Writing Self, Writing Empire

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Published by University of California Press


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In the previous chapters, we have examined Chandar Bhan Brahman’s life and career against the backdrop of multiple facets of seventeenth-century Mughal cultural and political life. Along the way, we have seen that he was patronized by, and often formed powerful and intimate friendships with, a veritable galaxy of Mughal notables, both Hindu and Muslim. He often recited his own poetry in palace gatherings and other occasions, both formal and informal, performances for which he was rewarded on numerous occasions by the emperor, with cash, or a robe of honor, or a promotion, or sometimes all of the above. He traveled with the court, serving for a time as Shah Jahan’s personal diarist (wāqī‘a-nawīs), and worked for nearly three decades in the office of the Mughal prime minister, most notably under the learned and widely admired wazīrs Afzal Khan Shirazi and Sa‘d Allah Khan. He was dispatched from time to time on sensitive matters of Mughal foreign policy, for instance assisting Sa‘d Allah Khan with the organization of the campaign in Balkh and Badakhshan in the 1640s, or serving as the lead envoy to the court of the recalcitrant rana of Mewar during a crisis in Mughal-Rajput relations a few years later. And he even appears to have had a fairly cordial relationship with the notoriously “orthodox” emperor Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir once the latter came to power in 1658, at least if Chandar Bhan’s letters to the new emperor are any indication.

Our munshi’s circle of friends, associates, and acquaintances also extended well beyond his immediate political patrons. As we have seen, Chandar Bhan carried on a rich epistolary correspondence with a wide network of Mughal cultural elites, including various mystical figures, minor officials who dabbled in literature, and even some of the most accomplished poets and other intellectuals of the era. He
was good friends, for instance, with the historian Muhammad Salih Kambuh, as well as prominent poets like Abu al-Barakat Munir Lahori and Muhammad Jan Quds, all of whom appear to have reciprocated Chandar Bhan’s friendship and admiration, as did many of the other mid-level Mughal officials and lower nobility with whom he exchanged letters.

One name that has been conspicuously absent from all of these discussions, however, has been that of Shah Jahan’s famously liberal eldest son, Prince Dara Shukoh (1615–59). Given this, it will perhaps come as some surprise to readers of my account of Chandar Bhan’s life and career that in the modern cultural memory of South Asia Chandar Bhan is more often than not remembered, if he is remembered at all, almost exclusively as an associate of Dara Shukoh—and Dara Shukoh alone. Our analysis of Chandar Bhan’s life, career, and cultural world thus cannot be completed without telling the story of how this peculiar, though largely fanciful, memory of Chandar Bhan’s relationship with Dara Shukoh came into being, and its crucial significance as a key building block in the larger modern historiography of Mughal imperial decline.

**DARA SHUKOH AND MODERN MUGHAL HISTORIOGRAPHY**

As a prelude to the discussion to follow, let us briefly examine a few salient aspects of Dara Shukoh’s career and how he is remembered in modern times, so that the more detailed examination below of how it is all relevant to Chandar Bhan’s story will be a bit clearer. Prince Dara was born in March of 1615, the first of Shah Jahan’s sons. Being the eldest son of the Mughal emperor, of course, automatically made Dara a person of considerable status and influence, even as a young boy. Like the others in his family line, he was a direct descendant of the great conquerors Chingiz Khan and Amir Timur and was thus suitably trained in the arts of war and governance during his youth. But Dara’s own bloodline was also quite cosmopolitan and was in many ways a microcosm of the cultural and ethnic diversity of Mughal India generally: through his father, he was descended from an illustrious line of Central Asian Turks; but through his mother, Mumtaz Mahal (d. 1631), the daughter of Iranian émigrés, he could also lay direct claim to the ancient cultural and political heritage of the Persianate world; and of course he was born in India and through his paternal grandmother Taj Bibi (d. 1619) was in fact one-fourth Rajput.

Already by his twenties Dara Shukoh had been given a generous military rank (mansāb) and his first official command, and in 1642, when still a few years shy of thirty, Dara was given the title “Prince of Great Fortune” (shāhzāda-yi buland iqbāl). By this time, he was widely seen as the likely heir apparent (wali-‘ahd) to Shah Jahan’s throne. But Dara’s “heir-apparency” also needs to be seen in its
proper historical context. For one thing, Shah Jahan’s public acknowledgment of Dara as his probable successor broke sharply with the existing traditions of Timurid succession, in which, as Munis Faruqui has persuasively argued, notions of primogeniture were largely subordinated to a culture of open princely competition. Every prince, including Dara himself, knew the rules of this game, the contemporary shorthand for which was *yā takht yā tābūt*—for a Mughal prince, it was “either the throne or the grave.” Such open competition for power put pressure on successful Mughal princes to expand their social and political networks and to build alliances beyond the existing frontiers of Mughal dominion. In so doing, Faruqui suggests, they also played a crucial role in Mughal state building generally, partly through princes serving as governors of strategically important frontier provinces, and thus also, in turn, laying a foundation for further imperial expansion. As one can imagine, such independent princely networks and alliances became crucial when the time came to fight for the throne upon the sitting ruler’s death.

In other words, while we might consider Dara’s public status as heir-apparent to have conferred a kind of royal legitimacy, his fraternal competitors for the throne and many other contemporary elites would have seen it as nothing more than a hollow, even insulting, token gesture. It should come as no surprise, then, that when rumors of Shah Jahan’s ill health began to circulate in late 1657, not one of Dara’s brothers deferred to his supposed right to rule, and an intense four-way struggle for the throne ensued. Shah Shuja’, who had a distinguished record of military service and was then serving as the governor of Bengal, was the first to declare himself the new ruler. He was quickly followed by Murad Bakhsh, who was then serving as the governor of Gujarat, and then, in turn, by Aurangzeb, who was at the time posted to his second stint as the Mughal viceroy in the Deccan. Aurangzeb and Murad Bakhsh quickly formed an alliance and began advancing toward Agra from the southwest, while Shah Shuja’ was closing in from the east. But by the time everyone realized that Shah Jahan had, in fact, not died, it was too late—the armies had already been mobilized and were on the march. War was inevitable.

As all this was happening, Dara Shukoh was with his father in Agra, and any neutral assessment of the events leading up to and during the war of succession would be hard-pressed not to conclude that he was relatively ill prepared to seize the moment. Though he certainly had an illustrious military rank, and had led a handful of campaigns—most notably, the failed attempt to retake Qandahar in 1653—he had far less actual martial experience than any of his three brothers, especially Shah Shuja’ and Aurangzeb, who both had extremely distinguished and hard-won reputations as battle-tested leaders with loyal followings. Dara also had almost no experience as an independent governor or administrator. On the contrary, precisely because of his status as likely heir, Dara had spent most of his
life at court under the watchful eye of his father. He was thus largely insulated—some might even say sheltered—from much of the actual day-to-day business of Mughal politics and governance, especially the art of independently managing armies, building provincial networks, and forging the kind of strategic alliances that his brothers had to cultivate over the course of their princely careers. As a result, even though he had the backing of the imperial army in Agra, and the support of his father Shah Jahan and many in the Mughal nobility (at least initially), when things came to a head Dara proved unable to use these strengths to his advantage and made a number of crucial errors—both strategic choices and tactical mistakes on the battlefield—that wound up costing him the throne and eventually his life. Aurangzeb, a wily tactician and a hardened warrior, emerged as the winner of the four-way struggle, eventually dispatching not only Dara but also Shah Shuja’ and even his erstwhile ally Murad Bakhsh.

Now, from the perspective of these practical realities, it is perhaps not so difficult to see why Dara was unsuccessful in his bid for the throne. It is also not especially hard to believe that for many Mughal observers at the time like, say, Chandar Bhan Brahman, Aurangzeb’s victory in the war of succession was not only a plausible potential outcome but in fact a fairly predictable one that did not appear to change the basic nature of Mughal rule, at least not right away. This, at any rate, would be one possible explanation for why Chandar Bhan did not really dwell on the war of succession anywhere in his oeuvre, and even, as we have seen in earlier chapters, maintained a good relationship with Aurangzeb in the first decade or so after the latter’s accession. Whatever contemporary observers may have thought of Aurangzeb’s personal piety and austere personality, in other words, in 1658 at the very least they would have had little doubt about his basic competence as a ruler and conqueror. After all, the vetting process of the war of succession had itself proven those capabilities.

Meanwhile, with few exceptions the vast majority of Mughal nobles and other officials—even many who had supported other contenders for the throne—retained their privileges and titles once Aurangzeb was in power, giving them little incentive to reject his claim. But even when questions about his right to rule did arise, as they did in certain quarters, it is important to remember that they arose mainly because Shah Jahan, the legitimate sitting monarch, was in fact still alive—not because of any significant groundswell of enthusiasm for Dara Shukoh. Some contemporary reports do suggest that when the prince was finally captured and paraded through the streets of Delhi on the way to his imprisonment and eventual execution, the people of Delhi came out en masse to watch, many of them bemoaning Dara’s fate. But among the nobility and other influential circles, there appears to have been pretty widespread acceptance of the outcome of the war and Aurangzeb’s accession to the throne. As we saw above in chapters 1 and 2, Chandar Bhan even wrote a letter of congratulations to the new emperor, and
in Chahār Chaman he also praised Aurangzeb’s decision to promote his fellow munshi Raghunath Ray to the position of chief financial officer of the realm.

Yet in modern historiography and cultural memory these events have been fairly consistently viewed as nothing less than a utter catastrophe for India. Why is this so? The short answer, as with a good deal of modern colonial and nationalist historiography in South Asia, is religion—specifically, the idea that Dara and Aurangzeb’s competing attitudes toward religion not only helped determine the outcome of the war of succession but were, in fact, reliable indicators of their respective fitness to rule. Dara, who is seen as by far the more tolerant and open-minded of the two, is almost universally adored in modern historiography, where he is hailed as a champion of Mughal pluralism in the mold of his great-grandfather Akbar; Aurangzeb, on the other hand, is almost uniformly reviled, cast as a religious zealot driven solely by a hatred of Hindus and a desire to Islamize the subcontinent at all costs, or at least to use the state to terrorize its non-Muslim populations with every waking breath. Dara’s execution in 1659 has thus turned out to be one of the most overdetermined events in all of South Asian historiography. It is the quintessential “What if?” moment, often viewed with modern (not to mention postmodern) hindsight as a kind of civilizational tipping point away from Akbar’s laudably pluralist policies toward a more austere pious—many would say outright bigoted—set of imperial policies under Aurangzeb. This Islamist turn is said to have alienated Hindus, incited a “Rajput rebellion,” fractured political coalitions, drained the treasury, and thus hastened the disintegration of the empire, in turn setting the subcontinent on an inexorable path (with the aid of British colonial mischief) to partition in 1947. As one modern critic colorfully put it, this was not merely a moment of import for seventeenth-century Mughal politics, but “India’s War of Succession, without exaggeration an almost Shakespearean tragedy [that would] unwind, through crisis after crisis of towering implication involving not only Shah Jahan and his children but their children and their children’s children and millions of anonymous participants. When a concatenation of ruin begins, nothing can stop it.”; In this modern formulation of Dara the “good Muslim” falling victim to Aurangzeb the “bad Muslim,” both men’s personalities, and all the complexities of seventeenth-century Mughal culture, politics, and society generally, are distilled into one simple proposition—that Aurangzeb’s greater piety was the main cause of Mughal decline, whereas Dara’s tolerance would have somehow prevented all that “concatenation of ruin.”

Now, there is absolutely no doubt that on balance Dara Shukoh was a more open-minded and intellectually curious person than Aurangzeb, who by all accounts was a much more conventionally pious Muslim than his older brother. Dara was a practicing Sufi of the Qadiri order, for instance, but he was also known to frequent the company of Hindu yogis, scholars, and other intellectuals. As Shah Jahan’s eldest son, Dara had immense power and resources at his disposal
with which to patronize the scholars, poets, mystics, and other intellectuals who shared his wide-ranging interest in the study of mysticism and comparative religions, and in these fields Dara’s accomplishments are virtually beyond question. He himself composed highly regarded mystical poetry, several important Sufi hagiographies such as Ṣafīnāt al-Auliyyā (1640), Sakinat al-Auliyyā (1642), and Hasanāt al-ʿĀrifīn (1652–54), and general treatises on the mystical path like Ṭariqat al-Haqiqat and Risāla-i Haqq-numā (1646), along with perhaps his most famous work, a profound meditation on the potential for conceptual rapprochement between Vedantic and Islamic metaphysical doctrines, known as the “Confluence of Two Oceans” (Majmaʿ al-Bahrayn, 1655). This text was later translated into Sanskrit as Samudrasangama. And, as if this weren’t enough of a contribution to early modern South Asian intellectual history, Dara is also responsible for commissioning several groundbreaking translations of Sanskrit philosophy, including a new translation of the Yoga-Vasishta (though it is important to note that there were already at least three Persian translations in existence before Dara’s) and, perhaps most ambitiously, the Upanishads.

All this knowledge production has left an important legacy, not just in South Asia, but indeed for the entire modern world. As many scholars have noted, for instance, it was Dara’s Persian translation of the Upanishads as “The Great Secret” (Sirr-i Akbar)—not the Sanskrit original—that found its way into the hands of the eighteenth-century French Orientalist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) and, via the latter’s Latin version, into the libraries of so many luminaries of Europe’s “Oriental Renaissance” (Schopenhauer is said to have kept a copy of the text by his bedside, and even to have gone so far as to name one of his poodles “Atma” as an homage to the Upanishads’ notion of the transcendant cosmic soul). Such intellectual genealogies can be a potent reminder of the degree to which colonized Asian scholarship and knowledge systems often lurk repressed behind many landmark “discoveries” of European intellectual modernity. But even as we must do more, generally speaking, to recuperate such genealogies and integrate them into a more truly global intellectual history of early modernity, for South Asian historiography specifically an eclectic figure like Dara Shukoh can actually present somewhat of a problem, particularly where our understanding of the larger issue of tolerance is concerned.

This is because there are at least two implicit assumptions in the conventional narrative charted above that deserve a bit of scrutiny. The first is that Dara’s tolerance and intellectual curiosity necessarily made him a kinder, gentler, more virtuous person than his brother. But why should we assume this? It may well be true on some abstract level that a person who displays great religious tolerance and intellectual curiosity will be more inclined to be generous, loving, and kind. But there are also plenty of examples of brilliant writers, scholars, and artists over the years who were tolerant in their politics and intellectual pursuits but prickly,
arrogant, and antisocial in their personal life. It is generally assumed in modern South Asian scholarship that Dara was more like the former caricature, but what if it turns out that he was more like the latter? How would that affect our view of his legacy?

