In the previous chapters, I have from time to time called attention to the first-person perspective that our seventeenth-century Mughal informant, munshi Chandar Bhan Brahman, cultivates in his magnum opus, “The Four Gardens” (Chahār Chaman). As I have tried to suggest, for all its fragmentary nature, Chahār Chaman is quite consciously constructed as a memoir of the secretary’s own personal experiences in the wider panoply of Mughal courtly and cultural life. In this chapter, we will examine this feature of the text in its most explicit form, namely, the third and fourth “gardens” (chamans), in which Chandar Bhan gives us a brief autobiography and supplements it with a selection of his personal letters and philosophical speculations.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A WELL-KNOWN MUNSHI

Chandar Bhan begins the third chaman, as he does the earlier two, with a brief introductory note. The heading explains that this “garden” of the text “is composed of an orchard of colorful trees bearing sweet fruit [ashjār-i rangīn wa aṣmār-i shīrīn]; that is, a narration [īzhār] of various stages in the author’s life, illustrated by certain events and sample writings.” As we will see, the events (wāqi‘āt) in question are mainly the highlights of Chandar Bhan’s professional career, but he does give some very intriguing details about his family as well. The “sample writings” (niwishtajāt), meanwhile, consist mainly of a series of his personal letters, arranged in categories according to the recipient’s status and relationship to our munshi. The last batch of these, most of which are to his brothers, are extremely concise and informal, many of them just a handful of lines, often dealing with
themes of a mystical nature. This running mystical “conversation” with Chandar Bhan’s brothers will, in turn, serve as the perfect transition to the fourth and final chaman, which is almost entirely composed of brief notes and miniessays on a range of philosophical and mystical themes.

Chandar Bhan is clearly conscious, in other words, of a kind of convergence between the twin vectors of autobiographical and epistolary self-fashioning, placing his life story and his personal letters in direct physical proximity within the text. He is also quite explicit about the fact that this dual self-presentation is intended for public consumption, directly addressing his “discerning” (mushkil-pasand) readers in characteristically florid prose:

Even as the ambience and fragrance of the second of Brahman’s Four Gardens is yet fresh [tāza] with the perfume of his musk-diffusing pen and the jewels scattered by his flowing soul, the keeper of the garden of creative literary temperament has already planted a Third Garden of colorful trees, all bearing sweet fruit.

I am hopeful that it will be acceptable in the eyes of those who have discerning taste, and agreeable to those who delight in delectable literature. (CC, 145)

At this point, he begins the most explicitly autobiographical portion of Chahār Chaman, under the heading: “Some Brief Particulars about the Author of This Ornate Text.” We have already discussed some of these basic details of Chandar Bhan’s biography above, in chapters 1 and 2, but let us review them here and look a bit more closely at the specific language Chandar Bhan uses to narrate his life.

“This broken-hearted and rightly faithful Chandar Bhan Brahman, the brokenness of whose heart is the very foundation of his upright character,” he tells us, “is a Brahman born of the country [mulk] of Punjab” (CC, 145). Right away, then, Chandar Bhan not only tells us where he was born but also gives us some insight into his existential outlook. But what, exactly, is he telling us?

One thing to note at the outset is that he does not mean “broken-hearted” (shikasta-khāṭir) here merely in the modern romantic sense of one who has suffered in love. That sort of worldly distress and affliction is certainly captured by the literal sense of the term shikasta-khāṭir, and the image of the thwarted lover suffering from a “broken heart” (khāṭir-i shikasta, or also commonly dil-i shikasta) was of course a common enough trope in the romantic Indo-Persian poetry of Chandar Bhan’s day, not to mention the Bollywood songs of our own. But in classical Indo-Persian poetry, of course, the depiction of the suffering undergone by those who are unsuccessful in physical worldly love has also almost always been susceptible to a more spiritual and metaphysical reading, wherein the romantic lover (āshiq) pining for his unattainable beloved (ma’šūq) is merely a metaphor (majāž) for the human being’s existential angst and yearning for connection with an aloof divinity. Sufis and Indo-Persian poets alike tended to consider the latter
to be “true love” (‘ishq-i ḥaqīqī), as opposed to the “metaphorical love” (‘ishq-i majāzī) experienced by human beings in their physical existence—which was thought to be nothing but a pale imitation, transient and ephemeral, of the real Love that was cosmic, eternal, and divine.

Chandar Bhan’s “broken-heartedness,” in other words, had little to do with mere lovesickness. It was, rather, an existential or even a spiritual condition. Hence the fact that it goes hand in hand with what he calls “proper faith” (durust i’tiqād). We should hasten to add, however, that this was not an endorsement of total renunciation, for as we have seen Chandar Bhan remained a man of the world, immersed in the politics and affairs of the day. Rather, he is talking here about what he will later repeatedly describe as a kind of “detachedness” (bī-ta’alluqī)—what in Sanskrit would be referred to as vairāgya, or “dispassion”—even in the thick of worldly affairs, and even surrounded by the power and lavish material wealth on display in the Mughal court. Such an attitude was a check on greed, breeding spiritual humility even in those who achieved great worldly power, success, and influence. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 2, it was exactly this quality of mystical civility that Chandar Bhan admired in those whom he considered to be the great wazirs of the day, such as Afzal Khan Shirazi and Sa’d Allah Khan. And here he reiterates that such “broken-hearted”—that is, dispassionate—detachment was the key to his own ethical sensibility, being the “foundation of my upright character” (bā’is-i durustī-yi hāl-i khwud).

I dwell on these opening lines at such length because they signal the degree to which Chandar Bhan appears in these pages to have been attempting to craft a vision of the ethical Mughal subject that was, as it were, community neutral—one that could draw on the spiritual and mystical idioms of both Hinduism and Islam but without ever being tied explicitly to one or the other, and thus, by the same token, one that could be equally comfortable in either. The trope of being existentially “broken-hearted” may well have had roots in a Sufi or Indo-Persian literary idiom, but the term itself, and the condition it described, was not “Islamic” as such but rather human and universal. In fact, especially in the Indian context it is hard not to see an echo of the Bhagavad Gītā’s message of “action without regard for personal desire” (niskāma karma) in Chandar Bhan’s own notion of worldly “detachment” (bī-ta’alluqī).

Similarly, even when Chandar Bhan describes himself as a man of “proper faith” (durust i’tiqād), he never clarifies: Faith in what? Faith in whom? It could be a certain divinity, or it could even mean dedication and loyalty to his patron, and in turn the emperor and empire. But the fact that he does not feel obligated to specify is telling in and of itself and appears to have been intentional—as if to say to the reader, “Whether you are a Muslim or a Hindu like me, spiritual devotion is an important component of an ethical life, a life of humility and good character.” It is a way of speaking about shared values across community lines without...
necessarily trying to flatten the differences—a way of harmonizing, but respecting and even preserving difference.

Indeed, despite his immersion in the Persianate literary and political idiom and his affinities for some of the spiritual lessons of Sufism, Chandar Bhan remained adamant throughout his oeuvre that he was a practicing Hindu, expressing consistent pride in his status as a Brahman. Thus he continues, “I have earned distinction and admiration among the cream of the Brahmans, the people of sacred thread” (CC, 145). But as we noted above in chapter 1, his vision of caste may surprise some modern readers, especially those who assume that “traditional” caste identities were always fixed and immutable, or who have an image of Brahmanism as being solely about ritual purity and the protection of status. On the contrary, he clarifies immediately that not all Brahmans are priests or ritual specialists by trade; many, like him, “earn their livelihood through various worldly professions” (CC, 145).

This participation of Brahmans in worldly pursuits is commonly accepted today, of course, as part of the practical reality of living in the modern, globalized, capitalist world. But for some reason people have a harder time believing that the same might have been true in seventeenth-century South Asia; and yet, at least as far as Chandar Bhan was concerned, it was a perfectly ordinary phenomenon.

This does not mean, of course, that Chandar Bhan believed there was nothing distinctive about Brahmans as a community. Significantly, though, he frames their prestige as being the result of their cultivation of certain generalized ethical and intellectual values, rather than any narrow obsessions with social hierarchy or ritual purity. Thus he tells us that despite the worldliness of some Brahmans, “Nevertheless, the greatest characteristic of this class [ṭā’ifa] is that they have retained the ability to discern visible and hidden meanings [pās-i marātib-i ṣuwarī wa ma’nuwā dāshta] and continue to live in conformity with the ways prescribed for their community in reliable ancient books [ba wajhī ki dar kutub-i mu’tabari qadim dar bāra-yi īn gurū ṣabt shuda ‘amal numāyand], and make a habit of fashioning their outer and inner selves in a manner detached from their worldly commitments [ārāstagi-yi zāhir wa bāṭin rā ‘unwān-i jarīda-yi a’māl-i khwesh sāzand]” (CC, 145).

In light of such comments one could, perhaps, plausibly argue that this was all just Chandar Bhan’s way of trying to rationalize his own family’s worldliness and that it can hardly be taken as representative of the state of caste relations in early modern India. Fair enough. But if nothing else Chandar Bhan was speaking for a growing population of early modern Hindus who were experiencing new possibilities of social and financial mobility under the protective umbrella of Mughal pluralism. Some of them, like Chandar Bhan’s family, had learned Persian and were working as bureaucrats and administrative officials in the imperial state apparatus—but certainly not all. The issue of such communities working for the state, when analyzed in modern scholarship, has often been framed solely
as a question of religious difference, for instance, their need to justify working for the “Muslim” state of the Mughals. But, especially for Brahmans, the issue would also have been one of whether some in the community could or should work at all, in any worldly profession. Many who took on commercial trades in the bustling and increasingly globalized early modern Indian economy would have faced the same questions, ritually speaking. So too with those of the subsequent century who began working for the East India Company. In other words, these were not questions unique to the “secretarial castes” who worked for the Mughals; they were shared and contested among many upper-caste and upwardly mobile communities across early modern South Asia.

We should caution too that any generalizations about “caste in India” are always at risk of overstating the case, in the seventeenth century no less than today. For one thing, generally speaking, whether in theory or in practice, the very phenomenon of the premodern caste “system” has always been far more complex than most modern commentary allows. For another, attitudes about caste and other forms of social status varied immensely from region to region. Thus in this case Chandar Bhan’s observations may have been tied to a particularly Punjabi, or Mughal North Indian viewpoint that would have found little traction in, say, Maharashtra or Bengal. More research on such questions is definitely needed, but recent scholarship on caste relations among service elites in early modern Maharashtra by scholars like Rosalind O’Hanlon, Christopher Minkowski, and Sumit Guha, and work on some of Chandar Bhan’s scribal counterparts in Bengal by Kumkum Chatterjee, suggest that there were significant regional variations in how the identities of Brahmans and other scribal communities like kāyasthas and khattrīs were fashioned—and in some cases reconfigured—during this period.3

In point of fact, Chandar Bhan himself was quite aware that there was something relatively “new”—modern, even—about his own family’s place in Indian society and that it was specifically their literacy and expertise in the domain of the secretarial arts that made it possible for them to take advantage of the possibilities afforded by the Mughal cultural and political world to move beyond a more “traditional” Brahmanical role. After mentioning that he was born in Lahore, he makes a point of telling us that “the ancestors of this rightly faithful Brahman remained engaged in our ancient ways” (ba ḥarz-i qadīm-i kḥwud ‘amal minumâyand) until his father Dharam Das’s generation (CC, 145–46). This was sometime toward the end of the sixteenth century, as we discussed above in chapter 1, and we may recall here that Chandar Bhan goes on to explain that his father was “an accomplished scribe” (nawisanda-yi kārdānī), a skill through which he was able to enter the Mughal administrative service as an officially recognized “rank-holder” (mansābdār).

After a successful career as a low-level Mughal bureaucrat, Dharam Das “retired to a quiet corner” (CC, 146). Meanwhile, Dharam Das’s path was followed not only by Chandar Bhan but also by at least one of his two brothers. We may
remember from the discussion in chapter 1 that his brother Ray Bhan was apparently a yogi or sadhu of some sort, and about him Chandar Bhan says here only that he had “a passion for self-liberation” and that he had “developed an antipathy toward all earthly attachments” (CC, 146). But his other brother, Uday Bhan, did establish a career as a skilled munshi in his own right and served in the office of ‘Aqil Khan, a Mughal official who was also, incidentally, the nephew and foster son of Chandar Bhan’s own early patron, the powerful minister Afzal Khan Shirazi. Uday Bhan appears to have had a very close relationship with ‘Aqil Khan, for after the latter’s death, Chandar Bhan tells us, Uday Bhan was so emotionally devastated that he withdrew entirely from social life, joining their brother Ray Bhan as some sort of renunciant and becoming “a complete stranger to the ways of worldly people” (CC, 146).

