

Sewing with Idris

Artisan Knowledge and Community History

WRITING THE MUSLIM ART OF SEWING

In 1909, Sheikh Khwaja Muhammad, an “expert in the art of sewing” and a tailor in the city of Allahabad, published a short, seven-page history of his trade through a small local press. Titled the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* (The treatise of Idris), the community history articulated a Muslim past for tailors, known in Urdu as *darzīs* or *khayāṭs*. Tracing the precepts of sewing to the Prophet Idris (Enoch), the third Prophet in Muslim tradition, Khwaja Muhammad sought to provide a religious lineage for Muslim tailors in North India. In doing so, he spoke to and for members of an artisan community that sought new forms of social status in the context of stratified North Indian Muslim society.¹

Framing the work of tailors as a divinely inspired art with a prophetic genealogy, Khwaja Muhammad claimed that it was Idris who first sewed a garment to clothe himself and that tailoring skills were revealed to him by God.² He maintained that sewing was “perfect and complete” upon its revelation to Idris and that the responsibility of contemporary tailors was to pass on this knowledge. He went on to position tailors as fundamental to Muslim belief and practice. He referenced, for instance, the “holy tunic” (*pirāhan-i sharīf*) that the Prophet Muhammad wore on the night of his ascension to heaven (*mi‘raj*), noting that the garment was made following the principles revealed to Idris.³

In addition to providing a Muslim past for sewing, Khwaja Muhammad articulated a set of moral and social precepts for tailors. The *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* taught Muslim tailors not only how to be good Muslims but also how to demonstrate their religious piety through their trade. For a young or apprenticed tailor to fail to adhere to these precepts and morals would, in Khwaja Muhammad’s terms, “bring shame to the teacher and unemployment to the student.”⁴ “These are the rules that the eternal tailor [*khayāṭ-i azal*], the pure God, taught the Prophet Idris,” he wrote,

describing first how a tailor must stay outwardly and inwardly pure and say *bismillah* and other prayers over his needle and other tools.⁵ For instance, in his fourth rule—for cutting fabric—he declared: “When you take scissors in your hand, recite this prayer: ‘God is truly most strong and mighty.’ And when you begin to cut, recite ‘Children of Adam, did I not command you not to serve Satan, for he was your sworn enemy.’”⁶ Khwaja Muhammad’s valorization of the piety and religious genealogy of tailors was published and circulated in a competitive North Indian artisanal knowledge economy. By the time of its publication, other writers and educators also sought to explain the work of sewing in print.

For instance, just two years earlier, in 1907, another, notably different text about sewing was printed in Lucknow, 220 kilometers to the northwest. Written by a woman named Shabihunnisa, this alternative narrative of how to sew was titled *Muft kā darzī* (The free tailor).⁷ The sixty-page, heavily illustrated manual sought to train young women to be seamstresses, as well as the basics of weaving and embroidery. It was written, according to Shabihunnisa, to “provide full aid” to the “teachers at girls’ schools when they teach how to cut patterns and sew clothes.”⁸ Shabihunnisa’s manual focused on the styles of hats, vests, tunics, and coats popular in the region, providing a series of patterns for her students to use, her text emphasizing technological flexibility. Shabihunnisa—a teacher at a state-aided Muslim-led girls’ school in the town of Belahra (also spelt Bilehra), located sixty kilometers from Lucknow—emphasized the use of the hand-powered sewing machines alongside scissors, thimbles, and needles (figure 5), and provided patterns for clothes ranging from North Indian kurta pajamas to a European-style waistcoat and a “Turkish hat.”⁹

For Shabihunnisa, sewing was a form of practical knowledge that could ensure the economic stability and social respectability of her students. It was, moreover, a skill that was appropriate for Muslim women, and a trade that could be executed from the home. Sewing, she claimed, could enable women to secure economic standing without necessarily entering male-dominated social spaces, thus protecting what she saw as a Muslim, feminine morality.¹⁰

A member of a prominent landholding family, Shabihunnisa dedicated herself to the moral and economic uplift of Muslim women of her region. She sought to initiate poorer girls—those who did not have access to the sort of home education in which she was trained—into *ashraf* (genteel) understandings of feminine social respectability. But unlike Khwaja Muhammad, the author of the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*, she did not tie the practice of sewing and creating garments to the Muslim social and religious identities of the makers. To her, sewing was a skill that served a purpose and promised economic uplift, rather than an intimate part of a tailor’s religious practice and moral development.

This distinction—between the intrinsic piety of specific labor practices and the possibility of a pious life through economic uplift—set community trade histories, such as the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*, apart from textbooks or treatises written by elite

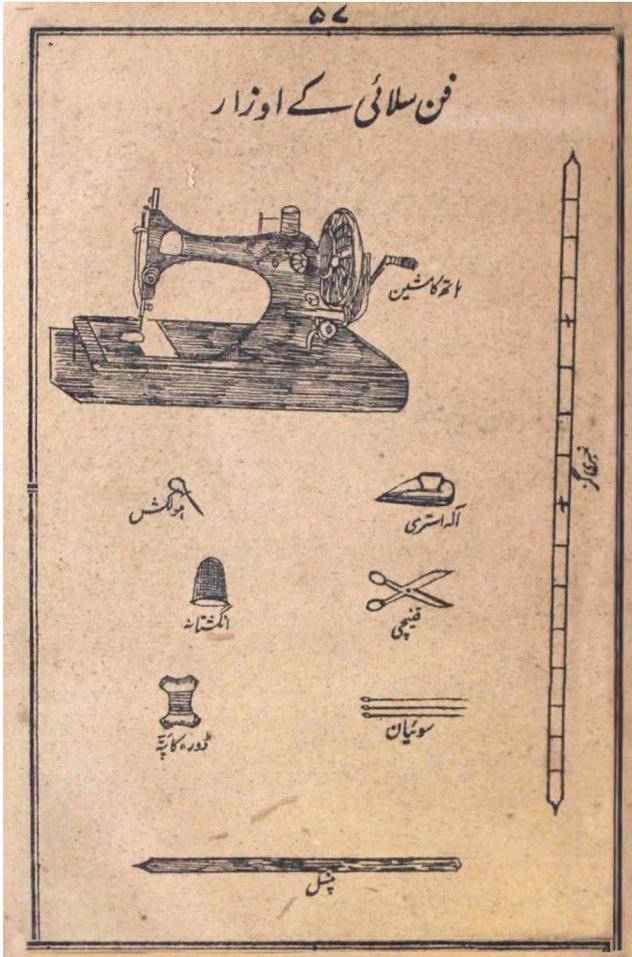


FIGURE 5. Shabihunnisa's *Muft kā darzī* (Lucknow: Isnā 'Asharī Press, 1907) concludes with sketches of key sewing tools described in the text, including but not limited to a hand-powered sewing machine. (Rekhta)

Muslims. Reading the two texts together reveals conflicts over the definition and practice of pious labor between workers and the Muslim middle class, as well as a contestation of the popular gendering of a trade. Reading the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* alongside the *Muft kā darzī* emphasizes that Sheikh Khwaja Muhammad sought to masculinize his trade in a context where sewing was increasingly framed as an appropriate practice for women.

