

Persian Scholarly Networks in Mughal Punjab

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Soon after Emperor Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar adopted Persian as the language of state in 1581, both the Mughal Empire and the cultural sphere of Persian expanded together in South Asia. Persian had a long history in South Asia before the Mughals, which would continue in South Asia even as the Mughal Empire slowly retrenched, but the stories of the language and the state that advanced it in India are intrinsically linked. Its official role in state administration and also as the language of the cultural elite encouraged numerous young men from the diverse communities of Mughal India to study the language and also embrace the cultural habits associated with Persianate traditions. The extent to which Persian soaked into the cultural fabric of South Asia, however, remains a matter of debate.¹ Was it mostly a language of the empire's elite, propelled by administrative needs and imperial patronage? What role did Persian play in the multilingual literary circles of the time, and to what extent did it shape ideas of self and community? This chapter engages these questions by focusing on a cluster of Persian scholars from the northwestern Mughal province of Lahore who were active under Shah Jahan (r. 1626–58).

Lahore during Shah Jahan's reign was a bustling mercantile center and a major hub of Persian learning and scholarship. The repeated journeys of the Mughal courts under the emperors Akbar, Jahangir, and, later, Shah Jahan had elevated the *suba* (province) of Lahore and also the city, as one of seasonal capitals of the empire, where the court frequently spent time on its way to its summer retreat in Kashmir. With the start of the cooling monsoons, the court returned to the plains of Hindustan, passing through Lahore again. Offensive and defensive military campaigns on the empire's northwestern borders with the Safavids of Persia and the Uzbeks were also launched from Lahore.² Unsurprisingly, too, as an important economic, political, and literary imperial hub, Lahore was a desirable destination for Persian-speaking scholars hoping to forge careers in Mughal India. By the time Shah Jahan had secured his hold on the Mughal throne, the role of Lahore as a meeting ground of home-grown and émigré talent in Persian circles was so entrenched that there is perhaps no better place to explore their interactions.³

By the opening years of Shah Jahan's reign in the late 1620s, Persian literary circles occupied a particularly thick set of interlinking circles centered in Lahore. The interaction of these clusters of poets, scholars, bureaucrats, and administrators reveals much about the immense reach of Persian as a cosmopolitan language of empire, as well as the limits to its connections with other literary communities in Punjab. Tracking the flows of patronage, mentorship, and social connections that fueled the trajectory of Persian-knowing bureaucrats and scholars in these circles also lays bare the competitive and aspirational motivations in the use of Persian in North India, particularly in its form as an instrument of self-fashioning. One such cluster of scholars in Lahore was that of Munir Lahawri, Chandarbhan Brahman, and the two Kanbu brothers, Muhammad Salih and 'Inayatullah.⁴ These men, like many of their Indian peers, had connections with provincial literary elites, who were usually the second or third generation of their families to be employed in Mughal service. They shared the distinction of having long family connections to both the province and the imperial officers of the Mughal court. They were also known to interact frequently with many of the Persian-speaking scholars who had relocated to Mughal India from other regions or had visited Mughal India during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. An awareness and celebration of these interlinked cosmopolitan literary circuits saturates their work, but their writing also reveals a deep ambivalence about their place in this literary network. A close reading of the works of this Lahori quartet suggests that their attempts to craft literary personas that commanded the respect of their peers and were attractive to patrons had far-reaching effects on the genres of literary Persian they favored. The cultivation of their image as scholars, teachers, and literary models through the dissemination of their cohort's works burnished their reputations in their own time and also influenced their perceived pedagogical worth among later scholars of Persian in Mughal India. In the works of these four men, we see Persian used as a tool for competitive self-crafting, and also as the very site of that competition, since they evaluated the literary merit of other scholars as well. At the peak of their careers, they chose to focus on prose, rather than poetry, as the medium of literary self-presentation. At a time when performance at the majlis, or poetic salon, and the ability to compose elegant poetry *ex tempore* were greatly valued, these four Punjabi scholars forged a divergent path, focusing in particular on literary criticism, epistolography, and writing introductions to one another's collected works. Munir and Chandrabhan Brahmin were also successful poets, but the most important part of their literary self-fashioning and legacy was their ornate prose.

PARROTS OF HIND OR BROTHERHOOD OF THE PEN?

Abu al-Barakat Munir Lahawri (1610–44), the son of 'Abd al-Majid Multani, an established scholar during Akbar's reign, was among the literati who benefitted from

the frequent presence of the imperial court at Lahore during the reign of Shah Jahan,⁵ as were his childhood friends Muhammad Salih Kanbu and ‘Inayatullah Kanbu, the sons of a man who enjoyed high status in the atelier of Prince Salim (the later Emperor Jahangir), the well-known calligrapher ‘Abdullah Muskhin Qalam, whose sobriquet was “musky-scented [*mushkin*] pen” (a perhaps ambiguous play on words, since *mushkin* also means “black”).⁶ Chandarbhan Brahman, the son of a former provincial Mughal bureaucrat, Dharamdas of Lahore *suba*, was another of the eminent young men at Shah Jahan’s court.⁷ The correspondence among these four men testifies to their long professional and personal intimacy. Indeed, favorable notices about one another’s talents in the realm of Persian literary mastery inserted into their literary offerings burnished this cluster’s reputations, not only for their peers, but also for later generations of Persian scholars.⁸ Lahore was also visited by a stream of Persian émigré scholars and poets, some of whom remained in North India.

