



Culture in the Mughal Empire

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Preface

The Mughal emperors were enthusiastic patrons of the arts. Their biggest contribution to the Indian arts were Mughal architecture and painting, both of which were amalgams of Persian and Turkic styles with local Indian styles.

The creation of a road system and a uniform currency, along with the unification of previously disparate territories, allowed for a strong economy under Mughal rule. The Mughal emperors were enthusiastic patrons of the arts, and their vast royal treasuries funded many cultural achievements. Most notable among their contributions to the culture of the Indian subcontinent were Mughal architecture and Mughal painting, both of which were an amalgam of Persian and Turkic styles with local styles. The Urdu language is another contribution, which continues to be the national language of Pakistan and a co-official language in India.

After the death of Akbar in 1605, his son, Prince Salim, ascended the throne and assumed the title of Jahangir, "Seizer of the World". He was assisted in his artistic attempts by his able wife, Nur Jahan. The Mausoleum of Akbar at Sikandra, outside Agra, represents a major turning point in Mughal history, as the sandstone compositions of Akbar were adapted by his successors into opulent marble masterpieces. Jahangir is the central figure in the development of the Mughal garden. The most famous of his gardens is the Shalimar Bagh on the banks of Lake Dal in Kashmir.

This book deals with a new empire of Mughals founded by Timur and Babur, in its various aspects that is political, legal, social, cultural, religious and military.

—*Editor*

Introduction

The culture of India was moulded all through the various eras of history, all the while absorbing traditions, customs and ideas from both invaders and immigrants. A number of cultural practices, languages, traditions and monuments are examples of this co-mingling over centuries.

In present day India, there is remarkable cultural and religious diversity all through the nation. This has been influenced by number of regions of India, specifically South, North, and North-East, have their own discrete identities and more or less every state has carved out its own cultural position. Despite this unique cultural diversity, the whole nation is bound as a civilization due to its common history, thereby preserving the national identity.

India was the birth place of religious systems such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism, which have a strong influence not only over India, but also the whole world. Following the Islamic invasions and the subsequent foreign control from the tenth century onwards, the culture of India was influenced by the alien cultures, chiefly Persian, Arabic and Turkish cultures.

Their influence comes in the form of religion, language and dress. Consequitively, a number of religions and the multihued customs of India have influenced South East Asia (and to a minimal extent, East Asia).

MUGHAL CULTURE

Shahjahan's court represented the height of kingly splendour. In his reign the Moghul Empire attained to the zenith of its prosperity and affluence. The fame of the wealth of India attracted a stream of foreign visitors from across the seas who were dazzled by the magnificent grandeur of the Emperor and his surroundings. The gorgeousness of his court surpassed their imaginations, and drew from them unstinted admiration. Bernier, Tavernier and Manucci have left charming accounts of their impressions, and though they are by no means completely reliable, yet from the mass of information which they supply we can gain a fair idea of the picturesqueness and wonders of the Moghul Court.

The central figure in this magnificent array of pomp and splendour was the Emperor. He was of moderate stature and wheaten complexion. He had an open forehead, raised eyebrows, a slanting but straight nose, bright sparkling eyes of brown colour, but with black eyeballs; and a wart on the left side of his nose. His mouth was narrow, and he had a beautiful and clear set of teeth. He possessed a sweet voice, and spoke eloquently in Persian. Unlike his father and grandfather, he bore a full-grown beard of the orthodox Muslim type. His arms were neither too long nor too short, and there were moles on four fingers of his right hand, which was regarded as an auspicious sign. Thus on the whole his appearance was in perfect accord with his kingly dignity.

By nature he was industrious and exacting. He was scrupulously careful of cleanliness. He rarely missed his ordinary prayers, or when at the capital his *Ramzan* fasts. On holy nights he passed half the time in reciting prayers and giving alms. He had a special taste for perfume which was profusely rubbed on his clothes. He was polite and courteous in conversation, and never used the word 'thou' even to the lowest menial.

Sarkar has well observed 'that the royal throne was not exactly a bed of roses even in those days. The king had his

duties, and his division of time showed that he knew the fact.' The popular view that the life of a Moghul Emperor was an unceasing round of pleasure, lasciviousness, sport and sensuality, is refuted by the very minute details of his daily routine, which we come across in contemporary Persian histories. This routine was strictly adhered to, whether the Emperor was in camp or at the capital. And there is overwhelming evidence to prove that Shahjahan led a strenuous life; and divided his time evenly between government and sport.

