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The Image Debate

*Figural Representation in Islam
and Across the World*

Edited by
Christiane Gruber



This book is dedicated to one of its authors, Mary Nooter Roberts (known to all as Polly), who died before seeing the book in its finished form.

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Figure 1. Poster showing the shrines of Medina and Mecca garlanded with roses. Below that, from right to left, Bait al-Muqaddas in Jerusalem, the tomb of Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer, Rajasthan, and the tomb of Abdul Qadir Jilani at Baghdad.

Artist: Kishore, publisher unknown, 1990s. Author's collection.

The Figural Image in Islamic Devotional Art of the Indian Subcontinent

YOUSUF SAEED

Many cultural historians, especially those following Oriental or Indological frameworks of inquiry, have imagined India largely as a Hindu or Vedic civilization. As a result, they have largely perceived its Islamic cultural heritage as an external oddness or later accretion that disrupted the ancient Hindu past. The Indian subcontinent – encompassing India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – is nevertheless home to the world's largest number of Muslims today. In South Asia, many cultural, linguistic and religious forms coexist and thus it is difficult in many cases to differentiate between its socio-religious cultures, identities and norms due to their longstanding imbrications. Besides boasting a rich tradition of Islamic painterly arts developed under the patronage of the Mughal dynasts, India has also been the most prolific producer of Islamic popular art from the mid-nineteenth century until the present day. It has supplied printed ephemera to a domestic audience, as well as to nearby regions in South Asia and the Middle East, in the process expanding the figurative arts of Islam through local themes and creative iconographies.

This essay focuses on the popular tradition of India's bazaar art, colourful posters and billboards. These pictorial materials have largely been overlooked by scholars since they are deemed cheap ephemera used by those of relatively low income in their practices of home decoration or religious devotion. In recent years, a number of art historians and collectors such as Patricia Uberoi,¹ Kajri Jain,² Christopher Pinney³ and Jyotindra Jain⁴ have nevertheless started taking Indian popular art seriously, although they have focused mostly on images of Hindu gods and goddesses popularly called *bhagwan ke chitra* (photos of the gods). With the exception of recent scholarly contributions by Jürgen Frembgen,⁵ Sandria Freitag,⁶ Jamal Elias⁷ and myself,⁸ the Islamic printed images of South Asia have remained a largely unexplored field of production.

The most common devotional icons found in almost every Muslim household represent Islam's two holiest shrines, or *haramayn*: the Ka'ba, a cubical structure draped in cloth, located in Mecca, along with the mosque-tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, topped with a green dome, in Medina (Figure 1). In a typical calendar or coloured poster image, the two

shrines are superimposed or surrounded by the names of Allah and Muhammad and the expression 'God is Great' (*Allahu akbar*) written in Arabic calligraphy. For the Indian or non-Arab Muslim faithful situated thousands of miles from the shrines, simply gazing at the image of Mecca and Medina may fill a visual void and arouse a desire to perform pilgrimage. Mass-produced pictures of the Ka'ba and Muhammad's mosque-tomb have been made in India for a long time and in a variety of forms and formats, from simple etchings and oil paintings to coloured photographs and computer-based graphics. Today, such images ornament calendars, posters, pilgrimage guides, chapbooks, prayer rugs, ceramic tiles and, more recently, stickers, lamp shades, digital clocks and other 'show-pieces' with blinking lights, adorning millions of Muslim households. Indian artists making these images, who may not always be Muslim, improvise or add local motifs to them, some of which are drawn from non-Islamic iconographical systems.

Not all artists or publishers of Islamic images in India were Muslim; rather, many were Hindu. Some of the earliest stand-alone Islamic images made for display were produced in the form of calendars or posters by the print industry pioneered by the artist-entrepreneur Raja Ravi Varma (b. 1848). A self-taught portraitist from the royal family of Travancore (Kerala, South India), Varma was one of the first Indians to use western techniques of perspective and figure modelling in painting and to adapt them to Indian subjects and idioms, resulting in a unique style of realistic portraits. Varma moved on from portraits to Indian mythology, painting the popular Hindu gods, deities and other characters drawn from epic tales, using human models to give shape to his pictorial vision of Hindu heroes (Figure 2).

To commercialize his art on a larger scale, Varma set up a lithographic colour press in 1894 in Mumbai which he later moved to Lonavla, Maharashtra. His depictions of gods, shown as divine yet human-like, were so widely copied by commercial artists and publishers that they have become an integral vision of the Hindu pantheon today. Varma's style seems to have inspired the early painters of billboards, cinema posters and even film studio sets for mythological movies or

staged plays. But how do Islamic themes connect with Varma's press? Some images with Muslim themes did come out of the artist's Lonavla Press as early as 1920,⁹ including those showing the shrines at Mecca and Medina, among others. These may have been produced by his successors after his death as their potential to sell well on the open market was quickly realized.¹⁰ Although the typical Ravi Varma style is missing from these visual products (in all likelihood because very little figure modelling was required), the architectural rendering of the Ka'ba shrine was maintained and often repeated by later artists of Muslim devotional images.

Soon, many other publishers besides Varma started producing mythological posters in south India as well as Bengal. The Calcutta Art Studio, started in 1878 by Annadaprasad Bagchi with his students, developed a peculiar style of religious art that is still followed in posters. Publishers such as Hem Chandar Bhargava (Delhi), Hafiz Qamrud Din & Sons (Lahore), G.I. Press (Mumbai), H. Ghulam Muhammad & Sons (Lahore), Swastik Picture Publication (Delhi), Muhammadi Fine Frame Works (Mumbai), Brijbasi (Karachi, Mathura, Delhi) and



Figure 2. Poster showing Saraswati, Hindu goddess of knowledge and the arts, holding a *veena*. Artist Ravi Varma, publisher Ravi Varma Press, Malavali, circa 1900. From the Tasveer Ghar archive.