What makes this cluster particularly compelling to any scholar of Persian literature in Mughal India is their self-reflective meditation in their works about mastery of Persian and the significant role this skill had played in their achievement of literary success, emotional development, and spiritual discipline. Rajeev Kinra has recently discussed the investment that bureaucrat scholars such as Chandrabhan had in preserving a Mughal cultural sphere defined by cosmopolitan inclusivity as practiced by its most famous Persian poets and scholars.⁹ As Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have argued, this specifically Mughal literary and political tradition created a context in which Persian literary practices molded the shared imaginative and philosophical outlook of its practitioners.¹⁰ A close look at the Lahori quartet on which this chapter focuses also suggests, however, that their relationship with Persian was not always celebratory: it was also tinged with an awareness of competitive and sometimes brutal competition with their peers. Their works also offer glimpses of their group as inhabiting a literary frontier, and of themselves as bridge builders and skilled interpreters in this world. Finally, it should be noted that the cultivation of Persian literary art and multilingual dexterity of these Punjabi scholars was to a large degree the result of a very privileged place in a network of imperial patronage. Barely visible in their works are their connections with and status in regional and subregional Persian, Hindawi, and Punjabi literary networks.

For the sake of brevity, I will use Munir Lahawri as an entrée into this cluster, particularly since recent studies of his work *Kar-nama* have been central to way in which scholarship has conceived of the fault lines of Persian literary culture in Mughal India. Munir Lahawri famously criticized the hyperbolic admirers of four Persian poets associated with the *tazagui* “fresh-speaking” aesthetics of his own time, ‘Urfi Shirazi, Talib Amuli, Zulali, and Zuhuri.¹¹ Munir’s critique of this blind admiration of the contemporary style over the master poets of the classical past was also an attempt to assert the superior literary merits of the two classical

poets that Munir most admired, Amir Khusraw and Salman Mas'ud Sa'd Salman. In particular, the excessively convoluted metaphorical imagery of his own time is contrasted in Munir's reading of these four émigré poets with the restrained classicism of the masters of the past. *Kar-nama's* goals, while much discussed in recent studies, remain opaque in the larger context of his oeuvre and literary network. Even if Munir's literary critiques of émigré and Mughal poets are clear in their intent in individual pieces, his target shifts and changes over time. Some recent studies have linked *Kar-nama* with the rivalries of the professionalizing Indian and Iranian intellectuals of the period as a "plea for cosmopolitan egalitarianism over parochial favoritism" and meditation on the problems of poetic communication in a diverse poetic milieu that serves as an opening salvo to the great Persian literary debates of the following century.¹² All of these positions have some validity, since Munir's own point of attack and imagined goals in *Kar-nama* shift considerably. Yet they are also framed, and each of these studies acknowledges this, by the masterful analysis of Munir's critique by Siraj al-Din Khan-i Arzu (1687–1756), a formidable scholar of Indo-Persian.¹³ A somewhat different picture of Munir and his famous essay emerges if it is inserted back into its own historical context.

Munir's self-presentation in *Kar-nama* is central to how this piece has been interpreted by later readers. The narrative framework presents a young, modest, but deeply erudite Munir as the quiet spectator in a majlis gathering of poets. Incensed with what he considers the ridiculous fawning of his colleagues at this gathering for the poetry of the four *tazagui* poets, he feels compelled to offer a fairer and, in his own opinion, more balanced view of the relative merits of these four poets as compared to the old masters of Hind, such as Amir Khusraw. Yet he hesitates to voice them as he sits quietly in a corner, held back by his belief that the validity of his defense will be ignored by an audience with a partiality for older men, men of wealth, Iranian origins, and a disputatious nature, all of which he lacks. He thus presents his *Kar-nama* to discerning readers in Hind and Iran as a restrained and judicious defense of the masters they all cherish.

Notably, contrary to his self-presentation in this work, Munir did not compose *Kar-nama* as a youth in Lahore, although certainly some of the references to the literary biases of his time were shaped in that environment. We know from Munir's correspondence that it was actually a work of his mature years, likely written in his early thirties, shortly before his death. Significantly, the work was composed while Munir accompanied his patron Sayf Khan to the imperial court at Agra and later to the *suba* of Bengal, where Sayf Khan would die in 1639. The prominent broadcasting of Munir's Lahori identity in *Kar-nama*, distracts from the actual place of its writing.¹⁴ The self-presentation of the tentative young scholar within the imagined majlis of its setting also cloaks the fact that this work was crafted at a time of great professional success, something Munir gestures to at the end of the essay. The mask of the talented, but bashful narrator slips at the end of the essay when Munir describes himself as the writer of "one hundred thousand

couplets, of which every verse is like an exalted house for that star of [poetic] meaning [*sad hazar bayt kih har yik bayt al-sharaf-i kaukaba-yi ma'ani ast*]."¹⁵

