Writing Self, Writing Empire

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To gaze upon the Taj Mahal in Agra remains, even today, nearly four hundred years after its construction, an exhilarating experience. One of the most recognizable structures in all of South Asia, and arguably in the entire world, it has become a visual icon not just of the Mughal dynasty that built it but of the entire subcontinent’s rich courtly, artistic, and architectural history. Something about the Taj just says India to most observers, almost as a floating visual signifier. And as a result, its iconic image has come to grace countless travel brochures, movie posters, advertisements, coffee-table books, and the like, instantly drawing the beholder’s mind to a certain aura of exotic Indo-Muslim mystique, even if the consumers of such images are not always aware that the monument is specifically “Mughal,” or that it was built in the 1630s by the bereaved Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58) as a monument to his beloved late wife, Arjomand Banu Begum, aka Mumtaz Mahal (“the palace favorite”). In a sign of the times, Google even announced recently that in 2014 the Taj Mahal was the most visited destination in Asia for “virtual travelers” using Google Street View to explore historical monuments and other tourist sites from the comfort of their own homes.  

But what of the emperor who built it? What of the court culture that produced it? Many will know the story behind the Taj’s construction as a mausoleum for the emperor’s wife, and some will surely have heard the popular legends of Shah Jahan’s draconian treatment of the builders and craftsmen who designed the exquisite monument (all of which are baseless, as far as any serious scholars have been able to detect). For some, the Taj is a luminous monument to sublime romantic love—a “solitary tear [that] would hang on the cheek of time,” as the Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore once famously called it. For others,
it is the embodiment of exotic Oriental romance’s evil cousins, decadence, despotism, and intrigue. For still others, somewhat paradoxically, it is both. “Its beauty,” as the title to an article accompanying a 1967 photo spread in *Life* magazine succinctly put it, “veils a Mogul’s ruthless whim.” And yet, for all the relative fame or infamy that attaches to it in the modern cultural imagination, when it comes to the general cultural history of the decades just before and after the Taj Mahal was built, or for that matter the entire Mughal seventeenth century, I’d wager that most people would be surprised to learn that there is actually a dearth of original scholarship on the period. Indeed, particularly for the English reading public (which includes a lot of South Asians as well), there is far less new, primary source–based research on the Mughal cultural world generally than most visitors to the Taj—whether real or virtual—probably realize.

This book seeks to help address this considerable gap in our knowledge of the period by examining the life, career, and cultural milieu of a prominent court insider, the Mughal poet and state secretary (*munshi*) Chandar Bhan Brahman (d. ca. 1666–70). Chandar Bhan was one of the great Persian prose stylists and poets of his era, and, while we do not know exactly when he was born, we do know that it was almost certainly sometime toward the end of the reign of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar (r. 1556–1605), widely considered to have been the greatest, and most transformative, emperor of the Mughal dynasty in India. Indeed, part of the reason there is such a lack of cultural historical scholarship on the later Mughals is that for generations such research has focused largely on Akbar’s reign, to the almost total exclusion of the literary and political culture of the ensuing decades.

An intellectual like Chandar Bhan thus provides us an excellent window onto a surprisingly neglected period in Mughal culture and politics. Though he was born during Akbar’s reign, he came of age and spent the bulk of his career during the reigns of Akbar’s successors Jahangir (r. 1605–28) and Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58) and even continued serving for a time under the last of the so-called “great” Mughals, Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir (r. 1658–1707). It was a few years into Aurangzeb’s reign that, citing old age, Chandar Bhan withdrew from official imperial service. But he continued to correspond with the emperor, and new evidence (discussed below in chapter 1) suggests that he also served the court in a less official capacity for nearly a decade even after that. This Hindu from Punjab thus lived, worked, and thrived through part or all of the reigns of four different Muslim monarchs, at the peak of the Mughal Empire’s power and global influence.

To be sure, it was an age of terrific splendor, and thus it is perhaps not so surprising that the popular memory of the Mughal world in Chandar Bhan’s lifetime tends overwhelmingly to fixate on extravagant monuments like the Taj, or on royal intrigue, or on the Mughals’ lavish patronage for exquisite miniature painting and other arts. Indeed, to most people, even to many professional scholars who are not specialists of the Mughal era or the Indo-Persian cultural world, they
remain, simply, in the words of Bamber Gascoigne, “India’s most flamboyant rulers.”

But Chandar Bhan’s era was also defined by key cultural and political transitions, both in India and in the wider geographical zones of Eurasia and the Indian Ocean world. It was a time when everyday bureaucratic and administrative policies in northern India were streamlined and rationalized to levels unprecedented in the history of the subcontinent and unsurpassed in all but a handful of states elsewhere in the world for some time to come. As a state secretary who spent most of his career working primarily out of the fiscal office (dīwāns) of the various prime ministers who served Shah Jahan, Chandar Bhan had an insider’s view of this administrative culture, and his observations thus provide us with unique insights into how certain classes of Mughal government officials thought about their professional duties and their obligations to the public at large.