Women artisans likely maintained their own forms of piety and their own understandings of their labor, but these narratives are largely absent from both texts. Masculinizing treatises such as the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* elided the presence

of women tailors and seamstresses from the *darzī*'s workshop. But even technical manuals such as *Muft kā darzī*—which valorized women's participation in the trade as a social good—presented working women largely as receptacles for middle-class knowledge and colonial technologies, rather than masters of the trade themselves. Even in a debate that centered the popular gendering of a trade, conflict over technical knowledge and authority remained the purview of male artisans and the middle class, providing limited space for women laborers to assert their own claims on technical knowledge.

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Together, the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* and *Muft kā darzī* suggest the circulation of competing and contested narratives of what it meant to be a tailor and the relationships between Muslim tailors, their trade, and their religion. These texts show that people who sewed—or taught sewing—debated the origins, social positionality, and gendered nature of their trade. They also debated the degree to which sewing should be taught in formal institutions, how tailors should demonstrate technological and material flexibility, and how to appeal to customers. Reading the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* and *Muft kā darzī* together provides an opportunity to excavate tensions and conflicts between the Muslim middle class—as well as their educational institutions—and the traditions claimed by members of artisan communities.

By the turn of the twentieth century, members of North Indian artisan communities, including tailors, increasingly published and circulated trade histories as means of articulating social identity and community tradition.¹¹ In the same period, both the colonial state and a wide range of charitable and religious organizations sought to train artisans in skills, technologies, and trades. Muslim artisans were in conversation with elite Muslim and colonial efforts to define and claim tailoring. Through their engagement with an increasingly accessible popular press, Muslim artisans contested the exclusion of their communities from popular understandings of what it meant to be an upstanding or respectable Indian Muslim. Simultaneously, however, they posed alternative exclusions, with texts such as the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* writing women tailors out of their religious and material traditions.

To understand the evolving social positionalities of tailors in turn-of-the-century North India, I first analyze how tailors were characterized in colonial ethnographic projects and the degree to which these projects informed elite Muslim discourse about the trade. I examine how the manual *Muft kā darzī* positioned itself within broader trends in elite Muslim charitable efforts, particularly those aimed at teaching girls to sew. I subsequently return to the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*, reading tailors' community histories in conversation with new forms of education represented by *Muft kā darzī*. I trace contestation between three understandings of what it meant to be a Muslim tailor in North India: those articulated by

colonial ethnographies, those promoted by middle-class Muslim institutions, and those asserted by tailors' community histories. Artisan Islam was asserted through religious lineages, prayers, and models of comportment in community histories such as the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*. Elite Muslim narratives of how Muslim artisans should work—as represented by *Muft kā darzī*—both informed and competed with artisan histories. I show, however, that women's experiences of artisan Islam were elided from both types of texts.

MUSLIM DARZĪS IN COLONIAL ETHNOGRAPHIC PROJECTS

Colonial efforts to ethnographically inscribe information about tailors mattered for tailors themselves because colonial policy makers used ethnographic categories to limit artisans' social mobility. Portraying tailors as technologically inept and committed to guarding outdated trade secrets, colonial ethnographic projects asserted that tailors were at best irrelevant and at worst an impediment to the growth of the Indian economy. Ethnographic projects also contributed to the social marginalization of Muslim tailors within Muslim communities because reports characterized Muslim *darzīs* as insufficiently orthodox, as low-caste Hindus in another guise, and as practitioners of a trade most appropriate for women. Texts such as the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* must be read at least partially as a response to the colonial representation of tailors, as an effort to reassert economic, social, and religious status in a context of colonial marginalization.

British ethnographers in India inscribed the category of the Muslim tailor in their writing as part of an effort to build administrative understandings that distinguished laboring Indians from their elite and middle-class counterparts. The developing field of ethnography was an official project, designed to develop scientific knowledge of colonized peoples and improve British capacity to rule them.¹² From the mid-nineteenth century, ethnographic projects were increasingly interested in how caste-like hierarchies functioned among Indian Muslims. Elite Muslims were typically characterized as more orthodox than their laboring counterparts. As in the case of the caste categorization among Hindu and other communities, this reflected the reliance of British ethnographers on elite Indian intermediaries.¹³ Ultimately, the ethnographic reporting of caste categories among Muslims informed the way the state responded to their petitions and requests, particularly when those petitions were made on religious grounds.

Colonial ethnographic reports consistently held that Muslim *darzīs* were not "orthodox" Muslims but instead participants in "syncretic" practices rooted in the community's "Hindu" past. And indeed, tailors' religious practices and places of worship did often cut across normative Hindu-Muslim divides. As Shahid Amin notes, both Hindu and Muslim tailors were "ardent worshippers" at the tomb of the Muslim "warrior saint" Ghazi Miyan in Bahraich, and practices of worship

there were not divided on a Hindu-Muslim binary.¹⁴ But by emphasizing this as the defining component of artisan religious identity, colonial ethnographies portrayed members of laboring groups like *darzīs* as lesser, unorthodox Muslims, whose practices and beliefs were external to the Muslim past.

A prominent 1896 British ethnographic report on the “castes and tribes” of the North-Western Provinces summarized the colonial perspective on the social standing of tailors. “The occupation is a poor one, and held rather in contempt,” wrote William Crooke, the Anglo-Irish colonial administrator charged with reporting on regional caste groups for the Ethnographic Survey of India.¹⁵ Crooke understood caste—and the caste-like hierarchies practiced by many South Asian Muslims—as defined by occupation, and he described *darzīs* as a composite caste group that incorporated both Hindus and Muslims. In his description of *darzīs* as an “occupational caste” that included people from multiple religious traditions, Crooke claimed that Muslim tailors were improperly or insufficiently Muslim and contrasted their practices with those of Muslims whom he perceived to be “orthodox.” He wrote that the majority of *darzīs* in the North-Western Provinces “profess to be Sunni Muslims” but “still cling to many Hindu usages.”¹⁶ For Crooke, the participation of Muslim *darzīs* in spaces of worship shared with Hindus negated their claims to Muslim religious identity, marking them as separate and lesser-than in local Muslim social hierarchies.

Crooke’s views of the construction of caste as rooted primarily in occupation were not universally shared among British ethnographers and administrators. For others, who understood caste as what Bernard Cohn has termed a “concrete and measurable entity” rooted in endogamy and descent, *darzīs* were perplexing.¹⁷ In the prominent *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab*, compiled by ethnographers who saw caste in “concrete” terms, *darzīs* were described as “not a caste in the proper acceptation of the word.”¹⁸ Noting that *darzīs* in Punjab comprised both Hindu and Muslim communities, these colonial ethnographers proposed that tailors were drawn from other “proper” caste groups and became known as *darzīs* when they took up the work of sewing. Complicating this picture, however, they noted that “there is a *darzī* guild in every town” in Punjab, responsible for regulating the trade and its membership, acting in a similar fashion to caste associations.¹⁹

British ethnographers in India thus never shared a uniform, uncontested understanding of the forms of association that tied *darzīs*, both Muslim and Hindu, together as caste or social groups. But from a practical standpoint, Muslim tailors were usually categorized as a “menial or lower occupational class,” or sometimes as a “degraded class of Muhammadans,” with the Punjab census specifically using the term *arzāl* (degraded).²⁰ This was a derogatory framing for Muslim communities that were believed to be descended from the lowest-caste Hindu and Dalit converts, below the general laboring (*ajlāf*) Muslim masses.²¹ On the basis of this classification, regional administrators sought to exclude *darzīs* from social contexts in which they might have authority over members of the *ashrāf*.