In spite of these accomplishments, Munir had reached an uncertain period in his life by 1640, the year in which the *Kar-nama* was written. For much of that period, his letters and works, both prose and poems, are full of homesickness for Lahore, its gardens, and its literary spaces. With the sudden death of his patron, this was also a time in which Munir, writing to his friends, was desperate to find a new patron, and in one of these letters, he declares his intent to dedicate *Kar-nama* to Prince Dara Shikuh, the heir apparent.¹⁶ In these circumstances, writing the introduction to *Kar-nama* was a struggle, and Munir describes his labors to finish the work in a letter to Nawwab Sa'dullah Khan.¹⁷ In another letter from this time to his friend Muhammad Sadiq, a frequent correspondent, this period of professional turmoil ends with an offer of a post with I'tiqad Khan.¹⁸ There is some irony in the fact that both Sa'dullah Khan and I'tiqad Khan were prominent members of the extended family of Persian émigrés to which Nur Jahan and Asaf Khan, Chandrabhan's mentor, also belonged. Thus, despite the angst Munir expressed about his Hindustani roots being a barrier to his career, it would seem that access to such men among the prominent Irani émigré community was also key to Munir's later success, and these patrons received him warmly. This suggests that these two men likely did not view the work as an exercise in regional chauvinism. But what did they make of Munir's harsher comments?

Let us briefly look at the possible roots of Munir's resentment of young Indian poets being held in little regard by his peers, keeping in mind that he feels that wealth and an argumentative nature attract undeserved notice and patronage. Munir never became as wealthy as some of his famous peers, but he was not entirely free of an argumentative streak. That a flood of poets from the Persian Safavid court and Central Asia came to India is a well-established fact, and the peculiar circumstances may well have made Munir's circle—longtime residents of Lahore—especially aware of this stream. For much of the youth and maturity of these scholars, the extended family of I'timad al-Dawla, Empress Nur Jahan's father, had held the governorship of the important border provinces of Lahore, Kashmir, Kabul, and Multan. Well educated, erudite, and powerful, this family lavishly patronized poets and scholars, many of whom were their own kin.¹⁹ Several generations of this family, other than the well-known branch that married into the royal family, were also poets who found patronage in India, beginning with Shapur Tehrani early in Akbar's reign, followed by I'timad al-Dawla's older brother Wasli, and later the poet Hijri. Some sense of this family's pride in these poetic connections can be taken from the extremely ornate and costly commemorative *diwans* (poetic collections) of his relatives that Ja'far Khan, the grandson of Wasli, commissioned in 1670 to mark the four generations of poets in this remarkable family.²⁰ Thus both the bureaucratic heights of the provincial administration and the cultural space of its court were dominated by numerous offshoots of the same

family and its associates, cemented by the marital ties of this clan to the imperial family. Not surprisingly scholars and poets who shared *nisbat* (genealogical) and *watan* (homeland) ties with this clan flourished, as the commemorative divans of Ja'far Khan suggest.

Yet before we assume that Munir's complaint is valid, let us remind ourselves of his place in the equally well-documented quartet of scholars whose mutual support of one another thrust their Punjabi brotherhood of the pen into the spotlight in Shah Jahan's court. Their mutual promotion not only elevated their status among their peers but also helped them become master scholars whose works were foundational for later generations of Persian munshis (secretaries) and other bureaucrats in the Mughal Empire. Munir himself wrote much admired flattering introductions to the collected volumes of *insha'* of both Kanbu brothers, Muhammad Salih's *Bahar-i Sukhan* (The Springtime of Eloquence) and 'Inayatullah's *Gulshan-i 'Inayat* (Garden of Commitment, 1651).²¹ At the time when Munir wrote the introduction to 'Inayatullah's work, it was still incomplete. Muhammad Salih would edit and organize his brother's letters into the final version of the *Gulshan-i 'Inayat* in 1661.²² That each of these works helped promote the scholarly image of their network is quite clear, and particularly in the case of Munir, whose early death appears to have fostered a desire to memorialize him. The burnishing of his memory is very apparent in some cases. Muhammad Salih, for example, insists in his notice of his departed friend in his '*Amal-i Salih* that Munir was the unsurpassed master of both prose and poetry of his age, and was the first to reach this height since the death of Fayzi (the much admired court poet of Akbar's reign). Furthermore his chief contribution, according to his friend, was that Munir had renewed and made the *tazagui* style fresh again (*rasm-i tazagui-ra taza sakhta*).²³

The idea that this quartet of Lahori scholars were engaged in reviving Persian literary mastery in India is also found in other works of their circle. Muhammad Salih, who had originally compiled *Bahar-i Sukhan* in 1655 and later revised it in 1663–64, notes that the encouragement to compile a volume of the letters he had penned during his long career in service to some of the leading men of the empire had come from Munir himself. He recalls Munir saying, "If they could see this sweet new nightingale in the garden of meaning, the parrots of Hind could once again fill their hearts with the nectar of beauty and the ornamentation of inspiration [*ilham*]." However, his busy professional life kept Muhammad Salih from perfecting this work.²⁴ What is remarkable about its long gestation is that Munir wrote the *dibacha* (preface) to his friend's volume before it was completed, since we know he died in 1644, long before the first draft of *Bahar-i Sukhan* was compiled in 1655. The ideas expressed by both Munir and Muhammad Salih were not unique to just this work, however, but broadly shared within their circle.

