

Socio-Cultural Interaction Through Written Heritage

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1. Introduction

Of the several Central Asian seats of Persian language and culture that sprang up in the medieval period and onwards, Iran, Afghanistan, and the subcontinent stood conspicuous and prominent. The Persian literary heritage, revealed through history, art, architecture, society, and the culture of the medieval and early modern times, is full of interpretation and discoveries. Persian language and literature came in contact with many central and south Asian countries in the early 13th century A.D. and continued to hold an important place till early 19th century A.D. Peoples of Central Asia and the subcontinent not only speak allied languages like Persian and Urdu, there was also an affinity with respect to their culture, religion, society, and traditions.

Persian played a vital role in the societal progress across the region. Persian was the chief vehicle of expression in Central Asia and the subcontinent in medieval times. Consequently, the study of Persian literature capsulated in the manuscripts is essential for understanding the socio-cultural life and history of the region. Accordingly, Persian manuscripts have always been valued for their textual content; however, their physical features such as, great impressions in their miniatures and calligraphy, designs, ornamental illuminations, margins, stamps, seals, embossments and endorsements seldom get the attention they deserve as several of them lie neglected in various libraries and museums of the world. Many of the published catalogs fail to deliberate with these physical features of the manuscripts. Persian manuscripts are part of the written heritage which offers the ways and means to study

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the cultural interactions between the Persianate society and Persian speaking world in the past and present times.

This paper intends to study two selected Persian manuscripts through which the historical and socio-cultural interactions between central and south Asian countries are interpreted from a codicological perspective. The manuscripts selected for this research are from the Warren Hastings collection preserved at the India Office Library collection at the British Library, London. The following section, provides a brief description of the physical and social environment in which these manuscripts were produced. The third section presents two examples, *Bahrul Asrār fi Manaqibul akhyār* by Mahmūd b. Amīr Walī Balkhī and *Raudat al Muhibbin* by Khwaja Ibn ‘Imād Fakīh and provides information on various physical features of these manuscripts. The fourth and final section concludes the chapter.

2. Manuscript Production

Very little is known about the physical environment where the copyist performed. The readings of colophons, which are short statements containing information about a manuscript such as the place and the date of transcription, help researchers to some extent. Yet the exact date of transcription, name of the ruler of the time, name of the city, that are generally recorded in the colophon does not help much to understand the exact location where the manuscript was written or copied. This must be noted that the production of a single manuscript, especially a royally commissioned manuscript, required much expertise such as the work of a *mudhahhib* (illuminator), *khattat* (calligrapher), *naqqash* (painter), *musawwir* (miniaturist) and a *sahhaf* (binder), to name a few.

The *kitābkhāna* or *kutubkhāna* may be translated into English as the “house of the book or the books” or more accurately as library in the modern-day sense. However, the concept of the library during the medieval and pre-medieval times were completely different from that of today. Maintaining a library was not an easy task. Only the emperors or the nobles could afford to preserve books in their private library where commoners were not allowed to access. Moreover, these *kitābkhāna* or royal libraries were not only the storehouse of books but also used to serve as workshops where manuscripts were produced. (See Fig. 24.1.)

Manuscripts were also produced or copied in the places of worship, for example at *mazār* (cemetery), *khanqāh* (a Sufi center), *madrasah* (school), etc.¹ However, there is no mention of any workshop or atelier which was specifically dedicated to producing manuscripts. In Spain, during the time of Umayyads in the eastern suburb of Cordoba² alone, one hundred and seventy women were engaged in transcribing the Qur'an in *kufic* script.

