Writing Self, Writing Empire

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As an heir to the rich tradition of great secretaries of the Indo-Persian cultural world, Chandar Bhan was expected to embody the high standard of erudition, professional training, administrative ability, political discretion, diplomatic panache, ethical behavior, mystical sensibility, literary flair, and general interdisciplinary excellence that had been cultivated for centuries by notable earlier “masters of the pen” (ašāb-i qalam). The need for a successful Mughal state secretary to embody these qualities is a regular theme of much of his most famous prose work, “The Four Gardens” (Chahār Chaman), and we will spend much of this chapter examining precisely what that meant in practical terms. But let us begin by looking briefly at Chandar Bhan’s general sense of what made a good munshi tick.

The Mind of a Munshi

It becomes quickly evident upon any perusal of Chandar Bhan’s works that in his view merely being literate in the Persian language and mastering a certain set of scribal techniques might get you a job but was not nearly enough to vault one into the ranks of the elite munhis of the Indo-Persian secretarial world. Perhaps the most explicit formulation of this view on Chandar Bhan’s part comes to us from a letter that he wrote to his son Tej Bhan, which is included in both of his major prose works, Chahār Chaman and Munsha’at-i Brahman. In it, Chandar Bhan makes clear to Tej Bhan that to be a successful munshi one had to have what we would nowadays call a well-rounded liberal arts education and that to truly excel one had to have, among other kinds of training, the early modern equivalent of
graduate degrees in disciplines as various as history, literature, philosophy, and political science. He advises Tej Bhan, for instance, to begin his studies of prose composition by emulating the collected letters (ruqʿāt) of ʿAbd al-Rahman Jami (1414–92), the celebrated poet of Timurid Herat, and by studying Saʿdi’s Gulistān and Būstān, two cornerstones of Persianate literary culture that have been used to teach the art of prose and inculcate moral wisdom in young and old alike for centuries. The well-educated Mughal gentleman should also have a strong background, Chandar Bhan felt, in the canonical treatises on statecraft, civility, and ethics (akhīlah), such as Akhīlāq-i Nāsirī, Akhīlāq-i Jalālī, and Akhīlāq-i Muḥsīnī, as well as histories of earlier eras (tawārīkh-i salaf) such as Ḥabīb al-Siyar, Rauzat al-Ṣafāʾ, Rauzat al-Salāṭīn, Tārīkh-i Guzīda, Tārīkh-i Ṭabarī, and Zafar Nāma, all of which he specifically names (CC, 176).

In the same letter, Chandar Bhan also shows his stripes as a professional poet, a vocation that, as we saw in the previous chapter, he saw not just as an entertaining diversion but as a craft that was inextricably tied to his success as a state secretary. To be a great poet, though, one first had to master the canon of literary greats. Thus he provides Tej Bhan with a lengthy syllabus of scores of “some of the great masters [ustādān] whose collections of ghazals and maṣnawīs this supplicant [i.e., Chandar Bhan himself] studied as a youth”—both ancients and moderns, some of them well known, and some barely traceable today—whose works Tej Bhan ought to study and emulate until, in time, “his own talent has been honed and he has a grasp of the art of expression” (CC, 176–77).

As highbrow as all this sounds, however, Chandar Bhan also placed a high value on expert training in certain more mundane skills, like accounting (siyāq), as eminently necessary for the well-rounded munshī. Indeed, sounding like many parents today who want their children to pursue “practical” undergraduate majors like business, economics, engineering, and so on, Chandar Bhan specifically counsels his son to study accounting because it would greatly improve his job prospects. “It would be best,” he tells Tej Bhan, “if you were to master not only literacy but also accounting, because very few munshīs also know accounts, meaning such men are scarce; indeed, the person who is able to combine mastery of both crafts is a prized commodity, a ‘light upon light’” (CC, 175).

The wording here is revealing, in that the phrase “light upon light” (nūr ‘alā nūr) is a direct allusion to the Qur’an’s so-called Āyat al-Nūr (24:35), a famously esoteric passage that became a favorite among medieval and early modern Sufis, philosophers, and literati who made the chapter’s potential for mystical interpretations “the subject of constant meditation and commentary,” as one noted modern scholar put it. Besides showing off Chandar Bhan’s erudition—and, for that matter, the level of erudition he expected of his son Tej Bhan—it points to the important overlap between Mughal ideas about good governance and the role of what might be called “mystical civility” in the cultivation of the well-mannered Mughal
gentleman. In Chandar Bhan’s view it was essential that those who made their living through worldly pursuits, from run-of-the-mill clerks and accountants right up to the most powerful men—indeed, especially the most powerful men—should cultivate a refined habitus of mystical disinterestedness amid the bustle of worldly activity. That is, even if professional obligations made it impossible for them to completely embrace the mystical path of the great Sufis and yogis by renouncing material attachments altogether and focusing exclusively on spiritual pursuits, they should nevertheless strive to emulate the humility of such “great men” (buzurgān).

Doing so not only would improve one’s moral character but also, perhaps counterintuitively, would make one an even more effective administrator, because it would reduce one’s susceptibility to the lure of greed and corruption.

Thus in the same letter to his son Chandar Bhan expounds at length upon the moral necessity of treating the material world with an air of detachment (bī-ta’alluqi), explaining to Tej Bhan that in his own youth whenever he had troubles he would seek counsel from “recluses, hermits, and mystics” (munzawiyān wa gosha-nashīnān wa darweshān) wherever he could find them. “Though there are many varieties of hostility and contentiousness in the actions and ways of the people of this world,” he adds, “by maintaining my connection to the sacred thread, my words, and my conduct I have been able to work to set aside ego in all circumstances” (CC, 173). In other words, however involved one might get in the vicissitudes of human power and commerce, in Chandar Bhan’s view one should not become “polluted by attachments” (ālūda-yi ta’alluq), and he reinforces the point by invoking the family tradition: “This faqīr’s father, your grandfather, even though he was clothed in the visible semblance of those who are attached to the material world [agar chi dar libās-i zāhir mushābahat ba ahl-i ta’alluq dāsht], nevertheless considered himself second to none when it came to [his understanding of the mystical] interior world [‘ālam-i bātin] and always had the verse ‘To remain pure is far better than to be polluted’ on the tip of his tongue” (CC, 174).

Of course, given Chandar Bhan’s pedigree as a Brahman it is perhaps tempting to read a certain caste inflection into all this discussion of the dangers of worldly “pollution,” particularly for someone who spent his entire career working with—and usually for—Muslim employers. But we should be very careful about reading such mystical metaphors out of context, for nowhere else in his entire oeuvre does Chandar Bhan even hint at this sort of anxiety about caste purity. To the contrary, though he makes plain on numerous occasions that he is proud of his Brahman heritage, all of his professional pursuits and intellectual interests are ecumenical in the extreme, suggesting that we should read these passages as reflecting more of a generic mystical attitude toward the dangers of worldly attachments, one that could comfortably be read from a Sufi, Vedantic, or other spiritual perspective, than as a trace of narrowly sectarian or caste-anxious Brahmanism. Such notions even pop up regularly in his poetry, as in the following verse:
A liberated man ensnared by the abandonment of desire
Does not let either of the two worlds into the sanctum of his heart.

[kaunain rā ba khalwat-i dil rah namīdihad
āzāda’ī ki tark-i tamannā girifta ast]
(DB, 35.2)

Also important for the munshī, in both practical and ethical terms, was a commitment to a code of gentlemanly discretion. “The keeping of secrets,” he tells Tej Bhan, is a defining feature of a successful state secretary (munshī ham ān ast ki rāzdār bāshad), punctuating the thought with a tidbit of personal experience:

Although in this humble servant’s capacity as a munshī at the court of the imperial caliphate there is plenty of opportunity to give in to human nature and indiscretion [bashariyat wa ghaflat], nevertheless when it comes to keeping secrets I have been like the proverbial flower bud, which, though it has a hundred tongues [i.e., the petals], keeps its mouth shut tight. I have never conveyed even a single word from one situation to another, and under no circumstances have I discussed one person’s secret with anyone else. Rather, whatever I have heard, and wherever I heard it, I have forgotten it right then and there. (CC, 175)

All of this was clearly intended to provide Tej Bhan not only with practical career advice but also with lasting moral guidance. Chandar Bhan makes this aim quite explicit in a kind of paean to the virtues of self-reliance and good character:

Among the ranks of scribes and amid the appeals of mankind, keeping my desired goals in view, I have made sure never to abandon my civility and good character [husn-i sulūk wa nek-zātī], always acting in accordance with my father’s admonitions. Hence I also trust that my fortunate son will maintain these good manners and distinguished comportment [auzā’-yi pasandida wa atwār-i guzida] at the forefront of his attention. Whatever employment comes his way will do so without the necessity of another’s recommendation. He will find self-satisfaction and will value his time [khwud-sa’ādat dānista wa waqt rā ghanimat shumarda]. Helping others achieve their goals will become central to his own purpose, and he will understand that [even] in this debased material world there is no task that can’t be accomplished and no goal that can’t be reached. (CC, 175)

One can easily understand why any father, of any era, would want to inculcate such wisdom in the mind of his son. But what was Chandar Bhan’s purpose in including such a lengthy didactic epistle in a work intended for wider circulation among the Mughal reading public? In the version of the letter that appears in Chahār Chaman, Chandar Bhan specifically describes the letter as a naṣīhat-nāma (lit., “advice book”), which would have immediately connected it in the minds of discerning contemporary readers with the larger medieval and early modern corpus of Indo-Persian akhlāqī texts on moral and political wisdom. Such texts often fell under the rubric of “advice for kings” (naṣīhat al-mulūk)
and thus served a function in the Persianate world similar to that of the genre of “mirrors for princes” in Europe. Classic examples of the genre include works like Nizam al-Mulk’s Siyāsat Nāma (Treatise on government; 11th cent.), Ghazali’s Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk (Advice for kings; 12th cent.), Kai Ka’us ibn Iskandar’s Qābūs Nāma (The book of Qabus; 1082), and Nizami ‘Aruzi’s Chahār Maqāla (The four discourses; ca. 1155–57), and the celebrated polymath Nasir al-Din Tusi’s Akhlāq-i Naṣīrī (Nasir’s advice on good conduct; 1235), a text that was read especially widely in Mughal India, and was among those which Chandar Bhan specifically recommended Tej Bhan study carefully. But in this case Chandar Bhan’s own letter was not aimed at kings; rather, it was intended as a more general set of norms and advice for the aspiring gentleman and especially the aspiring secretary—a “mirror for munshī,” if you will.

For those of us reading it today, this seemingly minor detail raises a whole host of larger questions about what kind of text Chahār Chaman actually is and how we are meant to read it. It has often been described simply as an “account of Shah Jahan’s court,” which is of course true up to a certain point. But it is also quite consciously constructed as a memoir of sorts, and a didactic one at that. Chandar Bhan inherited and saw himself as embodying a particular strand of the Indo-Persian cultural tradition where a certain cluster of the secretarial arts was normalized and idealized as applicable—in fact, as necessary—not just for the professional training of munshīs but also for the politico-moral regulation of royalty, ministers, nobles, literati, and elites generally. Just as Machiavelli had done, the authors of normative texts on moral and political wisdom in the Indo-Persian ādāb and akhlāq traditions had always placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of the state secretary—usually known in Persian texts variously as a dabīr, kātīb, or munshi—to the proper functioning of government and society. Certain skills, like penmanship (khwush-nawīsī), accounting (siyāq), the ability to write stylized prose (inshā’-pardāzī), and the ability to traffic in what the medieval treatise Qābūs-nāma called “coded language” (sukhān-i marmūz) were obviously critical components of any imperial munshi’s basic professional tool kit. But even in medieval royal advice books like Qābūs-nāma and Chahār Maqāla a much broader spectrum of qualities came to be associated with truly great munshīs and dabīrs as well: refined etiquette, diplomatic savvy, political discretion, literary flair, scholarly erudition, and even mystical sensibility, to name a few.