Munir's preface to *Baharistan-i Sukhan* closely traces the path that he would take in his introduction to his own collections of letters, elevating prose works to the same level of literary sophistication as poetry. Comparing the writing of such

elegant prose to the creation of a beautiful bride, paradise, or a bounteous garden in his preface to Muhammad Salih's work not merely repeated what now seem like clichéd reworkings of its title (The Springtime of Eloquence). These analogies served to underline Munir's emphasis on elegant writing as full of the light of gnosis (*nur-i ma'rifat*) and the pathway to the gardens of paradise, where the reader can dwell in the company of holy martyrs.²⁵ This closely parallels the benefits of self-improvement and self-fashioning he argued would follow those who studied prose writing in the introduction to his own letter collections. The first collection was a work of *insha'* that compiled his correspondence along with some of his prose writings, but a year later, in November 1641, he was encouraged to bring together another collection, *Nawbada* (New Wine), which is specifically dedicated to his Hindu pupil Nik Rai, whom Munir affectionately describes as his adopted son (*farzand-i banda Munir ast*).²⁶ Nik Rai had urged him to put together letters that had not been compiled into the earlier work, which Munir protests were as dissimilar from each other as "the patched robes of dervishes."²⁷ This seemingly modest dismissal of this eclectic letter collection appears to point, not to the poverty displayed by the patched robes of dervishes, however, but rather to the variety of their ethical insights.

Indeed, Munir picks up this theme of self-improvement repeatedly in the introduction to this work. He instructs his reader that letters are a source of civility (*adab*) and a suitable inheritance to men of the pen (*ahl-i qalam*); reading such works is akin to sitting in a majlis of learned men.²⁸ The reader is also introduced by such works to ethical thought (*akhlaq*). Furthermore, Munir hints that the act of writing is almost spiritual, as some other spirit rather than the author moves the pen: "When the pen begins to speak, it makes itself the master of eloquence [*sahib-i sukhan*] and I become the silent transmitter . . . in this state, the pen is not in my hand, but I in the grasp of the pen."²⁹ Indeed, much of this later collection for his pupil is full of more intimate letters to those close to Munir, including former patrons, close friends, and companions. It also includes their responses to him, reflecting a more intimate network of correspondents than the earlier, more formal collection of letters for his patron Sayf Khan. In a letter to Chandarbhan Brahman, Munir mentions reading the works of a mutual friend, but also encloses his own poetry with the letter for *istilah*, or correction.³⁰ In another, Munir confesses that having read many divans, he now thinks of himself as resident of the city of literature (*shahristan-i sukhan*), and he goes on to claim a relationship with his fellow scholars as brothers of the same lineage, a sentiment that is in strong contrast to the more defensive and nativist view of his fellow poets in his *Kar-nama*.³¹ But we also get a sense of other ambitions when Munir concludes this work by citing the influence of the emperor Akbar's famous scholar-bureaucrat Abu al-Fazl as his inspiration. Munir claims the reflected glory of this comparison, not for himself alone, but also for his friends and companions, without whose help he would have been unable to complete the work and who are as integral to his world as "the four

humors,” “the four elements,” “the four corners of the world,” and the four corners of his house.³² Repeatedly in these letters addressed to a large cross-section of Mughal India’s literati, Munir asserts his fellowship with them, as when he affirms that despite his love of Lahore, his true *watan* (homeland) is that of the *farsi-guyan* (Persian speakers).³³

Stepping back from this discussion of the intimate collaborations of Munir and his circle, and even that of his presumed rivals, we can see the parallels between these seemingly dissimilar groups. If some of the poets of Iranian origin are criticized in *Kar-nama*, in other works they are reclaimed as brothers, even given the shared identity of the *ahl-i qalam*. Munir appears to recognize that the diverse network he drew on was crucial to his later success. He did not reach the heights of power and wealth that Nur Jahan’s relatives achieved in the seventeenth century, but the efforts of the Lahori cluster to which Munir, the Kanbu brothers, and Chandarbhan belonged certainly launched them into an elevated place in Indo-Persian culture. It is also appropriate to note that each member of this Punjabi circle benefitted from the patronage of Irani nobles as well. Thus, neither the circles of patronage nor the networks of professional promotion in Mughal India were dominated by those from the same *watan*, or homeland. But we should also not dismiss the anxieties and insecurities we find expressed by Munir and his circle. Their perception of being judged less able, perhaps even provincial, although not dominant modes of self-presentation in their wider work, suggest that such perceived differences did occasionally spark strong heartfelt criticism of the different spheres of power held by this cluster of scholarly friends and those they perceived as rivals. This imagined frontier was real enough to motivate Munir to write works like *Kar-nama* and police the boundaries of the imagined *shahristan-i sukhān*, and for his colleagues in the quartet frequently to compare themselves to the acknowledged masters of Persian of the recent past. Likewise, this seems to be related to their perception that it was necessary to “revive” the flagging literary arts of the Mughal Empire in their own generation, and their hope that their own works might serve as models for aspiring students.

