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

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The Indo-Persian state secretary has occupied center stage in the emerging discourse on bureaucracy, administration and the political formation of the Mughal state. The status and role of the *munsh?* (the Indo-Persian state secretary) within the Mughal bureaucratic structure in 17th and 18th century have formed the basis of recent historical analysis. Scholarship on the Indo-Persian *munsh?* have been informed by the efforts at historicizing his status as a scribe, an administrator, a diplomat, poet, commentator on aesthetics, elite correspondent and as an agent of the Empire.⁽¹⁾ Scholarly attention has focused on the role of the Mughal *munsh?*, yet the exalted status and the power of the elite state secretary was not unique to 17th and 18th-century India. As Sunil Kumar has argued, the Persian knowing state secretary in early medieval India was immensely influential in the construction of the public image of the Khalaji and Tughluk sultans.⁽²⁾ Thus the rise of the Indo-Persian state secretary within the imperial bureaucratic structure was part of a long and continuous political formation. However, the emergence of specific caste groups like the Brahmans and Kayasthas as service elites and scribe-craft as a profession involving the acquisition of Persian and the movement of the upper-caste Hindus in ever increasing numbers in the Indo-Persian Mughal court was certainly characteristic of 17th and 18th-century north India.⁽³⁾

Rajeev Kinra's painstakingly researched and well-detailed monograph on the Mughal *Munshi* Chandar Bhan Brahman is a significant addition to the scholarship mentioned above. In deviating from existing trends in scholarship on scribes and scribe-craft in 17th and 18th-century India Kinra does not attempt a study of bureaucratic functions and their impact on state formation. That is to say, the formation of the Mughal state is not at the center of Kinra's historical analysis. He deftly shifts the focus from the Mughal state to the life and career of one of the most important Indo-Persian state secretaries in understanding imperial politics and ethics. Unlike most of his predecessors his narrative foregrounds everyday administrative behavior, courtly conduct and manifestation of civility as the basis of a unique Indo-Persian political formation. In an early section in *Writing Self, Writing Empire* he mentions that the primary focus of his historical study is on the political and cultural condition that enabled the steady movement of Hindus in the Indo-Persian court and their flourish as scribes in late Mughal India. Thus this book on Chandar Bhan Brahman, the Munshi who served Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, undertakes a study of the Indo-Persian political thought in commenting on the condition of civility and pluralism that marked everyday culture in late Mughal India.

Rajeev Kinra's history of the Mughals looks at Indo-Persian political language and political culture informed by the continuing discourse of *ʔulʔ-i-kull* or 'universal civility' in 17th and 18th-century north India. His disagreements lie with earlier histories of the Mughal Empire where the period between 1605–1727 have seldom received scholarly attention except for commentaries on the rise of Islamic orthodoxy in the Mughal court, the initiation of a new culture of decadence under Jahangir and Shah Jahan and the decline of the Indo-Persian Empire. His revisionist study of the life and career of Chandar Bhan Brahman is a long response to historical scholarship that has been unsuccessful in looking at the continuous patterns of cultural development that shaped Indo-Persian political thought in 17th and 18th-century India. Towards this effect, Kinra's book on the Mughal Munshi continues to take the suggestions made by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam in speaking for a new scholarship on the political and cultural world of the Indo-Persian Empire in their introduction to *The Mughal State*.[\(4\)](#)

In making his case for the strengthened political condition of everyday pluralism, Kinra presents an innovative analysis of the state secretary and his self-making as the Indo-Persian literary elite who does not give up his caste pride and religious belief or mask it in order to exhibit what John F. Richards referred to as their 'chameleon like attributes'. Rather he elaborates on the expansive cultural and political space of the late Mughal Empire where Hindu scribes like Chandar Bhan Brahman could easily be accommodated and speak proudly of the *zunnʔr* or the sacred thread, the mark of their caste identity. However, Kinra is quick to alert us not to read Chandar Bhan's caste pride in terms of 'ritual purity' but in terms of his 'commitment to intellectual excellence'. In fact as he later points out scribal profession in 17th and 18th-century north India was not limited only to a few upper-caste Hindus. The mention of individuals like Jatmal Shudra, Gopichand Shudra, Arjun Mal Shudra, Devi Das, Bhagwant Ray and Narayan Das in *Chahʔr Chaman* who practiced both the *taliq* and the *shikasta* seems to tell a different story of Indo-Persian literacy in north India.