For instance, as part of a 1900–1901 inquiry into the military recruitment of Muslims from the North-Western Provinces, Captain A. H. Bingley lamented that *darzīs* and other “lower occupational classes . . . have found their way into the ranks, and eventually risen to commissioned and non-commissioned grades.” Bingley, who had also compiled several prominent ethnographic reports, saw the recruitment of *darzīs* and other Muslim laborers as a problem not just because it threatened to upend *ashrāf* distinction. He also worried that potential social mobility among *darzīs* and other so-called menial Muslims threatened state theories that some Indian communities were “martial races” and therefore better suited to military service.²² “No self-respecting Pathan or Musalman Rajput can be expected to serve contentedly under native officers of low extraction, whose grandfathers may have been Hindu menial servants,” he wrote.²³

British administrators across North India were invested in forms of *ashrāf* social distinction, which often mirrored Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of a “class habitus,” relying on social norms to communicate elite positionality.²⁴ While South Asian Muslim social distinction had long preceded the colonial state, British administrators sought to compile information on the social norms that characterized Indian Muslim elites and to use them to police social and class boundaries. Colonial administrators in the region specifically sought to limit the access of Muslim laboring communities like *darzīs* to the social category of “Sheikh.” Within systems of ethnic and social categorization of Muslims in North India, “Sheikh” was one of the four most significant titles or markers reflecting a *sharīf* identity, the others being “Sayyid,” “Pathan,” and “Mughal.” Those who claimed the title “Sheikh” claimed to be descended from Arab migrants to India, though not, as Sayyids did, to be descended from the family of the Prophet Muhammad.²⁵

The category “Sheikh” thus carried with it forms of *ashrāf* privilege and an assumption of Arab descent. But as many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial ethnographic reports noted, it was also relatively capacious. Referring to oneself as “Sheikh” sometimes allowed *kārīgars*, especially those who had amassed some wealth, access to social privileges associated with the *ashrāf*. Ethnographic reports regularly quoted a proverb that they claimed was popular across North India: “Last year I was a *jūlāhā* [weaver], this year I am a Sheikh, next year, if prices rise, I shall become a Sayyid.”²⁶ The contents of the saying changed slightly depending on the report, with “butcher” or another artisan category sometimes substituted for *jūlāhā* or “weaver.” Regardless, it concisely expressed the idea that members of Muslim artisan classes aspired to, and claimed, *ashrāf* status.²⁷

By the turn of the twentieth century, colonial administrators expressed concerns that claims on Sheikh status by upwardly mobile laboring-class Muslims would disrupt state efforts to ensure that only “well-bred” Indians were accepted into military and state service ranks. Thus they increasingly sought to distinguish true Sheikhs from those who, like *darzīs*, were perceived to be from lower-caste, Hindu-convert backgrounds. This became especially important in 1909, when the

Morley-Minto Indian Councils Act slightly increased the number of opportunities for Indians to hold elected legislative council positions and created separate electorates for Muslims.

Following the Morley-Minto Reforms, British administrators repeatedly fretted that “low-born” Muslims might claim Sheikh status when running for councils.²⁸ *Darzīs* were among the candidates labeled “unsuitable” for council service, and those who attempted to stand for election were decried as “ridiculous” in colonial reports. On multiple occasions, Muslim *darzīs* who registered themselves as candidates were prevented from participating in elections through the intervention of colonial administrators.²⁹ Ultimately, then, efforts to categorize Muslim tailors as less orthodox Muslims, as descendants of caste marginalized Hindu converts, and as intrinsically lacking in social prestige led to limitations on their social mobility and political engagement, and these limitations were enforced through colonial policies.

MUSLIM *DARZĪS* AND THEIR TECHNOLOGIES AS COLONIAL CATEGORIES

When Khwaja Muhammad published his *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* in 1907, colonial ethnographers consistently portrayed tailors as unorthodox and marginal Muslims and fretted that tailors falsified descent as Sheikhs. But this was not the only colonial narrative about *darzīs* that the trade history contested. A second, equally prominent trend in colonial writing was a lamentation that *darzīs* were unable to adapt to the challenges of technological and economic change. This narrative gained prominence after the popularization of the handheld sewing machine in the mid-nineteenth century and was especially powerful after the invention of the electric sewing machine in 1889. However, its roots lay in an earlier colonial imagination of the Indian *darzī* as incapable of adapting to changing European fashions and norms of dress, an imagination that allowed administrators to contrast supposed European vitality with perceived Indian rigidity. David Arnold argues that in colonial discourse in India, “darzi became a byword for technological inertia, the unimaginative repetition of customary skills and imitative practices.”³⁰ Similarly, in her study of the use of the sewing machine in Sri Lanka, Nira Wickramasinghe argues that Europeans across Asia often saw tailors as “hostile to change,” unresponsive to changes in style, demand, and especially technical practice.³¹

It was this narrative that spurred the introduction of sewing courses in state-run and religious schools, as well as in jail workshops and other state-led projects. Because educational administrators saw the work of *darzīs* as simplistic and saw *darzīs* themselves as resistant to technological and stylistic change, they increasingly argued for the use of state-led institutions to create new classes of tailors. However, just as British administrative cadres never held uniform views about whether *darzīs* constituted a “caste,” they also articulated

a wide range of perspectives on how their work should be integrated into colonial educational institutions.

Specifically, educational administrators debated whether sewing ought to be taught in formal industrial schools set up by the state or whether the state might create new forms of apprenticeship and lineage-based training to create a new class of flexible, technologically adept tailors. An 1880 education department report proposed that Eurasian children—those of mixed European and Indian descent—should be educated in trades like tailoring, though its author admitted that they might be disadvantaged because they did not work as part of an established family trade. Therefore the author suggested that they be “brought into” state-run workshops, where they might train as apprentices and eventually “hand down to their children the taste for this work,” creating new, presumably superior, lineages of tailors who would come to dominate “private enterprise.”³² Other educationalists disagreed, viewing industrial schools as the appropriate venue for the training of new cadres of tailors and noting approvingly the proliferation of sewing courses in formal state- and missionary-run schools, especially, but not only, schools for girls.³³

Despite these differences, educational administrators concerned with sewing broadly agreed on two points. First, they maintained that as a trade, sewing was uniquely appropriate for women because it could be done within the home and did not require participation in a public space.³⁴ They often framed women as “seamstresses” rather than tailors or *darzīs*, but at least in colonial educational writing, the skills expected of each were often indistinguishable.³⁵ The exception to this overlap was that male *darzīs* were seen as more inclined toward design than women. Although colonial ethnographers dismissed male *darzīs* as not sufficiently creative to design within new fashion trends, these reports still placed male *darzīs*’ design skills above those of women in the trade. Seamstresses were assumed to work from patterns designed by men, rather than engaging closely in design work themselves, an expectation that minimized the actual creative labor performed by women. Sewing, colonial educationalists argued, was accessible for women who observed forms of *purdah*, and it could provide economic opportunity for women whose religious, class, or social norms prevented them from working in public.³⁶

Second, educational and industrial administrators were particularly concerned with adoption of sewing machines, both hand- and electric-powered, into the trade. They argued that as schools trained new, flexible cadres of tailors and seamstresses, they should emphasize the use of sewing machines. Atul Chandra Chatterjee, an Imperial Services of India official and the author of an expansive 1907 report for the colonial state on the industries of the United Provinces, suggested that “the use of knitting and sewing machines, in addition to ordinary knitting and sewing,” be taught at all girls’ schools in the region.³⁷ For state educationalists, sewing machines represented the potential for flexibility and change in the trade, with tailors who did not use sewing machines derided as rigid and backwards. The tailor or seamstress seated at a sewing machine became a key image in the colonial

imagination of the technological and social modernization, contrasting sharply with the image of the tradition-bound *darzī* bent over his needle.

