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The Secret of Letters: Chronograms in Urdu Literary Culture[1]

Mehr Afshan Farooqi

University of Virginia

Letters of the alphabet are more than symbols on a page. They provide an opening into new creative possibilities, new levels of understanding, and new worlds of experience. In mature literary traditions, the "literal meaning" of literal meaning can encompass a variety of arcane uses of letters, both in their mode as a graphemic entity and as a phonemic activity. Letters carry hidden meanings in literary languages at once assigned and intrinsic: the numeric and prophetic, the cryptic and esoteric, and the historic and commemoratory.

In most literary traditions there appears to be at least a threefold value system assigned to letters: letters can be seen as phonetic signs, they have a semantic value, and they also have a numerical value. Each of the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet can be used as a numeral. When used numerically, the letters of the alphabet have a special order, which is called the *abjad* or *abujad*. *Abjad* is an acronym referring to *alif*, *be*, *jīm*, *dāl*, the first four letters in the numerical order which, in the system most widely used, runs from *alif* to *ghain*. The *abjad* order organizes the 28 characters of the Arabic alphabet into eight groups in a linear series: *abjad*, *havvaz*, *ḥuṭṭī*, *kalaman*, *sa`faṣ*, *qarashat*, *ṡakhkhaż*, *ẓaẓẓagh*.[2]

In nearly every area where the Arabic script was adopted, the *abjad* system gained popularity. Within the vast area in which the Arabic script was used, two *abjad* systems developed. Syed Aḥmad Dehlavī (*Farhang-e Asafiya* 85) suggests that the *abjad* system was formalized during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph, Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–809 CE), and developed into distinct "eastern" and "western" varieties. The "western" variety is confined to Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. Urdu and Persian, the languages of my interest, followed the eastern *abjad* system. Charts giving the numerical value of the letters in the abjad system are easily available.[3] They are often provided in Arabic, Persian and Urdu grammars. Children memorize the mnemonic words and learn both the alphabet and the numeration at the same time. In Persian and Urdu, *abjad ḳhvān* means "a person learning the alphabet."

This abecedarian order of the *abjad* letters does not correspond to the phonetic or graphical order of the Arabic alphabet. The first 22 letters of the old Arabic alphabet, before it was re-constituted, followed the order of the Aramaic alphabet. Some scholars argue that the Arabs were unaware of other Semitic languages that followed the abecedarian order and assigned numeric values to letters (Ifrah 241–245). However, it is certain that they were not

satisfied with the explanation that the *abjad* simply follows the abecedarian order of the Semitic and related alphabets. Even more crucial perhaps was their desire to find an explanation of how the clusters originated and the meaning, if any, of each of the eight clusters (*abjad*, *havvaz*, *ḥuttī*, etc). Diverse explanations of the clusters' meanings have been handed down in the Arab tradition (Gibb *et al.* 7). According to one tradition, the first six groups are names of demons; according to another, they are names of the days of the week. Some grammarians, not satisfied with the traditional explanations, perceived the words to be of foreign origin and decided that they were probably borrowed from the Phoenicians. The pronunciation of the mnemonic clusters differs in the Arabic, Persian, Indian and other traditions, such as the North African Hausa.[4]

In Urdu and Persian, new sets of interpretive meanings are allocated. Syed Ahmed Dehlavi, the author of *Farhang-e Asafiya*, an important dictionary of Urdu published between 1898 and 1918, in his longish entry on *abjad* assigns remarkable glosses to the mnemonic words. Quoting *Risāla-e Ẓavābiṭ-e ʿAẓīm* for a set of meanings, he says that: *abjad* denotes "to begin," *havvaz* "to find," *ḥuttī* "to know," *kalaman* "to talk," *saʿfaṣ* "to learn" *qarashat* "to organize" *ṡakhkhaż* " to preserve" *and ẓaẓẓagh* "to conclude." He quotes an old Persian dictionary called *Madār al-Afāżil*[5] for another set of meanings: (1) My ancestor, Adam committed a sin; (2) He obeyed his base instinct; (3) He repented for having sinned; (4) His repentance was accepted; (5) He faced hardships; (6) He was blessed; (7) God gave him power; (8) The devil lost. It is most interesting, particularly from a cosmologic and hermeneutic point of view that a connection is made between the *abjad* and the biography of Adam (Dehlavi 84–86). In the Islamic tradition, it is believed that the first nine letters of the Arabic alphabet in the Semitic sequence were revealed to Adam. This tradition reinforces the cosmologic connections with the *abjad* (Schimmel 30).