FROM MAJLIS TO MAKTAB (SCHOOLS): THE PLACES AND PRACTICES OF ACQUIRING PERSIAN

Strong identification with their *watan* is found in many of the quartet’s works. However, they occupied very privileged spaces in the Mughal imperial structure. After his first patron, Sayf Khan, died, Munir apparently found himself another one—I’tiqad Khan, a wealthy, powerful Irani. both the Kanbu brothers held lifetime positions in the court’s central bureaucracy, which enabled the three, still alive in 1658, to survive the transition to the reign of Aurangzeb. Chandrabhan became the caretaker of the Taj Mahal, and the Kanbu brothers were able to build themselves a substantial tomb, which was still a landmark in colonial-era Lahore.³⁴

But as the quartet's own works remind us, their positions were only available to those who had spent years mastering the demanding curriculum, etiquette, and practices of the Mughal imperial bureaucracy, and, what is more, also had some access to the network of influential men who commanded the ability to make (or break) careers. So what about those who did not have such access?

We know little of the training of the quartet, but the hints they drop in their work reveal different pathways to literacy in areas within and outside imperial cities. Both Kanbu brothers and Munir, as sons of families with already close linkages with the imperial court and the eminent scholars, poets, and teachers clustered around it, likely did not lack for instruction and mentoring either in the intricacies of court etiquette as it related to bureaucrats, or the use of Persian in the court. Chandrabhan, born into a family of Punjabi bureaucrats, was a decidedly different case. His father appears to have had only mid-level provincial postings. As Rajeiv Kinra has noted, in his letters to family members Chandrabhan mentions learning to write the fiendishly difficult *khatt-i shikasta* from the "shudra" scholar Jatmal, one of many low-caste scribes skilled in calligraphy.³⁵ It is tempting to see this as a reference for the little-studied Jat author Jatmal Nahar, now known chiefly for his *Gora Badal ki Katha*, a reworking of the Padmavat Sufi narrative in a *masnawi* of 1628 written for his Afghan patrons in Punjab, but who is also known to have written two other works, *Lahore Ghazal* and *Zingar Ghazal*.³⁶ Lahore in the early part of the seventeenth century, at the center of a growing engagement not only with Persian and Indic literary languages such as Sanskrit and Braj but with vernaculars like Punjabi, Sindhi, and the Haryanwi dialects, was flooded with Jains, Kayasths, Khatris, Brahmins, and Jats employed in various literary and scholarly capacities.³⁷ Many of the scholars engaged in these multilingual, cross-cultural literary exercises were associated with new forms of religiosity such as the Adhyatmi Jains and the increasingly diversifying forms of Sikhism. New status groups appear to have used the opportunities presented by the expanding cultural literacy of the time to scale social ranks as well. For example, we learn from the family chronicles of the Ahulwalia Sikhs who would eventually establish a small Sikh state in the eighteenth century, that the ancestors of this family, originally distillers of the Kalal caste, had moved into two very different professions during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century: some, claiming a mixed Jat and Rajput status in the countryside, became zamindars (rural revenue collectors), and others found bureaucratic jobs in Lahore, where a quarter was named for this clan.³⁸

How did such families achieve this dramatic leap in both rural and urban mobility? This is a difficult question to answer since our sources for the day-to-day life of rural Punjab are limited. However, British Agency records for east Punjab in the early 1800s and a mid-nineteenth-century land survey offer some tentative answers. Most relevant to our discussion of the frontiers of Persian are the numerous charitable grants for which colonial officers were asked to survey and confirm

deeds—these included a large number of Sufi *khanaqahs*, as well as non-Muslim religious institutions including Hindu *maths* and *thakurdwaras* and Sikh *gurudwaras*.³⁹ Some had titles going back to the time of the early Mughal emperors, but the larger spikes are from the seventeenth century, and then again later in the period of the Sikh *misals*. The multifunctional role of these spaces in rural Punjab is particularly interesting for our discussion of languages, literature, and community. One of their primary functions for many of these spaces, particularly of *khanaqahs*, was to serve as hubs of social and cultural life for these rural communities. Most had a weekly market, or *hat*, and they also served as rest houses for travelers, merchants, and wedding parties. The annual *‘urs* (death anniversary) festivals attracted poets and musicians from around the region, but most significantly, they also had schools. Like the market, rest house, and *‘urs* festivals, these schools were open to all in the community, not just Muslims.⁴⁰ For these reasons, even in the eighteenth century, after political control of Punjab moved from the Mughals and later the Afghans to the Sikh chiefs, the latter confirmed most of these grants and often initiated new grants for Muslim teachers who ran schools.⁴¹

Very little survives of the instructional aids from the period. Walter Hakala’s work on bilingual dictionaries and commentaries on Persian literary works, for example, has unearthed the substantial work of ‘Abd al-Wasi’ Hansiwi, who hailed from Hansi, a town and *khanaqah* complex situated on the imperial highway from Kabul to Delhi in the eastern part of the Punjab region now associated with Haryana. Among these works were a bilingual dictionary intended to help with the composition of verse, a grammar of Persian, and commentaries on Sa’di’s *Bustan* and Jami’s *Yusuf wa Zulaykha*. Their inclusion in the traditional madrasa curriculum would lead to a dismissive view of such works by later scholars of Persian in India, which only recently has begun to reverse with Hakala’s groundbreaking study.⁴² The ostensibly “rustic” register of the vernacular received more criticism than the scholarly work on the challenging aspects of Persian acquisition in earlier studies.