J. B. Khanna (Chennai) all participated in producing poster and calendar art with Muslim themes during the first half of twentieth century; some of them are still active today in the cities of Sivakasi, Delhi and Mumbai. These publishers and the artists in their employment were well-versed in the details of each faith's visual mythologies, irrespective of their own religious affiliations. For example, in the mid-1920s Hem Chandar Bhargava produced posters depicting the Taj Mahal, Humayun's tomb, the *dargah* (shrine) of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin in New Delhi, Mecca and Karbala. These architectural depictions reveal an interest in visually conjoining Islamic shrines in India with those further afield, as far away as Iraq and the Hijaz. Moreover, Bhargava made posters containing Qur'anic texts and the *bismillah* written in Arabic calligraphy and decorated with ornate floral borders (Figure 3).

Since the purpose of most Hindu posters is for worship or devotional gazing (*darshan*) upon a deity, their iconographies have tended to remain circumscribed by received discourses and legends as well as the rather formulaic functions of the gods. For instance, the lord Ganesha helps to secure an auspicious beginning, the goddess Lakshmi brings about wealth and the goddess Saraswati assists in securing knowledge. In a Hindu devotional image, the figural mode is easily applied to a plurality of gods. Moreover, figural icons in general provide highly important sources and channels of religiosity in most Hindu sects. Most deities are easily recognizable, since they are drawn in frontal poses with their attributes (objects, animals, body parts, etc.) executed with great attention to detail.

Islamic printed images, on the other hand, display some distinct differences from the Hindu ones. While many artists



Figure 3. Calligraphic poster with *Bismillah* (In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful); Artist unknown, publisher Hem Chandar Bhargava, Delhi, circa 1930. From the Tasveer Ghar archive

and producers of Muslim posters were sensitive to, and cautious about, using figural imagery, others did not shy from creating portraits of Muslim saints and holy men. This said, mainstream publishers including Brijbasi, J. B. Khanna and Jothi were mindful of the sensibilities of users of Islamic posters, who most often preferred to buy images without the portrayal of human beings. Such aniconic expectations and tendencies, however, did not limit the creativity that went into crafting a diverse corpus of Islamic devotional imagery.

When exploring early images of the Ka'ba produced in India, it is important to pay particular attention to how these depictions were adapted to local styles and iconographies. Many posters show the Ka'ba in Mecca and the green dome of the Prophet's mosque-tomb in Medina as being profusely decorated. Motifs typically include a crescent and star, roses, date-palms, beams of light radiating from words calligraphed in Arabic, most often Allah, Muhammad, or the *kalima* (a phrase of declaration or prayers), and borders with vegetal or geometric patterns. Often, an open Qur'an is shown placed on a bookstand along with the number 786; the number 786 is the numeric equivalent (*abjad*) to the Arabic letters contained in the *bismillah*. Many calendars combine images of Mecca and Medina with local themes, such as Sufi shrines, talismanic designs, Karbala folklore, calligraphy and images of praying women and babies next to the Ka'ba or the Medina dome. In such images, the *haramayn* (two holy places) sometimes appear in decorated enclosures or alcoves with earthenware/clay lamps and incense sticks (*agarbattis*), both reminiscent of the Hindu worship corners set up in private houses.

Each artist adds variations or personal touches to the specific features or parts of the shrines. The longing to visit Mecca and Medina, for instance, is expressed in passionate and creative symbolism by the Indian artist Balkrishna, who includes two white doves bleeding from their wings next to the image of the two holy shrines (Figure 4). Though a bleeding dove is generally considered a popular Christian symbol for love, longing, sacrifice, or self-affliction, Muslims relate to it through the doves and pigeons of Medina, which flock around the holy mosque of the Prophet and are spoken of in loving terms in the devotional Muslim poetry of South Asia. For example, a south Asian scholar, Taufiq Ahsan Barkati, waxes poetic in his Urdu verses:

Kaash mein gumbad-e khizr ka kabutar hota
Rauza-e paak pe baitha hua din bhar hota
 I wish I was a pigeon on the green dome;
 would sit on the holy mausoleum all day long¹¹



Figure 4. Poster showing the shrines of Mecca and Medina flanked by two bleeding doves. The number 786 inscribed inside a crescent is the numerical equivalent of the *bismillah*. Artist Balkrishna, publisher and place unknown, circa 2000. Author's collection.

Besides print illustrations, depictions of the Ka'ba may also have existed in more popular and transient media, including murals on mud walls or paintings in homes, roadside shrines, or Shi'i congregational halls (*imambaras*), as they often do in India today. For example, a 1913 photograph taken in a mosque in Jaipur (Rajasthan) by the French traveller Albert Kahn,¹² shows a richly decorated mihrab with six murals of Islamic shrines (including Mecca, Medina and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem) painted in a style that resembles the early Muslim posters produced by the Varma Press. This mihrab surrounded by architectural scenes functions as the central axis of the mosque, toward which the imam and other devotees face while praying. Kahn's photograph hints at the possibility of other mosques or Muslim shrines containing such painted or printed images on their walls in the past, a practice that echoes Varma's framed prints adorning countless Hindu temples across India. Hence, early printed images and painted murals in Muslim shrines partook in shared iconographies, the former influencing the latter and vice versa.

While images of Mecca are the most important for Muslim devotees, they probably constituted less than half of all Islamic devotional images available in the twentieth century. More diverse and visually richer are the posters that depict local saints, their shrines, miraculous powers, talismans and other Islamic folklore, whose origins can be traced in the local and sometimes non-Islamic cultural practices of India. The history of Muslim saints and Sufi orders (*tariqas*) in India and Pakistan is complex, spanning a long period of time and geography. The Chishtiyya is one of the most popular and culturally rich Sufi orders in South Asia. It was brought by Khwaja Moinuddin (b.1140), one of the best-known Muslim saints of the South Asian region, who came from Chisht, a small town near Herat in Afghanistan to Ajmer in Rajasthan. His popularity over the course of the past eight centuries is in part due to his earliest disciples Khwaja Bakhtiyar Ka'ki (b.1173), Baba Farid (b.1175), Nizamuddin Aulia (b.1238) and Nasiruddin Charagh-e Dehli (b.1274), all of whom helped to spread the order by preaching and appointing disciples in the farther regions of India.

