

Collaborative Wit

Provincial Publics in Colonial North India

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“My dear Al-Punch! Mister Al-Punch! Brother Al-Punch! Mahatma Al-Punch!” Exuberant greetings regularly began submissions to *Al-Punch*, an Urdu newspaper published in the north Indian city of Patna in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The affectionate verve of these salutations reflects the efforts of the paper’s contributors to harness wit and intimacy as they built a public space linking them with readers and writers throughout northern India. By forging these connections, they sought to counter the mounting marginalization of their city, region, and language.

Patna has long been the chief city of Bihar, a region lying west of Bengal and east of Delhi, Lucknow, and the other great cities of north India. In the early modern period, it was famed for its poets as much as for its merchants, but by the late nineteenth century, both Patna and Bihar had lost their prosperity.¹ Notwithstanding the widespread dismissal of old cities like Patna as stagnant and provincial, *Al-Punch*’s disarming wit and collaborative spirit helped it cultivate what we might call an ordinary intellectual public: a zealous community of ordinary intellectuals, in ordinary places, who strove to claim a place in the wider world of print.

Al-Punch ebulliently embodied the symbiosis between the serious and the sensuous that characterized Indian commercial publishing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Francesca Orsini has argued, “oral-literate” texts brought new participants into the print sphere and fortified readers’ taste for heterogeneity in language, content, and tone.² *Al-Punch* participated avidly in the era’s debates over politics and social reform, but it pointedly refused to adhere to any uniform editorial agenda or “policy,” in contemporary terms. While many of the era’s best-known publications were mouthpieces for individual personalities like Bharatendu Harishchandra and Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Al-Punch* encouraged intimacy and dialogue with a collaborative ethic centered on its imaginary embodiment, Maulana Al-Punch. Equally important was the paper’s deliberate use of wit (*zarafat*), by turns elegant and cheeky, which reinforced this participatory spirit while wrapping the paper’s serious critiques in an appealing coating of what it called “haha heehee.”

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1. Yang, *Bazaar India*, 53–111.

2. See Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, 20–21, 41, 108–9, 158.

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From its origins in the 1880s in a quarrel over linguistic authority, *Al-Punch* developed into a venue for efforts to construct a provincial public out of materials gathered from Urdu literary traditions. Its readers and contributors—most but not all of whom belonged to Bihar’s Muslim elites—articulated a cultural imagination that was distinctly urban but set apart from tumultuous colonial cities like Calcutta. Equally, they distinguished themselves from the Bengalis with whom they shared a province: although Bihar had been ruled together with Bengal for many years as part of the Bengal Presidency, Biharis increasingly objected to the dominant role played by Bengalis, with whom they felt little affinity. Far from representing a decayed provincial city, *Al-Punch* conveyed a vision of urban culture that was both cultivated and informal, and global in its imagination while thoroughly enmeshed in its local community.

Reforming Biharis

In the mid-1880s, a local poet named Shad ‘Azimabadi published a book criticizing the Urdu spoken in Patna, and in Bihar more generally, as rustic and uncultured. To Shad’s surprise, he was met with a torrent of recriminations from his targets, who founded their own newspaper to attack him. Thus was born *Al-Punch*, a paper whose distinctive relationships with its readers and contributors were shaped by this struggle over modernity, provinciality, and linguistic mastery. The young men who established *Al-Punch* hoped to create a boisterous public forum for themselves and people like them. For them, Patna was not a provincial city but the metropolis of Bihar; not the home of moth-eaten aristocrats but a lively center of creativity.

Throughout India, language was entangled with struggles over religious and ethnic identity. Recondite questions of spelling and grammar were invested with great significance, and in north India in particular, activists were sundering Hindi from Urdu while claiming the one for Hindus and the other for Muslims. One result was the emergence

of the concept of the *ahl-e zaban*, the people of the language, to denote the true masters of Urdu. The boundaries of this august company, whose usages determined which elements of common speech were acceptable in literary discourse, were not only social but also geographic. While earlier writers had celebrated the dialects spoken east of Delhi as mellifluous and expressive, gatekeepers now increasingly disdained all Urdu speakers outside Delhi and Lucknow.³ The Delhi intellectual Muhammad Husain “Azad,” for instance, almost completely ignored Bihar and Bengal in *Ab-e Hayat* (*The Water of Life*), his immensely influential 1880 history of Urdu literature. The early nineteenth-century text that he drew on had portrayed both Patna and Murshidabad, in Bengal, as major centers of Urdu poetry, but the intervening decades had erased that perception.⁴ Now, even Bihari writers complained that local elites “confuse masculine with feminine and feminine with masculine, and besides, they use many words in violation of the idiom of the *ahl-e zaban*.”⁵

Urdu-speaking intellectuals’ concern for linguistic standards reflected a crisis of confidence among Muslim elites following the devastation of Delhi and the final defeat of the Mughal empire in 1857–58.⁶ Although the loudest voices for reform came from the remnants of the Delhi aristocracy, they were echoed elsewhere. In Patna, the poet and scholar Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad Shad ‘Azimabadi entered the fray in 1884.⁷ In his book *Nawa-e Watan* (*The Voice of the Homeland*), Shad followed Azad in addressing a reformist message to Bihar’s Urdu speakers through a history of the language, accompanied by a catalog of common errors. Like many others descended from Delhi’s elites, Shad displays a sense of linguistic superiority and of his consequent responsibility to defend Urdu from its enemies.⁸

Across northern India, Urdu was under attack from colonial officials and Hindu nationalists who considered it an artificial imposition by Muslim invaders.⁹ In Bihar, the government had re-

3. Faruqi, “Urdu Literary Culture,” 807, 813; Phukan, “Through Throats.”

4. Faruqi, “Constructing a Literary History,” 38–39.

5. Das, *Mithila*, 114.

6. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*.

7. The name indicates Shad’s connection with Patna, also called ‘Azimabad.

8. ‘Azimabadi, *Nawa-e Watan*, 10; Faruqi, “Urdu Literary Culture,” 813.

9. Dalmia, *Hindu Traditions*; King, *One Language*.

cently banned Urdu in the Persian script in official contexts, with mixed success.¹⁰ One venue for this contestation was the Bihar textbook committee, where Shad wrangled with opponents who argued that Urdu was spoken in Bihar by only a handful of Muslim elites, and that even they spoke it “so poorly and ineptly that one bursts out laughing uncontrollably.”¹¹ Shad was spurred by these assaults into writing *Nawa-e Watan*, in which, rather than rebutting the criticisms, he encouraged the people of his *watan*, or homeland, to respond to them by reforming their language. Shad’s own copious use of terms specific to Bihar suggests that his objection was not to regional idioms themselves, but rather to usages diverging from those of the urban elite to which he belonged.¹²

Shad made clear that the reason for Urdu’s decline in Bihar was the impoverishment of the city’s old elites after the rebellion of 1857, when “that warbling parrot was trapped in a cage of agonies and forgot its calls.”¹³ The old cultivated patricians were being eclipsed by government clerks and rural parvenus, who were “drawing the knife of their detestable dialects and distasteful words across [Urdu’s] throat.”¹⁴ Soon, Shad warned, “the *watan* will become Calcutta’s Burrabazar [the city’s trading center], where English, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Sanskrit, Bengali, and Bhakha [that is, rustic dialects of Hindi] are mixed and garbled, and nobody can grasp which is the real language.”¹⁵ Tellingly, the threatening figure Shad reaches for is not the village, but the commercial heart of the colonial metropolis, where identities and authority are in constant flux. Now that the aristocrats of the Mughal age have lost their lands and power, country cousins and nouveau-riche upstarts threaten to replace the urbane with the merely urban.