Indeed, though Dara’s most vehement antagonists in the immediate wake of the war of succession were certain members of the conservative Muslim ‘ulamā and various partisans of Aurangzeb, these were hardly Dara’s only critics. The European travelers Francois Bernier and Niccolao Manucci, who were both in India during the war of succession, also both suggest numerous reasons why Dara’s personality and general comportment may have played a part in his downfall, irrespective of spiritual matters. Manucci’s version is especially revealing, since he was an avowed partisan of Dara and fought beside him as an artillery specialist during the war of succession. Note, though, how his praise for some of Dara’s good qualities quickly segues into a rather scathing indictment of the prince’s arrogance, not to mention his sometimes insufferable behavior toward others:

The first-born son of King Shahjahan was the prince Dara, a man of dignified manners, of a comely countenance, joyous and polite in conversation, ready and gracious of speech, of most extraordinary liberality, kindly and compassionate, but over-confident in his opinion of himself, considering himself competent in all things and having no need of advisers. He despised those who gave him counsel. Thus it was that his dearest friends never ventured to inform him of the most essential things. . . . He assumed that fortune would invariably favour him, and imagined that everybody loved him. . . . [But] the haughty Dara scorned the nobles, both in word and deed, making no account of them. . . . [He] depreciated all the nobles at the court, above all the generals and commanders . . . [who] showed themselves aggrieved and disgusted. All these things united were the chief causes of Dara’s ruin and death. He might have been King of Hindustan if he had known how to control himself.8

These observations from Manucci point to a certain discontent with Dara festering among the Mughal nobility, many of whom clearly found the prince’s arrogant airs to be off-putting, boorish, immature, and downright unseemly for one with pretensions to the throne. To be sure, readers familiar with Mughal history will note that Manucci’s testimony should be treated with a certain amount of due skepticism, not least because his memoir was not actually penned until several decades after the events themselves, and he often had his own agenda in writing it.9 But even if Manucci exaggerated certain details as he recalled these events years later, let us not forget: he had been an ally of Dara’s, not a critic, and thus was trying to paint the prince in the best possible light. Even so, the general tenor of his remarks regarding Dara’s relationships with members of the Mughal nobility is inescapable—that the prince routinely spurned sincere counsel and had difficulty
“controlling himself,” resulting in fairly consistent breaches of etiquette and civility that “aggrieved and disgusted” many important and influential potential allies.

Little if any of this grumbling had anything to do, apparently, with Dara’s eclectic religious proclivities or intellectual pursuits, but it did prove exceedingly consequential when the time came to choose sides—and change sides—during the war of succession. Rajputs such as Jai Singh were just as likely as Muslims like Mahabat Khan and Shaista Khan to have been rankled by Dara’s behavior, and all three of these influential officers turned on Dara at one point or another during the events of 1657–58, each for personal grievances that had nothing to do with religion. Rumor had it, too, that the notorious traitor Khalil Allah betrayed Dara at the battle of Samugarh not because of any lofty ideals or principled stance against the crown prince’s eclectic religious pursuits, but rather for the oldest and most banal reason there is: jealousy produced by Dara’s intimacy with the man’s wife.¹⁰

In other words, despite the great admiration in some circles for Dara’s intellect and cultural patronage, there was also a significantly large and important constituency of contemporary Mughal elites, both Hindu and Muslim, who disliked him for purely nonsectarian reasons, in some cases out of personal enmity, and in some cases, no doubt, because of a sincere belief that Dara’s narcissistic arrogance simply made him unfit for the throne.

This brings us to the second major assumption implicit in the modern conventional wisdom about these events: namely, the notion that because Dara was more intellectually curious and tolerant of heterodox religiosity he necessarily would have made a better emperor than Aurangzeb, and somehow could have prevented the Mughal decline and the “concatenation of ruin” said to go with it. It is certainly a possibility; but it is also a purely counterfactual one that takes no account whatsoever of all the many complex economic, political, and social transformations taking place in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century India that had little or nothing to do with the emperor’s personal religious proclivities. Nor does it take any account, of course, of the kind of friction between Dara and some of the Mughal nobility just discussed, or the role that his own actions, personal foibles, and human frailties may have played in his failure to win the throne.

Even before the war of succession, there are indications that problems were brewing between Dara and those whom he would presume to lead. Munis Faruqui has noted, for instance, that during the 1653 Qandahar campaign Dara’s leadership style became a source of great tension with some of his most important commanders. In a harsh but telling verdict, Faruqui concludes that Dara’s failure in Qandahar “threw a spotlight on [his] military inexperience . . . [and] revealed the prince’s reliance on soothsayers and charlatans for important military decisions, his naïveté, his callousness toward individual suffering, and his inability to work with any nobles assigned to his command.” Even if we admit the potential for partisan hyperbole in the Persian sources Faruqui has relied on for making
this judgment, the fact remains that such behavior was likely to be far more con-
sequential to Dara’s ultimate doom than any of his religious investigations, par-
ticularly at the key moment “when the time came to marshal the Mughal nobility
against his brother in 1658.”

We even occasionally find evidence of some of these character flaws on Dara’s
part in the modern colonial and nationalist historiography, despite the overall
favoritism toward him in most such works. For instance, even the eminent early
twentieth-century historian Jadunath Sarkar, who was definitely no fan of Au-
rangzeb, couldn’t help acknowledging that Dara’s ultimate failure had been, in
some measure, a failure of character. Sarkar praises Dara for having “taken after
his great-grandfather Akbar,” especially in his thirst for religious knowledge and
his efforts “to find a meeting-point for Hinduism and Islam in those universal
truths which form the common basis of all true religions and which fanatics are
too apt to ignore in their zeal for the mere externals of faith.” But despite Sarkar’s
admiration for these spiritual pursuits and intellectual virtues, when it comes to
describing Dara’s actual preparedness and fitness to rule he strikes a far more
ambivalent note and admits that some of Dara’s less redeeming qualities played a
key role in his downfall:

His father’s excessive love did him a distinct harm. He was always kept at Court and
never, except at the third siege of Qandahar, sent to conduct campaigns or admin-
ister provinces. Thus, he never acquired experience in the arts of war and govern-
ment; he never learnt to judge men by the crucial test of danger and difficulty; and
he lost touch with the active army. Hence, he was rendered unfit for that war of
succession which among the Mughals served as a practical test for the survival of the
fittest. His unrivalled wealth and influence were not likely to develop moderation,
self-restraint, or foresight in him, while the fulsome flattery which he received from
all must have aggravated the natural pride and arrogance of an heir to the throne of
Delhi. Evidently, he was no judge of character. Men of ability and self-respect must
have kept away from such a vain and injudicious master. Dara was a loving husband,
a doting father, and a devoted son; but as a ruler of men in troubled times he must
have proved a failure. Long continued prosperity had unnerved his character and
made him incapable of planning wisely, daring boldly, and achieving strenuously,
or, if need be, of wresting victory from the jaws of defeat by desperate effort or heroic
endurance. Military organization and tactical combination were beyond his power.
And he had never learnt by practice how to guide the varying tides of a battle with
the coolness and judgment of a true general. This novice in the art of war was des-
tined to meet a practised veteran as his rival for the throne.

However much Sarkar tries to deflect the blame—onto Shah Jahan, for over-
indulging and sheltering Dara, or onto the “excess wealth” that prevented Dara
from learning humility and moderation, or onto the culture of “fulsome flattery”
that poisoned Dara’s judgment by inflating his pride and arrogance—here again,
if we read between the lines there is no escaping the conclusion that however tolerant Dara may have been in the religio-intellectual domain, in day-to-day courtly life he had a tendency to rub many people the wrong way.

One can surmise, too, that some of these problems would have persisted even if Dara had become emperor, leaving one to wonder whether he would have made such a great emperor after all. Indeed, given his overall lack of military experience and administrative acumen, it is just as plausible to suppose that he would have been a terrible ruler, one who might even have hastened the decline in the Mughal imperial fortunes. It is impossible to say either way. But modern scholarship almost never even considers the latter possibility, much less ponders the implications for how we interpret these events and their significance within the larger context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Mughal culture and politics. Indeed, far from holding Dara at least partially responsible for his own poor showing in the war of succession, modern commentators are far more likely to perform an ironic reversal of the usual epithet for Dara in Mughal sources—the “Prince of Great Fortune” (shâhzâda-i buland-iqbal)—and describe him instead as the “ill-fated, lovable Dara Shikoh.”

It is as if, pace Shakespeare’s Cassius (Julius Caesar 1.2), all fault emanated from his stars rather than himself. Meanwhile, the routine juxtaposition of Dara with Akbar (of which one can also see numerous examples in the previous note), to the exclusion of all other Indo-Muslim monarchs, nobles, and intellectuals who might have shared a similar “admiration for Hindu culture,” creates an effect in modern South Asian historiography whereby the two are treated not only as exceptional individuals but in fact as exceptions to an implied default position of Islamic orthodoxy to which Aurangzeb is viewed as some sort of logical “return.” Whatever their basis in some kernel of historical reality, the sharp dichotomies of this model could use considerable reconsideration. Indeed, as I’ve tried to show throughout this book, a great many seventeenth-century Mughal nobles and members of the Indo-Muslim intelligentsia besides Dara Shukoh showed plenty of civility and courtesy toward the Hindus in their midst and even, like Asaf Khan and several others, patronized the kinds of literary and scientific works of cultural translation for which only Dara and Akbar usually get credit. Moreover, a fair amount of recent scholarship has shown that, if nothing else, there was a great deal of complexity to both Dara’s and Aurangzeb’s personalities and career trajectories. Thus, while their respective religious perspectives certainly informed their worldviews—how could they not?—these perspectives were far from determinative, politically speaking, in any kind of straightforward way. Politics still mattered, as did personalities and a great many regional, socio-economic, and historical contingencies that had little if anything to do with some final palace showdown between intellectually liberal tolerance and implacable orthodoxy.
None of this, it should be emphasized, is intended to diminish the profound importance of Dara’s intellectual patronage, or to suggest that his openness to cultural translation and pluralism does not matter. It most certainly does matter, and as I myself noted above, we need more scholarship on such topics, not less. But given how one-sided the portrayal of Dara has been in modern scholarship and commentary, and given the related assumptions that characterization has engendered—that Dara was lovable, kind, and universally admired and that he would have definitely made a better emperor than Aurangzeb—it is nevertheless equally important to show that he was not necessarily the saint he has often been made out to be. To draw once more on Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (3.2), it is as though Antony’s famous proposition—that “the evil that men do lives after them; / the good is oft interred with their bones”—has been inverted in Dara’s case, to such an extent that most mentions of him today focus almost exclusively on the nobility of his spiritual pursuits, while any flaws he may have had were buried with him. Thus, somewhat ironically, one of the key challenges facing any intellectually honest reappraisal of Dara Shukoh’s cultural and political legacy will be to grapple with the negative image of him among certain early modern audiences.

Of course, the most obvious form of critique against Dara after the war of succession was charges of heresy and/or apostasy, leveled toward the end of his own life and in some of the historical chronicles composed during Aurangzeb’s reign to justify Dara’s execution. But even the deployment of this “weapon of heresy,” as Craig Davis has rightly noted, has to be seen in the context of Dara’s threat to Aurangzeb’s nascent imperial authority while he was still alive, and thus as a political act—one that merely helped rationalize what was, after all, a standard Timurid practice of eliminating political rivals for *raisons d’état*. While heresy may well have been Aurangzeb’s public excuse for eliminating Dara, let us not forget that the new emperor also imprisoned his father—the supposedly “orthodox” Shah Jahan—and eliminated both of his other brothers for good measure. Even if we make allowances for the charges of heresy against Dara being a product of Aurangzeb’s imperial propaganda, however, an undercurrent in other early modern sources suggests he was a rather immature, unkingly figure. The origins of this latter discourse are no doubt to be found in the kinds of brash, uncouth behavior we have noted above, which seem to have seeped into the popular memory of Dara well beyond the immediate precincts of the court, in the emergent Mughal public sphere. Thus, by the end of the eighteenth century, one even finds Hindu literati like Anandaghana “Khwash” depicting Dara in his *Maṣnawi-yi Kaj-Kulāh* (ca. 1794–95) less as an august but ill-fated sovereign who represented the last lost hope for tolerant Hindustan than as a precocious, oversexed, and sophomoric youth in desperate need of good guidance. Not all sources depict him this way, but there was nevertheless a noticeable strain of critique in the quasi-popular image of Dara that emerged in the generations after his death, partly in court chron-
icles, but also in literary texts that were themselves informed by the gossip and chatter in the bazaars, coffeehouses (gahwa-khānas), huqqa stalls, literary salons (mushā’īras), and other sites of urban mingling in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North India.

One crucial site for the textualization of this somewhat amorphous critical discourse was the genre of literary biographical compendia, or tazkirās, which saw an efflorescence in India beginning in the last decades of the seventeenth century and continuing on through the eighteenth. Such tazkirās provide an important, if underappreciated, window onto the sort of political critiques that were possible in the emergent Mughal public sphere, in which criticism of prominent public figures was often subtly encoded in wry anecdotes, jokes, satirical poetry, and other forms of urban “gossip.”19 The genre reflects an interesting synergy between the oral and textual cultures of late Mughal India, blending information compiled from written sources with what the author himself claims to have heard from reliable sources (“they say that one day, etc.”; “I heard from so-and-so that, etc.”). This feature of the genre often gives the tazkira literature an amusing, conversational feel. But it is also precisely by allowing this space for the oral, or one might even say the testimonial, that such texts—unlike their historical chronicle counterparts—were able to transmit alternative discourses that may well have been “true” at some level, though not always, and in any case were often empirically unverifiable. Reliable or not, these tazkirās circulated extremely widely and have exercised a powerful role in shaping the modern cultural memory of many members of the early modern Indo-Persian intelligentsia.

