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Cultivating Paradise: Persian Literature and Mughal Kingship in the Seventeenth Century

*Mughal Arcadia* is a groundbreaking contribution to early modern South Asian history and to the history of Persian literature. Sharma argues that for most of the seventeenth century, particularly in the reigns of Jahangir (r. 1605-27) and Shahjahan (r. 1628-58), the Mughal court fueled the production of a new type of literature in Persian that engaged with place—that is, with the actual locales in which the Mughal court was situated and not just the abstract, idealized ones of inherited Persian literary genres. In Shahjahan’s reign, as Mughal courtly elites and the poets they patronized traveled beyond urban centers, this topographical literature shifted from a focus on cities to an appreciation of the bucolic charms of the countryside. In the seventeenth century, Kashmir, which Akbar incorporated into the Mughal Empire in 1586, was the pastoral locale that came to hold a preeminent place both in the affective ties that bound the Mughal royal family to India, the unfamiliar land that had become their home and territory, and in their representation of their empire to a transregional Persophone audience.

The rise of the new genre of place-centric poetry intersected with this new significance of Kashmir to create a body of literature that, Sharma argues, occupies a distinct niche in the history of Mughal literature. This literature, on Kashmir as paradise, served as an important building block in the construction of Mughal authority and of the cultural construction of both Mughal rule and the idea of Kashmir. At first, poets born and raised in Iran dominated the composition of Mughal literature, including this new direction in it. By Shahjahan’s reign, however, poets of Indian birth, including Hindus, also began to play a significant role in this literary field. This particular literary and affective moment passed by the last decades of the seventeenth century as Aurangzeb shifted his focus on expanding the empire southwards, in the Deccan, and as the flow of Iranian emigrés from Safavid lands ebbed due to changed historical circumstances.

*Mughal Arcadia* joins a plethora of new books on the cultural history of the Mughal Empire (1526-1857), with some notable examples being those by Allison Busch, Rajeev Kinra, and Audrey Truschke.[1] It also is an important new perspective on the relationship between language and power more generally but on Persian language and Mughal authority in particular, following in the footsteps of Muzaffar Alam’s work in this area two decades ago.[2] As recent writing has made clear, Mughal literature extended beyond Persian into a range of other languages such as Hindi, Sanskrit, Turki, Urdu, and Arabic. Yet, Persian enjoyed a certain hegemony among these languages, being the language of high culture, administration, and politics in the Mughal period. Mughal Persian poetry consists of hundreds of thousands of verses and for a century or so it was widely read across the Persophone world, that is, from the Balkans to Bengal. Despite this, Mughal Persian literature has yet to receive the sustained scholarly attention that is commensurate to its vastness and significance. *Mughal Arcadia* draws atten-
Mughal patronage reshaped Persian literature far beyond South Asia. Akbar’s reign laid the foundation for a shift in the center of gravity of Persian literary production, as many contemporaries observed, away from the language’s homeland to India. The Mughal court sponsored a self-consciously fresh style, or taza gui, in Persian composition, the vogue for which soon spread across the Persophone world. Texts and verses composed in India were in demand by audiences in seventeenth-century Safavid Iran, Ottoman lands, and Central Asia.

Even as older literary representations of India as a land of marvels or as a paradise and refuge framed the initial approach of Mughal kings and courtly elites to India, more textured, observation-based writing about the land and its people began to emerge as India became home. In the second chapter of Mughal Arcadia, Sharma traces the rise of writing about actual locales, places, and people in India, based on firsthand experience. He shows how the geography and topography of the Kashmir valley, with its cool climes, verdant valleys, and scenic terrain, lent itself to its special place in Mughal self-presentation as a microcosm of their empire. For Iranian emigres, whether Sufis or poets, Kashmir came to be seen as “Little Iran” (iran-i saqhir) due to its climate and terrain resembling such Iranian regions as Mazandaran and Gilan. Many Iranian poets settled down in Kashmir and, fittingly, Shahjahan’s Iranian-origin poet laureate died there.