Battle Formations

As soon as he finished writing *Nawa-e Watan*, Shad sent copies out, including to the Urdu edition of

the *Indian Chronicle* newspaper.¹⁶ He was then taken aback when the *Chronicle*’s reviewer denounced the book for its intemperate tone and for Shad’s conflation of geography with status.¹⁷ Invoking the distinction between sharif Muslims—those claiming high-status origins outside India—and those understood as descendants of low-caste converts, the reviewer admonished Shad that “the antonym of genteel [*sharif*] is base [*kamina*] or low-born [*razil*], not rustic [*ganwar*].”¹⁸ This rebuke captures the essence of the entire conflict. Like Shad, the reviewer accepted that personal virtue could be inherited, but he sharply objected to Shad’s efforts to arrogate refinement and noble ancestry to urbanites alone.

The *Chronicle*’s attacks soon grew so vitriolic, in Shad’s telling, that the paper’s backers withdrew their support and the paper collapsed. However, a group of young men with roots in Desna and Asthanwan, two nearby *qasbas*—small towns celebrated for their sophistication—soon regrouped. They quickly gathered money for a weekly publication devoted to attacking Shad, naming it *Al-Punch* in a jab at his affectation of signing his name with the Arabic article *al*.¹⁹

The attacks on Shad that appeared in the *Chronicle* and *Al-Punch*, as well as in other publications across northern India, were accompanied by great public excitement.²⁰ Four thousand copies were sold in *Al-Punch*’s first week, and readers complained whenever an issue came out without an attack on Shad. Even his friends relished reading these satirical pieces aloud, while his enemies subscribed in his name and threw copies into his courtyard.²¹

The *Nawa-e Watan* conflict took shape within the Urdu literary world’s tradition of fierce antagonisms, where a certain amount of preening and competition was expected, and where any perceived departure in usage exposed authors to denunciation. These controversies gained heat from allegations of prejudice. For instance, when in

10. King, *One Language*, 72–75.

11. ‘Azimabadi, *Shad ki Kahani*, 81.

12. A dictionary of Bihari Urdu draws numerous examples from Shad’s writings. See Yusuf, *Bihar Urdu Lughat*.

13. ‘Azimabadi, *Nawa-e Watan*, 102–5.

14. *Ibid.*, 3, 106.

15. *Ibid.*, 2.

16. Wadud, *Shad ke bare men*, 22, 70; ‘Azimabadi, *Shad ki Kahani*, 82.

17. Samdani, “Khud-Navisht Sarguzasht,” 2.

18. The review is reprinted in Ashrafi, *Nasr-Nigari*, 215–17.

19. ‘Azimabadi, *Shad ki Kahani*, 85–87; Samdani, “Khud-Navisht Sarguzasht,” 3.

20. Ashrafi, *Nasr-Nigari*, 178–79; Samdani, “Khud-Navisht Sarguzasht,” 3–4.

21. ‘Azimabadi, *Shad ki Kahani*, 86–87, 94–95.

1905 'Abd al-Halim Sharar attacked Brij Narayan Chakbast's new edition of a poem by Daya Shankar Nasim, many suspected that his complaints were motivated by the fact that both Chakbast and Nasim were Hindus. On the other side, Chakbast and his defenders suggested that Sharar's *qasba* ties meant he was not a true urbanite.²² Like the battle over *Nawa-e Watan*, this controversy (in which *Al-Punch* took Sharar's side) illustrated the interdependence of face-to-face relationships and print, as well as print's potential to disrupt earlier norms of deference and hierarchy.²³

Like the quarrel between Chakbast and Sharar, the *Nawa-e Watan* conflict, like that between Chakbast and Sharar, also concerned the relationship between urbanity and provinciality. Shad seems to have sincerely expected thanks from the people of the *watan*, but he acknowledged that his critiques were seen as libelous accusations that "the people of the countryside are brutes and beasts."²⁴ This dispute over the location of civilization was not to be quickly resolved. As Frances Pritchett observes of some of Shad's contemporaries, Shad lacked earlier generations' confidence in "the self-evident, unchallengeable excellence of the literary tradition within which he worked."²⁵ Refinement could still be achieved, at least by certain elite men, but only by emulating the established masters of Delhi and Lucknow. It seemed to Shad that nobody in Patna, apart from himself, still had the creativity and grandeur of the old era; worse still was the distorted language of Bihar's towns and villages. For his opponents at *Al-Punch*, however, sophistication was not so rarefied. As Fazl-e Haq Azad wrote:

How long has it been since Delhi was ground in the dust?
And nobody knows what happened to Lucknow.
But there was a Patna, thronged with God's creatures—
Which neighborhood wasn't abuzz with new guests?
.....

22. Perkins, "Mehfil to Printed Word."

23. *Al-Punch*, August 3, 1905.

24. Samdani, "Khud-Navisht Sarguzasht," 2–3.

25. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, 44.

26. 'Imadi, *Fazl-e Haq Azad*, 71, 73.

27. Wadud, *Shad ke bare men*, 71; 'Azimabadi, *Shad ki Kahani*, 94, 96; Samdani, "Khud-Navisht Sarguzasht," 3–4.

28. The issues published between February 1900 and January 1907 are available at the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library in Patna. *Al-Punch* ceased publication sometime in the 1910s.

There's a long epic of Patna's linguistic prowess;
Both urbanite and villager spoke in Rekhta
[i.e., Urdu].²⁶

For Azad and other *Al-Punch* contributors, society and literature undeniably needed many reforms. But the people of Patna and Desna, with their passion and élan, were better able to do this work than those in the faded capitals to the west.

Openness and Intimacy

Despite its ferocity, *Al-Punch*'s early conflict with Shad and his supporters only lasted two years.²⁷ By the turn of the twentieth century, when the archivally available issues were published, other topics occupied its contributors—apart from Azad, who continued to attack Shad sporadically.²⁸ The founding controversy did, however, deeply influence the relationship between the paper and its community of readers and writers. The former upstarts were now well established, but the paper maintained its openness to contributors without aristocratic pedigrees, alongside its celebratory attitude toward Patna and the *qasbas* of Bihar. A cover from 1901 conveys a sense of the paper's self-image (see fig. 1). Floral embellishments, familiar from any number of contemporary Urdu book covers, border inner margins filled with a variety of announcements and a pair of Islamic stars and crescents. The sun—an often-used motif—illuminates the names of the paper and its city (Bankipur, or Bankipore, being the name of the colonial suburb at Patna's western end), shining on a Mughal-style building overlooking a palm garden. The image is dominated by Patna's most iconic building, the Gol Ghar granary. The distinctive domed structure has nearly become a globe, suggesting that Patna is a world of its own.

This image evokes *Al-Punch*'s simultaneous localism and Islamicate cosmopolitanism, which emerged from its participation in the Urdu literary formation, to adopt Farina Mir's term for "a group constituted through its members' shared practices of producing, circulating, performing,



Figure 1. Cover page, *Al-Punch*, March 15, 1901

reading, and listening.”²⁹ Although scholars have emphasized the anonymity afforded by print, social relationships were essential to the public sphere that these participants created. In particular, the *musha’ira*, or poetry gathering, was the central site of the Urdu literary formation. Its traditions, refined yet frequently confrontational, provided inspiration as well as financial support for newspapers like *Al-Punch*. Though largely governed by elite norms, *musha’iras* were never cut off from popular domains. According to *Ab-e Hayat*, for instance, the poems of the eighteenth-century satirist Sauda “used to spread so fast that the moment they were composed they were on the lips of every child.”³⁰

By the turn of the twentieth century, the wider availability and lower cost of print had dramatically expanded the possibilities for public discourse. Readers were vividly conscious of this

transformation: as one wrote, “Great benefit has come about from periodicals and newspapers, so that within many hearts the discussion of critical writing takes place, which is unprecedented.”³¹ This reader’s sense of membership in a literary community signifies a new subjectivity, driven by print. However, unlike Benedict Anderson’s famous newspaper reader, who performs his daily sacrament in silent communion with unknown compatriots, many of *Al-Punch*’s readers knew each other in person.³² They were reminded of this fact by the paper’s constant demands that particular readers contribute money and writing. At the same time, this local public was intertwined with others far away. When they compared Lahore’s sanitation problems with Patna’s, or collected donations for the Hijaz Railway or Lucknow’s Nadwat al-‘Ulama seminary, *Al-Punch*’s contributors wove together disparate public discourses for intimate as well as scattered audiences.