In Dara’s case, interestingly enough, most of this alternative critical discourse is expressed obliquely, not so much in direct accounts of Dara himself as through narratives about other prominent figures said to have been associated with him. This is, perhaps, one reason that the strain of criticism of the prince found in such anecdotes has not really been examined carefully by modern social and political historians. But—and here we are finally coming full circle—it is precisely where someone like munshī Chandar Bhan Brahman comes into the picture and is conscripted to serve as a corroborating witness.

THE MUNSHĪ AND THE PRINCE

To see how all this relates to Chandar Bhan, and to get a sense of just how far removed the modern image of him has become from what we have encountered in the previous five chapters, let us try a thought experiment. Imagine, if you will, a student looking for information on Chandar Bhan Brahman in the Encyclopedia Britannica. She will not find a separate entry for him, but maybe, if she knew where to look, she just might happen across our munshī’s name in a passage located in the section “Islamic Arts,” subsection “New Importance of Indian Litera-
The heir apparent of the Mughal Empire, Dārā Shikōh (executed 1659), also followed Akbar’s path. His inclination to mysticism is reflected in both his prose and poetry. The Persian translation of the *Upanishads*, which he sponsored (and in part wrote himself), enriched Persian religious prose and made a deep impression on European idealistic philosophy in the 19th century. A group of interesting poets gathered about him, none of them acceptable to orthodoxy. They included the convert Persian Jew Sarmad (executed 1661), author of mystical *robā’iyyāt*, and the Hindu [Chandar Bhan] Brahman (died 1662), whose prose work *Chahār chaman* (Four Meadows) gives an interesting insight into life at court.

With the long rule of Dārā Shikōh’s brother, the austere Aurangzeb (died 1707), the heyday of both poetry and historical writing in Muslim India was over. Once more, orthodox religious literature gained preeminence, while poets tried to escape into a fantasy world of dreams.¹⁰

Here we have a concise, yet potent, recapitulation of the typical narrative of Mughal golden age and decline available in most modern historiography. Akbar was great in every way, while nothing worth mentioning happened under his immediate successors Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Only Dara Shukoh truly “followed Akbar’s path,” a phrasing that also suggests that nothing related to the larger Islamic world, or Indo-Muslim political or intellectual history prior to Akbar’s reign, need be considered germane to Dara’s worldview, while it literally goes without saying that no one else in the era’s Indo-Muslim cultural elite did anything to help nurture, much less advance, the Mughal cultures of civility and *ṣulṭān-i kull* that Dara is thought to have epitomized.

Special praise for Dara’s “inclination to mysticism” only further reinforces this exceptionalist subtext, giving the impression that Dara must have been somehow unique in this regard, when in fact, as we have seen clearly in previous chapters, nothing could be further from the truth—Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and even Aurangzeb, like many other figures in the Mughal nobility and broader intelligentsia, all exhibited powerful mystical inclinations that to this day go largely unacknowledged. But, when framed in this way, even the just acknowledgment of Dara’s achievements as an intellectual and a patron, admitted to have “enriched Persian religious prose and made a deep impression on European idealistic philosophy,” winds up having a wistful, ominous ring to it—as if he were the only person other than Akbar to have done so, the last lost hope for a pluralistic, uncolonized, and unpartitioned Hindustan.

Meanwhile “the austere” Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir (r. 1658–1707), besides being cast one-dimensionally as a fanatical bigot, is also, for good measure, tarred with the brush of illegitimacy for having executed the supposed rightful “heir apparent” to the throne. As noted above, this insinuation is more than a bit misleading.
Nevertheless, we are told, Aurangzeb’s usurpation was a cultural disaster, causing “the heyday of both poetry and historical writing” to come crashing to a halt, not just for the Mughal era, but for all Muslim India. His particular brand of piety, moreover, is seen, not as a new and historically specific phenomenon, but rather as a return to an orthodoxy that is implied to have been lurking there all along, riding out the Akbar and Dara moment until “once more, orthodox religious literature gained preeminence,” leaving poets and other “interesting” people no recourse but the “fantasy world of dreams.”

Among these “interesting” people who gathered around Dara, we find none other than our munshi Chandar Bhan Brahman, along with the eccentric wayfarer Muhammad Sa’id Hakim Sarmad “(executed 1661),” who is the only other specific example given. Of course, it is hard to quibble with Sarmad’s inclusion in a list of “interesting” Mughal intellectuals, for he was arguably one of the most fascinating people in all of seventeenth-century India. A Jew from Armenia, Sarmad was later educated in Persia, converted to Islam, and then came to the subcontinent via the port of Thatta (Sindh) in the 1632. There he fell madly in love with a Hindu boy named Abhay Chand, and had some sort of rapturous mystical epiphany, after which he and Abhay Chand spent roughly the next twenty-five years wandering the subcontinent, usually naked, before finally landing up in Delhi in the 1650s. Once in Delhi, Sarmad appears to have developed quite a local following, which drew the attention of not only Dara, but also Shah Jahan, who is reported to have made inquiries about him as well. But once the war of succession began, Sarmad is said to have publicly predicted Dara’s victory. This, for obvious reasons, put him at odds with Aurangzeb, who ultimately executed him—ostensibly for obscenity, under the pretense of Sarmad’s refusal to wear clothes, but also clearly as a political vendetta. There is a fairly sizable scholarly literature on Sarmad, and I myself have also discussed some aspects of his peripatetic career and its relevance to the larger cultural memory of Dara Shukoh elsewhere. But here let us simply note that his two main distinguishing characteristics according to the Encyclopedia Britannica entry quoted above are apparently that he was a “convert Persian Jew” (though a convert to what is not entirely clear, if one reads Sarmad’s poetry and the sources that mention him) and that he wrote mystical quatrains (though this was of course hardly unique in Mughal India).

Chandar Bhan, for his part, appears to have been the only “interesting” person in this circle to have escaped execution, while it would seem that in the eyes of the late Annemarie Schimmel, the editor of this Encyclopedia Britannica entry and one of the most highly esteemed modern scholars of the Indo-Islamicate world, his most pertinent contributions to all this eclecticism were simply that he was a Hindu and that he wrote an account of court life containing “interesting insights.” Such were the trivial transgressions—having once been a Jew, writing mystical poetry, merely being a Hindu who wrote notable works in Persian—that
could, apparently, make one “unacceptable to orthodoxy” and even endanger one’s life in mid-seventeenth-century Mughal India if one lacked the protection of heroically tolerant patrons like Akbar and Dara Shukoh.

But if Chandar Bhan’s experience and broad network of friends, associates, and patrons proves anything, it is that Dara was clearly not the only Muslim with whom a prominent Hindu administrator and intellectual could find camaraderie. Indeed, perhaps the biggest irony in all this, as the reader of the previous chapters will recognize, is the fact that Chandar Bhan had had a long and remarkable career already before there is any record of his having even met Dara Shukoh. (The same, incidentally, is true of Sarmad, who came to India in 1632 and had already spent nearly three decades wandering the subcontinent and interacting with all manner of nobles, intellectuals, and others before coming to Delhi and becoming part of “Dara’s circle.”) That career was facilitated by plenty of other Muslim patrons, interlocutors, and supporters. Thus, besides completely ignoring these other relationships, the version of our modern historiographical collective wisdom that is reflected in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry quoted above short-changes Dara’s own “circle”—as if these intellectuals’ passing acquaintance with Dara Shukoh were the only notable aspect of their lives and careers. The prince’s patronage and accomplishments are presented as somehow so singular and unique that there were simply no other powerful contemporaries toward whom non-Muslims and “interesting” Muslims could gravitate.

What we see crystallized in this passage, in other words, are some of the ways in which Dara’s power, intellectual charisma, and tragic end have exerted a kind of centripetal pull in the construction of historical narratives about Mughal tolerance generally, exaggerating the degree to which figures like Sarmad and Chandar Bhan depended on his support for their livelihood, and almost certainly also exaggerating the prince’s own counterfactual role in the eventual decline of the Mughals. Meanwhile, this bright spotlight on Dara has obscured in almost total darkness the contributions of numerous other patrons, interlocutors, and supporters—a great many of them also Muslim—whose tolerance was equally critical to the successful careers of these and many other fascinating Mughal intellectuals, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Given all this, as I mentioned above, it is of course telling that Chandar Bhan himself hardly even mentions Dara Shukoh in his entire oeuvre—there are no letters to Dara, no poems in praise of Dara (such as we have for both Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb), and no discussions of any kind of relationship they might have had. In fact, there are only a handful of brief references in contemporary seventeenth-century sources to indicate that the two of them had any relationship at all, and nearly all of these refer to events that took place in the 1650s, roughly four decades into Chandar Bhan’s career in Mughal service. The most we can really say is that at some point very late in his career Chandar Bhan did have some kind of relationship with Dara Shukoh. But there is
very little concrete evidence regarding the exact nature or extent of that relationship, and in any case Chandar Bhan’s status at the Mughal court would have been firmly established by then.

Let us briefly examine this concrete evidence before demonstrating why all this is so important. One context in which Chandar Bhan’s and Dara’s names come up together is the political crisis with Mewar in autumn 1654 (discussed in the last section of chapter 2 above), where Chandar Bhan served as Shah Jahan’s chief envoy to the court of Rana Raj Singh (r. 1652–80) in Udaipur. Though Chandar Bhan himself never mentions Dara Shukoh in connection with this crisis or its resolution, either in *Chahār Chaman* or in the series of letters to Shah Jahan collected in *Munsha’āt-i Brahman*, one wrinkle in this entire episode does appear to have involved the prince. One of the main Mughal complaints had been that in addition to other provocations like refortifying the citadel at Chittor, Rana Raj Singh had refrained from sending any troops in support of Dara Shukoh’s Qandahar campaign the previous year, an effort that ended in embarrassing failure. Despite this humiliation, Dara for some reason agreed—it is not entirely clear why—to intercede with Shah Jahan on the *rana*’s behalf during the Chittor crisis, urging a diplomatic rather than a military solution. And when Chandar Bhan was selected as one of the two representatives dispatched by the Mughal court to negotiate the final settlement, at least two contemporary sources—‘Inayat Khan’s *Shāh Jahān Nāma* and Muhammad Salih Kambuh’s ‘*Amal-i Šālih*—both referred to Chandar Bhan in their respective accounts of these events as Dara’s “diwān.”

This would appear to be definitive enough evidence that there was some sort of working relationship between Chandar Bhan and the prince. But neither of our sources gives any further details regarding precisely what the nature of that relationship was, or what, specifically, being Dara’s “diwān” meant in this context. It could certainly mean that Chandar Bhan was assigned at some point to work as one of the prince’s secretaries, but we have no other corroboration of this, either from these sources or from Chandar Bhan himself. On the contrary, as we saw above in chapters 1 and 2, Chandar Bhan’s own account of these years places him in the central *diwānī* working under Sa’d Allah Khan during this period. This would not necessarily preclude him from also doing some work for Dara on the side, of course. But whatever Chandar Bhan’s relationship with the prince may have been in the early 1650s, one thing we can say almost categorically is that as an official emissary from the Mughal court he was acting as Emperor Shah Jahan’s representative, not Dara’s. Moreover, even if we grant the possibility that our munshī got reassigned to work for Dara as a secretary at some point in the 1650s, there is not a single reference in any contemporary source (including the two just mentioned) connecting him to the prince any earlier than this, whereas we know he had extensive connections with many other Mughal officials, including Emperor Shah Jahan himself, for several decades.
The only other reliable contemporary evidence explicitly connecting Chandar Bhan to Dara Shukoh comes from roughly the same time frame and again involves our munshi apparently doing a bit of secretarial work for the prince. Specifically, it was Chandar Bhan who translated Dara’s dialogues with a Punjabi spiritual divine, commonly known as Baba Lal, into Persian. The conversations were originally conducted in some unspecified form of “Hindi,” according to a preface to the Persian version of the work. But Dara clearly wanted the text to reach a wider audience both in South Asia and beyond, hence Chandar Bhan’s translation. This written version of the dialogues did indeed circulate very widely in early modern India and has come down to us under a variety of names—Nādir al-Nikāt, Mukālama-yi Bābā Lāl wa Dārā Shukoh, Gosht-i Bābā Lāl, Sawāl-o-Jawāb-i Dārā Shukoh wa Bābā Lāl, among others—and even seems to have been translated into Sanskrit with the title Praśnottarāvalī (A series of questions and answers) sometime toward the end of the seventeenth century.

Once again, at first glance this would seem to indicate that Chandar Bhan was indeed a part of Dara’s inner intellectual circle. But here too, the larger context matters. The dialogues took place in the autumn of 1653, as Dara Shukoh was on his way back to Delhi following the disastrous Qandahar campaign—that is, the very same campaign for which Rana Raj Singh had failed to send support troops. The Mughals had already made a couple of unsuccessful attempts to retake this important frontier outpost in Shah Jahan’s later years, efforts that had been commanded by such notable stalwarts of the Mughal military apparatus as Aurangzeb and Sa’d Allah Khan. The 1653 campaign thus represented an opportunity for Dara to prove his martial mettle, not only to his indulgent father, but also to some of the factions at court that were skeptical of his prowess on the field of battle. In this, the prince appears to have failed spectacularly, and Dara’s resounding loss in Qandahar may well have been the most humiliating defeat on an already flimsy military résumé. And yet, despite the dismal failure of this mission—or indeed, perhaps because of it—Dara appears to have been in no great hurry to return directly to his father’s court. Instead, the prince broke journey somewhere on the outskirts of Lahore, where the dialogues with Baba Lal were held.

At least one modern source has suggested that Chandar Bhan accompanied the Qandahar campaign, while others have even suggested that Dara’s conversations with Baba Lal were actually hosted in the munshi’s own Lahore household. These details are difficult to corroborate one way or the other. But either way, in keeping with the modern image of Dara, one thing that most modern commentators seem to agree on is that the dialogues were yet further evidence of Dara’s singularly tolerant disposition—part of his “experiment in Hindu-Muslim unity,” as the French Orientalist Louis Massignon once called it. But given all the evidence of everyday Hindu-Muslim interaction during Shah Jahan’s era discussed in the previous chapters, the idea that such a dialogue (however profound) was a com-
plete novelty, or some sort of heroically tolerant gesture on Dara’s part, is simply not supported by the evidence.