It is certain that the Arabs did not invent the system of assigning numerical values to letters of the alphabet. The ancient Greeks, not having a fully developed system of writing numerals, used the letters of their alphabet for numerals, as did the Romans. Like many other ancient alphabets, Hebrew characters are also used for numerals. They are arranged in a decimal system based on the order of the letters of the alphabet. As I struggled with the problem of the literal versus the numerical alphabetical order in Arabic, I studied the order of the Hebrew alphabet. I was surprised[6] to discover that the *abjad* order was simply the Hebrew order or the Aramaic order (if one prefers that term) with the extra six characters of the Arabic alphabet, i.e. *ṡakhkhaż* and *ẓaẓẓagh* tagged at the end.[7] During the seventh century Arabic writing assumed its final shape. The number of characters was fixed at 28 and the order of the characters was changed. Letters that had become similar graphemically were grouped together in sequence and were differentiated by dots. The diacritic vowels were also introduced. It was around the time that *niqqud* or "dots" were added to the Hebrew alphabet. The Western world gave up using letters of the alphabet as numerals, except for occasions culturally marked as peripheral. The Arabs continued to do so for many purposes, such as astrology, numerology, divination, charm writing, as well as astronomy, in which Arabic letters denoted specific constellations.

The use of letters for their numerical value as a literary device, i.e. the chronogram, to commemorate dates and events is a later development. G. S. Colin says, "[chronograms] consist of grouping into one meaningful and characteristic word or short phrase letters whose numerical values when totaled give the year of a past or future event" (Ifrah 250). It is called *ramz* in Arabic and Turkish, and *tārīkh* in Persian and Urdu. The term *tārīkh* can be used to refer to the actual chronogrammatic phrase or "substance", or to the entire verse of poem in which the date is embedded. The method of calculating the value is called *ḥisāb*

al-jumal. Texts embodying the date were composed with care and artifice. The chronogram was used in inscriptions, especially in mosques and important buildings. The dates were embedded in verse, marking important occasions like births, deaths and weddings of patrons, family and friends. They were an important part of the literary cultures of the Turkic, Persian and Urdu languages during the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. However, the tradition of composing chronograms seems to remain popular to the present day only in Urdu. This is a cultural phenomenon that would bear further investigation. I will have occasion to say more about this later.

The basic mechanics of composing chronograms takes characteristic forms in Urdu with their own particular difficulties. The Arabic alphabet has 28 letters, *hamza* not being counted as a separate letter. Persian has 32, and Urdu 37, with the *hamza* being counted as a separate letter. Our first concern is to explain how Urdu assigns values to the extra eight letters, and what is the value of *hamza*.

Eight characters specific to Urdu and/or Persian are assigned values equivalent to the closest similar or homographic Arabic character. Thus *pe* equals *be, te* equals *se, ce* equals *jīm, dāl* equals *ḍāl, rʰe* equals *re, że* equals *ze, gāf* equals *kāf*.[8]

According to the Urdu system, the *hamza* is an Arabic letter, but it is not included in the *abjad* formula. In Arabic, the identity of the hamza is peculiar: the letter alif is the "bearer" of the hamza and it represents a glottal stop. The hamza, therefore, cannot be assigned a value of a similar homograph in Urdu or Persian. If it has to be assigned a value it would be a *homophonic* one. In Urdu, unlike Arabic, the *hamza* is usually used in place of *alif*, i.e. when two vowels come together. Thus it is used over *vā'o* (Arabic *wāw*) or *ye*, as in *ā'o*, or in *ā'ī*. Some say it should be given the value of *vā'o* when used over *vā'o*, which is six, or the value of *ye* when used over *ye*, which is 10. Some scholars argue more plausibly that it should not be given any value in Urdu at all, for it has no value in the original *abjad* system.