Chandar Bhan will revisit his relationship with his brothers a bit later in the text, in a series of letters, but at this point he returns to the account of his own career trajectory. It is here that he tells us about his early relationship with the architect ‘Abd al-Karim Ma’mur Khan, whom he credits with launching his career as a munshi and setting a fine example as a man of erudition and principle. After this he gives us the most detailed account anywhere of “how I entered the most gracious service of that great intellectual of the age and the world, an Aristotle in stature, the pinnacle of the state, the wise scholar Afzal Khan” (CC, 146). Chandar Bhan frames this crucial turning point in his life as the result of a combination of good fortune, Afzal Khan’s keen appreciation for talent, and the munshi’s own ability to make the most of the opportunity once it presented itself:

When the Divine Creator casts a look of grace upon someone it elicits the attention of visionary men, thus delivering one to the care of those influential people whose alchemical gaze can transform sand into gold, or copper into a philosopher’s stone. [Thus it so happened that] when this insignificant speck had the honor, through various fortunate circumstances, to enter the service of that great scholar of the age and the world, Afzal Khan, I did so with tremendous eagerness and enthusiasm. Because of his keen ability to recognize talent, he nurtured and supported me with a grace and generosity far greater than this supplicant’s status and abilities merited. Right from the start, he produced a pen from his own pencase and said: “Write with this pen.” After that he demonstrated, saying: “These are the proper writing techniques.” Little by little, because of my great constancy of faith [rusūk-i ‘aqīdat], purity of intention [ṣafā-yi tawīyat], upright morals [durustī-yi aẖlāq], utter sincerity [rāstī-yi mahz], and lasting service [dawām-i kẖidmat], our professional relationship reached a level of trusting intimacy [mahramiyat]. (CC, 146)

Chandar Bhan clearly had great admiration for Afzal Khan, and it is here that he mentions some of the details of their relationship that we discussed in chapter 2 above: the khan’s kindness and generosity; the fairness of his managerial style; the special interest that he took in promoting Chandar Bhan’s career; his personal
introduction of the munshi to Emperor Shah Jahan; and his gift of an elephant, so that Chandar Bhan “could always travel alongside that illustrious khan in his personal company” (CC, 147)—as he once did, for instance, while accompanying Afzal Khan on some imperial business in Daulatabad. The two also appear to have shared a similar work ethic, about which Chandar Bhan proudly boasts: “From the break of dawn right up until midnight I had my place among the attendants at his public and private assemblies, and the drafting of his beneficent orders was especially entrusted to my expertise in the shikasta script” (CC, 147).

Here Chandar Bhan reminds us yet again that the literary facets of his persona were critical to his career success, as a shared appreciation for good poetry formed an important part of his comfortable relationship with the wazir. Thus he continues, “On many occasions [Afzal Khan] requested that the poems of this lowly author be conveyed to his forgiving ear, among which this couplet [of mine] was particularly dear to his heart: ‘With the heart’s eye I catch a glimpse of the witness to true Meaning / The veil is [actually] a looking glass for the man of real vision’ [naẓar ba shāhīd-i ma’ni ba chashm-i dil dāram / hijāb ‘ainak-i chashm ast mard-i bīnā rā].” In other words, to gain true mystical insight one must use “the heart’s eye” (chashm-i dil), rather than ordinary physical perception (which is inevitably flawed). Thus the veil (hijāb), by occluding one’s mundane faculty of sight, actually heightens one’s access to esoteric Truth by forcing one to focus inward and thus serves, paradoxically, almost as a magnifying glass (‘ainak) for one who has real “vision” (bīnā).

It is hard not to see an echo here of Afzal Khan’s similar response to the gift of a “glass” (‘ainak) from a port official in Surat, which we discussed above in chapter 2. Perhaps Chandar Bhan had that encounter in mind when he composed this verse, and that’s what made it resonate so powerfully with his employer? Then again, it’s equally possible that the reverse is true: that Afzal Khan, presented with an ‘ainak in real life, had occasion to recall his own munshi’s powerful verse, and this sent him into a spell of philosophical musing. We can probably never know for sure one way or the other. Still, one can see just how powerfully interwoven the literary, mystical, and professional personae of these Mughal administrators actually were in their day-to-day interactions—not to mention here, specifically, in Chandar Bhan’s crafting of his public persona. One can also see, moreover, why Chandar Bhan played such an active role in Afzal Khan’s salon “whenever the conversation turned to spiritual matters or intellectual discussions.” On such occasions, he tells us, “This meager speck had his designated corner among the assembled learned men, literati, and other intellectuals gathered in the majlis, and I noted down with the nib of my pen whatever crossed anyone’s tongue” (CC, 147).

We saw above in chapter 2 the extent to which Chandar Bhan viewed such mystical civility, as I call it, as a crucial feature of Mughal political culture generally,
and here we see how important it was to the cultivation of his own public persona as a successful, upwardly mobile bureaucrat and **munshi**. Just as he learned to emulate Afzal Khan’s admirable qualities as a gentleman and administrator and thus improved his own lot in life, so too can his readers, he seems to be telling them, if they will cultivate those same qualities. He goes on to praise Afzal Khan’s “innate talents and perfections” (*fazā’il wa kamālāt-i zātī*), to go along with his “acquired capabilities” (*khūbi-hā-yi irişfātī*) and mastery over both “applied and creative arts” (*funūn-i kasbi wa wahbi*). He was a man who “could display the universe of [hidden] meaning in visible garb”; but perhaps even more importantly, “though immersed in the world of multiplicity, he remained focused on the vision of Unity.”

In support of this observation, Chandar Bhan remarks that the following verse quatrain (*rubā‘ī*) “was often on the tip of that khan of sweet expression’s tongue.”

> [tā dost ba chasm-i sar nabīnam har dam
> az pāy-i ṭalab namīnishinam har dam
> guyand ki ḥaqq ba chasm-i sar natuwān did
> ān insān nai wa man chashm-am har dam]
> (CC, 147–48)

Remember, Afzal Khan was not some Sufi hermit in a cave, but the chief minister and an elite military commander of one of the most powerful empires on earth. Yet to one who knew him well the most impressive thing about him was the tone of gentility, civility, and spiritual humility that he consistently struck and that those around him clearly admired and strove to emulate.

We get further indication of just how widely admired Afzal Khan was in Mughal court society from Chandar Bhan’s account of his illness and death in 1639, which also represented a crucial turning point in our **munshi**’s own life journey. Losing his primary mentor and benefactor was a devastating blow for Chandar Bhan, of course, but from the way he describes it the death of such an accomplished and well-respected minister was also a cause for grieving among many in the wider Mughal aristocracy, including Emperor Shah Jahan himself. We don’t often hear much about basic human emotions like friendship, loss, and grief in modern scholarship about the Mughal court, so Chandar Bhan’s reflections on these final weeks of Afzal Khan’s life—as the khan “was making his way from this ephemeral abode [dār-i fānī] and turning his attention to the eternal world [*‘ālam-i jāwidānī*]” (CC, 148)—are especially noteworthy and offer a brief yet powerful glimpse of the inner lives and personal relationships cultivated by the Mughal political elite.
Chandar Bhan begins this passage by telling us that in those final weeks and days Afzal Khan “often spoke eloquently of the fickleness of fate [bī-ṣabāṭī-yi rozgār]” and in his final breaths recited these two couplets:

If Death himself shows up, tell him “Come hither!”
So that I can embrace him tightly, so tightly;
From him I will receive a soul eternal,
And from me he will get only this cloak patched brightly, so brightly

[gar ajal mard ast gū pesh-i man ā‘ī
tā dar āghosh-ash bagiram tang tang
man az ū jānī sitānām jāwidān
ū zi man dalqī bagirad rang rang]
(CC, 148)

The “patched garment” (dalq) here refers to the typical cloak of a Sufi darwesh, which often had a colorful appearance on account of being stitched together from multiple scraps of cloth. Thus the message of the two couplets is that Afzal Khan views all his worldly status and finery as nothing but the humble garb of a mendicant, and moreover, that when the appointed hour of his death comes he will happily give up even that in order to join with the cosmic soul—again, a stirring sentiment coming from one of the most powerful men in South Asia.

But perhaps even more compelling is Chandar Bhan’s narration of the reaction of others to Afzal Khan’s illness and death. As his condition worsened, Afzal Khan received personal visits not only from the emperor but also from “many elite nobles of the eternal empire.” In fact, according to Chandar Bhan, at some point the emperor himself took personal charge of overseeing the palliative care of his friend and confidant:

Whatever was necessary to tend to his convalescing servant, he arranged to have it produced [ba manāṣṣa zuḥūr āwurdand]. And when His Majesty the caliph of the age, out of an abundance of affection and respect, laid his blessed hand across the hand of that scholar of the world and asked after the latter’s condition, the gentle khan was unable to muster the words, but, recalling their longtime connection and bond of service, expressed his thanks for His Highness’s generosity, and then suddenly lost control of his emotions and began to weep.

Upon seeing this, the affectionate and considerate emperor used his inspired tongue to speak many words of encouragement for the improvement of that illustrious khan’s condition. (CC, 148)

Of course, even if the “King of the World” himself is in charge of your medical care, time catches up with everyone—a sentiment that Chandar Bhan proceeds to express with quite a flourish: “But, because it is a peculiar feature of the wine of destiny that ultimately it inebriates those who imbibe at the tavern
of existence with the empty gulp of nonexistence at the bottom of the cup, and hurls the rock of fragmentation against the glass of desire, that wise man of the world abandoned the trappings of existence in this decentered world and became a sojourner bound for the path to eternal sanctity” (CC, 148). Again, however, when it came to the evaluation of what made Afzal Khan so great in the eyes of his contemporaries—the emperor included—it had far more to do with his humanity and civility than with his military might or political influence, at least in Chandar Bhan’s assessment: “Since he had lived a well-fashioned life, indeed in every way, the emperor of the world and its inhabitants, recalling the laudable ethics, habits, and manners [ḥusn-i akhlāq wa auzā’ wa atwār] of that scholar of the age, who had spent nearly a decade as the standard bearer for governance and administration [imārat-o-wizārat] in the land of Hindustan, earning fame for his kindness, wisdom, and good character, made known to the entire world the special esteem in which he had held his knowledgeable wazīr” (CC, 148–49). Accordingly, a royal proclamation bearing the “dreadful news” of Afzal Khan’s death was read throughout the city of Lahore, where Afzal Khan not only had his private residence but had also served for a number of years as the provincial governor. Meanwhile, during his funeral procession, the bier was accompanied by a number of high-profile members of the Mughal nobility, including Wazir Khan, the governor of the Punjab; Mu’tamad Khan, the chief army paymaster (mīr bakhsi); Makramat Khan, the chief of equipment and matériel (mīr sāmān); “and several other notables . . . who conveyed his corpse toward the eternal country, showing their grief in sobs amid the throng of onlookers who remained behind in this transient world” (CC, 149).

For Chandar Bhan, however, what happened after Afzal Khan’s funeral turned out to be perhaps the most pivotal moment in his life. He has alluded to these events in passing a couple of times earlier in Chahār Chaman, but here he recapitulates them once again, filling in some of the missing details. First he offers a brief note on the fate of some of Afzal Khan’s relatives following the wazīr’s demise, beginning with the latter’s brother ‘Abd al-Haqq Shirazi (d. 1644–45), better known by his official title of “Amanat Khan.” According to Chandar Bhan, Amanat Khan was so distraught after his brother’s death that he “retired from service and gave up his mansāb, betaking himself to a secluded corner and becoming a complete renunciant.” Chandar Bhan also reports that Amanat Khan built a “charming hostel” (sarāy-i dilgushāy) one day’s journey from Lahore that became “a notable architectural curiosity” (mauza‘i-yi ihdās), and where Amanat Khan himself was eventually interred (CC, 149).

Meanwhile, Amanat Khan’s own son ‘Aqil Khan, who had also been mentored by Afzal Khan and who had, as we have noted, also been Chandar Bhan’s own brother’s employer, went on to have a very promising military and political career until, as our munshi puts it, “while he was en route to Kabul, still in the prime of
his youth, the tender shoot of his future success was cut down by the fierce winds of doom” (CC, 149). The entire discussion of Chandar Bhan’s patron, mentor, and benefactor Afzal Khan thus ends on a rather melancholy note. Chandar Bhan closes by remarking that “now, apart from his good name there is no one to carry on the memory of the ‘allama’s family line except for ‘Aqil Khan’s brother Faiz Allah” (CC, 149). The latter, though, was apparently some sort of eccentric, or possibly even mentally disturbed. All Chandar Bhan will say about him, somewhat enigmatically, is that “he lives according to his own manner” (ba ṭaur-i khwud zindagi mikunad) (CC, 149).

This discussion of the fate of Afzal Khan’s family was not, however, merely an opportunity for Chandar Bhan to express pathos, for it also explains something about our munshi’s own fortuitous career trajectory. Indeed, under the circumstances, it would not have been out of the ordinary for a service professional like Chandar Bhan to have remained a fixture in Afzal Khan’s household, had there been any member of the wazir’s family able and willing to take over its fortunes. But as Chandar Bhan reminds us, ‘Aqil Khan, the most viable candidate, died young; and no other family member stepped forward to assume Afzal Khan’s role, either as a Mughal mansabdār or even as head of the family estate.

Meanwhile it would certainly have been possible, had things turned out differently, for someone with Chandar Bhan’s skills to attach himself to some other notable family or commercial concern with a base in Lahore, and simply to live out the rest of his days in his native city. But a stroke of good fortune made all that moot, and Afzal Khan’s own nephew ‘Aqil Khan was instrumental in creating the opportunity for Chandar Bhan, as he tells us in the title of the next section of the text, to “enter directly into the most benevolent service of His Highness the Emperor and Shadow of God, the Lord of the Planetary Conjunction” (bayān-i idrāk-i mulāzamat-i sar-ā-sar-i sa’ādat-i bandagān-i a’li-ḥażrat-i khāqānī zill-i subḥānī ṣāhīb-i qirānī) (CC, 149). He explains:

> When Divine favor [‘ināyat-i ilāhi] presents an opportunity to improve one’s circumstances, those moments [in life] become allies until step by step, and moment by moment, one’s ultimate goals are reached.

