

Introduction

The pure Lord gave such power to the blacksmith
To turn to wax what was iron by nature.

.
You have raised the status of the jeweled blade;
Now all acknowledge the mettle of your sword.

.
All workshops depend on your wisdom;
The capitalist keeps his head bowed before you.¹

These verses, extracted from a longer Urdu *nazm* or poem, were written by Nazir, a blacksmith and bladesmith based in the North Indian city of Rampur in the mid-twentieth century. I first encountered Nazir and his poetry as part of a collection that the librarians of the renowned Raza Library in Rampur had put together to honor the city's artisanal and material heritage.² Nazir's versified account of his trade immediately grabbed my attention, because it evoked several traditions that, in researching this book, I had come to associate closely with earlier generations of Muslim artisans who worked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Nazir emphasized God's revelation of knowledge and skill to blacksmiths, even as he also placed these smiths in a context of industrial labor, in a workshop subject to the whims of a capitalist or *sarmāyahdār*, the possessor of wealth. Through his insistence on the smith's inherent relationship with the divine, and the imagery of the humbled capitalist forced to bow his head to the smith's God-given prowess, Nazir asserted social status for blacksmiths. Nazir evoked a widespread belief that God had revealed knowledge of blacksmithing to the Prophet Dawud (David) by turning iron to wax in his hands, arguing that the practice of blacksmithing was a pious practice of Islam. In a context where ownership or authority was often ceded to members of the middle class and where artisans had limited control over their materials, styles, and technologies of production, Nazir offered an alternative vision of his trade: he claimed an Islamic, God-given status for blacksmiths, highlighting not only the economic importance and social dignity of artisan communities but the distinct forms of Muslim piety embedded in their trades.

When Nazir asserted a Muslim past and future for his trade, he drew on ideas about the relationship between Islam and artisanship that had been rearticulated, reimagined, and circulated among artisan communities across North India over the course of the previous century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Indian artisans transitioned to new, often industrialized, wage-based sites of work, especially in rapidly expanding cities associated with colonial authority and industry.³ They also engaged with rapid changes in the materiality and technology of their labor, ranging from new plasters to steam engines, and from lithographic presses to electroplating. Muslim artisans asserted religious traditions for their work to make sense of these changes and claim new knowledge. In doing so, they challenged their marginalization within strengthening North Indian social hierarchies, with many contributing to the consolidation of regional working-class identities through an Islamic idiom.

Pious Labor provides a history of Muslim laboring cultures in North India, tracing the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century experiences and ideas that contributed to Nazir's portrayal of blacksmithing. It tells the stories of urban metalsmiths, stonemasons, tailors, boilermakers, carpenters, and press workers across the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (known as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh after 1902) and Punjab in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ *Pious Labor* traces histories of Muslim culture making from below through creative readings of an overlooked archive of Urdu artisan technical manuals and community histories and with a specific focus on the intersections of embodied and textual knowledge.

Muslim artisans engaged with religious pasts to make sense of changes wrought by the transition to a colonial economy. Their claims on the piety of their work reflected an effort to reassert authority over technology and material knowledge in a moment when technical authority was increasingly vested in the colonial state and the middle class. From the expansion of European political influence in India in the eighteenth century, colonial administrators had sought to discipline Indian labor to address European economic interests.⁵ As a result, over the course of the subsequent decades, Indian artisans were deprived of many historical forms of technical authority and autonomy.⁶ But by engaging with new sites of knowledge circulation that expanded from the mid-nineteenth century—especially vernacular print and urban industrial workshops—Muslim artisans sought to challenge their economic, technical, and religious marginalization within Indian class and social hierarchies.

Pious Labor shows that from the mid-nineteenth century, Muslim workers drew on narratives of Muslim pasts and claims to distinctively Muslim identities to imagine new roles for their skills and their trades. In doing so, they reasserted and reimagined traditions and practices that I term *artisan Islam*. I use *artisan Islam* to refer to a broad range of narratives about laboring Islamic pasts, claims on the piety of work or technology, and the development and intersection of Muslim social, religious, and laboring spaces among artisans. In *Pious Labor*, I argue that

through artisan Islam, Muslim workers both challenged and negotiated colonial capitalism and the consolidating social hierarchies in North India. Through claims on the piety of their work, Muslim artisans integrated their material and embodied knowledge with religious narratives, asserting social status and technological authority in a colonial economy that often robbed them of both.

DEFINING ARTISANS AND ARTISANSHIP

“Artisan” is a category so broad that its utility can sometimes be questionable. For E. P. Thompson, *artisan* could refer to anyone “from the prosperous master craftsman, employing labor on his own account and independent of any masters, to the sweated garret laborers.”⁷ Moreover, Indian artisans often did not—and do not—identify with this term. Instead, as Nita Kumar demonstrates, many preferred identities that were expressly associated with their specific trades.⁸ The chapters of this book are thus organized by trades and practices in recognition of the fact that individual trades often held greater salience for artisans than the category of artisanship itself.