This supposedly “rustic” vernacular served an important pedagogical purpose, however, helping Punjabi speakers learn and read Persian from difficult literary texts and creating a formal system of script, pronunciation, and standardized grammar for them, which until then had not been formulated in any systematic way. The Punjabi case closely follows the forms of multilingual literacy described by Thibaut d’Hubert and Paul Wormser with respect to the crucial bridging role of Persian in both language and spiritual instruction in the Bengali and Malay contexts. This form of early instruction of Punjabi Muslims in Arabic script, which includes works such as the *Baran Anwa* of Mawlawi ‘Abdullah, known by his pen-name (*takhallus*) ‘Abdi, now lies mostly neglected in archives. Such treatises instructed Punjabi Muslims in the vernacular, but the title headings and scholarly apparatus were in Persian.⁴³ These works should command our attention because, although not written in literary Persian, they mark the edges of the Persophone

world in the *khanaqahs*, small *qasba* (towns), and villages of rural India. Their intentions were not that different from the intentions of Munir, Chandarbhan, and the Kanbu brothers in trying to expand the knowledge of Indian Persian learners beyond basic literacy—enabling them to use the shared language of the Mughal empire fluently—to some grasp of the literature of Persian. It was the scale of these educational initiatives that was different. In small towns and settlements, they were geared to teaching functional command of a script that was not fully suited to the more copious sounds of Punjabi or Braj, but could be adapted to allow children to achieve a basic literacy in two languages at the same time. An important side effect was that Punjabi, which was not taught formally even within Punjab, but remained a mostly spoken vernacular, was now beginning to achieve the shape and form of a literary culture, both in the Arabic script taught alongside Persian, and also the Gurmukhi script taught and passed down in the Sikh community. As the archival material from Punjab inevitably reminds us, those who achieved literacy were often bilingual, if not multilingual in Persian, Punjabi, or Braj, often working in tandem and combinations with each other. Unlike in the later colonial period, when speakers increasingly began to see each language as the province of a particular religious or regional community, neither in the rural spaces of Punjab's *khanaqahs* and *dharamsalas*, nor in the urban spaces of the literary majlis was the community of scholars and poets monolingual or exclusively from one religious group. Much like Allison Busch's Braj poets at the Mughal courts, the numerous Jats—or, as she puts it, Shudra scribes and scholars—that Chandrabhan remembers with both affection and respect were “hiding in plain view,” as were the mid-to-low status Arains, Aroras, and others who would grasp literacy as a pathway to social mobility later in the eighteenth century.⁴⁴

Adjusting our perspective in this way then, we begin to see how the linguistic and scholarly leavening of engaged scholarship in these small towns fed the hungry demands of the Mughal Empire's great need for trained, multilingual officials necessary for the day-to-day working of the empire. Although we tend to focus on the specific demands of the more rarified environs of the imperial secretariat, every bureaucrat to some degree, but particularly those in the mid-to-lower rungs of the administration, had to be bilingual by necessity. The oral orders given to messengers, servants, soldiers, village account keepers, most likely in vernaculars, did not make it into the epistolography (*insha*) collections, but in their written forms, these were organized, analyzed, and rendered into Persian. Much as imperial buildings were both functional and exquisitely crafted, so too were these bureaucratic building blocks, written in beautiful scripts on decorated papers, or bound into elegant volumes. Even in the unadorned paper of everyday use, these were made beautiful by the conscientious use of exquisite civility, polished imagery, and pleasing themes. In this guise, they cloak the sheer labor and painstakingly acquired skills of their many anonymous crafters, both native speakers, and those who acquired Persian knowledge later in *maktabs*, madrasas, or in their family circles.

If we turn back then to the early generations of Indian-born bureaucrats who first came into imperial service like our Lahori quartet, we begin to see how and why both imagined barriers and carefully cultivated connections with the wider cosmopolitan world of Persian literature dominate their works. While not trail-blazers, they appear to have been conscious of the need to create works, particularly in the prose forms suitable for training bureaucrats, works that would allow other young men to achieve the hard-won mastery of these complex texts. It is notable that the while each of the individuals in this Punjabi quartet of scholars wrote poetry, the vast majority of their work was in the prose valued by Mughal bureaucrats—letters, short debates, and charmingly rendered prose vignettes that are collectively found in their *insha*’ works, as well as the histories such as *ʿAmal-i Salih* (Work of Salih) and the *Padshah-nama* (Book of the Emperor). The prose works of the Kanbu brothers such as *Bahar-i Danish* (Springtime of Learning) and *Bahar-i Sukhan* (Springtime of Speech), both of which contain letters as well as short prose extracts, and certainly the works of both Munir and Chandarbhan would actually become part of the standard curriculum for Persian learners in India, surviving into the period of printed texts in early lithographed versions.⁴⁵ This was not by accident. As mentioned earlier, Munir crafted his letter collections with a pedagogical purpose in mind. ʿInayatullah, too, expresses this purpose in his own *Bahar-i Sukhan*. Nor were the efforts of this group unique. Owing in part to agrarian expansion that made generous endowments possible, there were similar, if more modest, efforts throughout Punjab’s small towns and villages.