Papers like *Al-Punch* provided a new kind of platform for readers wishing to become writers, whether they hoped to report on local events, to comment on politics, or to test their poetic prowess. *Al-Punch* continually printed poems, both serious and comic, and reports on *musha’iras* in and outside of Patna. Such literary interests were typical of Urdu newspapers, which sometimes hosted their own *musha’iras*.³³ Publishing ventures were thus inserted into the networks of personal ties that structured the literary world. For instance, Shad grumbles in a letter that, despite his fame, he is having trouble finding a publisher because the press is dominated by the disciples of two famous poets from Delhi and Lucknow.³⁴

However, newspapers like *Al-Punch* did not merely reproduce the existing culture of poetry, but also provided new routes into the public sphere. While Shad complains that his poetic affiliations are hampering his access to the press, he also rejects those poetry magazines that are so open that they publish even prostitutes’ verses.³⁵ The same accessibility that offended Shad, though,

29. Mir, *Social Space*, 97.

30. Azad, *Āb-e Hayāt*, 172.

31. Zaman Kaftori, writing in *Zamana*, April 6, 1906; quoted in Perkins, “*Mehfil* to Printed Word,” 51.

32. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 35.

33. Stark, *Empire of Books*, 366–67.

34. Shad ‘Azimabadi to Humayun Mirza, January 10, 1901; reprinted in Zor, *Maktubat*, 37–38.

35. *Ibid.*

provided new opportunities to others, like the thirteen-year-old boy who, signing himself Abu al-Kalam Muhi al-Din Ahmad Azad Dehlavi, sent *Al-Punch* a long and self-confident report on a Calcutta *musha'ira* in 1902.³⁶ It was through the mediation of print that this boy, who was later known as the scholar and political leader Maulana Azad, was able to project such erudition that on meeting him in Lahore in 1904, the poet Hali took him for Azad's son.³⁷ The resources of Urdu literary culture helped enable a paper like *Al-Punch* to attract a widely dispersed community of readers and writers, so that, in this case, a writer calling himself a Delhiite (Dehlavi) was writing from Calcutta to a paper in Patna, while being read in Lahore. The union of poetic culture with print was no lingering archaism, but rather an enduring symbiosis that was inextricable from sharif cultivation.

Give and Take

Al-Punch kept an attentive eye on a broad public reaching across India and beyond. Theorists of the public sphere have noted that publics are created through the open-ended circulation and reformulation of texts over time; *Al-Punch* was certainly alert to this ongoing exchange, guided by a sensitivity to contributors' interests as well as a feeling of obligation to the emergent Urdu public sphere.³⁸ The former concern came to the fore when the Lahore literary magazine *Makhzan* reignited the old enmity between Shad 'Azimabadi and Fazl-e Haq Azad by praising both but suggesting that Shad was the greater poet.³⁹ A flurry of pieces in *Al-Punch*, some signed by Azad, took exception to his subordination to Shad. The paper acknowledged having treated Shad harshly in the past, but sighed, "What can be done—the era was like that." In any case, it argued, *Al-Punch*'s critiques had vastly improved Shad's poetry, and what mattered today was securing equal recognition for Azad.⁴⁰

But *Al-Punch* never spoke with only one voice. In the midst of this onslaught, the paper published an opposing article arguing that Azad had degraded himself by attacking Shad. It also pointed to the keen interest that such debates inspired, observing that "wherever you go in the city, people are talking about this."⁴¹ *Al-Punch* was punctilious about monitoring such goings-on, keeping readers abreast of literary news from Calcutta to Lahore. The paper reviewed everything from novels to agricultural manuals, almost always positively, and carefully placed each book socially and geographically. One review praises a biography by a "kind and special correspondent" from the Karimganj neighborhood of Gaya and directs purchasers to the author and to a bookseller in Lahore; another recommends a book of plague cures written by a disciple of "our city's skillful doctor, Maulana Hakim 'Abd al-Hamid" and published by "our city's famous bookseller, Hafiz Dost Muhammad from the Ghat Khwaja Kalan neighborhood of Patna City."⁴²

Always mindful of distant audiences alongside its strong local allegiances, *Al-Punch* reviewed and advertised publications from towns like Gorakhpur, Bareilly, and Hyderabad. Its dedication to open exchange was all the stronger when it came to the margins of the Urdu public sphere. Commenting on *Al-Mashriq*, a new magazine from Dhaka, *Al-Punch* said, "Since this is the only Urdu magazine of East Bengal, we hope that the literati of our province will also help *Al-Mashriq* with their own essays."⁴³ *Al-Punch* also reprinted articles from other papers and invited others to do the same, if they gave due credit.⁴⁴ When the Etawah paper *Al-Bashir* reprinted the first installment of an article on Sufism, *Al-Punch* said the second installment was "worthy of being reprinted by our very dear contemporaries, especially in the valuable columns of *Al-Bashir*."⁴⁵

Al-Punch's awareness of how its own words

36. Abu al-Kalam Muhi al-Din Ahmad Azad Dehlavi, "Jashn-e Tajposhi ka Kalkatta men Dilchasp Musha'ira," *Al-Punch*, July 5, 1902. Abu al-Kalam Azad, Fazl-e Haq Azad, and Muhammad Husain Azad were unrelated to each other but shared a pen name meaning "independent."

37. Douglas, *Abul Kalam Azad*, 59.

38. See, for instance, Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 90–96.

39. Chaudhri Khushi Muhammad Nazir, "Makhzan Sabha," *Makhzan*, September 1905.

40. "Makhzan Sabha," *Al-Punch*, September 28, 1905. The articles continued to appear until January 4, 1906.

41. "Azad ne Shad ko Na-Haq Mitaya," *Al-Punch*, November 2, 1905.

42. *Al-Punch*, June 14, 1902, and July 19–26, 1902. Patna City was the older part of the city, as distinct from Bankipur.

43. *Al-Punch*, December 6, 1906.

44. *Al-Punch*, July 19–26, 1902.

45. *Al-Punch*, November 7, 1903.

were circulating sometimes carried a sharper edge. Following a trend of the day, in 1903 the paper began publishing a monthly *guldasta*, or “bouquet,” a kind of printed *musha’ira* to which readers could submit poems on an assigned pattern. About 750 miles away, the Amritsar *Vakil* reacted critically, voicing the common reformist view that Muslim decline was caused by Urdu poetry, as well as by women’s seclusion. Despite the distance involved, *Al-Punch* took umbrage and retaliated for a month with articles like “The Amritsar *Vakil* Newspaper: Our Tasty and Zesty Review of its Bitter and Sour Review.”⁴⁶ Just as *Al-Punch* acted as a critic and cheerleader for other entrants into the public sphere, it was anxious that its own words should be well received.

Colonial officials derided these intertextual practices, complaining in a description of *Al-Punch* that “of originality there is little, and a great proportion of the articles are simply reproduced from other papers in an exaggerated and highly coloured form. A common plan is to invent an imaginary opposition and then to knock it down like a kind of Aunt Sally with a shout of self-congratulation.”⁴⁷ Notwithstanding the gibes of irritated officials, editors were driven not simply by laziness or the need to fill column-inches, but by the desire to promote a self-aware public. Thanks to papers’ practice of trading copies, contributors could have the satisfaction of writing for perhaps five thousand readers rather than five hundred.⁴⁸ And by recognizing allies and enemies, or creating them, a paper could appeal to external authority and strengthen a network of sympathetic authors. Welcoming a new paper preaching interreligious amity, *Al-Punch* said, “Our newspaper has the same policy. But now that we’ve found a like-minded contemporary, we will begin to work with greater interest.”⁴⁹ Other articles took for granted that readers would be informed about events beyond Bihar, so that a correspondent from Lucknow, 275 miles to

the west, begins an account of Shi’a-Sunni conflict by saying, “Maulana Al-Punch! Good morning! Sitting where you are, you must already be hearing the tale of the discord in our Lucknow.”⁵⁰

Readers were repeatedly reminded of their position relative to *Al-Punch*’s community. Patna was referred to as “here,” and other papers and authors were called *ham-asr*, or “contemporary.” The resulting sense of simultaneity and proximity heightened readers’ experience of listening through others’ ears. Michael Warner has commented that public speech resembles lyric poetry in that it is heard *as heard*.⁵¹ This observation is especially germane to Urdu; for instance, the hearer of a *ghazal*, the preeminent form in Urdu poetry, is in the position of overhearing the lover’s complaint about his beloved. Similarly, *Al-Punch*’s readers continually overheard the thoughts of poets and other reader-contributors. The paper spoke and listened, not as a disembodied and neutral authority, but as a concrete and lively interlocutor with echoes of the *sarpanch*, or village headman.⁵² Contributions would begin with comic bouts of stammering or with a breathless, “Maulana Al-Punch! Have you heard?” In a sense, then, contributions were always overheard; readers were complicit in eavesdropping on their mutual friend, the Maulana.