There are other concerns that have been given careful thought by chronogram theorists and practitioners in Urdu. I cannot go into all of them here, and will focus on only the more important ones. For example: in doubling consonants, the diacritic *tashdīd* is used. The letter is written once but pronounced twice. Should the doubled consonant be counted as one or two letters? Should the *alif* with *madd*, that is the lengthened *alif*, be counted as one or more? Should the *te marbūṭah*, which is actually *he* of *havvaz* in Arabic be counted as a *he* or *te*? The crux of these concerns lies in the question whether the orthography or the pronunciation should be the crucial factor in assigning numerical value. This has led to many different solutions. As an illustration, the value of the doubled letter is either doubled or not, depending on the user's interpretation of the spelling convention which relies upon *tashdīd* or doubling via a diacritic. The word *Allāh* employs a *tashdīd* above the *lām*. The calligraphic rendition of the word has complicated its numerical value. Orthographically the word is written with two *lāms* but the calligraphic tradition of employing the *tashdīd* with the dagger *alif* in the center, thus replicating the word graphically in a miniature form, produces the possibility of reading it with one only one *lām*. Depending on our interpretation, two values are possible: either "36" or "66." There are instances in Persian where the value of *Allāh* is taken to be 36. Arabic seems to favor assigning the value of 66 for *Allāh*. In calculating the numerical value of Muḥammad, which is 92, the value of the letter *mīm* is counted as double. And the numerical value of *rāżī Allāh* is also calculated by assigning the value 66 to the word *Allāh* (Syed Aḥmad 36). In the Indo-Muslim tradition, it is always counted as "66," as this value is required to produce the total of "786," the *abjad* value of the well-known and extremely popular Qur'anic phrase, *bismillāh ar-raḥmān*

ar-raḥīm. Certainly, 786 is the most popular of all *abjad* values used in the Islamic milieu. Even those who are not aware of the *abjad* consider 786 to be an auspicious number.

Relationships between numbers and things are integral to the Indo-Muslim sensibility and cultural consciousness. There is an amusing article in the *Urdu Digest*, April 1997, on the *abjad* value of *bismillāh*. "The practice of writing '786' instead of *bismillāh* [. . .] must be discouraged," says the author of the article, Yaas Mansuri. One of the reasons he puts forward is that the numerical value of 786 is the same as that of the mantra, *Hare Krishna*!

Another example of such dynamics is the frequent use of the poppy/tulip flower in Islamic decorative art. The poppy/tulip or *lāla*[9] has the same numerical value as *Allāh* and *hilāl* or the crescent, namely, 66. In certain prayers, each name of God is repeated according to the numerical value of its letters: *Allāh*, 66 times, *quddūs* 199 times and so on (Schimmel 261).

Given below are examples of some well-known chronograms:

1. On the Mughal Emperor Humayun's death: *Humayūn pādishāh az bām uftād* = 962 hijrī [Humayūn = 112; pādishāh = 313; az = 08; bām = 43; uftād = 486, total, 962].
(King Humayūn fell from the terrace.)
2. On the Afghan ruler Sher Shāh's death: *Ze ātash murd* = 952 hijrī [ze = 07; ātash = 701; murd = 244, total, 952].
(He died by fire.)
3. On the Mughal Emperor Jahāngīr's death: *Jahāngīr az jahān raft* = 1036 hijrī [Jahāngīr = 289; az = 8; jahān = 59; raft = 680, total = 1036]
(Jahāngīr [i.e. World-taker] left the world.)
4. On Prime Minister Indīrā Gāndhī's birth: *fakhr-e dō jahānī* = 959 times two = 1918 C E [fakhr = 880; do = 10; jahānī = 69, total = 959]
(The pride of the two worlds.)

Numbers 1 and 2 are notable because the chronogram phrase yields not just the date but also tells us how the death took place. The Mughal Emperor Humayun fell from the terrace of his library and died from the injuries he sustained in the fall. His contemporary and rival the Afghan ruler Sher Shah died from burns sustained during the siege of the fort at Kalinjar in modern Uttar Pradesh. The third chronogram plays upon the meaning of the word *jahāngīr*, "Taker or conqueror of the world," which was the title of the Mughal Emperor, whose real name was Salīm. In the fourth chronogram, the use of the word *dō* or "two" provides the hint to multiply by two the value of the phrase (959) to arrive at the desired date. The significance of the phrase "pride of the two worlds" enhances the beauty of the chronogram.

There is no doubt that a chronogramist, in order to be good, needs to have a knack for or special affinity both with words and with numerical computation. Doubtless, practice was also a part of the process toward perfection, but in the case of a good chronogramist like Ḥāmid Ḥasan Qādirī[10], almost any group of words was sufficient to yield the desired date.

For poets with the innate ability (or who were highly skilled) to compute the values of words and phrases it was natural to refine the *abjad*. These poets were, in fact, always ready to attempt more complicated codes and indulge in rhetorical flourishes in composing *tārīkhs*. In reaching for these variations, two broad approaches were used. In the first approach, the value of a *tārīkh* text was arrived at by adding up the value of letters used in spelling the words. In the second approach, the desired date was arrived at through using the simple *abjad* system, but adding to or subtracting from, even multiplying the values to achieve the desired result. Complex chronograms were, and in fact are even now, regarded

as eloquent testimony to the author's mathematical agility and an attestation of his creativity and natural, almost intuitive ability in a difficult genre.