There was also a tradition to engage the prisoners of war or slaves in transcribing manuscripts.³ But the question still remains unanswered whether these slaves worked in the atelier or somewhere else. There is also a record of an entire family engaged in book production in the mid sixteen century. Būdāq Qazwīnī, the author of *Jawāhir al Akhbār*, informed:

“in Shiraz there are many writers of nasta'liq, all copying one another, making it impossible to distinguish between their works. The women of Shiraz are scribes, and if illiterate, they copy as if they were drawing. The author visited Shiraz and ascertained for himself that in every house in this city the wife is a copyist, the husband a miniaturist, the daughter an illuminator, and the son a binder. Thus any kind of book can be produced within one family.”⁴

¹ Francois Deroche, *Islamic Codicology: an Introduction to the study of Manuscripts in Arabic script*, tr. Deke Dusingberre and David Radzinowicz, ed. Muhammad Isa Wale. (London: Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2005), 191.

² Córdoba is a city in the southern Spanish province of Andalusia.

³ Deroche, *Islamic Codicology*, 191.

⁴ Deroche, *Islamic Codicology*, 192.



Figure 24.2. Depiction of a *kitabkhāna*, Detail. Courtesy of Sabanci University, Sakip Sabanci Museum

It is evident from the record that most of the kings and nobles were great patrons of art and literature and used to maintain their own *Kitābkhāna*, the royal library. Owning a *Kitābkhāna* with a rich collection of manuscripts, miniatures, and other antiquities of historical importance was associated with power and sovereignty, besides patronization of art and culture. (See Fig. 24.2.) The trend of receiving and patronizing poets, writers, and Sufis were common amongst the kings. Between the kings exchanging of gifts such as illustrated and exquisite manuscripts, decorative arts, pearls, and jewelry, etc. were common practice.

Major libraries in the Muslim world were found in Kairouan (Tunisia) and Cordoba (Andalusia). The library of the caliph in Baghdad was very renowned until the 13th century. It was a center of translation of the ancient texts of Graeco-Roman civilization, and books on history, religion, and literature.⁵ Not only the king but also their viziers were also great patrons of literature. Rashīd al-Dīn Fadhl-allāh Hamadānī (1247–1318), the powerful vizier (prime minister) of the Ilkhan Mahmud Ghazan and author of *Jami ut Tawarikh* (“*Compendium of Chronicles*”), had maintained a rich library for scholars in the early fourteenth century in Tabriz.

“In his *Kitābkhāna*, Rashid al-Din ordered the reproduction of manuscripts in a specific large format, sometimes quite sumptuously illuminated, to disseminate theological, historical and scientific knowledge, in order to gain glory in this world and to win favor in the next. He also left his name to a widely illustrated world history of which there exist several copies”.⁶

We also come across very fine illustrative and illuminative manuscripts until 1620 from Shiraz which remained relatively independent under Ilkhanids.

However, there is established evidence from the Timurid Bāysanghur, (799-837/ 1397-1433) son of Shah Rukh, who assembled around him in Herat the most eminent artists of the time, including painters, illuminators, and calligraphers.⁷ The workshop of the prince’s *kitābkhāna* was engaged in producing manuscripts and paved the way for the posterity. The *kitābkhāna* of Bāysunghur was headed in 1427 by Ja’far Tabrizi, an eminent calligrapher, who reported to the former on the progress of the activities of the artists at the workshop.⁸ Dawlatshah calls him the *sarmad e Kuttāb*⁹ or the leader of the calligraphers. The workshop of Bāysunghur

⁵ Francis Richard, “The Kitabkhana: An Institution in the Service of Culture and the Art of the Book” in *The treasure of the Agha Khan Museum*. (Istanbul: Sabanci University Sakip Sabanci Museum, 2011), 106.

⁶ Richard, *The Kitabkhana*, 106.

⁷ E. J. Grube and E. Sims, “The School of Herat from 1400 to 1450” in *The Arts of the Book in Central Asia* ed. Basil Gray (Paris: Shambala, 1979), 154-158.

⁸ O.F. Akimushkin, “The Library Workshop (Kitabkhana of Baysunghur Mirza in Herat” *Manuscript Orientalia: International journal for Oriental Manuscript Research* 3, no.1, (1997): 14.