Kinra's history of the Mughals is based on the literary output of Chandar Bhan Brahman – more specifically *Chʔhar Chaman* (The Four Gardens) and *Munshaʔat-i-Brahman* (Letters from a Brahman Munshi). This as he suggests is barely scratching the surface of either Chandar Bhan's complete oeuvre which includes his poetry and his *ghazals* or that of his contemporaries. However, Kinra's concentration on two texts and their location in the social space of Mughal court in building his historical narrative is quite unique in the field of early modern Indian history. His book appears to dispel the ignorance born out of apathy towards serious engagement with the Indo-Persian texts. It is quite clear that for Kinra, Chandar Bhan Brahman appears as important as Machiavelli is to the historian of Italian Renaissance. Thus his dense, philological exercise also suggests his interest in reading Chandar Bhan not just an agent of Empire but making serious contribution to the development of Mughal political thought.

His comment on the general apathy and ignorance towards Indo-Persian literature that pervades current scholarship is quite accurate. In fact, the disappearance of Persian or Indo-Persian from the public space beginning in the late 18th century and continuing well into the 20th century is a well-known story. In

contemporary India it would be difficult to find Modern Indian language or Cultural Studies departments that offer courses on Chandar Bhan or any of his contemporaries. The apathy is not just individual and collective but also institutional and explains why most writers of Indo-Persian literature remain untranslated and therefore inaccessible to a larger public with no knowledge of Persian. Although Kinra's efforts are praiseworthy and immensely inspiring one wonders if it will encourage literature departments in India to use the book for a class on early modern political thought.

Kinra structures his arguments in six well-knit chapters besides an introduction and a conclusion. The chapters mostly follow a close analysis of each of the four gardens of *Chahār Chaman*. In the introduction Kinra locates Chandar Bhan Brahman and his political thought within a continuous global tradition of aesthetics – most notably, Indic, Islamicate, Persian, Turko-Mongol and Greco-Hellenic. He argues that the Mughal political thinkers envisioned their world and the empire as part of this continuous tradition of intellectual refinement and 'universal civility'. He situates the Mughals within a trans-imperial network of oceanic trade routes and exchanges and looks at their everyday administrative and bureaucratic discourse as emerging from a larger competitive political space involving the Ottomans, Habsburgs and Safavids. His reading of the Mughal Empire as part of a global political formation draws on previous research in this area by Sanjay Subrahmanyam. Kinra's takes Subrahmanyam's thesis forward and uses the career and writings of one of the foremost insiders of this expanding global political space in commenting on the Mughal ideas of civility and pluralism.

As has been indicated before his history of the Mughals is quite different from the works of his predecessors. This not just a book on Mughal political culture but a close study of the Mughal ideas of civility and pluralism as envisioned and practiced in 17th- and 18th-century north India. Towards this end, the chapters that follow from the introduction are an elaboration on the Mughal concept of *ʿulū-i-kuhl* and its presence in the everyday political space consisting of emperors, ministers, scribes, petty officials, intellectuals and travelers. The everyday political space of Mughal bureaucracy forms the crux of Kinra's efforts at historicizing the concept of *ʿulū-i-kuhl* by situating it in a world of imperial practice of civility.

