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# Characterising the Culture of the Mughal Era

## Chronicles of a Munshi

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**W**riting *Self, Writing Empire* by Rajeev Kinra is a biography of Chandar Bhan Brahman, a 17th-century Mughal munshi. (He died in the 1660s, Brahman was his caste and also his *takhallus* or pen name.) Simultaneously, *Writing Self, Writing Empire* is also a history of the political and administrative culture of the Mughal empire during Shah Jahan's reign (1627–58), and a contribution to the literary history of Persian in India. The book is part of a larger trend of writing Mughal and medieval Indo-Islamic history (also referred to as “early modern”) that has focused largely on cultural history of the Indo-Islamic milieu and shown how this was a “cosmopolitan” venture comparable to other similar “early modern” polities in West Asia and Europe (Breckenridge et al 2002; Lefèvre et al 2015). Theoretically, “cosmopolitan-ism” has been expounded by academic figures based in the West such as Kwame Anthony Appiah. Appiah sees cosmopolitan-ism as “a rejection of the conventional view that every civilized person belonged to a community among communities,” and as “regard[ing] all the peoples of the earth as so many branches of a single family, and the universe as a state” (Appiah 2006).<sup>1</sup> However, cosmopolitan-ism does not convincingly explain why a human being should feel belonging towards all of humanity more than towards any other community. In fact, is it possible to transcend cultural moorings and become “universal,” and would not any such transcendence not inaugurate yet another cultural formation that would with time become “particular”? The history of all ideologies, for example, Christianity, Islam, Marxism, Democracy or Arya Samaj, suggests so.

Methodologically, this research output is based on close philological engagement

### BOOK REVIEWS

**Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary** by Rajeev Kinra, Delhi: Primus Books (by arrangement with University of California Press), 2016; pp xix+369, ₹1,250.

with a variety of original sources. Kinra applies the model of “cosmopolitan-ism” to the Mughal cultural world and Chandar Bhan Brahman is his test case. The book derives from a close reading of two texts from Chandar Bhan's literary oeuvre, namely the *Chahar Chaman* (Four Gardens) and the *Munsha'at-i Brahman* (Epistles of Brahman). This is supplemented by data from a variety of contemporary and subsequent histories and commentaries that discuss Chandar Bhan's life and career as a poet and administrator.

#### The Munshi

In the 20th century, the Persian munshi is already a relatively forgotten figure. However, as late as the early 19th century, colonial officials were made to read English translations of the *Chahar Chaman*. Ethnically, the munshi could be a Hindu or a Muslim from South Asia, or a Muslim or Zoroastrian from Iran and Central Asia. Amongst Hindus, certain castes traditionally associated with literacy, such as Khatris, Kayasthas and Brahmins, formed the bulk of munshis. Using the biographical framework, Kinra documents the sociocultural processes through which Indian Muslims and Hindus became munshis, and acquired Persian as a language of poetry and bureaucracy. This description gives reasons behind the acceptance and success of the Mughal rule. Kinra suggests that the Mughal rule was part of a wider “cosmopolitan” world of Persian

language, literature and culture that included the Ottoman and Safavid empires, and other political formations in Central and South Asia. Kinra foregrounds forgotten evidence, and provides a detailed description of active and willing Hindu presence in the Mughal empire. He shows how dominant stereotypes of the present-day do not fit the evidence from the 17th-century Mughal realm. The strength of Kinra's work lies in the attention provided to the figure of the munshi, his social background, his acculturation and training into Persianate bureaucracy, and his relevance in the Indo-Persian state system. Kinra's book is also applicable to the political and bureaucratic world in Central and West Asia from Sarajevo to Samarkand where munshis and Persian language were equally relevant. Ethnically, these munshis may or may not have been born in families speaking Persian or kin languages. Chandar Bhan, the munshi chronicled in this book, was not a Persian-speaker by birth. He acquired the language and its culture to forge a successful career as a bureaucrat, and to a lesser extent as a poet.

The introduction to the book tells us why *Writing Self, Writing Empire* is important, and provides a theoretical framework and a synopsis of the chapters. It correctly points out that Chandar Bhan was a direct observer and participant in a Mughal bureaucracy that was “streamlined and rationalized to levels unprecedented in the history of the subcontinent and unsurpassed in ... the world” (p 3). Kinra tells us how Mughal bureaucracy was staffed by individuals moving in circuits of international commercial and intellectual exchange. Especially, his study zooms in on the Persian and Indo-Persian literary and intellectual traditions. Chapter 1 charts the intellectual world of Chandar Bhan. Kinra suggests that present-day academic understandings of the Mughal world, especially of the post-Akbar era, posit it to be a period dominated by a strident Islam that marginalised other traditions. This is a hasty observation. Kinra is very selective in his readings of academic opinions on the issue. He discusses the

works of J F Richards and Stanley Lane-Poole, but skips a vibrant tradition of “secular” historiography, including works of Irfan Habib, Bikramjit Hasrat, M Athar Ali, Satish Chandra, Harbans Mukhia and others whose arguments are not dissimilar to those of Kinra. He sees the life and literary output of Chandar Bhan and those around him as evidence of an Islam that was more accommodating, and a Hindu culture that was at ease with it. Chandar Bhan approvingly cites verses from the Quran in his work, and writes poetry such as *lazim aamad bar sar-i ma khidmat-i but barhaman/mahw kai gardad har aan naqshi ki dar dil-ha nishast* (It is incumbent upon us to serve the idol, Brahmin/How can any image that resides in the heart be erased?) (p 23). Not only did Chandar Bhan’s family get him schooled in Persian literary and accounting traditions, Chandar Bhan got his son Tej Bhan schooled in the same. He attests to the presence of Shudra scribes and draftsmen at the lower levels of bureaucracy. The chapter has detailed notes on Muslim and Hindu patrons of Hindus and Hindu learning at the Mughal court, such as Afzal Khan, Asaf Khan, Inayat Khan, Sadullah Khan and others. The chapter also has extended sections on medical science and literary culture at the Mughal court.