He woke up about two watches before sunrise, and after performing his daily ablutions went to his private mosque where sitting on a carpet he waited for the hour of prayer. After saying the morning prayer, he counted his beads till sunrise. When travelling he said these prayers in his private apartments.

From the mosque he went to the *Jharoka Dorshon* where he showed himself to his subjects every morning. This wise practice was instituted by Akbar, and was continued by his successors. The principle underlying it was characterised not so much by vanity as by the real desire on the part of the sovereign to come into closer touch with his subjects. Moreover in an age when the fabric of the Empire rested on the personality of the monarch, it was necessary for him to assure his people that he was clever and in full enjoyment of his bodily vigour. Here the public had free access to him and could seek justice *even against the highest officials of the government, without the assistance of an intermediary.*

It is doubtful if the common people had courage enough to approach the Emperor. His regal dignity would have overawed them; but more than that, they would have been afraid to court the animosity of the revengeful and corrupt officers who controlled the administration. But so far as Shahjahan is concerned it should be noted that he gave ear even to the complaints of his meanest subjects, and was never slow to meet out stern punishments to offenders, even the highest State officers. And it redounds to the credit of the Moghul sovereigns that they placed at the disposal of their subjects an institution

which could secure them justice if they could not or did not make use of it, it was not entirely the Emperor's fault.

Besides the admission of complaints and public salute the Emperor had many other things to occupy his attention at the time of the *Jharoka Darshan*.

Here the newly captured elephants, which could not be brought into the courtyard facing the Hall of Public Audience, were shown to the Emperor. It was from the *Jharoka* (window) that Shahjahan witnessed his favourite sport of elephant combats. On some days as many as five pairs were made to fight in succession to the delight of the Emperor. It was here, also that *mansabdars* passed their contingents in review.

After spending about an hour in *Jharoka Darshan* the Emperor repaired to the Public Hall of Audience known as the *Divan-i-'Am*. It is an imposing building of red sandstone supported on forty pillars. Its three sides open into the adjoining courtyard, and the fourth side is screened by a wall with an alcove in the centre raised above the level of the hall.

The alcove is of the purest white marble, richly decorated with *pietra dura* work and low reliefs of flowers. This hall at Agra is simple in design, and lacks that artistic decoration which is so conspicuous in the hall in the Delhi fort. A similar hall though of modest proportions was built for the same purpose in the Lahore fort. When the Emperor was in camp a place for Public Audience was improvised by erecting large tents.

In and outside the hall stood officers, courtiers, soldiers in strict order, awaiting the appearance of the Emperor, and with their gaze fixed on the alcove. The outer fringe of the hall was shut off by silver railings, and only the commanders of two hundred horse or more were permitted to enter. They stood in order of precedence with their faces turned towards the throne. A place near the pillars was assigned only to privileged *mansabdars*. On the left of the niche stood *Qorchis* with the royal flags and standards, their backs turned to the wall. On either side, at the foot of the alcove stood the chief officers of State, with their files ready to be laid before the Emperor.

Outside the silver railings another space was enclosed by wooden railings painted with red lac. In it were accommodated commanders below the rank of two hundred horse, *ahadis*, archers, gunners, and some retainers of the higher *mansabdars*. Outside the wooden railings stood menial servants of *amirs* and foot-soldiers. Admittance within these railings was made by three gates which were closely guarded by watchful officers and mace-bearers.

The business in the *Divan-i-'Am* began with the appearance of the Emperor at about 7-40 a.m. First the Chief *Bakhshi* presented the petitions of *mansabdars*, and ushered into the royal presence those who deserved promotion. Those who were appointed abroad received robes of honour. Then the *Sadr* brought to the notice of the Emperor the cases of the poor and destitute, and also introduced to audience the learned and the pious. After that the *Mir Soman* and the *Divan Biyutat* placed the papers of their departments before the Emperor. Then the *Bakhshi of Ahadis*, the *Mir Atish*, and the *Mushrif of Topkhana*, presented new recruits to their respective departments. After that, influential *mansabdars* in court laid before the Emperor the representations or presents from the provincial Governors, *Divans* or *Bakhshis*. Often the Emperor personally read these papers, and wrote orders on them. And last, the '*Arz-i-Mukarrar* presented to the Emperor the memoranda relating to *mansab*, *jagirs*, and *naqdi*. Serious work being over, the audience was concluded with the inspection of elephants and horses with fixed rations.