The seventeenth century was also a time when the Indian subcontinent bolstered its claim as the critical hub in a vast network of global trade routes that connected China and the rest of East and Southeast Asia, via India, to the Safavid and Ottoman domains, the wider Middle East, the city-states of the East African Swahili Coast, the Mediterranean, and beyond to Europe and even the Americas. In military and political terms, the Mughals were thus engaged on the global stage in what has been described as a “tight grid of interimperial rivalry” with competitors like the Ottomans, the Habsburgs, and the Safavids.

But culturally speaking it was also a time when the Mughals were among the greatest patrons in the world for an Indo-Persian literary and scholarly tradition whose area of influence extended across South, Central, and West Asia, and that, we should not fail to note, ultimately had a pronounced—though routinely unacknowledged—influence even on modern European and American notions of literary romanticism. Mughal patronage lured an extraordinary number of intellectuals from all over this cosmopolitan ecumene to Delhi, Agra, Lahore, and other major cultural centers in northern India, and all of them continued, along with their native Indian counterparts like Chandar Bhan, to participate in a vast transregional conversation whose voices could also be heard in Bengal, Arakan, the Deccan, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, the rest of central and inner Asia, and indeed the entire eastern Muslim world.

For centuries, Indo-Persian literary culture had also been a prime vehicle for the spread of Sufi idioms expressing mystical and existential angst, as well as bacchic rejoinders to the social and religious conservativism of orthodox Muslim clerics. Celebrations of earthly and divine L/love, of worldly and spiritual intoxication, and of devotion to the ostensibly heretical “idols” of T/truth and B/beauty emerged over the years as some of the most common themes in Indo-Persian literary life. And thus, in turn, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries such antinomian views also became critical components of the wider Mughal
perspective not just on literature but also on larger societal matters like civility, religious tolerance, the role of the state, and the meaning of what is often referred to nowadays as “political Islam.”

This openness to complex and unorthodox views on the basic questions of human existence had a correlate, too, in the flourishing respect during this period for multiple classical religious and intellectual traditions—Indic, Islamicate, Persian, Turko-Mongol, Greco-Hellenic—even while there was also a powerful sense of epochal newness in the air, as the heirs to these various knowledge systems and linguistic traditions sought to recalibrate their literary, philosophical, philological, and scientific bearings in response to the new social, cultural, and political realities of global early modernity. Thus the intellectual foundations of Mughal culture and politics rested precisely on a dual sense of both continuity with the great classical traditions of the old world and the equally strong belief that by integrating these cultural streams into a composite worldview, safeguarded by Mughal power, they were crafting an empire of unprecedented dynamism, social harmony, and “universal civility” (ṣulḥ-i kull).

As a native of Lahore and an elite member of the Mughal corps of state secretaries, or munshīs, Chandar Bhan Brahman was both an eyewitness to these developments and a prominent participant. But Mughal tolerance and civility, as such, are not really the main concern of what follows so much as they constitute the backdrop against which the administrative and literary career of a figure like Chandar Bhan was even thinkable. They created the conditions of possibility for cultural networks that cut across a wide variety of social, political, and intellectual contexts that were rarely, if ever, constrained solely by ethnic or sectarian affiliation, allowing many Mughal intellectuals to inhabit multiple subject positions and thereby to engage in multiple techniques of self-fashioning depending on the situation in which they found themselves operating. In the chapters that follow, then, we will explore some of the multiple perspectives from which a figure like Chandar Bhan Brahman engaged Mughal life, or, put another way, the multiple Mughal worlds that he was able simultaneously to inhabit.

To begin with, there is the world of Chandar Bhan’s family, his social networks, his access to various forms of Mughal patronage early in his career, and the wider context of Mughal attitudes toward diversity and multiplicity in his lifetime, topics that we will take up in chapter 1. As his name suggests, Chandar Bhan came from the sort of high-caste Brahman family, educated primarily in Sanskrit, that “traditional” social location, however, does not seem to have presented many obstacles to his family’s employment in the Mughals’ nominally Muslim state, an affiliation that began in his father’s generation. Nor, for that matter, did it preclude families like his, and entire classes of early modern Hindu literati, from continuing to pursue classical Indic traditions even as many entered into a seri-
ous engagement with the Perso-Islamic literary and political idioms that were the staple of Mughal high culture.