Chapter one offers a powerful and a convincing critique of standard Mughal historiography where the post-Akbar period has seldom been considered as independently significant. Kinra uses the literary oeuvre of Chandar Bhan Brahman in presenting the experience of the Mughal Empire which was quite different from what has often been referred to as a period of increasing Islamic orthodoxy. Chandar Bhan offers him an important entry point into the discourse of civility and noble manners that shaped imperial practice of politics in late Mughal India. Kinra traces the early career of Chandar Bhan Brahman and offers a historical overview of the intellectual world which he inhabited. One of the interesting aspects here is that neither Chandar Bhan and his son Tej Bhan nor his father Dharam Das was unique in pursuing Persian literary and professional skills. Kinra drawing primarily on Chandar Bhan's correspondences and secondary literature on 18th-century scribes shows that they were in fact part of a larger group of Hindus like Diyanat Ray and Raghunath Ray Kayastha who along with other members of their families participated in the burgeoning culture of Persian literacy in north India.

Kinra's suggestion of an expansive Persian literacy where Kayasthas and Brahmans played an important role reminds one of Kumkum Chatterjee's book on the Persianization of historical practice and history writing in early modern Bengal.⁽⁵⁾ However, the thrust of Kinra's work lies in putting the lesser and the forgotten nobles at the center of Mughal history. Thus chapter one, where he details the long career of Chandar Bhan, presents a host of Mughal characters whom we rarely encounter in the histories of the Indo-Persian Empire – 'Abd al-Karim "Ma'muri", Afzal Khan, Asaf Khan, Sa'd Allah Khan, Islam Khan Mashhadi, Mir Muhammad Sa'id Ardestani or "Mua'zzim Khan". As Kinra points out these nobles and ministers of post-Akbar period were not just patrons of Hindus like Chandar Bhan and Raghunath Ray Kayastha but played a significant role in the everyday bureaucracy of the Mughal Empire. That is to say, the empire was run by the collective efforts of these Muslim ministers and their Hindu *munshis* who practiced civility and religious pluralism as an integral part of everyday political behavior.

Kinra identifies two distinct forms of civility ('literary civility' and 'mystical civility') in everyday Mughal space of political wisdom and ethics and links them with the discourse on *adab* (ethics) and *akhlaq* (political wisdom). Through an analysis of the writings of Chandar Bhan Brahman on the working relationships during this period Kinra points out that both imperial ethics and political wisdom was marked by the efforts at accommodating religious diversity and civil modes of conduct. The later actually sums up his notion of literary civility which he describes as comprising of noble manners, ways of address, epistolary conventions and literary refinement. In describing one of the most tender accounts from Chandar Bhan's oeuvre where the scribe, now a bereaved friend, writes to his friend Ikhlas Khan, Kinra deftly shows the limits of what he calls 'literary civility'. Here Chandar Bhan is seen complaining to his friend whom he accuses of forgetting him. The scribe following the conventions of letter writing during 17th-century Mughal north India includes a poem where he takes recourse to literary imagination in order to express the emotional depths of his attachment to Ikhlas Khan. As Kinra explains, the Brahman here claims the legacy of Majnun in grieving the forgetfulness of his friend. Bhan writes,

Majnun's turn in the factory of love is over;

A Brahman has taken up this ancient legacy today.

[*gu?asht naubat-i-majn?n zi k?r-?h?na-yi 'ishq*

barahman ast dar ?n kuhna d?dm?n imroz]

Kinra suggests that the circulation of poetry that marked epistolary practice functioned as a 'social bridge' between people belonging to various religious, class or occupational groups connecting them using the 'common literary and mystical idiom of Persian verse'.

Chapter one appears as a long commentary on scribe-craft and the status and duties of the Mughal *munsh?*. Focusing on the first garden of *Ch?har Chaman* and the *Munsha'at-i-Brahman* Kinra historicizes the Mughal *munsh?* as an elite practitioner of the secretarial arts. The chapter begins with the self-fashioning of the scribe and here Kinra drawing on Chandar Bhan's advice to Tej Bhan states the importance of *adab*, *akhlaq*, *tarikh* (historical writing) and *siyaq* (accountancy) in the education of the Mughal gentleman. In fact as Kinra argues the success of the state secretary and the scribe depended on the gentlemanly manners and literary tastes. Thus we find Chandar Bhan asking his son to acquire the habit of keeping secrets to oneself in order to build a relationship of trust and dependence between the scribe and his patron. Chandar Bhan clearly states that dependence, trust, reputation and good manners were as important as skills in language and accountancy for the success of a Mughal *munsh?*.