> After the passing of that kind patron Afzal Khan from this bodily dustbin over to the spiritual world, that most distinguished of amirs ‘Aqil Khan presented all the munshis and others connected with the late khan whose abode is now in heaven in an audience before His Highness the Emperor. Each was honored with a promotion to some new position, in accordance with his status and lot.

> When this faqir’s turn came, a sample of this supplicant’s expertise in the broken [shikasta] script, which is not devoid of correctness, entered into [the emperor’s] alchemical gaze, and a ghazal produced by my humble nature also reached the august and magnificent imperial ear, earning a measure of appreciation and even delighting his discerning taste. (CC, 149–50)
The message is clear: Chandar Bhan got his position at the imperial court not because of any generalized caste or community affiliation, or even solely through his fortuitous connection to Afzal Khan’s household, but through his own individual merit and capabilities. When the opportune moment in his life arrived, he seized it to advance his career, and it was his lifelong industry and cultivation of certain qualities—scribal and literary skills, in particular, but also good character and other gentlemanly values—that had prepared him for this singularly transformative moment. A Horatio Alger character he may not have been, but the idea that in the Mughal world an individual’s talent, character, and work ethic could enable social mobility is certainly there nonetheless.

Once Chandar Bhan was recruited into the emperor’s personal circle, he applied his skills to a variety of tasks. Among these, initially, was the job of wāqi’-nawīs, or personal diarist to the emperor, in which capacity Chandar Bhan kept “the king’s special journal” (bayāz-i khāṣṣa-yi pādshāhī). Accordingly, he explains, “I was expected to report daily to His Royal Highness, for instance while en route to Kashmir or Kabul, on the condition of every stage [manzil] and the features of every noteworthy place along the way, detailing the particulars of the journey, the climate, the hunting areas, and so on, and recording it in the diary” (CC, 150).

Now, our munshī is obviously biased, but it would appear from his account that Shah Jahan took quite a liking to him and was impressed enough with his literacy and erudition that, according to Chandar Bhan, “His Majesty was inspired to dub this faithful Brahman his ‘Hindu expert in Persian’ [hindū-yi fārsī-dān]” (CC, 150). Taken out of context, it may be tempting to read into this comment the idea that Chandar Bhan’s Persian literacy was somehow exceptional among Hindus, but as we have seen throughout this book this was clearly not the case, even in his own family and social circle—and Shah Jahan, with plenty of other Hindus serving in both his military aristocracy and his bureaucratic administration who were also “Persian-knowing” (a more literal translation of “fārsī-dān”), would surely have known this.

So what was it that made Chandar Bhan especially fluent in Persian, according to the emperor? One reason, clearly, was that Chandar Bhan’s erudition in the various classical canons of Indo-Persian literature, history, and mysticism went far beyond what we merely necessary for the average clerk or bureaucrat. Chandar Bhan’s literary talents, in particular, which were notable by any standard, made him stand out in a way that went beyond routine literacy, and in fact, as we have seen above, were precisely what got him a position in Shah Jahan’s service in the first place. And when all was said and done, Chandar Bhan’s artful expression in lyric forms such as the ghazal and rubā‘ī would give him a notable status among some of the greatest, “freshest” poets in a century of great Indo-Persian poets (of any background). Chandar Bhan himself clearly recognized how critical his flair for literary expression was in his own career trajectory, reminding us here once
again that “on festival days and other blessed events, although the verses of many famous poets were presented for His Highness’s luminous gaze, the quatrains of this supplicant also reached the magnificent and grand imperial ear, as a result of which I obtained a number of promotions and rewards” (CC, 150).

At this point, Chandar Bhan moves fairly quickly through the rest of his autobiography and in fact skips over a lot of details that we have learned earlier in Chahār Chaman. He reminds us, for instance, that when Islam Khan Mashhadi was assigned to replace Afzal Khan as grand wazīr in 1639, Shah Jahan, “considering this supplicant to be well trained in the workings of the finance ministry [maṣāliḥ-i kār-i diwān-i a'lā] reassigned me to the office of that greatest of elite khans” (CC, 150). Interestingly, however, in this version of those events Chandar Bhan leaves out almost all the details regarding Islam Khan himself, and the matters pertaining to the latter’s character and stewardship of the finance ministry that featured so prominently in the section on ministerial conduct and ethics earlier in the text. He also leaves out any discussion of figures like his colleague Diyanat Ray, the fellow munshi who had served as interim chief minister during the nearly yearlong interval between Islam Khan’s promotion and actual assumption of his duties as head of the diwānī. Instead, the focus at this stage is primarily on his own role as a munshī and administrator; he explains only that “besides my work in the imperial secretariat [dār al-inshā’], this well-wisher was also entrusted with overseeing the distribution [of funds] and balancing [of accounts] [khidmat-i taqsim wa muwāzana] in coordination with the finance officers throughout the imperial dominions, and working with them suited me well [naqsh-i ṣuhbat durust nishast]” (CC, 150).

The explanation for these curious absences of detail at this stage in the text lies, I think, in certain genre considerations peculiar to Mughal inshā’. In this case Chandar Bhan is intentionally covering the same set of experiences and series of events for a second time, but from an entirely different perspective. The first time, in the parts of the first chaman discussed above in chapter 2, he did so almost as an essay on the norms of governance, from the perspective of an eyewitness to the chain of executives who administered Mughal power during his own tenure in Shah Jahan’s government, written in the didactic form of the subgenre of inshā’ known as “manuals for wazīrs” (dastūr al-wizārat). In that version, though Chandar Bhan himself is always lurking as one of the bit players in the narrative and even pops up explicitly from time to time in moments of first-person awareness, he himself is not the “main character,” as it were. Rather, the focus of the narrative is on the careers of others, especially the wazīrs in charge of the diwānī and their most trusted associates, and on the norms, ideals, and ethics of competent governance that they embody—or in some cases, fail to embody.

Here in the third chaman, however, the perspective is entirely and explicitly autobiographical. Thus the details of the lives of others in the Mughal administration
matter only insofar as they are relevant to the narration of our own 
munshi’s personal career, especially at the key moments in that career. In other words, Islam 
Khan’s promotion to the office of prime minister is relevant to this narrative not as 
a random factoid but as an event that represented a key moment of reshuffling in 
the overall Mughal administrative machinery, one in which Chandar Bhan himself 
was promoted and given added responsibilities that he would retain for the rest of 
his tenure at court.

A similar turning point in our 
munshi’s career occurred, Chandar Bhan con-
tinues, “when that axis of important affairs, the aforementioned [Islam] Khan, 
was reassigned during one of the court’s sojourns in beautiful Kashmir to serve as 
the governor of the Deccan, and the daily administration of imperial affairs was 
handed over to that great role model, the grand 
wazir, the scholar of the age and and the times, Sa’d Allah Khan” (CC, 150). This reshuffling of the political and admin-
istrative hierarchy happened in July 1645, as we may remember from the discus-
sion in chapter 2, at which point “His Majesty the Caliph of the Age and Emperor 
of the World, out of his affection and high regard for me, assigned this insignifi-
cant speck to assist that illustrious khan” (CC, 150). Sa’d Allah Khan would serve 
as prime minister for over a decade, until his death in 1656, and as far as we can 
discern Chandar Bhan served directly under him for virtually that entire period. 
This decade represented in many ways the acme of our 
munshi’s career, as he “enjoyed the best of times working on the imperial business in the company of that khan of great stature” (CC, 150), and the two appear, at least from Chandar 
Bhan’s perspective, to have enjoyed a tremendously close relationship. “Often,” 
he explains, “we carried on as if of one mind, from early morning until evening, 
and from evening right up until the next morning” (CC, 150–51). It was also while 
working in Sa’d Allah Khan’s office that Chandar Bhan got his most extensive 
firsthand military experience—or at least, proximity to the action—reminding us 
here that “when that most elite khan of high status was dispatched to see to the 
critical imperial agenda in Balkh, this lowest of servants, per His Highness’s or-
ders, was sent to accompany that magnificent pillar of state so that I might draft 
the necessary letters and progress reports from the front” (CC, 151).

Chandar Bhan closes the explicitly autobiographical section of the text with 
Sa’d Allah Khan’s death in April 1656. But again, whereas in the first 
chaman 
our 
munshi had provided a number of details regarding the circumstances of the 
wazir’s demise, the period of mourning it ushered in for the entire court, the af-
fec tion and grief displayed by the emperor himself during that time, and the re-
shuffling of the administrative hierarchy that resulted, all from the third-person 
perspective of a participant-observer, here Chandar Bhan mentions it only in 
passing, and mainly from the perspective of what it meant for him personally. 
“When that illustrious khan passed on from this world,” he tells us, “His Majesty 
the Emperor, who was a keen evaluator of talent with respect to every trade and
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every class of people [har ṭāʿifā], bestowed on this faithful and rightly loyal serv-
vant, who had spent years perfecting my craft in the service of the most illustrious wazīrs, a promotion to the title of rāy.” “By entrusting me with the task of draft-
ing the imperial farmāns acknowledged and obeyed by the entire world,” he adds
by way of closing, “[the emperor] gave me one of the most distinct honors in the world” (CC, 151).

From our present-day vantage point, it can admittedly be a bit frustrating that
Chandar Bhan ends his autobiography here, of all places, for we know in hind-
sight that there is much more to the story. Indeed, the ensuing years were a pe-
riod of intense volatility at the court, not only because of high turnover in the
dīwānī, to which Chandar Bhan was still ostensibly assigned, but also because of
the looming succession crisis instigated by reports of Shah Jahan’s own ill health
beginning just a year later, in September–October 1657. Chandar Bhan’s narrative
of his career trails off just on the eve of some of the most momentous—and many
would argue, calamitous—events in the entire Mughal era. One wonders in vain
what he really thought of all that went on over the next few years, a period when,
let us remember, he continued working in the Mughal administration and would
have had an excellent vantage point from which to observe the war of succession
and its aftermath.

But perhaps the simplest, and most likely, explanation for why Chandar Bhan
did not feel it necessary to include the tumultuous events of these years is simply
that Chahār Chaman is not that kind of book. Historical events, as such, do not
drive the narrative. Even in the one section late in the first chaman that deals
largely with military and political events, Chandar Bhan glosses over many details,
preferring to stick instead to questions specific to the secretarial domain. So we
should not be entirely surprised that he is not much interested in recording them
here. Moreover, as we have just seen, even in the most explicitly autobiographical
part of Chahār Chaman our munshī tends to focus largely on transformative mo-
ments and relationships in his career, rather than on a narration of his entire life
story. Since there was no real qualitative change in his position in the years follow-
ing Sa’d Allah Khan’s death, so far as we know, even after Aurangzeb acceded the
throne, perhaps he simply didn’t see the need to dwell on the details. Moreover,
if our munshī had any inkling that he was a living witness to the beginning of the
end for Mughal imperial success, he certainly doesn’t give any indication of it.
Maybe, just maybe, he did not see the transition to Aurangzeb’s rule as the kind of
civilizational calamity it has later come to represent.

Chandar Bhan also, unfortunately, tells us virtually nothing about his family
and domestic life. We get no details of his wedding, nor that of any of his chil-
dren. We do not even know, for that matter, if he had any children other than his
son Tej Bhan, or whether any of them were daughters. We learn about Chandar
Bhan’s father’s death, but only because it is mentioned in one of the collected let-
ters discussed below—Chandar Bhan did not see even this milestone as suitable or necessary content for his “autobiography.”

Straightforward autobiography, however, is only one possible form of self-fashioning. Indeed, much scholarship on the intellectual history of the early modern world has focused on the degree to which epistolography and other forms of informal “life writing” were crucial to the construction of private individual self-consciousness. To catch a glimpse of what that process might have looked like from an Indo-Persian perspective, we move now to Chandar Bhan’s personal letters, and his construction of an epistolary self.

**LETTER WRITING AND SOCIAL INTIMACY**

Before we examine the letters that conclude the autobiographical section of *Chahār Chaman* a bit more closely, however, perhaps a brief preliminary excursion about Chandar Bhan’s epistolary oeuvre, his correspondents, and his letter-writing style is in order. There are three main sources for Chandar Bhan’s letters. The most extensive collection is usually referred to in most manuscripts as *Munsha’āt-i Brahman*, the title under which a printed text edited by S. H. Qasemi and W. H. Siddiqi was published in 2005. The exact contents of some of the manuscripts of this text vary somewhat, and some of them have different titles (e.g., *Ruq’āt-i Brahman*, *Inshā’-yi Brahman*), but there is enough consistency that we can be confident that Chandar Bhan himself purposefully selected the letters for inclusion in at least one collection produced in his lifetime. We know, moreover, that he collected these letters after he had already compiled his two other major works, *Chahār Chaman* and his *diwān* of poetry, for he mentions both of these latter works (along with a handful of others, most of which are now lost) in a preface to the *Munsha’āt*. There he goes on to explain:

> From the time that this supplicant first took up a pen in my hand I had written such a variety of letters [ruq’āt] on just about every topic, especially on happy matters, that I knew that if the opportunity arose they could be arranged in a separate volume.