Too often, modern scholarship has treated premodern social, religious, and even linguistic identities in South Asia as though they were zero-sum phenomena—as though a Muslim ruler had to become “less Muslim,” as it were, in order to exhibit genuine tolerance and respect toward the non-Muslims in his realm, or as though a Hindu who learned Persian, for instance, somehow became “less Hindu” as a result. This is certainly the logic, albeit perhaps unintended, of the great Mughal scholar John Richards’s praise for the “chameleon-like attributes” of the “caste” of Hindu munshi like Chandar Bhan who came to dominate the Mughal secretariat in the seventeenth century—the implication being that such non-Muslim service elites had to stage some sort of elaborate performance of collective self-abnegation or dissimulation in order to function in a Muslim state.

But we see nothing in Chandar Bhan’s oeuvre to corroborate this notion. Quite the contrary, throughout his writings he evinces consistent pride in his Brahmanical lineage—why else, after all, would he choose “Brahman” as his literary nom de plume?—at one point even boasting that it was precisely their Brahmanical background that made him, his father, and his brothers so well attuned to the Perso-Islamicate Sufi ideals of worldly detachment. Perhaps even more significantly—at the risk of stating what ought to be obvious but unfortunately, in a good deal of modern scholarship and commentary, is not—Chandar Bhan’s Muslim patrons, colleagues, and interlocutors routinely showed themselves to be perfectly conscious of the fact that he was a Hindu and tended simply to accept him as such. We know of no effort to convert him, nor do we have any evidence that he felt any pressure, at any point in his life, to downplay or otherwise camouflage his religious identity in order to advance his career.

And what a career it was. From relatively modest beginnings as a provincial clerk in his native Punjab, Chandar Bhan rose over the course of his life in Mughal service to occupy some of the most elite secretarial appointments in Shah Jahan’s government. Through his employment by various powerful officials along the way, and in his later capacity as the emperor’s personal secretary and diarist (wāqi’a-nawīs), Chandar Bhan gained privileged access to the royal household, the courtly society, and the administrative apparatus of the Mughal Empire at the peak of its power and influence. He shares this perspective with us in many of his writings, especially in his celebrated memoir of life at the Mughal court, Chahār Chaman (The four gardens), as well as his separate collection of personal letters, known under various names but most often given the title Munsha’āt-i Brahman. Chahār Chaman and Munsha’āt-i Brahman were two of the most widely circulated—and emulated—Persian prose texts in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century South Asia, as evidenced by the numerous manuscripts of each that are still housed in archives all over India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and indeed the rest of the
world. Both texts were taken as models of exemplary stylistic prose (inshā’) for subsequent generations of Indo-Persian secretaries and other literati, and Chandar Bhan’s style was still considered so worthy of emulation at the end of the eighteenth century that excerpts of *Chahār Chaman* were even featured prominently in *The Persian Moonshie* (1795), a widely used Persian textbook for East India Company officials compiled by Francis Gladwin, a celebrated British Orientalist and member of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta from its founding in 1784.

What we find in a close examination of *Chahār Chaman* and *Munsha’āt-i Brahman* is that Chandar Bhan was a subtle and astute commentator, not only on the ideals of Indo-Persian secretarial conduct, which were his primary area of professional expertise, but also on broader issues like the nature of political leadership, the social value of civility and gentlemanly conduct, the role of literature and mysticism in public life, and the importance of refining the mechanisms of Mughal administration in order to better serve the public good. Our munshi’s attitude toward such themes will be the focus of chapter 2, which centers mainly on an analysis of the first of *Chahār Chaman*’s “four gardens” of Mughal self-fashioning. I argue that this long understudied essay on the cultural role and ethical responsibilities of Mughal secretaries, ministers (wazīrs), and other administrators was very likely intended to be read in the rich tradition of Indo-Persian wisdom and advice literature, or naṣīḥat-nāmas, as a kind of “mirror for munshīs.”

Indeed, Chandar Bhan’s reflections on his experience of various types of courtly assemblies, his relationships with notable Mughal officials, and his participation in several important military campaigns and diplomatic missions were intended not simply to offer the reader a randomly dazzling display of Persian prose style—which is how *Chahār Chaman* has typically been read by generations of dismissive modern scholars—but also, crucially, to provide once and future Mughal munshīs and other officials with practical models of exemplary conduct and approaches to good administration. By using his own career to showcase the complex package of cultural and administrative skills expected of the elite munshi, Chandar Bhan offered a firsthand illustration of successful career mobility for later generations of Indo-Persian secretaries. Equally important, as we will see, in describing the excellent qualities of the great Mughal wazīrs of his era such as Raja Todar Mal (d. 1589), Afzal Khan Shirazi (d. 1639), Sa’d Allah Khan (d. 1656), and Raja Raghunath (d. 1664), Chandar Bhan also showed that successful governance was not simply about military authority (imārat) but also a matter of balanced temperament, managerial skill (wizārat), a keen mystical and literary sensibility (ma’rifat), and a deep concern for the public welfare above one’s own.