Few were considered capable of fully mastering this comprehensive cultural package, which is part of what made becoming truly adept munshi, or “munshi-yi ḥaqiqī” in Mughal parlance, so rare. Nevertheless, for aspiring civil servants a talent for the secretarial arts (funūn-i dabīr or munshīgīrī) was seen as a critical pathway to upward social mobility. Meanwhile, for princes and the nobility, an education in the funūn-i dabīrī was likewise considered essential, at least in theory
allowing those in positions of authority to understand and practice the norms of good prose composition and epistolary etiquette, to comprehend what was going on in the administrative apparatus around them, and thus, too, to maintain power and govern more effectively. This instrumental view of the secretarial arts as keys to power meant, by extension, that a much broader spectrum of less tangible secretarial qualities also came to be seen as critical components of gentlemanly conduct, moral sentiment, social civility, and ethical politics.

These intellectual historical trends were well established in Indo-Persian literary and political culture long before the consolidation of the Mughal Empire, and thus it is not surprising to see them so clearly reflected in Chandar Bhan’s oeuvre. On the one hand, as we will see, he viewed the Mughal state as one in which meritocracy mattered and in which social mobility was possible if one had talent and was willing to work hard. But perhaps more significantly he also considered it perfectly appropriate to judge the competence of various nobles and wazīrs, not necessarily on their military and political capabilities, but rather on the basis of criteria specific to the realm of the secretarial arts. In his view attributes like high birth and martial valor, while certainly important, were not nearly enough to make someone a great leader, much less a great wazīr. Rather, having a knack for skills like calligraphy, managing accounts, and drafting elegant letters augmented one’s competence as a manager, and possessing the correct balance of diplomacy, discretion, religious tolerance, mystical sensibility, and akhlāqī civility was what separated the truly great Mughal ministers from others whom he saw, as it were, “merely” as great military commanders.

**WIZĀRAT, MA‘RIFAT, AND MUNSHĪGIRĪ: MYSTICAL CIVILITY AND THE ART OF MUGHAL ADMINISTRATION**

These themes are on clear display in the first section, or “garden,” of Chandar Bhan’s most celebrated work of expressive prose, *Chahār Chaman* (The four gardens). We saw in the previous chapter that one important message of the opening sequence of *Chahār Chaman* is that a certain flair for the opportune deployment of literary style and wit could, in Chandar Bhan’s estimation, be an important pathway to social and professional mobility. In public settings, the ability to craft a memorable poem in praise of the emperor or some other patron could earn the professional secretary a handsome reward, raise, or promotion. But we saw too that there was a pronounced literary pulse beating through the heart of Mughal letter-writing practices, one that allowed for the circulation of all manner of mystical and heterodox views, even among figures not usually associated with literary and mystical cultures. A keen literary sensibility was a staple of virtually all levels of Mughal social interaction, and this, no doubt, was why Chandar Bhan was so
insistent that his son Tej Bhan master the canon of medieval and early modern Persian literature as part of his basic education.

Overall, *Chahār Chaman* is a text that is episodic and fragmentary in the extreme, with a heavy emphasis on the sort of stylistic artistry that was the professional *munshi*’s stock-in-trade. Yet while *Chahār Chaman* may lack a certain continuity it does not lack coherence. Each of the four main chapters, or “gardens,” showcases a different facet of the *munshi*’s self, and thus, however fragmentary, episodic, and lacking in linear narrative it may be, *Chahār Chaman* unfolds with clear autobiographical and didactic intent. The first “garden,” for instance, explores three core components of the *munshi*’s profession: the literary (which we have discussed already above), the administrative, and the political/diplomatic. Moreover, each of these three subsections functions on a more macro level as well, mapping Chandar Bhan’s personal experiences as a *munshi* onto a broader set of reflections on three of the core functions of the Mughal state as a whole: (1) cultural patronage; (2) effective administration in the public interest; and (3) war, politics, and diplomacy. There is an interplay between these two modes—the micro/personal and macro/imperial—throughout the first *chaman*, and indeed throughout the text as a whole, as Chandar Bhan uses his own experience at court to explore the larger contours of Mughal imperial culture more generally.

While there is some variation in the ordering of contents, most manuscripts of *Chahār Chaman* begin (as does the 2007 printed edition used here) with a brief prefatory apologia of sorts. After explaining that the first of the text’s “four gardens” will provide a description of various public assemblies and festivals “containing all the freshness and succulence of the roses of eternal spring in this everlasting empire,” Chandar Bhan notes, however, that the sequence of anecdotes to follow is merely a personalized sampling because it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive account of all the many grand festivals and public occasions held at Shah Jahan’s court over the course of his thirty-year reign:

Even though in this age adorned by the felicity and prosperity of His Most Exalted Majesty—the Sovereign of the Times, World Conqueror, and Treasure-Bestowing Emperor, who is bounteous as the sea, and the earthly shadow of the divine splendid presence—a new social occasion takes place every day, and fabulous assemblies and festivals are arranged every month and every year; and from the six directions an amber-sweetened zephyr of victory and conquest wafts into nostrils eager for a whiff of its grace; and there is no way to measure or count the trappings of the court and the imperial apparatus of this eternal caliphate; and if from the very beginning of this spring of empire and fortune the pen of narration were to commit to writing the details of the day-increasing festivities and freshness and verdancy of the garden of eternal spring in this stalwart empire—the space of many volumes would be necessary.
The flowing garden imagery that pervades this passage is a sign of things to come in the remainder of *Chahār Chaman* and echoes a good deal of Mughal writing generally in using the imperial garden as a metaphor for paradise on earth. But we should also note Chandar Bhan’s admission, right up front, that this is not a comprehensive account of the history of Shah Jahan’s reign, nor is it intended to be. The episodes described are offered, rather, merely as a representative “token” (*yumrn*) of the larger court culture as Chandar Bhan experienced it. This sort of personalized expression would perhaps have struck many readers as unseemly in a straightforward historical chronicle but is perfectly at home in a work of *inshā’,* which was considered to be an extremely flexible genre. Thus, Chandar Bhan explains, for reasons of space he has included only events that were personally witnessed by his own “spectating eye” (*ki ba chashm-i tamāshā mushāhada ufāda*).

If the purpose of the prologue is to insist that *Chahār Chaman* is a text founded on personal memories and eyewitness testimony, and if the opening sequence of literary anecdotes is designed to highlight the benefit of literary skill for social and professional mobility generally, then the next section of the opening “garden” takes us in another direction entirely. The overall underlying theme of showcasing the various skills and values necessary and relevant to the secretarial domain remains, but here Chandar Bhan’s “mirror for *munshīs*” is positioned to reflect a different aspect of the court secretary’s world—that of governance, administration, and the ideal conduct of ministers, secretaries, and the like. This new section, Chandar Bhan explains, will recount the “efficacious and knot-unraveling” accomplishments (*kār-farmā’ī wa girih-gushā’ī*) of various *wazīrs* of Hindustan, and it is clearly designed to evoke a specific subgenre of the medieval and early modern *akhālqī* texts mentioned above, one that dealt with ministerial theory and practice and was generally referred to as “manuals for *wazīrs*” (*dastūr al-wizārat*).

At first glance, then, this section is not about *munshīs* at all, focusing instead mainly on Chandar Bhan’s impressions of the various prime ministers and other administrators with whom he worked over the course of the middle decades of the seventeenth century. But Chandar Bhan’s idiosyncratic secretarial perspective nevertheless remains a crucial subtext throughout. 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 (*bī-ta’alluqī*) 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 state, over and above the mere brute demands of conquest. And these were pre-
cisely the kinds of qualities, Chandar Bhan seems to be suggesting, that his readers should seek to emulate too. Indeed, the notion that all gentlemen and good imperial servants should cultivate this trivium of ideal qualities—selfless ministerial leadership (\textit{wizārat}), spiritual gnosis (\textit{ma'rifat}), and mastery of the secretarial arts (\textit{munshīgīrī})—is reiterated throughout.

As with the matter of tolerance and cultural pluralism discussed in the previous chapter, such values as the bureaucratic work ethic and the importance of mystical spirituality for everyday civility in Mughal life have not received much if any attention for the post-Akbar period. With regard to administration, for instance, most modern commentators have been inclined to agree with M. Athar Ali’s assessment that “the Mughal polity, so long as it functioned with any effectiveness, say, until the early years of the eighteenth century, continued basically with the organizational forms that Akbar instituted.” Meanwhile, with the exception of studies of the activities of Shah Jahan’s eldest son, Prince Dara Shukoh (1615–59), everyday mystical cultures during this period haven’t received much systematic attention either, thanks largely, as we noted in the previous chapter, to the perception that apart from Dara’s heroic example Shah Jahan’s reign was characterized by “an orthodox reaction to the policies of Akbar and Jahangir.” And needless to say, there are few if any studies that treat these two domains of Mughal life—the bureaucratic and the mystical—together as part of the same cultural dynamic.

Chandar Bhan’s reflections on such matters show, however, that whatever might have been going on with the most conservative clerics during Shah Jahan’s period, their influence appears to have been far more limited than has previously been supposed. For a great many Mughal observers, the era of Akbar was still one to be admired, emulated, and built upon.

Indeed, our \textit{munshī} begins his section on \textit{wizārat} with an overview of great ministers from earlier reigns, starting with a brief survey of notable \textit{wazīrs} under Akbar such as Bairam Khan, Mun‘īm Khan, and various others. Among these, Chandar Bhan singles out Akbar’s celebrated finance minister Raja Todar Mal for especially high praise. Chandar Bhan notes that not only Todar Mal’s military accomplishments but also his financial and administrative expertise had earned him the title “Master of the Sword and the Pen” (\textit{sāhib al-saif wa al-qalam}), adding that many of the regulatory principles established by Todar Mal, aimed at improving agricultural productive capacity (\textit{ma'mūri-yi mulk}) and ensuring the well-being of the people (\textit{rifāhīyat-i ra‘īyat-parwarī}), remained, even decades later, “the textbook for expert administrators of the world” (\textit{imroz nazm wa nasaq-i ān dastūr al-'amal-i arbāb-i rozgār ast}).

Here Chandar Bhan relates two anecdotes that highlight key principles of good \textit{wizārat}, in particular “the raja’s integrity, virtue, trustworthiness, expertise, political acumen, and erudition” (\textit{rāstī wa diyānat wa amānat wa kār-dānī wa mu‘āmala-fahmī wa dānā‘ī})—in other words, precisely the sort of characteristics
that any good wazīr or imperial secretary ought to emulate. He then concludes: “Indeed, the proof of the raja’s true wisdom is that the great intellectual of the times, Shaikh Abu al-Fazl, whose attributes and qualities are famous the world over, said of him that whatever [knotty problems] he was able to unravel, no one else could have unraveled, and has said with utmost praise that, like [the great Qadiri Sufi] Miyan Shah Mir [d. 1635]’s understanding of spiritual truths and advanced esoteric knowledge, the expertise displayed by the raja in the fields of agrarian and administrative science [had made him] a khalifa of the times” (CC, 49). The message is clear: a great leader’s true power stems not merely from the sword but also, even especially, from the intellect, and from the sort of humility, self-discipline, and spiritual detachment exemplified by great Sufi shaikhs like Miyan Mir. The power of wizārat, in other words, is nothing without the wisdom of ma’rifat. For munshīs, too, the message is clear: just as a mastery of the secretarial arts enhances a wazīr’s abilities, so too the ethos of mystical civility must be a prominent component of the secretary’s intellectual repertoire, enhancing his ability to contribute to imperial governance in a way that is ethical and selfless.