The most well-known variation of the *abjad* is *bayyanāt*. In this system, each letter is first written as pronounced and then the values of the letters used for writing it are calculated, *excluding* the first letter. The letters are vocalized as in Persian, not Urdu. Thus *alif* written with an *alif, lām* and a *fe*, has a value of *lām* plus *fe*, that is 30 + 80 = 110; instead of 1, which is its value in the standard *abjad* system. Similarly, *be*, pronounced as *bā'* equals 1, and the same is the case with *te*, which in Arabic is pronounced *tā'*. Once the values under the system of *bayyanāt* are tabulated, it is simply a matter of practice to write chronograms using *bayyanāt* instead of *abjad*. However, in *bayyanāt*, the values are considerably lower because the first letter is discounted. Interesting and difficult chronograms can be constructed by alternating *abjad* and *bayyanāt*.

A quatrain or *rubā'ī* by Fā'izī, in praise of Akbar, the Mughal emperor, plays on the denomination of the word "akbar" which is "223" in *abjad*, with the denomination of "āftāb" in *bayyanāt* which also adds up to "223". He uses the two systems of enumeration to equate the emperor Akbar with the sun (Aḥmed 166).

Akbar ke ze āftāb nisbat dārad   īn nukṭa ze bayyanāt-e-asmā paydāst.[11]

(Akbar is surely connected to the sun; this point is illustrated through the *bayyanāt* of the names.)

In the system *Jumal-e Kabīr* or *Zabar* or *Zubūr*, each letter is written as pronounced and construed as if its name were spelled out. Thus, the value of *alif* in this system is 111 (*alif* = 1, + *lām* = 30, + *fe* = 80) and that of *bā'* is 3 (*be* = 2, + *alif* = 1) and so on.

Other refinements on the *abjad* system, such as the rhetorical device of *ta'miya* and *takhrīja*, are used to compose chronograms that are more rhetorical than cryptic. In using *ta`miya* for constructing a chronogram the straightforward *abjad* enumeration is used for calculation. If the chronogram phrase or line does not yield the required date, the author asks the reader within the space of the hemistich, to add or subtract from the value of the phrase or line a certain number represented by a letter or word so as to arrive at the actual date. When the number is achieved by adding, it is called *ta`miya* and when it is achieved by subtracting, it is called *takhrīja*. For example, here is a famous *takhrīja* chronogram composed by the Urdu poet Momin (Hakim Momin Khan 1800–1852) to commemorate the birth of his daughter:

Nāl katnē ke sāt^h hātif nē   kahi tārīkh dukhtar-e Mōmin[12]

(As soon as the umbilical cord was cut, the announcing angel's voice composed the chronogram "dukhtar-e Mōmin" i.e. Mōmin's daughter). Here the value of *nāl* (= 81) is subtracted from *dukhtar-e Mōmin* (= 1340) to arrive at the date: 1340–81 = 1259 *hijrī*.

Mōmin was a man of considerable erudition. He was trained to be a physician or *ḥakīm*, and loved using the specialized vocabulary he had acquired from his study of medicine, mathematics, music, astronomy, astrology, and even chess, and thus added new and piquant flavors to his already colorful poetry. He was a master practitioner of chronograms, enigmas, conundrums, many of which turn on quite abstruse wordplay. He suffered a serious fall from the top floor of his house when the roof was being repaired. He died of injuries sustained in the fall some days later, but not before he had demonstrated his virtuosity and skills in both astrology and chronogram-composition by predicting the date

of his demise in a most appropriate chronogram: *Dast-o-bāzū bishikast*, that is, "The arm and forearm were fractured". (*Ḥayāt-e Mōmin* 13–16).

Usually a *ta`miya* or *takhrīja* of a single unit, that is, from 1 to 9, is the only permissible deduction. In Momin's verse about his daughter's birth, "81" has been deducted, yet the meaningfulness and aptness of the verse justifies the bending of the rule. In fact, many chronogram composers did not observe the rule of 1 to 9 with any degree of rigidity. This brings us to the more interesting question of the literary merit of the chronogram: the meaningfulness of the verse with the embedded chronogram as against the technical perfection in composing the chronogram.

