

Review

Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary, Rajeev Kinra, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015, ISBN 9780520286467 (pbk), 394 pp.

Writing Self, Writing Empire is an intimate history of Persianate bureaucratic culture in Mughal India told through the eyes of the imperial scribe Chandar Bhan Brahmin. Though Hindu Brahmin scribes were commonplace in Mughal India, Chandar Bhan was noteworthy for serving at the court of three major Mughal emperors—Jahangir (r. 1605–27), Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58) and—albeit briefly—Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707). Historians of Mughal India have already delighted in a nuanced portrayal of Chandar Bhan Brahmin’s world that offers insights into cultural transformations and unsettles contemporary religio-nationalist notions of a medieval Hindu–Muslim schism. Scholars of Persian Studies will value Kinra’s exposition of an early modern Indo-Persian realm offering a rich account of a Persian scribe’s self-fashioning as well as a comparative study of the literary turns of *tāza-gu’i* (new poetics) in Mughal India and the *bāzgasht-e adabi* (literary return) in post-Safavid Iran. Kinra’s conception of a distinct Indo-Persian literary sphere offers opportunities for thoughtful debate with recent works that argue for a transcendental Persianate cultural geography—one

with enmeshed literary networks between Iran and India¹ and intermediary regions such as Kashmir serving as sites of both patronage and poetic inspiration.²

In the first chapter, “Chandar Bhan’s Intellectual World: A Revisionist Perspective,” Kinra contests the teleological narrative of a Mughal cultural decline. He draws attention to the simplistic understanding of Jahangir’s rule, the virtual neglect of Shah Jahan’s reign, outside of art history and—notably—the popular, contestable notion of Aurangzeb’s “implacate orthodoxy” (p. 19). Briefly—but importantly—Kinra also sheds light on caste relations in Mughal India. He notes the presence of lower-caste scribes, calligraphers and revenue officers, and that one such scribe, Jatmal Shudra, taught Chandar Bhan Brahmin *khat-e shekasta* (p. 24). The reader learns about the emphasis on the advancement of medical knowledge at Shah Jahan’s court and the notable role of women, particularly Shah Jahan’s daughter Jahan Ara, in patronizing scholarship (pp. 33–4). The evocatively titled second chapter, “Mirror for Munshis,” provides insight on the training of bureaucrats, particularly *munshis* (scribes) and *wazirs* (ministers), in a range of skills alongside administrative and secretarial arts. *Adab* (refinement), *akhlāq* (ethics) and *‘Erfān* (gnosis) were key components of the training of a *munshī*. Scribes also played a critical role in the organization of the Mughal bureaucracy as well as diplomacy after Akbar’s reign. The third chapter, “King of Delhi, King of the World,” focuses on the figure of Shah Jahan, Chandar Bhan Brahmin’s relationship with and perception of the emperor and the role of the king in the daily life of the empire. The maintenance and beautification of the province of Agra is a notable preoccupation in his gazetteer *Chabār Chaman*—though, as Kinra notes, there are surprisingly few mentions of the Taj Mahal in account given that Chandar Bhan became its caretaker (pp. 144–5). Here Chandar Bhan Brahmin appears to be both a skilled propagandist and loyalist of the state.

In the fourth chapter, “Writing the Mughal Self,” Kinra offers compelling observations regarding Chandar Bhan Brahmin’s self-fashioning attempts through a selection of epistolary works. Chandar Bhan Brahmin’s correspondence with notable Mughal noblemen such as Asaf Khan reveals a shrewd diplomat repeatedly urging former patrons to speak highly of him to the emperor (pp. 181–3). In the fifth chapter, “Making Indo-Persian Literature Fresh,” Kinra offers the first sustained Eurasian contextualization of the turn to *tāza-gu’i* (new poetics) in Mughal India and the *bāzgasht-e adabi* (literary return) in post-Safavid Iran, arguing that these coincided with the new Islamic millennium as well as European mannerism. Chandar Bhan Brahmin merged these new poetics with his own mystical inclinations. Kinra shines light on a set of Chandar Bhan’s verses that provide both subtle and explicit critiques of orthodoxy (p. 219). The final chapter, titled “The Persistence of Gossip,” examines divergent strains of cultural memory regarding Chandar Bhan Brahmin, who may not have received his own encyclopedia entry, according to Kinra, but is referenced frequently in chronicles and anecdotes. Here Kinra reflects that

¹Kia, *Persianate Selves*; Schwartz, *Remapping Persian Literary History*.