At the same time, I have chosen to use the term *artisan* because it intersects with categories that the authors of Urdu-language trade manuals and community histories used to describe their communities. The most important of these was *kārīgar*, which I translate both as “artisan” and “laborer,” reflecting the fact that in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Urdu (as well as Hindi and Punjabi) the word was used to reference both the skills associated with craftworkers and the status of a wage earner. The authors of artisan manuals and community histories often relied on the category of *kārīgar* to emphasize their own shared interests with people who read their texts (or heard them read aloud). *Kārīgar* was an especially important identifier for communities in which many artisans were shifting between trades, such as bladesmiths who turned to surgical tool manufacturing, or woodcarvers who turned to furniture making. While “artisan” was often a category applied from above—by the colonial state, middle-class overseers, or Indian patrons—its rough equivalent, *kārīgar*, held widespread relevance in the worlds of Indian labor.

Another factor complicating our definition of *artisan* is that colonial industrial policy in India often enforced distinctions between “artisanal” and “industrial” labor that did not reflect these workers’ own understandings of their trades and communities. *Pious Labor* argues that as many artisans transitioned to new fields of industrial work—such as boilermaking, railway carpentry, or print labor—they adapted both their technical skills and their community narratives of the Muslim past. Despite the distinct challenges inherent in colonial industrial capitalism, many artisans moved flexibly between familial workshops and capitalist- or state-run factories, transferring and applying their technical and religious knowledge from one to the other.

Consequently, I have maintained a capacious definition of *artisan*, one that upends colonial depictions of industrial laborers as divorced from artisanship. Simultaneously, my approach to the category of “artisan” seeks to challenge colonial portrayals of “cottage artisans” as uninterested in technological and material change. The category of *kārīgar* may ultimately suggest paths beyond the artisan-industrial worker divide, providing space to consider the flexibility and multiplicity of individual experiences of industrial and artisanal labor.

WHY MUSLIM ARTISANS?

The histories of South Asian labor and artisanship have often assumed Hindu social, religious, and caste identities as a norm among workers, positioning Muslim workers as complications or sources of potential religious conflict. This is due, in part, to what Chitra Joshi characterizes as the dominance of studies of “fragmentation and conflict” among Indian workers.⁹ For instance, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s study of jute-mill workers in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Calcutta remains among the most prominent theorizations of community and religious identities among Indian laborers. Chakrabarty critiques portrayals of religious community and identity that “situate this working class in a web of immutable, unchanging loyalties,” arguing, instead, that “the meaning of these [religious] ‘ties’ changed through colonial-era industrialization.”¹⁰

But what did shifting ties of religion look like for Muslim workers? Were workers’ religious identities reflected primarily in the strengthening of oppositional religious communities, of modern “communalism,” as suggested by Chakrabarty’s exploration of “riots” among Muslim millhands?¹¹ Were they directed toward shifting socioreligious authority, shaped by the Muslim elite, sparking mass participation in political projects related to both Indian independence and Muslim “separatism,” ultimately reflected in the Pakistan movement?¹² This book does not discount the strengthening of these forms of assertion of Muslim identity in the context of urban industrialization, but it also argues that Islam held a far wider range of meanings for Muslim artisans and laborers. Artisan Islam was never siloed, and Muslim workers did engage with elite, middle-class, and nationalist movements, but these were rarely the only ways that Muslim artisans and laborers asserted ties of religion. Instead, Islam was central to how Muslim *kārīgars* narrated and taught their work, learned new technologies, negotiated shifts to new fields, and contested their marginalization within North Indian social and economic hierarchies.

Pious Labor thus joins recent scholarship that analyzes the religious, social, and laboring worlds of Muslim artisans and workers on their own terms, both historically and in the contemporary context.¹³ At the same time, *Pious Labor* not only integrates Muslims and Islam into the study of artisanship and labor but also

centers artisans and labor in our study of South Asian Islam. Persistent colonial-era narratives portray laboring-class Muslims as religiously marginal and less orthodox than their elite counterparts. Scholarship about Islam in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Asia may inadvertently reinforce these narratives because of the frequent focus on the Muslim middle class, on the *‘ulama*, and on new sites of intellectual production, to the exclusion of laboring-class Muslims.¹⁴

I therefore integrate workers’ experiences of Islam into an understanding of Islamic history beyond the “exclusive” claims of a supposed canon, emphasizing the way in which *kāriḡars* made meaning for Islam in their specific social and economic contexts.¹⁵ I draw, for instance, on Nile Green’s study of the promotion of “customary” Islamic practices and forms of authority among millworkers, dockhands, and other laborers in colonial Bombay, which emphasized the role of Islam in working-class life.¹⁶ Green studies workers’ participation in Muslim “theolog[ies] of intervention” via “holy men,” through the archives of mobile religious leaders.¹⁷ I reorient this analysis by centering Muslim narratives embedded within technical manuals and community histories that were authored by Muslim artisans themselves, drawing on an Urdu-language archive of artisanal production and artisan practices of Islam.