This conversational air was not merely imaginary: larded with rhyme, onomatopoeia, and pulsing rhythms, articles begged to be read aloud. One piece begins, nonsensically but propulsively, “*Punch dar Punch bar Punch sar-Punch nagar Punch dagar Punch sagar Punch!* [Punch in Punch but Punch sarpanch city Punch street Punch every Punch!]”⁵³ Mir refers to such elements as “protocols of orality” meant to guide oral performances of printed texts. Such protocols were essential elements of the “texts of pleasure” that were at the center of the expanding authorships and readerships of the late nineteenth century, and equally

46. “Akhbar-e Vakil-e Amritsar: Talkh-o Tursh Review par Hamara Mazedar aur Chatpata Review,” *Al-Punch*, December 5, 12, and 26, 1903.

47. “Annual Report on Indian Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the Province of Bihar and Orissa for the Year 1916,” British Library, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, Mss. Eur. F

523/10. “Aunt Sally” is a reference to a carnival game, and suggests a straw figure.

48. “Taj,” *Al-Punch*, September 20, 1902.

49. *Al-Punch*, July 9, 1904.

50. *Al-Punch*, May 24, 1906.

51. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 81.

52. Dalmia, *Hindu Traditions*, 253.

53. Shor Bihari, “Rulate Ho Mujhe Abr-e Bahar Samjhe Ho / Baras Parun na Kahin Atishin Bukhar Hun Main,” *Al-Punch*, March 9, 1900.

important in didactic and reformist literature.⁵⁴ Though *Al-Punch*'s contributors were particularly exuberant, those of other Punch papers were similarly playful, exclaiming, "Dear Punch, Maharaj Punch, libertine Punch," or, "Bravo, sir, bravo! Why not?"⁵⁵ Reading could resemble eavesdropping, gossiping, or carousing, as poetry mingled with prose, and humor with gravity.

Paying Dues

Readers' involvement with the paper and with each other went beyond simply subscribing through the mail: *Al-Punch* invited, rewarded, and even demanded engagement. Correspondents' mock-respectful honorifics—Maulana *Al-Punch*, Mahatma *Al-Punch*, Khan Bahadur *Al-Punch*—served to focus the paper's humorous charisma onto the figure of Punch. Many articles came unsigned and untitled, hinting that the author was the Maulana himself. This conceit, that *Al-Punch* was an embodied confidant—a recipient, as well as a source, of information and humor—promoted an intimacy that inspired loyalty and zeal. Contributors would even write poems of praise:

Curing the ills of the nation and serving its
homeland,
Oh, my heart and soul, you're a sacrifice to
Al-Punch.
I pray to the Creator at dawn and dusk,
For the progress, night and day, of *Al-Punch*.⁵⁶

This devotional idiom encouraged contributions of money as much as of writing. Like most of its contemporaries, *Al-Punch* was constantly anxious about finances. Throughout India, courtly patronage for literature had largely evaporated,

but this did not mean that texts were sold entirely like commodities. *Al-Punch* (as well as its *guldasta*, *Bihar*) instead charged subscribers on a sliding scale, depending on their location, the length of their subscription, and whether they were students.⁵⁷ Notices regularly appeared urging readers to "please remember the Maulana a bit" by paying the traveling subscription agent, and those who paid up were listed under the heading "*jhanajhan ka shukriya*"—perhaps best translated as "Thanks for the Cha-Ching."⁵⁸ The paper also rebuked stingy elites (*umra-o-rausa*) and demanded that they subsidize poor and middle-class readers by paying as much as their "generosity and courage" allowed, lest their names be listed with the commoners (*'awam*).⁵⁹ Defaulters, meanwhile, were handled severely, and their names stricken from the subscriber rolls "like misspelled words—good riddance to bad rubbish."⁶⁰ Similarly, the paper demanded contributions to its favorite causes and celebrated the donors.⁶¹

The paper took for granted that subscribers would share their copies with others, and pointed this out to those who complained about the standard annual rate of Rs. 6.⁶² Some subscribed on behalf of libraries and clubs, while others doubtless shared *Al-Punch* with their friends or read articles aloud. The paper's reach was thus larger than it might seem from its modest subscription figures—fewer than 600 in its first year, and as few as 250 by 1911. These figures were in fact typical for Urdu papers of the time, though much smaller than for Hindi and Bengali papers.⁶³ Circulations were limited in part by technological constraints. Despite a few experiments with moveable type in Urdu, lithography was preferred for both aes-

54. Mir, *Social Space*, 91–92; Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, 108–11; Ingram, "Portable Madrasa," 854, 856.

55. Ek Sha'ir-e Ghaza, "Maharaj ko Haq Rakhe Shad Kam / Nayi 'Arz Karta Hai Ik Ghulam," *Awadh Punch*, January 16, 1902; Khwah Makhwah Dehlavi, "Khat ka Jawab," *Dehli Punch*, April 1, 1906.

56. I have translated the Urdu *qaum* as "nation" (i.e., Muslims) and *watan* as "homeland." Baligh al-Mulk 'Azimabadi, "Bihar *Al-Punch*," *Al-Punch*, November 29, 1906.

57. Other papers followed the same practice; see *Sir Punch Hind*, May 12, 1878, and Stark, *Empire of Books*, 357.

58. *Al-Punch*, July 20, 1900, July 12, 1901, and February 8, 1906. The *Awadh Akhbar* did the same, under the heading "List of Receipts." Stark, *Empire of Books*, 358–59.

59. "Panch Rupaye Kya," *Al-Punch*, September 14, 1900; *Al-Punch*, October 4, 1902. Most papers in Patna had patrons, usually large landlords or their representatives; see Bihar State Archives, Government of Bihar and Orissa, Political Department, Special Section, file 178 of 1914.

60. *Al-Punch*, August 31, 1905. The phrase is *khas kam jahan pak*, that is, the fewer the twigs, the purer the earth.

61. See, for instance, *Al-Punch*, "Nadwat al-'Ulama," December 14, 1900; "Anjuman-e-Islamia Bankipur," November 8, 1902; and "Hijaz Railway," March 1, 1906.

62. *Al-Punch*, November 28, 1903.