One of the traditions of composing chronograms drew upon a famous verse or phrase to "forge" a chronogram through extrapolation. There are several examples to illustrate how some of the most interesting chronograms were actually "borrowing" from a famous poet's lines and were used by the poet to create his chronogram. When two modern Urdu poets, Jigar Mōrādābādī (1890–1960/61) and Dil Lakhnavī, died in the same year some chronogramist modified and used a famous *she`r* from Asadullāh Khān Ghālib (1797–1869) to compose a chronogram yielding the date of the two deaths:

Ḥairāñ hūñ dil kō rō'ūñ kē pītūñ jigar kō maiñ
Maqdūr hō tō sāth rakʰūñ nauḥagar kō maiñ
(I do not know what I should do, lament for my heart or weep for my liver; I wish I could afford a professional mourner.)

This was modified to read:

Ay yār dil kō rō'ūñ ke pītūn jigar kō maiñ

The line now yields 1380 *hijrī*. The poet went on to add:

Ghālib kē lab sē `īsvī tārīkh bʰī huī
Maqdur hō tō sātʰ rakʰūñ nauhagar kō maiñ
(Ghālib's own words give us the *tārīkh* in the Christian era:
I wish I could afford a professional mourner.)

Here the second line, which is the entire second line of the Ghalib verse noted above, is shown to give the desired date in CE (1929 + 32 = 1961) by adding the value of "*lab*" (32) in the first line to the value of the original line. The piquancy of the chronogram lies in the fact that *dil* and *jigar*, used by Ghālib in the literal sense, are also the pen-names of the two poets and the chronogram uses them as such. Then Ghālib is written with *ghain*, *alif*, *lām* and *be*. The last two standing alone can be read as *lab* = lips. Thus, the "lips of Ghālib" is delightful because *lab* means lips and its value is added to the main text, which is Ghālib's, and thus the chronogram can literally be claimed to have issued from "Ghālib's own lips".

There is a fine chronogram composed by Alṭaf Ḥusain Hālī (1837–1914) on Ghālib's death. It uses *takhrīja*, and employs another famous line from Ghālib for constructing the chronogram:

Tārīkh ham nikāl cukē parʰ baghair-e fikr
Ḥaq maghfirat karē 'ajab āzād mard tʰā[13]

This gives 2796–1511 = 1285 *hijrī* in the following way:

(I have composed the *tārīkh*, read without anxiety [*fikr*], "may God pardon his sins, what a wonderful, free thinking man he was.")

As Hālī himself explains, one of the beauties of his chronogram is in the phrase "*tārīkh nikalnā*." Idiomatically it means "to find/compose the *tārīkh*," but literally it means, "to expel the *tārīkh*," and it is the latter sense that applies here. "I have expelled [the word] *tārīkh*, read without anxiety [*fikr*]" now means: take away the value of "*tārīkh*" and "*fikr*." The value of these two words adds up to 1511, which is to be taken out from the value of the entire Ghālib line (2796) to yield the desired date (2796–1511 = 1285 *hijrī*.).

An even better example of reduction (*takhrīja*) is the chronogram composed by Imām Bakhsh Nāsikh (1772–1838) on the death of King Ghāzīuddīn Haidar of Lucknow. He uses a well-known hemistich of the famous Persian poet Ibn Yamīn (1286/87–1367/68) to find the date. The second line here is from Ibn Yamīn:

Guft tārīkh-e miṣrā'-e ustād
Ayy basā ārzū ke khāk shudah = 1243 *hijrī*

(I have composed a chronogram using a hemistich of the master; "Alas, many desires were reduced to dust.")

Here are a few more interesting and complex chronograms from Persian:

1. Commemorating the death of the prophet Muḥammad:
   Az Muḥammad zamāna khālī mānd

The literal meaning of the *misrā'* is, "The world was deprived of Muḥammad." The date is arrived at by subtracting the value of the word "*zamāna*" from the numerical value of the word "Muḥammad": 103–92 = 11 *hijrī*.

2. Commemorating the death of Ḥusain, grandson of the prophet, martyr of the battle of Karbalā':
   Sar-e dīn sāl az vilādat-e ū
   Ḥarf-e bāqī bedān shahādat-e ū
   (*Dīn*'s head, the year of his birth.
   The letters that remain know them to be the year of his martyrdom.)

The head or the first letter of the word *dīn*, that is *dāl*, has the numerical value of 4; it denotes the date of Ḥusayn's birth according to the *hijrī* calendar, and the remainder of the word *dīn*, i.e. *ye* plus *nūn* (= 60), give the date of his death according to the same calendar. The beauty of the chronogram turns on the word *dīn*, which in Arabic/Persian means many things including "the path, the judgment" and is therefore used to denote the religion of Islam. So Ḥusain's death signifies the head of *dīn*" [that is, the letter *dāl*] being cut off, and his birth was the head of *dīn* itself.