⁹ Dawlatshah bin Ala u d Dawla Bakhtishah al Ghazi of Samarqand, *The Tadhkiratu Shuara /Memoirs of the Poets*, ed. E.G. Browne (London-Leyden, 1901), 350.

was comprising of twenty-five craftsmen, including Jafar Tabrizi. The workshop-library of Herat at the end of the Timurid period was famous and under dual patronage of Sultan Husain Mirza Bayqra (d. 1605) and his eminent vizier and poet Mir Ali Shir Navai. Muhammad Qawwam Shirazi, the renowned illuminator, painter, and binder, and Khwaja Ali Musawwir were also associated with the workshop. The famous painter or miniaturist Kamaluddin Bihzad was also employed at the court who later, with the accession of the Safavids conferred with the title of *Kalāntar*, head of the *kitābkhāna* of Shah Tahmasp.¹⁰

Persian was enjoyed as the language of communication and the list of manuscripts produced at the *Kithābkhāna* of Bāysunghur reaches upto 23, of which two were gifts). Amongst them were *Gulistaān* by Sa'di; *Shahnāmā* by Firdawsi; *Diwān-i Khwāju Kirmānī*; *Tārīkh-i Jahāngushāi* by Juwaynī; *Tārīkh-i Tabarī*; *Tājul Ma'thir* by Sad al-Dīn Muhammad al-Nishaburi; *Kalīlawā Dimna* by Nasrullah Munshi, etc. to name a few. It is also to be noted that among 23 manuscripts the following five of them survived today: *Gulistān*; *Shahnāma* (2 copies); *Tārīkh-i Tabarī* and *Tārīkh-i Jahāngushāi*.¹¹ The detailed discussion on the *kitābkhāna* of Bāysunghur is out of the scope of this article. However, with the above discussion, it is very much established that Central Asian rulers of the 15th century remained active in patronizing the artists and book production.

¹⁰ Richard, *The Kitabkhana*, 107.

¹¹ Akimushkin, -on the basis of lecture of Prof. P. Souček- opines that the list provided by Efendī is full of error. See "The library-workshop (Kitabkhana) of Baysunghur Mirza," 9.



Figure 24.3. Seals and endorsement at the flyleaf-Courtesy of British Library, UK

It is believed that the royal library served as the workshop in producing manuscripts for the king. Several colophons in the manuscripts, seals, *shamsia*, and endorsement at the flyleaf help us to understand the whereabouts and provenance of the manuscript. The information on the flyleaves of the manuscripts is firsthand information about a manuscript. The *shamsia* and royal seal bearing the name of the owner or library serves as the source of the provenance of the manuscript. A particular inscription reading as “*arzđida*” or “*arzđida shod*” records the inspection of the object by the owner which is mainly found in the manuscript originated or once possessed in the sub-continent. (See Fig. 24.3.) The following examples from the manuscript selected herewith peeps into the changes of several hands and the movements of a manuscript from one place to another.

3. *Bahr ul Asrār fi Manaqib ul-akhyār* and *Raudat al-Muhibbin*

*Bahr ul Asrār fi Manaqib ul-akhyār*¹² is a monograph containing a very interesting observation of Mahmūd b. Amīr Walī Balkhī who wrote this book after seven years of his extensive travel to the important cities of the sub-continent. The book includes a detailed history of Uzbek Khans of Transoxania from 1597 to 1640 A.D. and provides significant accounts of all the men of letters, Amīrs, Sheikhs, and poets of the period especially those in Balkh.¹³ (See Fig. 24.4.)



Figure 24.4. *Bahr-ul-Asrār fi Manaqib-ul-akhyār* -Courtesy of British Library, UK

¹² Riazul Islam, *The Bahr ul-Asrar: Travelogue of South Asia*, ed. Mahmud b. Amir Wali-Balkhi (Karachi: Institute of Central & West Asian Studies, 1980), xviii + 162

Riazul Islam, *A Calendar of Documents on Indo-Persian Relations (1500-1750)*, vol. I (Tehran: Iranian Culture Foundation, and Karachi: Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1979), xxiii + 511.