63. Jha, "Fifteen Years," 75; Stark, *Empire of Books*, 380; *Report on Native Papers in Bengal* for January 6, 1900, January 7, 1905, January 1, 1910, and January 7, 1911.

thetic and economic reasons, despite smaller print runs.⁶⁴

The paper's position that different readers bear different responsibilities is consistent with its practice of listing subscribers not only by name and location but also by occupation. These details form a composite picture of the archetypal *Al-Punch* reader as an elite Muslim man living in Patna, but nonetheless include substantial variation in social and spatial location. Most of the subscribers had Muslim names, but about 15 percent were Hindus—predominantly Kayasthas, members of a scribal caste with long-standing affinities with sharif culture. A majority came from the landed and professional elites, but a number were positioned more ambiguously. Alongside aristocrats, landlords, lawyers, and doctors, there were also students, police officers, two courtesans—the only women subscribers—and even an orderly (*chaprasi*).⁶⁵

About half of *Al-Punch*'s readers were in Patna district, mostly in the city itself, but many lived elsewhere in Bihar, and some lived much farther away. However, many distant contributors didn't appear in the subscriber lists, perhaps because they were excused from payment, like contributors to other publications.⁶⁶ In particular, people wrote regularly from Lucknow, Calcutta, and Lahore, as well as from Peshawar, Ajmer, and Hyderabad. *Al-Punch* even hosted a dispute between two well-known Lahoris. While noting that "it would be more appropriate to send this to one of Lahore's local papers," *Al-Punch* published a long open letter from Muharram 'Ali Chishti, a combative newspaper editor in that city, lambasting the political leader Lala Lajpat Rai for bigoted rhetoric.⁶⁷ Chishti presumably also wrote to papers closer to home, but 800 miles away, the predominantly Muslim readers of *Al-Punch* must have been a valuable audience for an attack on Punjab's religiously polarized politics.

These letters bespeak the links that *Al-Punch*

forged with readers and publications across India and make clear that commercial viability was secondary to aesthetic and social vitality. This attitude comes through in a poem by 'Ishrat Lakhnawi, titled "Maulana Al-Punch's Appeal," which admonishes negligent readers to render the paper its due:

Why did you buy the paper?
Why did you spill the blood of the talented?
If you weren't interested at all,
You should have ordered a headache.
.....
If you don't pay the price, then you'll be
disgraced,
This price will redeem your half-stained
spirit.⁶⁸

The censure that 'Ishrat threatens reflects *Al-Punch*'s sense of the ways that affection not only paid the bills but helped form an intimate public. Dependent as it was on submissions from often-distant contributors, the paper constantly addressed them: "Ain Jim Bhagalpuri, keep trying"; "Shor' Bihari, write useful things"; "Nazim, your *ghazal* is being edited." *Al-Punch* pouted when it received too few letters, and when contributors were tardy, it chided them.⁶⁹

Intimacy also demands discipline. *Al-Punch* was open to a wide range of topics and opinions, but as in a *musha'ira*, participants had to meet certain criteria, whether of literary attainment, social status, or personal acquaintance. Those who broke the rules were unwelcome: in addition to publicly rebuking those who were delinquent in sending articles or money, *Al-Punch* announced that anonymous submissions would go straight into the trash.⁷⁰ *Al-Punch* was particularly vigilant on questions of offense, especially concerning the mundane transgressions that could disrupt a reading public. So when a landlord named Babu Karopad-dya complained about a caricatured Bengali character who showed up speaking pretentious Urdu in a piece titled "Entertaining Travelogue," *Al-Punch* was quick to deny that the character was based on

64. Lelyveld, "Sir Sayyid's Public Sphere"; Stark, *Empire of Books*, 45–49.

65. Other Urdu papers had similar audiences; see Stark, *Empire of Books*, 358–59.

66. *Lisan al-Sidq*, November 20, 1903; reprinted in Desnavi, *Lisan al-Sidq*, 33.

67. *Al-Punch*, April 26, 1906.

68. 'Ishrat Lakhnawi, "Maulana Al-Punch ki Appeal," *Al-Punch*, October 4, 1906.

69. See, for instance, *Al-Punch*, July 27, September 7, and December 27, 1900.

70. *Al-Punch*, March 7, 1903, August 30, 1906, and October 4, 1906.

him. Insisting that his suspicion of being singled out was “absolutely wrong” and had probably “been planted by some madman,” the paper objected that “our admirer the Babu Sahib unjustly shows his temper.”⁷¹ It is unsurprising that *Al-Punch* couldn’t always please everyone, but it is notable that it seems to have felt obliged to acknowledge this failure publicly. If *Al-Punch* was afraid of losing a customer, its reassurances were repaid when Babu Karopaddya continued to contribute and subscribe.⁷² Beyond this pragmatic reason, though, when *Al-Punch* acknowledged the dissonances within its community, it was able to represent itself as a public institution: a venue for diverse views, rather than an authoritative monolith, and an impartial force for reform, rather than a platform for personal enmity.

This beneficent air was crucial to the production of *Al-Punch*’s public. But the multivocality with which it produced that demeanor could also provoke anxiety. After all, when lighthearted texts like the “Entertaining Travelogue” were juxtaposed with reportage and political commentary, it was unclear whether criticism and mockery were aimed at individuals or groups. These anxieties were amplified when articles provoked readers’ feelings on delicate subjects, like class antagonisms, tension between Hindus and Muslims, and Bihari resentment of Bengalis.⁷³ By casting the offending piece as ethnic parody rather than personal invective, the paper encouraged Babu Karopaddya and other readers to understand themselves as members of a broad public, but one that now assumed clearer regional and ethnic boundaries.⁷⁴

At the same time as *Al-Punch* invited its readers to identify themselves within general social categories, it routinely addressed them as individuals: the paper’s public was undoubtedly dispersed and mediated, but it was also intimate. However, this synthesis of wit and intimacy took a different form than in older satires. Whether in the courtly but barbed polemics of Sauda or the lusty ribaldry of

Nazir Akbarabadi and Ja’far Zatalli, earlier satirists critiqued both general social types and specific individuals.⁷⁵ For them, satire—often intemperate and even obscene—was a vehicle for moral censure and personal invective. However, as elite and popular culture diverged in the late nineteenth century, the earthier elements of popular culture were increasingly suppressed. Satire certainly remained alive in chaster forms as writers like Akbar Allahabadi and Ratan Nath Sarshar mocked the absurdities of colonial modernity for appreciative readerships.⁷⁶ But in their works, and in *Al-Punch*, it was not only the style of expression and the sense of colonial subjecthood that were new. Rather, the relationship between critic and victim had changed.

Earlier satirists had focused their attentions on individual, generally elite, targets and had named them explicitly. Whether they were motivated by genuine hostility or by mere playfulness, there was no attempt to conceal the object of ridicule.⁷⁷ In colonial-era satires, by contrast, when individual targets appeared at all, they tended to be political leaders. *Al-Punch* mocked educated women, lower-class upstarts, stingy newspaper readers, those who flaunted their English education, and any number of other groups, but it took pains to disclaim any personal insult on the rare occasions when a reader perceived one. The scale on which words were being distributed and consumed, as well as the diversity of participants in the public sphere, made it less likely that such slights would be understood, or that the reading public would consider them just.

Clowns and Judges

Unlike many of its contemporaries, *Al-Punch* was driven by neither a single goal nor style; indeed, it defined itself by its flexibility and heterogeneity. The figure of Maulana Al-Punch provided a focus for the imaginative work of suturing together the paper’s public and unifying its divergent impulses.

71. “Mazedar Safarnama,” *Al-Punch*, June 25, 1904; *Al-Punch*, July 16, 1904.

72. *Al-Punch*, August 27, 1904, and August 3, 1905.

73. *Al-Punch*, June 18, 1904, and May 24, 1906.

74. See Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 105.

75. See Islam and Russell, *Three Mughal Poets*, 37–68; Behl, “Poet of the Bazaars”; and Oesterheld, “Satirizing the Late Mughals.”

76. See Faruqi, “Power Politics of Culture,” and Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, 160–97.

77. For instance, Sauda had warm relations with several of his targets, who mocked him in turn. Islam and Russell, *Three Mughal Poets*, 54–56.

He was a reminder that *Al-Punch* belonged to the global Punch genre, and a token of the ease with which such forms could migrate and mutate. The most famous paper in this genre was *Punch, or, the London Charivari* (itself modeled on a Paris paper), which had been immensely popular and commercially successful since its inception in 1841. Papers from Denmark to Japan, but mostly in British colonies, soon followed. These papers varied widely in style, politics, and audience and often had little in common but the Punch name.⁷⁸ Among those in India, the most influential was the *Awadh Punch* of Lucknow, which shared several contributors with *Al-Punch* and was admired even by Shad.⁷⁹ Rather than following a fixed model or mimicking their ancestors, Punch papers were participants in a fluid genre structured by a satiric and playful style, and they were often organized around the figure of Punch himself.