A good work ethic is another quality that Chandar Bhan emphasizes repeatedly. Following the discussion of Raja Todar Mal, he moves on to a brief account of some of Jahangir’s more prominent wakīls and wazīrs, such as I’timad al-Daula (d. 1622), Asaf Khan (d. 1641), and Khwaja Abu al-Hasan Turbati (d. 1633). The latter was the scion of an important family of patrons, many of whom were notable literati in their own right, and whose court in Kashmir became a prime destination for a number of prominent poets and other intellectuals from the period. For instance, when the great Iranian poet Sa’ib Tabrizi made his way to the subcontinent in 1624–25, his first Indian patron was actually not the Mughal emperor but rather Abu al-Hasan Turbati’s son Mirza Ahsan Allah Zafar Khan (d. 1663), who was then serving as the governor of Kabul and who was himself an accomplished poet who wrote under the pen name “Ahsan.” Zafar Khan was also the primary patron for another great Indian Persian poet of the period, Muhammad Tahir Ghani Kashmiri (d. 1669), while his son ‘Inayat Khan (d. 1670–71) became a well-known literary figure in his own right, composing poetry under the pen name “Ashna” and even more famously writing one of the major prose chronicles of Shah Jahan’s reign, the Shāh Jahān Nāma.

Chandar Bhan, however, does not mention any of this, finding Abu al-Hasan notable mainly for the dedication he displayed as a Mughal officer and the amiable atmosphere he cultivated in the diwānī: “The khwaja never abandoned his post and almost never left [the diwān’s office]; he was renowned for his energetic style [tarz-i nishast wa bar-khāst], for he used to arrive at the diwān-khāna even before dawn and managed to handle his administrative duties in just a quarter of the day. During the period of Khwaja Abu al-Hasan’s tenure as wazīr, Sadiq Khan was the paymaster [mīr bakhshi], and Mir Jumla (Shahristani; d. 1637) was the
quartermaster [mīr sāmānī]; all three of these men had the utmost affection and amicability toward one another” (CC, 50). Others come in for praise as well, including ‘Abd al-Rahim Khan-i Khanan for the “bravery, courage, fortitude, poise, virtue, and composure” (shujā’at wa shahāmat wa himmat wa ḥālayat wa fażīlat wa jāmī’īyāt) that he displayed “right up to the end of his life,” and especially for his intellect and patronage, thanks to which “the convivial atmosphere and collection of literati, eloquent writers, and intellectuals that assembled in his majlis shone even brighter than the sun” (CC, 50). Chandar Bhan also includes here a letter from the Safavid monarch Shah ‘Abbas, in which the erstwhile Mughal envoy Khan-i ‘Alam is praised especially for his “excellent manners, expertise in negotiation, epistolary eloquence, and diplomatic grace” (tarz-dānī wa ādāb-i sąfārat wa tablīgh-i risālat wa lutf-i mu‘āwadat) (CC, 51)—in other words, skills squarely within the domain of the secretarial arts.

At this point Chandar Bhan turns to those wazīrs whom he knew and had worked with personally. As we noted in the previous chapter, when Shah Jahan came to power, the chief administrative responsibilities were initially split between the current wazīr, Iradat Khan, and the wakīl, Asaf Khan, who was himself aided by a trusted Hindu munshī named Mukund Das Kayastha, as Chandar Bhan reminds us. Within a year, however, Iradat Khan was replaced by Afzal Khan Shirazi, who initially continued to split duties with Asaf Khan but was eventually “appointed wazīr in his own right, on account of his intellect of Aristotelian genius [fahhāma-yi Arastō-manish]” (CC, 51). Other sources record that the occasion was marked by a revealing chronogram that exalted both the king himself and his trusted adviser in grand historical terms: “Plato has become the minister of Alexander” (shud Falāṭūn wazīr-i Iskandar = 1038 AH = 1629 CE). Chandar Bhan was already serving in Afzal Khan’s employ when all this happened, and he continued to do so throughout the khan’s entire tenure as wazīr. Our munshī was thus in an excellent position to observe Afzal Khan’s character and demeanor.

We do not know exactly when or how Chandar Bhan entered Afzal Khan’s service, but it was certainly one of the biggest turning points in the munshī’s career. After coming to India early in the seventeenth century, Afzal Khan had spent time in Shah Jahan’s retinue while the latter was still a prince; later he served in the important post of imperial procurement officer (mīr-i sāmān) toward the end of Jahangir’s reign, and he continued in that post in the early part of Shah Jahan’s. For some of that time he was based in Chandar Bhan’s hometown of Lahore, which is probably how the munshī managed to enter his employment.

However it happened, there is no doubt that Chandar Bhan had great admiration for his new patron, a respect that, at least as far as Chandar Bhan could tell, was mutual. In the autobiographical section later in Chahār Chaman, for instance, he insists that Afzal Khan was fastiduous about not showing favoritism among
his employees, yet he can’t help adding a telling boast: “Although many munshīs of excellent penmanship and knowledge of the rules of writing from Iran, Turan [i.e., Central Asia], and Hindustan had all worked closely over the years with that eminent scholar, and although the grace of the great man’s alchemical gaze was consistently impartial in both appearance and reality, nevertheless, because of my knack for being an agreeable companion and with help from my lucky stars, he promoted this feeble ant ahead of all others” (CC, 146–47). One proof of his patron’s sincerity in this regard, according to Chandar Bhan, was that when Shah Jahan had come to tour Afzal Khan’s newly built Lahore estate the khan honored Chandar Bhan by personally introducing him to the emperor. Afzal Khan also gave Chandar Bhan an elephant, “so that,” he tells us, “I could always travel alongside that illustrious khan” to keep him company while on official business (CC, 147).

Meanwhile, Chandar Bhan was a fixture at the khan’s literary salons, both as an audience member and as a participant, and the two also carried on a regular epistolary correspondence.

Chandar Bhan consistently praises not only Afzal Khan’s intellect and administrative abilities but also, especially, “the inner purity and compassionate heart of that knower of spiritual and universal mysteries” (CC, 53). He was, in Chandar Bhan’s estimation, “singular among the literati of the world, the title page in the book of ‘ulamā of the times, the cream of renowned wazīrs, the acme of elite amirs, the epitome of mastery over manifest and hidden meanings, the knower of spiritual and worldly subtleties, the grand wazīr of Hindustan, the great scholar of the age and times [‘allāmat al-‘asr wa’l-daurān], Afzal Khan, who achieved universal fame for his virtue, learning, civility [husn-i khulq], gentility, and kindly nature” (CC, 52). This string of glowing epithets might seem like flowery and pointless hyperbole to some modern readers, but from the pen of a writer as careful as Chandar Bhan they were definitely not random; rather, such compliments were carefully calibrated to point to certain qualities in the wazīr rather than others. In this case, Afzal Khan’s fame as a man of great political clout and acumen notwithstanding, Chandar Bhan wants his readers to focus on the khan’s erudition, spiritual introspection, and generosity rather than simply to be overwhelmed by his might and power. Such character virtues were, after all, ones that anyone could emulate, and if they did so, the thinking appears to have been, the entire society would be better for it.

A good wazīr, in Chandar Bhan’s view, also had to be always open to new ways of improving the administration. The next passage thus emphasizes Afzal Khan’s willingness to innovate, written in prose that strongly echoes the language used earlier to eulogize Raja Todar Mal. The khan’s dedication to maximizing “economic productivity and the affluence of the people” (kifāyat-i māl wa rafāhat-i ra’īyat), Chandar Bhan was confident, would definitely earn him “a good name for himself in the present and next life” (CC, 52–53).
At this point, Chandar Bhan relates two anecdotes that appear to have nothing whatsoever to do with governance and thus at first seem almost like non sequiturs. But on closer reading it becomes clear that they are specifically designed to emphasize Afzal Khan’s virtuous character and to highlight the notion that a truly great wazīr must also have the humility and ascetic ethos born out of a mystical sensibility:

AN INTERESTING STORY

One day the Plato-esque scholar Afzal Khan was sitting on the throne of wizārat. This lowest of servants, who had been nurtured and trained by that eminent scholar of the age and the empire, and had acquired prosperity in the copiously generous service of that pillar of nobles of the world, and has since gained renown [ishtihār dāsht] as a disciple of that wise master—this faqīr, then, I myself brought an interesting passage from a book for his analysis. [It concerned the notion] that the moment of actual physical death requires a more violent exertion than the moment of separation of the soul [from the body], because the former demands fleeing from creation, whereas the latter is [a moment of] arrival at the Creator. As one familiar with ecstatic moods, when the ‘Allama heard this he was transported to another mental state and spontaneously bolted up from the diwān’s dais to go be in private, overcome by compassion. When he regained his senses, his happy pen wrote the following letter to Aqa Rashid, who was among the sagacious khan’s most respected and intimate friends. 16

COPY OF THE DEAR MISSIVE (RAQĪMA-YI GIRĀMĪ) THAT THE WISE SCHOLAR AZFAL KHAN WROTE TO AQA RASHID

One can only hope that God on high, upon gladly and gently severing the likes of you and me from these worldly attachments [‘alā’iq-i dunyawī], may grace us with awareness of himself. May He banish our hearts from the pursuit of worldly status, which directly threatens those actions which attract us to the Divine. Whenever He wants to guide one of His servants on the path to Himself, He creates in them an aversion to this world. And it is precisely through such aversion that [people] can be content with their life’s achievements, and count their situation as a blessing.

Now this friend of yours also feels that calling [dā‘iyat] which you know so well—that, having engaged in all sorts of activities, and now grown lukewarm toward worldly affairs [dil-sardī az umūr-i dunyawī ba ham rasīda], at seventy years of age I am entering the final stages of life. And just as there is no limit to this kind of talk, one does ultimately run out of paper [chūn in chunin sukhan rā pāyānī nist ba itmām-i kāghaz tamām namūd].

ANOTHER ANECDOTE

One day [Mir Musá] Mu‘izz al-Mulk, the mutaṣaddī of the port of Surat, had sent a novel eyeglass [‘ainak] [as a gift] for that ‘Allāma of the age who is in the highest echelon of men of understanding. 17 Since it did not pertain to official financial business, out of courtesy [Afzal Khan] accepted it [chūn māliyatī nadāsht az rū-yi ahliyat qabūl farmūdand] and wrote this letter [ruq‘a] to Mu‘izz al-Mulk.
One can only hope that Allah on high will grant our ilk deliverance from the prison of this illusory existence [hastī-yi mauhūm] and from the contemplation of this ephemeral multiplicity. The viewing glass that you sent—which shows one thing as a multiplicity—has arrived. [But] this inmate of the prison of multiplicity is looking, rather, for a viewing glass that will turn such panoply into a unity. If you come across anyone who has such a glass, do give me some indication so that I can enlighten my eye by meeting him, and, having gotten hold of such a glass, can look through it and deliver myself from the prison of all this multiplicity. (CC, 53–55)

It’s not entirely clear what kind of “eyeglass” (‘ainak) Chandar Bhan is referring to here. It could refer to some sort of kaleidoscope—which would explain the comments about seeing “multiplicity” upon looking through it—or maybe a telescope, which is just the sort of novel item that Europeans were beginning to use in the seventeenth century as maritime aids, and bringing to India as gifts for local notables, patrons, and government officials. This would at least circumstantially explain how the gift originally came into the possession of Mu’izz al-Mulk, who was the chief official at the bustling port of Surat on the western Indian coast and would have interacted with newly arriving Europeans on a regular basis. But the ‘ainak could also have simply been a set of spectacles, which were a known technology in early modern India, but were nevertheless items of enough relative curiosity that they became the subject of occasional philosophical discussion. Indeed, Nilakantha Chaturdhara, the great seventeenth-century Sanskrit philosopher and commentator on the Mahābhārata, specifically used the example of eyeglasses (upanetra) in his Bhāratabhāvadīpa (Light on the inner significance of the Mahābhārata) to explain the workings of cosmic illusion (māyā), because of their power to make the invisible visible, or the illegible legible. In other words, for Nilakantha too the eyeglass’s ability to heighten a certain kind of visible perception was—perhaps paradoxically—for that very reason an example of cosmic illusion, because it was only a means to enhanced physical eyesight, not the kind of spiritual or esoteric insight necessary for glimpsing ultimate Truth.18