¹³ Mahmud b. Amir Wali Balkhi, *Bahr-ul-Asrār fi Manaqib-ul-akhyār*. Hermann Ethe. IOL. Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the library of the India Office, (Oxford, 1903) Ms. no. 1496/575, 229.

Walī Balkhī had visited India between 1624-1630 A.D. during the period of Emperor Shāh Jahān and traveled through Deccan and Ceylon. There is an endorsement on page 409 of the present manuscript stating:

”شاه قاسم در کتاب خانه حضرت خاقان اعظم و ملک معظم نذر محمد خان
خلد الله ملكه و سلطان الى يوم الدين“

Shāh Qāsim at the library of Khāqāni ‘Azam (*Honorable or Generous*)
Nazar Muhammad Khānkhuld Allah malkah o sultān al yomiddīn.
(See Fig. 24.5.)

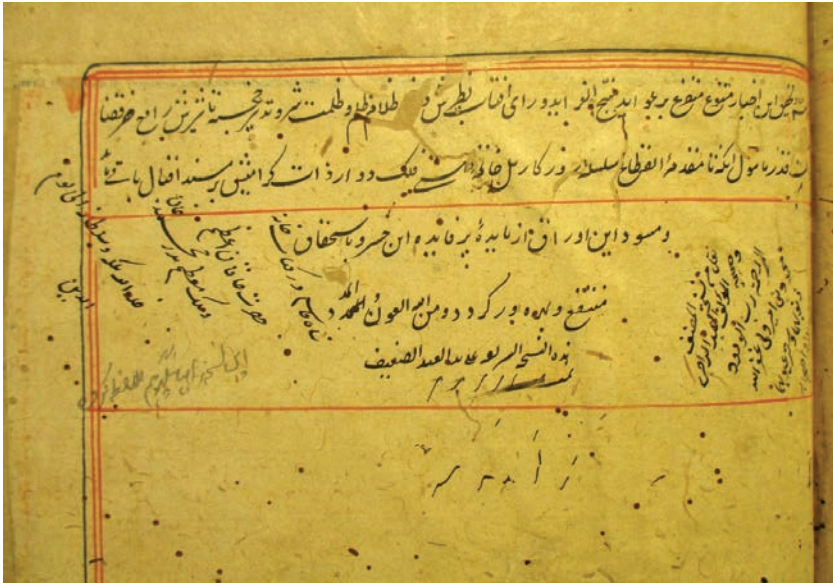


Figure 24.5. Endorsement on *Bahr ul-Asrār fi Manaqib ul-akhyār* -Courtesy of British Library, UK

As per the above note, the present manuscript belongs to the library of Nazar Muhammad Khan (d. 1649), the ruler of Balkh.¹⁴ Nazar

¹⁴ Nazar Muhammad Khan, the Uzbek ruler, has asked for Mughal support in a civil war against his son ‘Abdul ‘Azīz. Emperor Shāh Jahān had sent his son Murād with an army of 60,000 for help. In 1646 Prince Murād and ‘Alī Mardān Khan, his commander, occupied Balkh and seized twelve million rupees from treasure. Emperor Shāh Jahān had also moved his court to Kābul for a while but Mughal Army could not stay at barren land since grain fields had been completely deserted because of civil war. Emperor Aurangzeb handed over Balkh to Nazar Muhammad Khan in 1647 and returned back.

Muhammad Khan had appointed Walī Balkhī, as the chief librarian of his great library at Balkh.¹⁵ The other note on the same folio approved the statement as it reads:

نقل من نسخه المصنف و صحيحه المؤلف عبد الرجى الرحمة رب الودود
محمود بن امير ولى غفر الله و ذنوبى

The present manuscript is copied from the author's autograph soon after the completion of the work. The note clearly shows that Nazar Muhammad Khan was still alive when this manuscript was scribed.