> Now I have finally given the nib of my pen permission to write some of them out and have named the collection *Munsha’āt-i Brahman*, which contains copies of reports [‘arāʾīz] dispatched to the celestial court, as well as letters and epistles [raqāʾim wa ḥuṭūt] written out with my broken pen [qalam-i shikasta] and sent to notable wazīrs, great men of the age, and other friends and literati. (*MB*, 1)

The collection is far too long for us to examine in any detail here, but let us note a few features before returning to the parallel set of letters included in *Chahār Chaman*.

Like many such collections from this period, the letters in Chandar Bhan’s *Munsha’āt* are organized into sections according to the recipient’s social status
and relationship to the author. Thus Part One (qism-i awwal) contains only letters to recipients of the highest status possible, the royal family. There are four letters to “His Majesty the Emperor” (ba janāb-i hażrat khāqān), that is, Shah Jahan, in which Chandar Bhan reports on his diplomatic mission to Mewar in 1654 (discussed above at the end of chapter 2) (MB, 2–11). These are followed by another three letters to Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir, all of them penned sometime after the latter became emperor in 1658.

Part Two (qism-i sānī) contains letters written to “great and elite nobles of the age” (‘umda wa zubda-yi amīrān-i rozgār), including many that we have encountered already in this book, as well as a number of others that we have not (MB, 14–53). This section also includes a handful of letters to notable Sufi mystics of the time, and the names on this list are a powerful reminder of just how wide Chandar Bhan’s circle of friends and acquaintances in the Mughal nobility actually was.

These letters also further demonstrate the remarkably rich literary life of even the most aristocratic nobles and hardened warriors of the Mughal military and political elite, as we noted above in chapter 1. In the printed edition of the Munsha‘āt, there are forty-four letters in this section; and of those some twenty-six—more than half—include our munshī’s own poetry, usually short lyrical odes (ghazals) or quatrains (rubā‘is), either appended as a simple courtesy or in many cases newly composed with a specific request for suggested improvements. Poetry was also routinely used in such letters simply to provide a literary flourish to otherwise mundane correspondence. A good example is the following letter to Islam Khan Mashhadi, which, we may infer from the contents, was perhaps written sometime in early 1639, after Islam Khan had been named prime minister and had been ordered to return to court from Bengal, where he had been serving as the provincial governor, but had yet to arrive (MB, 31). The letter clearly suggests that the two had been acquainted for some time, long before Islam Khan was appointed wazīr and our munshī began working as his direct subordinate:

To the Pillar of Pillars of the Exalted State, the Expert of All Things Superficial and Esoteric, Islam Khan:

How can the eyes of the lover lined with eyeblack be bright?  
Come, for only your arrival can light up my eye.  
The dust of your lane works as pearly collyrium for my sight,  
And through that ointment benighted eyes will be set alight.

[zi surma dida-yi ‘āshiq kujā shawad raushan  
biyā ki zāmadan-at chashm-i mā shawad raushan  
ghubār-i kū-yi tu kuhl al-jawāhir-i bāṣr ast  
ki chashm-i tīra ba ān tūtiyā shawad raushan]

Greetings, My Dear Nawab, the Gracious Connoisseur! It has been ages since this faqīr has served as a disciple to you, the true master [ustād-i ḥaqīqī]. Although in
that time I have been deprived of the special alchemical grace of your company
[az sa‘ādat-i suhbat-i kimiyā-khāṣṣiyat mahrum būd], nevertheless I have never let
go of the precious tie of fidelity that connects us. And now that the wonderful news
of your impending arrival has reached this hermit’s ear, my afflicted heart has spon-
taneously burst with joy. Quatrain:

The pleasure of nightly wine I know,
The tales of romance I know,
Though my hands and feet are paralyzed,
  my heart starts to dance,
For the pulsing of this melody, too, I know.

[mā zaauq-i mai-yi shabāna rā midānim
afsāna-yi ʿāshiqāna rā midānim
bi-jumbish-i dast-o-pā ba raqs āyad dīl
mā shorish-i in tarāna rā midānim]

Here the new wazīr, one of the most powerful and august personalities in the
entire Mughal aristocracy, is cast in the conventional role of the cruel romantic
beloved familiar to connoisseurs of Indo-Persian literature, while Chandar Bhan
assumes the guise of the tormented lover pining for a glimpse of her (or some-
times, as in this case, him). The verses function not just as a light touch or a liter-
ary flourish but also as a means of flattening the otherwise pronounced difference
in the two men’s social and political status, providing the correspondents with
an idiom of friendship and epistolary intimacy that could transcend the osten-
sibly wide gulf separating their respective places in the overall social order. The
personal letter was, in other words, a space in which the notoriously rigorous for-
malism of dress, gesture, and hierarchy of Mughal courtly life under Shah Jahan
could melt away, replaced by amiable bursts of literary wit and fond individual
sentiment.

We should note, too, the relative brevity and familiarity of the letter’s opening
salutation. Indeed, the conventional image of Mughal epistolary inshā’ is exactly
the opposite, namely that it is encrusted with fussy ornament, unwilling and un-
able to get to the point. It has even been argued, perhaps most notably by the late
nineteenth-century Urdu writer and critic Altaf Husain Hali (1837–1914), that one
of the key features that distinguished modern Indo-Persian letter-writing prac-
tices from their more “artificial” courtly antecedents was the dropping of long-
winded salutations (alqāb-o-ādāb), which were said by modern reform-minded
critics to be dripping with sycophantic courtesy but ultimately devoid of content.
Perhaps nowhere did Hali make this argument more explicitly than in Yādgār-i
Ghālib (A memoir of Ghalib; 1897), his biography of the celebrated nineteenth-
century poet Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1869), who, he argued, was
perhaps the first modern epistolographer in Indo-Persian letters—precisely on
the grounds that Ghalib had boldly renounced such unnecessary verbosity and often began his letters with brief salutations of just a few words. Hali also singled out Ghalib’s conversational prose style as being new and inimitable, it should be noted. But the main structural innovation he credited the poet with was his abandonment of extended epistolary salutations: “Mirza [Ghalib’s] Urdu epistolary style was in reality utterly unique. Neither has anyone written letters in this style before Ghalib, nor will anyone after him ever be able to fully emulate his style. He completely abandoned the old and decrepit manner of address [alqāb-o-ādāb kā purāna aur farsūda ṭariqa], as well as many stylistic features that epistolographers had considered essential to letter writing, but which, in truth, were useless and beside the point [fuzūl aur dūr az kā].” This critical stance has been so influential among Urdu literary critics that it remains almost universally accepted, as does the presumption that the entire earlier Indo-Persian letter-writing style was weighed down by excessive, fatuous, and insincere formality—a blanket assertion that is usually taken simply on faith, without any attempt at critical investigation. Indeed, barely two years ago the Pakistani newspaper Dawn ran an essay commemorating Ghalib’s death anniversary (February 15), in which the author does little more than restate Hali’s claims from over a century ago: “Before Ghalib, in the subcontinent letters were normally written in Persian. Letters occasionally written in Urdu were laden with highly ornamental language and long and tortuous salutations and formalities. . . . But Ghalib entirely changed the way letters were written. Aside from being in Urdu, Ghalib’s letters are spontaneous, candid, and in a language that is chaste and literary. He bade farewell to the formal style of letter writing that was in vogue in those days and began writing letters quite an informal way.”

And yet here we have Chandar Bhan doing exactly that, nearly two centuries earlier, in a great many of his own letters, even those addressed to eminent Mughal officials and other clear social superiors. For instance the very next letter after the one just cited, also to Islam Khan, begins simply: “Greetings, true teacher!” (ustād-i ḥaqīqī salāmat) (MB, 31–32). A letter to Sā’d Allah Khan later in the collection begins in similar fashion: “Greetings, O Scholar of Aristotelian Genius!” (‘allāma-yi arīṣṭo-fiṭrat salāmat) (MB, 41–42). To be sure, many of Chandar Bhan’s letters do begin a bit more formally than this, particularly those addressed to the emperor and others who commanded great respect. But there are dozens of examples of more conversational openings in Munsha’āt-i Brahman alone, and the letters become increasingly informal and to-the-point as one gets into the later sections, especially the letters to Chandar Bhan’s brothers—some of which abandon the opening salutation altogether.

What, then, are we to make of Hali’s suggestion that a core feature of modernist epistolary authenticity is the absence of stilted and verbose opening greetings? Clearly, as Chandar Bhan’s letters demonstrate, Ghalib was not the first
Indo-Persian epistolographer to use such relatively informal salutations. Perhaps, we might be tempted to muse, our munshi was the real pioneer in this regard—but I doubt it. Far more likely is that the elements of such conversational and informal epistolography were already becoming established parts of the epistolary landscape in Chandar Bhan’s day, just not in the type of “official” courtly documents and diplomatic correspondence that modern scholars have tended to treat as the only part of the corpus worth perusing. Indeed, the perceptive reader may have already noted that the letters from Afzal Khan and Sa’d Allah Khan that Chandar Bhan records in Chahār Chaman (discussed above in chapters 1 and 2) are also concise and conversational in tone, certainly by the standards of contemporary seventeenth-century Indo-Persian prose style, even though they deal with highly recondite subject matter. But how pervasive was the trend? And was the trend even new, or did it have its own antecedents in even earlier letter-writing practices, whether Indic or Perso-Arabic? Did vernacularization have an influence on the Persian epistolary sensibility? Was it the spread of literacy, coupled with a boom in informal personal correspondence facilitated by the growing sophistication of the Mughal postal system? Are we even asking the right questions?

The honest answer to all these questions is: it is difficult to say. Indeed, absent a major collective scholarly effort to recover, preserve, and actually study the many such collections of epistolary and other inshā’ that sit unread in manuscript archives, it is difficult to know even how to pose the right questions, much less begin to answer them. Already by Hali’s time scholarly attention to Mughal-era Persian inshā’ had waned to a point of considerable institutional neglect, both in the British colonial-Orientalist scholarship and in the emergent nationalist historiography. But therein lies the conundrum. Because so few in India can actually read Persian any more, documents that were once thought to be not worth reading are now nearly forgotten to have existed in the first place. Thus the very types of personal correspondence that would allow us to at least begin the type of prosopographical analysis that could bring such Indo-Persian letter-writing practices into a more global cultural historical conversation about early modern self-fashioning have fallen into such a musty linguistic and archival purgatory that they are barely even available to be read any more.

Things have gotten a bit better since the onset of the digital age, as more and more archives are being made available online. But we are still a long way off from the day when those who are interested in such things can even ask, much less provide a serious answer to, such a simple question as: “What was the typical mode of address in personal letters exchanged between friends in Mughal India, and how would the answer inform our understanding of epistolary self-fashioning in early modern India more generally?” At this stage we can at least draw attention to the analytical problem by pointing to Chandar Bhan’s way of doing things, but beyond that we can only await further research.
In any event, to return to the letters themselves, Chandar Bhan also exchanged letters and verse with a number of professional poets, some of which are collected in Part Three (\textit{qism-i siwum}) of 
\textit{Munsha'\text{"a}t-i Brahman}. In a brief preface to this section he apologizes to the reader for not including all the letters he has exchanged over the years with various “masters of learning and intellect and men of fluency and eloquence” (\textit{arb\={a}b-i fazl-o-kam\={a}l wa ahl-i fa\={s}\={a}hat-o-bal\={a}ghat}), but he insists that “there simply wasn’t enough space in this brief compilation, and thus a few samples will have to suffice” (\textit{MB}, 53–62). This is followed in Part Four (\textit{qism-i chah\={a}rum}) by a fascinating set of letters of “recommendation” (\textit{sif\={a}rish}), which seem to have functioned, just as they do today, as reference letters testifying to the professional competence of Chandar Bhan’s friends and acquaintances—and sometimes their children—mostly addressed to influential members of the Mughal and Rajput nobility with whom he had connections (\textit{marb\={u}t wa man\={u}t}) (\textit{MB}, 62–73). Chandar Bhan’s own secretarial skills and success were thus, it would appear, also a conduit for the social mobility of others, most of them Persian-literate fellow Hindus who were looking for positions as scribes and accountants in the imperial and subimperial bureaucracies.

This is followed in the fifth, final, and longest section of \textit{Munsha'\text{"a}t-i Brahman} by Chandar Bhan’s letters to “my esteemed father, the qibla of truth” (\textit{qibla-yi haqiqi pidar-i buzurgw\={a}r}), along with those addressed to his son, brothers, friends, and literary disciples (\textit{MB}, 73–120). Here too Chandar Bhan apologizes that his readers will have to be content with only a sampling of such letters, because if had he included all the many letters he had written since “the exuberant days of my youth and the first stirrings of literary activity” (\textit{shorish-i aiy\={a}m-i jaw\={a}n\={i} wa garmi-yi hang\={a}ma-yi sukhand\={a}ni}) it would have required another volume entirely.