The movement of genres and styles was not limited to the imperial routes followed by Punch papers. Urdu speakers also remained bound to the international culture of Persianate letters. These connections are readily visible in *Al-Punch*, in references to Persian poetry and reviews of some of the Persian papers published in India.⁸⁰ The paper also kept readers abreast of events throughout the Middle East in a regular section titled *Islami Dunya*, or “Islamic world,” a label then becoming current.⁸¹ In Iran itself, satirical newspapers played an important role in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11, as papers published both inside and outside the country articulated and organized nationalist critique, in tones of ironic naïveté and mock pomposity.⁸² The most successful of these papers was *Mulla Nasr al-Din*, a polyglot journal named after a folk character popular in many Muslim societies for his accidental wisdom. Like Punch, Mulla Nasr al-Din signed poems, answered letters, and popped up in cartoons.⁸³ Perhaps the most celebrated Persian satirist was ‘Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, who took the pen name Dakhov from a

folkloric figure, akin to Mulla Nasr al-Din, who “stars in a cycle of numbskull tales . . . as a wise fool or faux naïf.”⁸⁴ Both Dakhov and Mulla Nasr al-Din bear a striking similarity to Punch’s evocation of the sarpanch, or village headman: in each case, the effect is to simultaneously claim and reject moral authority.⁸⁵

Tracing these histories of influence helps illustrate the ongoing affinities between Urdu and Persian literatures; as Farzin Vejdani has recently shown, Indo-Iranian exchanges remained productive well into the twentieth century.⁸⁶ Persian satirical papers arose later than most of the Indian Punch papers, but they resemble each other in a number of respects, especially in their propensity for give-and-take with other publications. Many of the most prominent were published from provincial locations like Baku and Tabriz, gaining prominence by dint of wit and by forging relationships with like-minded contemporaries.⁸⁷ Likewise, both groups of papers invited their readers to join in a playful fantasy by displacing the editorial voice onto a semimythical character who melded moral authority with charm.

Maulana Al-Punch, then, belonged to an international brotherhood of satirical newspaper mascots. Like his colleagues, he helped give his paper a voice and a personality; at the same time, his image attested that, distinctive as it might be, *Al-Punch* was not laboring alone. When he began to show up in person (see fig. 2), it was a foregone conclusion that he would appear as “a big-nosed picture,” the famous *pulcinello* of the London *Punch* (see fig. 3).⁸⁸ The Maulana shares Punch’s paunch, his hooked nose, and his protruding chin, but he is also garbed in the fez and floral-patterned *achkan* of a sharif north Indian Muslim. He has been redrawn in the crosshatched, somewhat rigid style common to the *Awadh Punch* and other contemporary publications, which had adapted the traditions of manuscript illustration to the demands of lithography.

78. Harder and Mittler, *Asian Punches*; Khanduri, *Caricaturing Culture*.

79. ‘Azimabadi, *Nawa-e Watan*, 60.

80. See, for instance, *Al-Punch*, December 27, 1900, and February 28, 1903.

81. See Aydin, *Muslim World*, 65–98.

82. See Gheissari, “Despots of the World,” and Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature*, 136–53.

83. Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature*, 147.

84. Afary and Perry, “Translators’ Introduction,” 29.

85. Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature*, 147–57.

86. Vejdani, “Indo-Iranian Entanglements.”

87. Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature*, 157–61.

88. “Al-Punch,” *Al-Punch*, October 4, 1902.



Figure 2. Cover page, *Al-Punch*, October 18, 1902

Together with pictures of the Maulana and other subjects, *Al-Punch* represented itself to readers with a multitude of messages on each issue's cover. Alongside announcements of subscription and advertising rates, as well as a list of books sold by the Matba' Al-Punch (*Al-Punch* Press), these included something like a manifesto for hybridity. This exhortative "Royal Announcement" explains the relationship between wit and reform:

Have you still not looked at Maulana Al-Punch? Definitely look! . . . If you look at one article without grabbing your gut, then we're sinners. And it's not as if it's nothing but "haha heehee" and useful things are completely absent. No, it's brimming with political, social, and moral articles. We cleverly take mighty pinches of articles on national progress [*mulki taraqqi*] and ethics [*akhlaq*]. What can we say about its linguistic purity and idiomatic panache? Read it and you'll be rolling on the floor.⁸⁹



IMITATION THE SINCEREST FLATTERY.
JANUARY 7.

Mr. Punch. "WELL, OF ALL THE —"

Figure 3. R. J. Richardson, "Imitation the Sincerest Flattery," *Al-Punch*, January 16, 1901

Wit, the primary substance of *Al-Punch*, has intrinsic value—so much that the announcement equates humorlessness with sin. But laughter alone is not enough. Political, social, and moral reform, together with literary grace, are also needed. The protesting tone of the announcement betrays some doubt about the possibility of doing justice to both "haha heehee" and "useful things."

Wit and critique are old friends, but their relationship is contentious: someone will always insist that a given subject is no laughing matter, while someone else complains that a social message ruins a gag. Neither *Al-Punch's* espousal of a reform platform nor its jocular insouciance exempted it from the criticism and dissent of its readers and contributors. One author complained about the difficulties of advocating social reform to a fun-seeking audience:

My personal experience is that every time I've written anything on national reform, the same

89. "Shahi E'lan," in many issues of *Al-Punch*, including those of March 15, 1901, and October 18, 1902 (see figs. 1 and 2).

controversy occurs. That's why now I'm afraid to lift my pen. . . . I have to confront even greater difficulty in a witty [*zarif*] newspaper. If essays are too whimsical and comical, then people protest, "this is just 'haha heehee'—this isn't wit, it's just scurrilous prattle." If one strikes a more serious tone, then they protest, "we buy *Al-Punch* for diversion—if there's no fun and joking, then what's the point in buying *Punch*?"⁹⁰

Despite such dissents, *Al-Punch*'s exuberant eclecticism was central to its aesthetic and ethical projects. Like the paper's collaborative authorship, the variety of its contents evoked the multifarious nature of urban life. In each issue's eight to twelve tabloid-size pages, readers might encounter news of local weather and disease; reports from fairs; medical ads; legal updates; Reuters wires from Europe and the Middle East; travelogues; serialized fiction; notices of official tours; sarcastic and sincere commentary on politics; and poetry ranging from doggerel to the devotional. In this regard, *Al-Punch* resembled the pioneering serialized story *Fasana-e Azad* (*The Tale of Azad*). Orsini has argued that this picaresque novel, installments of which ran in the *Awadh Akhbar* under the title "Wit" (*zarafat*), expressed the social anxieties roiling north Indian society in the late nineteenth century. Its witty accounts of everyday life and recognizable character types, expressed in a protean idiom, elicited enthusiastic responses from readers eager to see their own lives reflected in print.⁹¹ Its author, Ratan Nath Sarshar, proudly said that although his narrative made readers "fall over with laughter at every step," nonetheless "this should not be empty laughter or jest, it should be woven into the texture of witticism [*zarafat*] and should teach morals."⁹² Similarly, *Al-Punch*'s mutability reflected the fundamental instabilities of colonial modernity. Wit and reform, country and city, substance and appearance all seemed inseparable at the same time as they were opposed.