In a few cases, the spaces and practices of worship among North Indian Muslim artisans intersected with those of their Hindu and Sikh counterparts.¹⁸ I have chosen, deliberately, not to characterize these forms of shared space or practice as “syncretic.” In its most positive use, *syncretism* highlights shared experiences to argue for a potential world not riven by the contemporary majoritarianism that threatens the lives and livelihoods of religious minorities across South Asia. But as we shall see throughout the book, concepts such as “syncretism” have also been taken up pejoratively by those who hope to “purify” workers’ religion, and they frequently fail to account for how practitioners themselves understand their faith practices.

Most significantly, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonial administrators were invested in drawing class and caste boundaries within Indian religious communities and identifying orthodox religious practices. Colonial ethnographers frequently described artisan Islam in India as perverted by contact with Hinduism and as not really Islam at all but instead a reflection of laboring-class Muslims’ lack of understanding of their supposed faith. One British administrator summed up this perspective succinctly in 1895, describing local Muslim artisans as “followers of the Prophet only in name.”¹⁹ Moreover, as SherAli Tareen demonstrates, debates among Muslim reformist scholars likewise often included polemics about the need to “purify” the religious practices of the so-called cattle-like Muslim masses.²⁰ And colonial and elite Muslim anxieties about the religious practices of laboring-class Muslims were sometimes in conversation with each other, retrenching understandings of artisan Islam as deviant.

In many of the community histories and technical manuals that form the backbone of my archival approach, artisans sought to demonstrate the specifically Muslim pasts of their trades and the specifically Muslim piety reflected in their work and technologies. Their careful insistence on the exclusively “Islamic” nature of their practices likely reflected artisans’ own cognizance of elite and colonial framings of their practices as unorthodox. Like many Muslims whose practices have been externally labeled “popular” and “syncretic” rather than “normative” or “formal,” they engaged in what Torsten Tschacher termed “a defense of contentious practices” against the ascriptive assumptions of both elite Muslims and the colonial state.²¹ Rather than reading syncretism into these archival materials, I follow the lead of the authors of these histories and manuals and, in turn, analyze artisan Islam as reflective of a distinctly Muslim practice. Simultaneously, I consider whether and why artisan manuals might reflect a conscious effort to “defend,” reshape, or even elide material and religious practices that were criticized or debated by other Muslims or by the state.

CONFRONTING CASTE THROUGH ARTISAN ISLAM

Taking artisans’ engagement with Islam seriously also forces us to contend with the complex and sometimes ambiguous role that caste plays in South Asian Muslim communities. The relative paucity of studies of labor, artisanship, and the working classes within South Asian Islam has contributed to an elision of the role of caste in shaping conflict and contestation within Muslim communities. Caste—and experiences of caste marginalization—are motivating factors in many of the Urdu-language technical manuals and community histories that I analyze in this book. And as several recent works have noted, from the mid-nineteenth century, caste-like social hierarchies often underscored the writing of members of the consolidating Muslim middle class, who sought to advocate for their economic and class position based on *sharīf* (pl. *ashrāf*), genteel, descent.²² But the very existence of the *ashrāf* and their practices of social distinction necessarily imply a community against which “genteel” Muslims defined themselves.

Sociologists of South Asian Islam often note the category of *ajlāf*, laboring or “common” classes, to identify this “other” against whom *ashrāf* communities defined themselves. The term *ajlāf*, however, was rarely embraced as a social identity by Muslim workers themselves. Instead, Muslim artisans and laborers more often advocated for their own trade or kinship communities beyond the supposed *ashrāf/ajlāf* binary.²³ Indeed, whether *ajlāf* as a category held widespread salience beyond efforts to distinguish the non-*ashrāf*—often by *ashrāf* writers—seems unlikely. Laboring-class Muslims more often sought to highlight what made their communities distinctively pious and skilled and to emphasize their histories as sites of potential religious or technological authority.

By arguing that caste-like hierarchies informed the experiences of Indian Muslim artisans and laborers, I am not suggesting that their experiences can be mapped directly onto Hindu artisans' experiences of caste, which themselves were also plural.²⁴ Studies of Muslim *birādarīs*—kinship networks that are usually endogamous and sometimes tied to specific trades—have emphasized that they are not always direct corollaries of Hindu *jatis* or caste groups.²⁵ Moreover, like Hindu caste structures, *birādarīs* and other Muslim forms of caste-like association in North India underwent significant change as a result of both urban industrialization and colonial property law and ownership practices. In Punjab especially, mid-nineteenth-century colonial property law and inheritance practices were often implicitly or explicitly tied to *birādarī*, contributing to a reconstruction and reification of genealogical pedigrees as the basis for status and community.²⁶

Against this backdrop of reified caste marginalization, laboring-class Muslims wrote and circulated manuals and community histories through which they aimed to improve their social standing and promote their forms of religious and technological authority. In some cases, these efforts conformed to a process of “ashrafization,” which Joel Lee, in a study of Dalit Muslims, defines as “the effort to raise one’s social status by claiming *ashrāf* status and adopting the social practices of the Muslim elite.”²⁷ I do not argue that “ashrafization” was a universal approach among Muslim artisan communities. Instead, following Lee, I recognize that Muslims excluded from *ashrāf* status employed a variety of religious and social narratives, often simultaneously, to claim dignity and status for their communities. Some of these reflected *ashrāf* aspiration, but they coexisted with narratives that emphasized the piety of labor and the social importance of laboring communities.²⁸ Caste contestation took place not only along *ashrāf-ajlāf* lines but also within and across laboring communities as Muslim workers sought to define their trades and their communities as possessing specific, sometimes exclusive, Muslim pasts.