GIRLS' SCHOOLS AND THE MAKING OF THE IDEAL SEAMSTRESS

Colonial state educational and industrial officers expressed interest in both boys' and girls' schools and educational programs that would create more flexible tailors and seamstresses, distinct from North India's *darzīs*, whom they held to be tradition bound. But the most significant interventions in training in sewing came, not through state programs, but through charitable and religious institutions. Initially, these schools were led primarily by Christian missionaries, but by the 1880s they were joined by both Hindu and Muslim reformist groups.

Missionary schools, particularly those aimed at girls, invested in sewing machines and mandated the study of sewing as a central part of the curriculum. The leaders of missionary schools argued that they could train seamstresses and tailors who were more efficient and detailed—and therefore higher paid—than their non-missionary school trained counterparts. In doing so, they sought to attract poor families not only to their schools but also to Christianity.³⁸ For instance, by the mid-1860s the American Methodist Episcopal Church Mission founded orphanages and industrial schools for both girls and boys in Bareilly. Sewing was among the primary skills taught at the girls' orphanage, and the 1870 mission report on the orphanage noted that it aimed to become self-sustaining through profits from “fancy work and plain sewing” undertaken by the girls.³⁹ As Charu Gupta has shown, sewing was also important to missionaries who hoped to distinguish “the ‘seminude’ outcaste [Hindu] women” from their converted Christian counterparts, “clad in ‘decent’ clothes, fit for clean Christian souls.”⁴⁰ Missionary reports expressed a conviction that the economic opportunity and the potential social status conferred by sewing would serve to attract the poor residents of Bareilly to Christianity.

Missionary efforts to spur conversion through industrial change prompted a backlash among both Hindu and Muslim elites, particularly those associated with “reformist” trends in each religion. By the 1890s, Christian missionary groups in North India complained of the “competition” their schools and charitable organizations faced from the Arya Samaj, a prominent Hindu reformist organization founded in 1875. Indeed, the orphanage-industrial school of the Bareilly Arya Samajists explicitly aimed to challenge the American Methodist mission there and was founded in part to stem conversions of Dalits and lower-caste Hindus to Christianity.⁴¹

Muslim reformist organizations likewise worried that the outreach of Christian missionary orphanages, industrial schools, and other charitable institutions would lead to the conversion of poor Muslims. Like the Arya Samaj and other Hindu revivalist organizations, Muslim charitable groups sometimes adapted the

missionaries' own emphasis on the importance of training in sewing for poor Muslims, especially girls. They consistently asserted the potential power of sewing for economic and social uplift.⁴² In Punjab, at the Maryam Muslim Orphanage in Sirhind—founded by the custodians of the shrine of the Naqshbandi Sufi Ahmad Sirhindi—the principal lamented that “the Christians proselytize through industry!”⁴³ The solution, he argued in a 1918 publication that sought support for his orphanage from Muslims across India, was to train Muslim artisans who could earn “higher wages.” He argued that with greater financial support, his orphanage could train Muslim boys as “tailors, carpenters, and blacksmiths” who were successful enough to run their own small workshops and stores.⁴⁴ Girls, he wrote, should likewise learn sewing, so that they could “avoid the ills of poverty,” ensuring their economic uplift and the preservation of their virtue.⁴⁵

For Muslim founders of girls' schools and orphanages, efforts to educate the Muslim poor also often centered on whether it was possible to inculcate values of middle-class social respectability into working-class girls. As Shenila Khoja-Moolji has shown, the question of how and whether Muslim women should be educated was intimately tied to middle-class, *ashrāf* conceptions of propriety and respectability. Elite Muslim men debated whether educating a *sharīf* woman outside of the home would diminish her—and her family's—social respectability or, conversely, contribute to her status by enabling a woman to “reproduce her own and her family's social standing.”⁴⁶ Those who believed that education conferred social respectability on women and their family sometimes sought to extend charity to poor women by offering them the promise of social respectability through charitable schools, orphanages, and other institutions.

Shabihunnisa wrote her 1907 *Muft kā darzī* in this context of competition between religious organizations in North India and the work of some elite Muslims to inculcate middle-class values into poor and working-class Muslim girls. Her book was intended, she explains in her introduction and conclusion, as an educational tool to be used at a wide range of girls' schools across the region. The very existence of a state-aided Muslim-led girls' school in the village of Belahra, located thirty-five kilometers from the small city of Barabanki, suggests the rapid geographic spread of narratives and practices of Muslim institutions of girls' education in the early twentieth century, as well as the spread of shared understandings of what characterized an upstanding Muslim woman. A conclusion to Shabihunnisa's book noted that, as the accomplished and educated wife of a *moulvi* in Belahra, Shabihunnisa was seen as the most suitable women to teach Muslim girls. Explaining that her “nature was inclined towards knowledge and skill since childhood” and that she had learned “reading, writing, sewing” to the “necessary degree,” the text positioned Shabihunnisa as a model *sharīf* woman, able to demonstrate both social respectability and the useful skill of designing, cutting, and sewing clothing.⁴⁷

In addition to drawing on her familial status as a member of the Muslim landed elite of the United Provinces, Shabihunnisa was clearly adept at negotiating the

preferences and beliefs of regional colonial administrators. She noted with pride that her school had passed inspection by regional education directors.⁴⁸ The school was given “aided” status, meaning it received government grants. As Muslim-led charitable and girls’ schools expanded in geography and popularity, many engaged more closely with the interests of the colonial state. In this case, that meant the desire of regional British administrators to create new classes of technologically and stylistically adaptable tailors and seamstresses. Indeed, the conclusion noted that the text itself was commissioned partially to fulfill the needs of state-funded girls’ schools in the region, suggesting the fluid movement of models of women’s engagement with sewing between Muslim girls’ schools and other educational institutions in the region.⁴⁹

SEWING AND EXPERTISE IN A MUSLIM GIRLS’ SCHOOL

Shabihunnisa was explicit about her efforts to contribute to new forms of expertise about sewing and to help create new classes of tailors. In an introduction, she lamented that no other text like hers existed, likely because in the past tailors had passed on the trade from father to son. The lack of school books on sewing, in her view, not only limited the spread of knowledge and expertise about sewing but also kept the trade inert. What she desired, she wrote, was to see “new branches of industry emerge.”⁵⁰

Shabihunnisa’s text rejected the centrality of a male *ustād* to sewing education, as well as the lineages of training that were central to *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*. However, the book was not designed to be used without guidance, and like other technical manuals it reflected the intersection of oral, illustrative, and textual knowledge in artisan education. The introduction noted that one of its purposes was to make the work of teachers in girls’ schools easier, suggesting that Shabihunnisa’s descriptions of sewing and illustrative patterns were, like the explanations of many other artisan manuals, used in combination with forms of oral education and training.⁵¹

For students in Shabihunnisa’s school, as for those in government-run and Christian missionary schools, an aptitude with sewing machines was central to this conceptualization of a new class of women tailors. Providing a sketch of the hand-powered sewing machine, Shabihunnisa suggested that facility with the machine, far more than formal training under a master *darzī*, would allow one to make a living as a seamstress.⁵² To an even greater degree than the sewing machine, however, Shabihunnisa positioned patterns and scissors as technologies that would create economic stability for Muslim women. Because cutting and designing were seen as marks of a highly skilled (and usually male) master tailor, Shabihunnisa emphasized these physical practices as the route to economic stability and social respectability.