CONCLUSIONS

Much has been said about the “cosmopolitan” nature of Persian in Mughal India, but while there is ample evidence of the inclusivity of the literary circles in the empire, we must be careful not to overextend this view when studying how Persian became rooted in imperial cultures, or the extent to which it engaged with regional cultures. Particularly in the seventeenth century, when the reforms of Akbar were finally beginning to get an impetus from agrarian expansion, on the one hand, and the expanding need for literate men, on the other, the contexts in which Persian was acquired, mastered, or used were quite varied. In Punjab, the contexts of Persian and Punjabi literary acquisition often closely related, and while the full tide of Persian mastery acquired in the smaller towns of the province does not become evident until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the roots of this expansion can be traced to the network of schools, mentors, and early patrons active the period of Shah Jahan. Later, famous figures from these smaller towns would include the *tazkira* writer Sarkhush and his childhood friend Nasir ʿAli Sirhindi from the Naqshbandi complex in Sirhind; Sialkoti Mal “Warista” from Punjab’s prime paper-producing center, Sialkot; and the veritable tide of *khatris* from towns like Batala, Thanesar, and Qasur who flooded into many parts of

the empire starting under Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707). Equally important here was the bilingual production in Punjabi and Persian in a variety of Sufi *khanaqahs* that grew steadily over the course of the seventeenth century. In these contexts, Persian was equally a frontier, a bridge, and a path.

Most Persian learners or users in the early decades of the seventeenth century functioned, not in the rarified inner circle of the imperial court, but in much more eclectic settings all over the province and in the cities of the empire. The urban *majlis* however, operated in a more competitive milieu. Dominated by affective ties of kinship, regional origins, and patronage, each literary circle had its own sense of collective belonging to a wider literary world, but also of the fissures perceived within it. This is true of the four men discussed in this paper—Munir Lahawri, the Kanbu brothers, and Munshi Chandarbhan. Even as they pushed Persian to become an even more expansive, inclusive, and triumphant medium of their collective sense of success, we find discordant notes of competitive regionalism, status anxiety, and a failure to imagine the very cosmopolitanism they ardently desired. Not all frontiers are concretely rendered in geographical or political solidity, and one may argue that even such frontiers require feats of collective imagination. The imagined topography of Persian as presented in the works of these masters of the language in Punjab is simultaneously expansive and restrictive, its borders patrolled by gatekeepers who were often self-appointed. Farsi was itself both the territory they fought over and the weapon they wielded.

NOTES

1. See Muzaffar Alam, “The Culture and Politics of Persian in Pre-colonial Hindustan,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 131–98, and Abdul Ghani, *A History of Persian Language and Literature at the Mughal Court in Three Parts* (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1929). On claims of a one-way influence of Safavid culture on the Mughals, see Ehsan Yarshater, “The Indian or Safavid Style: Progress or Decline?” in *Persian Literature*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1988). Paul E. Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī: Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1998), offers a nuanced counterargument for cross-regional influence.

2. These journeys to and from Lahore are mentioned at length in key primary sources such as the emperor Jahangir’s *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, ed. Henry Beveridge (1909; repr. New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1999), 67–77, 239–46, and Muhammad Salih Kanbo, ‘*Amal-i Salih, Shahjahan-nama*, ed. Ghulam Yazdani (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-yi Adab, 1972), passim.

3. A large number of such scholars and learned men are cited in Salih Kanbo, ‘*Amal-i Salih*, 264–346.

4. For their works and collaborations, see D. N. Marshall, *Mughals in India: A Bibliographic Survey of Manuscripts* (London: Mansell, 1985) 120–21, 203–4, 338–39, and 353–55.

5. Abu al-Barkat Munir Lahawri, *Kar-nama wa Siraj-i Munir*, ed. Dr. Sayyid Muhammad Akram Ikram (Rawalpindi: Iran Pakistan Institute of Persian Studies, 1977).

6. A portrait of the Kanbo brothers’ father appears in the illustrated manuscript of the *Diwan-i Hasan Dihlawi* in the Walters Art Museum, fol. 187a. See “Walters Ms. W650, Collection of Poems (Divan),” www.thedigitalwalters.org/Data/WaltersManuscripts/html/W650/description.html