From the *Divan-i-'Am* the Emperor went to the *Divan-i-Khas*. or the Hall of Private Audience. The halls both in Agra and Delhi were constructed in the reign of Shahjahan. Tavernier describes the former, and of the latter Md. Waris gives a picturesque account. Here the Emperor spent another two hours in transacting such business as for administrative or political reasons could not be done publicly. High ministers of State placed their representations before the Emperor, who either dictated orders or wrote them himself. Special cases of need were reported by the *Sadr*, who obtained the Emperor's sanc-

tion to grants of the *madad-i-mu'ash* or dole. Here the Emperor inspected the works of art, e.g., painting and embroidery. The *Darogh-i-Imarat* was always present here to obtain the Emperor's approval to the plans of royal buildings. These plans were fully discussed here, and in the first part of the reign Asaf Khan was the chief adviser of the Emperor in affairs connected with architecture. Also in the *Divan-i-Khas* hawks, falcons, and trained *cheetahs* were presented to the Emperor.

From the *Divan-i-Khaz*, the Emperor went to the *Shah Burj* or 'royal tower' where a strictly secret council was held. With the exception of the princes and three or four other officers none was allowed entry. No officer could stay there beyond the time taken by his business. In the *Shah Burj* secret decisions were taken, and confidential orders were drafted, and despatched to provincial officers. Also the business relating to *Khalsa* (crown lands), *Talab* (salary) or *Tankhwah* (pay) which could not be transacted in the *Divan-i-Khas* was transacted here. Aminai Qazvlni says that it was here that the Emperor occasionally summoned him to correct his work. About two watches were spent in the *Shah Burj*.

It was now past mid-day and the emperor retired to the *harem*. Here also some work awaited him. After taking his meal he had a siesta, and when he awoke Mumtaz Mahal placed before him a list of deserving cases for charity, brought to her notice by her chief maid Sati Khanum, sister of the poet-laureate of Jahangir's court. The Emperor considered every case individually and passed his orders. Suitable dowries were provided for poor and destitute girls, and sometimes their marriages were also arranged. Orphans and widows were given subsistence money. It was rarely that a suppliant turned away disappointed from the palace. Thus large sums were daily distributed in relief work.

The Emperor left the palace at about 3 p.m. He sometimes came to the *Divan-i-'Am* to inspect the palace guards, but usually joined the congregation for his afternoon prayers. After this he spent the evening in transacting administrative work in the *Divan-i-Khas* and then in listening to music or witnessing

deer fights. Big chandeliers were now lighted, and their effect on the brocaded curtains and cushions must have been marvellous. We can but dimly imagine the glittering beauty of the *Divan-i-Khas* at Delhi when it was lit up in the evening. Even now, that it is completely divested of its once gorgeous furniture, the lines of Amir Khusrav inlaid on one side of its walls remind one that it must have been 'a Heaven on earth.'

At 8 p.m. after holding another council for half an hour in the Shah *Burj*, the Emperor retired to the harem where he took his supper, and then listened to songs sung by women. At about 10 p.m. he retired to bed. A screen separated the royal bed chamber from the gaze of good readers who sat on the other side and read aloud books on various subjects, e.g., travel lives of saints, or history. The autobiography of Babar was the Emperor's favourite.

This routine was varied only on Fridays, which is the Muslim sabbath, and when no court was held, and on Wednesday when the Emperor repaired directly from the *Jharoka Darshan* to the Hall of Private Audience to hear appeals and administer justice. Here he sat on the *Firoz Takht* and opened the proceedings in the presence of judicial officers, *muftis*, and jurists. The *Darogh-i-'Adalat* presented every case individually, and the Emperor talked to complainants and passed orders in strict accordance with *Shara'* or Muslim law.

The Moghul court presented an imposing spectacle of discipline and order. This was possible because strict adherence to etiquette was insisted upon. The order of precedence depended upon the grade or rank of a *mansabdar*. All had to remain standing. Only princes could sit, but not without permission. Jahangir had a gold chair for Shahjahan at his court, and the latter extended the same privilege to his eldest son, Dara Shikoh. Only the *Vizir* and *Mir Bakhshi* were allowed to ascend the stairs and approach the throne; others had to remain at the foot.