To measure, sketch, and cut material, a seamstress using Shabihunnisa’s book would have required a degree of extant knowledge of sewing, and likely also oral

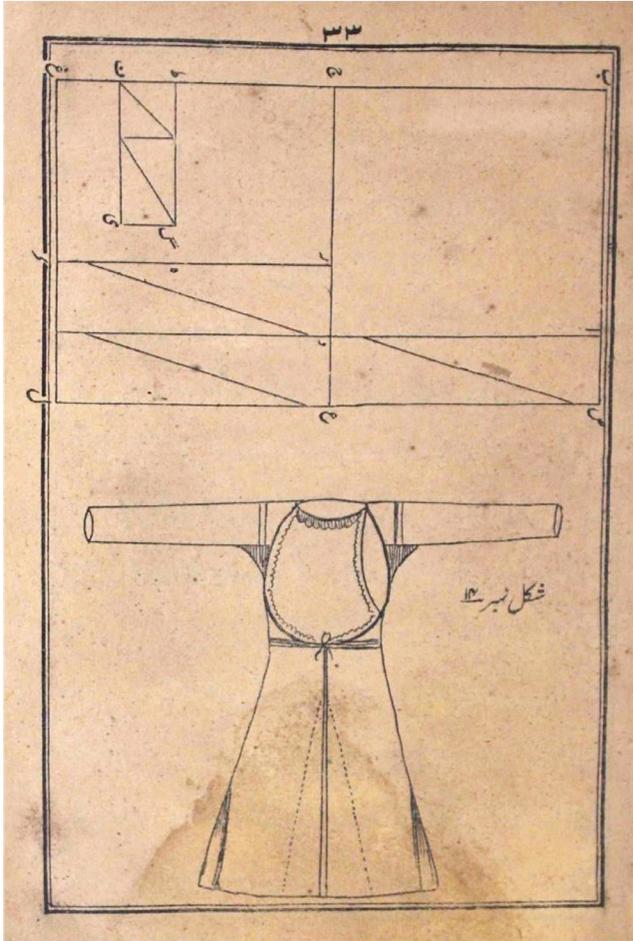


FIGURE 6. A pattern for an *angarkhā*, a style of men's outer coat, in Shabihunnisa's *Muft kā darzī* (Lucknow: Isnā 'Ashari Press, 1907). (Rekhata)

engagement with a teacher or mentor. The text also assumed that readers would consult the attending images as they worked, or be shown them by a teacher. Introducing a section titled “Rules for Cutting an *Angarkhā*” (a men's outer coat), Shabihunnisa wrote, “If a cloth is $2\frac{1}{4}$ *gaz* [yards] in length and 20 *girah* [one-sixteenth of a *gaz*] in width, provided the lower waist is 16 *girah*, then you can make a $2\frac{1}{4}$ -*gaz*-long *angarkhā*, always in the style of sketch number 12.”⁵³ Shabihunnisa's sketch provided an outline of the *angarkhā*, as well as a model of where the tailor should cut (figure 6). Her instructions reflect a broader assumption often embedded in artisan technical manuals: the written word would be used alongside, rather than in place of, oral and visual education.

Shabihunnisa hoped to create a technologically adept and adaptable class of women who might compete with male *darzīs*, but male tailors continued to receive significantly higher pay than their female counterparts through the early twentieth century and beyond.⁵⁴ Indeed, even as training for women expanded, the terms *darzī* and *tailor* often remained associated with men in both colonial and postcolonial South Asia, with women portrayed as less skilled “seamstresses.”⁵⁵ Despite colonial hand-wringing about the inflexibility of Indian male *darzīs*, and despite the efforts of women like Shabihunnisa, both colonial administrators and Indian consumers continued to express suspicion of the idea that women possessed enough creative expertise to design and cut patterns for more elaborate clothing.⁵⁶

To this end, Shabihunnisa’s book suggests at least one radical departure from the gendered assumptions about sewing and labor in colonial North India. Using *darzī* in the title and providing a wide variety of models that girls and women were expected to use and expand upon to design clothes, *Muft kā darzī* positioned women as real competitors to male tailors, not a secondary class of seamstresses. The text adopted colonial narratives about how tailors and seamstresses should train to become technologically modern, as well as the popular charitable understandings about the role of sewing education for poor and laboring women. But it also expanded these narratives insofar as it positioned women as the inheritors of the trade of tailoring, rather than as marginal participants in the trade and its economies.

Ultimately, however, the experiences and claims on technical authority that may have circulated among women tailors themselves—and even those of the pupils in Shabihunnisa’s school—remained absent from the manual. Shabihunnisa and her elite Muslim contemporaries were dedicated to the creation of new classes of Muslim workers. Women tailors were to be created and cultivated from among the mass of the Muslim poor and working classes. The experiences of women who already engaged in tailoring seem to have been largely irrelevant, aligned with the technologically inert world of male *darzīs*.

ELITE MUSLIMS AND THE REFORM OF THE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF TAILORS

Shabihunnisa’s frustration with male lineages of *darzīs* was likely informed by a colonial discourse that portrayed male *darzīs* as technologically and socially inert, hoarding knowledge of the trade while contributing to its lack of development. At the same time, it was also influenced by elite Muslim efforts to spread *ashrāf* models of social respectability to the working classes. As I explore in greater detail in chapter 4, elite Muslim *anjumans* opened a range of schools, including orphanages and charitable industrial schools, to train the poor in how to be religiously and socially upstanding Muslims, and to compete with Christian charitable institutions.

An 1895 report of a Bareilly orphanage-industrial school founded by the local Anjuman-i Islāmiyah (Islamic Association) noted, for instance, that “the elders of the community and supporters of the faith” had secured funding for the “books, meals, and clothing” used by the orphans. Anjuman members donated this funding with the expectation that the students would receive “rigorous” religious and moral education, and in doing so spread the Anjuman’s interpretation of how a Muslim should behave and worship.⁵⁷ Implicit in this framing was the idea that the *ustād-murīd* relationship and apprenticeship training upheld by tailors such as Khwaja Muhammad had failed not only to inculcate technological adaptability but also to teach religiously “correct” forms of Muslim piety and worship.