These themes will continue to resonate in chapter 3, as we examine Chandar Bhan’s views on Mughal kingship itself, beginning with his attempt to locate Shah Jahan within a deeper genealogy of Indic kingship going back to mythical times and to cast the emperor as an ideally just, tolerant, and generous mon-
arch. One important source for Chandar Bhan’s perspective on such topics is his short treatise “History of the Kings of Delhi” (Tārīkh-i Rajahā-yi Dihlī), which traces the rulership of northern India from the mythic heroes of the Sanskrit epic Mahābhārata forward, all the way up to Shah Jahan himself. This will set the stage for an extended discussion of Chahār Chaman’s second “garden,” in which Chandar Bhan dilates at length on the emperor, his daily routine, and the general atmosphere at court and in the mobile imperial camp.

This portion of Chahār Chaman takes on added significance when we realize that it was also excerpted and widely circulated as a separate work in early modern India, usually under the title of either Guldasta (a “flower bouquet” plucked from the “four gardens” of Chahār Chaman) or sometimes Qawā’id al-Saltanat (Principles of governance). This was almost surely the means by which this exact passage found its way into the hands of Francis Gladwin, as mentioned above, who used it in his Persian Moonshee (1795) to exemplify what he considered to be the typical “Rules Observed during the Reign of Shahjehan.”

Chandar Bhan’s work thus had a significant role to play in shaping the early British colonial understanding of what had constituted the norms and practices of Mughal governance, at a crucial historical moment when East India Company officials were still in the incipient stages of studying the Mughal example in order to learn how to manage their own territorial holdings in the subcontinent. And yet, as was so often the case, the British colonial gaze seems clearly to have missed the mark, for if understanding the actual “rules,” principles, and practices of governance in Shah Jahan’s reign had truly been Gladwin’s intention, then he would have done much better to consult any number of other technical manuals on Mughal administration from the genre known as dastūr al-wizārat (norms of ministerial conduct), including, ironically enough, the earlier sections of Chahār Chaman itself that deal so explicitly with such matters.

At this point in Chahār Chaman the author’s attention suddenly radiates outward, from his tight focus on the beating heart of the empire in the form of the emperor’s body, person, and routine to a broad geographical survey of the major cities and provinces that constituted the backbone of the Mughals’ imperial dominions. This outward spatial movement is suggested even by the order of Chandar Bhan’s descriptions, beginning as he does with the newly built capital city of Shahjahanabad (i.e., the part of the city nowadays referred to as “Old Delhi”) and moving outward from there to what he calls “Old Delhi” (dihlī-yi kuhna, by which he means the part of Delhi nowadays referred to as “Nizamuddin”), and thence to Agra, Lahore, Multan, Kashmir, Kabul, Thatta, Ahmadabad, the Deccan, Malwa, Ajmer, Awadh, Allahabad, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Qandahar, and finally the Central Asian provinces of Balkh and Badakhshan. Chandar Bhan’s accounts of these places vary in length, with some running to several pages, while others are only a paragraph or even just a few lines. Mixed in are a handful of anecdotes, for instance
a particularly interesting account of Shah Jahan’s meeting with the Sufi shaikh Miyan Mir while the imperial camp was on route from Kashmir to the Punjab.

But perhaps the most important feature of this section of Chahār Chaman is Chandar Bhan’s extraordinary descriptions of the bustle of daily life in urban centers like Shahjahanabad, Old Delhi, and Lahore. These are some of the most vivid firsthand descriptions we have of the everyday atmosphere of seventeenth-century urban public spaces such as the bazaars, gardens, shrines, and grand Mughal boulevards like Chandni Chowk. Chandar Bhan’s account of such places may reflect a growing concern in early modern Indo-Persian literary culture with what Sunil Sharma has characterized as a new style of “urban ethnography” and may well be one of the earlier examples of the phenomenon, anticipating by nearly a century some of the more flamboyant and well-known accounts contained, for instance, in sources like Dargah Quli Khan’s Muraqqa‘-i Dihli (Delhi scrapbook). Besides adding to our general store of knowledge about the emergent urban public sphere in early modern Indian cities like Delhi, Lahore, and Agra, Chandar Bhan’s observations provide a refreshing firsthand look at some of the various types of social and cultural intercourse that were possible in such spaces.

In chapter 4 the perspective shifts once again, from public, to semiprivate, to deeply personal, as Chandar Bhan uses the third of his “four gardens” to explore two important forms of Mughal prose composition, or inshā’, that have been almost entirely neglected by modern scholarship but that were nevertheless critical vehicles of life writing and self-fashioning among Mughal intellectuals: the memoir and the personal letter. Both autobiography and epistolography have long been seen as crucial genres in the cultivation of the early modern self, a historical development that is often assumed to have its exclusive origin in seventeenth-century Europe. What most people don’t realize is that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also saw a boom in such forms of letter and life writing across the Indo-Persian world, a fact that is no less significant for being hitherto all but unexamined.