TECHNOLOGY, LABOR, AND RELIGION

Pious Labor integrates the study of South Asian Islam with the study of artisanship and labor. It also brings both fields into conversation with histories of technology. Recent scholarship in the expanding field of South Asian history of science, technology, and medicine has emphasized elite Muslim religious engagement with technological and scientific change in the wake of colonial claims on scientific authority.²⁹ Likewise, the relationship between craft, artisanship, and technology in colonial and postcolonial South Asia has been central to several recent studies.³⁰ The contributions of Muslim artisans and laborers, however, have remained largely absent from both trends. *Pious Labor* not only addresses this lacuna but also places Muslim artisans at the center of technological change in colonial India, asking how Muslim claims on technology informed class and

laboring identities. It disrupts persistent assumptions about the technological marginality of both colonized peoples and laborers, highlighting Muslim artisans' creativity in their use of and meaning making for new technologies.

Muslim artisans did not present their adoption of shifting technologies—even technologies closely associated with the colonial state—as technological “transfer” from Europe to Asia.³¹ Instead, as Projit Mukharji has argued in the context of small-scale medical technologies, their narratives “braid[ed] distinctive strands of knowledge and practice.”³² Specific practices—boilermaking, electroplating, and others—became the spindle around which Muslim artisans braided their forms of knowledge.³³ These processes of meaning making for artisan-industrial technologies might also be characterized by what David Arnold has termed “acculturation,” in which new machines simultaneously “conform[ed] to” and were “transformative of” cultures that used them.³⁴

Pious Labor expands our understanding of how technology was “acculturated,” and how knowledge systems were “braided,” by highlighting distinctly Muslim claims and imaginations of technical knowledge. Beyond this, however, it also centers the importance of these claims on technical practices within class identities. It argues that artisans sought to assert new places for themselves within the consolidating social and class hierarchies of North Indian Muslims by asserting their distinct physical relationship with the technologies they used. Muslim artisans sometimes argued that the very thing that placed them in “lowly” positions in class or caste hierarchies—the physical labor carried out with their own hands—made them masters of technology in ways that members of the middle classes could not hope to achieve.³⁵ Because they understood these technologies and skills as Islamic, their command over them implied a Muslim practice that elevated artisans as distinctly, even inherently, pious.

Practices of translation, vernacularization, and linguistic adaptation were central to Indian efforts to assert new, localized uses and meanings for technologies that were introduced through European colonial authority. Adapting scientific and technical knowledge into South Asian languages required the integration of new knowledge with the material and social culture of the vernacular language.³⁶ Simultaneously, as Charu Singh shows, the authors of Indian scientific and technical treatises worked to establish equivalences “at the level of the word itself.”³⁷ Within artisan manuals, however, practices of vernacularization and translation not only cultivated localized meanings but also established difference from and awareness of elite claims on technical knowledge. Most of the artisan manuals and treatises examined in this book did not describe themselves as translations from other languages. Nonetheless, practices of translation and vernacularization underscored manual composition. Many manual authors compiled materials drawn from contemporary English-language treatises—or earlier translations thereof—that circulated in South Asia.

Efforts to localize technologies and establish linguistic equivalences through artisan manuals reflected artisans' struggles to negotiate shifts associated with the colonial industrial economy. Sometimes this meant rooting new terms in Indian and Islamic artisanal and material pasts. In other instances, it meant promoting adapted, transliterated English terminology as more accessible to artisan and industrial workers than the Urdu neologisms—sometimes created from Arabic roots—preferred by elite Muslim scientists and scholars. In either case, artisan decisions about how to express concepts and practices in Urdu reflected their cultivation of authority over new technical knowledge. Their practices of translation claimed new technologies as relevant to their own physical skills, trades, and histories. Through this process, they distinguished their translated knowledge from the emerging scientific and technical translations that circulated among both middle-class supervisors and Muslim scientific societies.

AN ARCHIVE FOR MUSLIM ARTISANS?

Muslim artisans have often been overlooked as intellectual and technological agents, in part because of the nature of the archive that they produced. Engaging this archive, which is constituted primarily of artisan technical manuals and community histories in Urdu, requires taking seriously the cultural and religious narratives embedded in artisan technical knowledge. In *Pious Labor*, I read vernacular manuals that explained new technologies and material practices not only for their technical descriptions but also for their minor asides and use of metaphor, their introductory poems and marginal notes, their small statements that reveal popular imaginations of technological change.

