

*Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary.* By RAJEEV KINRA. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. xix, 371 pp. ISBN: 9780520286467 (paper, also available in cloth and as e-book).

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Is India apart from the world, separated by mountains and oceans, or can India, especially premodern India, be seen as a part of the Asian ecumene, where soldiers and sailors wedded the subcontinent to neighbors both near and distant? That query is matched by related queries of those who inhabit India: Is a seventeenth-century Hindi speaker able to master a “foreign” language, one imported from beyond its mountains or oceans, and even claim “native” proficiency in that tongue? Moreover, can one who embraces Hindu ritual and belief be fluent in another religious idiom, one not only “foreign” but Abrahamic, for instance, Islam?

The answer to all three questions is a resounding yes in Rajeev Kinra’s deeply textual and broadly revisionist monograph. *Writing Self, Writing Empire* would seem to belong to that popular genre of work known as *tazkiras*, that is, biographical collections that provide summary depictions of major—and also minor—figures from a place, time, or tradition. Such collections, written in Persian, are popular and widespread in South Asia.

The subject of Kinra’s probing, engaging, and comprehensive work is a seventeenth-century Mughal secretary, Chandra Bhan, who himself became an entry in the *tazkiras* of other Mughal elites, even though he himself was first and foremost a *munshi* or secretary. Chandra Bhan authored a singular book, *Chahar Chaman* (The Four Gardens), which became a guidebook to indices of sociability, civility, and lyrical license that form the background, and impart political wisdom, for others of his class, whether scribes, clerks, or secretaries—a how-to-do-it manual, of a kind unimaginable for a bureaucrat today but indispensable for one in the court of a seventeenth-century Mughal emperor.

Kinra’s forensic analysis answers the three questions posed above—about India as a place, about Hindi as a language, and about Hindu as an identity—from the perspective of Chandra Bhan, also known as Chandra Bhan Brahman, with the last name signifying both his Hindu identity and his caste. Not only does he connect India to other places, he is himself marinated in Persian culture, history, and language. For centuries, Indians from many regions had learned Persian at an early age, and Indian elites wrote notable poetry in Persian from the eleventh century on, with Amir Khusrau of thirteenth-century Delhi lauded as the exemplar for all who came after him. By the time of Chandra Bhan, Persian had become not just the lingua franca of elites but also the required bureaucratic language at all levels of Mughal court administration.

But just because India was linked to Iran, did that mean that someone like Chandra Bhan could acquire sufficient fluency to write not just Persian prose but also Persian poetry, and not just everyday poetry but verse that could be repeated, lauded, and preserved by his compatriots? Kinra’s answer is yes. Chandra Bhan was steeped in an Indo-Persian “cosmopolitan ecumene,” one that extended across northern India and also “participated in a vast transregional conversation whose voices could also be heard in Bengal, Arakan, the Deccan, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, the rest of central and inner Asia, and indeed the entire eastern Muslim world” (p. 3). Chandra Bhan’s guidebook is deemed to be both expansive and pragmatic, “aimed at a wide cosmopolitan readership among the mobile intellectual populations of the Persianate and Indian Ocean worlds” (p. 157). And the particular Persian idiom that *Chahar Chaman* exhibits is called

*taza-gui* or fresh speech, itself a movement that flourished in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal cultural circles to such an extent that it could, and should, be seen as a catalyst “to bring the vast Persophone literary tradition into the wider scholarly conversation about various ‘alternative modernities’” (p. 236).

A frequent idiom in *taza-gui* is Sufism, which Chandra Bhan links to images and conventions of other poets, both Iranian and Indian. Precisely because Chandra Bhan is Hindu, he can, and does, vacillate, at times “exploiting his interstitial subject position as a Brahman steeped in the Perso-Islamicate cultural world, [at other times] drawing on ‘Indic’ tropes” (p. 220). He even plays with his own name “Brahman” in verse precisely to demonstrate how “a highly literate and sophisticated Indian poet can Persianize his very name in order to conform to the classical metrical conventions that remained the norm among the wider audience of the Persianate world” (p. 223).

Yet the adventuresome imagination and the cultural border crossing that marked Chandar Bhan have not been lauded by posterity, or even much studied today. His own reputation as a Hindu loyal to a “Muslim” emperor was even called into question through a dubious, oft-cited couplet attributed to him but severely critiqued by Kinra (pp. 281–85). More serious is the neglect of the Indo-Persian cultural production of the great Mughals. Major scholarship on the political, military, economic, and bureaucratic aspects of Mughal rule abound, yet the genre of literary labor that Chandar Bhan exemplifies—one linked to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Indo-Persian *taz-kiras*—has been routinely ignored. As Kinra observes, “This is not just a loss for Western scholarship; many of these texts have faded into obscurity even in India ... [at the same time that they] are often difficult to locate even in Persian printed editions” (pp. 12–13).

One can only hope that Kinra’s pioneering labor will inspire others to look beyond narratives of dependency and decline and instead explore the treasure trove of cultural production that led Mughal India “to be viewed all over the wider Persianate world as a haven for intellectual freedom and literary genius” (p. 206). *Writing Self, Writing Empire* is indispensable for any student of the Indian Ocean region or comparative history, especially as it provides a blistering, novel, and convincing corrective to Orientalist or Western triumphalist views of the “decadent East.”

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In *Far Out: Countercultural Seekers and the Tourist Encounter in Nepal*, Mark Liechty fluidly unfurls the interconnected stories of Nepali entrepreneurs and Western travelers who built the infrastructure of Nepal’s tourism industry. Artfully threading together comings and goings of people, capital, and ideas in Nepal, especially Kathmandu, he utilizes interviews with key actors and ephemera from various phases of tourism to create an exceptionally readable text, with interest within and beyond the academic world. Liechty challenges broad-brush stories of Shangri-la and lawless lands with