Almost all the Sufi orders and shrines dotting the landscape of Pakistan today are connected to those in India, a fact that can be explained by the route taken by Sufis coming from central Asia who had to cross the region that is now Pakistan in order to arrive in the region that is now India. Many of them settled in places like Multan, Lahore and other towns in Sindh and Punjab; as a result, a rich body of Sufi literature and music emerged in these cities.¹³ While Lahore and Punjab are famous for saints like Ali Hujwari (Data Ganj Baksh), Baba Farid Shakar Ganj, Baba Bulleh Shah, Khwaja Ghulam Farid, Baba Shah Jamal, Barri Imam, Pir Mehr Ali, Sakhi Sarwar and others, Sindh and Multan boast their own as well, including Abdullah Shah Ghazi, Shahbaz Qalandar, Rukn-e Alam, Shah Abul Latif Bhitai, Bahauddin Zakariya, Sultan Bahu, Hazrat Naulakh Hazari, and many more (Figure 5). Posters of these Sufi saints demonstrate that Pakistan is home to a thriving culture of popular Islam represented by Sufi shrines, syncretic rituals and a vibrant print culture of devotional art and literature. Indeed, its output of Muslim figural images is more voluminous, and arguably more creative, than India's industry of Islamic devotional icons.

Due to the popularity of these Sufi saints, thousands of devotees from all over South Asia make long journeys to visit Sufi shrines, including that of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer. After spending some time praying at the shrines, the pilgrims usually take home a souvenir – and what better memento than a brightly coloured, printed image of the shrine they have just visited, to hang in their homes and channel the

saint's blessings? Publishers of devotional art cater to the pilgrims' requirements for souvenir material by producing a variety of images of Sufi shrines. One dilemma that faces the artists is whether or not to depict Muslim saints in their full corporeal form within such printed images.

While today it is widely believed that it is forbidden to produce figurative art or portraits of holy Muslim personalities, such images were made throughout the Islamic world in the pre-modern era.¹⁴ Except for God, every important person – including the Prophet Muhammad, his family members, companions, caliphs, previous prophets, angels, imams, saints and clerics – have been portrayed in various pictorial styles by Muslim artists since the thirteenth century.¹⁵ India in particular has had a long tradition of figurative arts both in elite spheres and folk traditions. Members of the Mughal nobility, including the emperor and his courtiers, proved lavish patrons of portraits, which were often produced as single-page folios and compiled into albums of calligraphy and paintings.¹⁶ Some illustrated manuscripts made in India even featured depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, his son-in-law and cousin 'Ali and his grandsons Hasan and Hussain. For instance, a 1686 manuscript of the *Khavarnama* (Book of Eastern Exploits), a Persian poem on the epic deeds of 'Ali compiled in the Punjab, features a painting showing the Prophet Muhammad, 'Ali, Hasan and Hussain, besides other early caliphs.¹⁷ Similarly, a copy of the *Divan* (Collected Poems) of Minnat (Mir Qamar al-Din) made in 1782 in India contains miniatures showing 'Ali, Hasan and Hussain with angels pouring gold over them.¹⁸ However, the large majority of these manuscripts were elite products whose illustrations were seldom available to a large viewing public: their small sphere of circulation curtailed the mass consumption and popular veneration of the figures depicted within their pages.

However certain images, especially those depicting the Prophet Muhammad, 'Ali, Hasan and Hussain and other imams, did become objects of veneration in Iran, mostly after their mass reproduction in modern times.¹⁹ Moreover, many Islamic posters published in Syria, Egypt, Turkey and Iran during the first half of the twentieth century depicted figural representations of Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses and Jesus accompanied by various details and motifs.²⁰ These posters, along with their mural renditions, can be found decorating the walls of roadside tea-houses (*chai-khanehs*) in Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey, where people sit and tell stories in a leisurely way.²¹

After the middle of the twentieth century, however, artists and publishers became more cautious vis-à-vis figural



Figure 5. Poster made from a collage of cut-outs depicting the saint Hazrat Naulakh Hazari Shahkot Waley. The words 'who read the Quran nine hundred thousand times' appear in the inscription. Artist Sarvar Khan, publisher unknown, Lahore, Pakistan, circa 2000. Author's collection.

representation. For example, a poster published in Lahore around 1970 illustrates the Prophet Muhammad taking refuge in the cave of Thaur during his flight from Mecca to Medina in order to escape his Meccan opponents. The artist avoided a depiction of the Prophet by showing a cave on a hill, its mouth covered with a cobweb and a pigeon's nest filled with eggs and a few Arabs on horses searching for the Prophet.²² Another poster in the same series also avoids drawing the image of the Prophet by showing two camels walking from Mecca to Medina, their backs loaded with a large bundle of roses, which no doubt symbolize the Prophet (and possibly his companion Abu Bakr). The rose is often considered the king or queen of flowers and signifies love. It holds special religio-cultural significance in Muslim societies, with some South Asians naming their sons *Gul Muhammad* and *Phool Muhammad* (the flower of Muhammad). An image of a rose as a symbol of the Prophet Muhammad was also used in devotional art of the late Ottoman period.²³