Beyond his own works, another small set of letters to and from Chandar Bhan is scattered in various \textit{insh\={a}}’ collections from the period. For instance, the contemporary historian of Shah Jahan’s reign Muhammad Salih Kambuh included a letter to our \textit{munshi} in his unpublished collection of miscellaneous writings \textit{Bah\={a}r-i Sukhan} (The springtime of expression; 1655).\textsuperscript{10} The preface to \textit{Bah\={a}r-i Sukhan} was written by Salih’s friend, the celebrated poet Abu al-Barakat Munir Lahori (d. 1644), who was himself also a friend and correspondent of Chandar Bhan. At least one of Munir’s letters to Chandar Bhan has survived and is reproduced in Lachmi Narayan Shafiq’s eighteenth-century literary biographical compendium, \textit{Tazkira-yi Gul-i Ra’\={n}a}.\textsuperscript{11} There is also a letter addressed to Chandar Bhan by an unknown author in an unpublished notebook (\textit{bay\={a}z}) of Mughal epistolography called \textit{Makt\={u}b\={a}t-i Mukhtalif\={a}}, housed in the manuscript archive of the Bombay University library.\textsuperscript{12} We do not know when it was written, but the letter, which deals mostly with the themes of friendship and mystical longing, was probably penned sometime in the 1630s, as it is addressed to “Chandar Bhan, the munshi
of Afzal Khan, from myself” (ba Chandar Bhān munshi-yi Afzal Khān az jānib-i khwud)—alas, since it is not entirely clear who made the collection, we don’t know who that “myself” actually refers to.

Another massive, hitherto unpublished, collection of Mughal inshā’ known as Majma’ al-Afkār (A collection of thoughts) contains three letters from Chandar Bhan.13 The first is to the architect Mir ‘Abd al-Karim, his first patron, and appears unique to this manuscript. Another lengthy letter, also unique to this collection, is addressed to one Khwaja Bhag Mal, in which Chandar Bhan discourses on a number of literary, spiritual, and ethical subjects but also reflects on the ways he has matured since the days of his headstrong youth, when, he explains, “I was adrift in the roiling seas of adolescence, and had plugged my ears with the cotton of carelessness” (dar āghāz-i hāl ki daryā-i jawānī dar josh wa pumba-yi ghaflat dar gosh būd) (fol. 207b). The third is to Muhammad Jan Qudsi (1582–1640), one of the preeminent poets of the era, who had come to India in 1632, at the age of fifty, and immediately established himself as a fixture at Shah Jahan’s court.14 Unlike the other two epistolary specimens in Majma’ al-Afkār, this one is actually included by Chandar Bhan himself in both Munsha‘āt-i Brahman and Chahār Chaman (see below).

One imagines that a perusal of more of the dozens of unpublished collections of miscellaneous inshā’ produced during this period might turn up even more letters to our munshi—but only further research can tell us for sure. What we do know, even from this handful of examples, is that the seventeenth-century Mughal culture of personal letter writing was extremely robust and that intellectuals across the spectrum of Mughal social and cultural life not only were availing themselves of new opportunities to transmit their “epistolary selves” via the Mughal postal system but also had a kind of meta-awareness of letters themselves as important cultural artifacts that ought to be collected and preserved. Whether all this represents a shift toward a more “early modern” sensibility among the Indo-Persian intelligentsia, however, remains to be seen.

PATRONS, POETS, AND PARENTS

All this brings us back to Chandar Bhan’s own sense of self-fashioning in Chahār Chaman, another good source for understanding his epistolary practice. Again, the autobiographical essay that opens the third chaman segues directly into a compilation of his letters, followed by a fourth and final chaman dealing with his mystical, spiritual, literary, and ethical musings. In other words, our munshi’s autobiographical impulse, his epistolary practice, and his views on mystical civility were all three clearly related in the construction of his public persona.

Though far fewer than those collected in the Munsha‘āt, the letters compiled in Chahār Chaman are arranged according to a similar pattern, albeit not explicitly.
Thus the first five letters are to important nobles with whom Chandar Bhan corresponded over the course of his career, with one each addressed to the wazīrs Asaf Khan, Afzal Khan, Islam Khan, Sa’d Allah Khan, and Ja’far Khan. Oddly enough, though, especially in a text so much of which is dominated by Chandar Bhan’s views of Shah Jahan and his court, he does not include here any of his letters to the emperor, or to Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir for that matter, that we find in the Munsha’āt. Be that as it may, these first few letters are nevertheless revealing, not just for the raw information they provide us, but also for what they tell us about how Chandar Bhan presented his epistolary self to his superiors. Note too that they are arranged chronologically in the order of their recipients’ respective tenures as prime minister, which was also, of course, the order in which Chandar Bhan himself worked for each of them. He thus subtly recapitulates the linear arc of his career simply by the arrangement of letters in the compilation.

The first letter is a thank-you note of sorts to the celebrated noble and member of the extended royal family Abu al-Hasan Asaf Khan (d. 1641), whom we discussed briefly in chapter 1. As we noted there, Chandar Bhan never worked for Asaf Khan directly, but the latter did have an important indirect influence on the course of Chandar Bhan’s early career. Our munshi was then still in Lahore, working on the fringes of the Mughal bureaucracy in the closing years of Emperor Jahangir’s reign (1605–28), and spent much of this period working with the noted architect Mir ‘Abd al-Karim Ma’muri. But at some point Chandar Bhan also developed some sort of working relationship with one ‘Inayat Khan, an official who was at the time serving as governor of Lahore province.

‘Inayat Khan had himself had been a protégé of Asaf Khan, whose training Chandar Bhan credits with instilling such a high ethical standard in ‘Inayat Khan that “he had neither peer nor equal in terms of rectitude and integrity” (dar rásti wa durusti ‘adil wa nazīr nadāsht). Meanwhile, ‘Inayat Khan had apparently promised to recommend Chandar Bhan’s services to his mentor, who was of course one of the most powerful and respected members of Mughal courtly society. But, as Chandar Bhan explains in the letter, “the vicissitudes of fate” (ittifāqāt-i rozgār) had prevented this from coming to pass, and our munshi eventually wound up in Afzal Khan’s employ rather than that of Asaf Khan himself. Nevertheless, he explains, since Chandar Bhan had learned so much from ‘Inayat Khan, who was himself Asaf Khan’s protégé, our munshi considered himself already “in reality a part of the eminent Nawab’s network” and hoped that now that he had become a part of the central Mughal bureaucracy he would benefit from Asaf Khan’s direct tutelage and “alchemical gaze” (naẓar-i kīmiyā-asrar) (CC, 151).15

This letter to Asaf Khan, probably written in the early 1630s, is followed by a single letter to Afzal Khan (d. 1639), who was, as we have seen, arguably the most important early patron of Chandar Bhan’s career. It is introduced by a subheading explaining that it is “a faithful epistle addressed to that magnanimous scholar of the age, the
illustrious, erudite, and magnificent exemplar, the grand wazīr and illustrious khan, Afzal Khan, the gentleman par excellence” (CC, 152–53). This is followed by one of the more extended opening salutations in our munshī’s epistolary repertoire, beginning: “The humblest of devoted servants and hopeful well-wishers, Chandar Bhan Brahman, who wears the thread of servitude around his sincere neck, and the sandal paste of bondage on his loyal forehead, like an insignificant speck submits this letter to the master, the qibla of truth and the ka’ba of erudition, and relates that . . .” and so on.

Like the letter to Asaf Khan, this letter too is undated—alas, almost all of them are—but we may intuit from the contents that it may have been written sometime toward the end of Afzal Khan’s life, because in it Chandar Bhan explains that after obtaining leave from the emperor to travel to Lahore on personal business, the first thing he did upon arrival in his home town was offer prayers for the eminent khan’s health and long life at the “shrine of the gift-giver” (dargāh-i wāhib al-‘aṭāyyā). This could be a generic reference to God (i.e., the divine “gift-giver”; wāhib al-‘aṭāyyā) on Chandar Bhan’s part, or, perhaps even an oblique reference to the tomb complex of the eleventh-century Sufi saint Pir ‘Ali Hujwiri, who is known colloquially as Dātā Ganj-Bakhsh (The Giver of [Divine] Treasures), and who is buried in Lahore. At any rate, as he made his way around touring various buildings and palaces, Chandar Bhan continues, “I was constantly reminded of the litany of the exalted Nawab’s virtues and good works.” Chandar Bhan also reports that one Ishwar Das, then the province’s minister of architecture (mutaṣaddī-yi ‘imārāt), “had demonstrated his great competence and excellent taste with respect to every heavenly building” in the area, including, presumably, Hujwiri’s tomb complex. In other words, to reiterate a theme from earlier in the book, not only was Chandar Bhan himself perfectly comfortable visiting the shrine of a Sufi saint for blessings, but under Shah Jahan it was also possible for a Hindu administrator to be placed in charge of regulating the upkeep of all Mughal monuments and other landmarks in Lahore, including specifically Muslim sites like Pir ‘Ali Hujwiri’s tomb, which, as we noted in the previous chapter, was one of the most notable spiritual and tourist attractions in the entire region.

The next two letters in the collection provide Chandar Bhan with opportunities to display his poetic virtuosity, as each contains one of the munshī’s own ghazals at the end. The first is to Islam Khan, with whom we have already seen Chandar Bhan exchange verses, and is marked off by an elaborate heading similar to the one that introduced Chandar Bhan’s sample of his correspondence with Afzal Khan. This was, it should be said, only appropriate for a subordinate like Chandar Bhan writing to the prime minister of the empire. But the two men were also clearly good friends, and the letter itself begins simply: “Greetings, great sir, the qibla of connoisseurs!” (nawāb sāhib qibla-yi qadr-dān salāmat) (CC, 153–54)—a drop in formality that is likely to indicate, not necessarily that he thinks any less of Islam Khan than of his predecessor as wazīr, Afzal Khan, but rather that this is simply a different type of letter, on a less sober topic.
In it, Chandar Bhan complains that he has been so busy lately that “these days I can barely even remember myself, or keep track of what I myself have been up to” (dar in muddat khwūd rā ba yād nadāda wa khabar az khwūd nadāshta). But when he finally had some free time “and had a brief respite to recover my senses,” he explains, he realized that it was a good opportunity to rekindle his correspondence with “the affectionate sir” (sāhib-i mihrbān) and wondered, too, “why my esteemed mentor appears to have forgotten me, his complete and sincere well-wisher.” In such a situation, he asks with an almost cheeky rhetorical flourish, “From whom can I expect justice, from whom can I beg for fairness?” (man insāf az kai khwāham wa dād az kai ẓalbān). Chandar Bhan goes on to explain that he has been working night and day on imperial business, and hopes that Islam Khan will remember him fondly to the emperor, as well as to the other members of the imperial assembly. He closes the letter with “a ghazal that immediately sprang to mind with the thought of the pleasure of your company,” adding that he hopes it will be “agreeable to your discerning taste”:

No one knows my condition in this solitude;
No one knows the condition of an indigent stranger.

My eager hands so small, your skirt so great;
These insufficient arms cannot attain their objective.

I come madly with my passionate forehead prostrate on the path to you,\(^{19}\)
For one does not journey the path of love on erect legs.

The dust of your lane is a pearly collyrium for the eye;
Mere ointment brings no relief to the lover’s sight.

What will be the fate of Brahman’s frail heart
If the medicine from your charm factory fails to arrive?

\[kasī zi bī-kasī-yi mā ba hāl-i mā narasad
kasī ba hāl-i gharibān-i bī-nawā narasad
marā-st dast-i ṭalab past-o-dāman-i tu buland
zi kūtahī-st ki dast-am ba muddaā narasad
jabīn-i shauq ba rāḥ-i tu sauda miyāyam
ki ẓai-yi marḥala-yi āšiqī ba pā narasad
ghubār-i kū-yi tu kuḥl al-jawāhir-i baṣar ast
ʾilāj-i dida-yi āšiq ba tātiyā narasad
buwad chi ḥāl-i dil-i khasta-yi barahman rā
zi kār-khāna-yi lutf-i tu gar dawā narasad\]
(CC, 153–44)
Once again, Chandar Bhan casts Islam Khan in the role of absent beloved and himself in the part of tormented lover hoping for a glimpse of her to relieve his suffering.

There is a slightly different tone, however, to Chandar Bhan’s next letter, described in the heading as “a letter seeking corrections, addressed to the pillar of pillars of the age, the cream of learned men of the world, the scholar of Platonic vision, the grand wazīr of Hindustan, Sa’d Allah Khan, written with the pen of sincerity” (CC, 154–55). The letter appears to have been written sometime soon after Chandar Bhan was initially assigned to work with Sa’d Allah Khan, when the latter was appointed to take over as prime minister for Islam Khan in 1645; and the “corrections” (islāh) in question refer specifically to literary guidance. Chandar Bhan explains that previously, “when this humblest of servants had the good fortune to be employed in the service of the lately deceased most eminent scholar and intellectual of the age, Afzal Khan, I sent a fresh ghazal to him every day for suggestions, that it might be transformed under the examination of the late khan’s alchemical gaze.”

It would appear, then, that Afzal Khan’s death had deprived Chandar Bhan not only of his first great patron but also of one of his most important literary interlocutors, and he therefore hoped to cultivate a similar relationship with his new boss, Sa’d Allah Khan. Thus, he explains, “I have decided for myself that from now on I will submit whatever poetry or prose emanates from my defective character for review and corrections by the Nawab, who is a kind and a keen judge of quality.” Accordingly, the letter concludes with “a freshly composed ghazal written with my broken pen, which I hope will be agreeable to your most gracious and discerning eye”:

We crafted our tales by the candlelight of the friend’s face;
We burned like the flame, but turned ourselves into the moth.