Chapter 2 focuses on the training and cultivation of secretaries or *ashab-i qalam* (gentlemen of the pen; scribes) in 17th-century northern India. Other than training in reading and composing poetry, the road to munshi-hood also passed through disciplines such as statecraft, diplomacy, ethics (*akhlāq*), writing letters and documents (*insha*), and accounting (*siyaq*). Kinra suggests that “mystical civility” was essential to the training of a munshi. In the *nasihat-nama* (book of advice) named *Chahar Chaman* that includes letters to his son Tej Bhan, Chandar Bhan writes that acquiring detachment (*bi-tal-luqi*) was essential for him, as was visiting recluses, hermits and mystics (*munzawīyan*, *gosha-nashinan*, and *darwesan*), and keeping secrets (*razdar bashad*). To varying degrees, this curriculum was also part of the education of political figures, including sultans. The *Chahar Chaman* also includes accounts of the careers of

past munshis such as Raja Todar Mal, and other political, military and administrative figures of the 17th century, and cites letters written by some.

### Shah Jahan and His Court

Chapter 3 is a gleaning of Chandar Bhan’s observations of Mughal sovereignty, especially as ensconced in the figure of Shah Jahan *padshah*. In his *Tārīkh-i Rajahā-yi Dihlī*, Chandar Bhan places Shah Jahan *padshah* at the end of a list of kings of Delhi, including real, mythical and obscure Hindu predecessor “rajās” such as Yudhishtira, Janamejaya, Jiwanjit and Anand Pal. In the *Chahar Chaman*, Chandar Bhan eulogises Shah Jahan with epithets, terming him a premier political, legal, military and spiritual entity. These eulogies were penned in prose and verse. The court of Shah Jahan was a highly formalised entity and attracted visitors from as far as China, Arabia and Europe, and from various religious and class backgrounds. Chandar Bhan’s writings serve as a valuable source of Shah Jahan’s and his court’s daily life, routine and rituals. On the basis of these intercultural changes, Kinra describes the court as “cosmopolitan.”

Chapter 4 highlights the autobiographical aspects of Chandar Bhan’s writings which say that he was a believing Hindu from the Punjab. In Kinra’s reading, Chandar Bhan’s writings display no tension between his Hindu and Persianised/Islamised selves, and is an ethical Mughal subject. Kinra suggests that Chandar Bhan was more a “spiritual” being than a mere Sikh, Hindu or Muslim. This usage of “spiritual” as separate from “religious” needs more explaining. Kinra uses Chandar Bhan to argue that Brahmins were a distinct caste not because of their occupation or mastery of Hindu rituals, but because of their spiritual and textual pursuits. Chapter 5 addresses the seemingly fraught relations between Persian literary worlds of India and Iran that existed in the period. He argues that poets writing in Persian in India were keen to stake their own presence and did so not by formulating the *sabk-i hindi* (Indian style), but by being part of a literary movement of *taza-gui* (fresh manner of telling). *Sabk-i hindi* was a term coined by modern

Iranian literary critics that mapped boundaries of modern nations on past Persian literary worlds. These critics often saw most of Indian writing in Persian as second grade. On the other hand, *taza-gui* refers more to the search for new themes and meanings in the period. Chandar Bhan was one of the participants in this literary movement across the Persian literary world that had counterparts in Europe, such as the Mannerism movement. In the final chapter, Kinra discusses the memory of Chandar Bhan after his death during the first decade of Aurangzeb’s reign (1658–1707). A surprising aspect of this memory is its portrayal of a deep association between Chandar Bhan and Dara Shikoh that is not corroborated by scrutiny of historical evidence. Kinra also charts how some of the subsequent efforts to create a memory of Chandar Bhan painted him as a heretical upstart.

The book is rich in data and anecdotes based on hitherto underutilised sources, and a previous reviewer has rightly suggested that *Writing Self, Writing Empire* shall be indispensable to the teaching of Mughal India (Robinson 2018). Nevertheless, the book does have shortcomings. There is a disregard of previous writings pertaining to the cultural life of Mughal India. One wonders what was the political and economic basis behind the acceptance of the Persian-style *adab* and *akhlāq* (literature, bureaucracy and polity) by participants hailing from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Did India’s historical experience with Persian as an elite language of culture and bureaucracy prepare it for English? Does the democratisation and “devolution” of Persian into Urdu hold some lessons for the fate of English?

Methodologically, as Kinra himself acknowledges, the book is based on the

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life and oeuvre of a single person which is less than adequate to reach the rather broad-stroke conclusions he advances. The book shows examples that negate present-day stereotypes of Hindus and Muslims that dominate the historiography of Mughal India. Kinra portrays a picture of a cosmopolitan world defined more by “spirituality” than religions, such as Hinduism or Islam, and a taste for poetry over politics. His book is replete with data displaying instances of friendly relations amongst Hindus and Muslims. However, such data may easily be matched by someone else parading instances of discord amongst Hindus and Muslims

during the same period. This data can easily make Kinra’s framework redundant. There is a need to develop a theoretical framework to study Mughal India that goes beyond the present-day stereotypes of Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and secular (reinvented as “cosmopolitan” in Kinra’s book).

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#### NOTE

- 1 See introduction in Appiah (2006), attributing the latter quote to Christoph Martin Weiland who was also known as the German Voltaire.

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