Whatever the precise nature of the “glass” in question, the anecdote’s significance for Chandar Bhan clearly lies more in the way that it highlights several valued aspects of Mughal gentlemanliness that he wanted to bring to his readers’ attention. The rejection of a gift that could be perceived as a bribe, for instance, highlights Afzal Khan’s incorruptibility in the course of his duties. The wry sense of humor used to respond to Mu’izz al-Mulk displays the sort of wit that was an essential part of the lively literary and epistolary cultures of the day. And of course the mystical interpretation of an everyday object highlights Afzal Khan’s powers of esoteric gnosis.
These examples of Afzal Khan’s mystical bent are followed by a lengthy discussion directly out of the *nasīḥat-nāma* tradition, recounting the “Plato-esque” (*Afīṭīn-kirdār*) minister’s advice on the art of *wizārat* and the duties and obligations of imperial servants—including *munshīs*—to king and empire:

**AN ACCOUNT OF SOME OF THE LEARNED WAZĪR AFZAL KHAN’S EXPRESSIONS OF KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM**

Now, the late and deceased khan used to say that *wazīrs* are of two kinds: *first*, the one who correctly comprehends whatever the emperor says and acts accordingly; *second*, the one upon whose counsel and advice the emperor acts. Alas, we *wazīrs* of the current era do not [even] have the [former] capability for correctly comprehending the *bādshāh*’s commands and then executing the blessed will and temperament, much less making it into the second category [*ḥālat-i digar*].

Also, the late Afzal Khan used to say that truly, in consulting [*kangāyish*] with kings one should never utter a word unless asked. And if he should ever ask, one should never deviate from the truth [simply to appease the ruler]; for one should fear God more than one fears the *bādshāh*.

Also, one should never blurt out in public [*dar kaṣrat*] that which could be counseled in private. For kings have a proud [*ghayūr*] nature, and God forbid the king should repudiate you in front of so many people. On the other hand, if he doesn’t accept private [advice], a well-wisher [*daulat-khwāh*] can always raise the matter with him again later.

Also, since the wisdom channeled through royal succession [*‘ilm-i khilāfat*] transcends [mere] administrative expertise [*‘ilm-i wizārat*], the science of *wizārat* should never be used to subvert the policies of kings. For whatever inspiration illuminates the minds of this illustrious group [i.e., kings], that will be the true reality. Still, if a specific proposal that is beneficial to the state comes to mind that is based on your administrative expertise, never offer it with an arrogant attitude, for one must always give due deference to the king’s wisdom [*maṣlahat*].

Also, if an important problem presents itself but one is too daunted by the king’s grandeur and majesty to raise it with him [openly], the need to seek good advice and guidance demands that one should still search for an opportune moment when the king will not be perturbed, whereupon [you can ask and] he can reveal his own insights to you. At that time, if you have come up with a suggestion that benefits the empire, you should offer it. If the king agrees, well and good—if not, then at least by advancing a proposal for the good of the empire you will have fulfilled your basic responsibility [as an adviser].

Also, when the time comes to counsel [a king] you should make sure first to have considered every potentiality and pitfall, whether powerful or trifling, and to have swept clean the prudent corner of your mind with the broom of sound intellect so that nothing will be left out. Then begin by explaining whatever is of primary importance; anything following from that can be deferred until the appropriate time.

Also among the late khan’s sayings was that, to ensure the strength and firm foundation of the empire, a wise and visionary king requires four pillars—that is, four wise advisers⁹—that so that whichever way he turns, from whichever of them he
may inquire, there will be someone to offer unveiled truth in any matters that require clear advice. Then the bâdshâh, having taken each of their words to heart and weighed them with the scales of his wisdom, can decide which counsel is most sound in word and meaning [muttafiq al-lafz wa’l-ma’ni] and can proceed to enact it.

More than anything, a powerful monarch requires an abundant treasury. If he does not have wealth, he cannot mobilize an army. If he does not have an army, there can be no law and order [zabt] in the realm. If there is no law and order, wealth cannot accumulate, and the state’s treasury can grow only if the country itself is prosperous. The realm can therefore flourish only if it has a capable administrator [šâhib-i mu’âmala] who is attentive to imperial business and derives a sense of personal satisfaction from it. 30

Also, even though one can build an army using wealth alone, the real management and conquest of the hearts of soldiers is not possible without the stewardship of a commander who is authoritative [zâbit], well-mannered [khwush-sulûk], unenvious [ser-chashm], open-minded [wusi’-mashrab], courageous [šâhib-i haušala], tolerant [mutahammil], sincere [durust-i-khâlîs], experienced [âzmûdakâr], and of pleasant demeanor [shigufta-peshâni]. Such a person must be so reliable that he can be absolutely independent [mukhtâr-i mutlaq] in matters of promotion, demotion, bonuses, supervision, and hiring and firing. And his salary must be sufficient to support a large enough retinue that other elites and pillars of the empire will consider him someone to reckon with.

Finally, [a king requires] an aide who can be candid in both private and public [khalâ’ wa malâ’], without calculating whether it may please or anger [’itâb wa khitâb] [the king]. Such a person must be both truthful and discreet, so that whatever he says and hears will not be divulged elsewhere. Although such men are rare and difficult to find, they are definitely available for the king who seeks them. (CC, 55–57)

A detailed breakdown of all the elements of political wisdom covered in this passage could easily take up a whole chapter unto itself. But here let us simply reiterate the obvious general takeaway—namely, that in Chandar Bhan’s opinion (albeit channeling Afzal Khan), the role of the ideal minister (and secretary) involved much more than mere administrative competence. It involved a certain demeanor, a certain understanding of human nature, a certain discretion, trustworthiness, and humility in the face of the extraordinary opportunities for material gain (and, potentially, corruption) that being a Mughal court insider afforded one.

For his part, Afzal Khan’s wisdom regarding such matters made him one of the most widely admired men of the era. Even Emperor Shah Jahan was deeply distraught when the wazîr’s health began to fail and, as Chandar Bhan put it, “The noble humors and graceful essence of that wise role model veered away from equilibrium.” Our munshî adds that the emperor even took a personal interest in tending to the convalescing wazîr, noting that “His Most Exalted Majesty the Sovereign of the Times betook his own noble and precious self to that peerless wazîr’s mansion, where he personally tended to and lavished all manner of kindness and
Following Afzal Khan’s death, the position of prime minister went to Mir ‘Abd al-Salam Mashhadi, aka Islam Khan (d. 1647). Islam Khan was a prominent noble with a decorated military record, but, as we saw in the previous chapter, he also possessed a connoisseur’s literary sensibility, and he figures prominently in Chandar Bhan’s discussions of the literary atmosphere of the court, as well as the munshi’s collected letters.21 When he was officially appointed wazir, however, Islam Khan was serving as governor of Bengal, and thus there was a period of nearly a year, from January until October of 1639, between his official appointment and his arrival at court to assume his new responsibilities. In the interim, as we also noted in the previous chapter, virtually the entire administrative apparatus of the central Mughal diwānī was overseen by another of Chandar Bhan’s Hindu contemporaries, Diyanat Ray, who was promoted to the title rāy-i rāyān.22

Diyanat Ray had been in the Mughal administrative service since Jahangir’s time, with many of those years being spent, like Chandar Bhan, in the offices of Afzal Khan. Indeed, Afzal Khan’s dependence on Diyanat Ray became the stuff of minor legend. Despite his many talents, apparently Afzal Khan was known to be somewhat hopeless in accounts (siyāq), or, as the eighteenth-century text Ma’āsir al-Umarā put it, had a tendency because of his immense intellect to refuse to write things down (bā īn hama ‘ilm-o-dānish ḍalāl ba kāghaz namīrasīd wa siyāq-dān nabūd), leaving such quotidian matters to his assistants. Thus for decades after his death an anecdote continued to circulate in which a wag at his funeral had eulogized the khan by suggesting that when the angels of death, Munkar and Nakir, appeared at his grave to ask him to account for his life and deeds, he had simply replied: “Ask Diyanat Ray, he’ll be able to answer” (az Diyānat Rāy bapursad, ū jawāb khwāhad dād).23

Jokes aside, Afzal Khan’s mentorship clearly served Diyanat Ray well. According to Chandar Bhan, during his time as interim diwān Diyanat Ray “supervised all the activities usually managed by the grand wazir, such as the salaries [tan], unassigned imperial lands [khāliṣa], and other important fiscal responsibilities,” adding that “it was he who performed the chief diwān’s job of signing the dols and siyāhas recording jāgīr assignments, and then affixing the imperial seal to memoranda and circulars sent to various finance ministers and revenue collectors [diwāniyān wa karoriyān]” (CC, 57). On certain documents he was, however, specifically instructed by Shah Jahan to leave the space designated for the wazir’s signature blank. But this was probably more to preserve formal appearances and hierarchy than an indictment of Diyanat Ray’s capabilities.

Interestingly enough, though, there does seem to have been a bit of friction during this period between Diyanat Ray and yet another high-placed Hindu administrator named Sabha Chand, a fellow munshi who had once served in the
Lahore *diwānī*, and later as *faujdār* of Dāman *chakla*, Sialkot (a district in north-eastern Punjab, located in present-day Pakistan). Sabha Chand was now serving as the *diwānī*’s fiscal auditor (*mustaufī*), and Chandar Bhan describes him as “well known for his rectitude and integrity [*diyānat wa bī-gharażī*]” (*CC*, 57–58). Thus, when Diyanat Ray tried to discharge certain of the wazir’s responsibilities for which he had not been specifically authorized, it was Sabha Chand, not the emperor, who blocked him.

More revealing, even, than such quibbling over official protocols is the clear sense one gets from reading between the lines of Chandar Bhan’s account that once Islam Khan arrived at court to begin his tenure as wazir, the efficiency and morale of the *diwānī* began to falter a bit. To begin with, Islam Khan and Diyanat Ray seem to have rubbed each other the wrong way. On the one hand, Islam Khan did have certain traits that might have endeared him to the elite *munshīs* in the *diwānī*; for instance, Chandar Bhan draws particular attention to the khan’s flair for the secretarial arts: “He wrote beautiful *shikasta* calligraphy and composed well-expressed triplicate verses [*muṣallašīn*]. He was at the head of the class of calligraphers and *munshīs* of the age, with a proud nature and a high intellect; indeed, one of the sayings of that khan of sweet expression used to be ‘All the world’s work is the job of one perfect man’ [*tamām kār-i dunyā kār-i yak mard-i kāmil ast*].” But Chandar Bhan also describes Islam Khan as having a somewhat “martial mentality” (*dimāγ-h-i imārat*), a man who, though highly gifted, was also strong-willed (*qawī-nafs*) and had a tendency to be quite demanding (*sāḥib-i dā’īyat*). He began to run the office of the *diwānī* with a kind of military discipline—“joining,” as Chandar Bhan puts it, “the principles of *wizārat* with the rules of command” (*bā dastūr-i wizārat rā qawā‘id-i imārat jam‘ sākht*)—and thus, though Chandar Bhan never comes right out and says it, he strongly hints that the khan’s ego got in the way of him and Diyanat Ray working together. As our *munshi* delicately put it, “The need to coordinate with him did not sit well with the aforementioned khan” (*naqsh-i sūh-bat-i ū bā khān-i mashārun-ilāh durust na-nišast*). As a result, Diyanat Ray was “honorably reassigned” (*iftikār yāft*) to oversee the *diwān-i khālisha*, while Islam Khan, “became the unquestioned *diwān*” (*diwān-i mustaqlī gardīd*). “His martial mentality notwithstanding,” Chandar Bhan adds in a telling aside, Islam Khan “managed the affairs of *wizārat* well enough” (*bā wujūd-i dimāγ-h-i imārat ba umūr-i wizārat pardākhīt*) (*CC*, 58).