In general, the publication of portraits of Muslim saints in India has always been rather conservative. The earliest Indian shrines depicted in such posters, produced by Bhargava and Brijbasi publishers, were the tombs of Nizamuddin Aulia (Delhi), Moinuddin Chishti (Ajmer) and Sabir Pak (Kaliyar, Uttar Pradesh). The posters are often described as *naqsha*, that is a plan to help devotees locate important landmarks in and around the shrine. Already in awe of the saint, most pilgrims on arrival at the shrine develop a special bond with the site, its sacred enclosure, the grave, the stone lattice grille (*jali*) and the doorway through which they enter. They also visit nearby shrines and sites of religious importance. When available in the form of an easily 'readable' image of the sacred site these posters become ideal mementos or souvenirs, especially treasured if the devotees have travelled from a remote place. The sites laid out in the detailed plan can also help pilgrims locate or remember the places they should visit. For instance, *naqshas* for the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer include labels for each significant site and object, among them the *badi*



Figure 6. *Naqsha* of the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer, Rajasthan. Artist unknown, publisher Jothi, Tamil Nadu, circa 2000. Author's collection.

degh (large cauldron), *chiragh-e shehn* (lamp of the courtyard), *chhoti degh* (small cauldron), *buland darwaza* (high gateway), *mehfil khana* (assembly hall) and *Taragarh* (fort in the hills above) (Figure 6). It is notable that the plans show only buildings, objects and the landscape, and not human figures, whereas Karbala posters made in Iran and Turkey include many figural depictions of Yazid's soldiers and important members of Imam Hussain's family. Indian *naqshas* depicting the tragic details of the Battle of Karbala mostly use non-figural depictions of tents, swords, arrows, the desert, Hussain's horse Duldul and so on. In one example the artist has depicted the martyrs of Karbala as red roses, with the largest rose symbolizing Imam Hussain in the centre of the composition. Some smaller roses are simply inscribed with the word *bachche* (children). Many short sentences in Urdu describe other important details of the battle (Figure 7).

Despite its rather image-averse culture today, in the past Pakistan's thriving poster industry produced countless

depictions of Sufi saints. However, Indian publishers have generally been extremely reluctant to depict Muslim figures and many Indian Muslims would probably consider it blasphemous to produce, sell or purchase portraits of saints, even though printed images of holy figures such as 'Abdul Qadir Jilani, Moinuddin Chishti, Nizamuddin Aulia, Sabir Pak Kaliyari and Shah Mina are freely available across the India-Pakistan border (Figure 8). Still today, in the streets of Lahore one can find portraits for sale of 'Ali, Hasan, Hussain and other personalities revered by the Shi'a, although such depictions are probably imported from Iran.

One Indian *naqsha* that features human representations, mainly of devotees, provides its viewers with a map of a winding uphill road leading up to the shrine of Haji Malang Shah near Kalyan, Maharashtra (Figure 9). In its style and concept this vertically orientated poster can be seen as an Indian miniature painting. In the same way that a miniature narrates the events of a story in a single frame, this poster fits the entire pilgrimage



Figure 7. *Naqsha* depicting the battle of Karbala with labels in Urdu; several short sentences describe important details of the battle. Artist and publisher unknown, circa 1990. Author's collection.