Shahjahan was certainly more orthodox in his religious views than his predecessors. He would not tolerate any practice which outraged religious precepts. The prevalent practice of

Sijda or prostration which was introduced by Akbar, was of this type. *Sijda* according to Islamic religious conception is due only to God, and to no living being on earth. Hence the very first order which Shahjahan issued was for the abolition of this unholy practice. He intended to introduce instead the ordinary form of salutation, but Mahabat Khan flatteringly represented that some distinction was necessary in the case of monarchs and royal personages, because God had placed them higher than others. Accordingly, *Zaminbos* or kissing the ground was substituted for *Sijda*. In *Sijda* a man had to kneel and rub his forehead on the ground, but in *Zaminbos* he had to take both of his hands to the ground and lift them up to his forehead. But later when it appeared to Shahjahan that the new method of salutation was hardly distinguishable from the previous one, he abolished *Zaminbos* also, and substituted 'char taslim' for it. But scholars and religious divines were excused both from '*Zaminbos*' and 'char *taslim*,' as the Emperor held them in special esteem. They observed the ordinary form of salutation prevalent among the Muslims, that of wishing peace to one another.

A loud cry of 'long live the King' greeted the Emperor every time he appeared whether in the *Jharoka* (window) or at court. This was followed by silence, and ordinary business was carried on in whispers. If the Emperor wanted to speak to anybody, he merely signed towards him, and mace-bearers conducted the individual to the foot of the throne, where after making the customary bow, he stood in all humility to listen to the sovereign's pleasure. If the Emperor conferred on him a robe of honour, the recipient bowed again and retired to his place moving backwards, keeping his face all the while towards the throne, because to show one's back to the throne was regarded as the height of disrespect.

Foreign envoys were ushered into the royal presence by nobles in the Hall of Public Audience. Persian envoys were treated with greater esteem and consideration than the messengers of any other Asiatic country. They were allowed to bow in their own style and were loaded with extraordinary

favours and rewards. But when relations with Persia were strained, the honour and regard enjoyed by the representative was transferred to those of Turkey. Envoys from Bokhara, Samarqand and Kashghar were treated with great courtesy, but they never enjoyed the same privileges as those of Persia. As to the messengers of European nations, they were held in contempt. With the exception of Sir Thomas Roe, there is not a single instance in the first half of the seventeenth century, when a European envoy was received with due honour. Even Sir Thomas Roe had to fight hard for the maintenance of his dignity. During the reign of Shahjahan the Dutch and the English were regarded as petty traders having no political status, so that native chroniclers do not even take notice of them.

The buildings of the *Divan-i-'Am* and the *Divan-i-Khas* were in themselves elegant enough, but on gala days their beauty was enhanced by gorgeous and tasteful decorations, and by extensive illuminations. On the occasion of *Nav Ruz*, the accession anniversary the two *Ids*, the *Shab-i-Barat*, and the Solar and Lunar weighings of the Emperor, the court was *en fete*. The *amirs* appeared in splendid apparel under a spacious canopy of brocade with deep fringes of gold. And the Emperor bedecked with a mass of diamonds, pearls, and other precious stones, sat on his magnificent throne, accepted presents and bestowed rewards.

The greatest marvel of Shahjahan's court was the famous *Peacock Throne*. Upon his accession he issued orders for its construction and it was completed in seven years. Its exquisite workmanship has been fully described by Tavernier. Next to it came the celebrated diamond known as "*Koh-i-Nur*", which was presented to the Emperor by Mir Jumla.

But the court did not primarily exist for the display of magnificence. The show of splendour was only one phase of its life. The other and the more useful side of its activity was the development and dissemination of culture among the people. The prevailing peace in the country together with the personal interest of the sovereign gave a powerful impetus to the growth

of art and literature. Poets, philosophers, scholars, artisans, all flocked to court in search of patronage, and talent was but rarely disappointed. The King was never slow to recognise merit and rewarded it generously. His example was followed by his courtiers, who vied with one another in extending their patronage to really capable men

Moreover, some of the courtiers themselves were men of high literary attainments. Ali Mardan Khan, Sadullah Khan, Said Khan, Zafar Khan, Khanazad Khan, Mir Jumla, Afzal Khan, Raja Jai Singh, to name only a few, were as distinguished in the field of war as in the realm of letters. They carried with them the traditions of the court and diffused them in the various provinces of the Empire. It is unfortunate that no systematic records of their cultural activities have come down to us but still from the stray references in the contemporary' political literature we can gather at least some idea of their contributions.