One near-contemporary Persian source that mentions the dialogues rather matter-of-factly, for instance, is Sujan Rai Bhandari’s *Khulāṣat al-Tawārīkh* (1696), in a description of a town called Dhyanpur (literally, “City of Contemplation”):

Dhyanpur is the place where Baba Lal, a genius of mystical experience and discourse [sar-āmad-i arbāb-i hāl-o-qāl] who acted as a portal to the bounties of glorious God [maurid-i fuyūzāt-i izad-i zū al-jalāl], had his residence. In life he was a master of erudition and godly knowledge, and in the explication [guzārish] of divine Truth and gnosis he was a captain on a vast ocean of multiplicitous waves of eloquence [marzbān-i bahr-i amwāj-i gūn-gūn sukhanān būd].

Many classes of men, both elite and common, have become his disciple or devotee, and incorporated his Hindi poetry on matters of spiritual Truth, mystical gnosis, and divine unity into their regular prayer litanies [wird-wazīfa-i khwud dārand]. On several occasions during his life the Imperial Prince Dara Shukoh met with that celebrated saint and discussed the gnosis of God [ma’rifat-i ilāhī], whereupon Shah Jahan’s *munshi* Chandar Bhan committed their dialogues to the prison of the pen in an elegantly expressed Persian text.28

Readers familiar with such terminology will note that the language Sujan Rai uses to praise Baba Lal, even though by a Hindu, about a Hindu, is almost entirely drawn from Indo-Persianate Sufi idioms and that the topic of the dialogues themselves is described as “spiritual gnosis” (ma’rifat-i ilāhī). Even the prayers of his devotees are described not with what we would consider to be typical “Hindu” terms but rather as *wird-wazīfa* litanies. It would appear, then, that for at least some early modern writers such terminology was not necessarily always coded as “Muslim” but rather had become, especially in Mughal Persian texts written in certain circles, a kind of neutral idiom available for describing mystics, and mystical experience, of all types.29

But more importantly for present purposes, note too that the author describes Chandar Bhan specifically as a *munshī-yi shāh jahānī*, which can be translated as “Shah Jahan’s *munshi,*” or perhaps more generally as “*munshi* of Shah Jahan’s time.” There is no indication whatsoever that Chandar Bhan had some sort of special relationship with the prince beyond his general service to the court. It could be that he was simply the person commissioned to do the translation, nothing more. In terms of content, much of the dialogue concerns what I’ve been calling “mystical civility”—questions of ethics, humility, and maintaining a spiritual perspective even as a person engaged with worldly pursuits. One could even argue that the dominant theme of the dialogues is not spiritual matters as such but rather kingship—specifically, Dara’s desire to resolve the tension between the worldly demands of kingship and the otherworldly yearnings of the spiritual adept. This preoccupation is evident in some of the prince’s earlier works, too, such as *Sakīnat
The Persistence of Gossip

al-Auliyā, where he had noted that “he who is called by God a faqīr, though he appears to be an amīr, remains a faqīr” (ān ki nām-ash az ḥaqq faqīr ast agar chi amīr ast faqīr ast). Dara is not simply asking Baba Lal to explain Hinduism to him, in other words, but in fact asking for advice on how to be a better king and, even more significantly, how to be a better Muslim. In one especially revealing passage, Baba Lal advises Dara to make sure that as a king he continues to seek out “people of God” (ahl-i allāh). He—or at least Chandar Bhan’s incarnation of him—also demonstrates a robust familiarity with all manner of Islamicate theological concepts, not just through his consistent deployment of Sufi terminology, but also, for instance, in an exchange on the question of whether or not the Prophet Muhammad had a visible shadow. As if that weren’t enough, he also occasionally sprinkles his answers to the prince’s questions with Persian poetry, including direct quotations from the ghazals of Hafiz Shirazi.

Having just lost the battle for Qandahar, perhaps Dara was feeling the tension between his intellectual endeavors and the demands of rulership all too acutely, lending an even greater real-world seriousness to such recondite subject matter. There is evidence to suggest, moreover, that at least some early modern readers viewed Chandar Bhan’s Persian version of the dialogues in precisely this way—not merely as an inquiry into Hindu religion but as a text that fit comfortably within a whole spectrum of genres pertaining to political philosophy, rulership, and moral wisdom (akhlāq). One eighteenth-century manuscript miscellany, for instance, directly juxtaposes Chandar Bhan’s text with what the compiler describes in the colophon as “some intriguing and wonderful extracts from miscellaneous books” (ba’zī naqal-hā-yi gharib-o-‘ajib az kutub-i mutafarriqa), including specific excerpts from works on political history such as Iqbāl-nāma-yi Jahāngīrī, Ma’dan-i Akhbar, and Ḥabīb al-Siyār, as well as others that come directly out of the ādāb and akhlāq tradition, such as Abu al-Fazl’s ‘Iyār-i Dānish and Sa’di Shirazi’s Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk, and Sufi treatises on Hindu cosmology such as ‘Abd al-Rahman Chishti’s Mir’āt al-Makhlūqāt and Mir’āt al-Haqā’iq.

Seen in this light, Dara’s dialogues with Baba Lal appear less an “experiment in Hindu-Muslim unity,” as Massignon put it, than simply one contribution to a much broader Mughal curriculum of texts designed to teach the wise exercise of worldly power.

FROM INNOCENCE TO INSOLENCE: THE CURIOUS BEGINNINGS OF THE MODERN MEMORY OF CHANDAR BHAN

The larger significance of all this will become a bit clearer in the remainder of this chapter, as we trace the evolution of the somewhat peculiar memory of Chandar Bhan’s career that emerged in the ensuing decades and centuries. Much of this
cultural memory was initially formulated and refined in the many works of literary biography, or *tazkiras*, and other miscellaneous literary compendia that were produced in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Indo-Persian cultural world, most of which have brief and in some cases quite extensive entries on Chandar Bhan. The explosion of Persian writings in this genre during this period has not really received much modern scholarly attention and thus no theory explaining why the commemoration of famous literary careers became such a powerful impulse among early modern Indo-Persian literati at this particular historical moment. But it is clear that such texts worked on many levels, and some of the politico-cultural “work” that they performed involved far more than mere scholarly inquiry.

Among the first stand-alone *tazkiras* to contain an entry on Chandar Bhan was Muhammad Afzal Sarkhwush’s “Words of the Poets” (*Kalimāt al-Shu’arā*; 1682), compiled roughly ten to fifteen years after the *munshi*’s death. Sarkhwush acknowledges that Chandar Bhan “was of sound character” (*ṭabar‘-i rasā*) that he “was a treasure among the Hindus” (*dar hindū‘ān ghanimat būd*), and that “he composed poems that were clear and elegant in the style of the ancients [*ba ṭarz-i qudama*].” This last comment, of course, could easily be seen as damning the *munshi* with faint praise, especially in a literary cultural context where, as we saw in the previous chapter, “speaking the fresh” (*tāza-gū‘ī*) was considered the summum bonum of the poetic craft. Indeed, though Sarkhwush does acknowledge that Chandar Bhan “also had a knack for composing artful prose” (*dar inshā‘-pardāzī nīz salīqa dāsht*), his rather less enthusiastic endorsement of Chandar Bhan’s poetry hints at a curious antipathy toward the *munshi* that he then illustrates with a vivid anecdote:

One day, an order summoning him [Chandar Bhan] to recite a poem was issued directly from the Seat of the Imperial Caliphate [i.e., from Shah Jahan]. He recited this couplet:

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I have a heart so acquainted with infidelity that, however many times
I took it to the Ka’ba I brought it back still a Brahman.
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*ma-rā dili-st ba-kufr āshnā ki chandīn bār
ba ka‘ba burdam-o-bāz-ash barahman āwurdam*

Emperor Shah Jahan, the protector of the faith, became angry and declared: “This ill-starred infidel is a heretic. He should be executed.” Afzal Khan suggested [instead] that “the following couplet of Hazrat Shaikh Sa’di is an appropriate rejoinder”:

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Even if Jesus’s donkey goes to Mecca
It’s still just a jackass when it comes back.
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*khar-i ‘īsā agar ba makka rawad
chūn biyāyad hanūz khar bāshad*

The emperor smiled and turned his attention elsewhere. Meanwhile, they quickly escorted him [i.e., Chandar Bhan] out of the privy chamber [*diwan-i khāṣ*].34
Now, there is no evidence, either from Chandar Bhan’s own extensive writings, or from any other contemporary source composed during his lifetime, to corroborate that an encounter like this ever actually took place. Indeed, until Kalimāt al-Shu’arā, Chandar Bhan’s relationship with Shah Jahan had never been described by any source as anything but friendly and affectionate. Moreover, Sarkhwush’s chronology simply doesn’t work—we saw above in chapter 1 that although Chandar Bhan had been presented to Shah Jahan by Afzal Khan at least once during his early career, technically he did not begin his tenure at court until after Afzal Khan died in 1639. In fact, if anything the anecdote seems to be a clever inversion of Chandar Bhan’s own autobiographical account in which quite the opposite happened: far from offending the emperor with an impertinent verse, the munshi made a great impression on the bādshāh, at Afzal Khan’s funeral no less, with a witty panegyric quatrain in praise of the emperor himself!

Of course, it is also possible to read the anecdote in such a way that Afzal Khan is the real hero, using his wit to protect his naive protégé from the emperor’s dangerous temper. This interpretation would certainly comport better with the known historical evidence. But since Sarkhwush makes no mention of the wazir’s and the munshi’s prior relationship, it is difficult to draw a conclusion either way. Regardless, though, there is nothing in Sarkhwush’s version of the story that can really be disproved. The fact that Chandar Bhan himself never mentions an encounter like this does not necessarily mean that it never happened. Indeed, had such an unpleasant audience actually taken place one can certainly imagine that our munshi would have been embarrassed and reluctant to write about it.

Yet something about the story flies in the face of everything we know about Chandar Bhan’s personality and his relationship with the emperor. Virtually everything we know from Chandar Bhan’s own writings and other contemporary sources suggests that both Afzal Khan and the emperor were very cordial toward him. There is not a single mention in any source prior to Sarkhwush’s account of Shah Jahan ever getting so much as annoyed with his “Persian-knowing Hindu” (hindū-yi fārsī-dān), much less so angry that he wanted to punish—let alone execute—the munshi. Nor do we ever hear of a single occasion where Brahman’s religious background is raised as an issue of concern with respect to his ability to do his job. The overriding impression one gets is that Chandar Bhan was well liked, went about his business, impressed everyone with his talent and civility, and never, ever, ruffled any feathers whatsoever, much less those of the bādshāh.

In other words, nowhere among sources from Chandar Bhan’s actual lifetime do we find evidence of the type of brazenly cheeky attitude on display in this anecdote. On the contrary, in his own writings Chandar Bhan’s tone is without fail one of extreme—some might even argue obsequious—deference to the emperor’s majesty, and, as we detailed above in chapter 1, he had numerous occasions on which he had the opportunity to recite poetry for Shah Jahan (and later Aurangzeb, for that
matter), or had his verse communicated to them by some nobleman. In every single known instance Chandar Bhan followed the usual Mughal etiquette of praising the emperor with grandiloquent hyperbole. Not once in such a situation does he offer so much as a single couplet on even an innocuous nonpanegyric theme, much less something so “inflammatory” as we have in Sarkhwush’s anecdote.

We should add, too, that as M. A. H. Farooqui, the modern editor of Chandar Bhan’s *dīwān*, has pointed out, the verse in question does not seem to appear in any extant manuscript of Chandar Bhan’s collected verse, or even among the prodigious amount of poetry contained in his other surviving works. Nor, for that matter, is there a single *ghazal* in his entire *dīwān* with the right metrical and rhyme scheme to match this verse, or ending in the correct refrain “āwardam.”

True, such counterpositive evidence is not definitive—it is of course possible, however unlikely, that Chandar Bhan composed such a verse and then left it out of his *dīwān*—but it certainly is compelling.

With all that said, let us nevertheless suppose for argument’s sake that Chandar Bhan had in fact recited such a verse before the emperor. Given all we know about the antinomian tendencies in Persian poetry generally, and during Mughal times in particular, the idea that Shah Jahan would be so naive as to be offended by this verse simply strains credulity. After all, Mughal India was the place regularly hailed by early modern Indo-Persian literati as a land where one not only was free to think—and poeticize—unorthodox thoughts but could actually make a great living doing so. Playful, esoteric, and heterodox themes had been the heartbeat of Indo-Persian literary culture, in which ostensibly heretical practices such as idol worship were routinely valorized as metaphors for love of the divine, while orthodoxy of all kinds was dismissed as hypocritical.

We saw several examples of such verse in the previous chapter, but let us consider a few more. Long before Chandar Bhan came along, for instance, Amir Khusrau (d. 1325) had defiantly said in the fourteenth century:

Some say to me, ‘O idol worshipper, why don’t you just wear the Hindu’s sacred thread?’
But tell me, which of Khusrau’s blood vessels is not already a sacred thread?

[chand güyand ki rau zunnār band ai but-parast
az tan-i Khusrau kudāmin rag ki ån zunnār nīst]

Elsewhere, Khusrau turn’s the cleric’s puritanism on its head, asking him to bless his dabbling in idol worship as a virtue rather condemn it as heresy:

If you have any prayer for me, O preacher, make it this:
That this wanderer on idol street goes even further astray!