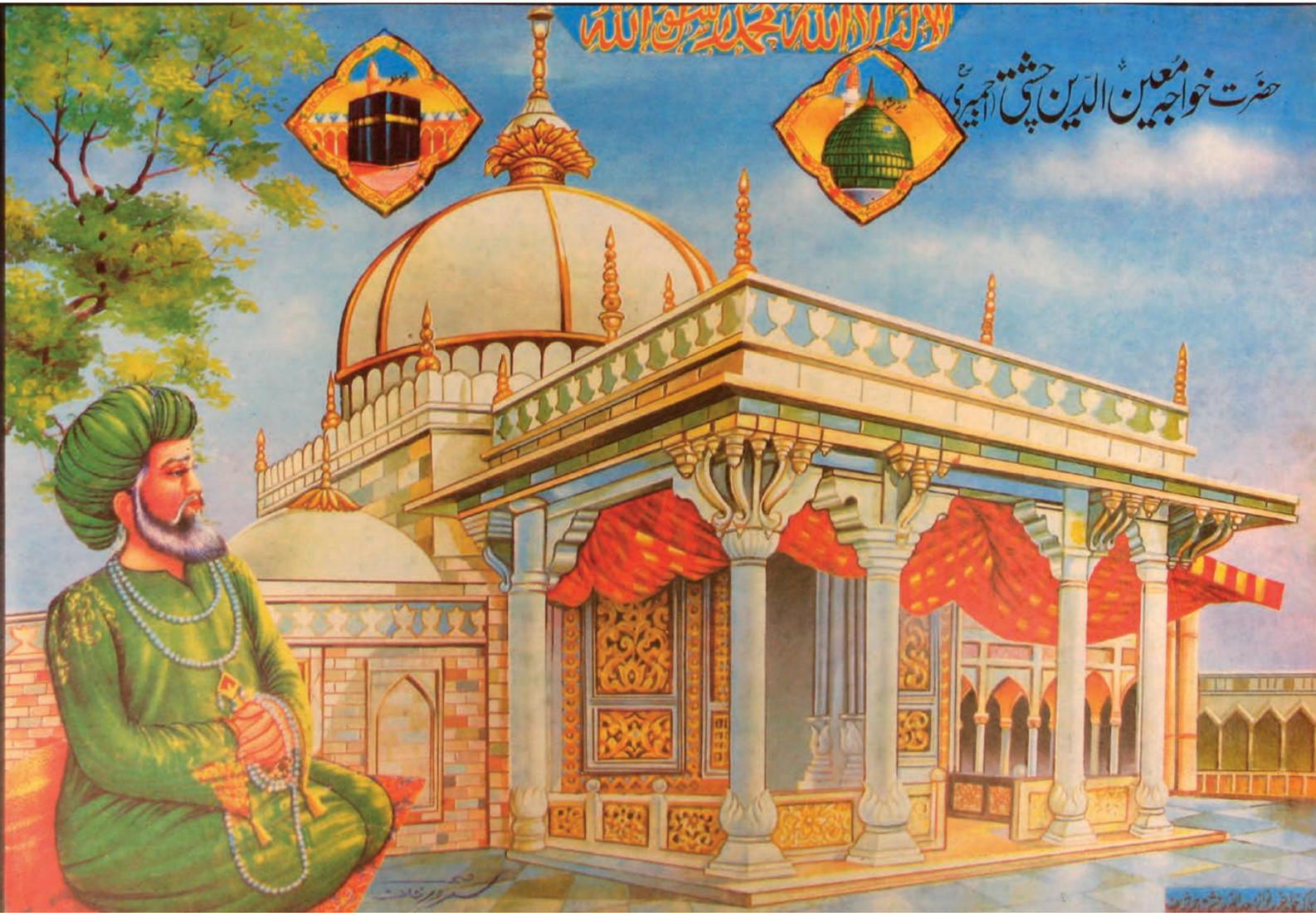


Figure 8. Portrait of the saint Moinuddin Chishti at his shrine at Ajmer, Rajasthan. Artist Sarvar Khan, publisher unknown, Lahore, Pakistan. Purchased in 2005 by the author.

route from the Kalyan railway station at the bottom up to the shrine on the hilltop, with many smaller details distributed along the way. In reality, the road is 13 kilometres long and is followed by a two-hour steep trek on foot! Since the route also houses a number of Hindu shrines and religious structures belonging to other faiths, the devotees who travel along it are likewise of mixed religions too (in fact, the place is very popular with eunuchs). The journey is arduous and most devotees are shown struggling as they walk up to the hilltop, where a lion symbolizes the persona or spiritual power of the saint. This poster is truly a syncretic image that focuses more on the path to be taken on than the pilgrimage's ultimate goal.

A kaleidoscopic pilgrimage map such as this one follows in the same tradition as the *naqshas* of Hindu sites like Varanasi. Poster publishers sometimes promoted the merits of a particular *naqsha* by claiming the inclusion of more sacred sites, advertising it as a more trustworthy guide to the sacred site than those produced by their competitors.²⁴ However, although these maps depict the topographic details of a site,

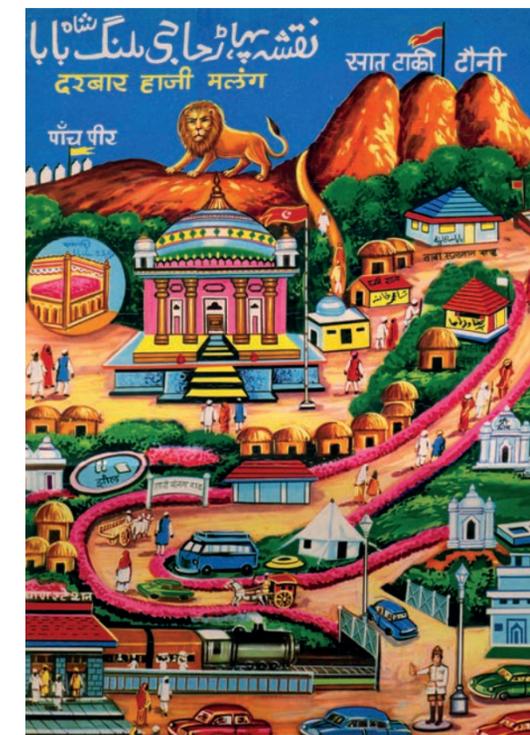


Figure 9. *Naqsha* of Haji Malang Shah in Maharashtra, India. Artist unknown, publisher Jothi, Tamil Nadu, circa 1990. Author's collection.

they tend not to be spatially accurate. They do not provide exact cartographic details, but rather a devotional and visual narrative of the pilgrimage on a miniature scale. One *naqsha* poster showing the fifteenth-century *dargah* of Haji Ali on an islet off the Mumbai coast is more realistic and serene, although the image of a 500-metre-long causeway which is submerged by the tide twice daily and is only accessible at low tide indicates the great efforts required to reach the shrine (Figure 10). Conversations with pilgrims have emphasized how travelling along a difficult path to a shrine tests their faith and the final arrival serves as a reward for their struggles.

When the Indian publisher Brijbasi produced a poster in the 1980s showing an imaginary meeting of six saints – Shaikh ‘Abdul Qadir Jilani (b. 1077), Moinuddin Chishti, Bu Ali Shah (b. 1209), Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Ka’ki, Baba Farid and Nizamuddin Aulia – the firm faced criticism from some Muslims (Figure 11). The objections were not linked to the figural portrayal of the saints, but rather to the assembling of six men who were not contemporaries in time or place.

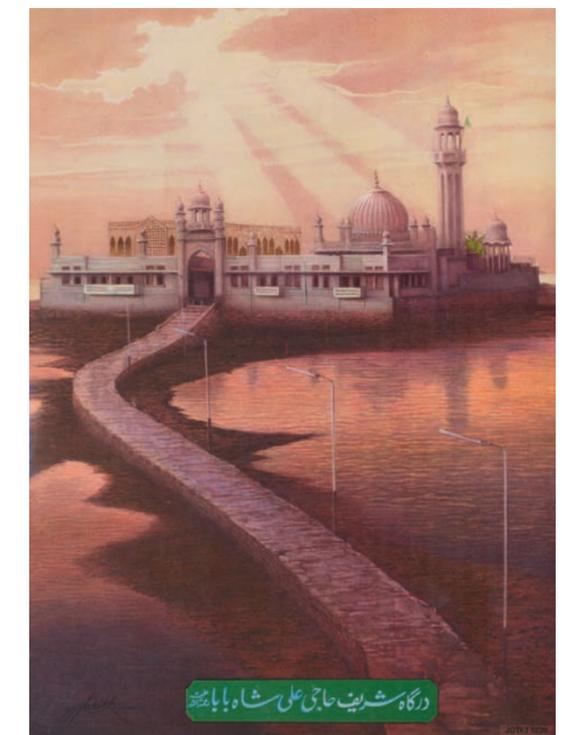


Figure 10. Poster showing the shrine of Haji Ali Shah on an islet off Mumbai. Artist unknown, publisher Jothi, Tamil Nadu, circa 1990. Author's collection.