How nice to be like the comb, silent despite a hundred tongues;
I too have learned, like the comb, to live with the twists and turns of your curls.

May the land of the civilized flourish! For I, in my solitude,
Have made my nook of sorrow into a treasure in the wilderness.

The principles of far-sighted reason are of no use to me!
I have been set loose, and make do with a heart gone mad.

Until we’ve become truly acquainted with ourselves, Brahman,
We have as yet encountered only the heart of a stranger.

[bā sham‘-rū-yi dost ba afsāna sākhtīm
chūn sham‘ sākhtīm-o-chu parwānā sākhtīm
bā ṣad zabān chu shāna khamoshi nikū buwad
bā pech-o-tāb-i zulf-i tu chu shāna sākhtīm]
ābād bād mulk-i murūwat ki mā ba khwesh
dar kunj-i gham chu ganj ba wirānā sākhtīm

bā mā nasākht qā’ida-yi ‘aql-i dūr-bīn
fārīgh shudīm-o-bā dil-i diwāna sākhtīm
tā āshnā shudīm barahman ba khweshtan
bā āshnā’i-yi dil-i begāna sākhtīm]

An analysis of the literary delights packed into this short ghazal—not to mention translational challenges—could occupy us for many pages, but for present purposes what is important is that it is there at all. Sa’d Allah Khan was not only the newly minted prime minister of one of the most powerful empires on earth; he was, even more so than Afzal Khan, one of that empire’s most capable and feared military commanders. Indeed, if he is remembered at all by modern historiography, it is, for good or ill, depending on one’s perspective, almost entirely for these military exploits. And yet here we see him engaged in a private correspondence with his Brahman munshi, in which the secretary makes clear that a cornerstone of their working relationship will be the friendly exchange, discussion, and revision of poetry suffused with mystical and romantic themes—about being struck dumb by the beauty of the beloved, challenging orthodox pieties, glamorizing antisocial behavior, and celebrating the quest for individual self-knowledge. It is difficult to imagine a glimpse of everyday human, indeed humanist, cultural interaction more at odds with the commonly held image of Shah Jahan’s era than this.

In this case the correspondence between the content of the letter and the metaphors in the appended poem is not as direct as it was in the letters to Islam Khan that we have quoted above. But it is nevertheless important to take note that the rich everyday literary and mystical cultures on display here were transmitted and circulated through private epistolary networks of which Chandar Bhan is able to provide only a glimpse, but that extended throughout the literate Mughal elite. Our modern image of Mughal poetic culture is largely that of professional poets in august courtly assemblies, reciting florid and elegant panegyrics in exchange for handsome rewards, or else plying their trade in exclusive private mahfil and literary salons. And it is true that those were obviously crucial domains of literary life in Mughal India. What we see here in Chandar Bhan’s letters, however, is a far less conspicuous, but arguably even more pervasive, forum for everyday Mughal poetic culture, one that allowed for a seamless fusion of the idioms of literature, mysticism, and personal intimacy in one epistolary space, through exchanges between friends and colleagues that were entirely outside the public eye.

The final letter in this set is to Ja’far Khan, in which Chandar Bhan updates the wazir on the progress of his recovery from an illness that apparently caused our munshi to suffer an extended absence from court, and thus also from his duties in the diwānī (CC, 155). Remember, Ja’far Khan did not become prime minister
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until the late 1650s, by which time Chandar Bhan too was already getting on in years and was only a few years removed from his own retirement. One thus detects a hint of self-awareness regarding the onset of old age here, a tone that also dominates Chandar Bhan’s letter to Aurangzeb announcing his retirement just a few years later (MB, 12–13). Apparently, the illness had completely disrupted our munshi’s occupational routine of spending “night and day” working on the imperial business, and thus, he explains, for one who prided himself on his work ethic the effect of boredom caused by the inability to work had grown “most difficult” (sakht dushwār). Chandar Bhan goes on to explain that, “although I am beginning to recover thanks to the grace of God, the emperor’s kindness, and the Nawab’s own solicitude, nevertheless my body is still quite weak.” Still, he closes the letter by noting that he hopes to be back at court soon, and he requests in the interim that Ja’far Khan convey his affectionate regards to the emperor, his fellow courtiers, and his colleagues in the diwānī.

With the clever selection of just a handful of letters, then, Chandar Bhan provides his readers with a snapshot of his entire professional bildung—from the early years of his career, when he had to prove himself and work every connection possible just to break into the upper echelons of Mughal administrative and courtly society, through the middle years, when he developed lasting friendships and professional relationships with elite members of the nobility like Afzal Khan and Sa’d Allah Khan, right up to the period when he could reflect on a lifetime of hard work with the growing realization that he could no longer put the energy into his administrative duties that he once had as a younger man.

Along the way, Chandar Bhan had also befriended a good number of professional poets, letters to two of whom are the next to be included here. The first is to Muhammad Jan Qudsi (1582–1640) (CC, 155–56), a letter that is also included not only in Chandar Bhan’s own Munsha’āt-i Brahman (MB, 61–62) but also, as we mentioned above, in the miscellaneous compilation of Mughal inshā’ known as Majma’ al-Afkār. The letter is fairly short—only eight lines, in the printed edition of Chahār Chaman—but it also has appended to it a seven-couplet ghazal, among the longest verse selections in the entire work.

Qudsi was originally from the holy city of Mashhad, in the northeastern corner of modern Iran—near the borders with Afghanistan to the east and Turkmenistan to the north—and in his early life he had had a successful commercial career as a grocer. These business skills, along with Qudsi’s good reputation in the community, came in handy when he was appointed as the administrator of the important local shrine of the revered early shī’a imam ‘Ali Reza (765–818). Eventually, however, Qudsi’s poetry began eliciting the interest of important patrons, and, after a brief stint at the court of Hasan Khan Shamlu, the Safavid governor in Herat—during which Qudsi was devastated to learn of his son’s death back home in Mashhad and decided not to return—he made his way in 1632 to
the Mughal court in India. He is remembered among critics and literary historians as one of the great all-around poets of the age, but it was perhaps in panegyric that he excelled the most, renowned for his exquisite poems in praise of not only various patrons but also the *shi’a* imams and other religious figures. And it was precisely for such panegyrics that Qudsi was rewarded by Shah Jahan on more than one occasion with his weight in silver and gold. Twenty of his verses in praise of the emperor were even inscribed on the Mughal monarch’s celebrated Peacock Throne.24

Chandar Bhan may have had these two features of Qudsi’s biography in mind—his business background and his reputation for writing lucrative prize-winning panegyrics—when writing the letter included here in *Chahār Chaman*, because one of its most distinctive features is the clever way that the language of trade, money, and commerce courses through it:

*A Bouquet from the Garden of Unity, sent to the Banquet of Purest Intellect, Mulla Muhammad Jan Qudsi*

Nightingale of a Thousand Tales, may your gracious character, nestled amid the orchards of melody makers’ expression, be forever loquacious and full of *ghazals* and sweet songs! In this bountiful age, which is among the most rarefied and distinguished eras [in history], the one who most delights in literary capital [*naqd-i sukhan*]25 and best evaluates the masters of expression [*qadr-i arbāb-i sukhan*] is none other than your angelic self, that mine of eloquence and good taste [*ma’dan-i fasāhat-o-balāghat*]. Accordingly, it is incumbent upon all wayfarers in the land of meaning and wanderers through the valleys of poetry to remit their literary wares [*matā’-i sukhan*] from every region to the bounteous assembly of that great sophisticate of the world. Although the worthless poetic merchandise of this insignificant speck [*matā’-i sukhan-i kāsid-i īn zārra-yi bimiqdār*] is not nearly so fine that I may dare venture to offer it for such a purpose, nevertheless, in hopes of editorial guidance, I have set down a freshly composed *ghazal* here with my broken pen. I can only hope that the benefit of your revision will raise it to another level.

*My heart is forever jealous of the breeze*
*Wondering why it too cannot caress the tips of her tresses.*

*One who possesses even a passing acquaintance with your veil*
*Would weave from that cloth a spectacular tale of epic beauty.*

*An uncanny new light blazes in the eye of whoever enters your lane*
*Where the dust of the road, [instead of blinding], is a healing collyrium.*

*A hundred times you have come crookedly down the path of love—*
*Otherwise the straightness of the road*
*would have easily shown you the way.*26

*To seek forgiveness for past sins is simple enough;*
*To use past forgiveness as an excuse to err again, that is truly a crime.*
It produces no commodity of knowledge, nor any monetary benefit:  
But why would you expect a return on investment from empty-handed prayer?

Brahman, it is best to detach and consign yourself to a corner,  
For the highest achievement, after all,  
is in renouncing the very idea of achievement.

[ma rā hamesha ba dīl ghairat-i šabā bāshad  
ki āshnā-yi sar-i zulf-i ū chirā bāshad]

kunad zi parda tamāshā-yi kārnāma-yi husn  
agar kasi ba hījāb-i tu āshnā bāshad

ba chashm-i har ki rasad nūr-i diγāzād  
ghubār-i kā-yi tu ham-rang-i tūtīyā bāshad

[ma rā hamesha ba dīl ghairat-i šabā bāshad  
ki āshnā-yi sar-i zulf-i ū chirā bāshad]

kunad zi parda tamāshā-yi kārnāma-yi husn  
agar kasi ba hījāb-i tu āshnā bāshad

It may not be as obvious in my paltry attempt at an English translation as it is in the original Persian, but there is a running play on the idiom of business transactions throughout this letter. Meanwhile, the commercial connotations of words like naqd (money, capital), ma’dan (mine, quarry, i.e., for precious metals and other valuable objects of exchange), matā’ (merchandise, goods, wares), and īrsāl (dispatch, remittance, e.g., of a bill or invoice) all dovetail nicely too with the association of travelers (saiyārān and rah-rawān) with traders—in this case, wandering merchants of literary taste displaying and exchanging their wares for Qudsi’s expert evaluation. Given Qudsi’s background, it therefore appears to have been not just any play on words but rather one specifically crafted with the former businessman in mind. One suspects, too, that it was precisely this clever wordplay that made the letter stand out to the compiler of Majma’ al-Afkār as a notable morsel of skilled Mughal inshā’.

The next letter, addressed to the poet, literary critic, and Chandar Bhan’s good friend Abu al-Barakat Munir Lahori (1610–44), is roughly similar in substance to the letter to Qudsi, albeit without all the elaborate extended metaphors. Like Qudsi, Munir is widely considered to have been one of the great Indo-Persian poets of the seventeenth century and is considered by some even to have been somewhat
of a literary prodigy, having reportedly begun his professional poetic career at the age of fourteen, and having claimed to have penned over one hundred thousand verses during his relatively short life. Munir also gained a reputation even in his own lifetime as a fierce critic, launching attacks in both satirical verse and independent essays against the perceived aesthetic flaws and violations of good taste of a number of high-profile contemporaries (see the next chapter for details). But as far as we can tell, his relationship with Chandar Bhan was excellent, and the two almost surely exchanged far more letters than the two that have survived. In this one, Chandar Bhan begins by praising Munir’s poetic virtuosity and then follows the typical courtesy by humbling himself as a mere literary amateur and begging for the guidance of his esteemed colleague, appending yet another ghazal for Munir’s—and our—perusal.

A heightened literary sensibility also figured prominently in Chandar Bhan’s letters to his family members, to which he now turns with a letter to his father. This letter also includes a ghazal of nine couplets; notably, however, it is not part of a new section but rather a continuation of the section on letters to great nobles and literati. It is addressed “to that man of gracious stature, the qibla of truth, the ka’ba of erudition, my esteemed father, a man of all manner of affection, composed with the pen of fidelity” (CC, 157–58)—epithets that almost precisely echo those Chandar Bhan uses in his letters to Afzal Khan, whom he also refers to with salutations like “qibla of truth” (qibla-yi haqiqi) and “ka’ba of erudition” (ka’ba-yi tahqiqi) (e.g., in CC, 152).

Obviously there is an element of convention here that could neutralize any overinterpretation. But the use of “Muslim” terms like qibla and ka’ba to describe the virtuous character of a Brahman, by a fellow Brahman, is nevertheless quite notable. Religion aside, moreover, the similarity of language suggests something about the parallels between how Chandar Bhan viewed his relationships with his father and with the erstwhile wazir, respectively. On the one hand, we may see it as the broader norms of Mughal social hierarchy being recapitulated in the microcosm of the family—a son using the norms of epistolary etiquette to show his father, the family patriarch, the same respect that he shows for his social and political superiors in the Mughal courtly elite. On the other hand, the reverse interpretation is also available to us, alerting us in retrospect to the fact that the emotional range of Chandar Bhan’s relationship with Afzal Khan included not just professional courtesy, friendship, and the admiration of a servant for his patron but also a degree of almost filial devotion—even love.

The letter itself begins with lofty expressions of service and devotion that are also similar to those Chandar Bhan used in writing to Afzal Khan: “May this humble offering, expressing the earnest supplication and prayers incumbent upon those with the bond of service around their neck and the sandal-mark of duty on their forehead meet with a high degree of satisfaction; greetings, true qibla!” If the
conventions of epistolary prose are any indication, in other words, Chandar Bhan
seems to have viewed his father Dharam Das to be in the same social category of
recipient as his erstwhile patron, Afzal Khan, entitled to be addressed with the
same idiom of submission, courtesy, and respect. This is perhaps why the letter is
placed in the same group as the letters to wazīrs and respected literary mentors,
rather than the subsequent group of letters to Chandar Bhan’s son and brothers.
In Chandar Bhan’s view, his father’s authority matched that of the prime minister
of the empire.