It was fitting, then, that when they tried to define the paper, *Al-Punch* and its contributors regularly invoked the *bahurup*, or clown, the cha-

meleonic master of many forms. This ambivalent image appears, for example, in a *ghazal* by 'Ishrat Lakhnavi celebrating *Al-Punch*'s versatility:

It's *Al-Punch* that keeps you laughing,
Each new day it tells you the news.
.....
Sometimes it turns advisor to the
Governor-General,
Sometimes it raises a ruckus in the city.
Sometimes it's a *maulvi*, sometimes a brahmin;
It keeps turning itself into a *bahurup*.
Riding the horse-carriage of the age,
Every day it goes hither and thither.
Sometimes it becomes a judge in the court,
Sometimes it causes a stir in the street.⁹³

In 'Ishrat's view, the virtue of *Al-Punch* lies precisely in its readiness to adopt disparate roles: loyal at one moment and rebellious the next, now Muslim and now Hindu. However, this image of mutability is complex. Literally a person of many appearances, a *bahurup* (or *bahurupiya*) is a jester and a mimic, able to adopt new personas to mock and critique audiences. While 'Ishrat's tone here is admiring, the *bahurup* can also evoke dishonesty and hypocrisy.⁹⁴

The same metaphor appears in a different light in an unsigned 1902 article titled "Al-Punch," in which the paper responds to the imagined accusation that it is a *bahurupiya*. *Al-Punch* first concedes that it changes its garb readily, but argues that in volatile times, these metamorphic talents give it strength:

What they say is true: wherever *Al-Punch* sees the wind blowing, it sails against that wind. Gauging the taste of the public, it also changes its nature. And this is, and should be, the way of the world. . . . There is no Parliament here, such that any newspaper could be called liberal or conservative. . . . The *Punch* paper can't have any fixed taste. It will say everything and do everything. But through the ornamentation of its wit, it will also guide.⁹⁵

Al-Punch argues that allegiance to any particular ideology is impossible under colonialism, but that its apparent caprice is underlain by a consistent

90. "Nai Roshni ki Nai Nasl," *Al-Punch*, January 30, 1904.

91. Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, 164–69.

92. Quoted in *ibid.*, 189.

93. 'Ishrat Lakhnavi, "Akhbari Bahurup," *Al-Punch*, September 21, 1905.

94. Dehlavi, *Farhang-e Asafiyya*, svv. "bahurup," "bahurupiya."

95. "Al-Punch," *Al-Punch*, October 4, 1902.

morality that allows it to guide its readers through wit. Like the jester, it uses humor to exert moral authority; also like him, it is careful to respect the limits of loyalty, insisting that it is a “partisan of the just government.”

Proud as *Al-Punch* is of its ability to adjust to changing times, it is alarmed by the idea that it is imitative. “The charge that the *Punch* paper is a *bahurupiya*,” the article continues,

is purely based on ignorance and naiveté. The reason for *Punch*’s naming is that in England, in many families, a very special type of alcohol is used, called “punch.” This word is taken from the Persian word *panj* [five], and the punch alcohol is made by mixing several liquors. For this reason, we call a paper “Punch” when it’s an amalgam of various tastes. . . . In English, “punch” also has another meaning, of beating someone’s head. Therefore, [*Al-Punch*] also mashes the tops of its opponents’ heads.

Al-Punch goes on to acknowledge the many *Punch* papers in India and England, but it dismisses them as undistinguished and lacking in wit. Its own inspiration, it suggests, comes not from these lackluster competitors but from the word “punch” itself: a blend of Persian and English influences, it is both hybrid and pugnacious. Of course, a *bahurupiya* shares these very same qualities; hence, perhaps, the paper’s vacillating response to its imagined critics.

Location, Stagnation, and Nation

Al-Punch’s pride in its flexibility by no means meant that it lacked an editorial policy. To the contrary, it continued its original project of defending Biharis, particularly sharif Muslims, from accusations of uncultured backwardness. Two related topics that occasioned energetic comment were progress—whose meaning and desirability was an ongoing question—and competition with Bengal. *Al-Punch*’s contributors made clear that the same forces marginalized them as Biharis and as Muslims. On the one hand, they resented Bengali elites for their dominance in education, administration, and white-collar jobs; on the other, they

sought to protect their traditions and sense of self from criticisms coming from both inside and outside the Muslim community.

While some were confident in the desirability of progress on colonial terms, *Al-Punch* was not so sure. True, it bemoaned Biharis’ inadequate attendance at public meetings, and it repeatedly warned that without educational reform and the cultivation of newspapers, “Muslims will continue drowning in the dangerous river of decline.”⁹⁶ But at the same time, the paper merrily lampooned the voices clamoring for reforms that it saw as undermining social cohesion; in particular, it derided critics of purdah, or women’s seclusion.

In one satirical piece, a husband writes to his wife from Bombay, reproaching her for her inability to read English. “I consider it beneath my dignity as a gentleman to write in Urdu,” he says, “because this bankrupt language lacks the words to take a photo of true emotions and real situations, although it certainly does a good job of expressing all the old bigoted religiosity and obsolete poetry.” He goes on to contrast his wife’s backward conservatism with the boundless courtesy shown him by Mr. Irreligious, Miss Liberty, and the “several dear ladies” who took him to their house and “ensured that . . . there was no desire that went unfulfilled. But even then, I was seized by the thought of your ignorance—if some guest comes to our door, he’ll be greeted with nothing but trouble, on account of your ignorance and your seclusion in purdah.” Thanks to the attentions of “those cultured and thoroughly chaste ladies,” he concludes, “someone like me, who’s deprived of his homeland [*watan*], finds the comfort of home even in a big city like Bombay.”⁹⁷

The protagonist of this satirical piece embodies many of the threats that perturbed *Al-Punch*. With his contempt for sharif norms and for the Urdu language and its poetic traditions, he stands as a warning against mimicry and blind faith in progress. This critique, in which multiple anxieties converge around fears of emasculation, is expressed in spatial terms. Having abandoned his *watan* for the debauched and deracinated me-

96. *Al-Punch*, November 15, 1905. See also the issues of February 28, 1902, July 23, 1904, and September 20, 1906.

97. Alif ‘Ain Khair al-Umur, “Ek Gentleman ka Khat Biwi ke Nam,” *Al-Punch*, March 5, 1904. See also “Taraqqi Karo Taraqqi,” *Al-Punch*, July

12, 1901, and Abu al-Kamal Bihari, “Parda aur Us ki Zarurat,” February 22, 1906.

1 tropolis, this reformed gentleman has little need
2 for its old-fashioned morality.

3 *Al-Punch*'s ambivalence about progress, as
4 well as its faith in Bihar's superiority to more met-
5 ropolitan and apparently modern places, was most
6 of all expressed through criticism of Bengalis. Elite
7 Biharis had been arguing for several years that
8 their region's "backwardness" was a result of the
9 dominance of elite Bengalis in government and
10 education. Their opportunity came with the 1905
11 partition of the Bengal Presidency: while Benga-
12 lis, especially educated Hindus, launched a fierce
13 campaign against the partition, Bihari activists po-
14 sitioned themselves, successfully, as loyal subjects
15 who deserved their own province.⁹⁸

16 These activists worked mainly in English, but
17 their concerns were shared by many who wrote
18 in Urdu and Hindi. These included the contribu-
19 tors to *Al-Punch*, who attacked Bengali protesters
20 as selfish, religiously bigoted troublemakers.⁹⁹ In-
21 deed, they went beyond their English-speaking
22 compatriots in critiquing the entanglement of
23 spatial and social hierarchies under colonialism,
24 arguing that Bihari Muslims were threatened on
25 two fronts: as Biharis, they suffered from Bengali
26 dominance, while as Muslims they were disadvan-
27 tagged like their brethren throughout India. One
28 article, on the appointment of High Court judges,
29 asked pointedly whether Muslims would be consid-
30 ered for the job, and whether the benefits would
31 be reaped by Calcutta alone or by upcountry areas
32 like Bihar.¹⁰⁰ Another article immediately followed,
33 criticizing the government's neglect of higher edu-
34 cation in Bihar and arguing that Muslims suffered
35 disproportionately, so that only two of fifteen M.A.
36 recipients in the last half-century had been Mus-
37 lims, against four Hindus and nine Bengalis.¹⁰¹

38 *Al-Punch* did not hesitate to move beyond
39 such critiques into the realm of invective. Invoking
40 the stereotype of Bengalis as Anglicized "babus,"
41 *Al-Punch* regularly ridiculed "*babu shab*" ("babu