I locate the core archive of this book in two intersecting genres, the “technical manual” and the “community history.” In English, the titles I have assigned to these genres suggest a sharp distinction, but in Urdu their titles often overlapped, and indeed, the interplay between the description of technical practice and that of religious community history is often most suggestive of how artisans negotiated colonial economic and material change. Many of these texts—be they primarily technical manuals or community history—were framed as a *risālah* (treatise), a *kasbnāmah* (book of trade), a *tazkirah* (compendium), or simply a *kitāb* (book) on a particular trade, community, or technology.

In many cases, these artisan manuals and community histories were concise, between six and sixty pages long. They were often printed on cheap paper by local publishers. Their short form and relatively low cost—often between six pies and a few annas—suggest that authors were concerned with making pious knowledge available among communities that had limited money to spend on books. Likewise, sketches and illustrations, when included, were often simple, drawn up by the authors themselves, or copied from other texts, perhaps to keep the costs of the books low.

Regardless of their titles and framing, the texts analyzed here sought to explain to artisans how to practice their trade piously under deepening colonial and middle-class technical authority. Many of the artisans who wrote about their labor (and had access to publishing) in trades such as carpentry, metalworking, and tailoring were *mistrīs*, whom I frame as “master artisans” in this context. This category includes Thompson’s “prosperous master craftsman” who led his own workshop and employed other workers, as well as some artisans who secured state patronage and employment.³⁸ Many were upwardly mobile, or at least more successful than their contemporaries in transitioning their skills to the colonial capitalist market. I also borrow the language of “master artisans” from Tirthankar Roy, who has highlighted their successful negotiation of shifting systems of capital, employment, and supervision. While Roy characterizes these successful transitions as primarily a reflection of the “agency of the innovative individual,” I am most interested in how these figures spoke to and for artisan communities.³⁹ In the artisan manuals and histories that I analyze, master artisans asserted authority and agency in their trade, but they often sought to claim this authority for their communities rather than for individuals.

Although this book positions artisan manuals and histories as an overlooked archive, most technical writing in Urdu in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not authored by artisans—*mistrīs* or otherwise—and most of it was not aimed at laboring artisan cadres. Artisan technical manuals occupied one corner of a growing corpus of Urdu printed literature about technology. Many of the earliest projects of scientific and technical vernacularization into Urdu were carried out within colonial educational institutions. From approximately the 1830s, some colonial educationalists positioned Urdu as the most suitable Indian vernacular for communicating Western scientific knowledge, leading to the development of Urdu translations of English textbooks and treatises.⁴⁰ As noted earlier, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Indian scientific societies also engaged in projects of vernacularization that included the adaptation of technical manuals. And as I examine in chapter 2, middle-class Muslim industrialists promoted their own visions of technological authority by publishing technical treatises and compendia that profiled new trades and technologies.

These varied forms of Urdu technical writing intersected with each other, with authors borrowing liberally from other manuals and textbooks. Master artisan authors of technical manuals and community histories frequently engaged with other types of Urdu writing about their trade. In the case of electroplating, for instance, artisan manuals reoriented middle-class claims about the Muslim nature of the technology to center artisan skill and labor. In other cases, such as a wood-working manual profiled in chapter 4, both the author and the intended audience of a manual are ambiguous, and it is possible that the text circulated among both

artisans and middle-class industrialists, or even consumers. In this context, I note the multiple potential uses of the text, embracing its ambiguity to trace the ways technical knowledge and material practices circulated among consumers and producers across a range of social classes.

The artisan manuals and histories that form the backbone of this book circulated in a crowded print-knowledge economy. In the long run, it was usually artisan skill that lost out in a contest for technological authority between cadres of artisan workers and the middle-class Indians who often became their supervisors in industrialized contexts. But the manuals and histories that were authored by and circulated among artisans nonetheless reveal that beyond the level of elite knowledge systems, workers creatively integrated new technologies into their bodies of religious and material knowledge and their practices of work.

HOW SHOULD WE READ ARTISAN ARCHIVES?

Reading artisan archives requires abandoning an underlying assumption of much of the scholarship on Indian artisans, namely, that because many artisans were illiterate, their communities did not read, produce, or engage with text. I do not suggest that most *kārīgars* could in fact read or read well. But forms of community literacy, orality, and the engagement with the text as object all contributed to the circulation of technical manuals and community trade histories from the mid-nineteenth century.

The manuals and community histories central to *Pious Labor* reflect the circulation of artisan knowledge through overlapping practices of literacy and orality in the context of an expanding and increasingly accessible North Indian vernacular print economy. Some manuals and community histories explicitly tell us about their intended use, noting that they were meant for people who read them or heard them read aloud.⁴¹ In other cases, manuals and histories relied heavily on versification, suggesting intended practices of circulation through memorization.⁴² Moreover, artisans likely engaged with printed manuals and trade histories not only as collections of knowledge but also as objects that marked their authority over the knowledge contained within. In visits to present-day scissor-making workshops in Meerut, I found that artisans sometimes still display lithographed pages that promise protection for their shop and provide Quranic verses or prayers relevant to their trade. The printed word became a reminder of pious knowledge, perhaps only rarely read but consistently present, sometimes even “sacralized,” in Mahmood Kooria’s terms, as a marker of religious wisdom.⁴³