In fact, a variant version of the letter found in some manuscripts (as well as
Sayyid Muhammad Murtazā Qadiri’s Urdu translation [1992: 148–51]) begins
by saying that “the ties and bonds between a father and son are so great that if
thought and imagination could try to comprehend them it would ignite a fire of
passion from each direction.” But, as Chandar Bhan goes on to explain, a son’s
love for his father is a complicated thing, neither a given nor constant. “Although
it has been heard,” he writes, “that a father’s natural affection [‘uttāfat-i jibillī-yi
pidar] for his son is always greater [beshtar] than what the son reciprocates with
devotion to the father, nevertheless, in light of my own example, I firmly believe
that if a son is truly fortunate he will gather within himself a level of sincerity and
trust toward his father that is far greater than the kindness his father could pos-
sibly show him.” Our munshi did not come to this judgment easily, however, for
he goes on to admit to his father that he has not always felt this way and that he
had to mature from a somewhat headstrong youth before he learned to appreciate
his father’s wisdom. The same variant version of the letter adds:

Earlier, when my head was drunk with the pride and arrogance of youth, I kept a
veil over the eyes of my heart that masked both my outward self-assurance and my
inner [turbanl] and regarded whatever was contrary to prudence as the right course
of action. But eventually, as I became more acquainted with various life experiences
that introduced me to the subtleties of the meaning of life [ba-irdāk-i ḍaqāʿiq wa
ḥaqāʾiq-i maʿnī], my purpose shifted toward polishing my inner self like the surface
of a mirror [ṣafāʾ-yi bāṭin rā ʿāʿina ṣūrat maṭālib sākht].

I now understand with clarity that the rewards of this world and the next come
to those who put their heart and soul into serving their parents, [because] he who
has the hand of his father on his head wears a crown of joy. The attainment of
such happiness is the very aim of one’s livelihood and the reward for having lived
a good life.29

The sentiments are expressed in somewhat high-flown prose, no doubt, but it
is hard to think of a more universal human experience than the realization, after a
rebellious youth, that one’s parents were not nearly as obtuse as one thought they
were, followed by the respect and admiration for them that such insight brings. One
is almost tempted to speculate that perhaps Chandar Bhan wrote this letter some-
time after becoming a father himself, but there is no way to know for sure. What
we do know is that these broader philosophical ruminations on the volatile nature of father-son relationships give way to a much more mundane, yet also universal, sentiment—Chandar Bhan misses his father and wishes that they could meet:

Having made my eyes red from yearning, I now long for the happiness of actually seeing you—what more can I say? Maintaining the proper etiquette [demands that I] suppress the cry in my throat and the sigh of my heart, squeeze up the blood of my liver like a bud, and not say a word. [But] out of an abundance of love, I have said so many times, and say again, that I am a son who idolizes his father [man pisar-i pidar-parast-am] and considers my service to this metaphorical god to be the highest form of devotion to the [universal] God of magnificence and grandeur ['ibādat-i khudā-yi 'azz-o-jall rā dar khidmat-i in khudāwand-i majāzī midānam].

The letter closes, as so many of Chandar Bhan’s letters do, with “a freshly composed ghazal [that] has been written out with the pen of supplication.” It is nine couplets long, among the lengthiest in Chandar Bhan’s entire oeuvre, and it is with these nine couplets that he closes the section of Chahār Chaman containing his epistles to the authority figures in his life.

THE MYSTICAL DIMENSIONS OF EVERYDAY MUGHAL CORRESPONDENCE

Nearly all of the twenty-three remaining letters in the latter part of Chahār Chaman are addressed either to Chandar Bhan’s brothers, Ray Bhan and Uday Bhan, or to his son Tej Bhan. Most of them deal with mystical themes or moral and ethical principles, but a couple of them do venture into more worldly matters—the most notable example being, perhaps, the poignant letter Chandar Bhan writes to his son concerning the death of his father, Dharam Das (CC, 170–71). But before getting to the letters themselves, our author alerts us to the general mystical and moral tone of these epistles with an intriguing autobiographical aside:

In [earlier] days when this wayfarer through the valley of submission and acquiescence [rah-naward-i wādī-yi taslim wa rizā] was consumed with a passion for liberation, a mysterious tumult found its way into my heart and mind. But when I began to seek out the company of some of the wise men possessed of great equanimity [fuqarā-yi šāhīb-i jam’iyat], a newfound freedom, quietude, and composure settled in my heart—even amid the hot commotion of the prime of my youth, passion, and excitement—and I developed an inner and outer calm.

Since poverty and wandering are among the ancient practices of Brahmans [az ān jā ki faqîr wa sulūk ā’in-i qadim-i brahmanān ast], the father of this faqîr was a faqîr, and my two brothers Ray Bhan and Uday Bhan are also faqîrs, who step by step have surpassed even their spiritual masters, and little by little have elevated their understanding of the states of mystical consciousness and ecstasy [jażba-o-hāl] beyond even the level of great masters of consciousness [arbāb-i jażba].
These brothers have completely abandoned the ways of worldly employment and awareness of self in the world of material attachments [‘ālam-i ta‘alluq]. A few of the letters that this servant of darweshes occasionally wrote to these two brothers, who are so familiar with Reality, have been copied out below. (CC, 159)

Here again, Chandar Bhan expresses his admiration for mystics and other holy men, and especially for those, like his brothers, who manage to distance themselves entirely from the “world of attachments” (‘ālam-i ta‘alluq), even if he himself was never able to do so completely. Note too that even though Chandar Bhan describes himself, his father, and his brothers using terms like faqīr and darwesh—Persian terms that would generally be associated in India primarily with “Muslim” mysticism—he is at pains to emphasize that his family’s mystical sensibility is in perfect harmony with “the ancient practices of Brahmans” (ā’in-i qadim-i brahmanān), for whom lives of poverty and wandering were considered not only appropriate but, in some ways, ideal.

Most of the “letters” that follow are really just short notes, many of them just a few lines long. A good number of them, moreover, lack any kind of salutation at all, making it hard to identify the recipient. And even where we are able to cross-reference the letters with the versions that sometimes also appear in sources like Munsha‘āt-i Brahman, they will often only say things like “to my brother,” without specifying which one. We may surmise, then, that even if in their original composition these were intended as personal letters addressed to specific individuals, in their publicly circulated form they served a different function, perhaps simply as a vehicle through which Chandar Bhan could explore his understanding of a broad range of mystical themes.

Thus the first letter in this section, introduced by the subheading “A Note on Reality” (raqīma-yi haqīqat-āyīn), goes as follows:

May you be graced with special blessings. The root of prosperity lies in striving for the gnosis of Truth [ma‘rifat-i haqq], and the apprehension of the condition of the self [dar-yāft-i hāl-i khyud], after the awareness of which comes the recognition that one’s self is merely like a drop in the ocean, or a speck of dust floating in the sunlight of Reality [āftāb-i haqīqat], and [after this] the understanding and contemplation of the eternal and unending nature of the essence of the Real [zāt-i haqq]. Quatrain:

You have kept on making us aware of the state of our own selves,
You have made a rose out of the thorn, and an entire ocean from a single drop;
Once we have fulfilled our debt of thanks to you,
We finally understand what you have done for us.

[ma rā chu ba hāl-i khyud shināsā kARDī
az khār gul-o-zi qatra daryā kARDī
az ‘uhda-yi shukr-i tu chu bīrūn āyīm
mā midānīm ān chi tu bā mā kARDĪ]

(CC, 159)
The echoes of William Blake notwithstanding (“To see a World in a grain of sand / And a heaven in a wild flower / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour”), as it turns out the version of this letter that appears in *Munsha’āt-i Brahman* is considerably longer and includes an extended dilation on the far less philosophical topic of Chandar Bhan’s relationship with Afzal Khan, followed by a complete—and completely different—*ghazal* rather than the *rubā’ī* that is given here *(MB*, 75–76). Clearly, then, Chandar Bhan was exercising some form of editorial discretion as he compiled these letters, consciously varying his self-presentation from one text to another. Unfortunately, he does not give us much clue as to the criteria upon which he based these editorial decisions. It could be that in *Munsha’āt-i Brahman* he wanted to present his readers with the letters themselves, as he originally wrote them (or at least close to it), whereas in *Chahār Chaman* he was so conscious of organizing the text thematically that he decided to prune some of the letters in order to maintain the focus on the topic at hand and avoid digressions. In this case, that meant excising the more mundane content of the letter as it appears in *Munsha’āt-i Brahman*, leaving only the mystical kernel. But, absent a more exhaustive line-by-line comparison of the two texts, not to mention a collation of the many manuscript versions of the text, we cannot know for sure.

What we do know is that, at least in the selection compiled for *Chahār Chaman*, such mystical and moral themes dominate this part of the work. In the next letter he insists, among other things, that “the best habit one can cultivate in this world is to keep the company of the virtuous [ṣuhbat-i nekān]” *(CC*, 160). And in the letter after that he extols the virtue of refining one’s character, saying that “the first condition of this oasis of civilized manners [wādī-yi tahžīb-i akhlāq] is that when a person improves his manners [muḥazzab al-akhlāq gardad] all phenomena become manifest in their desired form on the mirror of his heart [bar āyina-yi ẓamīr-ash har āyina ṣūrat-i maṭlūb jilwa-gar shawad].” “Although this supplicant is still a prisoner of worldly attachments [giriftār-i qaid-i ta’ālūq],” he adds, “nevertheless I never rest from the cultivation of praiseworthy manners [akhlāq-i ḥamīda],” and he punctuates the sentiment with a couplet urging the recipient (and the reader, presumably) to seize the day:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{It is morning, time to rise from the sleep of heedlessness.} \\
&\text{The chance to achieve your purpose is fleeting, wake up!}
\end{align*}
\]

*[ṣubḥ shud az khwāb-i ghaflat sā’ātī bidār bāsh} \\
*fursat az andāza birūn mirawad hoshyār bāsh]*

*(CC*, 160)

Worldly virtue and civility, in other words, were intimately tied in Chandar Bhan’s moral universe to the need to awake from the “sleep of heedlessness” *(khwāb-i ghaflat)* and cultivate a sense of mystical detachment *(bī-ta’ālūqī)* from the everyday material world.
As we noted above, one did not necessarily have to be a practicing Sufi or yogi, much less a complete renunciant, in order to benefit from these principles of mystical civility. On the contrary, in Chandar Bhan’s vision of the ethical Mughal subject a certain familiarity with them was essential for anyone who aspired to a life of virtuous character and gentlemanly conduct. Thus in another letter he openly laments his inability to truly embrace the mystical path but reassures himself that: “at least by maintaining as a token the society of great men who are the guardians of these [mystical] stages [ṣuḥbat-i buzurgān-i pās-i in marātib], this supplicant manages to cling to a certain equipoise [iʿtidāl]; perhaps with the passage of time I can rise above this stage [sar az maqāmī bar āwarad] and reach my desired goal”—a thought he punctuates with the following couplet.

At last we have lifted ourselves above our place and station;
The discipline of our quest was not in vain.

[Akhir sar az maqāmi-o-jā’i bar-āwurim
bi-hûda nist qa’ida-yi just-o-jā-yi mā]
(CC, 160–61)

In most cases, the verses that accompany these meditative epistles are clearly Chandar Bhan’s own, and they often correspond to ghazals or rubā’īs in his own Dīwān of poetry. There are others, however, like the one just quoted, that do not seem appear anywhere else in his oeuvre. These could perhaps be verses that he composed extemporaneously while writing the letter in question, or simply verses from poems that he composed over the course of his life and career but that were never included in the published Dīwān. But in a handful of cases Chandar Bhan also uses the poetry of others for an emphatic flourish. A good example comes from another short letter to his brother Ray Bhan, in which Chandar Bhan comments on the difficulty, for most people, of subduing their physical desires (laẓzat-i jismānī) in favor of spiritual pursuits (laẓzat-i rūhānī) (CC, 161).34 This only increases his admiration for what he describes as “that special class of people” (tā’īfa-yi khāss) who can transcend the distinction altogether and arrive at true spiritual awareness. He ends this thought with a single cryptic line of verse:

Just see the distance on the way from where to where!
[Babīn tafāwut-i rah [k-]az kujā-st tā ba kujā]

The tone of self-critique implicit here may be clear enough even if one does not know the source of this line, but Chandar Bhan clearly expected his brother (and his readers) to recognize these as the words of the celebrated fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafiz Shirazi (1325–90) and to read his own observations in light of the full couplet:
Where is the do-gooder, and where a degenerate like me?
Just see the distance on the way from where [I am] to where [he has already reached]!

\[
\text{[salāh-kār kujā wa man-i kharāb kujā}
\text{babīn tafāwut-i rah k-az kujā-st tā ba kujā]}
\]

Besides alerting us once again to the fact that a mastery of the classical Indo-Persian literary canon was considered a staple of educated discourse in Chandar Bhan’s intellectual world, the allusion to this particular verse is yet another indication of our munshi’s vision of the ethical Mughal subject. Even for a man at the center of worldly power and influence, such as Chandar Bhan himself, or the patrons and nobles he worked with, a certain humility was in order. One may not find the strength of character to overcome one’s personal ambition, material desires, and so forth, but a recognition that one should strive to do so, and that it was possible to do so—as demonstrated by that “special class” of people who possessed such spiritual discipline—was nevertheless an important check on hubris and greed. Such awareness was thus not only a virtue in and of itself but also, in turn, an important factor in promoting the larger set of akhlāqi virtues such as justice, moderation, and tolerance that were so essential to Mughal civility.