[gar ai zāhid du’-ā-yi khair migū’ī ma-rā in ġū
ki ån āwāra az kū-yi butān āwāra-tar bādā]
And long after Chandar Bhan had gone, the eighteenth-century Urdu poet Khwaja Mir Dard (1721–1785) wrote:

The idols that made you turn the temple desolate
O Shaikh! They’ve chosen my heart for their home.

\[jin ke sabab se dair ko tū ne kiyā kharāb
ai shaikh un buton ne mere dil mein ghar kiyā]\[37\]

Comparable verses from Chandar Bhan’s own contemporaries can easily be found, including this couplet from Talib Amuli (d. 1626–27), an Iranian émigré who, after a peripatetic career, wound up in India and served for a time as Jahan-gir’s poet laureate (malik al-shu’arā):

I do not condemn infidelity, I am not a bigoted believer;
I laugh at both, the Shaikh and the Brahman.

\[na malāmat-gar-i kufr-am na ta’assub-kash-i din
khanda-hā bar jadl-i shaikh-o-barhaman dāram\][38]

Even such basic tenets of Islamic religiosity as the importance of Mecca as the Muslim sacred space par excellence were not off limits, and poets throughout the centuries played with this type of insouciant rejection of orthodox strictures, finding cleverer and cleverer—or, in light of the previous chapter, we might say “fresher and fresher”—ways to express such imagery. In fact Shah Jahan’s own poet laureate Abu Talib Kalim (1585–1651), a man on whom the emperor famously and repeatedly lavished heaps of wealth and patronage, routinely explored such themes in his verse. For instance this couplet:

The same fire illuminates the congregations of both Muslim and infidel.
The very same spark resides in the stones of the Ka’ba and the temple.

\[majlis-furoz-i gabr-o-musalmān yak ātish ast
dar sang-i dair-o-ka’ba ba-juz yak sharār nīst\][39]

Or this one:

The sandal mark on the forehead of the Hindu idols is made with Kalim’s blood
Like dawn’s colorful glow adorns the resplendent brow of the morning sky

\[sandal-i hindū butān zi khūn-i Kalim ast
z-in shafaq ārāstand ṣubḥ-jābin rā\][40]

Beyond the ethical and theological issues, as we saw in the previous chapter there was a virtually ubiquitous streak of inventiveness, jocularity, performative excess, and recitational gamesmanship to such poetry that has been well documented, if rarely praised in modern scholarly works that view Mughal poetry only as decadent sabk-i hindī. This antinomian strain continued even after the
transition to *rekhtā* (i.e., Urdu) as a poetic medium in the eighteenth century, a literary culture in which poetic satire and subversive expressions were “not only made explicit but . . . carried to an extreme.”

In fact, at least one modern scholar has gone so far as to suggest that such “dissent” against orthodoxy was the dominant thematic topos of early modern Urdu poetry. In this context, the verse attributed to Chandar Bhan by Sarkhwush appears downright conventional, and memorable largely for its witty use of the existing theme rather than its alleged “heresy.” Sure enough, virtually the identical trope was deployed about a hundred years later in at least two verses by the celebrated Urdu poet Mir Taqi Mir (1723–1810):

> I went to Mecca, went to Madina, and went to Karbala
> And after all that gadding about came back the same as when I left.

\[
\text{makke gayā madīne gayā karbalā gayū} \\
\text{jaisā gayū thā hī chal phir ke ā gayā}
\]

If going on Hajj made one a man,
then the whole world would go;
Thus Mr. Shaikh has returned from Mecca,
still the same ass of asses as before.

\[
\text{hājj se koˈi ādmī ho to sārā ˈālam hājj hi kare} \\
\text{makke se āe shaikh jī lekin wai to wahī hain ḱhar ke ḱhar}
\]

Clearly, then, the verse that allegedly caused so much offense to Shah Jahan was very much within the parameters of commonly acceptable poetic themes and imagery.

But knowing this, as the extremely literate Sarkhwush himself surely would have known, in some ways only deepens the mystery. Why portray the *munshī* in this way, as a cheeky, heretical upstart who lacks the most basic courtly manners, and utterly contrary to his reputation as a learned and refined gentleman? And why, for that matter, portray the emperor in this way, as a hotheaded zealot unable to take even a relatively mild expression of heterodox wit in stride? It is difficult to put one’s finger on it empirically, but it is hard to resist speculating that the image contained in this anecdote—of the emperor as “protector of the faith,” as a strong force for Islam in India, meting out exemplary punishment to the insolent Brahman poet—is especially powerful precisely because it goes against the grain of everything sources tell us about Chandar Bhan’s character and relationship with Shah Jahan. Ironically, this projected image of Shah Jahan maps so perfectly onto the archetype of the Muslim despot as a quick-tempered dispenser of harsh justice that, had it been penned by a European, we might be quick to denounce it as shamelessly Orientalist. The fact that the anecdote comes from a precolonial Persian source thus creates quite an interpretive conundrum.
We don’t know, moreover, whether Sarkhwush himself invented the story or if this sort of inversion of Chandar Bhan’s image was already circulating as gossip in the decade or so after his death and Sarkhwush was simply the first to write it down. He does, however, also go on to provide the earliest known written account of another verse often attributed to Chandar Bhan, in which the poet openly satirizes the orthodox impulse to tear down temples and build mosques in their place. In this case, though, there is an interesting twist. Sarkhwush knows that this second verse is not by Chandar Bhan, yet he records it in connection with the munšī anyway, seemingly for the sole purpose of furthering the mnemonic association of Chandar Bhan with antinomian verse and poor manners.

The following couplet is widely attributed to him [Chandar Bhan], but a bit of research [tahqīq] shows that it was composed by some other Hindu:

\[
\text{Just see the miraculous power of our idol-house, O Shaikh—}
\text{When it gets destroyed, it becomes a house of Allah!}
\]

\[
\text{[\textit{babīn\ karāmat-i but-khāna-i ma-rā\ ai\ shaikh}}
\text{\textit{ki\ gar\ tabāh\ shawad\ khāna-i\ khudā\ gardād]}}
\]

Mirza Muhammad ‘Ali Mahir [Sarkhwush’s own literary mentor] asked him: “Is this verse yours?” He said, “Perhaps I composed it, I don’t remember.” This had to be some kind of ruse, because if it had really been his own verse that he “didn’t remember” [\textit{chūn\ shī’r-i\ bar-jasta\ az\ ba-khāṭir\ nabūd}], then the mere mention of it should have sufficed to remind him. This faqīr [i.e., the author] prefers the writing of poems with honesty and integrity [\textit{ash’ār\ rāst\ ba-rāst\ niwishtan\ faqīr\ rā\ khwush\ mi-āyad}].

Here Sarkhwush seems to be suggesting that Chandar Bhan has slyly accepted credit for a verse that he might not have composed, by being cagey without actually lying about it. Thus, on top of having two potentially offensive verses associated with him, in Sarkhwush’s eyes Chandar Bhan has compounded the problem by committing a serious breach of literary etiquette, affecting nonchalance where a forthright admission of what was sometimes known as “accidental plagiarism” (\textit{tawārud}) would have been more appropriate.

THE POLITICS OF ANECDOTAL TRUTH

Whether any of what Sarkhwush has to say is empirically true, however, is in some ways beside the point. His image of Chandar Bhan as the cheeky Hindu poet who, whether out of naïveté or outright insolence, once recited an ill-mannered verse before the emperor and almost paid for it with his life, emerged over the ensuing decades as the single most commonly remembered moment our munšī’s career. This process only picked up steam when the memory of Prince Dara Shukoh got attached to the anecdote as well, thanks in large part to Sher Khan Lodi, another
late seventeenth-century author who included Sarkhwush’s anecdote about Chandar Bhan in his expansive compendium *Mir’āt al-Khayāl* (completed in 1690–91 CE) but made some very telling additions.46 Lodi’s most significant intervention was not only to insert Dara Shukoh into the narrative but also to recast virtually the entirety of Chandar Bhan’s career as nothing but a lucky result of the prince’s largesse. He begins:

Chandar Bhan, the sacred thread-wearer [*zunnar-dār*], was among the residents of Akbarabad [i.e., Agra], and took “Brahman” as his pen-name. He had a fairly mystical temperament [*khāli az wā-rastagi nabūda*] and got started in the office of *munshīs* under the auspices of the Prince of Great Fortune, Sultan Dara Shukoh. He advanced in association with the prince through the gift of a glib tongue [*ba-dastāwez-i charb-zabāni*], and his poetry and prose became a joy to the prince’s heart. Among his writings, the work *Chahār Chaman* gives evidence of his rhetorical skill and clarity of expression [*matlab-nawīsī wa sādagī-yi ‘ibārat*] and cannot mask the silkiness of his verse.

Here too, even more overtly than Sarkhwush, Lodi seems to be damning Chandar Bhan with faint praise, incorrectly crediting Dara with starting and advancing his career but at least acknowledging that Chandar Bhan did indeed have a modicum of literary skill. Lodi is, however, nonetheless suspicious of this Hindu *munshī*’s success, explicitly wondering how Dara could have favored Chandar Bhan over the more “capable men” (*musta‘iddān*) at the Mughal court. To this mystery, he can only venture to suggest that “either the prince had a special affinity for his simple style [*sukhan-i sāda*], or [Chandar Bhan] achieved this status through sheer luck.”

Even though Chandar Bhan is the overt target here, however, no savvy reader could miss the fact that Dara is implicated too. Lodi’s chauvinistic assumption that Hindus a priori cannot achieve true mastery of literary Persian collides squarely with the otherwise indisputable fact of Chandar Bhan’s successful administrative and literary career, and thus he resorts to deftly insinuating that there was some kind of Brahman trickery lurking behind Chandar Bhan’s success. Concomitantly, he virtually takes for granted that Dara was in fact a naive, gullible, and ultimately unwise personality, susceptible to the malign influence of mediocre, irreligious, and ignoble charmers. Just as Dara’s ungentlemanly behavior in real liferankled many members of the nobility, so too in Lodi’s depiction he rebuffs the “capable men” of the court in favor of Chandar Bhan’s “simple style” (*sukhan-i sāda*)—which again, as with Sarkhwush, has to be taken in pejorative contrast to the *tāza-gū’ī* that was all the rage. Lodi then continues the theme with a subtle retelling of the same anecdote first penned by Sarkhwush:

They say that once one of [Chandar Bhan’s] couplets greatly impressed the prince. One day, in the heart of the privy chamber [*ghusl-khāna*], where talented men from all the seven climes congregate, he mentioned to [Shah Jahan] that “a wonderful
new couplet has been composed by Chandar Bhan Munshi. With permission, I will call him to your presence.” Through this tactic Dara Shukoh had an eye toward demonstrating [Chandar Bhan’s] talent and ability. The emperor ordered him to present himself, and when [Chandar Bhan] arrived [the emperor] commanded: “Recite that couplet of yours that Baba [Dara] liked so much today.” Chandar Bhan recited this verse:

I have a heart so acquainted with infidelity that, however many times I took it to Mecca I brought it back still a Brahman.

Upon hearing this, the faith-protecting, shari’a-following emperor [bādshāh-i mutasharri’ din-dār] became angry, wrung his hands, and said: “Can anyone answer this infidel?”

Among the esteemed gentlemen Afzal Khan, who was known for being quick with an answer, came forward and said: “With permission, I will respond with a couplet from the master.” The emperor nodded, and Afzal Khan recited this couplet of Hazrat Shaikh [Sa’dī], which had refuted him four hundred years in advance:

The emperor’s blessed heart relaxed and, thanking [Afzal Khan], he said: “It was by the power of the faith, may Allah be propitious and bless it, that you offered this sort of rejoinder, otherwise I might have killed him in anger.” He [the emperor] ordered gifts for Afzal Khan, warned the prince not to bring such undignified chatter [muzakhrāfāt] into his presence again, and had Chandar Bhan removed from the privy chamber.

The basic structure and elements of the anecdote are the same as that of Sarkhwush, but by casting Dara as the overeager facilitator of Chandar Bhan’s alleged transgression Lodi throws a spotlight on Dara’s willingness to flout—indeed, his total cluelessness about—a certain presumed standard of acceptable decorum. Surely this would have resonated with a readership that had a living memory of the prince’s occasional bad behavior, hints of which are reinforced at every stage of Lodi’s version of the story, from infantilizing the prince as “Baba” to the patronizing warning not to traffic in such muzakhrāfāt. Indeed, by framing the anecdote in this way Lodi subtly shifts much of the story’s attention to Dara, making Chandar Bhan himself into almost an afterthought.

At this point Lodi adds another twist to the story that would also become part of the standard repertoire of mnemonic images of Chandar Bhan, and, by
extension, of Dara as well. “At any rate,” Lodi continues, “the aforementioned [Chandar Bhan], having renounced his employment after the death of Dara Shukoh, went to the city of Banaras and busied himself there with his own [i.e., ‘Hindu’] ways and customs, until finally in the year 1073 [1662–63 CE] he became ash in the fire-temple of annihilation.”

This is simply, patently false. As we discussed at length above in chapters 1 and 2, Chandar Bhan’s own extant writings and various other bits of reliable evidence indicate clearly that he continued to serve Aurangzeb for a number of years even after Dara’s execution before finally retiring to Agra, where he and his son Tej Bhan maintained their connection to the court by managing the Taj Mahal complex until at least the autumn of 1666 (i.e., some four years after the date Lodi gives for his death), when they were both honored by Aurangzeb with robes (khil’ats). Thus the idea that Chandar Bhan retired instead to Banaras appears entirely to have been Lodi’s own invention. No source prior to Mir’āt al-Khāyāl, to my knowledge, had ever mentioned Chandar Bhan even visiting Banaras, much less renouncing his imperial service and moving there permanently so that he could mourn Dara’s death. This little epilogue thus appears very clearly calculated to further reinforce a certain image of Chandar Bhan, not as a long-serving member of the Mughal administrative elite in good standing, but rather as a kind of imaginary, idealized, generic Hindu—the sort of devoted Hindu for whom a final pilgrimage to Banaras, a city inextricably linked to the religio-cultural imagination of and about Hinduism, was the logical next move after his liberal benefactor was no longer around to advance his career.

The fact that this portrayal of Chandar Bhan and his relationship with Dara can, for the most part, be debunked on strictly empirical grounds does not in any way undercut its long-term historical importance, however, because some version of Lodi’s narrative gets transmitted by virtually every eighteenth-century tagkira that includes an entry on Chandar Bhan. In most cases, the central encounter between Chandar Bhan, Dara Shukoh, and Shah Jahan is reported as the most salient—often the only salient—thing worth remembering about the munshi’s career. Most of these later reports borrowed explicitly from Lodi’s ur-version of the event, sometimes acknowledging him as a source, often reproducing his exact words, and along the way transmitting a potent cultural memory of “Baba” Dara as well. In the process, this almost certainly fictional encounter becomes absolutely critical for how not just Chandar Bhan but also Dara Shukoh was remembered by early modern audiences.