Figure 11. Poster showing an assembly of six saints alongside their shrines. clockwise from top right: Abdul Qadir Jilani of Baghdad (1077–1166), Iraq, Bu Ali Sharf (1209–1324) of Panipat, Haryana, Nizamuddin Aulia (1238–1325) of Delhi, Baba Farid Ganj-e Shakar (1179–1266) of Pakpattan, Pakistan, Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar-e Kaki (1173–1235) of Delhi, and Moinuddin Chisti (1142–1236) of Ajmer, Rajasthan. Artist unknown, publisher Brijbasi, Delhi, circa 1990. Author's collection.

Brijbasi's reply, according to M.L. Garg, the current owner of the company, argued that the bringing together of these saints in one image denoted their belonging to the same *silsila* or spiritual lineage.²⁵ The peculiarity of this poster has been explored by Jürgen W. Frembgen, who traces its antecedents directly to a series of Mughal paintings. By comparing eight pictorial versions of the scene painted in different periods (the earliest of which dates to the seventeenth century), Frembgen convincingly shows how this imaginary assembly of Muslim saints has been repeated in each version with slight variations.²⁶

This circulation of visual topoi suggests that other twentieth-century portraits of saints may also have had their origins in premodern miniature painting. Moreover, they highlight the relationship and royal patronage of the rulers who commissioned such paintings for a particular saint or his shrine. Two early seventeenth-century album paintings are worth

noting here (Figures 12A and 12B): the first shows Shaikh Moinuddin Chishti holding a small globe (topped by the crown of the Timurid dynasty), which he seems to be handing over to the Mughal emperor Jahangir, proclaiming that 'the key to the conquest of the two worlds is entrusted to your hand'.²⁷ The painting on the facing folio depicts Jahangir holding that very same globe. The Mughals considered the order of Chishti Sufis as their spiritual guardians and therefore patronized their shrines all over India. Several other Mughal miniatures show meetings or the granting of favours between Mughal kings and saints, despite the fact that some Chishti Sufis, notably Nizamuddin Aulia, wished to keep a distance from the rulers.²⁸

Modern Indian artists consulted earlier Mughal pictorial sources in their efforts to craft an iconography of Muslim sainthood for popular devotional posters. In addition, they

relied on any descriptive details of a saint's physical attributes available in popular biographical anecdotes (*mal'uzat* or *tazkireh*), especially if no image was available. A pictorial portrait could also be shaped by the saint's spiritual hierarchy, as well as circulating anecdotes and miracles attributed to the saint, some of which are described in *tazkireh* texts.

Almost all Chishti Sufis and their followers in South Asia consider Shaikh 'Abdul Qadir Jilani their spiritual master and axis/pole (*qutb*), although he founded only the Qadiri order. A simple calendar image showing his tomb in Baghdad counts among the earliest representations of Sufi shrines to have been printed in India and Pakistan. A more complex image depicting him with a woman devotee and an image of a miracle at his shrine started appearing after the 1970s, especially in rural *dargahs* of Punjab. The poster shows a praying woman, clad in recognizably Punjabi dress, who lost her family and guests when the boat carrying them in a wedding celebration sank in a river (Figure 13). After seven long years of prayers by the widow Shaikh Jilani revived the entire family and the image

shows his miraculous disembodied hand lifting the boat out of the water.

Such figural images are referred to as *shabeeh*, a 'likeness' or 'similitude' of a saint, and are considered metaphorical rather than accurate portraits. The hereditary administrators (*sajjadeh nashins*) of most shrines usually inherit the sacred heirlooms (*tabarrukat*) of the saint, including a portrait in the form of an old painting or a faded photograph, which could then be used as source material by poster artists. In the absence of any painterly or photographic sources, a new portrait could emerge from the artist's own imagination. For many of their portraits of Muslim saints, Pakistani artists not only draw inspiration from various textual and oral sources but also seek out actual images which can be Christian, Hindu, or Sikh portraits made outside Pakistan. The resulting images are made as collages with different elopements cut and pasted to form the overall composition; this technique reached its apex in the production of Islamic devotional prints in Pakistan's poster industry. In one example the saint Baba Sher Shah Wali is shown sitting



Figure 12A and B. Folios depicting Shaikh Moinuddin Chishti (12a) and the Mughal emperor Jahangir (12b) by the artist Bichitr, c. 1610–18. Minto Album, In 07A.14a, In 07A.5b, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. © The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

on a lion, wearing a sari-like costume and holding a sword and shield, weapons that symbolize his spiritual powers (Figure 14). The artist has used the collage technique to convey the totality of the saint's attributes, which include a domed structure and an entrance arch cut out from two separate faded photos, the saint's person culled from an older painting, trees and hills taken from a Swiss landscape, a lion extracted from a wildlife magazine and lamps (*diyas*) from a Hindu poster. Further additions include pictures of Mecca and Medina, Arabic inscriptions and a crescent and star that may have been painted by the artist to add a final touch of originality.