The explicit contrast here between the authority of command (*imārat*) and Chandar Bhan’s ideal of true governmental leadership (*wizārat*) could not be starker. And, as if it weren’t plain enough, Chandar Bhan reiterates the point a few lines later. Just a few years after Islam Khan became wazir—in July 1645, to be exact—the eminent noble Khan-i Dauran Bahadur Nusrat Jang, who had been assigned to govern the Deccan, was murdered by one of his servants before he could travel south. In the wake of this awful news, Shah Jahan, needing someone...
to take over the crucial Deccan governorship—and perhaps recognizing that his new wazīr was not a terribly effective administrator in any case—turned to Islam Khan, “upon whose resolute stature,” in Chandar Bhan’s revealing words, “the robe of command was a much better fit than the office of wizārat” (khi'ilat-i imārat bar qāmat-i khwāhish-i ā chust-tar az tashrif-i wizārat būd) (CC, 58).

This contrast between imārat and wizārat is again recapitulated in Chandar Bhan’s portrayal of the careers of the next two prime ministers, Sa’d Allah Khan (d. 1656) and Mir Muhammad Sa’id Ardastani “Mu’azzam Khan,” better known simply as “Mir Jumla II” (1591–1663). Sa’d Allah Khan took over when Islam Khan left for the Deccan in 1645 and was widely respected for having quickly worked his way up the ranks of Mughal nobility through his intelligence and talent, rather than political connections or birth.27 Sa’d Allah Khan also quickly emerged as one of the most effective military commanders of Shah Jahan’s reign, which of course only increased the respect with which most seventeenth-century commentators regarded him. As we will see below, Chandar Bhan had occasion to observe Sa’d Allah Khan’s martial capabilities firsthand, having accompanied the khan for at least part of the military campaigns in Balkh and Badakhshan in the 1640s—campaigns that the munshī describes at length later in Chahār Chaman.28 But as we have seen, great military ability alone was not enough to make a great administrative leader as far as Chandar Bhan was concerned. Rather, it was Sa’d Allah Khan’s managerial acumen, generous disposition, and spiritual awareness that made him truly great in our munshī’s estimation. Like Afzal Khan and Abu al-Fazl before him, he was typically saluted as ‘Allāmī, or “Learned One,” and Chandar Bhan explicitly compares his “Aristotle-like” intellect to that of “the peerless and inimitable Shaikh Abu al-Fazl” (CC, 60).

Chandar Bhan was especially impressed with Sa’d Allah Khan’s mastery of secretarial arts such as accounting and prose composition, which allowed him to oversee the Mughal administration in a deft, hands-on way: “He drafted exquisite letters [nāma-hā-yi wālā] on His Majesty’s behalf to the rulers of Turan and Iran, doing true justice to eloquence and verbal artistry. . . . In addition to Arabic and Persian, he was completely fluent in Turkish, and whenever conversing with eloquent men of Arabia or ‘Ajam his superiority was on display. In drafting replies to the revenue and property officers he had no need of accountants and auditors [peshkārān wa mustaufiyān]; in fact, there was hardly any matter in which he needed anyone’s assistance” (CC, 60). His ability and willingness to do some of the elite secretarial work himself, in other words, clearly endeared Sa’d Allah Khan to assistants like Chandar Bhan, who found in him someone they could respect as a fellow expert in the funūn-i dabīrī. His managerial style, too, seems to have been much more appreciative of his staff’s efforts, for Chandar Bhan repeatedly describes him as qadar-shinās, someone who “appreciates the talents of others.”
Finally, though he was indisputably one of the great military commanders of the entire Mughal era, Sa’d Allah Khan’s demeanor was nevertheless considerably more genteel, spiritual, and humanistic than that of his generalissimo predecessor. “Many times,” Chandar Bhan recalls, “I conversed from dusk until dawn with that khan who had an appreciation for talent, as if we were of one mind,” adding that “even though his business was worldly, he also had a penchant for mystical introspection, and right there in the epicenter of worldly affairs he breathed an air of detachment” (bā wujūd maṣğhala-yi rozgār shaghl-i bāfīnī dāsht wa dar ‘ain-i ta’alluq dam az bi-ta’alluqī mīzad) (CC, 60).

Virtually their entire extant correspondence, in fact, deals with mystical and literary themes. And, like his account of Afzal Khan, Chandar Bhan’s account of Sa’d Allah Khan includes one of the khan’s mystically themed letters to a friend, as well as another extended passage in the naṣīḥat-nāma tradition—this time, in the form of a dialogue in which the ważīr summarizes his precepts on the responsibilities of governance for his munshī. Chandar Bhan begins the conversation with a fundamental question: “Should one’s own interests [irāda-yi ḥud] take precedence over the will of the public [irāda-yi khālq], or should one rather give preference to the public interest over one’s own?” As any ideal ważīr would, Sa’d Allah Khan answers unequivocally that “to the best of one’s ability” (tā maqduɾ bāshad) public benefit should always override an administrator’s desire for personal gain.

What follows is an extended meditation on the type of sound character that those who wield power must cultivate in order to best serve the public interest, for instance: “One should strive to the extent possible for the public good [khair-i khālq] and not discriminate among the people [bā ahl-i rozgār yak-sān wa yak-rang bāshad], whether they are in your presence or not”; an imperial servant must “cast aside his own emotional and physical desires [aghrāz-i nafsānī wa jismānī] and have an eye toward the safeguarding of truth [ḥaqq] in every matter”; in worldly matters he should be “deliberate, calm, and free of rancor and malevolence” (āhista wa āramīda wa bī-shor-o-sharr) rather than “impatient, brash, and brazen” (bī-tahammul wa bī-bāk wa bī-āzarm); he should not flaunt his position, for “doing and not saying is far superior to talking and not doing”; he should not use his power to usurp other people’s wealth (tasarruf dar māl-i digari nakardan); he should be humble, and avoid jealousy toward others (ḥāsid wa mu’ānid-i kasī nabāyad būd), even those who display such bad behavior toward him; and, perhaps most importantly, he should continue to emulate the great mystics (buzurgān) of the past, even in worldly service to kings, so long as he transforms the engagement with politics into an opportunity to accomplish “the work of God’s servants” (kār-i banda-hā-yi khudā) (CC, 62–64). Patience, humility, piety, a strong work ethic, a strong sense of duty in service of the greater good—these are the values Chandar Bhan acknowledges having learned from Sa’d Allah Khan, qualities he himself sought to emulate and
hoped his readers would, too. It should come as little surprise, then, that Chandar Bhan, like many of his contemporaries, was deeply saddened by Sa‘d Allah Khan’s death. In fact, he takes the unusual step of including in *Chahār Chaman* the full text of an ornate eulogy circulated by Shah Jahan to announce the sad news, in which the khan is lauded, among other things, for being singular among the erudite men of the world (*yagāna-yi dānishwarān-i jahān*); the model for wise men of the times (*qidwa-yi khiradmandān-i zamān*); the textbook for scholars of the age (*dastūr al-‘amal-i dānāyān-i rozgār*); the arbiter of visible and hidden perfections (*maẓhar-i kamālāt-i šuwarī wa ma‘nawi*); the touchstone of the sciences (*mihakk-i ‘ulūm*); the assayer of eloquence (*naqqād-i sukham*); the penetrator of truths (*darrāk-i haqā’iq*); the unveiler of subtleties (*kashshāf-i daqā’iq*); and the treasure of knowledge (*ganj-i ‘ilm*) (*CC*, 61–62). As above, with Chandar Bhan’s praise of Afzal Khan, such strings of panegyric compliments were clearly intended to have a hyperbolic rhetorical effect, but that did not mean that they were random; in this case, note especially the fact that even in the emperor’s opinion what was worth remembering about Sa‘d Allah Khan, what elevated him to greatness, was his intellectual talents and accomplishments rather than his distinguished military record, which is barely alluded to in the entire eulogy.

After Sa‘d Allah Khan’s death in 1656, while “the dust of grief was still settled on the mirror of [Shah Jahan’s] heart,” once again there was a period during which an official *wazīr* was yet to be named. During that time, as noted above in chapter 1, much of the fiscal administration was overseen by Chandar Bhan’s colleague Raghunath Ray Kayastha, with both Hindu administrators receiving promotions commensurate with their added responsibilities.

Eventually, however, the official post of grand *wazīr* was awarded to another military man, the aforementioned Mir Jumla (II), who had originally come to India as a diamond merchant, gotten involved in Deccan politics, and become incorporated into the Mughal hierarchy through his connections to Prince Aurangzeb. Chandar Bhan begins his account of Mir Jumla’s tenure by noting the latter’s superior skill (*mahārat-i tamām*) in the various arts and sciences of war (*ādāb wa funūn-i sipāhghiri*) (*CC*, 66). Of course, in almost any other context this would surely be viewed as a compliment, but given what Chandar Bhan has already told us about the subtle difference between *imārat* and true *wizārat* we cannot take this praise entirely at face value.

Sure enough, less than a year after Mir Jumla’s appointment in 1656 he was sent back south to accompany Prince Aurangzeb in the ongoing Deccan campaigns. Chandar Bhan notes this quick turnaround in *Chahār Chaman* and also includes the gracious farewell letter that he wrote to Mir Jumla in his *Munsha’āt* (*MB*, 39). He also explains, however, that even though Mir Jumla had left the court for the Deccan, he retained his official title in absentia, while his son, Muhammad Amin Khan, was assigned to take over the prime ministerial duties in his father’s absence.
Administrative authority was thus split for a time “between the seal of Mu’azzam Khan [i.e. Mir Jumla] and the signature of Muhammad Amin Khan” (CC, 66).

The suggestion, clearly, is that Mir Jumla was for all intents and purposes a wazīr in name only. Even after his practical authority was transferred to Muhammad Amin Khan, Chandar Bhan tells us, “[Raghunath] Ray-i Rayan continued overseeing his own administrative operation [dar kār-i khwud istiqlāl dāsht].” Chandar Bhan then gripes that “because [Mir Jumla’s] sojourn in the Deccan grew extended,” the accounting work of the diwānī grew increasingly “clogged with delays” (dar ‘uqda-yi ta’wīq uftād), leading Shah Jahan to assign nearly all of the wazīr’s actual administrative duties—running the finance ministry, keeping revenue accounts, drafting orders, and so on—to Raghunath Ray-i Rayan in any case. Considering Chandar Bhan’s earlier praise for the ability of a wazīr like Sa’d Allah Khan to run his own departments, keep track of accounts, and draft his own jawābs to provincial administrators, it seems difficult to read this as anything but a rebuke of Mir Jumla’s appointment, absentee status, and general hands-off approach to wizārat. From the career civil servant’s perspective, figurehead wazīrs like Mir Jumla and his son, whose skill sets were almost entirely military, only caused delays and disrupted the administration. Even worse, it turned out that Muhammad Amin Khan was so inexperienced in administrative practices that Shah Jahan had to reassign Chandar Bhan completely, remanding him to work as a special liaison between the wazīr’s office and that of Raghunath Ray so that he could “train Muhammad Amin Khan in such matters [az in ma’ni muṭṭali’ sāzad]” (CC, 67).