What exactly is going on here culturally and politically? Simply proving that Lodi got it wrong is not much help in answering this question. And perhaps the real question in any case is why, in the face of so much easily available contradictory evidence, Lodi and Sarkhwush felt so comfortable telling these tales, less than a generation after Chandar Bhan’s death.
One interpretation could be that Lodi is trying to use Chandar Bhan as a kind of synecdoche for Hindus in general, particularly in terms of their interactions with imperial power. The modern scholars Bruce Lawrence and Marcia Herman-sen have argued that the *tażkira* as a genre was notable for its use of “memorative communication” to sacralize a certain Muslim cultural space in South Asia by invoking the memory of past and present Muslim “heroes” like Sufi saints, prominent nobles, excellent poets, and so on. This narrow view of the function of such texts in Indo-Persian literary and mystical culture breaks down somewhat when one considers that a great many eighteenth-century *tażkiras* were also written by Hindus. But Lodi’s portrayal of Chandar Bhan does nevertheless at least provide some evidence for the more general notion that *tażkiras* could be used to circulate stories and anecdotes with important cultural and political symbolic value beyond their mere usefulness as sources for biographies and other information about poets.47

Indeed, one is hard pressed here not to detect a certain culturally conservative attitude on Lodi’s part regarding the threat of Hindus such as Chandar Bhan who would attempt to encroach on urbane Indo-Persian society by insinuating themselves into elite literary and cultural circles. The emperor is valorized for upholding good taste and taking due offense to the perceived affront to Islam contained in the verse, while Afzal Khan is on hand not only to put Chandar Bhan in his place but to do so in just the right way, using a precedent from a canonical Persian master to counter the upstart’s moral (and literary) transgression. Afzal Khan’s wit was a weapon, but it was also a means to neutralize the emperor’s anger and defuse the tension. This in turn allows for the image of the emperor to be doubled: he is both ideally uncompromising in his defense of the faith and ideally merciful for not punishing Chandar Bhan once an appropriate literary rejoinder has undercut him. But it is an ambiguous mercy—the threat of his power still lurks, hence they must usher the offending *munshī* out of the room while Shah Jahan’s now bemused attention is distracted, that is, before his mood changes again. The entire moment can be read a parable about necessity for royal power to safeguard certain cultural norms, even as one must always beware the volatility of that power.

But one could also read it as a parable about the Persian language itself and the cultural anxiety of some intellectuals, like Lodi, regarding the domestication of Persian as an Indian language accessible to Hindus as well as Muslims. Though Persian had long been a kind of “secular” language of Indo-Muslim literary and administrative culture, by the time Lodi was writing *Mir’āt al-Khayāl* Hindus had begun to dominate the Mughal secretarial and bureaucratic classes, and more and more Hindus were participating at all levels of Indo-Persian literary and intellectual culture.48 Their presence was also increasingly being felt socially in elite literary salons and urbane cultural forums, not only as participants but also as patrons, as seen for instance in the career of the famed “Lord of Traders” Anand.
Ram Mukhlis (1695–1758), a poet himself who also became a major patron of Indo-Persian literary culture in the early eighteenth century. In other words, far from a socially insular world produced by an age of widespread orthodox retrenchment, late seventeenth-century South Asia arguably witnessed more Hindu-Muslim cultural interaction than ever before. But this did not mean that everyone always got along, or that there was no cultural anxiety about such developments, particularly among more conservative critics like Lodi. And perhaps what we are really seeing here is an example of such anxiety, filtered through the prism of a seemingly isolated anecdote about munshi Chandar Bhan Brahman.

As we discussed in the previous chapter, moreover, this was also a period in which India’s rivalry with Iran was taking a particularly interesting turn, perhaps leading Lodi and some of his fellow Indian Muslim intellectuals to feel squeezed between two kinds of pressure, one regional and “horizontal,” and the other social and “vertical.” Horizontally, Indian poets and other intellectuals’ long-standing claim to a status as equal participants in the cosmopolitan Persianate ecumene was coming under fire from Iranian critics who claimed to be the only true “native speakers” (ahl-i zabān) with linguistic and cultural authority. Meanwhile vertically, from “below,” the elite status of certain Indo-Muslim intellectual communities within India was being trespassed upon by an upwardly mobile and newly prominent class of Hindu bureaucrats and literati, many of whom, like Chandar Bhan, could advance their own claims to Persian linguistic and literary mastery.

What better way, then, to alleviate some of the cultural anxiety of the moment than by putting such upstarts in their place—in this case, by revisiting the memory of the most famous of their ilk, Chandar Bhan, and lampooning him? Better yet, by also lampooning the patron saint of syncretism, Dara Shukoh, right along with him, and doing it in such a way that recasts Shah Jahan as resistant to the prince’s liberal and eclectic agenda, and therefore by extension politically resistant to Dara himself in favor of the eventual successor, and Lodi’s own emperor, Aurangzeb?

None of this, unfortunately, really tells us any more about where the anecdote originally came from. But it certainly gives us a more historicized context in which to read the story and to understand why it made anecdotal—if not empirical—sense to some intellectuals like Lodi and Sarkhwush and found such a receptive audience among other Indo-Muslim elites of succeeding generations throughout the eighteenth century.

FROM GOSSIP TO CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

In an interesting twist to all this, it was a member of that very class of “upstart” Hindu Persianists who composed the next major tazkira of this period, the Hamīsha Bahār (Eternal spring) of Kishan Chand “Ikhlas” (d. 1754). Ikhlas was a khattrī and resident of Delhi, the son of one Achal Das Dehlavi, who by
all accounts was quite an intellectual gadabout himself and an avid follower of various Sufi darweshes in and around Delhi toward the end of the seventeenth century. According to its author, Hamīsha Bahār was completed in 1136 AH / 1723–4 CE, about thirty years after Lodi’s Mirʿāt al-Khayāl.

Given the timing, it is likely that Ikhlas’s father had frequented some of the same Delhi literary circles as Lodi and Sarkhwush, and Ikhlas himself might well have been familiar with oral versions of some of the anecdotes about Chandar Bhan that these earlier writers had included in their tazkiras. In fact, Ikhlas acknowledges Kalimāt al-Shuʿārā as one of his major sources, especially for poets with whom he was not personally acquainted. Chandar Bhan would certainly have fallen into this category, making it all the more intriguing that Ikhlas completely bypasses both Sarkhwush and Lodi’s accounts of the munshi’s encounter with Shah Jahan and instead adds his own curious anecdote to the mix. His account is as follows:

Rai Chandar Bhan Brahman was a native of Lahore; he resided in the Abode of Tranquility and Universal Civility [dar dār al-amn-i sulh-i kull āramida] and was very genteel; he had a compassionate disposition and was a friend to poverty (i.e. to mystics) [bisyār pasandida waẓ’-o-dardmand wa faqr-dost būd].

It has been heard from the mouths of many a knower of secrets and many skilled historians in this ancient land that, from the beginning of the Timurid era up to the present, such a great Hindu had not appeared in the realm [hindu’i ba-in khūbī ba-’arṣa-i ūbī ba-’ars ʾa-i zūhūr nayāmada]—even though, compared to Raja Todar Mal and some other Hindus, he was neither blessed with such a degree of worldly resources nor quite so accomplished in terms of rank and status. There had been many other pre-eminent Hindus [hindu’ān-i sāhib-i kamāl] who demonstrated the acquisition of rational [’aqli], practical [naqli], natural [tābī’ī], and spiritual [ilāhi] sciences, and so on. But insofar as he placed great faith in highly distinguished holy men [i’tiqād ba-firqa-i ‘āliya-i fuqrā bisyār dāsht], he was able to inhale an extra whiff of Truth.

He was the beauty worshipper in the idol-house of Meaning and also wrote the broken script [shikasta] well. In the discipline [ā’īn] of insha’ he emulated the excellent master Shaikh Abu al-Fazl. When reciting poems, tears flowed from his eyes, and he used to sigh with the lamentation of [mystical] searching. In the beginning of his career he worked for Mir ʿAbd al-Karim, the superintendent of buildings in Lahore; after that he was attached to the exemplar of pure character Afzal Khan and then entered the service of Emperor Shah Jahan.

This passage clearly suggests that unlike Sarkhwush and Lodi, who mention Chandar Bhan’s works but don’t give any clear indication one way or the other that they’ve actually read them, Ikhlas is familiar not only with Chandar Bhan’s own oeuvre but also some of the other contemporary sources that talk about him (for instance, the work of the historian Muhammad Salih Kambuh, some of whose description of Chandar Bhan in ’Amal-i Șāliḥ Ikhlas has lifted practically verbatim). In any event, Ikhlas continues:
Praise God! How fortunate is he who is remembered fondly after his death! If one spends all day and night like dogs and jackals engaging in wolfish deceit and dirty tricks, then what’s the use? As the melodist in the rose garden of mystical meanings, Mirza Mu’izz Musawi Khan, has put it:

Live so that when calamity comes and you are obliterated from this world You didn’t abandon the finer virtues lest you fade from memory.

[ān chunān zī ki chu az hādiṣa bar-bād rawī ḫusn-i mā’ni nagūzārad ki tu az yād rawī]

From among Brahman’s glistening verses [six verses follow, of which I quote only the last]:

Just see the miraculous power of our idol-house, O Shaikh— When it gets destroyed, it becomes a house of Allāh!

[babin karāmat-i but-khāna-i ma-rā ai shaik_h ki chūn k_h arāb shawd khāna-i khudā gardad]

This last couplet, which has become inscribed at the front of the niche of fame in the opinion of elite and common alike, is attributed to him, but this is simply a mistake. I have heard firsthand from [Bhupat Rai] Bi-Gham that it was composed by Dayal Das Pararsuri [a.k.a. “Pasruri”].

They say that one day the rai [Chandar Bhan] was passing through the bazaar of Akbarabad [i.e., Agra] riding in a chariot with his disciple Shiv Ram—who, in the time of Emperor ‘Alamgir, was assigned to serve as a draftsman for Nawab Fazil Khan, the head of supplies, and who, being in the onset of youth, captivated the heart with flirtatiousness and coquetry through every expression of his mind and body. Suddenly, the rai’s gaze fell on a beautiful woman dressed in a ravishing outfit who was sitting in a storefront selling pipefuls [chillum] of tobacco to her customers for one rupee apiece. These enchanted customers of the peerless beauty were heatedly bartering and crowding around her [dar dād-o-gīr sar-garm būdand]. Stopping the chariot, the rai handed Shiv Ram a rupee and said: “You also buy a chillum from her.” When the youth approached this beloved, the saucy lady looked toward them and said: “This strange old man is so bashful [ablāh], that he gave you money, sent you before me, and thus placed me in your hands.” Exposed on hearing these words [ba-mujarrad-i shanidan-i in harf], they both remained too flabbergasted to answer, and simply went on their way.

The first thing to notice about this passage is its appropriation of several lines, not from Sarkhwush, but from Muhammad Salih Kambuh’s account of Chandar Bhan at the end of his historical chronicle ‘Amal-i šālih. This might not seem so odd, except for the fact that Sarkhwush was by far Ikhlas’s primary source, so much so that Wahid Qureshi, the modern editor of Hamīsha Bahār, feels compelled to note every instance in the text where Ikhlas has borrowed from
Sarkhwush, sometimes almost word for word. Given this overwhelming reliance on *Kalimāt al-Shu‘arā*, it is certainly a bit curious to find no mention of Chandar Bhan’s alleged encounter with Shah Jahan here. In a footnote, Qureshi states simply that Ikhlas “didn’t take anything from *Kalimāt al-Shu‘arā*” for the section on Chandar Bhan—but he does not address the more vexing question of why Ikhlas would or wouldn’t follow Sarkhwush in any given instance. Sarkhwush has been a perfectly valid source for him throughout *Hamīsha Bahār*, so what causes Ikhlas to avoid *Kalimāt al-Shu‘arā* here?

It may well have simply been a question of scholarly methodology. Perhaps, having read Chandar Bhan’s own works and other sources like Salih carefully, Ikhlas—like me—simply found Sarkhwush’s information less reliable for Chandar Bhan than for some of the other poets he deals with in *Hamīsha Bahār*. But Ikhlas presumably would have also sensed the same subtext in Lodi and Sarkhwush’s accounts of Chandar Bhan that I have adduced above. And, as a Hindu himself, he might have had his own experience with the social and literary controversies of the day, making him especially attuned to Sarkhwush and Lodi’s biases and their implications. In other words, though it would be far too simplistic to suggest that Ikhlas ignores Sarkhwush’s and Lodi’s portrayals of Chandar Bhan solely because, as a Hindu, he found them distasteful and demeaning, it is hard to resist speculating along those lines. He therefore bypasses their versions, turning instead to the testimony of Chandar Bhan’s own friend and contemporary, Salih.

Besides illustrating at least one way that social and religious biases could play a subtle part in certain types of knowledge transmission, Ikhlas’s account raises the question of how early modern intellectuals like him actually conducted research. He clearly seems to sense the limitations of his main source, *Kalimāt al-Shu‘arā*. But what types of methodological choices did writers like him make actually in constructing their texts? How did they distinguish between valid and invalid sources, and what were their criteria for sifting reliable from unreliable sources? How did they negotiate the sometimes conflicting claims of oral history versus textual archives? And how did the tension between these various types of sources factor into their narrative choices?

Modern scholarship has not yet even begun to address these sorts of questions, in part because, like the *inshā*’ canon, such *tazkiras* have generally been read in modern times simply as sources of data, rather than as a textual tradition with its own set of internal norms. But it is in this context that we might read Ikhlas’s story of Chandar Bhan and his *shāgird* Shiv Ram riding through the market and being embarrassed by a local woman. Perhaps Ikhlas is attempting to insert his own alternative memorable anecdote into the tradition, in an attempt to provide a more innocuous narrative to compete with the one offered by Sarkhwush and Lodi. But if this was indeed Ikhlas’s goal, then he was ultimately unsuccessful.
Only one other tazkira writer—ironically enough, another of Sarkhwush’s acolytes, Brindaban Das Khwushgu (d. 1756), in his Safina-yi Khwushgu—took up this vignette about Chandar Bhan and Shiv Ram riding through the market, and that too slightly altered. Thus, despite Ikhlas’s best efforts, and despite Hamisha Bahar’s considerable influence on later writers, it was Sarkhwush’s and Lodi’s versions of Chandar Bhan’s personality that came to dominate accounts of him for the remainder of the eighteenth century and beyond.