We don’t have many good answers for why Indo-Persian literati, too, became so enamored of epistolary self-expression during this period, largely because very few of the scores of personalized letter collections and prose miscellanies that were produced during this period have received any critical scrutiny. But we do know that Chandar Bhan was widely considered by contemporary and later critics as one of the foremost practitioners of the epistolary arts and thus his particular approach to self-fashioning through memoir and letter writing can be a useful window onto the general cultural practices of the era.

As we examine Chandar Bhan’s juxtaposition of his autobiography with various modes of letter writing we will see that he too, like many of his European contemporaries, was capable of crafting a complex, context-specific “epistolary self.” And as we read the autobiographical episodes in his memoir, we will see that he
too, like his contemporary and fellow state secretary Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), was conscious of using diverse modes of life writing to craft a public version of his private persona. Admittedly, Chandar Bhan was not so obsessed with chronological delineation of daily minutiae in his self-presentation as Pepys was, but his approach was no less “individual” as a result. Moreover, given that Pepys’s diary wasn’t actually published until nearly a century after his death, one can say with some confidence that even without the benefit of print capitalism Chandar Bhan probably had a much broader imagined community of readers than his English counterpart’s “secret masterpiece” — a great many of them hoping to emulate the Brahman’s literary style, his career trajectory, and his confident sense of Mughal gentlemanly identity in order to advance their own careers.

At this point, we might feel confident enough that Chandar Bhan’s life and writings have already provided us ample material for an investigation of the seventeenth-century Mughal political and cultural world. Yet we have barely even touched on two of the most compelling features of his oeuvre, namely the mystical and literary sensibilities that are on virtually constant display throughout. These will be a focus of chapters 4 and 5. Like so many intellectuals of his era, Chandar Bhan took a pluralistic and ecumenical approach to religion, drawing heavily on the mystical dimensions of both Islam and Hinduism, weaving the idioms of both Sufism and Vedanta into the fabric of his prose with such deftness and consistency that one would actually be hard pressed to find a single passage in any of his surviving works that does not bear evidence of their powerful effect upon his personality and worldview. Whether he is discussing political matters such as the duties and responsibilities of the prime minister of the empire or personal matters such as his anguish at the death of his father, there is no mistaking the pervasiveness of these mystical idioms in Chandar Bhan’s world, not only in his own day-to-day life but also in that of almost everyone around him, from his own family members right up to Emperor Shah Jahan himself.

For our munshi, then, the incorporation of mystical ideals and idioms into his discursive repertoire was not some superficial add-on or ancillary diversion (the camouflage of which we spoke above); nor was it an elusive normative ideal, to be read about in books but never explored in practice; rather, it was constitutive of his very intellectual being and informed his entire approach to the basic matters of daily human existence. One simply can’t understand his intellectual landscape without it. Nor, significantly, did Chandar Bhan view his deep personal investment in Sufi modes of mystical awareness as any threat whatsoever to his confident sense of identity as a Brahman. Indeed, as I noted above, he boasts from time to time that being a Brahman made him even more attuned to the esoteric intellectualism and spirituality of Sufism (taṣawwuf)—somewhat paradoxically turning the ugly logic of caste pride on its head in order to validate a profoundly radical cultural pluralism.
We will encounter Chandar Bhan’s mystical attitude periodically throughout the early chapters of Writing Self, Writing Empire, and these intermittent forays will culminate with our discussion at the end of chapter 4 of the fourth and final “garden” of Chahār Chaman, a somewhat cryptic miscellany of the munshi’s most esoteric thoughts on various topics, from the cosmic nature of linguistic expression (sukhan), to meditations on philosophical and mystical subjects such as the desire for spiritual detachment (lazzat-i tark-i ta’alluq), the patient acceptance of divine fate (tawakkul), or simply, the nature of Truth (kaifyat-i asl-i haqiqat), among other matters. A running theme throughout this series of esoteric reflections is the tension between the individual’s experience of the material world of phenomena perceptible through the physical and rational senses and the deeper experience of existential, mystical, and cosmic meaning.

This dynamic interplay between the dueling human experiences of surface reality (sūrat) and a yearning for access to the deeper spiritual meaning (ma’ni) behind brute phenomenological existence is, in turn, one of the dominant themes of Chandar Bhan’s ghazals, or lyric poems, an examination of which we will take up in chapter 5. Of course, in many ways Chandar Bhan’s poetic interest in such philosophical themes simply reflects the larger influence of the Sufi mystical idiom on Indo-Persian literary culture more broadly. But this is precisely why it is so important for any historical analysis of Chandar Bhan’s era to take into account both the mystical and the literary sensibilities that shaped the worldview of so many of his contemporaries in the Mughal political and intellectual establishment, from the emperors on down to the administrative clerks.