Despite this tension, Chandar Bhan appears to have remained cordial toward Muhammad Amin Khan, and we do know that at least at some point in their acquaintance he wrote a very respectful letter to the khan asking if he would offer a job to a certain munshī by the name of Surat Singh, who may well have been the same Punjabi Brahman mentioned in the previous chapter in connection with a literary salon held in Agra, and whom Chandar Bhan affectionately refers to as “this faqīr’s brother and student” (MB, 27). Of course, helping to find gainful employment for a friend is one thing, but it appears clearly from the account in Chahār Chaman that Chandar Bhan didn’t feel that either Mir Jumla or Muhammad Amin Khan fully lived up to his ideal of the learned Mughal wazīr.

Finally, in late 1657, in order to settle down the diwānī, Shah Jahan appointed another respected noble and longtime servant of the court, Ja’far Khan (d. 1670), to take over officially for Mir Jumla. Chandar Bhan has great praise for the new wazīr’s “dignity, eminence, forbearance, prudence, civility, ability, and talent” (shān wa shaukat wa burdbāri wa hoshyāri wa huṣn-i khulq wa qābiliyat wa isti’dād) (CC, 67)—so fulsome that it’s a bit hard not to read it as an implicit repudiation of Ja’far Khan’s predecessor. Chandar Bhan also includes a number of letters to Ja’far Khan in his collected letters, including one specifically
congratulating him on his promotion to the wizārat (MB, 44–45). Meanwhile, he also notes that Raghunath Ray kept his title, office, and responsibilities overseeing financial affairs, as a kind of dual administration co-superintended by him and Ja’far Khan was eventually settled upon. By that time, however, Shah Jahan’s reign was already basically at an end, and by early 1658 he had been imprisoned in Agra Fort and replaced by his son Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir, the victor in a four-way struggle for the Mughal throne.

As we have noted several times, Aurangzeb’s reputation in modern historiography is almost universally negative, and anyone familiar with this modern image could be forgiven for assuming that Hindus like Raghunath Ray (and Chandar Bhan, for that matter) would fare poorly once such an orthodox “zealot” came to power. Yet in fact the opposite is true—as we saw in the previous chapter, Chandar Bhan continued to serve Aurangzeb for nearly a decade following the war of succession, and in Raghunath’s case it was Aurangzeb who gave him the highest promotion of all.

Chandar Bhan says nothing of the war of succession by way of details, saying only that “[Raghunath] Ray-i Rayan was appointed to the full prime ministership” after Ja’far Khan was appointed governor of Malwa—an event that we know, from other sources, happened right at the beginning of Aurangzeb’s reign. It was then that Aurangzeb also promoted Raghunath to the title of raja, perhaps partially in recognition of the fact that—again, quite contrary to the expectation that Hindus would automatically reject Aurangzeb’s claim to power—Raghunath had not only supported Aurangzeb’s effort to win the throne but also participated in the later battles against Dara Shukoh and Shah Shuja’. Once Aurangzeb’s power was secure, Raja Raghunath continued as chief of the dīwānī for over half a decade, right up to his death in the sixth year of Aurangzeb’s reign (1664).35

Later in life, Aurangzeb wrote fondly of Raja Raghunath in letters to others, praising the raja’s abilities and even quoting his sage advice on how to appoint good administrators.36 Chandar Bhan, for his part, closes the dastūr al-wizārat section of Chahār Chaman’s first garden by eulogizing Raghunath Ray in a way that resonates with all the virtues we have encountered above—erudition, self-reliance, a good work ethic, and excellent gentlemanly manners:

Numerous other ministers, despite ostensibly being skilled enough in the art of wizārat that they needed no help, had always approached the raja for corrections and a discerning eye, whether with regard to concluding or deciding some business or assessing and confirming the account ledgers. But whatever work the raja did, he did it himself, with no need of anyone else’s help. Along with great skill in the art of penmanship, he had a true talent for prose style and usage [inshā’-o-imlā’] and is famous for his excellent manners, politeness, and civility [ḥusn-i sulūk wa murūwat wa mudārā]. (CC, 68)
As we noted in the previous chapter, Chandar Bhan too continued to serve in the administration of “the kind, merciful, just, and loving emperor” Aurangzeb for a number of years, even after his official retirement from the daily rigors of bureaucratic service. According to the surviving letter to Aurangzeb in which he requested the opportunity to spend his twilight years as caretaker of the Taj Mahal complex, in fact, Chandar Bhan saw this continued service to the Mughal court not as a form of blind loyalty but in quite grandiose spiritual terms, explaining that the Taj “is situated between this world and the hereafter and thus will gain me favor in the present life and the next.” He openly expressed his continuing dedication to the royal family, including Aurangzeb himself, to whom Chandar Bhan offered “prayers for your long life and continued prosperity” (MB, 12–13).

Little did Chandar Bhan realize that Aurangzeb would rule for another four decades after the munshī's death or that the new emperor would wind up as one of the most vilified men in Indian history. Be that as it may, the totality of Chandar Bhan's perspective on imperial governance clearly suggests that for secretaries, wazīrs, and others entrusted with the economic and administrative health of the empire, intellect, competence, and civility were valued above all. A penchant for humility born of a mystical attitude (ma’rifat) and expertise in the secretarial arts (funūn-i dabīrī) were also considered vital character assets, not simply to make one a better person, but also to augment one’s basic aptitude for the governmental tasks at hand. The contrast between Afzal Khan and Sa’d Allah Khan’s tenures as wazīr versus those of Islam Khan and Mir Jumla, at least in Chandar Bhan’s version of events, amply demonstrates this set of principles—principles that he, like many others, observed, in practice and in person, throughout his career.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that for more than a few contemporary observers Chandar Bhan himself emerged as a model of exemplary civility and conduct. Thus we have the comments of a certain Bal Krishan, another notable Hindu munshī from Aurangzeb’s reign who consciously modeled his own grand prose treatise Chahār Bahār on Chandar Bhan’s Chahār Chaman and who singled out Chandar Bhan as one of the great gentlemen and literati of the era. Among Chahār Bahār’s many varied contents—including praise for Aurangzeb and some of the author’s other patrons and teachers, such as Shaikh Jalal Hisari (d. 1660), as well as learned disquisitions on topics like Sufism, akhlāqi ethical principles, asceticism, and the nature of good and evil—Bal Krishan also expounds at length upon the skills and virtues required of a great secretary, a section that culminates with special praise for Chandar Bhan:

Today among the word magicians of the land of Hindustan [saḥr-tarāzān-i ‘arṣa-yi hindīstān] and literary savants of this young age [i.e., Aurangzeb’s reign] is that Mercury-quick secretary Ray Chandar Bhan, whose happy nature has been decorated and adorned with excellences and perfections and whose fame and reputation for good qualities has spread across the land.
Though it is true that he is an intimate and close confidant in the service of great sovereigns and sultans, nevertheless the phoenix of his spirit is not at all fettered by worldly status and wealth, and he maintains cordial relationships with the faqīrs, mendicants, and pious people of every community [hummā-yi himmat-ash ba jāh-o-daulat-i dunyā muqaiyad nīst wa bā fuqarā wa ghurabā wa sulahā-yi har ṭā‘ifa sari-yi khvush dārad].

He has such a courteous way with everyone, whether familiar or stranger, elite or peon, that even another whole essay or treatise on his civility and good manners would be insufficient. 37

In other words, if a large part of Chandar Bhan’s message was that aspiring officers and gentlemen should model their behavior on the great wazīrs of the day such as Afzal Khan and Sa’d Allah Khan, then along the way our munshī had himself clearly emerged as a powerful model of good conduct among the contemporary Indo-Persian cognoscenti.

THE MUNSHĪ IN WAR AND DIPLOMACY

After his discussion of the theory and practice of ministerial conduct, Chandar Bhan turns in the last third of the first “garden” of Chahār Chaman to a new topic entirely—namely, the art of war and diplomacy—in a section entitled “An Account of Some of the Conquests of This Eternal Reign” (zīkr-i ba‘zī az futūḥât dar ‘ahd-i abad-qarīn). He does not propose to tell us the details of every aspect of Mughal foreign policy, or even every military engagement undertaken during the nearly three decades that he worked in Shah Jahan’s central administration. This would take far too long, for, as he insists, “The victorious warriors [ghāzīs] and conquering royal forces are always busy in every direction and quadrant of the imperial dominions subduing the skyscraping citadels and incorporating the wealth and territory of the tyrannical and recalcitrant, overcoming worthy opposition.” Thus, “although fresh victories beyond measure are the constant good fortune of the friends of this conquering dynasty, [only] a few of the great conquests that were most difficult to achieve [ki wuqū‘-i ān ishkāl-i tamām dāsht] are described here with a sincere pen” (CC, 69).

What we notice immediately upon examining this chronicle of historical events, however, is that it is not really a chronicle at all—at least, not in any conventional sense of narrating the military and political history of Shah Jahan’s reign “as it happened.” Indeed, Chandar Bhan merely alludes in passing to a good number of the “great conquests” in question, dispensing with quite a number of them in barely a couple of pages of Chahār Chaman’s printed edition. By contrast, he spends roughly the next eleven pages on a single campaign, the Mughal invasion of Balkh and Badakhshan launched in early 1646, followed by another two full pages on the resolution of a crisis in Mughal-Mewari relations that occurred in
1654, and a brief closing note on Mughal relations with Bijapur. In other words, virtually the entirety of Chandar Bhan’s account of Mughal military activity under Shah Jahan is focused on just two events, with the campaign in Balkh and Badakhshan figuring most prominently.

This somewhat curious narrative strategy makes much more sense, however, when we recall that for all its episodic format and blithe disregard for linear chronology *Chahār Chaman* is, at its heart, a kind of memoir. Of all the military campaigns that Chandar Bhan discusses in this section, the action in Central Asia and the diplomatic crisis in Mewar were the only two in which he appears to have played a personal role, as a member of the administrative support staff in the case of the former, and in the role of Shah Jahan’s personal envoy to the court of Rana Raj Singh in the case of the latter. Thus his emphasis here on these two particular campaigns is intended, not to suggest that these two events were necessarily the focal points of Mughal foreign policy as such during this period, but rather to describe *his own involvement* in that policy—the moments when, in Alam and Subrahmanyan’s elegant formulation, he was not merely a “witness” to empire but also its “agent.”

This does not mean, however, that Chandar Bhan has nothing interesting to say in his relatively brief remarks on the other campaigns. He begins by drawing our attention to the Mughal conquest of Daulatabad Fort, which, he informs us, “is renowned as one of the most sturdy and well fortified strongholds in the world, the ramparts of which are so sturdy and high that the tops of them seem to reach the Wheel of Atlas” (*CC*, 68). Here once again we see an example of how references to figures from the Greco-Hellenic tradition—such as Plato, Aristotle, Galen, or in this case Atlas—are woven seamlessly into Chandar Bhan’s descriptive vocabulary, albeit filtered through a Persianate literary and political idiom. But we also see that although most of the content of *Chahār Chaman* is concerned with Chandar Bhan’s own personal experiences in the Mughal heartlands of northern India, he was certainly aware, and even supportive, of the empire’s expansionary efforts in the Deccan during the middle part of the seventeenth century.