Contrary what many believe, the Mughal *Munshi* as the master of the pen or *??h?b-i-kalam* was not just a poet or a literary person but also played significant roles as an administrator, diplomat and a military person. However, refined literary taste and a flair for poetry and letter writing remained central to his status. To put it in a different way, knowledge of the humanities remained as a cornerstone of the education of the state secretary. Chapter two also introduces Chandar Bhan as an important commentator on Mughal governance. Here Kinra seems to be interested in the everyday patterns of governance and relationships that existed between officers and their employees in Mughal bureaucracy. He cites instances from Chandar Bhan's writings on secretarial conducts and shows how these were circulated as texts on advice or *na?ih?t-n?ma* which at once linked them to *akhlaqi* texts on ethics and political wisdom in a wider trans-imperial medieval and early modern space of Persian literacy. He further argues that the art of Mughal administration and secretarial success as envisioned by people like Chandar Bhan depended on the synthesis of a 'trivium of ideal qualities' – *wiz?rat* (selfless ministerly leadership), *ma'rifat* (spiritual gnosis) and *munsh?giri* (secretarial qualities). This as Kinra argues was enshrined in the much coveted idea of mystical civility practiced at the level of everyday governance. He writes,

[...] For, it turns out, in Chandar Bhan's view the ideal Mughal minister was not just an excellent military commander but also a man of deep learning and civility. Specifically, he was a man of *secretarial* learning, one who had mastered the very same secretarial arts and values that Chandar Bhan himself tried to emulate and promote in his works; and he was, moreover, a man of *mystical* civility, one whose attunement to esoteric spiritual gnosis (known as *ma'rifat* in Sufi parlance) gave him the sort of humility that allowed him to do his job with the very sense of detachment (*bi-ta'alluqi*) from material gain that Chandar Bhan advocated to his own son Tej Bhan. These spiritual and secretarial qualities enhanced a leader's ability to handle affairs of the state, over and above the mere brute demands of conquest. [...]

Chapter three looks at the second garden of *Chahar Chaman* in order to reflect on the Hindu *munsh*'s ideas of kingship and his experience of Islamic rule in 17th- and 18th-century north India. Kinra begins the chapter with an analysis of a much shorter and oft cited work on kingship by Chandar Bhan Brahman, *Tarikh-i Rajah-yi Dihli* or *A History of the Kings of Delhi*. This short history (complete in 20 folios) of the kings who ruled from the throne of Delhi tells us much about the Brahman *munsh*'s conception of the Islamic rulers and their period of rule. As Kinra explains, it is almost impossible to find any instance where the Brahman *munsh* considers Islamic rule as a moment of disjuncture in the history of north India or as marking something entirely different from what was before. Chandar Bhan situates the Khalajis, the Tughluks and the Mughals in a long line of continuous kingship going back to mythic and historical figures like Yudhishtira, Janmajeya and the Tomar king Raja Suraj Pal and calls them 'just' and 'ocean hearted monarchs'. For Chandar Bhan Islamic kingship appears not to be very different either as he clubs all of them (the Hindu and the Muslim rulers) under the title *Rajah-yi Dihli*. And again Kinra alerts us that there is no reason to believe that this was mere sycophancy on the *munsh*'s part. In fact there is evidence to prove his dislike for individual Muslim rulers. However, much of the description that he provides here supports nothing close to the standard narrative of conquest and a 'radical rupture' marking the beginning of Islamic rule in medieval India.