There are three endorsements on the flyleaf -one of them belonged to the 5th reign year¹⁶ of Ahmad Shah,¹⁷ when the manuscript was purchased at the cost of 25 rupees of that time. The two inspected dates on the flyleaf are of 1196 A.H./ 1781 A.D and 1197 A.H/ 1782 A.D. (See Fig. Fig. 24. 6) There are two seals at the end of the manuscript (on page 409 read as "...Khan Syed 'Ali Badshah 'Alamgīr dated 1086 A.H/ 1675 A.D") and the other on p.410 reads "Qābil Khān Khānzādi Bādshāh 'Alamgīr 29 reign" (See Fig. 24.7.) that means it belonged to 1687 A.D. i.e. the 29th reign year of emperor Aurangzeb (reign 1658-1707).



Figure 24.6. Dates on the flyleaf *Bahr ul-Asrār fi Manaqib ul-akhyār*

¹⁵ Nabi Hadi, *Dictionary of Indo-Persian Literature*, (New Delhi: IGNC, 1995), 332.

¹⁶ 1753.

¹⁷ 29 April 1748 – 2 June 1754.

The present manuscript copy from the collection of Warren Hastings was preserved at the British Library. The first two pages following 1b and 2a are highly gilded with interlinear gold decoration written in fine *nast'aliq* script and have 29 lines on a page.



Figure 24.7. Seal-Bahr ul-Asrār fi Manaqib ul-akhyār



Figure 24.8. Raudat al Muhibbin

Raudat al Muhibbin or *The Garden of Lovers*¹⁸ (see Fig. 24.8.) should not be confused with the book entitled 'Dah-name' or *Ten Letters* of Khwaja Ibn 'Imād Fakīh (d. 1372/ 1391 A.D.). This *Raudat al Muhibbin*¹⁹ is a mystical *mathnavi* consisting of ten letters composed by Ibn 'Imād as mentioned on the folio 38b of the manuscript. (Fig. 24.9a and 24.9b). The *mathnavi* was originally composed in the month of Rabi ulAwwal in 794 A.H/ January 1393 and the present copy was scribed by one of the greatest of Persian calligrapher Mīr 'Imad al Husainī (d. 1615) sometime in the late 16th century as the date on the colophons has been erased. Fig. 24.10.