Pakistani collages depicting saintly figures also include photographs of the shrine's current guardian (*khadim*) and his male family members, including children, to keep their image alive in public memory. Some of the current shrine keepers in rural Pakistan are powerful landowners who have political, spiritual and temporal influence on the local population. In

the collages, more recent photographs are pasted alongside cut-outs of tigers and lions, animals which invoke the saint's power among his devotees. The epitome of such pictorial collages from Pakistan is a veritable kaleidoscope incorporating almost every saint revered in South Asia, from the eleventh-century Shaikh 'Abdul Qadir Jilani to a twentieth-century Sufi shown wearing a western suit and tie (Figure 15). All the figures represented in this print are cut out from previous posters and pieced together in a complex amalgam, usefully provided with an indexed list of names. Although this version of the collage featuring 57 saints (another version shows 32) includes mostly Pakistani Sufis, some are also from India. With its assembly of so many individuals the image not only establishes a clear Sufi hierarchy but also displays a great diversity of ideologies and sects – ranging from the wandering mystics (*malangs*) of Sindh to the sober scholars of Iraq, some of whom were opposed to saint and shrine cults. If the bringing together of so many saints in one frame maximized the *barakat* (blessings) of the



Figure 13. Poster showing an Indian woman praying or offering her obeisance to Shaikh 'Abdul Qadir Jilani of Baghdad, with his tomb depicted in the background. In the top left are inscribed the saint's name and titles along with a couplet in Urdu. Artist unknown, publisher Brijbasi, Delhi, circa 1990. Author's collection.

image, as some pious users in Pakistan believe, then without a doubt it would prove a bestseller.

Depictions of animals or supernatural beings are also found in popular Muslim iconography. Most prominent among them is Buraq, the human-headed flying steed mounted by the Prophet Muhammad during his heavenly ascension (*mi'raj*). This miraculous episode in the Prophet's life has attracted further myths and festivities around it such as *shab-e mi'raj* or *shab-e barat*, when occasion-specific prayers are recited and special foods are prepared. Printed posters of Buraq produced in Pakistan never depict the Prophet, whereas comparable paintings of this scene from Iran and Turkey often show him with a veiled face, and surrounded by angels.²⁹ Instead, Buraq is depicted with a female head adorned with local jewellery and peacock feathers (Figure 16). The image of Buraq is comparable to a semi-Hindu deity called *Kamadhenu*, a wish-fulfilling cow with wings and the head of a woman; twentieth-century printed images of the two mythical beasts seem to borrow elements from each other.³⁰ Similarly, the Shi'is

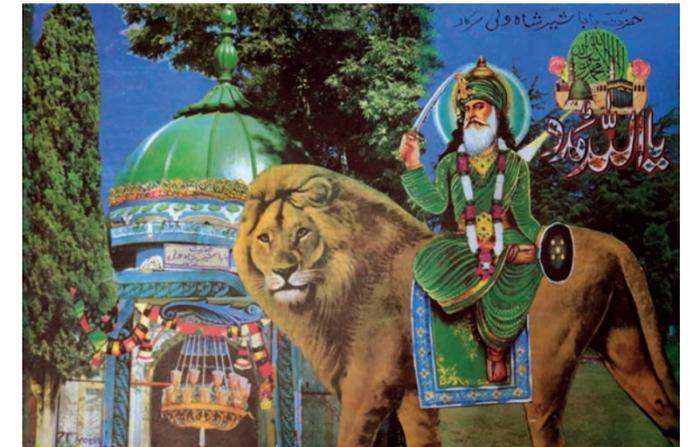


Figure 14. Collage depicting Baba Sher Shah Wali sitting on a lion. Few of the visual elements were originally drawn by the artist Sarvar Khan; every element has been crudely cut out and pasted to form this unique montage. Publisher unknown, Lahore, Pakistan. Purchased in 2005 by the author.



Figure 15. Collage showing almost all the saints of South Asia, or at least the Pakistani region. The numbers inscribed on each portrait correspond to an index of names on the top, numbering 57 figures. Artist and publisher unknown, Purchased in 2005 in Lahore by the author.



Figure 16. *Buraq un Nabi*, the steed that transported the Prophet Muhammad to the heavens during his *mi'raj* or celestial ascension. Artist unknown, publisher J. B. Khanna & Co., Chennai, circa 1990. Author's collection.

pay great reverence to Zuljinah, a horse ridden by Imam Hussain in the Battle of Karbala and the only sentient being to have survived the bloody massacre and hence perceived as a symbol of martyrdom.³¹ Colourful images of Zuljinah were painted on or attached to the outer walls of Shi'i *imambaras* (congregational halls), where the horse is often depicted with the Shi'i icon of the *panjtan* (five fingers of a hand denoting members of the Prophet's family, also known as Fatima's hand). Large-scale images of these icons were paraded in processions, with smaller versions kept inside homes and local *imambaras*. Most participants in the Shi'i Muharram processions, including Hindus, touch the moving exhibits or have their children pass quickly underneath them in the hope of reaping blessings before these *tazihs* (tomb replicas) are buried in a local Karbala. South Asia's Muharram processions are very reminiscent of the noisy Hindu processions of Durga, Ganpati or other deities that are later immersed in the river or sea after a lot of fanfare.

India's non-Muslim publishers of calendars have often dealt with Islamic themes exercising considerable restraint, a cautionary approach which probably emerged from the complex relationships Hindus and Muslims forged in the creation and supply of specific goods for each community's needs. The depiction of Hindu deities allows a flexibility of personal expression as well as a fuller embrace of the figural mode whereas in the case of Muslim devotional art, anxieties about possibly offending Islamic religious sensibilities narrowed the range of pictorial possibilities. Even a minor possible provocation in a poster image would inhibit the publisher from printing it. The printing presses, largely owned by members of Hindu business community (*baniyas*), wished to 'play it safe' and to keep the trust of their clients – rather than incur their displeasure and see their businesses suffer the consequences of an icon or motif that caused offence.

