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Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East

Duke University Press

Volume 24, Number 2, 2004

pp. 61-72

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

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*Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24.2 (2004) 61-72

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**The Making of a Munshi**

Muzaffar Alam

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The difficult transition between the information and knowledge regimes of the precolonial and colonial political systems of South Asia was largely, though not exclusively, mediated by scribes, writers, statesmen,

and accountants possessing a grasp of the chief language of power in that time, namely Persian. More than any vernacular language or Sanskrit, it was in Persian that the officials of the English East India Company conducted its early rule, administration, and even diplomacy in the years around the seizure of the revenues of Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century. Hence they naturally had to come to terms with the social group that was regarded as most proficient in this regard.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the Mughal aristocracy and its regional offshoots provided them with certain models of etiquette and statecraft, and various "Mirror of Princes" texts attracted the attention of Company officials. But the pragmatic realities of political economy that had to be dealt with could not be comprehended within the *adab* of the aristocrat, and the representatives of Company Bahadur were, in any event, scarcely qualified themselves to claim such an unambiguous status. The real interlocutor for the Company official thus was the *munshi*, who was mediator and spokesman (*vakil*), but also a key personage who could both read and draft materials in Persian, and who had a grasp over the realities of politics that men such as Warren Hastings, Antoine Polier, and Claude Martin found altogether indispensable.<sup>2</sup>

Though the term *munshi* is recognizable even today, it has shifted semantically over the years. Aficionados of Hindi films since the 1960s will recognize the character of the *munshi* as the accountant and henchman of the cruel and grasping *zamindar*, greasily rubbing his hands and usually unable to protest the immoral demands of his master.<sup>3</sup> Specialists on colonial surveying operations in the Himalayas and Central Asia will recall that some of those sent out on such ventures were already called "pundits" and "moonshees" in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> But the latter set of meanings is not our concern in this brief essay. Rather, we shall look at how, in the high Mughal period, one became a *munshi*, what attributes were principally called for, and what the chief educational demands were. The sources with which we approach this problem fall broadly into two categories. Relatively rare are the first-person accounts or autobiographical narratives that will be our principal concern here. More common are normative texts, corresponding to the "Mirror of Princes" type, but which we may term the "Mirror for Scribes." Thus, in the reign of Aurangzeb, just as Mirza Khan could pen the *Tuhfat al-Hind* (Gift of India), in which he set out the key elements in the education of a well-brought-up Mughal prince,<sup>5</sup> others wrote works such as the *Nigarnamah-i Munshi* (Munshi's Letterbook), which were primarily concerned with how a *munshi* was to be properly trained, and which technical branches of knowledge he ought rightfully to claim a mastery of.<sup>6</sup> Earlier still, from the reign of Jahangir (r. 1605-28), we have a classic text entitled *Insha'-i Harkaran*, the author of which, Harkaran Das Kambuh of Multan, claimed to have served with his family as scribes in the high Mughal administration. The significance of this text was such that the East India Company produced an edition and translation of it in the late eighteenth century, so that it could serve as a model text for its own early administrators when they dealt with the knotty problems of inherited Mughal administrative practice and terminology.<sup>7</sup> The *munshi* was thus the equivalent in the Mughal domains of the south Indian *karanams*, whose careers and worldview have recently been the object of an extensive treatment.<sup>8</sup>

Since such materials fell into a branch of knowledge that was regarded as secular, in the sense of being distinctly this-worldly and largely devoid...



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