

Making a Persianate Society: Literati Migration to Mughal India

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This paper explores the migration of literati from Iran and Central Asia to Mughal India during the 16th and 17th centuries and analyzes the bibliographies (*tazkiras*) of poets compiled in Iran, Central Asia, and India. Mughal India was the center of Persianate (I use the term Persianate instead of Persian as it is more suitable for literary cultures inspired by the Persian language outside Iran or Persia) culture at the time, and it was the most generous supporter of Persian poets. The migration of Iranians to Mughal India has attracted the attention of some scholars (Irshad 1986; Haneda 1997; Dadvar 1999¹; Haneda 2004), while the migration of Central Asians to Mughal India has been discussed by Richard Foltz (Foltz 1997). We already know that many Iranians attended the Mughal court as notables (*amirs*). For example, during the period between 1658 and 1678, 33.5 percent of Mughal *amirs* were Iranians while 18.5 percent of the *amirs* were from Central Asia (*Tūrānī*) (Athar Ali 1978, 45). However, migration took place on such a large scale that it is difficult to discuss it comprehensively in just one paper.

Basing my research on *tazkira* literature, I confine my investigation to the Persianate literati, i.e., those who composed Persian poems and whose works were contained in the *tazkiras*. A *tazkira* is an anthology of poetry including short biographies of the poets. This genre of collected works had already prevailed in Iran, Central Asia, the Ottoman Empire, and Mughal India after the fall of the Timurids. Although its biographical part was written in Chaghatai Turkish, Nava'i's *Majalis al-Nafa'is* became a model for later works.² The *tazkira* literature contains biographies of not only professional poets but also kings, bureaucrats, *ulama*, merchants, and ordinary people. For this reason, this genre of literature is a useful source for social history as well as literary and cultural history. Although Maria Szuppe's two articles based on Central Asian *tazkiras* are quite inspiring, they only deal with several specific literati (Szuppe 2004, 2011). This study analyzes six *tazkiras*: two each from Iran, India, and Central Asia, and it discusses aspects of literati migration to Mughal India.

I. Indian *Tazkiras*

The first *tazkira* to be referred to is the biographical section of poets of *Muntakhab al-Tavarikh*, a chronicle, compiled by 'Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni in 1596 (Bada'uni 2000-1, 3:

119–164); it is concerned with poets during Akbar's reign in the period after 1556.³ Among 164 poets, 99 (60 percent) were of Iranian origin, 19 (12 percent) were from Central Asia, 22 (13 percent) were of Indian origin, and 12 (7 percent) were from present-day Afghan cities such as Kabul and Qandahar. The former city was, at the time, inside Mughal territory, while the latter was contested between the Mughals and Safavids. The *Muntakhab al-Tavarikh* clearly indicates that Iranians were dominant in the poetic societies under Akbar. In fact, the number of Iranians among poetic circles was higher than those among *amirs*; this was most probably because poets were more dependent on their Persian language skills than *amirs*.

Sarkhush's *Kalimāt al-Shu'ara*, compiled in 1682-3 in Lahore had different results (Sarkhush 2011). The work deals with poets after the reign of Jahangir (1605–27). Among the 169 poets described by the *tazkira*, 71(42 percent) were from Iran while only four from Central Asia (2 percent). Moreover, among them, 12 Iranian poets and one Central Asian had never visited India. In author's perspective, the Persian literary circle extended beyond the Mughal Empire; Sarkhush knew about Iranian poets—even those who had not visited India. With regard to migration, according to the *tazkira*, 59 Iranian poets and three Central Asian poets moved to Mughal India. It also contains details of 47 poets (28 percent) of Indian origin, including the author Sarkhush himself, who was born in Kashmir. Most Indian poets referred to by Sarkhush were Muslims; however, the work included one famous Hindu literati, Chandar Bhan Brahman.⁴

The emergence of Indian poets is reflected in this *tazkira*. Naturally, Persian poetry was brought to Mughal India and was predominantly practiced by Iranian migrants. However, during the 17th century, the activity of Indian poets is also notable. Here, one can see the process of Persian culture gaining acceptance and the making of a Persianate culture in Mughal India.