Muslim artisans thus engaged with and used text. But engaging with and using text do not foreclose the centrality of embodied knowledge of a trade. Artisans nested textual knowledge within other ways of knowing and communicating their

skills and trades. Traditional archival methodologies do not necessarily provide ways to account for the interplay between embodied and textual knowledge.⁴⁴ To contend with the limitations of the textual archive, I return repeatedly to the question of how artisan manuals and histories were used alongside other forms of training, teaching, and knowing. My readings aim to restore the material function of the texts and to imagine their place within a workshop, factory, or site of training. I analyze the relationship between the materiality of the text and the physicality of labor, and the potential interactions between workers, their work, and their books.⁴⁵

In conceiving the intellectual, religious, and social worlds of Muslim artisans through the printed Urdu manuals and community histories that they used, I also build on recent scholarship on laborers' intellectual and print practices outside of the South Asian context. In his study of the political and literary worlds of Puerto Rican labor, Jorell Meléndez-Badillo examines how cadres of self-identified "enlightened workingmen" sought to speak for workers, "creat[ing] and dominat[ing] their own means of knowledge production."⁴⁶ Likewise, in the context of the United States, Tobias Higbie has noted that "the concerns, doubts, and ambitions of workers indelibly stamped the urban public sphere" of the early twentieth century as they circulated political and intellectual debates through both print and oral exchange.⁴⁷ *Pious Labor* enters into conversation with this work by asking how we might reconceptualize the "knowledge production" of Muslim artisans and laborers to include the intersections of their religious and laboring identities.

Despite the comparative utility of this scholarship, there are limitations unique to South Asian Urdu writing of artisan knowledge and laboring identities. The most significant of these is that not all Muslim artisans across North India used Urdu or understood it well, even as a spoken language. This book incorporates stories from the North-Western (later United) Provinces, where various registers and dialects of spoken Hindustani, or Hindi-Urdu, were used by Muslim workers.⁴⁸ It also draws on examples from Punjab, where many artisans used registers of Punjabi (or Saraiki or other languages) in their daily lives. While the authors of artisan manuals often announced their intentions to write in a popular-register Urdu that was accessible to *kāriḡars*, the fact remains that they often wrote in Urdu instead of Punjabi, even in Punjab. Their choice of language reflects the more widespread, state-supported, nature of publishing in Urdu over languages such as Punjabi.⁴⁹ It also reflects the urban contexts of the artisan communities analyzed in this book. Because many of these communities consisted of migrants from elsewhere in North India, Urdu was often used as a shared language. Likewise, while many artisan community histories were local, several of the authors of manuals explicitly aimed for their texts to be read by Muslim workers across India. They chose Urdu as the language most likely to attract readers and listeners across multiple cities, even beyond North India.⁵⁰

IDENTIFYING AND ENGAGING ARTISAN ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS

To identify artisan manuals and community histories, many of which are uncatalogued, I have relied on the knowledge and kindness of archivists and librarians. I have been especially dependent on the work of often undercompensated librarians in small regional public libraries, including those working in libraries that have experienced flooding or are missing walls that endanger the collections. I note these challenges to make it clear that the records I have collected are glimpses of larger, perhaps missing, histories of Muslim artisans and their material, religious, and textual traditions.

I have also sometimes encountered bemusement at the types of sources I have chosen to investigate, particularly at my focus on technical manuals. Even the most accommodating librarian once exclaimed, “*Another one?*” when I requested to look at the third electroplating manual in his collection, and he wondered aloud whether the texts really differed from each other. Some of my Urdu tutors, without whom this book likewise would have been impossible, expressed concern that I was not more interested in “good” Urdu writing and poetry. I believe that these responses are due to a widespread perception, not only in South Asia but globally, that technical literature lacks cultural and religious content. I aim to offer a convincing counterpoint in this book. Writing about technology not only reflects religious, cultural, and social knowledge; it also demonstrates how workers assert religious and cultural knowledge to negotiate technical change, and how they assert technical knowledge to negotiate religious and cultural contexts.

WHICH TRADES, WHICH ARTISANS, AND WHERE?

Pious Labor examines the religious, social, and laboring lives of scribes and press workers, metalsmiths, tailors, carpenters, boilermakers, and stonemasons. The decision to focus on these trades was in part a practical one—a reflection of the artisan manuals and trade histories available to me. At the same time, it was also based on my desire to suggest new directions in the study of South Asian artisanship by decentering the questions that have traditionally been asked through studies of weavers and textiles. Despite the plurality of industries grouped under the category of “artisan” in contemporary South Asian historiography, studying artisan labor has most often meant studying weavers and textiles manufacturing. Focusing here on trades other than weaving should not diminish the centrality of textiles and textile workers to our understanding of how colonialism remade the Indian economy and Indian labor. After all, weavers and other textile workers were centrally positioned within the changing global trade systems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in India their industries were radically remade during the rise of European political and economic influence.⁵¹

By focusing this book on trades other than weaving, I tell stories that have sometimes been overlooked in studies of artisans and artisanship. Trades such as carpentry, stonemasonry, and blacksmithing also faced upheaval beginning with the rise of European imperial power in India. Unlike weavers, however, many of the workers in these fields did not face the most extreme forms of deindustrialization and displacement to agricultural work by European imports.⁵² Like weaving, trades such as carpentry, stonemasonry, and metalsmithing were reoriented to address the demands of the colonial state and its representatives in India, but artisan experiences of this state reorientation differed significantly.