The rest of the chapter proceeds by a close reading of the most popular and much translated second garden of *Chahar Chaman*. Here Kinra concentrates more on Chandar Bhan's views of Shah Jahan as the emperor of the world and his imperial court. He cites many instances from the text to argue that Chandar Bhan had an open access to most of the happenings of the emperor's court and the mobile camps. And as a result of this we find some brilliant details about the everyday life of individuals and urban locales during the late Mughal period – something which is entirely left out from standard Mughal historiography. Chandar Bhan presents us with some fascinating details regarding the conceptions of the Mughal realm and the cosmopolitan constitution of the late Mughal court. Rich in metaphors and highly ornate these descriptions compound the reader's interest in an otherwise lengthy chapter on the Brahman *munsh*'s perception of legitimate Islamic kingship.

Chapter four and five take us back to the world of Persian literacy and squarely deals with two important aspects of it – autobiographical writings and the *tazagiyan* turn in Indo-Persian literature. In chapter four Kinra focuses on the third garden and mostly the autobiographical sections from *Chahar Chaman* in teasing out a narrative of self-reflection. As he quite deftly shows Chandar Bhan was very much aware of the exalted status of his family and his status as an 'ethical Mughal subject'. The later Kinra argues was not determined by one's community and Chandar Bhan appears to be quite clear on this while suggesting that the 'ethical Mughal subject' could draw on the spiritual and mystical aspects of both Hinduism and Islam without strictly identifying himself with any one of these. It is also curious that Chandar Bhan never appears to be very specific while defining himself as observing 'proper faith' (*durust i'tiqad*). Kinra reads this as lack of clarification as 'intentional' and an articulation of religious pluralism that marked the everyday life of the ethical Mughal subject. This chapter also foregrounds the importance of letter writing or the practice of *insha* in late Mughal India. The wide reaching Mughal postal service allowed the nobility to exchange letters quite frequently and as our author notes this gave rise to rich culture of literary manners and civility in

17th-century north India. Indeed the proliferation of *insha* as the preferred form of communication led to the emergence of a new social intimacy where the aristocrats and the nobles initiated a conversational and informal way of address. This is in contradiction to the standard view that the everyday world of Persian literacy was flooded with letters that were highly ornamental and strictly formal. Kinra points his readers to instances from Chandar Bhan's letters in dispelling the notions on the stylistics of Persian letter writing.

As well as studying the poetry of Chandar Bhan in order to comment on the 'freshness' (*t?zagi*) of Indo-Persian literature in the 17th century, Kinra tackles two extremely important issues in chapter five. Both of these issues stem from his disagreements with the historiography of Indo-Persian literature and literary modernity. His first disagreement lies with the way in which 17th-century Indo-Persian literature has been read without paying any attention at all to the emerging discourse of *t?za-guy?n* (fresh speech). Kinra locates this new Persian literate space within the cosmopolitan world of the Mughal Empire where merchants, traders and intellectuals from various parts of the Indian Ocean network participated in large numbers. He further states that the expansive space of Mughal social life marked by the above discussed aspects of civility and religious pluralism created the condition for exchange and innovation. It is within this socio-literary space that poets like Chandar Bhan Brahman entered into a dialogue with the past. This dialogue was marked by both the recognition of the past as an important precedent as well as the need to initiate a new speech marked by 'freshness'.

Kinra locates this dialogic space between the contemporary generation (*muta'a?h?hir?n*) and the ancients (*mutaqaddim?n*) within a wider space of Sanskrit literary innovation (the *navya* thinkers) and the arrival of newness in 17th-century literary culture. However, his comparative framework appears to be even wider as we find him comparing this newness to something similar like Ezra Pound's conception of literary modernity two centuries later. Although this might appear as surprising to his contemporary readers, Kinra's suggestion cannot be entirely ruled out and deserves scholarly attention. The other disagreement that Kinra has with Indo-Persian historiography has to do with the status of *sabk-i-hindi*. As Kinra points out the category of *sabk-i-hindi* is marked by derision towards Indo-Persian literature that according to some commentators began to be heavily hindized following the acquisition of Persian language by the Hindu scribes. However, Chandar Bhan's poetry shows no attachment to the world of early modern Hindi literature and his poetic oeuvre is entirely Persian – both in content and in form. The only local element, if one has to point out to one, is his constant use of the self-referential Brahman. This as Kinra suggests was because the *munsh?* chose that as his *takhallus* and had nothing to do with Hindi elements in his poetry.