When Munshi Nawal Kishore was printing Qur'ans in large numbers in nineteenth-century north India, he hired only Muslim employees who performed ablution before starting their work. Nawal Kishore also had his Qur'an editions checked and sanctioned by famous clerics from the ulama.³² While one cannot compare the printing of Qur'ans with calendar images, there is reason to believe that poster and calendar publishers also followed this type of verification process before printing Muslim posters, especially if they involved figural representation. Thus, some types of Muslim devotional art might have been ruled out early on by Indian publishers, who continued to produce items under a mild self-censorship even after 1947. On the other hand, Pakistani publishers, being Muslim themselves, have remained freer and more confident in depicting figurative art, following in local artistic traditions dating back to the Mughal period. Contrary to the perceived notion of 'Islamic iconoclasm', it seems, at least in the case of twentieth-century South Asia, that it was Hindu publishers who curbed the inclusion of figural elements in Islamic popular posters, whereas their Pakistani counterparts had no such qualms.

NOTES

1. Patricia Uberoi, *Freedom and Destiny: Family, Gender and Popular Culture in India*, Delhi 2006.
2. Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*, Durham 2007.
3. Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods, The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, London 2004.
4. Jyotindra Jain, *Indian Popular Culture. 'The Conquest of the World as Picture'*, an exhibition at the House of World Cultures, Berlin, 2003, https://asianart.com/exhibitions/body_city/culture.html
5. Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, *The Friends of God, Sufi Saints in Islam, Popular Poster Art from Pakistan*, Karachi 2006.
6. Sandria B. Freitag, 'South Asian Ways of Seeing, Muslim Ways of Knowing: Indian Muslim Niche Market in Posters', *Indian Economic Social History Review*, 2007, 44 (3), 297–331.
7. Jamal J. Elias, 'Islam and the Devotional Image in Pakistan', in *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf, Ranikhet 2009, 120–132.
8. Yousof Saeed, *Muslim Devotional Art in India*, New Delhi 2012.
9. Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger, *Popular Indian Art, Raja Ravi Varma and the Printed Gods of India*, New Delhi 2003.
10. These Muslim posters are printed at Ravi Varma's Karla-Lonavla press, but published by Anant Shivaji Desai, a well-known calendar publisher in Mumbai.
11. From an Urdu blog of Naat poetry <https://taufiqahsan.wordpress.com/naat-poety/>
12. The photograph featured in *Infiniment Indes*, an exhibition of archival photographs of India held at Le Musée Albert-Kahn, Hauts-de-Seine, France, 2008–09.
13. Motilal Jotwani, *Sufis of Sindh*, Delhi 1986, 166.
14. See the essay in this volume by Christiane Gruber, 'Idols and Figural Images in Islam: A Brief Dive into a Perennial Debate', pages 8–19.
15. For a review of the subject, see in particular Christiane Gruber, 'Between Logos (*Kalima*) and Light (*Nūr*): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting', *Muqarnas* 26 (2009), 229–262.
16. Elaine Wright, Susan Stronge and Wheeler Thackston, *Muraqqa': Imperial Mughal Albums from the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin*, Alexandria, VA, 2008.
17. British Library, London, Add. 19766, f. 360r (unpublished).
18. British Library, London, Or. 6633, f. 22r (unpublished).
19. Ingvild Flakerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism*, Continuum 2012; Christiane Gruber, 'Prophetic Products: Muhammad in Contemporary Iranian Visual Culture', *Material Religion*, 12:3, 2016, 259–293.
20. Sergio Stocchi, *Itinerari D'immagini, Islam in Prints*, Milan 1988; Elisabeth Puin, *Islamische Plakate: Kalligraphie und Malerei im Dienste des Glaubens*, 3 volumes, Dortmund 2008; Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, *Imageries populaires en Islam*, Geneva 1997.
21. Peter Chelkowski, 'Narrative Painting and Painting Recitation in Qajar Iran', *Muqarnas* 6 (1989), 98–111; Victor H. Mair, *Painting and Performance: Picture Recitation and its Indian Genesis*, Warren, CT, 2009.
22. Posters published by the New Star Stationery Mart, Urdu bazaar, Lahore (undated, probably 1970s), reproduced in Sergio Stocchi, 1988.
23. Christiane Gruber, 'The Rose of the Prophet: Floral Metaphors in Late Ottoman Devotional Art', in *Envisioning Islamic Art and Architecture, Essays in Honor of Renata Holod*, ed. David J. Roxburgh, Leiden 2014, 227–254.
24. Martin Gaenszle and Jörg Gengnagel (eds.), *Visualizing Space in Banaras: Images, Maps and the Practice of Representation*, Wiesbaden 2006.
25. Interview with author, 2010.
26. Jürgen W. Frembgen, 'An Imaginary Assembly of Sufi Saints: Notes on Some Devotional Pictures from Indo-Pakistan,' in *La multiplication des images en pays d'Islam: De l'estampe à la télévision (17e–21e siècle)*, eds. Bernard Heyberger and Silvia Naef, Würzburg 2003, 81–102.
27. The two paintings by Bichitr are from an album belonging to the Earl of Minto, now in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. The two folios may or may not have originally been placed side by side. Even though the globes in the two images look different, it is assumed that the one carried by the saint is meant for the ruler.
28. Sunil Kumar, 'Assertions of Authority: A Study of the Discursive Statements of Two Sultans of Delhi', in *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture, Indian and French Studies*, ed. Muzaffar Alam et al., Delhi 2000, 37–65.
29. See Thomas W. Arnold, *Painting in Islam, A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Cultures*, New York 1965, 117–22; Christiane Gruber, 'Al-Buraq', *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd edition, Leiden 2012, 40–46.
30. See Freitag, 'South Asian Ways of Seeing', 2007.
31. Micheline Centlivres-Demont, 'La bataille de Kerbela (680/61 h.) dans l'imagerie populaire chiite: langage et symbols', *La multiplication des images en pays d'Islam: De l'estampe à la télévision (17e–21e siècle)*, eds. Bernard Heyberger and Silvia Naef, Würzburg 2003, 102–17.
32. Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books, The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India*, Ranikhet 2007, 285.