This triumph is clearly evident in the notice about Chandar Bhan in another influential eighteenth-century tazkira, ‘Ali Quli Khan “Walih” Daghistani’s Riyāz al-Shu’arā (The garden of poets; 1748). Born in Isfahan to a distinguished family, Walih had moved around quite a bit in early life as a result of disturbances caused by the Afghan invasions of Iran in the early 1720s before winding up in India and finally reaching Delhi in 1734–35. He served under various Mughal rulers, beginning with Muhammad Shah (r. 1719–48), and eventually achieved the notable mansab ranking of 7000 under ’Alamgir II (r. 1754–59) before dying in Delhi in 1756.56

Walih’s entry on Chandar Bhan in Riyāz al-Shu’arā basically follows Sarkhwush’s seminal account in Kalimāt al-Shu’arā to the letter, but perhaps the most noticeable feature of this later version is that, for Walih, it seems that Chandar Bhan’s encounter with Shah Jahan has by now become practically the only thing worth mentioning about the munshi. Here is the entry in full:

Chandar Bhan, pen-named “Brahman,” was among the Brahmans of Hind and the munshis of Shah Jahan Badshah. One day the order came from the Court of the Caliphate [pesh-gāh-i khilāfat] that he recite one of his poems. He delivered this couplet:

I have a heart so acquainted with infidelity that however many times I took it to Mecca I brought it back still a Brahman.

[marâ dîli-st ba-kufr āshnā ki chandīn bār
ba k’a’ba burdam-o-bāz-ash barahman āwardam]

According to the demands of piety [ba muqtazā-yi din-dārī], the enraged emperor declaimed: “This insolent wretch [shaqi] should be killed.” Afzal Khan replied, “This verse of Sa’dī suits his [i.e., Chandar Bhan’s impudent] character” [miṣdāq-i ḥāl-i ū-st]:

Even if Jesus’s donkey goes to Mecca,
He’s still just a jackass when he comes back.

[khar-i ’īsā agar ba-makka rawad
chūn biyāyad hanīz khar bāshad]

The emperor smiled and turned his attention elsewhere, and those assembled at the foot of the exalted throne removed him [Chandar Bhan] from the eminent chamber.57
This is all Walih has to say about Chandar Bhan, despite, by his own profession, having had numerous sources available to him besides Sarkhwush. He claims to have studied over seventy poetic collections and numerous biographical and historical texts—including the *tażkiras* of Aūfī, Taqī Auhādi, and (significantly for our purposes) Sarkhwush and Lodi as well—in preparing his work. Moreover, as several scholars have pointed out, Walih was, generally speaking, very attentive to these sources’ credibility, even going so far as to see himself as adjudicating the matter when his sources disagreed. As Paul Losensky has marveled, “Vālih deploys all his resources. . . He gathers new material, critiques his sources, and brings some older material up to date.”

It would appear, however, that in the case of Chandar Bhan he has deployed few if any of these scholarly resources. He does not examine any of Chandar Bhan’s own writings, and he leaves out a fair amount of Sarkhwush’s account, including the notorious “babīn karāmat” verse. He also ignores Lodi’s many additions, such as Dara’s alleged role in the matter, and he says nothing of Chandar Bhan’s supposed retirement to Benares. Nor does he seem to be aware of Ikhlas’s revisions and additions.

Again, we are faced with the question of how the authors of such *tażkiras* used, abused, and adapted their sources. There is very little scholarship on the topic, unfortunately, but Losensky, in his excellent treatment of how the tradition slowly revised the biography of the great Timurid poet Baba Fīghānī Shirāzi (d. 1519), observes that one technique writers used was simply to insert “undisguised repetitions” of earlier works into their biographical accounts (indeed, we saw a perfect example of this technique above, with Ikhlas’s unattributed borrowing from Salīḥ). Losensky ponders whether such wholesale borrowing reflects a form of casual “indifference to [their] subject matter” on the part of early modern critics or rather the opposite—a way of referencing earlier sources “without the convenience of footnotes.” In the case of the *tażkira* sources that deal with Baba Fīghānī, Losensky concludes that “the obviousness of [the] borrowing suggests the latter.” But Chandar Bhan’s case does not appear to be so clear-cut, and we might even be forced to come to the opposite conclusion—that Walih was so curtly distilling the Chandar Bhan story down to its most memorable part simply out of indifference.

If he was, even this indifference has a kind of proactive logic to it. Walih is making scholarly choices here about what is or isn’t worth being passed on to posterity. The contrast with his treatment of Fīghānī is instructive. Whereas Walih “finalizes Fīghānī’s literary and saintly canonization” by going to great lengths to “[evaluate] Fīghānī’s importance in terms of the entire Safavid–Mughal literary tradition and his own personal poetic development,” he seems to perform the opposite operation on Chandar Bhan. He excises all other competing information and cements the memorial image of Chandar Bhan: not as the affable “Persian-knowing Hindu” (*hindū-yi fārīsī-dān*) employed by Shah Jahan; or as the mystically inclined “idol-worshipper in the temple of expression” (*ṣanam-parast-i but-khwānah-i sukhan*) of
Muhammad Salih Kambuh’s contemporary account; or as the master epistolographer in the tradition of Abu al-Fazl; or as the author of numerous Persian works of which Chahār Chaman, Munsha’āt-i Brahman, and Diwan-i Brahman were only the most famous; or even as the synoptic image of the Hindu envisioned by Lodi as detrimental to Prince Dara’s character. Rather, in Walih Daghistani’s hands Chandar Bhan becomes, simply, the impudent Brahman who one day angered the emperor with a heretical verse and nearly paid for it with his life.

THE AFTERLIFE OF A MUGHAL ANECDOTE

Within a century of Chandar Bhan’s death, then, a complex process of negotiating the parameters within which remembrance (literally, tažkira) of the celebrated munshi would be defined in literary circles had already been consolidated. This is not to say that all writers after Walih simply followed Riyāz al-Shu’arā or that no one after him ever questioned the story’s veracity. Of course, this is not the case. The image has been doubted by several scholars and has even been openly questioned by some. But even those who have been most vehement in refuting the possibility of the encounter have failed to account for its persistence or to offer some explanation of why it was even told in the first place. Thus the fact remains that after Walih virtually no one (including myself) has been able to write about Chandar Bhan without dealing with this story in one way or another. It frames the entire context within which he is remembered and has dominated the memory of him right down to the present day.

In fact, in some cases the image has become even more exaggerated. For instance, the early nineteenth-century tažkira of Shaikh Ahmad ‘Ali Hashimi Sandelvi, Makhzan al-Gharā’ib (Treasury of wonders; completed 1803–4), basically follows Lodi’s account of the incident. Thus Sandelvi too mistakenly states that Chandar Bhan was from Akbarabad (Agra) and argues that Chandar Bhan retired to Banaras after Dara’s death. But Sandelvi doesn’t simply copy Lodi’s account. In some cases, he clarifies passages that were either implied or ambiguous in Lodi’s wording, thus creating almost a gloss or commentary on Lodi’s master text. But Sandelvi is also uses a noticeably sharper, more acerbic tone toward our munshi. Writing at the tail end of the debates on Iranian Persian versus Indian Persian, and being a vigorous partisan of the Iranian side, perhaps Sandelvi found it even more urgent than Lodi did to paint Chandar Bhan as emblematic of the negative effects of Hindu (and by extension Indian) influence on Persian literary culture. In Sandelvi’s account Chandar Bhan is not simply an infidel but a boorish one at that: an “uncultured sacred-thread-wearer” (zunnār-dār-i bī-adab). And whereas Lodi had reported that Dara was warned at the end of the incident not to engage in such “undignified chatter” (muzakhrāfāt), Sandelvi takes it a step further and tells us that the emperor warns the young prince not to bring “such people” (i.e.,
insolent Hindus?) into his presence again (ba shâhzâda mana' farmūd ki bār-i digar chunin kasân rā dar huẓûr nayârad).

In certain later texts, in other words, the subtext of the earlier accounts was becoming much more explicit. Long forgotten, meanwhile, is the perspective of Chandar Bhan’s seventeenth-century contemporaries like Muhammad Salih Kambuh, Munir Lahori, and others, for whom the fact that Chandar Bhan was a Hindu might have remained worth noting as a marker of religio-cultural difference but did not preclude his ability to master the etiquette and comportment (ādāb) of an urbane Indo-Persian gentleman. In its place, Sandelvi anchors his entire account to a determinist framework where religious identity is a critical factor in achieving certain kinds of linguistic expertise, something that Lodi and Sarkhwush had merely hinted at. Of course, this type of determinist view would only gain momentum as the nineteenth century progressed, as modern communal interpretations of South Asia’s history and culture came into their own in British colonial and Indian nationalist historiography, and the equations “Persian/Urdu = Muslim languages” and “Hindi = Hindu language” gained wider and wider currency.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, moreover, the status of these earlier taṣkiras as reliable sources of collective cultural knowledge began to undergo a change, as did the value judgment implicit in Sarkhwush and Lodi’s original anecdotes. While some of these shifts are definitely attributable to the growing British colonial influence on Indian intellectuals, it is not always easy to pin down exactly how that influence manifested itself in actual scholarly practices.

For instance, consider Nishtar-i ‘Ishq (Lancet of love), the voluminous taṣkira written by Aqa Husain Quli Khan “‘Ashiqi” ‘Azimabadi over the course of nearly a decade and completed in 1233 AH / 1818 CE. ‘Ashiqi’s main motivation in writing Nishtar-i ‘Ishq appears to have had far less to do with ingratiating himself among the Europeans than with contesting the received literary canon. Though he was born in Patna, it is reported that ‘Ashiqi gained most of his poetic knowledge during the numerous visits to Agra and Delhi that he made over the course of his life. (This pattern, it should be noted, was true for Sandelvi as well, who was not a native of Delhi but who credits his conversations with various expatriate Khurasani and Iraqi poets living in Delhi for teaching him the true fundamentals and ethos of Persian literary culture.) But upon reading Walih’s Riyâz al-Shu’arâ, ‘Ashiqi seems to have awoken from his dogmatic slumbers, for he claims that he was so unimpressed by Walih’s selection of poets and insipid characterizations that he decided to write his own alternative. His entire taṣkira can thus be read in dialogic relation to Riyâz al-Shu’arâ, as a direct contestation of the earlier work’s vision of what constituted the Indo-Persian literary canon, and moreover of what constituted the best scholarly approach to representing the writers and works who populated that canon.
It is no coincidence, then, that ‘Ashiqi’s portrayal of Chandar Bhan represents the most sustained attempt to provide an alternative to Walih’s version—or rather, if not quite to counter Walih’s version, then at least to expand on it by providing multiple versions of the infamous anecdote we have been discussing here. ‘Ashiqi also self-consciously foregrounds his methodology, quoting from source material and providing full attributions to those sources. Thus, after providing some introductory background on Chandar Bhan, mostly taken from Salih, he goes on to quote the notices of both Sarkhwush and Lodi in their entirety and in succession. He does not comment on whether either source is reliable, but he obviously has some doubts, and the fact that he assembles his sources in this way suggests clearly that he is thinking chronologically, as well as critically distancing his own scholarly judgment from that of sources he deems suspect. In other words, drawing his readers’ attention so self-consciously to the fact that he is quoting them is also a way of bracketing them as part of a past archive rather than an ongoing conversation—a clear move, it would seem, to a kind of modern scholarly disciplinarity.

‘Ashiqi also adds what appears to be an entirely new anecdote to the store of memories about Chandar Bhan, but in this case he tellingly does not reveal his source. Recall that Chandar Bhan claims in his Munsha’āt (quoted in chapter 5 above) that his writings had achieved fame throughout Iran and Turan, and all over Hindustan. ‘Ashiqi, perhaps wishing to highlight what he considered to be the bad manners \([bi\text{-}adabī]\) of Iranian and Central Asian rivals in his own day, turns Chandar Bhan’s boast on its head. He reports that Chandar Bhan once sent a gilt, ornamented, and beautifully bound copy of his Dīwān to the master poets of Iran and Turan (specifically which ones, however, we are suspiciously not told). In turn these rude Iranian and Turanian poets abroad—all of them, apparently—are said to have kept the expensive bindings and sent Chandar Bhan’s poems back to him. For ‘Ashiqi, then, at a historical moment of heightened Indo-Iranian rivalry, Chandar Bhan seems to stand as a symbol, not of the “Hindu” encounter with Mughal rule, but rather as a symbol of Indian resistance to perceived slights coming from other parts of the Persianate world.

In the grand sweep of modern Indo-Persian historiography, however, ‘Ashiqi’s interpretation of Chandar Bhan’s cultural significance has become something of an outlier, for there were still more cultural shifts on the horizon that would have an even greater impact on the memory of our munshī. One immensely important shift was the change in attitudes about the Mughal Empire itself. As we have noted several times earlier in this book, over the course of the nineteenth century the Mughals (especially the post-Akbar Mughals) underwent a withering critique in British Orientalist and Hindu nationalist historiography. Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, in particular, were increasingly viewed through the lens of “orthodoxy” and despotism and were given much of the blame for the
empire’s ultimate demise. All the tangled complexity of early modern India’s social, ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, economic, and political worlds got reduced, eventually, to a simple tale of “Muslim rule” versus “Hindu resistance.” And as the larger colonial discourse of rescuing India from Muslim despotism was increasingly deployed to justify all manner of modern political agendas—British colonialism itself, the promotion of “Hindi” over “Urdu,” cow protection, Hindu majoritarianism, Partition, and even postcolonial Hindu nationalism—the memory of many minor figures like Chandar Bhan, and even major figures like Dara Shukoh, was similarly transformed.

Dara Shukoh, for instance, had no doubt been widely admired among many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commentators. But as I noted above, there was also a consistent undercurrent of doubt in early modern sources about the prince’s actual fitness to rule, even if many evinced great respect for his learning, scholarly endeavors, and patronage. This strain of critique is clearly evident in some of the anecdotes discussed above, as well as several others from the eighteenth century that I have discussed elsewhere.67 But over the course of the nineteenth century, and continuing on to the present day, any doubts about Dara’s character, political savvy, and kingship have been filtered away, and he has emerged simply as the heroic post-Akbar “good Muslim” par excellence, the sole bright light in an otherwise darkening cultural and political landscape.

As a result, anecdotes like the ones about Dara and Chandar Bhan found in early modern tazkiras have been read completely differently in modern times than they appear to have been read in many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century circles. In Chandar Bhan’s case, whereas writers like Sarkhwush and Lodi clearly intended to paint the munshi in a somewhat negative light, repeatedly insinuating that he was uncultured and ill-mannered, many modern commentators have completely inverted the message of these anecdotes. In other words, though they appear to have been originally and specifically designed to tarnish Chandar Bhan’s reputation with the stigma of impudence, they have instead been transformed into tales of heroic “Hindu” resistance to “Muslim” rule. What once was read as Chandar Bhan’s ignorance of Mughal decorum and cultural norms is now seen as a kind of protonationalist political dissent.