II. Iranian *tazkiras*

Naturally, the *tazkiras* compiled in Safavid Iran is mainly concerned with the poets of the empire. One can easily find records of migrations to India in these works. The first *tazkira* referred to here is Sam Mirza's *Tuhfa-'i Sami*, compiled in 1550 (Sam Mirza n.d.). It contains numerous descriptions of poets, as many as 710; some are very short though. The first chapter deals with kings and princes and does not only include the Safavids but also the Timurid, Mughal, Ottoman, and Uzbek rulers—all political rivals of the Safavids. However, the presence of Mughal India does not feature much in this work. There are no Indian poets mentioned, only details of three members of the Mughal ruling dynasty were provided, namely, the first emperor Babur, the second emperor Humayun, and 'Askari Mirza. According to the *tazkiras*, only eight poets (1 percent) had migrated to India. One of them was Amir Khanzada Hashim Daliri from Termez, Central Asia, who served Humayun as the royal huntsman of

India before moving to Iran and leaving for Mecca one year later. Another is Mawlana Shahid from Qum, who was the poet laureate at the court of Sultan Ya‘qub Aq Qoyunlu in Tabriz and who migrated to India through Khorasan to settle in Gujarat. The *tazkira* was compiled at a time when migration was not suitable. Humayun, who had fled to Iran, had yet to retake the throne in Delhi, and migration was limited in the first half of the 16th century.

In contrast, the *Tazkira-i Nasr-abadi*, a large *tazkira* containing details of 903 poets, compiled in 1680 by the Isfahan literati, has much more information regarding Mughal India (Nasr-abadi 1999-2000). Section 2 of chapter 3 concerns *amirs* and *khans* in India, including 27 literati of whom 12 were migrants from Iran. Section 3 of chapter 3 relates to 17 poets residing in India. All of them were of Indian origin. Section 1 of chapter 3 concerns poets of Central Iran and Khorasan, where most of the migrants were present, that is, 90 in total. Chapter 2, which addresses the *sayyids* and the nobles, mentions 20 migrants, while section 1 of chapter 3 relates to the *ulama* and scholars, of whom 12 were migrants. In total, it details 143 literati who migrated to India, which constituted 16 percent of the total poets in the *tazkira*.

Some Iranian migrants to India were successful. For example, Mirza Ja‘far Qazvini, later known as Asaf Khan (d.1612), was from an Iranian bureaucratic family. He moved to India in 1587 and served the emperor Akbar. First, he received a modest salary of 200 *mansab* and was sent to Bengal. When revolts erupted, he managed to escape to Delhi, where, gradually, he gained the emperor’s favor and received a higher sum of 2000 *mansab*. After acquiring important posts, including the governor of Kashmir, he became the empire’s minister of finance (*divan-i kull*) in 1598. His skills for writing Persian poetry and belle-letters helped his career progression. Another example of a successful Iranian migrant to India is Talib Amuli (d.1627-8). A poet, Amuli grew up in Kashan before he served the governor of Marv, after which he moved to Qandahar, where he served the Mughal governor. In 1612-3, he relocated to Agra and served the Mughal court. He was appointed poet laureate of the emperor Jahangir.

Some migrated for economic reasons. For example, Mirza Muqim Jawhari was a son of a goldsmith from the Abbas-abad quarter of Isfahan. After his father’s death, he became a merchant and traded jewelry. He visited India where he became acquainted with princes and *amirs*. After succeeding in making vast sums of money, he returned to Iran. Several years later he visited India again only to make an even larger fortune, before returning to Iran. Although he was a merchant, Jawhari also had a flair for poetry, and he dedicated his work to the governor of Herat. A common motive for either migrating to, or visiting, India was economic. Mughal India was financially more prosperous than Safavid Iran, and in India, Iranian literati had a good chance of becoming rich. This is not to say that this journey was free of risk. In the *tazkira*, one can find details of four people who died in the middle of their travels to India. The ship could be broken or bandits could attack the caravan en route. Even so, Iranian literati

often took their chances and headed for India.

III. Central Asian *Tazkiras*

Mutribi Samarqandi compiled his first *tazkira*, *Tazkirat al-Shu'ara*, in 1604 and dedicated it to the Bukharan ruler Vali Mohammad Khan (Mutribi Samarqandi 1998). It contains details of 343 poets, among whom more than 224 (65 percent) were from Central Asia, 63 (18 percent) from the Safavid realm, and 18 (five percent) from the Mughal empire.

In the *tazkira*, one can find mentions of 21 migrants, 9 percent of the Central Asians that were listed, who went to India. One of them, Qulchi Muhammad Khan (d. 1613-4), was from Balkh and served the emperor Akbar. He acquired some posts in the empire and was finally appointed governor of Agra. It is not clear whether the Central Asian poets were successful as professional poets as some also had academic or religious backgrounds. Shaykh Sharaf al-Din Husayn Samarqandi, for example, was a famous sufi *shaykh* of the Kubraviyya Order in Samarqand. He died in India when he was in his seventies, and his mortal remains were sent to his *khanqah* and buried there. Qazi Muhammad Sadeq Samarqandi (d. 1595-6) is another example. He went to India for religious learning, but he stopped in Kabul, where he served Muhammad Hakim Mirza, the son of the emperor Humayun. Later, he returned to Samarqand and was appointed a judge (*qazi*). Four other religious students and scholars moved to Mughal India because the Mughal India shared Sunni Islam and the Hanafi School of law with Central Asia.