²Sharma, *Mughal Arcadia*.

Chandar Bhan is most often remembered as an associate of Dara Shukoh, who evades execution. Through exploring the memory and counter-memory of this association, Kinra's notable intervention in the chapter is a revisionist perspective on the simplistic historiographical binary between the heterodox Dara Shukoh (d. 1659) and orthodox Aurangzeb (p. 244). In the last chapter, Kinra also demonstrates that Chandar Bhan is memorialized in a mocking light in Persian and Urdu *tazkeras*.

Kinra's ambitious revisionist attempt makes the first chapter of his book valuable for Mughal historians working on political, intellectual and cultural topics. Kinra meticulously engages with Chandar Bhan Brahmin's autobiographical treatise, the *Chahār Chaman*, his epistolary works, collected under the title *Munsha'āt Brāhmin*, and masterfully brings these into conversation with Mughal noblemen and scribes who were in correspondence with the *munshi*. Kinra kindles the reader's historical imagination with interesting anecdotes that animate the everyday life of the Mughal court as well as the afterlife of Mughal culture. Through these anecdotes, Kinra uncovers the genealogy of politicized misreadings of Chandar Bhan's experience working with Muslim rulers. He argues that later *tazkeras* misread Chandar Bhan's initial unfamiliarity with Mughal norms of civility as a Hindu cultural resistance (p. 278). Stylistically, Kinra's craft and method provide a bridge between intellectual biographies and micro-histories for emerging scholars interested in specific historical actors. As Kinra himself reflects in the conclusion—Chandar Bhan Brahmin's contemporaries await “renewed attention, translation and critical scrutiny” (p. 296).

The main question Kinra poses is an intriguing one with unrelenting presentist stakes: “If post-Akbar Mughal society really did witness such a ‘revival of a strident and uncompromising Islam’ then wouldn't we expect to see at least some evidence of it in the testimony of a prominent Hindu who lived through this period?” (p. 21). The response remains a productive and enduring tension in the monograph. On the one hand, Kinra successfully shows that there is no evidence of religious animosity in Chandar Bhan's experience at the Mughal court. Chandar Bhan never explicitly states the reasons for his retirement from Aurangzeb's service. On the other, the reader wonders, since he is an imperial servant conditioned to be loyal to the emperor and trained in a genre of laudatory civility, if any direct critical observation could be expected in his account. Kinra does compellingly observe in the last chapter that the silences in Chandar Bhan Brahmin's accounts do not necessarily mean an event did not transpire (p. 260). Kinra's engrossing account of *tāza-gu'ī* also leaves the reader curious for details on the regional particularities of poetic rivalries in the public sphere of Mughal cities. Could the contestation between Sarkhwush and Chandar Bhan be understood as both a poetic rivalry and competing intellectual genealogies within Lahore's literary sphere? How did Chandar Bhan's ancestral links to Punjab feature or not feature in his self-fashioning, especially as Punjab, by Kinra's own admission, was becoming a hotbed for Indo-Persian literary activity? How does a *munshi* transition from a local or regional scribal identity to forging a cosmopolitan persona for central imperial service? And—finally—in dialogue with recent works, is the early modern Persianate world best understood as an interconnected cosmopolis

or a cultural geography “divided by a common tongue”?³ *Writing Self, Writing Empire* makes a mark in the fields of Mughal history and Persian studies for its historical and literary nuance. Kinra leaves emerging scholars of early modern South Asia and the Persianate world with a rich set of themes and large questions to address.

Bibliography

- Fani, Aria. “Divided by a Common Tongue: Exclusionary Politics of Persian-Language Pedagogy.” *Ajam Media Collective*, 2015. <https://ajammc.com/2015/10/05/exclusionary-politics-persian-language-pedagogy/>.
- Kia, Mana. *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin before Nationalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020.
- Schwartz, Kevin. *Remapping Persian Literary History, 1700–1900*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020.
- Sharma, Sunil. *Mughal Arcadia: Persian Literature in an Indian Court*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Mariam Sabri

University of California, Berkeley

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Iranian Studies. Originally published by Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1848167>

³Fani, “Divided by a Common Tongue.”