Meanwhile, the modern politics of language in South Asia have added yet another fascinating layer to Chandar Bhan’s journey through modern historiography. As the various registers of northern India’s dominant spoken idiom became standardized, along with their attendant scripts, into modern “Hindi” and “Urdu” over the course of the nineteenth century, those two languages—which aren’t really distinct languages at all in any proper linguistic or grammatical sense—also got mapped along religious lines. The idea that Hindus spoke “Hindi,” while Indian Muslims spoke a supposedly different language called “Urdu,” became all too
common conventional wisdom in modern South Asia. Meanwhile Persian, too, began to lose its Mughal-era aura as a neutral pan-Indian idiom of culture, power, and diplomacy, irrespective of religious persuasion, and instead came to be specifically coded in British colonial and Indian nationalist writings as a “Muslim” language of conquest.

The story of how all this unfolded, and the devastating ramifications of these language politics for modern South Asian political history more generally, have been explored extensively in postcolonial scholarship. But they are especially relevant here because these language debates probably wound up coloring the specific memory of munshi Chandar Bhan as well. Since the late eighteenth century, British colonial scholars had argued that Urdu was the “camp” language of India’s medieval Muslim conquerors, a mix of “their” Turko-Persian idiom and the “Hindi” of their Hindu subjects. The essentialist underpinnings of this origin story have been thoroughly debunked in a number of recent studies, most notably by the literary scholar Shamsur Rahman Faruqi. But for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was still fairly common for serious commentators to speak of an odd sort of equation whereby “Hindi + Persian = Urdu,” and it was in those heady days of debates about the religious determinants of India’s linguistic identities that someone like Chandar Bhan could emerge as a powerful, even paradigmatic, exemplar of this phenomenon. He was a Hindu, after all, which meant by definition that his “natural” language would have been “Hindi.” But he was also arguably the most celebrated Hindu Persian savant ever, one who was, moreover, a denizen of the Mughals’ royal “camp.” Intuitively, then, he must have also known and dabbled in “Urdu” too, if the modern theories of India’s historical linguistics were to hold true. The only problem, of course, is that there is not a shred of contemporary evidence, whether from Chandar Bhan’s own writings or from any other contemporary source, that our munshi ever wrote a single line of vernacular poetry or prose.

Or did he? It would appear that the symbolic need for an origin story for Urdu literature that conformed with the modern equation “Hindi + Persian = Urdu” had to be met, and symbolically, at least, if not empirically, Chandar Bhan fit the bill quite nicely. Thus, sure enough, around the turn of the twentieth century what appears to be a previously unattested Urdu ghazal attributed to him mysteriously began to circulate. Just like the two Persian verses made so famous by Sarkhwush and the other tagkira writers, there is no evidence from Chandar Bhan’s surviving oeuvre to corroborate his authorship of this or any other Urdu ghazal. Nevertheless, beginning with Sri Ram Lala’s Khumkhāna-i Jawed (1908), and carrying forth in later decades to Brij Mohan Dittatriyah Kaifi Dihlavi’s Kaifīyyah (1942), Jigar Barelvi’s Yādgār-i Raftagān (1943), and as recently as Jamil Jalibi’s Tārikh-i Adab-i Urdu (2000), this mystery ghazal has been offered up as a way to make the case for Chandar Bhan as the progenitor of modern Urdu literature. The text of this ghazal...
has also been included in other works without comment, for instance at the end of Shahid Naukhez Azmi’s recent edition of Chandar Bhan’s poetry, where it is the sole entry in a section on Chandar Bhan’s “Urdu oeuvre” \( (\text{urdū kalām}) \). But Kaifi puts it most explicitly when he says: “Urdu’s first poet was Amir Khusrau, and its first prose writer was [the great Chishti Sufi] Hazrat Gisu-Daraz; but the oldest Urdu ghazal that is still available is that of a Hindu writer named Brahman.”

Kaifi had explained this a bit earlier in the text:

Thinking that on hearing Wali’s poetry north India developed a sudden taste for Urdu poetry is a violent injustice to history. A ghazal by a poet of Shah Jahan’s reign is offered here as proof. The poet was Rai Pandit Chandar Bhan, takhallus Brahman, whose birth was nearly a century before Wali’s (Wali was born in 1079 AH, Brahman in 982 AH). Brahman was the mir munshi in Shah Jahan’s darbār, and was a powerful poet and prose stylist in Persian. He passed away in 1073 AH. Along with Persian, he also used Urdu, and several scholars agree that the ghazal copied below is the first Urdu ghazal ever written.

Multiple dynamics are in play here. On the one hand, there is an attempt to reclaim Urdu for North India, away from the trajectory that posits Wali Deccani (1667–1707) as the founder of modern Urdu (another story entirely). But there is also an unmistakable—albeit implicit—way in which it simply makes sense to a certain type of modern audience that Chandar Bhan, who combined the Indic and Persianate traditions so effectively, would have written in Urdu. Kaifi does not name any of the “several scholars” \( (\text{ba’z muḥaqiq}) \) who agree with him that this is the first Urdu ghazal ever written, nor is it even really clear where the poem came from. As I mentioned above, the earliest reference to it that I can find is in Sri Lam Lala’s Khumkhāna-i Jawed (1908). Lala doesn’t tell us where he came across the poem either, saying only that Chandar Bhan “also composed melodious verse in rekhtə [i.e., Urdu]” and adding that “although the language is somewhat archaic and mixed with Hindi, nevertheless the beauty and exquisite-ness of its themes shine through clearly” \( (\text{zabān agar chi qadīm aur makhliṭ ba hindi hai magar maẓāmīn ki nafāsat-o-ḵūbī ūf jhamak rahī hai}) \). Again, note the emphasis on Chandar Bhan’s idiom being “mixed with Hindi” to produce “Urdu.” As for the rest of Lala’s appraisal of the quality of the ghazal, I leave it to the reader to judge:

What is this city that God has gone and dumped us in?
There is no friend, no cup-bearer, no glass, no cup.

Friends, what manner of splendor could there be in the garden of beauties?
Where are the daisies, the marjoram, the lilies, the tulips?

Even if I wanted to meditate on the name of God, how could I?
I have no rosary, no beads, no necklace, no garland.
It seems so strange, the Lover slain for the sake of the Beloved
When there is no sword, no knife, no dagger, no spear.

Brahman has returned from the garden for his bath;
But there is no Ganges, no Jumna, no river, no stream.

[khuda ne kis shahr andar hamen ko la'e dalai hai?
na dilbar hai na saqi hai na shisha hai na piyala hai
khuban ki bagh men raunaq ho ve to kis taraf yarn?
na dona hai na marwa hai na susan hai na laala hai

piyaa ke na'on ki sumran kiyain chahlun karun kaise?
natashhi hai na sumran hai na kanthi hai na malai hai

piyaa ke na'on 'ashiq kon qatl baa'jab dekhe hun
na barchhi hai na karchhi hai na khanjar hai na bhala hai

barahman wuste amsan ke phirta hai bagiya sen
na Gangai hai na Jumnai hai na nadi hai na nala hai]72

Whether or not one thinks this is a particularly good ghazal (or, for that matter, translation) is, for present purposes, somewhat beside the point. What interests me most is that as a historical matter it is simply impossible to prove or disprove its authenticity. But the fact that Lala and so many scholars after him have felt the need for there to be a founding ghazal for Urdu poetry, and for Chandar Bhan to be its author, is itself indicative of a certain modern framing not only of our own munshi's legacy but of the memory of the entire Mughal literary, linguistic, social, and political milieu.

THE TREACHERY OF MEMORY

Despite these modest attempts to posit Chandar Bhan as a sort of godfather of modern Urdu literature, in the end he is far better remembered for having been the Hindu sidekick of Dara Shukoh who once made the near-fatal mistake of reciting a subversive verse in front of Emperor Shah Jahan. And as I have suggested above, this received tradition of Chandar Bhan’s place in Mughal society transforms him, from the dutiful and amiable state secretary loyalty serving Shah Jahan, a series of Mughal prime ministers, and ultimately even Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir, into a symbol rather of anti-Mughal sentiment—in some cases, as a symbol of perceived Hindu insolence who managed to corrupt the gullible Dara Shukoh along the way; in other cases, as a champion of Hindu-Muslim rapprochement, standing up for composite Indo-Muslim culture in the face of orthodoxy and imminent Mughal imperial decline.

A couple of very recent examples bear this out. One comes from popular memory, as evidenced in a 2002 article published in the Chandigarh Tribune
newspaper. Quite sensibly opining on the immoral futility of communal attacks on rival religious institutions, the author refers his readers to our very own munshi Chandar Bhan:

Is there any wisdom in hurting the religious susceptibilities of the people by desecrating or destroying their places of worship? When Aurangzeb decided to demolish the famous temple of Benaras and build a mosque on its site, poet Chandar Bhān Brahman, who had held many important posts under the inexorable emperor, said in a satirical verse:

O’ Shaikh! See the miracle of my idol-temple.  
Even after its demolition it becomes the abode of God [i.e., a mosque].

[Ba-been karaamat-e-butkhaana-e-mara ai Shaikh  
Agar kharaab shavad khaana-e-Khuda gardad]73

The image of Chandar Bhan as the rude, defiant Brahman standing up to orthodoxy is here transvalued, from Sarkhwush and Lodi’s derision to a post-Nehruvian, secular admiration for Chandar Bhan’s willingness to speak truth to power.

But such persistence of tagkira knowledge does not have to be explicitly socio-political. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, one of the most eminent scholars of Urdu and Persian in India today, recently released a delightful collection of Persian verses called Shadow of a Bird in Flight. In it, the verse from Chandar Bhan’s infamous encounter with Shah Jahan is one of only two couplets which he quotes from the celebrated munshi, which he translates as

My heart is so much in love  
with heresy  
that times out of mind  
I took it to the Ka’ba, yet  
every time  
it came back  
the same old Brahmin.74

Faruqi seems completely unaware that there could be some doubt about the verse’s authenticity, and who can blame him? There is almost nothing in the tagkira tradition itself that casts specific doubt on the verse or the occasion on which it is said to have been recited. Thus no one who wasn’t either doing specific research on Chandar Bhan or actively scouring the archives in a targeted effort to authenticate it would have any reason to doubt. It is by far his “most famous” verse, and it is, after all, a very good one at that. It is thus, in a very real sense, worth remembering, and it has gone from the oral public space of the seventeenth century to the oral (and printed) public space of the twenty-first century, kept alive in the intervening years by its inscription in innumerable tagkiras.
and modern literary histories. The anecdote vividly encapsulates a moment of encounter—between Hinduism and Islam, and between ordinary subject and emperor—that lends an added symbolic power and provides a context in which to frame the memory of an already memorable and clever verse.

As V. S. Narayana Rao and David Shulman have noted in another context, with respect to the transmission of another tradition of oral poems that sometimes wend their way through written canons, the cātu verse of South India: “Most poems have a story that goes with them, and each is invariably memorable, a perfectly worked-out expression of skilled composition, though often disarmingly simple. . . Together, they represent a literary culture and a tradition built up for centuries. They bring to mind, in addition to aesthetic judgment, a host of literary, political, and cultural contexts, indeed a whole world view.”

Here too, the supposed moment of encounter and the verse associated with it are so deeply entrenched in the collective memory of Chandar Bhan (not to mention Shah Jahan and Dara Shukoh) that they have both found their way into the only known pictorial depiction of the munshi (see figure 1). The picture is reproduced in the first modern but nevertheless quite obscure twentieth-century edition of Chandar Bhan’s poetic dīwān, the Gulzār-i Bahār, Ma‘rūf ba-Bazm-i Nazm-i Brahman, compiled by a certain Bhagwant Rai Sunnami. The painting is clearly a modern work, despite the vague claim that it is “an exact reproduction of the ancient painting.” But even if it is a complete fabrication, perhaps drawn or commissioned by Sunnami himself, it only further reinforces the argument being made above.

The painting’s Persian caption should, by now, strike a familiar note: “Prince Dara Shukoh’s introduction of Munshi Chandar Bhan Brahman to the Presence of Emperor Shah Jahan in the Blessed Privy Chamber at Shahjahanabad.” Shah Jahan is seated to the left, being fanned by an attendant. He is faced on the right-hand side by Dara Shukoh (bearded) and Chandar Bhan (mustachioed), with heads deferentially bowed. The painting cannot speak to us, obviously, but the artist has employed an ingenious device with which to transmit Sarkhwush and Lodi’s anecdote through visual, rather than a narrative, representation. In his hands, Chandar Bhan is holding a tablet (lauh), on which is written our infamous verse: “I have a heart so acquainted with infidelity that however many times I took it to Mecca I brought it back a Brahman” (see figure 2 for detail). It is a fitting image, not least because of the strong connection between the writing tablet (lauh) as a symbol of primordial memory in the Perso-Islamicate philosophical imagination. It is the primordial preserved-tablet (lauh al-mahfūz) “on which the destinies of men have been engraved since the beginning of time.” But there is a double meaning to this symbolism, because that which has been “preserved” has also been “memorized” through “a sequence of articulations of what has been preserved on this primordial tablet.”

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In a way, then, we might end by suggesting that the *tazkira* as a genre presents us with a similar sequence of articulations that are bound up with received memories and the inscription of those memories. Indeed, the image that first appears in Sunnami’s (1930s?) edition of Chandar Bhan’s *Diwān*, a text in which the notorious couplet never appears, has in turn gained a new afterlife as the cover image on the dust jacket of the recent printed edition of Chandar Bhan’s letters, the *Munsha’āt-i Brahman* (2005)—yet another text in which the anecdote’s mise-en-scène and the accompanying verse also do not appear—like a visual palimpsest canceling out the actual contents of the book and replacing them with a more anecdotal, symbolic memory of the munshi’s life and career.
And thus in the case of Chandar Bhan it is not the recorded texts of history or even his own writings that have served as the primary reference point for the remembrance of him. Rather, it is this “sequence of articulations” in the tazkiras that have come to be preserved, and memorized, on the imaginative tablet upon which much of his legacy has been written for him.

Figure 2. Detail of Figure 1, close up on Dara Shukoh, Chandar Bhan Brahman, and a writing tablet.