Here is another about Ḥusain:

Sar judā shud az Ḥusain-o-gasht tārīkh āshkār
ham zeḥarf-e bī-nuqaṯ, ham az ḥarf-e nuqṭa-dār
(Husain's head was parted from his body and the date became apparent. In both the "*bī-nuqaṯ*" [dotless], and the "*nuqṭa-dār*" [dotted] modes.)

This how one arrives at the date in this case: take away the head (the first letter) from "Ḥusain." The first letter is now *sīn*, which is dotless. Its numerical value is 60, which is the

date of Ḥusain's death in the *Hijrī* calendar. Now when you write "sīn" as a word, you write, "*sīn, ye, nūn*": *ye* and *nūn* are both dotted; their numerical value is 10 and 50 respectively which totals again to 60, giving the date of Ḥusain's death.

   A similar and even more interesting example of a chronogram using just one letter to express a whole date is from Imām Bakhsh Nāsikh, who composed the following verse on the fall from favor of Ḥakīm Mahdī then prime minister of Awadh:

Az ḥā'-e ḥakīm hasht bar gīr
Se martaba nisf nisf kam kun[14]
(From the *ḥē* of *ḥakīm*, take eight and reduce it by half three times.)

The letter *ḥē* has the value of eight, as we know. In order to arrive at the desired date the chronogram requires us to reduce eight by half, again reduce the remainder by half, and yet again reduce the remainder by half. Thus eight–four–two–one which is the desired date, namely 1248 *hijrī*.

   This discussion of especially artful and meaningful chronograms brings me to a consideration of a *ghazal* by Ghulām Ḥasnayn Qadr Bilgrāmī (1833–1884), a pupil of Ghālib's who wrote an extraordinary *ghazal* commemorating Ghālib's death (1869). Each *she'r* of the *ghazal* yields the date twice, the first line giving it in the Common Era, and the second giving the date again in the *Hijrī*. Moreover, the *ghazal* is not just a clever exercise in numbers; it is also an eloquent obituary on the master poet (Bilgrāmī 338–339).[15]

Murād-e ḥashr kyā dehlī kā khaṭ tʰā = 1869
Falak ṭūtā yē mujʰ par āh nāgāh = 1285
Mērē ustād-e ʿālījāh ghālib = 1869
Duvam ziq'dah kō ab mar gayē āh = 1285
(The letter from Delhi was like an announcement of Doomsday.
Unexpectedly did the heavens fall on me.
My teacher, the venerated Ustād Ghālib passed away
On the second of the month of Ziq'dah, alas.)

   To come back to the question of why the tradition of composing chronograms continues to flourish in Urdu, let us begin by examining some of the important books on the subject that have been published in the past 50 years in Urdu. The July 1963 issue of the quarterly journal *Nigar*, edited by Akbar ʿAlī Khān (1939–1997) from Rāmpūr was in fact an anthology of Urdu chronograms. In an essay in this number, Akbar ʿAlī Khān discusses a manuscript in the Raza Library at Rampur, India, entitled *Tārīkh-e Laṭīf*, which is a collection of chronograms composed on the death of important Urdu poets. Khan describes it as an invaluable resource for appreciating the *ustād-shāgird* (master–pupil) relationship in the art of poetry, for the relationship must also have meant that the pupils of a poet must have felt it emotionally and culturally valuable to record the death of his master in a chronogram. There are other useful essays in the volume; there is also a lengthy excerpt of the above-mentioned *Tārīkh-e Laṭīf*.

   From 1985 to 2002, there appeared several books on the art of composing chronograms. I will briefly allude to three useful publications. *Lughāt-e Abjad Shumārī 1992* (Words for Counting Abjad 1992), compiled by Syed Ahmad of Toronto, published by the National Council for Promotion of Urdu, Government of India, New Delhi, 1994. In his introduction, Ahmad mentions that the title of the book *Lughat-e Abjad Shumār* was

composed to yield 1981, because the book was projected for publication in 1981. However, it was ultimately published in 1992, requiring Ahmad to modify the title somewhat, the new title being *Lughāt-e Abjad Shumarī 1992*. The book lists 27 000 words in alphabetical order, their definitions and their numerical value. While the usefulness of such a compendium for an aspiring chronogramist cannot be over-emphasized, it must also be noted that Ahmad's idea is not entirely new. In 1934, Āfāq Benārsī published *Moinush Shu`arā'*, a dictionary of the genders of Urdu words. He took care to record the numerical value of each of the 10 000-odd words that he entered in this book. Ahmad has also provided the rules of his calculation. He has made it clear in his calculation, *hamza* has no value, and *tashdīd*, a doubled consonant, is to be counted as one. In a long introduction, Ahmad goes over the ideas and opinions current in modern-day Urdu chronogram writing and then chooses among many positions the one he considers most suitable. He describes how the work was made easier by using a computer program designed especially for this project. It is clear that Aḥmad believes deeply in the abiding aesthetic power and attraction of the *abjad* system.