For instance, carpenters and woodworkers were recruited both for railway labor and as joiners and fitters in European-owned factories from the mid-nineteenth century. Other artisans, such as weaponsmiths, were forced out of their trades by a combination of cheaper imports and colonial laws limiting their trade. As I discuss in chapters 2 and 5, these workers usually turned to other trades that used similar skill sets, such as alternative forms of metalsmithing in the case of weaponsmiths. These were major, complex transitions for these individuals and informed how they understood their religious practices and their relationship with technologies of production. But the specific ways that artisans negotiated and experienced these transitions—and asserted religious claims on their new trades—have been overlooked because they do not necessarily match the experiences of textile workers.

I locate these transitions in urban North India. I define *urban* broadly, to include growing metropolises and industrial centers like Lahore and Kanpur (Cawnpore), as well as midsized cities such as Meerut and Sialkot. I also include the capitals of regional, quasi-autonomous princely states located geographically within the North-Western Provinces and Punjab, particularly Rampur and Bahawalpur. My focus on the urban reflects the impact of migration—which I explore most closely in chapter 4—as cities of various sizes served as important sites for the exchange of material and religious knowledge among artisans. Despite the limited nature of colonial investment in the infrastructure of urban India, artisans were drawn to cities around the mid-nineteenth century because of forms of military, railway, and public works expenditure, which were shaped by state responses to the anticolonial Uprising and war of 1857. Likewise, a post-1857 expansion of Indian mercantile and landholding economic interests in North Indian cities meant that artisan labor was in high demand, with both state and Indian capitalists sometimes complaining of their want of labor, spurring recruitment of artisans from smaller towns and villages.⁵³

By the late nineteenth century, cities were also the centers from which middle-class Muslim reformist organizations sought to discipline the religious practices of Muslim workers, often drawing together local and transregional ideals of orthodoxy.⁵⁴ New intersections of local and transregional Muslim knowledge were engendered through the print economy and new forms of travel, and cities were often the first spaces where these competing religious ideas were

contested and spread.⁵⁵ Urban artisans responded or adapted to middle-class challenges to their religious practices. Moreover, through urban encounters, they incorporated translocal and transregional ideals into their own assertions of the Muslim past. By locating artisan Islam in urban settings, I build on Michael Dodson's characterization of the city as "always in a state of 'becoming,'" as multiple "pasts and potential futures multiply and jostle for view."⁵⁶ The migration and growth of artisan communities in urban India, along with their transitions to new trades and technologies, forced artisans to confront these multiple pasts and potential futures and to assert or claim them for themselves and their communities.

THE GENDER(S) OF PIOUS LABOR

Pious Labor engages with archives that restore the claims of artisans and laborers to both Islamic and technological authority. Overwhelmingly, these voices are male, and in most cases the artisans profiled labored in trades popularly gendered as masculine. Women did, however, work in many of these trades. Particularly in the context of small-scale, family-run workshops, women engaged in forms of labor related to trades such as blacksmithing and carpentry, even if the finished products were often attributed to their male kin.⁵⁷ But just as women artisans—as well as third-gender or gender-nonconforming workers—were often erased by colonial record keepers, they were also often absent in the vernacular archive of artisan Islam.

The absence and erasure of artisan women from both the colonial and vernacular archive should not be read as a benign coincidence. Instead, it reflects a purposeful masculinizing of trades. This was a tactic that some male artisans used to advocate for their own religious and technical authority, which was increasingly challenged and usurped by members of the middle class and representatives of the colonial state. Indeed, several of the authors of the manuals and community histories that we will meet in this book explicitly sought to assert the masculinity of their labor as a means of subverting middle-class Indian and European writings about their trades.

In manuals and trade histories, these writers characterized pious knowledge of their labor and technologies as something that was passed through male lineages of *ustād* and *murīd*, master/teacher and disciple/student. This is most evident in chapter 3, which discusses the trade of tailoring; this is also the one chapter in which I engage with an artisan manual authored by a woman. In the context of tailoring, I argue that the late nineteenth-century development of educational and charitable programs that sought to teach girls to be seamstresses sparked a backlash among male tailors. In response, some male tailors sought to assert and circulate male authority over their trade, arguing that knowledge of how to sew according to God's revelation could only be passed from father to son or (male) *ustād* to (male) *murīd*.⁵⁸ The key site of contestation was between state and middle-class

projects that feminized sewing, and working-class male projects that sought to restore the masculinity of the trade through a religious idiom and narratives of the Muslim past. As I argue in the chapter, while an analysis of these competing projects helps us understand how artisan practices became popularly gendered, both narratives exclude the experiences of working-class women, who remain starkly absent from my archive.