Economic factors for travel and migration were also important for Central Asian poets. Two were merchants, one was a shoemaker, one was a quiver maker, and another was an armorer. The author of the *tazkira* clearly states that Kafshi Bukhara'i, the shoemaker, went to India to escape the hardship of his life in Central Asia.

The last *tazkira* in this paper, Maliha's *tazkira Muzakkir al-Ashab*, was compiled in Samarqand in 1692-3 (Maliha Samarqandi 2012).⁵ It contains 210 poets in the main part and the supplement; 142 literati (68 percent) are from Central Asia while 63 (30 percent) are from Iran. The author traveled Iran and collect information on Iranian poets but mentions only two poets from India.

The number of Central Asian literati who find mention as having visited, or migrated to, India is 20. Among them, 10 left Central Asia for the pilgrimage to Mecca and stopped by India on their return. This may be an indicator of the use of the Indian sea route for the pilgrimage. For example, Dastur Nasafi accompanied 'Abd al-'Aziz Khan, ruler of Bukhara (r. 1645–81) on his pilgrimage in 1681-2. On his return, he visited the emperor Aurangzeb and was appointed judge of Peshawar. He was later made judge of Kabul. Hajji Muhammad Sabir Samarqandi, accompanied Imam Quli Khan (r. 1612–1642) to make the pilgrimage, on his return from which, he went to India through the Indian Ocean and served the Mughal Empire

for 20 years. He returned to Balkh only after he completed his service.

Eight of the Central Asian literati had *ulama* backgrounds. ‘Abd Allah from Tashkent moved to India in 1679-80. He had a difficult time there, but finally he acquired the post of chief judge (*sadr*). Mawlavi Ibrahim Balkhi (d.1681-2) traveled to India for scholarly training. He later returned to Samarqand and became professor at the Yaltknush Bi Madrasa. Although poets were the main concern of the *tazkira*, only a few Central Asian migrants succeeded as poets in India. Instead, Central Asia had scholarly and religious ties with Mughal India.

Conclusion

Iranian and Central Asian literati migrated to Mughal India mainly after the coronation of Akbar in 1556. During Akbar’s reign, most poets were migrants from India and Central Asia. However, by the time of the reign of Aurangzeb, the number of Indian poets had increased to constitute 28 percent of the total. The Persianate culture that the migrants brought to India was accepted, and it even flourished.

By analyzing the *tazkiras*, it can be determined that there were some boundaries to the migration of the literati. The first barrier was the borders of the states; the Mughals, the Safavids, and the Uzbek states sometimes confronted each other. However, for the literati, these boundaries were not decisive. So far as the *tazkiras* go, the literati did not refrain from moving from one state to another. They could cross the borders rather easily.

The second boundary was the realm of the Persianate culture. The three regions of Iran, India, and Central Asia, appear to have been culturally well connected. However, only few Ottoman poets were mentioned in these *tazkiras*. We know that the Ottomans were fond of Persian poetry; however, it did not cause migration to or from the Ottoman Empire.

The third was the religious and confessional boundary. Robert McChesney criticized the barrier of heterodoxy and indicated that the Sunni and Shi‘i divide did not prevent cultural contact between Iran and Central Asia (McChesney 1996). However, the relation between Safavid Iran and Mughal India was slightly different from that between Central Asia and Mughal India. Iranians found an opportunity to serve the Mughal Empire mainly as bureaucrats and poets. Conversely, Central Asians did not compete with Iranians in the field of administration or poetry. Instead, they had other connections that were used for migration to India, the Hanafi School of Law and Sufism. The Mughals accepted both Sunni and Shi‘i migrants; however, naturally, Shi‘i Iranian migrants could not enter fields related to religious and legal matters. One does not see this as sectarian exclusion, but it cannot be denied that the religious and confessional boundary still had some significance.

Even though these boundaries existed, the literati did not stop moving. At least, the cultural and religious ties were much stronger than the political boundaries were. The early modern world was characterized by such migrations of, and contacts between, people.

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Notes

1. Unfortunately, the book includes some plagiarisms and cannot be relied on. See Haneda 2002.
2. I discussed the process of *tazkira*'s development in Kondo 2009.

3. The work was based on another *tazkira*, *Nafa'is al-Ma'asir* by Mir 'Ala al-Dawla.
4. For his works and biography, see Kinra 2015.
5. For this work, see McChesney 1990.