Indeed, in seventeenth-century Mughal India the ability to produce and appreciate good poetry was not some sort of auxiliary skill cultivated only by a virtuoso cadre of professional, elite practitioners; rather it was an integral feature of daily life, both public and private, not just in the courtly milieu, but also in the bustling world of the bazaars, in the offices of administrators and other minor officials, in the madrasas and other schools, in everyday epistolary correspondence, and throughout many other sites of public and private sociability. Chandar Bhan’s letters, for instance, even his “official” correspondence with members of the royal family or other Mughal officials, are full of poetry—making it quite difficult at times to distinguish his “administrative self” from his “poetic self.”

Far too often these literary aspects of everyday life in Mughal India go virtually unnoticed in political and administrative histories of the period, and often they are even excised from printed editions of Mughal inshâ’ collections. But as we will see, given the degree to which Mughal literary tastes informed political, religious, and social policies, one simply cannot dissociate the literary material of these letters and other forms of inshâ’ from that which is “properly historical.” Indeed, for most men of the pen like Chandar Bhan, to be a Mughal state secretary was to be a poet as well, while for the Mughal state more broadly in many cases the language
of poetry was the language of politics, and the patronage of various types of literary production—in multiple languages, not just in Persian—was a prime vehicle for communicating key aspects of Mughal social and religious policy.16

Like so many of his intellectual contemporaries, Chandar Bhan displayed a pronounced veneration for the past masters of classical Indo-Persian literature. But poets of his era also evinced a keen literary historical consciousness, combining their respect for the achievements of “ancients” (mutaqaddimīn) like Firdausi, Rudaki, Anwari, Khaqani, Sa‘di, Rumi, Hafiz, Amir Khusrau, and Jami (to name a few) with a notable effort to distinguish themselves as the voice of a new age in human history, and their poetry, in turn, as suitably innovative and “fresh” (tāza) to capture the spirit of the new era. Across the seventeenth-century Persianate world, in fact, “speaking the fresh” (tāza-gū‘ī) emerged as a conscious aesthetic goal, while the poets themselves were typically referred to as “the latest” (muta‘ākkhīrīn) or sometimes “the contemporary” (mu‘āsīrīn) to distinguish them from the earlier masters.

One cannot help but see interesting parallels between this movement and other types of “new intellectualism” in early modern India, whether among intellectuals of classical traditions like Sanskrit or vernacular literati who leveraged new forms of Mughal and regional patronage to advance their own claims to cultural novelty and authority.17 The comparative questions raised by the virtual simultaneity of these intellectual historical developments in multiple knowledge systems across South Asia have barely even begun to be raised, much less pursued with any serious attention. And this is to say nothing of trying to place such developments in a comparative perspective even further afield, for instance, say, with the much-discussed “quarrel between ancients and moderns” taking place in almost exactly contemporaneous Europe.