Another volume worth mentioning here is *Mu'āvin-e tavārīkh* (*An aid to composing chronograms*), by Muḥammad Zubayr Fārūqī Ilāhābādī, published from Karachi in 1985. This book addresses the mechanics of creating a chronogram in Urdu more directly: one could call it a kind of "grammar" of *abjad*.

There is yet another useful volume entitled *Janāb Mawlānā Ḥamīd Ḥasan Qādirī and "The art of the chronogram" 1988 AD* by Khālid Ḥasan Qādirī, published in Karachi, 1988. The phrase in quotes adds up to the value 1988. It is full of interesting poems or verses containing chronograms on a vast variety of subjects ranging from minor everyday events to major historical and personal events. The author of the chronograms was the famous Urdu critic and scholar and occasional poet Ḥamīd Ḥasan Qādirī (1887–1964). Ḥamīd Ḥasan Qādirī's son Khālid Ḥasan Qādirī, of SOAS in London, is the author/editor of the book and is himself a chronogramist of some distinction.

Yet another recently published essay on chronogram writing can be found in *Aywan-e Urdu* (Delhi, September, 2002), entitled *Tārīkhgōī kē Karishme* (*The charisma of writing chronograms*) by Mukhtār Tōnkī. The essay contains a collection of recently made chronograms, once again indicating that there is an abiding interest in this subject. One could, in fact, compile a longish list of books and papers that have been published in Urdu on the art of chronogram-making over the last four decades. If demand generates supply, it follows that such a large number of books and papers were not being produced in a vacuum: they are supplying a felt need.

In a society where there is a strong oral culture, chronograms provide an easy linkage in the memory of the people between an event and its date. In the past, when there was no formal system of recording dates of birth and deaths, even in books such as *tażkiras*, the chronograms provided and still provide a major source of information. In modern times, they are regarded more as an act of homage and love. Every time a well- known writer or writer friend passes away, Urdu magazines and newspapers in the subcontinent publish chronograms in verse commemorating the event. While the quality of all the contributions may not be first-rate or the manner so telling as to become immediately fixed in the memory, there are many clever chronograms occasioned by these deaths.

The continued interest in chronograms could, I believe, be partially explained by the fact that the Indian mind has had a fascination with numbers since the beginning of literate civilization in India. In fact the identity of number and object, that is, the number and the object it represents has been a common notion in Indo-Muslim culture. When Prince

Khurram ascended the throne in 1627, he assumed the title *Shāh-e-Jahān* (Ruler of the world). Kishan Chand Ikhlās in his *tażkira* with the title *Hamēshā Bahār*, narrates an amusing incident that is also illustrative of the importance of numbers regarding the title Shāh-e Jahān. Ikhlās reports that the Sultan of Turkey wrote to Shāh-e Jahān pointing out that since he was only the ruler of Hind (India) it was inappropriate for him to adopt such a title. The Sultan suggested that 'Abdullāh (Allāh's slave) or Abdur Raḥmān (Raḥmān's slave) would be a more appropriate title for the Mughal ruler. The poet laureate of Shāh-e Jahān, Kalīm Hāmādānī came up with a brilliant rejoinder to the Sultan of Turkey's objection. Kalim explained that the numerical value of Hind and Jahān (that is 59) is the same. He framed this reply in a verse that was dispatched to the Sultan who, it appears, was silenced by the logic of the argument.

Fascination with numbers in the Urdu culture is also evident in the fact that there are discussions about the ideal of the optimum number of *she`rs* (couplets) in a *ghazal*. While in theory the *ghazal* may contain anything from three to an infinite number of *she`rs*, the *ustāds* have argued in favor of seven, nine or 11 *she'rs* as the optimum number. The *ghazals* of some classical writers such as Mīr Asar (1735/36–1794) are particularly singled out for praise because he does not write more than five *she`rs* to a *ghazal* and is still able to create a sense of closure. Similarly, there are other questions relating to numbers that have engaged the attention of theorists: for example, what is the desired number of words that should be strung together in one *eżāfat*? Is it desirable to repeat a particular letter within the space of one or more than one words and, if so, how many times. Scholars of the art of rhetoric love to count the number of objects mentioned in one line of a poem, and so on. We thus see that the Urdu speakers' continuing interest in *tārīkh-gōī* is of the same order as that of the general Indian in and for numbers and it is a fortunate conjunction that the *tārīkh* of the chronogram embodies literary quality, historic value and an interest in numbers which may be described as innate among Indians.

