

SOUTH ASIA

RAJEEV KINRA:

Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary.

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Rajeev Kinra's fascinating study of Chandar Bhan "Brahman" highlights the role of the Mughal state secretary (*munshī*) while challenging conventional interpretations of Mughal history. Born in the closing years of Akbar's rule (1556–1605), Chandar Bhan served the Mughal emperors Jahangir (r. 1605–27), Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58) and the first decade of Aurangzeb's reign (1658–1707). He composed the *Chahār Chaman (Four Gardens)* during these latter years and Kinra's book could be read as a textual study of the *Chahār Chaman*, a biography of Chandar Bhan's life, as well as an administrative history of the Mughal Empire.

The book opens with the Taj Mahal, pointing out that while the monument's story is popular, other aspects such as its administration and maintenance are less known. This raises a central argument that politics, conquests, and economics dominate Mughal history, while other subjects such as administrative practices remain understudied (21). This thread continues in the first chapter by questioning the common belief that later Mughal emperors moved away from Akbar's doctrine of peace for all (*ṣulḥ-i kull*). Chandar Bhan's advancement through the Mughal administration and his Hindu identity in poetry shows a continuance of Akbar's peace for all that belies the typical narrative of Shah Jahan's increasing orthodoxy and Aurangzeb's religious zealotry leading to Mughal decline.

Kinra engages in a close reading of the *Chahār Chaman* over three chapters, or approximately half his book. A central concept is that the text acted as a "mirror for munshīs" for aspiring secretaries advancing through the administrative ranks similar to the mirror for princes literature instructing princes on how to rule. The best leaders, according to Chandar Bhan, combined the military and secretarial arts. This explains Chandar Bhan's admiration for Shah Jahan, who is extolled with a list of 42 titles, only three of which, Kinra notes, referred to conquest. The vast majority lauded Shah Jahan's justice, wisdom, intellect and mystical knowledge (103). When Chandar Bhan described the emperor's daily routine, he praised Shah Jahan's attention to administrative affairs throughout the day and mentions how the emperor personally oversaw the administration between appointments of grand viziers (125). Chandar Bhan demonstrated how Shah Jahan's attention to detail led to prosperity throughout the country, and he included descriptions of Delhi, Agra, Lahore, Kashmir, Ajmer and Qandahar that a traveller might find interesting.

Beyond serving as a mirror for munshīs or an administrative history, the *Chahār Chaman* offers a considerable amount of biographical detail. Kinra translates and analyses letters to prominent officials and family members included in the text. These letters recount Chandar Bhan's self-fashioning in etiquette, diplomacy, poetry and mystical sensibility (62). He repeatedly advocated for a mystical sensibility, expressed through Sufism, as a counterbalance to success and power. The best leaders maintained this balance and Shah Jahan is once again exemplary in his Sufism and mystical sensibility. While Chandar Bhan noted the death of the grand vizier Sa'd Allah Khan (d. 1656), with whom he "carried on as if of one mind, from

early morning until evening and from evening right up until the next morning” (172), he failed to mention Shah Jahan’s declining health the next year and the ensuing war of succession between Aurangzeb and Dara Shikoh. Kinra explains that Chandar Bhan reached the apex of his career and that the war for succession neither affected his position nor related to his autobiography, so it remained unstated. Remarkable throughout these letters – at least for today’s reader – is Chandar Bhan’s use of both Persian and Sufism when referring to Hindu concepts.

These Hindu concepts are most apparent in the Persian verses scattered throughout the *Chahār Chaman*. Kinra spends a chapter on the seventeenth-century search for freshness (*tāza-gū’ī*). What made Persian poetry fresh was innovation on Classical Persian rather than the creation of a new style. Here is the first evidence of Chandar Bhan’s Hindu faith as the “Brahman” (his penname) wove Hindu ablution, the sacred thread, and other religious practices into his Persian poetry. Kinra expertly unpacks the imagery in seventeenth-century Hindi and Persian literary traditions. He also uses these verses to challenge the derogatory *sabk-i hindī* label by noting these verses incorporate Indic traditions into the Classical Persian style without Hindi loanwords, syntax or grammar.

While Chandar Bhan saw no incongruity in writing Persian or serving the Mughals, later social memory and historiography have focused on his Hindu faith. Biographical compendia (*tazkira*) erased decades of service by wrongly reporting that Shah Jahan’s son, Dara Shikoh, befriended Chandar Bhan and introduced him to the emperor. Chandar Bhan, according to this story, composed a verse for the occasion, “I have a heart so acquainted with infidelity that, however many times/I took it to the Ka’ba I brought it back still a Brahman” (261). The verse infuriated Shah Jahan, who declared Chandar Bhan a heretic and ordered his execution. Dara Shikoh interceded, explaining the meaning and appeasing the emperor. This story becomes a (false) historical example contrasting Akbar and Dara Shikoh’s pluralism with Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb’s orthodoxy. Just as Kinra opens his book with the image of the Taj Mahal, he closes it with a miniature of Dara Shikoh introducing Chandar Bhan holding a page with the offending verse. Both images are reminders that sometimes the accepted history is only one part of the picture.

Kinra achieves a difficult task in this book by combining textual study, biography, and administrative history. The prose is elegantly written in an engaging and conversational style. The only downside is that the microhistorical approach occasionally lacks a larger context. Kinra asserts, for example, that Chandar Bhan wrote a mirror for munshīs in the mirror for princes style. A deeper analysis of these authors, particularly Aruzi’s *Chahār Maqāla*, would elucidate the similarities while distinguishing Chandar Bhan’s use of life experiences (common in *inshā’* prose literature) from the more mythic–historical mirror for princes, further supporting Kinra’s argument. Such a minor blemish, however, fails to tarnish Kinra’s achievement.

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