Besides the court there were also some other institutions for the spread of knowledge and culture among the people. There were two government schools as we may call them, one at Agra and the other at Delhi, in which teachers were directly appointed by the Emperor. But let it be noted here that the State as such did not directly concern itself with the education of the masses. It only endowed mosques which in most cases became centres of learning. This lack of interest on the part of the government though it deserves to be condemned according to our modern conception of its duties, was not an unmixed evil.

It provided a scope for individual and private enterprise. A writer remarks that in the reign of Jahangir there were schools in every village and town. These schools were certainly not government aided institutions. They must have come into existence through local and private efforts. Moreover, education was then considered quite outside the scope of temporal activities. It was a profession reserved for religious recluses, who imparted it free, or at a nominal charge. Institutions conducted by holy men were to be found at Lahore, Ahmedabad, Burhanpur, and Jaunpur. In the reign of Shahjahan famous

scholars also resided in Sirhind, Thaneswar and Ambala, and attracted students from distant places.

Another important centre of learning in this period was Kashmir. Its salubrious climate, its peaceful atmosphere and its picturesque scenery drew a large number of scholars who settled down there to write their works and to pass their lives in comfort. Mulla Hasan Faroghi and Mulla Muhsin Fani belonged to Kashmir; Khvaja Khudavand Mahmud settled in that province Mulla Shah visited it very often and Kalim and Qudsi took residence there to versify the Padshahnama.

The curricula of these educational institutions included a variety of subjects, which were taught by versatile and gifted teachers. There was no specialisation of the modern type. A general smattering of every useful science was what was aimed at. It is true that more attention was devoted to theology and metaphysics, but history, mathematics, prosody, and calligraphy were also favourite subjects of study. There were no examinations, but to have studied under a distinguished professor was regarded as a sufficient qualification.

The natural result of this universal system of education was the quickening of literary activity. Persian being the court language, received greater encouragement. and an enormous mass of literature was produced in it. By this time two distinct schools of writers had come into existence, the Indo-Persian school and the purely Persian school. The first outstanding representative of the former school, who standardised the language and style, was Abul Fazl. He set an example of a ponderous and involved style in which sense was very often sacrificed to the requirements of rhythm and diction. In this reign there was a large number of writers who attempted to imitate the 'master'; but with a few exceptions they succeeded only partially. The names of Abdul Hamid Lahauri, Md. Warts, Chandra Bhan and Md. Salih stand out prominently.

The Indo-Persian literature produced in this period is certainly not purely Persian. It is futile to expect it to be so. The Persian language had come to stay in India, and it could not for long keep itself aloof from its new and powerful

environments. It absorbed Indian ideas and Indian thoughts, and it was used for Indian subjects. Necessarily it developed a distinct character. To condemn it as un-Persian without consideration of these factors is to pay a poor tribute to the genius of the Indian people. No language can retain its virgin purity among a strange people unless they be intellectual nonentities and there is no reason why Persian should form an exception to this rule.

The Indo-Persian style developed because it was excessively patronised at court. Abul Fazl's works instinctively appealed to Shahjahan because their language was so ornate. Hence his quest for a man who would be able to chronicle the account of his reign on the same model. And indeed there is an indefinable charm in this Indo-Persian style which excites admiration in the heart of an Indian, but which is positively annoying to a foreigner who cannot appreciate what it stands for. The glories of the region of Akbar and Shahjahan could not have been penned in a less grandiose language.

The second school, the purely Persian school, was favoured by officers who were either of Persian origin or who traced their descent from Persian stock. In the early part of the reign Mulla Shukrullah, surnamed Afzal Khan patronised a large number of Persian scholars, among whom Aminai Qazvini and Jalaluddin Tabatabai are the two most important. Their works stand in a striking contrast to those of their Indian compeers, and boldly bring out the difference between the two styles.

A noticeable feature in this reign, and in fact throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, is the influx of a large number of poets from Persia. No Indian poet after Faizi held the post of poet-laureate at the Moghul court. The fact is very significant. It indicates that although the prose style of Indo-Persian had been standardised, in poetry, pure Persian still held its pre-eminence. When Shahjahan appointed Kalim as poet-laureate he recognised the fact.

From the question of style let us turn to a discussion of the types of literature produced in this period. After history, next in point of volume comes poetry. As remarked above, the best

poets were those who came from Persia. But with one or two exceptions they were of mediocre intellect, and incapable of producing anything new or original. Their works are insipid and show a remarkable lack of breadth of vision and sublimity. They devote more attention to changing the arrangement of words than to putting fresh ideas into their verses; and in most cases it is evident that the work is more an outcome of necessity than of inspiration.