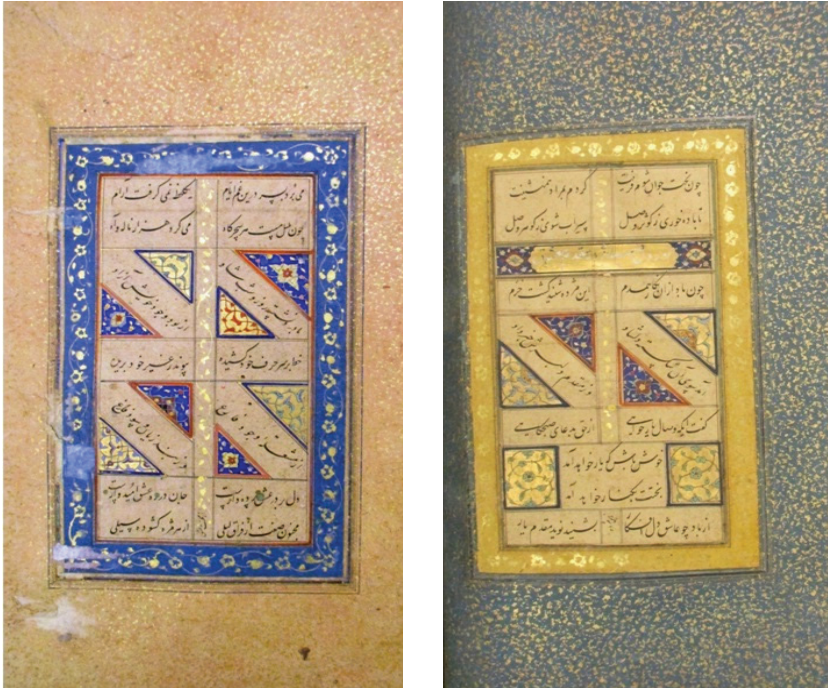


Figure 24.8a and 24.8b. *Raudat al Muhibbin* Folio 38b

¹⁸ Khwaja Ibn Imad Faqih, *Raudat al Muhibbin*. Ethe. 1023.

¹⁹ The book has been edited and published by Nasharyāti Moassisi Khāvar in Tehran, Iran with an introduction by Sa'yeed Nafīsī.



Figure 24.9. *Raudat al Muhibbin*-Detail

‘Imād began his career under the guidance of famous artist Isa and Malik Dailami and later left his birthplace Qazwin for Tabriz where he enjoyed the company of Muhammad Husain. Mir ‘Imād enjoyed

the patronage of Shah 'Abbas of Safavid (b. 1552). He had moved to Turkey and returned to Herat and Khurasan before he was murdered in 1615. During his stay at Herat, 'Imād had served as the calligrapher of the library of Farhad Khan Qaramanlu (d. 1598) the commander-in-chief of the Safavids.²⁰ It was most probably during this time the present manuscript was produced. The present manuscript copy from the collection of Warren Hastings is a highly gilded and illuminated copy written in fine *nasta'liq* script on creamy paper, finely illuminated opening, and chapter's headpieces throughout, double intercolumnar rules in gold with framed in multicolor gold sprinkled borders. There are two beautiful illustrations in the manuscript. (See Fig. 24.11a and 24.11b) The book is consisting of 720 couplets and flyleaf bears a seal of one Murīd Khān Bahādur dated 1161 A.H./ 1748 AD.



Figure 24.11a and 24.11b. Illustrations on *Raudat al Muhibbin*

²⁰ It was in 1598 when Farhad Khan Qaramanlu enjoyed the governorship of Astarabad (gorgan). The same year he had taken over Mashad from Uzbeks and fought against Uzbek army in Herat. David Blow, *Shah Abbas: The Ruthless King Who became an Iranian Legend*. (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2009).

4. Conclusion

The canvas of Persian manuscripts is very wide and the collections of Persian manuscripts are dispersed in various libraries and museums of the world. However, such collections, despite containing valuable resources on literature, history, science, and the arts of the sub-continent and Central Asia, remain woefully neglected. The tradition of manuscript production, i.e. workshop trends in the *kitābkhāna*, were inherited from Iran and certainly enriched the Persian studies in terms of dissemination of new styles in illustration, illumination, bookbinding, and paper production in Central Asia and the subcontinent. The hundreds of poets, writers, artists under the royal patronage of the emperor of the time flourished and enriched the manuscript production. The men of arts kept on migrating from one court to another where they were given patronage. The rise and fall of the empires no doubt affected book production, yet Samarqand, Herāt, Bukhārā, Shirāz, Astrabād, and Khurāsān remained active centers of book productions even during and after the 16th century. The migrations of writers, poets, Sufis, and artisans were a usual historical phenomenon. Their works attracted the attention of people in India and they were profusely transcribed in manuscript forms.

The manuscripts presented in this paper are full of interpretation and discoveries. The collections of Persian written heritage offer various ways and means to study the socio-cultural interactions. However, a detailed study of them and those in other collections from a codicological perspective is yet to be done. Such a study will undoubtedly provide us with an insight that extends far beyond the borders of a state given that these collections contain the remains of once-great libraries in various parts of the world. Research on this area will hopefully enhance our understanding of the history of manuscript production and the assembly of library collections during medieval periods.

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