Locating an intellectual like Chandar Bhan’s literary cultural persona amid these broader global trends, as we hope to do in chapter 5, will thus be something quite new to the field of Indo-Persian intellectual history. Meanwhile, any analysis of Chandar Bhan’s poetry only prompts further questions regarding his ultimate cultural legacy, which we will take up in chapter 6. Though he was widely respected by critics in his own day, it took only a few decades after Chandar Bhan’s death (ca. 1670) for the memory of his literary and political career to become the stuff of vivid anecdotes and urban legends. These memorable stories about Chandar Bhan’s activities at the Mughal court and his interactions with important patrons appeared largely in the many biographical compendia (tazkīras) and other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts that narrated the lives and exploits of prominent Indo-Persian poets—yet another part of the Mughal archive that has received far too little critical attention in modern scholarship. As specialists of Indo-Persian literature and Sufism will of course know, by the seventeenth century the tazkīra genre was far from new; but the early modern period
saw a boom in the production of such compendia that has yet to be historicized in any serious way. Indeed many, many questions remain to be answered regarding why the cultural dynamics of this particular era produced such a sense of urgency among Indo-Persian literati and other intellectuals to recover and preserve collective knowledge about their literary past and to juxtapose that archival knowledge with more ephemeral oral histories, anecdotes, and gossip about more recent and contemporary poets like Chandar Bhan. We will try to pose and address some of these larger historical questions in Chapter Six, but one thing that we do know and that is worth noting here in the Introduction is that this explosion in early modern *tażkira* writing had firmly established the genre as a worthwhile venture for a broad range of Indo-Persian intellectuals already by the middle of the eighteenth century, when their distant cousin Samuel Johnson began in the 1740s to compile his own seminal *Lives of the Poets*. The latter—not published in its entirety until the 1780s—has of course been hailed for generations as a crucial transitional text, one that helped inaugurate an entirely new form of anglophone literary and critical modernity. Like Johnson’s *Lives*, many texts in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Indo-Persian *tażkira* archive also served as important vehicles for negotiating not only the authority of the classical literary canon but also a whole host of intellectual concerns regarding “the relationship between authorship, experience, and history.” But unlike Johnson’s work, which has been exhaustively scrutinized by modern critics and intellectual historians—both for its actual content and as the embodiment of a new type of scholarly sensibility that was recognizably “modern”—the vast corpus of Indo-Persian texts written in an analogous vein have received comparatively scant attention. We don’t even know enough about them to say one way or the other whether such *tażkira* production might represent a kind of “modern” impulse or not, or what the larger significance of the answer would be for the conventional wisdom and familiar narratives of South Asian and global intellectual history. Indeed, so far as I can tell, not one of these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *tażkiras*—not the relevant portions of Muhammad Salih Kambuh’s *‘Amal-i Sāliḥ* (ca. 1660), not Muhammad Tahir Nasrābādi’s *Tażkira-yi Naṣrābādī* (1672–73), not Muhammad Afzal Sarkhwush’s *Kalimāt al-Shu‘arā* (1682), not Sher Khan Lodi’s *Mīrāt al-Khayāl* (1690–91), not Kishan Chand Ikhlās’s *Hamesha Bahār* (1723–24), not Brindaban Das Khwushgu’s *Safīna-yi Khwughū* (ca. 1730?), not ‘Ali Quli Khan Wali Daghistani’s *Rīyāz al-Shu‘ārā* (ca. 1747–49), not Siraj al-Dīn ‘Ali Khan Arzu’s *Magmā al-Nafā‘īs* (1750–51), not Shaikh ‘Ali Hazin’s *Tażkira-yi Mu‘āširīn* (1752), not Mir Husain Dost Sanbhali’s *Tażkira-yi Husainī* (1759–60), not Lachmi Narayan Shafiq’s *Gul-i Ra’nā* (1767–68) and *Shām-i Gharībān* (1768–69), not Shaikh Ahmad ‘Ali Hashimi Sandelvi’s *Makhzan al-Gharā’īb* (1803–4), not Husain Quli Khan ‘Ashiqī ‘Azimabādi’s *Nishtar-i Iśhq* (1817–18), or any other comparable contemporary work—has ever even been fully translated into English.
This is not just a loss for Western scholarship; many of these texts have faded into obscurity even in India, where the percentage of readers and scholars who actually know Persian and/or Urdu has dwindled considerably in modern times. Primary source-based scholarship on the Mughal period has suffered accordingly, and if that weren’t bad enough, many of the relevant tazkiras, inshā’ collections, and the like are often difficult to locate even in Persian printed editions. Imagine trying to write on the Italian Renaissance and not having access to the works of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Machiavelli, and you’ll have some idea of the challenges that scholars of Indo-Persian cultural history sometimes face, even when they do have the requisite skills and interests.

Such tazkiras thus represent yet another chronically neglected chunk of the archive aptly described by the Iranian scholar Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi as the “homeless texts” of Indo-Persian cultural early modernity. And even though we cannot hope to provide an exhaustive catalog and analysis of the literary tazkiras of the era in one short chapter, by using chapter 6 to track some of the stories about Chandar Bhan that appear in such texts we will hopefully gain some insight into the mechanics of the genre, as well as the ways in which these tazkiras served as informal, but nonetheless very significant, sites for the production and contestation of certain kinds of cultural historical memory in the shifting contexts of India’s late Mughal, and in turn colonial, nationalist, and even postcolonial worlds. As we will see, the production, dissemination, and persistence of an almost entirely fanciful set of memories about Chandar Bhan’s experiences at court not only came to shape the modern view of the significance our munshi’s own life and career but also played an important role in the ongoing negotiation over how the Mughal political legacy itself was to be narrated and remembered by subsequent generations.

As this overview should indicate, it is not as though Chandar Bhan Brahman was some completely obscure or forgotten figure whom I am rescuing from total oblivion. He was one of the most well-known intellectuals of his era, and he continued to be remembered—albeit in the somewhat peculiar fashion that we will examine in chapter 6—in later centuries. Nevertheless, Chandar Bhan’s career and oeuvre have never really received a sustained analysis or critique in modern scholarship, and in this he is far from alone. In fact, apart from a handful of isolated case studies or the occasional article in a specialist journal, it is difficult to think of a single Indo-Persian intellectual from the entire seventeenth century, whether Hindu or Muslim, whose work has received sustained critical attention in the last several decades, much less become a household name. Manuscript copies of Chandar Bhan’s works abound in archives around the world, but it is only in the last ten years that his two most celebrated prose works—Munsha’āt-i Brah-
man (2005) and Chahār Chaman (2007)—have even become available in printed editions. Meanwhile none of his works has ever been fully translated into English, except for the brief section of Chahār Chaman excerpted by Gladwin in 1795.