Their *ghazals* are in the so-called Sufistic strain and deal with stereotyped and commonplace subjects. Their similes and metaphors are mostly drawn from the traditional stories of 'gul-o-bulbul' (Rose and Nightingale), 'Shirin-o-Farhad' or 'Laila-o-Majnun.' They rarely rise above a pedestrian level, and give a poor display of the flights of their imagination. But apart from the *ghazal* the main line of development in this period was the *qasida*, because originality in its composition was paying. The Emperor was very fond of listening to his own praise, and if the eulogy pleased him he had a poet weighed against silver or gold which was given to him in reward.

There were certain fixed ceremonial occasions when poets were expected to display their ability and genius. At the time of Lunar or Solar birthday celebrations the accession ceremony, or the birth of a son in the Imperial household, they composed chronograms, or *qasidas* and obtained fitting rewards. Also regular *mushairas* (competitions) were held at court when poets vied with one another to attract the attention of the Emperor.

Perhaps the oldest poet of the purely Persian school living at the court of Shahjahan was Sa'idai Gilani who ever since the reign of Jahangir had held the post of *Darogha-i-Zargar Khana* or Head of the Department of Jewellery. He combined in himself the old and the new spirit, and some of his chronograms are exquisite.

Abul Talib Kalim was the poet-laureate of Shahjahan's court. He belonged to Kashan but was brought up in Hamadan. He came to India in the reign of Jahangir, and was patronised by Mir Jumla, also called Rah-al-Amin. He entered the Imperial

service after the accession of Shahjahan who in recognition of his merits bestowed on him the highest honour. His *divan* (collection) consists of *qasidas* mostly addressed to Shahjahan, *masnavis* describing the buildings erected by him and a 'Saqinama' composed for Zafar Khan, Governor of Kashmir. He versified the Padshahnama.

Haji Md. Jan surnamed Qudsi possessed an elegant style which was widely appreciated. He soon attracted the attention of Shahjahan, who entrusted to him the work of versifying the Padshahnama. He wrote a description of the gardens of Kashmir, and a poem on various buildings erected by Shahjahan, with chronograms ranging from 1630 to 1638. He was regarded as abler than Kalim.

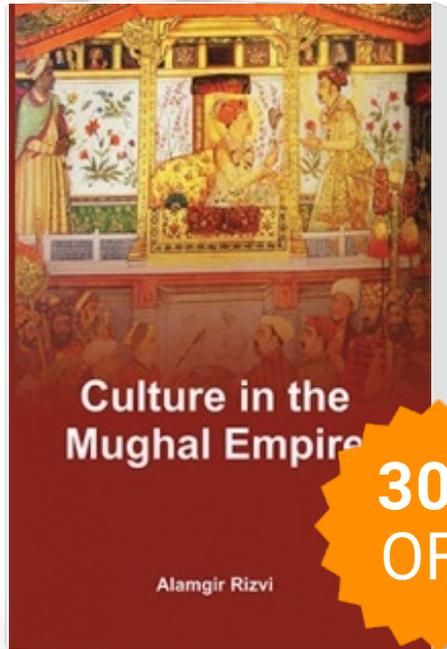
Mir Md. Yahiya, surnamed Kashi, traced his origin to Shiraz. He came to India, and secured the patronage of the Emperor and Dara Shikoh. He was also entrusted with the work of versifying the Padshahnama, but he soon fell out of favour and his work remained incomplete.

But the greatest poet of that period, and the one who is credited with having invented a new style, was Mirza Md. Ali, poetically surnamed Sa'ib. He was for a long time at Kabul, where he enjoyed the patronage of Zafar Khan. He was favourably received by Shahjahan, who conferred on him the title of Musta'id Khan. He did not, however, stay at court, but accompanied his original patron, Zafar Khan when he was appointed Governor of Kashmir. Later he returned to Persia, when Shah Abbas II appointed him poet-laureate.

Salim was a native of Teheran, and like many others, left his home to seek patronage in India. He possessed a ready pen and could compose extempore; but his verses were not popular, nor were his merits recognised universally. He was in the service of Islam Khan, and wrote a short *masnavi* on his exploits in Kuch Bihar and Assam.

Hakim Ruknuddin, surnamed Masih, was a native of Kashan. He was in the service of Shah Abbas I, but feeling offended by him came to India, where he found favour with

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