CONFRONTING MUSLIM RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY THROUGH TAILORS’ COMMUNITY HISTORIES

Despite limitations on tailors’ social mobility and perceptions of their religious marginality, some Muslim tailors did successfully engage with both the colonial state and Muslim elites, contesting their exclusion from definitions of piety and orthodoxy. In some cases, they even negotiated forms of colonial authority to press for their religious and economic interests vis-à-vis members of the Muslim elite. In the realm of law, Julia Stephens notes that a Muslim tailor from Tajpore, in Bihar, then part of the Bengal Presidency, contested the prayer practices of the *imām* of a local mosque in colonial courts after the *imām* brought a civil case against congregants for “interfering” with prayers.⁵⁸ Stephens argues that the decision of the Privy Council, which ultimately heard the case, set a standard for a “hands-off approach to governing ritual differences” among Muslims.⁵⁹ Still, the ability of a Muslim tailor to assert his piety and religious knowledge in court, and to muster proof of the “correct” nature of his position, suggests that some engaged with shifting sites of political authority to press for their own status and beliefs as Muslims.

Khwaja Muhammad’s engagement with print, and his efforts to disseminate knowledge of tailors’ intrinsic piety through the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*, can likewise be understood as a negotiation of an emerging site of South Asian authority represented by the printed word. Print facilitated the ability of tailors like Khwaja Muhammad to address readers across North India. It enabled him to contribute to the creation of a translocal, shared ideal of what it meant to be a pious tailor. At the same time, because community histories like the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* were publicly available, print contributed to the efforts of tailors and other *kārīgars* to counter elite writing that excluded Muslim workers from ideals of piety. The *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* highlights what Tortsen Tschacher has described as “a heightened concern with authenticity” among Muslim communities that are accused of practicing “syncretic” or “popular” religion.⁶⁰

LOCAL ENGAGEMENTS AND ARTISAN RESPONSES
TO ELITE IDEOLOGIES

Although the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* circulated translocally, across North Indian cities, it was also written in the specific context of early twentieth-century Allahabad. In his work and his writing, Khwaja Muhammad likely negotiated specifically Allahabadi claims on Muslim religious authority asserted by members of the Allahabadi Muslim elite. The city of Allahabad—from which Khwaja Muhammad published his community history—was an especially notable center of Muslim reformist efforts to address the urban working class.⁶¹

Like colonial administrators, many Muslim reformist intellectuals argued that the practices of working-class Muslims, including *darzīs*, were informed by Hindu religious pasts. Indeed, colonial ethnographers often drew on elite and reformist narratives of “orthodoxy” in their framings of the religious failures of Muslim artisans, with ethnographic practices shaped by elite Indian interlocutors. However, Muslim reformist scholars promoted discourses of how working-class Muslims should demonstrate piety that were more capacious and nuanced than the simplified dichotomies between orthodoxy and unorthodoxy that were reimaged by the state.

For instance, the scholar Maulana Muhammad Husain (d. 1904) was among the most prominent Muslim public lecturers in turn-of-the-century Allahabad and contributed to reshaping local conceptions of orthodoxy that Khwaja Muhammad may have encountered. Key reference points in the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*, such as Khwaja Muhammad’s insistence that piously tailored clothes had adorned the Prophet during his night ascension, or *mi’raj*, seem to reflect his influence on both popular and elite Muslim practice in Allahabad. Muhammad Husain is often credited with contributing to the popularization of public celebration of *mi’raj* night, which had previously been a primarily private, elite affair.⁶² As a member of a scholarly family associated with a prominent local Sufi shrine, he delivered public addresses on the virtues of the Prophet that attracted Allahabadis from across social classes.⁶³

Along with many other prominent Muslim scholars of the era across divergent reformist movements, Muhammad Husain viewed Muslim worship at shrines and sites of pilgrimage that were shared with Hindus with suspicion and consternation. But this did not mean that he, like some of his contemporaries, abjured the public worship of birth and death anniversaries or even popular practice at processions and Sufi shrines as intrinsically colored by contact with Hindu neighbors.⁶⁴ On the contrary, he was fundamental to the development of new forms of public worship, celebration, and commemoration that targeted working-class communities, including the celebration of *mi’raj* night.⁶⁵

In early twentieth-century Allahabad, the night of the *mi’raj*—which had previously been marked primarily by elite Muslim families—became an important public

celebration for Muslims from across class backgrounds. The public commemoration of events like *mi'raj* grew to incorporate large numbers of working-class Muslims and became a space for public lectures and processions, in part because of the intercession of scholars like Muhammad Husain.⁶⁶ Khwaja Muhammad's decision to center *mi'raj* in his narrative of the Muslim past of tailors, therefore, reflects not only his integration of tailors into a narrative of the Muslim past but also his potential engagement with the efforts of prominent Allahabadis to speak to Muslim laborers.

THE *RISĀLAH-YI IDRĪSIYAH* AND THE MUSLIM PASTS OF TAILORS

The *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* suggests the interpenetration of some of the elite and laboring-class Muslim narratives of piety and practice. But it also reveals artisan efforts to assert that their communities, by virtue of their labor, had distinctive claims on Muslim piety. Khwaja Muhammad integrated tailors into contemporary understandings of important moments in the Muslim past—such as the *mi'raj*—and provided a lineage of education and training for Muslim tailors that began with Idris but wound through Sufi saintly lineages in Allahabad and the surrounding regions. He suggested that a Central Asian Sufi saint from Samarqand had brought the knowledge of the Muslim precepts of sewing to North India and that local Sufi-tailor *ustāds* had trained *murīds* in the Islamic practice of their trade.⁶⁷ For Khwaja Muhammad, *ustād-murīd* relationships—condemned by both the colonial state and some Muslims elites as reflective of the inflexibility of the trade—were fundamental to protecting the distinctive Muslim past and piety of tailors.

Moreover, throughout his trade history, Khwajah Muhammad attributed his advice to that given by the prominent members of the Sufi-*darzī* lineage that he outlined in his introduction. In doing so, he suggested that his work was not his alone but representative of his community and his history. Indeed, while the title page of the book listed Khwajah Muhammad as its author (*muṣanif*), in the text he claimed he was more of a translator, making older bodies of knowledge accessible to contemporary tailors. He attributed the knowledge of the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* to a Persian *kasbnāmah* (a book describing a craft of trade).⁶⁸ “It should be clear,” he wrote, “that this advice was a translation [*tarjumah*] from a *kasbnāmah*.”⁶⁹

As I explore in chapter 5, the ability to adapt and vernacularize technical knowledge and terminology—usually between English and Urdu—often became a mark of authority among upwardly mobile *kārīgars* in North India. In this case, however, the authority vested in the author-as-translator was based on the prestige of Persian and its association with knowledge of South Asian (and transregional) Muslim pasts. Although the use of Persian in India was in decline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it retained authority and prestige as a language of historical South Asian dynasties, courts, and literature, claimed especially

but not just by Muslims.⁷⁰ By referencing his translation and vernacularization of tailoring knowledge from a Persian *kasbnāmah*, Khwajah Muhammad positioned tailors as the inheritors of a specific and distinctly pious Muslim tradition.

PIETY AND GENDER IN THE *RISĀLAH-YI IDRĪSIYAH*

Khwaja Muhammad did not just counter the narratives of both elite Muslims and the colonial state about *darzīs* by offering Muslim pasts that centered the work of tailors and their lineages of descent and training. He also disputed the idea—present in the writings of both Shabihunnisa and the Anjuman-i Islāmiah—that sewing was incidental to a worker’s religious identity. The authors of these texts hoped that sewing, like other forms of industrial training, could be used to help laboring Muslim women become socially respectable in an *ashrāf* model of femininity. However, they framed this work as a means to an end, not a form of piety in itself.