There is an abiding demand or 'consumer public' for chronograms. The continued use and composition of *tārīkh*s in Urdu indicates that the tradition is alive and well in its literary culture. The chronogram functions as a useful adjunct to the religio-cultural belief system, common among all of the major religious groups in South Asia. It is the notion that "number" in relationship with "event" plays an important role in the life of every individual. The events comprising an individual's life or existence may be trivial and repetitive, such as the purchase of a pen, or momentous and unique, such as a wedding, the birth of a child, or the death of a relative. In either case, they are thought to play a role in determining life's trajectory. Chronograms provide a sense of stability within chaos, a sense that "history" is partly within our reach and control. From the purely aesthetic point of view, the *tārīkh* provides a link to the past and reaffirms the creative impulse within Urdu literary culture.

Notes

1. A preliminary draft of this paper was presented at the New York Conference on Asian Studies in October, 2001, held at Cornell University. I am grateful to Professor Christopher Minkowski for the inspiration to think of the role numbers play in literature.
2. According to Urdu pronunciation and transliteration.
3. For example, the Library of Congress transliteration tables for Arabic and Persian are available at: <www.lib.umich.edu/area/Near.East/lcromanization.pdf> and <www.lib.umich.edu/area/Near.East/persian-rom.pdf>. I have also provided a comprehensive chart (see Appendix) that includes the numerical value of letters exclusive to the Urdu alphabet.

4. In Hausa, the numerical value assigned to the word order in the last three clusters is different because the configuration is slightly different *(saʿfaz, qarashat, zaghghash)*.
5. *Muʾyyid al-Fuzalāʾ*, a Persian dictionary compiled by Mawlavī Muḥammad Lād in 1519, published by Naval Kishore Press, Kanpur, borrowing from *Madār al-Afāżil* gives identical glosses for the *abjad* clusters. See vol. II, p. 288.
6. My intellectual background is the Indo-Islamic tradition, which privileges the Arabic perspective of Semitic cultural history, thus my initial surprise.
7. In other words, *āleph, beyt, gīmel and dālet* make up the mnemonic word *abjad*, and *hē, vāv* and *zayin* make *hawwaz, heyt, ṭeyt* and *yōd* correspond to *huṭṭī* and so on up to *qarashat*. *Śakhkhaż* and *żazzagh* are made up from the remaining or extra six letters of the Arabic alphabet i.e. *śe, khe, że* and *zuād, zōʾe,* and *ghain*.
8. See appended chart (Appendix).
9. There are multiple meanings associated with the translation of *lāla* as 'poppy' in Urdu. The most important being that the poppy has a dark or black center, and that is a metaphorical *dāgh* 'scar' that it bears in its heart.
10. See Bibliography for a list of Ḥamīd Ḥasan Qādirī's publications.
11. I have cited the latter half of the quatrain because the chronogram is contained in that couplet.
12. *Kulliyāt-e Mōmin*, Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow 1931, p. 189.
13. *Dīvān-e Ḥālī*, Urdu Academy Delhi 1992 (facsimile of 1893 edn) p. 221.
14. *Kulliyāt-e Nāsikh*, ed. Yunus Javed, Lahore, 1989, p. 227.
15. Kishan Chand Ikhlās, Hameshā Bahār, (ed.) Waḥīd Qurayshī, Anjuman Taraqqī Urdu, Pakistan, Karachi, 1973, p. 209. I am grateful to my father, Shamsur Raḥmān Fārūqī, for providing the exact reference.

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Appendix: The <u>Abjad</u> Values in Urdu

kalaman	ḥuttī	havvaz	abjad
ک ل م ن	ح ط ی	ه و ز	ا ب ج د
50 40 30 20	10 9 8	7 6 5	4 3 2 1

sakhkhaż	qarashat	sa'faṣ
ث خ ذ	ق ر ش ت	س ع ف ص
700 600 500	400 300 200 100	90 80 70 60

ẓazzagh

ض ظ غ

1000 900 800

پ	ٹ	ڈ	چ	ڑ	ڑ	گ	ے	ٴ
?	10	20	7	200	4	3	500	2