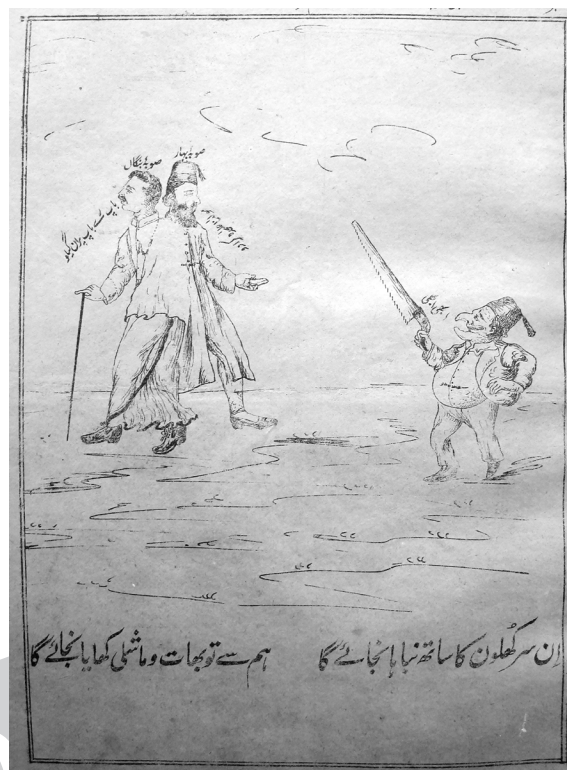


Figure 4. *Al-Punch*, February 1, 1906

Bengal Province [in Bengali]: "Oh gosh, I'm shocked!"

Bihar Province: "Maulana, separate us!"

Maulana Al-Punch: "Right now."

"We won't tolerate remaining with these bareheaded people
We won't eat fish and rice."

sahib") for his accent and his love of "*mashli*" (fish).¹⁰² The full-page cartoon pictured in figure 4 conveys the paper's anxiety and resentment, as Bihar desperately begs Maulana Al-Punch to cut him apart from his conjoined twin, Bengal. Where Bihar is represented in the dress of a sharif Muslim, Bengal is distinguished by his dhoti and by his English shoes and cane. He is also disgracefully hatless, as the caption indicates with the epithet *sarkhula*, bareheaded, a term that had become a standard shorthand for Bengalis.¹⁰³

Other Biharis shared *Al-Punch*'s resentments of Bengalis, and they couched their critiques in

98. See Sinha, *Some Eminent Behar Contemporaries*.

99. See *Al-Punch*, September 7 and 21, October 19 and 26, and November 16, 1905.

100. "Judge-e High Court," *Al-Punch*, September 20, 1906.

101. The paper often employed this threefold taxonomy; see Qazi 'Azimabadi, "Bihar aur A'la Ta'lim," *Al-Punch*, September 20, 1906. See also "Samp Chhu Gaya," *Al-Punch*, February 23, 1900, and "Bengali University," *Al-Punch*, May 31, 1906.

102. See, for example, "Babu Shab," *Al-Punch*, August 30, 1902, and *Al-Punch*, August 16, 1906. *Mashli* is a corruption of the Hindi-Urdu *machhli*. The fact that fish is called *machh* in Bengali was apparently irrelevant, as was the widespread consumption of fish in Bihar.

103. Yusuf, *Bihar Urdu Lughat*, sv. "*sarkhule*."

similar terms. For instance, the Patna Hindi newspaper *Bihar Bandhu* attacked a Hindi paper published from Calcutta, the *Bharat Mitra*, on olfactory as well as linguistic grounds. The *Bandhu's* criticism of its competitor rests on the *Mitra's* disregard for the proper pronunciation and use of the Persian and Arabic words associated with Urdu:

The boy who, reading your newspaper, gets in the habit of saying “*karja*” and “*hajir*”—won’t he be considered a bumpkin by his own society? You live in Calcutta, so you’re surrounded by north Indians wallowing in the stink of Bengali. . . . Whether you say “*rupaye ki kish*” or “*farzi ki qist*,” nobody there will question you, but if you come here and a mistake like that slips out of your mouth, people will mock you immediately.¹⁰⁴

The *Bandhu* goes on to lambaste the *Mitra* for its refusal to use diacritic dots to indicate Perso-Arabic sounds in the Nagari script, and explains that “it is now being investigated in Bihar whether the local vernacular is Urdu or Hindi; in this context, the partisans of Urdu can point to the *Bharat Mitra* to prove the rusticity of the Hindi language.”¹⁰⁵

As the *Nawa-e Watan* controversy showed, linguistic activists were often exercised by questions of orthography and the didactic obligations of participants in the public sphere. Here, the *Bihar Bandhu* points out that Urdu’s champions regularly criticized Hindi as coarse and rustic. Even though it defined itself by its opposition to Urdu, the *Bandhu* diverges from most Hindi activists in warning against deviations not from Sanskritic purity but from Urdu refinement. More than simply inverting Bihar’s apparent subordination to Calcutta, the paper asserts that Hindi must preserve its ability to represent the Persianate inheritance of north India despite the oafish, “rustic” (*ganwari*) influence of Bengali. The perversity of the *Bandhu's* argument is provocative: plenty of people who had never left Bihar were already saying *karja* and *hajir* instead of *qarz* and *hazir*. To blame such pronunciations on Bengali and Bengalis is to paint Patna and Bihar as the true home of Persianate culture.

Al-Punch would have had no quarrel with the *Bihar Bandhu's* argument. Despite their other differences, the papers agreed that Biharis’ mastery over Urdu was an incontrovertible fact that proved their refinement and demonstrated the injustice of their subordination. One point of difference, however, was in *Al-Punch's* argument that Bihari Muslims were particularly mistreated, in ways that tied them to Muslims elsewhere in India.

Conclusion

By the early twentieth century, *Al-Punch* had moved away from the fixation with Shad ‘Azimabadi that had occasioned its founding. Many of the former insurgents who had once assailed Shad now celebrated him as a local literary icon, while he reciprocated by subscribing to *Al-Punch* and even writing an elegy for the founding editor, Sayyid Rahim al-Din.¹⁰⁶ Personal hatreds had undoubtedly dimmed over time, but this detente also reflected the growing self-confidence of the ordinary intellectuals who read and wrote for *Al-Punch*. Delhi and Lucknow now seemed more like literary and linguistic peers of Patna than like its superiors. Instead, Bengalis seemed to pose a more pressing threat. Having long been on the margins of the Gangetic heartland, elite Biharis had a mounting sense that their peripheral position within the Bengal Presidency was limiting their aspirations in political and other spheres. In the eyes of *Al-Punch's* contributors, such concerns were best handled with a beguiling dash of wit and with the camaraderie that it enabled.

Many formerly thriving cities like Patna, not to mention *qasbas* like Desna, were now provincial by most measures. Thanks in large part to the rise of Calcutta as an industrial and political center, trade had declined, populations had shrunk, and many observers saw all of Bihar as a stagnant backwater. Nonetheless, as *Al-Punch* demonstrates, provincial publics retained their capacity for vigor and creativity by relentlessly pursuing collaboration and exchange, within intimate communities as well as among dispersed and anonymous participants. Similarly, though usually understood

104. “‘Hath ke Asakt Muchh Terhi,’” *Bihar Bandhu*, October 15, 1901. Most of the words in question are related to finances.

105. Ibid.

106. “Jhanajhan ka Shukriya,” *Al-Punch*, May 3, 1902; Shad ‘Azimabadi, “Qita’at-e Tarikh-e

Intiqal-e Purmalal-e Maulvi Sayyid Rahim al-Din Mahjur Mudir *Al-Punch*,” *Al-Punch*, August 2, 1902.

as driven to anger or melancholy by the assaults of Hindi's partisans, Urdu-speaking intellectuals often responded by drawing on cosmopolitan traditions of humor and play. *Al-Punch*'s public had allegiances to Patna and to Bihar but looked equally toward Lahore, Tabriz, and London. And crucially for its readers, the paper didn't just speak to its public, but listened as well. ■■■■

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