Chandar Bhan’s letters to his brothers continue in this vein for some time, reiterating this same basic didactic message, that the cultivation of the ethical self requires an awareness of mystical civility. But such precepts could also lend comfort in a time of crisis or emotional distress, as we see from the first letter to Chandar Bhan’s son included in Chahār Chaman, in which he conveys the news of his father’s death (CC, 170–71). He explains that the news, which Chandar Bhan himself learned from a letter from his “grief-stricken brother,” transformed the loveliness of spring into an autumnal misery, as though “a caravan of pain and anguish from the land of hopelessness had dumped its entire cargo in the city of my afflicted heart and saddened mind.” He goes on to describe at some length his own efforts to control his grief once “the cotton had been yanked from my heedless ears.” Once he accepted the news, he continues, “I entered such a stupor that I was frozen like a painting on the wall, and even though I was cognizant of the world around me I quickly descended into a world of madness and derangement, to the point that since my hands were incapable of reaching my soul I grew crazed and tore at my shirt instead.” He found himself weeping uncontrollably and cursing the heavens, as if “there was no longer any brain in my head, nor any sense in my mind,” before finally entering a kind of daze in which “my mouth, though like a rosebud with its hundred tongues, had gone silent, and the excessive stupor had silenced the ability of my lips to speak.”

Despite these tribulations, Chandar Bhan goes on to reassure Tej Bhan with some consoling words. “Still,” he explains, “since it is a principle among those who cultivate the habit of equanimity to place the string of acquiescence in the
hands of providence, and to avoid placing themselves at the center of things, I wrapped up my sadness in the hem of the tunic of resignation and, giving my acceptance over to fate, made the bitterness of this heartbreaking calamity, the mere thought of which still makes my pen gush with tears of black blood, more palatable with the sherbet of forbearance [ba sharbat-i šabr khwāsh-guwrā sākht]."
The healing of Chandar Bhan’s shattered psyche was also aided, incidentally, by affectionate gestures of condolence from none other than Emperor Shah Jahan himself—who, he explains, upon hearing the sad news of Dharam Das’s death “elevated this insignificant speck, this frail ant, in this world and the next by publicly gracing me with a robe of honor in his Solomonic assembly.” “With just one benevolent word,” Chandar Bhan adds, “[the emperor] gave some respite to my afflicted heart.”

This touching moment of overlap between the public world of the court and the intimate world of Chandar Bhan’s family then segues directly into the longest, and in some ways the most intriguing, letter in the munshi’s entire oeuvre: the “letter of advice” (naṣīḥat-nāma) to his son Tej Bhan that we referenced briefly at the beginning of chapter 2 (CC, 171–77).\(^{36}\) The letter is replete with guidance for Tej Bhan (and of course Chandar Bhan’s readers) on the kinds of upright character and professional skills required of the successful imperial munshi, providing, as Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have noted, a kind of “syllabus” for how to cultivate the right knowledge and necessary skills. But the letter also dwells at length on how to cultivate the kind of habits, temperament, and civility that Chandar Bhan considered to be essential traits of any successful Mughal gentleman. Once more, he expounds at length upon the moral necessity of treating the material world with an air of detachment (bī-ta’alluqī), but he also urges Tej Bhan to “maintain his hold on the reins of proper Reason [‘aql-i durust] at all times, in every place, while sleeping and awake, in a stupor and while alert” (CC, 172).

But as the third chaman ends and gives way to the fourth and last, a somewhat different perspective begins to dominate the final pages of the work. Here we are treated to a repeated display of our munshi’s deepest and most esoteric thoughts on various philosophical topics, from the nature of language (sukhan), to Chandar Bhan’s favorite theme of the desire for spiritual detachment (lazzāt-i tark-i ta’alluq). Other miniessays and aphorisms in this section concern things like “constancy along the path of acceptance of divine fate” (istiqāmat bar jāda-yi tawakkul), or simply, the nature of Truth (kaifiyat-i ašl-i ḥaqīqat), among other matters.

A running theme throughout these esoteric reflections is the tension between the individual’s experience of the material world of phenomena perceptible through the physical and rational senses versus the deeper experience of existential, mystical, and cosmic meaning. A good example is the following passage on the “Nature of [Mystical] Ecstasy” (kaifiyat-i ḥāl), in which Chandar Bhan appears
to be advocating precisely the opposite state of mind to what he has just advocated to his son Tej Bhan in terms of cultivating “proper Reason” (‘aql-i durust):

**Kaifiyat-i Ḩāl**

Once the veil of obliviousness [ḥijāb-i ḡhaflat] is lifted from in front of the eyes of the heart, the fire of True Love [ātish-i muḥabbat-i ma’nawī], which was hidden and concealed in the ashes of existence, instantly sets ablaze the flame that had been suppressed there. The longing for that special object that had been cast aside to the edges of the intellect and the outskirts of the soul is refreshed anew.

The imagination and contemplation that are necessary at the very outset in order to rouse one’s passion toward achieving the goal [imbī‘āṣ-i shauq bar nail-i maqṣūd], and that stiffen the seeker’s resolve to tread the path of desire and the way of searching [eventually] produce a fresh radiance that gathers at the forefront of the heart.

Thereafter, once the image of True Beauty [ṣūrat-i shāhid-i ma’nī] is transformed into a refulgent manifestation in the assembly of singularity, the spark of passion [shauq] engulfs the hem of the heart and the collar of the soul—regardless of whether one is in a state of dreaming, wakefulness, oblivion, or alertness. The head looks up and around from every direction, and the mystery of Love that had been annihilated by the repression of that old man Reason sounds a great alarm [ḡosh-māl mīdād], and [the seeker’s] visage begins to beam with a visible splendor [bar manaṣṣa-yi zuhūr jilwagārī namūd].

The breeze from this springtime of passion causes the previously pursed lips of the buds of desire to blossom, while in the mirror of thought [āyīna-yi kḥiyāl] the pageant of the multiplicity of forms and meanings becomes comprehensible, and from out of the darkness of anxiety the true objective is obtained, as if the water of life. (CC, 195–96)

In these cryptic thoughts on the nature of perception versus reality, the irrational and ecstatic are clearly privileged over the rational perception available to the senses. The latter, in fact, represent an illusion, and it is only after one lifts this “veil of obliviousness” (ḥijāb-i ḡhaflat) that one can experience the triumph of Love over Reason, and the ultimate oneness of the universe. In another passage, described simply as “an observation” (nukta), Chandar Bhan argues, in fact, that what we typically perceive to be reality is in fact nothing but an illusion, a dream state from which we can only awake with esoteric gnosis.

**Nukta**

O you who have the sleep of heedlessness [khwāb-i ḡhaflat] pulled up over your head, [know that] time has a stone up its sleeve, and a glass in hand. How long will you be intoxicated by the cheap wine of wakefulness [khām-i hosh]? How long can you continue deluding yourself with the sleep of heedlessness? The sun has crossed the zenith, and the goblet has been drained of wine. While you were still busy with the cheap wine [of material attachments], the morning of desire has already turned to evening. Couplet:
From the first time you blinked your eyes, life was already at the beginning of the end; We have tread this path without producing so much as the sound of a footfall.

\[
\text{[chashm tā bar ham zadi anjām shud āghāz-i 'umr}
\text{tāi shud in rah ān chunān k'āwāz-i pāy bar nakḥāst]}
\]

\[\text{(CC, 199)}\]

The final pages of *Chahār Chaman* are replete with such esoteric passages, many of which would be perfectly at home in any discussion of arcane Sufi interpretations of the “unity of being” (*wahdât al-wujûd*), or the speculative traditions of influential medieval and early modern philosophers like the great Andalusian thinker Ibn al-ʿArabi (1165–1240) or the celebrated Persian illuminationist philosopher Mulla Sadra (1572–1640).

Mulla Sadra, in fact, may be particularly relevant here given that he was part of a new wave of early modern philosophers and other intellectuals that has come to be known as the “Isfahan school” and that also included luminaries such as Mir Findarski (d. 1641), Shaikh Baha al-Din Muhammad al-ʿAmili (aka “Shaikh Baha’i”; 1547–1621), and Mir Muhammad Baqir al-Astarabadi (aka “Mir Damad”; d. 1631). Deeply influenced by the *ishrāqī* illuminationism of the medieval Sufi saint Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (1171–1208), as well as the neo-Platonic and neo-Aristotelian metaphysics of Ibn al-ʿArabi (1163–1240) and the thought of other, even earlier figures such as Ibn-i Sina (979–1037), their works were also meant to revive, revise, and synthesize these various strands of the Hellenic and Perso-Islamic philosophical traditions. Needless to say, their works were also widely read in India, quite possibly by Chandar Bhan as well. And, in turn, many of the “Isfahan school” thinkers were themselves fascinated with India and Indian thought. Mir Findarski, in particular, not only traveled to the subcontinent but also wrote extensively on Indian religions, most notably in a commentary on a Persian translation of the *Yoga Vasistha* prepared by Nizam Panipati and originally commissioned by Jahangir while the latter was still a prince. So there is little doubt that the robust traffic in such philosophical ideas across the Indo-Persian world would have had some influence on our erudite and intellectually curious *munshī*.

... When we recall, however, that *Chahār Chaman* as a whole was intended as a didactic text, carefully crafted to display the exemplary skills and attributes of a successful *imperial* secretary to the wider Indo-Persian reading public, we must ask: What are these esoteric passages even doing in this work? One answer, of course, is that Chandar Bhan simply wanted to show that such metaphysical conversations were an important part of his everyday life, and especially his relationship with his brothers. In so doing, however, he also communicates to his
readers—and to us—the fact that brief notes like this (he often refers to them simply as *nukta*s, or “points”) were an important genre of Mughal writing unto themselves, a common, informal vehicle for the circulation of esoteric ideas via the epistolary networks of the day.

But there is another interpretation as well, one that I believe lies in Chandar Bhan’s more general views on the ideals of humility and self-control incumbent upon those who were given the privilege and responsibility of governance. At the philosophical level, Chandar Bhan valorizes a certain mystical epistemology, reflected for instance in his exaltation of the dream state (*khiwāb*) over the more quotidian “reality” of wakefulness (*bidāri*) and the allure of worldly desires and attachments (*ta’alluqāt*), which to him were mere illusions that distracted one from the true, cosmic Reality. These are common enough themes in Sufi and Vedantic thought, of course. But it is precisely in his repeated calls to abnegate the self that Chandar Bhan winds up, ironically enough, giving us powerful insight not only into his own personality but also into his wider views on the nature of Mughal service and the ideal attributes of those charged—as he was for much of his life—with the day-to-day exercise of Mughal power, administration, and governance.

Indeed, for Chandar Bhan, recognizing the dreamlike, illusory nature of empirical reality was not an excuse to withdraw entirely, as the hermit does, but rather an ethical demand placed on the Mughal gentleman—to avoid greed, to work hard, to cultivate one’s moral self, and to make the most of life. Perhaps nowhere is this ethos voiced more explicitly than in one of the last passages of *Chahār Chaman*, “A Vision of the Morning Garden,” in which Chandar Bhan urges his readers to remember that life is short, so they had best make the most of the time that they have:

“A Glimpse of the Morning Garden” [*Nazzāra-yi Gulshan-i Šubh*]

Before the rays of the great illuminating sun overspread the earth and the day; and before the chatter of the morning birds claws at the hearts of meditative people [*arbā-i āl*]; you should rise up from your dreams together with the heart-blossoming and perfume-scent-scattering breeze of the morning garden and take in the panoply of sights and smells of this colorful garden [of the world].

Lucky is he who, taking time’s rope [*sar-rishta*] in hand, understands that this state of wakefulness and the people who are currently alive [to enjoy it] are ever more ephemeral than those that have already passed by, and thus treats each breath as though it might be his last.

Take care not to take your breath for granted for even a single breath, For it could well be that this very breath may be your very last.

[*ghafat zi ihtiyāt-i nafas yak nafas makun
shāyad hamīn nafas nafas-i wāpasin buwad*]

(*CC*, 196)
It is precisely in his insistence on the ephemerality and transience of life, in other words, that Chandar Bhan produces, not fatalism and withdrawal, but rather a call to action—a sense of urgency that he, his brothers, and of course his readers should make the most of their this-worldly potential—even if it does all turn out to be one big dreamy illusion.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to read the contents of this fourth *chaman* simply as an afterthought, or as a random assortment of philosophical musings completely detached from the themes of the earlier parts of *Chahâr Chaman*. When viewed in light of the overall ethical message of the text, these metaphysical epistles emerge as yet one more among the many varieties of life writing that Chandar Bhan used to craft his public persona—a persona that reflected, in every way possible, his understanding of the ideally fashioned Mughal self.