7. Rajeev Kinra, "Master and Munshi: A Brahman Secretary's Guide to Mughal Governance," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, 4 (2010): 536.
8. *Ibid.*, 534–37.
9. Rajeev Kinra, "Making It Fresh: Time, Tradition, and Indo-Persian Literary Modernity," in *Time, History and the Religious Imaginary in South Asia*, ed. Anne Murphy (London: Routledge, 2011), 12–39.
10. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Making of a Munshi," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24, 2 (2004): 61–72.
11. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Kinra, "Making It Fresh," 28–30; Alam, "Culture and Politics of Persian," 182–84.
12. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 26–28; Kinra, "Making It Fresh," 30; Alam, "Culture and Politics of Persian," 182–84.
13. Kinra, "Making It Fresh," 30; Alam, "Culture and Politics of Persian," 183.
14. Munir, *Nawbada wa Ruq'at Mulla Munir*, Salar Jang Museum and Library, Acc. no. 3428, Adab Nasr 333, fol. 511b. Also see D. N. Marshall's discussion of dated works, *Mughals in India*, cited in n. 4 above.
15. 'Abu al-Barkat Munir Lahawri, *Kar-nama wa Siraj-i Munir*, ed. Dr. Sayyid Muhammad Akram 'Ikram' (Rawalpindi: Iran Pakistan Institute of Persian Studies, 1977), 27. I am grateful to Daniel Sheffield for pointing out the astrological significance of *bayt al-Sharaf* as the "exalted house."
16. Munir, *Nawbada*, fol. 511b.
17. *Ibid.*, fol. 67a.
18. *Ibid.*, fols. 64b–65a.
19. No major study of this family's literary activities has been attempted; only glimpses of it occur in some of the works on Indo-Persian discussed above, although the archival legacy of this clan is immense. The only major monograph on the prominent noblemen in this family remains Anil Kumar's *Asaf Khan and His Times* (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1986).
20. These commemorative volumes are now in the Salar Jang collection, each is lavishly decorated with gold and blue floral margins. The autograph of Muhammad Ja'far Khan appears on the flyleaf. Salar Jang Museum and Library, *Diwan-i Wasli*, Cat. no. 1824, Adab Nazm 1093/2. In the same bound volume fol. 29a starts the section by Shapur. The volume was rebound in 1983. The section between Wasli and Shapur's poetry, which contained Ja'far Khan's own poetry and that of Hijri, another relative, is now a separate manuscript shelved as Adab Nazm 1155. Yet another section is Adab Nazm 1156 with the *Diwan-i Wasli*.
21. Muhammad Salih Kanbo, *Bahar-i Sukhan*, British Library, Oriental MS 178. Munir's introduction is on fols. 2a–4a of this work.
22. See Marshall, *Mughals in India*, 203–4, 354.
23. Muhammad Salih Kanbo, 'Amal-i Salih, 342–42.
24. Muhammad Salih Kanbo, *Bahar-i Sukhan*, 9b.
25. Munir in introduction to Muhammad Salih Kanbo's, *Bahar-i Sukhan*, fols. 2a–4a.
26. Munir, *Nawbada*, fol. 57a.
27. *Ibid.*, fol. 57a.
28. *Ibid.*, fol. 581b.
29. *Ibid.*, 59b.
30. *Ibid.*, fols. 70b–71b.
31. *Ibid.*, fol. 99b.
32. *Ibid.*, fols. 106b–109b. The comparison of groups of four intimately connected objects goes on at length to stress this point.
33. *Ibid.*, fol. 34b.
34. Rajeev Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 56; Muhammad Salih Kanbo, 'Amal-i Salih, intro.

35. Kinra, *Master and Munshi*, 536–58.

36. Marshall, *Mughals in India*, 230–31. Ramya Sreenivasan identifies him as an Osval Jain working for the Pathan chief 'Ali Khan Niazi Khan in Simbala Village near Lahore. However, as she herself makes clear, the question of his identification either as a Jat or an Osval Jain is not clear. Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India, c. 1500–1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 77, 113n57. It is important to note that these are not mutually exclusive. Since the Nahar *gotra* caste are included in Jain, Jat, and even Afghan genealogies in Modern India today, this may reflect a longer history of caste mobility and transformation.

37. For Jains, particularly the Adhyatmis, see Mukund Lath, *Ardhkhathanak, Half a Tale—A Study in the Interrelationship between Autobiography and History* (Allahabad: Rupa, 1981), 46. The interface between Punjabi and Braj, particularly in the life of the noted seventeenth-century Sikh poet and intellectual Bhai Gurdas, is also relevant here; see discussion in Rahuldeep Singh Gill, "Growing the Banyan Tree: Early Sikh Tradition in the Works of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla," (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2009), 72–79.

38. Ram Sukh Rao, *Jassa Singh Binod*, M/772, Punjab State Archives, Patiala, fols. 57a–58b.

39. These records are currently available, organized by date and district, in the National Archives in New Delhi under "Foreign and Political Proceedings."

40. See, e.g., the cluster of grants to Muslim shrines in the village of Nimaneewal near Sialkot, mostly beginning in the Mughal period and later confirmed by subsequent Sikh rulers. Foreign and Political Proceedings, January 9, 1857, Nimaneewal, Jila Sialkote, Lahore Division, no. 221, 1–12. I have retained the original spelling of the colonial officials who compiled this file.

41. See, e.g., Foreign and Political Proceedings, National Archives of India, January 9, 1857, no. 233, entries 27 and 28. The first grant cited here was by Jahan Khan, a Mughal-era *lambaradar* (revenue collector), for a school on the premises of a mosque in Chaudhriwalla; the second was a Sikh-era grant for a mosque with a school.

42. See, e.g., discussion of the "Haryanvi" diction in Walter Nils Hakala, "Diction, and Dictionaries, Language, Literature and Learning in Persianate South Asia," (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010), 381–420.

43. For a full description of these works in English, see Christopher Shackle, *Catalogue of the Sindhi and Punjabi Manuscripts in the India Office Library* (London: British Library Publishing Division, 1977), 39–40.

44. Allison Busch, "Hidden in Plain View: Brajbhasha Poets at the Mughal Court," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2010): 267–309.

45. For details of this, see Marshall, *Mughals in India*, cited in n. 4 above.