These masculinizing processes are less explicit in other texts and other trades. Nonetheless, they often underscore the assumption of manual authors that their intended audience was male. They also intersect with consolidating middle-class debates about gender, labor, and the role of women in the home, sometimes informed by colonial, (post-)Victorian projects and policies.⁵⁹ As Samita Sen has shown in the context of Bengal, in the late nineteenth century class was mapped onto women's nondomestic labor in new ways. "Working women"—meaning those who did nondomestic work—were often assumed to reflect familial poverty.⁶⁰ Women's labor outside the home was understood as undermining a family's respectability. These norms were sometimes articulated as reflective of religious practice and status by members of both the Hindu and Muslim middle classes.⁶¹ Artisan writers were undoubtedly aware of widespread class and social assumptions that accompanied women's nondomestic labor, and the fact that they chose not to explicitly reference women's artisanal labor is ultimately unsurprising.

The absence of women from much of the historical record that I engage in this book should not be read as an absence of women from the religious or economic worlds of artisanship that I explore. Instead, this absence itself suggests male workers' efforts to project artisanal and religious authority and status against a backdrop of widespread narratives that masculinized trades, labor, and even public urban space more broadly.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The chapters of *Pious Labor* are organized by trade rather than chronology, reflecting the degree to which artisan Islam was often asserted through specific trades and technologies. Most chapters cover the period from roughly 1860 to 1935. They trace the ways that distinct Muslim artisan identities were asserted from the consolidation of the British Raj after 1857 through the global economic depression of the 1930s. While I follow some trades across the entirety of this period, focusing on change over time, in other instances I have chosen to zoom in on moments of contention or debates within the trade. This reflects the often piecemeal nature of my archival materials, in which artisan Islam disappears and reappears from view depending on which materials have been preserved and remain accessible.

Each chapter opens with a short story or description of a text that is especially evocative of its subsequent argument. The chapters are grouped by key forms of contestation and debates over religious, technological, and material authority that

shaped Muslim artisan expressions of their religion and their trades. Chapters 1 and 2 examine how artisans negotiated and challenged consolidating middle-class authority over new industrial trades and technologies. Chapter 1, “Lithographic Labor,” focuses on the rise of the vernacular print economy from the mid-nineteenth century in North India, examining new religious and social solidarities asserted by scribal workers and other artisans at lithographic printing presses. Chapter 2, “Electroplating as Alchemy,” analyzes metalsmiths’ engagement with the technology of electroplating to argue that Muslim artisans creatively reoriented middle-class claims on Muslim pasts to support their own forms of technological authority.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze the circulation of artisan knowledge and training. I argue that artisans engaged with sites of knowledge circulation—the print economy and urban industrial workshops—as a means of contesting their social marginalization within both colonial narratives and elite Muslim conceptions of religious authority. Chapter 3, “Sewing with Idris,” examines tailors’ pious knowledge of their trade in the context of an expanding print economy. Male Muslim tailors engaged with print to challenge their own marginalized religious positionality, but they did so, in part, by excluding women tailors from their claims of piety. Chapter 4, “Migrant Carpenters, Migrant Muslims,” asks how migration to large urban centers such as Lahore and Kanpur contributed to the exchange of both religious and technical knowledge among Muslim carpenters and woodworkers. Shifting ties of religious identity engendered by urban industrialization served not only consolidating middle-class claims on religious cohesion but also carpenters’ own claims on the pious practice of their work.

The final two chapters turn to questions of state employment and patronage, interrogating how artisans negotiated recruitment by colonial railway projects and public works departments, as well as patronage from the rulers of regional princely states. Chapter 5, “The Steam Engine as a Muslim Technology,” analyzes how Muslim master artisans transitioned to trades such as boilermaking in railway locomotive workshops, and how they contested their marginalization within new technical hierarchies. Chapter 6, “Building the Modern Mosque,” likewise emphasizes the emergence of new hierarchies of technical oversight within construction. It does so in the context of the princely patronage of stonemasons, analyzing conflict and contradiction between masons’ own understanding of the Islamic relevance of their work and elite Muslim attempts to spur the revival of “Islamic architecture.”

The Conclusion draws the chapters together to examine the broader impacts of artisan Islam on labor solidarities in the immediate lead-up to Partition and independence. It reflects on the degree to which practices of Muslim artisan knowledge circulation were disrupted and remade in the wake of Partition. And it argues for a future of Islamic studies in South Asia that centers the lives, work, and ideas of Muslims who have sometimes been excluded or marginalized through an insistence on the primacy of canonical thinkers and texts.

Ultimately, *Pious Labor* joins Nazir in his evocation and celebration of the power that God gave to blacksmiths. The six chapters together emphasize the vitality and plurality of artisan Islam and the creativity of Muslim artisans' engagement with emerging technologies and trades. The creativity and expansiveness of Muslim artisans' religious and material traditions exceed what a single monograph could hope to describe. Nonetheless, in telling the stories of colonial-era social, industrial, and economic change through the eyes of Muslim artisans, *Pious Labor* suggests new approaches to histories of Islam in South Asia, revealing how Muslim workers asserted claims on their own pasts and practices.