Several other military encounters from the early years of Shah Jahan’s reign are quickly passed over in similar summary fashion. Next up is the conquest of “various forts along the frontiers of Bijapur and Golconda by the servants of this court of celestial station,” after which, Chandar Bhan tells us, “Adil Khan, Qub al-Mulk, and other rulers [*dunyā-dārān*] of the Deccan, having draped the saddle-cloth of fidelity and allegiance over their shoulders, became submissive and obedient” (*CC*, 68–69). Chandar Bhan does not feel obliged to give us any details of the larger political implications of these events, or the diplomatic machinations and military tactics required to bring them about, or even, for that matter, the dates of the campaign (roughly the first half of 1636)—again, this is not our
author’s aim, and besides, as Chandar Bhan himself would have recognized, those details are easily available in other historical chronicles of Shah Jahan’s reign.39

He does make sure, however, that we understand what such conquests meant in terms of the projection of Mughal power across the subcontinent and, perhaps even more importantly, the ability of the Mughal imperial apparatus to incorporate defeated rivals with grace and civility. This capacity of the Mughal state to be gracious in victory is a theme that runs throughout the Chahār Chaman and is clearly something that Chandar Bhan wants to advertise to the entire Persianate world as a feature of the overall ideology of ʿulūḥ-i kull—in particular to audiences in the realms of the Mughals’ great rivals, the Ottomans and Safavids (the latter of which had important direct ties to many of the very Deccan sultanates whose subjugation Chandar Bhan is writing about here). Hence, he emphasizes: “Everywhere in that region it became routine to read the khutba and strike coins in His Highness’s name of names, and eloquent ambassadors [from the Deccan] conveyed precious gifts, presents, and protestations of sincere fealty to the foot of the throne wherein the Caliphate resides [‘arā‘iz-ī bandagi wa ikhlāṣ ba pāya-i sarīr-i khilafat-maṣīr rasānidand]” (CC, 69).

But Chandar Bhan is also not afraid to emphasize the empire’s capacity for vengeful ruthlessness. He reminds us, therefore, of Shah Jahan’s uncompromising response to two significant rebellions that occurred very early in his reign, the first by an Afghan noble named Khan Jahan Lodi, also known as “Pir Khan” or “Pir Afghan,” who had been a stalwart at the Mughal court since the time of Akbar, and the second by a Rajput chieftain named Jujhar Singh Bundela. Those who might expect, on the basis of modern assumptions about the nature of religious community in South Asia, that Chandar Bhan would somehow be sympathetic to Jujhar Singh’s insurrection simply because they were coreligionists would be sorely mistaken. Indeed, Chandar Bhan reserves some of the harshest language in all of Chahār Chaman for Jujhar Singh, calling him an “ill-starred wretch” (bad-akhtar) whose actions stemmed in part from “the ignominy that resides at the core of his powerful clan” (az rū-yi jahālati ki dar nihād-i īn jama‘at mutamakkin ast) (CC, 69).40

This may of course be an allusion to the fact that it was Jujhar Singh’s own father, Bir Singh Bundela (d. 1627), who in 1602 had personally assassinated Akbar’s celebrated courtier Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak (1551–1602), arguably the most revered intellectual in the history of the Mughal court. This was one of the most infamous acts of political treachery in all of Mughal history, and Chandar Bhan and most of his readers would surely have been familiar with it. Clearly it informed his judgment of Jujhar Singh’s character as well.

Moreover, the entire chain of events leading to Jujhar Singh’s rebellion—his second, actually—was initiated when he had attacked, murdered, and appropriated the lands of the Hindu zamīndār of Chauragarh, a Gond chieftain named Prem
When Shah Jahan attempted to discipline Jujhar Singh for these crimes and to force the Bundela ruler to make some restitution for the lands and money he had expropriated, Jujhar Singh chose defiance instead. The point is, none of the people who figure here—not the author Chandar Bhan (whom we see vehemently criticizing a fellow Hindu for his political crimes), not Jujhar Singh (who brazenly murdered a prominent fellow Hindu, Prem Narayan), and not Shah Jahan (who took the side of a provincial Hindu zamindār against his own manṣābdār)—appear to have made their decisions on the basis of religious sentiment alone, much less some sort of general communal or “national” solidarity. On the contrary, except to the extent that one may deduce the various figures’ religions on the basis of their names, their sectarian identities appear to have been totally moot as far as Chandar Bhan was concerned.

In any event, Chandar Bhan gives relatively few details of what was, in fact, a nearly eight-month-long counterinsurgency. He also declines to report on the grisly details of Jujhar Singh’s death at the hands of a band of vengeful Gonds who discovered him and his son hiding in the forests of the central Indian region of Chanda, after which both were summarily beheaded by the Mughal commander Khan-i Dauran—lurid accounts of which are available in other contemporary sources. Chandar Bhan does, however, indirectly allude to this unceremonious end to the recalcitrant Rajput’s career, citing the chronogram said to have been composed on the spot by a fellow munshī named Nand Rai: “The head and territory and possessions of the Bundela are now in hand” (āmad sar wa mulk wa māl-i Bundela ba-dast = 1045 AH = 1635–36 CE) (CC, 70). The point, one suspects, had less to do with the triumphalism of a Mughal propagandist than with taking every opportunity to reiterate the centrality of the munshī in Mughal affairs, and the capabilities required of such munshis—in this case, the literary expertise necessary to extemporaneously mark a significant event with an apt chronogram. Nand Rai was also a fellow veteran of Afzal Khan Shirazi’s circle, so he and Chandar Bhan were presumably known to one another. And calling attention to Nand Rai’s munshī-on-the-spot participation in these military activities would have also highlighted Chandar Bhan’s larger theme in this section, namely that the elite munshī wasn’t someone who just sat in an office ghostwriting letters and reviewing accounts all day, he was also expected to get out in the field.

Chandar Bhan closes this survey of the early campaigns of Shah Jahan’s reign with the Mughal action against the Portuguese at Hugli, about which all he says is that it was “among the famous ports of Bengal, conquered thanks to the excellent effort and leadership of Qasim Khan, the governor (ṣūbadār) of Bengal” (CC, 70). He does not allude to the sharp sectarian overtones of this confrontation, which took place in 1632, and which most sources agree was launched after Shah Jahan began receiving complaints that the European traders there were raiding local villages, taking residents captive, and forcibly converting many of them to
Christianity. There was also, of course, an economic dimension. Besides the fact that the Portuguese commercial activity at Hugli was taking business away from other nearby ports, some sources accused the Portuguese of engaging in disruptive maritime piracy, while others, such as ‘Inayat Khan’s *Shāh Jahān Nāma*, intimate that they were illegally seizing control of “all the villages and *parganas* surrounding the port on both sides of the estuary,” adding insult to injury by not paying the appropriate taxes or rent on those lands.

Chandar Bhan does, however, use some fairly colorful language to briefly mention the Mughal campaigns in Assam (ca. 1636–38), the subjugation of which, he tells us, “came about under the management and command of the Pillar of State, Islam Khan,” and in which “countless Assamese more numerous than a swarm of ants or locusts became fodder for the swords of the victorious imperial *ghāzis*” (*āshāmiyān-i bi-shumār ziyāda az mor-o-malakh ‘alaf-i tegh-i ghāziyān-i nusrat-farjam gardīdand*) (*CC*, 70). After this there is a brief discussion of Mughal efforts in the late 1630s to win back from the Safavids the strategic fort of Qandahar, which once again gave the Mughals—albeit only temporarily—control of a crucial gateway to the lucrative overland trading routes to Central and Inner Asia.

Again, Chandar Bhan does not give extensive details about any of these campaigns, merely registering them as great victories, touting Shah Jahan’s strategic wisdom, and occasionally noting some of the important commanders who led the efforts. Clearly, then, the point is not to offer a comprehensive history of Shah Jahan’s foreign policy but to showcase another domain of imperial life in which the *munshi* had to be prepared to engage, namely war making, politics, and diplomacy.

This becomes especially clear in the two lengthy sections that follow, both of which deal with major military-diplomatic campaigns in which Chandar Bhan himself participated. The first was a massive, difficult, and expensive campaign in Balkh and Badakhshan. The Mughals had always looked to these areas of Central Asia as the ancestral lands of their illustrious forefathers, and, as a number of scholars have noted, one can find a strain of nostalgia regarding Balkh and Badakhshan running throughout a great deal of Mughal writing and cultural symbolism throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As one of the historians of Shah Jahan’s reign put it: “From the time of the last Emperor Jahangir’s death, when [the Uzbek ruler] Nazar Muhammad Khan had vainly attempted to seize Kabul, the mighty soul of the world-subduing monarch [Shah Jahan] had been bent upon the conquest of the countries of Balkh and Badakhshan, which were properly his hereditary dominions.”

Despite some early successes, though, there were immediate challenges to sustaining the Mughal presence in Balkh and Badakhshan. One, of course, was the infamously difficult terrain of these regions, which has been a source of exasperation for invading armies ever since ancient times and of course remains so even
today. There were also the various local tribes to deal with, who somehow had to be pacified, recruited to the Mughal cause, or otherwise disciplined. Sometimes these groups acted independently, raiding Mughal advance parties and supply chains through the steep passes and narrow defiles of the Hindu Kush Mountains, and sometimes they acted in concert with the Uzbek contingents that continued to harass Mughal forces from the north.

Another logistical challenge of these campaigns—one that would have involved Chandar Bhan directly—was the payment of soldiers. When a military campaign like this was launched, the Mughal armies did not just pick up and go; there were all manner of issues to be worked out regarding the differential salaries, rights, and duties of those involved, and the bureaucracy that handled the Mughal information order had to be mobile and supple enough to handle these transactions, even far from home. At the time of the 1646 campaign in Balkh and Badakhshan, such administrative matters were usually handled by Sa’ed Allah Khan, who had become prime minister barely a year earlier, and in whose office Chandar Bhan himself was one of the chief bureaucrats.

Thus Chandar Bhan reports that once Balkh was initially conquered it was Sa’ed Allah Khan who was sent to manage the logistics (band-o-bast) of the transition to Mughal control (CC, 78). But even before the imperial army had originally set out under the command of Prince Murad Bakhsh, Sa’ed Allah Khan had been dispatched to Kabul in advance of the royal party to ensure the smooth disbursement of funds and to address certain grievances among the soldiers, many of whom had not received a promised three months of advance pay, as well as other subsidiary incentives, and were thus refusing to march onward. Once these issues were resolved, Sa’ed Allah Khan was also authorized as a further incentive to reduce the typical muster obligations of the various mansabdars taking part in the campaign, meaning that the officers’ individual contributions to the imperial cause in the form of troops and horses would be less of a burden on their personal households.48

This relatively minor episode of bureaucratic messiness actually reveals a much larger truth about Mughal administration—and Mughal power—as a whole. However “absolute” the emperor’s authority may have been in the abstract, when it came time for him to exercise that authority, particularly in a major undertaking like the Central Asian campaigns of the 1640s, he couldn’t just wave his hand and expect the entire politico-military apparatus to fall into line by fiat. Soldiers, even the rank and file, had certain expectations; and it was even possible in a case like this for them to, in effect, strike for better pay and benefits. Meanwhile, there was an entire bureaucratic machinery in place to work out the details of how the Mughal state and treasury could meet those expectations, calculate the necessary balances of payments, disburse funds, and integrate whatever concessions the state had to make to its soldiers into the larger calculus of the Mughal political economy.
While Sa’d Allah Khan would have had the overall authority as prime minister to manage these contingencies, someone actually had to keep the physical records of all these arrangements—the rosters of various classes of soldiers, the relative pay scales they were entitled to, the amounts of their wartime bonuses according to rank, the effect on overall manpower of reducing the mansabdārs’ troop and cavalry obligations, and so on—and this is precisely where imperial munshīs like Chandar Bhan came in. This is also why they were often required to travel with the Mughal army, even in the thick of an arduous military campaign. An elite grandee of the court like Sa’d Allah Khan would have had little need of technocratic assistants like Chandar Bhan in his specific capacity as a military commander; but in his larger governmental role as a manager of imperial finances and logistics, access to his best munshīs was essential, even on the front lines. Thus the administrative arm of the Mughal government had to be not only flexible enough to send teams of technocrats to travel with the imperial army but also expert and sophisticated enough to multitask even while they were on the move. Indeed, it is not as if the management of the rest of the empire was suspended simply because the emperor and a large percentage of the nobility were away on a campaign. To the contrary, the expectation was that routine business of the empire would continue basically as usual.  