The two most substantial existing studies of Chandar Bhan’s life and career, in fact, are two unpublished PhD theses that appeared barely two years apart in the 1970s: Narindar Nath’s “Chandar Bhan Brahman: A Critical Edition of His Unknown Chahar Chaman” (Delhi University, 1974) and Jagdish Narayan Kulshreshta’s “Critical Study of Chandra Bhan Brahman and His Works” (Aligarh, 1976). These two works are both very informative, but they are also both products of their time, and they did not have the benefit of the substantial new scholarly insights and advances of the last forty years. An updated approach is thus surely necessary.

The same could be said for most of the shorter notices of Chandar Bhan in other secondary scholarship—much of it informative but none of it comprehensive. Generally speaking, literary scholars have been the most interested in Chandar Bhan, and indeed the modern editors of his two most important “historical” works are all specialists of Indo-Persian literary culture, not Mughal history. Other literary scholars have also taken notice of Chandar Bhan from time to time. For instance, readers of Urdu can consult the literary critic S. M. ‘Abdullah’s brief article on Chandar Bhan in the Oriental College Magazine, published all the way back in 1928. Much of the same material was also included in ‘Abdullah’s later work, Adabiyyāt-i Fārsī meň Hindu’on kā Hiṣṣa (The contribution of Hindus to Persian literature). Also in Urdu, one could consult a thirteen-page article on Chandar Bhan by Syed Suleiman Nadvi (1947) or the relevant sections of Muhammad Sa’id Ahmad Marahravi’s Umarā’-yi Hunūd (1910). And there have been a handful of articles in English over the years as well, such as Iqbal Husain’s seven-page article in Islamic Culture, “Chandar Bhan Brahman (A Hindu Writer of Persian Prose and Verse)” (1945), and Hira Lall Chopra’s brief pamphlet Chandra Bhan Brahmin (1956). But probably the most informative work in English until now, apart from Nath’s and Kulshreshta’s PhD theses, is M. A. H. Farooqui’s introduction to his edition of Chandar Bhan’s poetic diwān, Aḥwāl-o-Āsār-i Chandra Bhān Brahman wa Dīwān-i Pārśī (1967).

Historians, by and large, have been even less interested in the cultural historical significance of Chandar Bhan’s oeuvre, even if they have sometimes mined the munshī’s works for tidbits of empirical data over the years. Thus, while one will often find Chandar Bhan or one or the other of his works referenced as a “useful” source in a fair amount of modern Mughal historiography, there has been very little historical analysis of the munshi himself, his cultural networks, his views of the empire and Mughal governance, his literary and mystical sensibility, and so on—precisely the themes that will interest us in the chapters that follow. With reference to the specific context of Indo-Persian stylized prose, or inshā’, the modern
scholar Momin Mohiuddin has briefly discussed Chandar Bhan in his work on the technical aspects of Mughal secretarial administration, *The Chancellery and Persian Epistolography under the Mughals* (1971). A few years earlier, the historian Ibn Hasan made excellent use of parts of *Chahār Chaman* in his *Central Structure of the Mughal Empire* (1967), one of the best available modern works on Mughal administration. But after that, the pickings get slimmer and slimmer.

One will note, moreover, that the vast majority of the scholarship mentioned in the previous two paragraphs dates from the 1970s and earlier, meaning that for all intents and purposes, apart from the editors’ introductions (in Persian) to the recent editions of *Chahār Chaman* and *Munsha’āt-i Brahman*, there has been barely any work at all on this major Mughal intellectual in nearly two generations, and almost none of it in English (or even Urdu, for that matter). Some aspects of Chandar Bhan’s urban subjectivity have been analyzed in Taymiya Zaman’s PhD thesis, “Inscribing Empire: Sovereignty and Subjectivity in Mughal Memoirs,” and some of his views on the high level of education required of a successful *munshi* have been briefly examined by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyan—but that’s about it.

I will refer to some of these articles and other secondary sources throughout this book, whenever it is necessary and appropriate. But I also maintain that in the continuing absence of any substantial biographies, scholarly monographs, or comprehensive analyses of Chandar Bhan’s life, career, and cultural-historical milieu, the *munshi’s* own writings remain the best sources for information about his life and career. Trying to understand these difficult and neglected texts as best I can, and to convey something of their significance to the reader, has been my main focus. And as I hope to show, they have great potential relevance, not only for a revised Mughal historiography, but also for some important debates in post-colonial South Asian historiography more generally, and even for conversations about the global nature of early modernity writ large.