The last chapter of the book returns to the world of Mughal social life and the role of cultural memory. In this chapter Kinra masterfully reads episodes and anecdotes from the remembered life of the Brahman *munsh?* in tracing his later public image. As he points out, much of modern memory on Chandar Bhan revolves around the notion of a 'Hindu sidekick' to the maverick Mughal prince Dara Shukoh. However, rather than ignoring such memories based on fanciful imagination Kinra situates them in the world of Persian decline. He suggests that the construction of Chandar Bhan's public image as a Hindu infidel and a cheeky audacious poet whose pride lay in his caste symbol (*zunn?r* or the sacred thread) was embedded within the wider political space of Mughal decline. Towards this end, he closely studies the 19th and 20th century *t?zkiras* that lie at the base of such constructions. Kinra successfully shows his readers that the shift in Chandar Bhan's public image was due to efforts by later biographers towards owning his legacy within their immediate literary context (most importantly fashioning him as an early practitioner of Urdu). The chapter in a fascinating manner foregrounds the circulation of anecdotes and their changing meanings within the space of the Persian and Urdu literary biographies. Kinra does a compelling reading of one such anecdote in showing how the public image of Chandar Bhan was constructed on gossips, fragmented stories and anecdotal memory. The reader cannot help being reminded of the Chandar Bhan's insistence on good reputation and public image of the *munsh?* which the author of this book referred to in one of the earlier chapters. In the end then it is reputation (be it true or false) that seems to live on coloring the image of the ethical Mughal subject.

Kinra achieves a rare feat of synthesizing literary and socio- historical analysis in writing this book. His

attention to the literary aspect of the archive comes through in the analysis in all six chapters. Although coming from a debutant author *Writing Self, Writing Empire* shows a maturity that prevents the work from being just a philological or just a historical study. And this not only raises the expectation of his readers but also alerts us to the methods of historical writing. Historical writing, particularly cultural histories of medieval and early modern India, need more such work where the author is aware of the demands of the empirical and the conceptual in his archive. The manner in which Kinra lays out his textual archive in six different chapters with a firm base on the conceptual discussions on universal civility and religious pluralism exhibits such a synthesis.

There is very little room for disagreements with most of Kinra's claims. This is primarily because he presents a fresh view of an archive that has been rarely mentioned in Mughal historiography. And as Kinra in the conclusion points out this is just the tip of an iceberg and there is much to do in this area both in terms of conceptually and empirically oriented historical scholarship as well as translation of the Indo-Persian texts for a wider range of readers. However, one wishes that some of the later chapters could have been leaner and contained less information. Maybe the book could have been broken into two more chapters. That is not to say that Kinra loses his readers in such moments. Perhaps it is the immense pull of the archive which he skillfully braids into the narrative that holds the reader's attention. Apart from Kinra's extremely well-written revisionist analysis, it is the sheer literary quality of this archive and its deft presentation that remains with the reader, urging him to return to the book and the Indo-Persian poetry delights it offers.

Notes

1. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics* (New York, NY, 2012).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, Sunil Kumar, 'The ignored elites: Turks, Mongols and a Persian secretarial class in Early Delhi Sultanate', *Modern Asian Studies*, 43, 1 (2009), 45–77.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See the essays by Rosalind O'Hanlon and Sumit Guha in the special issue of *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 47, 4 (2010).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *The Mughal State, 1526–1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New Delhi, 1998).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (New Delhi, 2009).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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