Conversely, Khwaja Muhammad tied the practice of Islam to the practice of sewing. He suggested that to fail to adhere to the norms of the trade—the “rules of the work”—would bring both religious and professional disrepute, and indeed that the religious and the professional were one and the same. He explained that tailors must maintain both “outer and inner purity” as they sewed. To be outwardly pure meant cleansing oneself and performing ablutions as one would for prayer, while inward purity meant to “work honestly, without theft.” He argued that hadith taught that completing one’s “daily work” without complaint was a *farz*, or religious duty.⁷¹

The *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* placed tailors at the center of a Muslim past and contemporary Muslim piety. In doing so, its author argued that knowledge of Islam was central to the correct practice of one’s trade and that the correct practice of a trade could secure one’s status as a pious and respectable Muslim. Khwaja Muhammad referenced the role of tailors and sewing in the creation of not only the “tunic of the Prophet Muhammad” worn on the night of the ascension, but also the “cloak” (*kisā*) of the Prophet.⁷² This was a reference to a well-known hadith that was particularly prominent within the Shia tradition but also recognized and well known among Sunnis. It held that the Prophet wrapped the members of his family “under his cloak” and in doing so purified them and removed their sins.⁷³ For Khwaja Muhammad, the hadith revealed the importance of the piety of tailors, implying that the cloak of the Prophet, like the Prophet himself, must have been pure. In other words, it showed not only that the labor of tailors had shaped and informed early Islamic history but also that the piety of tailors was central to the continued well-being and improvement of a wider Muslim community.

Khwaja Muhammad did not remark explicitly on the influence of the colonial state, and he was likewise silent about the relationship between his community and the charitable projects promulgated by elite Muslims. But he wrote in a moment when middle-class Muslims, many associated with religious reformist

movements, sought to articulate moral standards and norms for Muslim artisans.⁷⁴ Khwaja Muhammad's silence about the efforts of middle-class Muslims to provide moral and practical education in trades such as sewing does not reflect a failure to recognize these projects. To the contrary, my contextualized reading of the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* suggests that his religious, moral, and historical claims about the work of tailors were written in conversation with the rising influence of new, elite-led forms of artisan training aimed at tailors.

Khwaja Muhammad sought to distinguish the forms of training offered by artisan lineages from those proffered by both the colonial state and schools led by elite Muslims. Sewing, he argued, was central not only to tailors' laboring identities but also to their religious identities. He asserted that performing tailoring without a rootedness in its specific forms of Muslim piety risked exposing the tailor to both material and moral ruin. Conversely, learning to be a tailor without guidance from a pious (implicitly male) *ustād* meant that young tailors risked practicing the trade in an un-Islamic way. Rather than adopting colonial or middle-class narratives about what it meant to be a pious or modern Muslim tailor, Khwaja Muhammad argued that training within the community would always produce tailors who were both more adept and more pious.

In countering the claims of the colonial state and middle-class Muslim organizations about the nature of Indian tailors, Khwaja Muhammad also asserted the masculinity of his trade. He allowed limited space for the work of Muslim women tailors, masculinizing the work of tailors in a context where women were increasingly positioned as potential competitors. This suggests an important broader shift in how male tailors experienced the social and gendered spaces of sewing. Many likely continued to work alongside their wives and female relatives in family-run shops, a practice that was common across a wide range of artisan trades.⁷⁵ But they also aimed to limit the most lucrative spaces of tailoring to male authority and to claim the primacy of implicitly male forms of training and piety within the trade, in a context where forms of female training had expanded.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE AND ARTISAN CREATIVITY IN THE *RISĀLAH-YI IDRĪSIYAH*

Given the degree to which technological ineptitude and a resistance to the sewing machine featured in colonial depictions of artisans, it is initially surprising to not find the sewing machine mentioned explicitly in the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*. But Khwaja Muhammad portrayed his text as timeless, reflective of knowledge that had been revealed by God to Idris, passed down from *ustād* to *murīd* over millennia, and recorded in an earlier Persian *kasbnāmah*. In this understanding of sewing, addressing the technological change represented by the sewing machine, or the material change represented by colonial styles, could have diminished Khwaja Muhammad's ability to claim religious authority for his community.

Still, the pressures of economic, material, and technological change were not wholly overlooked in the text. Among Khwaja Muhammad's chief claims was that God had given the tailor the power of creativity and design. "The tailor's purpose," he wrote, "was created by almighty God, and as if by a flash of lightning, he gave [tailors] the power of creation, to make clothes fall into [the tailors'] hands."⁷⁶ To sew, to create new designs, and to embrace the creative force given by God was, for Khwaja Muhammad, to respect God's intentions for tailors. The type of clothes one sewed—or indeed, the specific tools one used—became secondary in this understanding of tailoring. Although the sewing machine itself remained unaddressed, the emphasis on creativity, or even flexibility, suggests that it was not necessarily prohibited.

Although the sewing machine was not prohibited or disdained in Khwaja Muhammad's understanding of his trade, it was not a key part of the education of a tailor at the feet of his master. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the central conflict between texts published by elite Muslims, like *Muft kā darzī*, and community histories like the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* was a difference in a fundamental understanding of the role of education. For Khwaja Muhammad, the education of a tailor at the feet of his *ustād* was a form of religious education, a chance to learn to be a good *Muslim* tailor. While the elite Muslims who founded new girls' schools were invested in the education of both good Muslims and good tailors, these categories remained distinct from each other. The sewing machine, for Khwaja Muhammad, may have been part of the practice of sewing and the embrace of the creative potential gifted by God, but it was not, in his understanding, fundamental to the practice of tailoring as a Muslim, so it remained absent from his *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*.

COMMUNITY HISTORIES IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Khwaja Muhammad's *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* was far from being the only community history produced by a member of an artisan or working-class community or trade in the early twentieth century. Partly because of the increased accessibility of print, members of many economically or socially marginalized communities—with varied religious identities—published community histories that sought to improve their social status both vis-à-vis their coreligionists and vis-à-vis the colonial state. Badri Narayan argues that among Dalit and marginalized communities within a Hindu caste context, efforts to improve social standing included claiming "narratives of social origin" and community histories that both mirrored and undermined upper-caste claims. This process relied on—and perhaps even contributed to—the rise and popularization of print technology in the early twentieth century.⁷⁷

Within Muslim communities, the early twentieth century also saw a rise in print production of community histories by laboring groups. Santosh Kumar Rai has shown that Muslim weavers from *jūlāhā* caste backgrounds in early twentieth-century North India asserted new social identities and forms of social prestige by claiming Arab origins, an identity usually seen as restricted to the *ashraf*.⁷⁸ This included

forming associations for social, religious, and economic uplift that published works about the community's history and correct religious practice. Leading members of Muslim butcher communities in early twentieth-century North India likewise used print to circulate community histories. One such work, the *Risālah-yi banī Quṣṣá* (Treatise of the children of Qussa), published in Delhi in 1925, was similar to the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* in that it provided a lineage of practice and a set of moral and social precepts for butchers. It laid out a set of behaviors, rooted in an Islamic past and a Quranic tradition, that were indicative of a butcher's morality and piety.⁷⁹