In any event, it was largely because Chandar Bhan personally traveled with the Mughal army as part of Sa’d Allah Khan’s retinue, and was intimately involved in the bureaucratic logistics of the Central Asian campaign, that “this lowest of servants” was, as he himself tells us, “[so] well-acquainted with the events that transpired there” (kamtarīn-i bandagān . . . az sawānih-i ān jā wāqif ast) (CC, 79). He provides a list of all those “illustrious amīrs who gained top honors in contributing to the tumultuous contest for Balkh and Badakhshan” (CC, 79–80), both Hindu and Muslim. He also gives a lengthy description of the diplomatic negotiations and lavish ceremonies surrounding the defection of the Uzbek prince Khusrau Sultan to the Mughal cause. Parts of this section read almost like a primer on Mughal court ceremonial, and Chandar Bhan repeatedly emphasizes that Khusrau Sultan behaved “with perfect courtesy” (ba adab-i tamām), adding interesting details about the literary ambience of the proceedings—there was, apparently, always time for good poetry, even in the midst of a grueling military campaign—and the exorbitant gifts that Shah Jahan doled out to his new ally.

Once again, then, the munshī’s personal experience organizes what would otherwise appear to be a straightforward narration of historical events. But however personalized the narrative, the larger politics and transregional audience of Chandar Bhan’s account appear never to have been far from our munshī’s mind. Rehearsing the august ceremonial minutiae of the assembly down to every last detail provides Chandar Bhan with a clear opportunity to flaunt not only his expressive prose but also the wealth and grandeur of Shah Jahan’s court. Indeed, as an adver-
tisement to far-flung Persianate literati, intellectuals, and even freelance soldiers who might find themselves in need of patronage one could hardly do better.

Even more significant, the framing of this entire episode allows Chandar Bhan once again to reiterate for a wider Persianate audience one of the central themes of Mughal ideology, namely, the great courtesy and hospitality that they prided themselves on extending to defeated rivals. The entire logic of Mughal imperial power held that those who submitted to it graciously, even after hard-fought wars, were not to be punished but rather to be incorporated into the imperial apparatus, given a rank and status commensurate with their character and capabilities, and subsequently honored for their loyalty regardless of their regional, ethnic, or sectarian identity. The system was never foolproof, of course; but as part of the broader logic of ṣulḥ-i kull it had clearly served the Mughals very well over the years and had been the ideological glue that had held the empire together and facilitated its expansion for generations. From the entire campaign in Balkh and Badakhshan, which, for all the fuss, ultimately wound up accomplishing very little, Khusrau Sultan’s submission was perhaps the one shining exemplification of this larger principle. Hence Chandar Bhan’s repeated emphasis on “civility” and “courtesy” (ādāb) throughout Khusrau Sultan’s audience, especially Shah Jahan’s own hospitality and generosity. The message, loud and clear, was that whatever you brought to the table as a prospective servant of the Mughal empire, the court would give back many times over.

The same underlying themes also seem to animate the penultimate part of this section of Chahār Chaman, in which Chandar Bhan describes his part in helping to resolve a deepening crisis between Shah Jahan’s imperial court and that of the Rajput king of Mewar, Rana Raj Singh (r. 1652–80). The house of Mewar had been one of the few Rajput kingdoms to never fully acquiesce to Mughal overlordship, and it remained extremely proud of this fact even if a relatively stable détente had prevailed since the negotiation of a 1615 truce between Jahangir and Rana Amar Singh (d. 1620), the ruler at the time. Over the course of the 1640s and ’50s, however, a series of what could be described as misunderstandings or outright provocations—depending on whose side you were on—had begun to raise tensions, culminating in the Mewar court’s decision to renovate, reoccupy, and refortify the massive citadel at Chittor, a key stronghold that lay directly between the Mughal capitals of Delhi and Agra and the lucrative commercial trading areas of coastal Gujarat. This was a direct contravention of the 1615 treaty and a direct threat to Mughal strategic interests in the region. And thus, though the friction between the Mughal court and Mewar had been building for a number of years, things finally came to a head in 1654.⁵⁰

In response, Shah Jahan relocated his entire court from Delhi to Ajmer in order to be closer to Mewar, and from there he engaged in a two-pronged military-diplomatic approach. On the diplomatic front, he sent our own munshi Chandar
Bhan to the Mewari capital of Udaipur as his personal envoy, with instructions to convey directly to Rana Raj Singh the emperor’s chagrin over recent events and to dangle certain diplomatic “carrots” in hopes that the rana would desist from these provocations—Chandar Bhan refers to them as “errors,” “offenses,” or even outright “crimes” (taqsir)—and come back into the imperial fold. At the same time—the “stick”—Shah Jahan dispatched the wazīr Sa’d Allah Khan to lay siege to Chittor with an army of some thirty thousand soldiers, with instructions to raze it if Chandar Bhan’s diplomacy should fail.

The strategy worked. Rana Raj Singh received Chandar Bhan’s embassy with all due courtesy, and after hearing what the munshi had to say he relented. “The rana,” Chandar Bhan tells us, “whose determination had been shaken by the menace of the conquering imperial armies and the singularity of the pādshāh’s censures, listened to my prudent advice and valuable counsels and pulled back from his untoward intentions.” As a further sign of good faith, Rana Raj Singh even sent his son, who, Chandar Bhan tells us, “was like a piece of his own liver, and only six years old at the time,” to accompany Chandar Bhan’s retinue back to Ajmer “so that he could be trained in the ways of sublime service to the exalted court.” No doubt this appears at first glance like a menacingly heavy personal price for the imperial court to exact for peace. But the young man was treated extremely well and, exactly according to the logic of hospitality toward defeated rivals as a core component of šulh-i kull discussed above, was immediately lavished with gifts and accorded considerable status within the Mughal nobility. After they had returned to Ajmer, Chandar Bhan tells us, “he was brought graciously into the sublime imperial service [ba mulāzamat-i ashraf-a’lā mustas’ad gardid], and with an abundance of favor was granted the new moniker Subhag Chand and was honored with the gift of an elephant and a robe [khil’at].”51 “The members of his personal retinue,” Chandar Bhan adds, “were also each ennobled by gifts of horses and robes of honor” (CC, 82–83).

Chandar Bhan’s description of these events in Chahār Chaman is actually relatively concise, especially considering that the munshi himself gives a much more detailed account of his activities in Udaipur in a series of letters and reports to Shah Jahan that he includes in Munsha’āt-i Brahman. But for present purposes, the central point is the way in which participating in war and diplomacy were clearly recognized parts of Chandar Bhan’s portfolio of duties as a munshi and an agent of the empire. In the case of the Balkh campaign, Chandar Bhan was expected to travel with the imperial army and perform a number of executive functions directly from the front. And in the case of the Udaipur mission, Chandar Bhan himself was raised to the level of imperial representative and sent to negotiate directly with a subordinate—and somewhat hostile—power.

But why, specifically, did Shah Jahan tap Chandar Bhan for this particular mission? On the face of it, there is little doubt that the religious identity had
something to do with the emperor’s decision. Chandar Bhan was a Brahman, after all, a status that would have commanded respect in any Rajput court regardless of the simmering political tensions involved. Moreover, there was at least some precedent for Shah Jahan choosing to send a notable Hindu from his court as an envoy to a hostile or refractory Hindu client state. As Allison Busch has noted in her extensive study of the Braj-Hindi literary culture of the period (including at Shah Jahan’s court), we know from Persian chronicles of the period like ‘Amal-i Šālih and Shāh Jahān Nāma of several occasions earlier in his reign when Shah Jahan had sent the Hindi poet Sundar Kaviray on sensitive diplomatic missions, for instance in dealing with the recalcitrant Bundela Rajputs who were based in Sundar’s home region of Gwalior.52 This gesture on Shah Jahan’s part, of deploying high-profile Hindu literati to serve as diplomatic envoys to Rajput courts, does not appear to have received much specific scholarly attention. But as we have just seen, we have an almost exact parallel to Sundar’s case in our own Chandar Bhan’s 1654 mission to Mewar.

Yet religion alone does not—indeed cannot—fully explain the choice of Chandar Bhan for this mission. After all, there were plenty of high-status Hindus at Shah Jahan’s court, any number of whom were Chandar Bhan’s social superiors, and many of whom were themselves Rajputs who would have commanded royal prestige on a par with that of Rana Raj Singh of Mewar. So why did Shah Jahan not send one of them?

The answer, I believe, lies in Chandar Bhan’s particular mix of training, background, and skills. In particular, we must recall that Chandar Bhan was well known as a protégé of the great wazīr Afzal Khan Shirazi, who himself had a great reputation as an expert in the art of diplomacy and moreover had a specific history as mediator between Mewar and the Mughal court. Decades earlier it had been none other than Afzal Khan, still newly arrived in India, who had negotiated the terms of the 1615 truce between Jahangir and Rana Amar Singh. In those days Afzal Khan had been already a part of Shah Jahan’s inner circle, while the latter was still a prince. And it should be noted, too, that in those same 1615 negotiations Afzal Khan had worked in tandem with a Brahman aide named Sundar Das (d. 1623), another close confidant of Prince Khuuram / Shah Jahan who was himself promoted to the lofty title of ray-i rayan at the conclusion of the Mewar affair.53

Surely there would have been a memory of these events at Shah Jahan’s court in later years; thus, when tensions with Mewar flared up again in the 1650s, who better to turn to than one of the most esteemed protégés of the man who had negotiated the terms of the original 1615 truce? As we have seen above, Chandar Bhan had clearly learned to emulate Afzal Khan’s refined habits and demeanor, and one can assume that some lessons in the art of diplomacy—and maybe even the specific history of Mughal-Mewar relations—had also passed to the munshi from his erstwhile mentor. Thus, while Chandar Bhan’s most recent mentor and
the current wazīr Sa'd Allah Khan was sent to handle the military side of the problem by commanding the siege of Chittor, Chandar Bhan himself turned out to be an especially apt choice to handle the diplomatic maneuvering at the rana’s court in Udaipur.

In short, if part of the Mughal wazīr’s job was to function as a kind of “secretary of state,” then here, in Sa'd Allah Khan’s absence, a highly trained and respected munshī like Chandar Bhan could be tapped to serve as a kind of “undersecretary of state”—speaking on the court’s behalf and negotiating directly with a rival power. Just as Chandar Bhan’s colleagues Diyanat Ray and Raja Raghunath had once stepped in to fulfill the wazīr’s duties when political exigencies and administrative necessity had required, here too Shah Jahan was perfectly comfortable having Chandar Bhan serve as his political agent in what was, after all, an extremely delicate matter where war and peace hung in the balance. An expert Mughal munshi, it would seem, had to be not only a secretary, an administrator, an accountant, a poet, and a mystic but also a diplomat.

Moreover, beyond the narrow question of the elite Mughal munshi’s mentalité that lies at the heart of this chapter, we see too in the Mewar affair yet another powerful illustration of an important theme from the previous chapter—namely, the fact that in early modern South Asia a common religious identity did not necessarily translate into automatic political solidarity, just as religious difference did not automatically produce social and political antipathy. At no point during the entire sequence of events in 1654 did Chandar Bhan’s loyalty to the Mughal cause waver, something we would surely have expected if Shah Jahan had been even half as sectarian and “orthodox” as he has been made out to be in modern historiography. Clearly, the munshi’s commitment to Shah Jahan’s sovereignty transcended any affinity he may have had toward Rana Raj Singh simply because they both happened to be Hindus.

But this observation only raises yet another set of questions that we have yet to address. What did someone like Chandar Bhan actually think of Shah Jahan’s legitimacy as a ruler, and of Mughal sovereignty in general? It is to these questions that we turn in the next chapter.