This is explored further in the third chapter, in which Sharma spells out how the Mughals, particularly under Jahangir and his Iranian-origin empress, Nur Jahan, saw Kashmir as an “actualization of what was celebrated in Persian garden poetry. If it took a leap of imagination to conjure up a Persian garden in other lovely spots, being in Kashmir did not require any such effort. The whole place was one big garden” (p. 83). In the reigns of Jahangir and Shahjahan, the Mughals set about ornamenting this beautiful landscape with ordered gardens and pavilions. In the fourth chapter, which is the most central to the book’s argument, Sharma shows how existing genres within topographical poetry came together and extended to include the countryside in Shahjahan’s reign. The pre-Islamic Persian ideal of the king as gardener continued to be influential in Persianate societies. In Shahjahan’s kingly self-representation, the propagation of the image of Kashmir as a paradisiacal garden flourishing in his care was then a metaphor, in the hands of court propagandists, for his tending to the garden that was his empire. These compositions, as Sharma skillfully shows, were part of the wider body of painting, architecture, and literature that Shahjahan commissioned to represent his
authority to both his subjects as well as to Persophone audiences beyond his domain. Kashmir’s perception as a spiritual land also grew in Shahjahan’s reign, with its beauty seen as a “manifestation of a higher reality” (p. 166).

This literary moment came to an end in the last years of Shahjahan’s reign, with the Mughal state embroiled in a long civil war. Shahjahan’s successor, Aurangzeb, had little interest in sponsoring poetry and subsequent Mughals’ resources were significantly reduced. The drying up of patronage in India slowed the migration of Iranians to the region and poets of Indian birth, whether Muslim or Hindu, began to dominate the composition of Persian poetry in South Asia. Relations between the Safavids and the Mughals cooled after the Mughal loss of Qandahar. Attraction to India changed into ambivalence and distance. By the eighteenth century, Iranians rejected the “fresh style” of Persian poetry associated with Mughal India and sought to revive an older, “purer” style. While Persian poetry continued to flower in India until the nineteenth century, the idea of India in the wider Persophone literary imagination as a land tended by the Mughals into a paradise on earth withered away with the Mughal state.

Sharma’s mastery of Persian literary genres, tropes, metaphors, and intertextual references is impressive and only underscores just how indispensable such a toolkit is to a good analysis of Mughal-era Persian literature. At the same time, throughout the work, Sharma underscores the permeability and mutual exchange between the Persian literary sphere and literary cultures in other South Asian languages, whether Sanskrit or regional vernaculars (for instance, pp. 44-52, 130, 142-43). Mughal Arcadia is as a result impressive in its ability to contextualize the Mughal Persian literature that is its subject against both the transregional Persophone world and the subcontinental Indic setting that conditioned its production.

Another delightful achievement of Mughal Arcadia is the way its reflections on literature shed new light on paintings from the Mughal era, some iconic and some less known. The most impressive illustration of this is in the section (pp. 143-55) dealing with an illustrated manuscript copy of a compilation of the poems of Zafar Khan, Mughal governor of Kashmir in the 1630s and 40s. This manuscript has received attention largely from art historians and so far, they have found little connection between the five double-paged paintings and the three masnavis (narrative poem in rhymed couplets) in it. Sharma’s skilful reading of the text make possible the drawing of connections between the paintings and the text. Sharma moves dialogically between image and the text. Sharma moves dialogically between image and the text. Sharma moves dialogically between image and the text. Here is an example of the complementarity of literary and art-historical study for Mughal India, and a demonstration of the rewards of a methodology that combines both.

The book offers a textured history of the interconnectedness of Iran and South Asia. Though Mughal Arcadia is focused primarily on the seventeenth century, it also paints a vivid portrait of the bonds between the two regions from the Mongol invasions of the fourteenth century into the establishment of British colonialism in the nineteenth. For north India, the seventeenth century may indeed have been the peak of the interconnection between the two lands and for that reason, the book’s focus on the literary aspect of these ties is valuable. The influx of Iranian emigrés and the density of literary circuits at this time was an important element in shaping the particular trajectories that not only Indo-Persian literature but also South Asian culture and politics took.

The significance of Mughal Arcadia is manifold. It identifies and explains a literary development—pastoral poetry in Mughal India—that will be of interest to scholars of Persian literature. For historians of early modern India, it shows the significance of poetry in crafting Mughal kingship and the ties that wove together the multiethnic nobles and administrators of the Mughal state. Read from the vantage point of the present, the book’s reconstruction of a time in which flourishing societies welcomed refugees is a poignant one, as is the power of the metaphor of Kashmir as a synecdoche for a flourishing India.

Notes


[3]. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Iranians Abroad: Intra-

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