The *Risālah-yi banī Quṣṣá* also emphasized ancestral lineage and bloodline descent in a more direct way than the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*. It argued that Delhi's Muslim butchers could claim ancestors who were members of prominent Arab families that had shaped the early Muslim world. In focusing on a narrative of community descent and Arab ancestry, *Risālah-yi banī Quṣṣá* more explicitly used the language of the *ashrāf* for laboring-class Muslims.⁸⁰ Its use of genealogy mirrored the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century publications of family trees and narratives of descent by elite Muslims across the region, suggesting the spread and assertion of some elite assumptions about social respectability among Muslim laboring communities.⁸¹

The diversity of tactics represented by the work of *jūlāhā* weavers, as well as *Risālah-yi banī Quṣṣá* and the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* highlights the fact that Muslim artisans and laborers in colonial India had differing opinions about how to assert social respectability in contexts of marginalization. One important element that was shared was an emphasis on the transmission of knowledge about their trade. Both the *Risālah-yi banī Quṣṣá* and the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* highlighted Sufi regional lineages that the authors claimed had contributed to the transmission of knowledge across centuries. Just as Khwaja Muhammad traced knowledge about tailoring through a Sufi saintly lineage to Allahabad, so too did the author of the *Risālah-yi banī Quṣṣá*. He asserted that shrines and saints in Delhi were connected to Muslim butchers' histories.⁸² Transmission through Sufi lineages, the authors of both the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* and the *Risālah-yi banī Quṣṣá* argued, had allowed information about how to piously practice one's trade to move across languages and geographies. This emphasis on the process of transmission not only served to historically root the community histories but also suggested how their authors expected their printed texts to be used.

PRINT, LITERACY, AND ORALITY IN THE CIRCULATION OF COMMUNITY HISTORIES

An obvious problem with using community histories such as the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* to reconstruct early twentieth-century artisan social identities is the question of literacy. We do not have detailed records that reflect, for certain, the percentages of artisans who could read and write in Urdu or any other language. We know, however, that overall literacy rates across British India remained around

10 percent through the early twentieth century and that literacy rates among artisan and laborer communities were usually much lower, with a few exceptions.⁸³ Therefore, when we read the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*, we must do so with careful consideration of its intended audience and the ways that they may have accessed the text, even without high rates of literacy.

Khwaja Muhammad himself referenced this question in his conclusion to the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*. He noted that the history was meant to provide blessings and moral edification for “anyone who reads it, or hears it read by another.”⁸⁴ He clearly wrote with an assumption that literacy and orality intersected and that knowledge about sewing was transmitted between master and pupil—and within the community more broadly—through both methods. While not all tailors could read or read well, Khwaja Muhammad recognized that literate people read aloud to others and that those who were read to remembered and passed on knowledge to others. Indeed, while the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* was a short, concise manual that did not make extensive use of poetry, other community histories, such as the *Risālah-yi banī Quṣṣá*, were written with large portions in verse, indicating that the author may have intended the text to be partially memorized to ease circulation.⁸⁵

Moreover, Khwaja Muhammad attributed similar levels of authenticity to knowledge transmitted orally and through text. After all, he noted that the knowledge that he published through the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* had itself reached him through a combination of oral and literary transmission. Although he cited from, and claimed to have translated portions of, a Persian *kasbnāmah* aimed at tailors, he also attributed his knowledge more broadly to the *ṣāḥib-i fan* or masters of the art, emphasizing his own, presumably orally transmitted, education.⁸⁶ And while he used the presumed textuality of the older *kasbnāmah* to support his authority on the trade and its history, he did not explicitly prefer textual knowledge over oral knowledge. He wrote that Idris had learned to tailor, not through a process of reading or writing but instead through God’s revelation and command.⁸⁷

It is in this context of mixed print and oral transmission that we should consider the religious traditions proposed by trade and community histories such as the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*. For Khwaja Muhammad, print offered the opportunity to promulgate an alternative narrative of Muslim practice and belief that centered his own trade. But this promulgation relied on not only individual, literate leaders but also on processes of oral community transmission. Indeed, the popularization and transmission of trade histories that centered the narratives of Muslim laborers in the Islamic past was also informed by consolidating spaces of labor, including the development of large-scale urban workshops and factories. Processes of urbanization, migration, and industrialization, spurred by both the state and the consolidating Indian capitalist classes, contributed to intensifying social marginalization. At the same time, they also contributed to the ways that artisans circulated

narratives about their histories and religious practices, enabling, in the case of Khwaja Muhammad, engagement with the printing press and translocal forms of oral and printed circulation. In chapter 4, I turn to these consolidating spaces of work as spaces of social interaction, asking how artisans circulated localized narratives of the Muslim pasts of their trades through processes of migration.

. . .

Shahid Amin has argued that the “siring of communities through print and the affixing of history to persistent memories” contributed to the consolidation of oppositional religious identities in India.⁸⁸ And indeed, emphasis on an exclusively Muslim past and claims on religious orthodoxy in the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* and other similar community histories likely contributed to the elision or erasure of shared pasts. Because religiously shared pasts and practices were decried by both Muslim reformists and the colonial state as evidence of low status and a lack of orthodoxy, the community histories of Muslim artisans did often emphasize an exclusively Muslim social identity. But reading the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* in its contemporary social context also highlights the fact that it was not a purely responsive text that adopted middle-class norms, colonial narratives, or reformist ideologies. It sought instead to “sire communities” and “affix history” to assert community identity for marginalized Muslims in a way that challenged exclusive elite and middle-class claims on Muslim pasts.

Ultimately, the publication of the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* reflects efforts within established Muslim artisan communities to contest state and elite understandings of their trades, in part by positioning their work within narratives of the Muslim past. Muslim tailors like Khwaja Muhammad recognized their own marginalization within the ethnographic and educational projects of the colonial state, which often depicted them as unorthodox Muslims incapable of technological adaptation. Likewise, they understood that middle-class projects aimed at creating new classes of tailors were built on the fact that many *sharīf* Muslims viewed existing communities of Muslim tailors to be of poor social, familial, and educational backgrounds. As suggested by *Muft kā darzī*, schools led by elite Muslims sought to create new models of artisanal expertise. In doing so, they often excluded the forms of training that were most dominant within extant artisan communities, even as they asserted conceptions of the trade that made space for women’s economic participation and professional authority. In response, the authors of trade histories placed their own work at the center of a Muslim tradition. They argued that their trade practices reflected, not technological or educational inflexibility, but their piety and connection to the Muslim past.

This chapter focuses on individuals like Khwaja Muhammad, who circulated their claims on the Muslim past through an expanding North Indian print economy. Chapter 4 turns to the circulation of artisan religious and material practices through migration. Drawing on analyses of migrant carpenters in Lahore and

Kanpur, it highlights the exchange of localized traditions within new urban workshops. Just as the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah* and the *Muft kā darzī* reflect a competitive knowledge economy about sewing, the carpentry manuals reflect multiple understandings of how to practice carpentry and how to practice Islam. Drawing on an Urdu-language manual of carpentry knowledge, as well as records of labor migration, chapter 4 traces how knowledge of carpentry moved and changed through processes of artisan urbanization.