suitable for readers from all walks of life, whether they had a direct religious connection to the material or not. The cross-communal reach of magic, expressed in many of the compilations, was not an expression of tolerance—of which there was precious little in the public life of late colonial India—but the result of magic’s fall to earth. In ways that Francis Robinson would appreciate, print culture magic had itself become ‘Protestant’. It is striking that despite their long-winded and exotic sounding titles, our magic compilations did not actually exude a strong feel of the esoteric or the occult. There was a matter-of-factness about the listing of magic prescriptions by the everyday problems they were meant to solve. These compilations may have depended on the claim that they contained the secret wisdom of faraway lands, of ancient myth, or great magician professors, but their ultimate promise as commercial books was precisely that such knowledge no longer needed to be reserved for a class of initiates and specialists. Every reader could now learn ‘magic’ and, as the compilers were never tired of pointing out, use it to achieve financial gain. This situates the world of Urdu grimoires within the wider landscape of late colonial consumer culture. As I have argued in *The Politics of Self-expression*, wild promises to enhance household income were also attached to such unlikely products as Sherlock Holmes novels, light-bulbs, and energy drinks, and amounted to a veritable ‘cult of use-value’ in the precarious world of late colonial India.<sup>47</sup> The ultimate magic of ‘magic’ came from the belief that the purchase of a book of instructions could mysteriously transform one’s life. It was not the magic of *Chīn* and *Bangāl* but the magic of the commodity form.

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<sup>47</sup> Daechsel, *The Politics of Self-expression*, pp. 182–185.

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