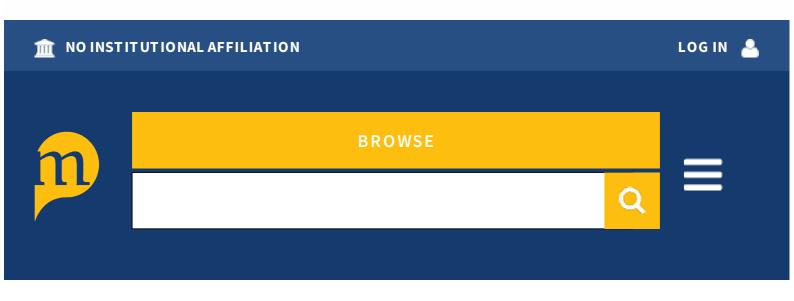
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The City of Beauties in Indo-Persian Poetic Landscape.



# The City of Beauties in Indo-Persian Poetic Landscape

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

# The City of Beauties in Indo-Persian Poetic Landscape

Sunil Sharma

Premodern Persian poetry was largely produced in an urban environment, and poets, whether associated with a royal court or of a mystical bent,

had a special relationship with the city in which they practiced their craft. In prosperous times the city was the location of patronage networks and a cosmopolitan center of cultural life, as well as being a macrocosm of the narrower spaces that provided the context for the performance of Persianate poetry, i.e., the private *mahfil* (assembly) or the *majlis* (session) of courtiers or Sufis. The opinion of Gustave E. von Grunebaum concerning Arab poets can equally be applied to those of other Islamic traditions:

The poets have set reasons when they praise life in the city ...

They take pride in the presence of a powerful prince, of men learned and pious, without exhibiting as a rule much interest in the glories of the city's past. They have an open eye for its scenic beauties, and like their less articulate fellows identify strongly with their place of residence yielding only too often to the impulse to turn on other cities and their inhabitants if some disappointment does not even provoke them into an attack on the place which they had praised to the sky only a short while before. <sup>1</sup>

As a result, the large corpus of topographical literature in Persian is often the only documentation of places and people that have otherwise vanished without a trace from historical memory. In the Indo-Persian context, poets affiliated with patrons who had commissioned grand building projects, such as Amir Khusraw's (d. 1325) description of the architectural projects of the Delhi sultans and the poems of Mughal poets active at Shah Jahan's court, had a prescribed role in translating the vision of a new building or city into the discursive realm of poetry. Along with the buildings and gardens of a city, a Persian poet's amorous gaze would often settle on the beautiful inhabitants of the place, who embodied a city's vigor and vitality. Working within a narrow system of poetics, but one that did not exclude the potential for innovation, poets described relationships between poet and patron or poet and city in the metaphoric language of love. Given the power-based and often mercenary nature of such relationships, it is not surprising to find the

dalliance of the lover and beloved set in the commercial world of a thriving city. In this paper, I would like to explore the rhetorical connections between love lyric, commerce, and the city at one level, and at another level, read Indo-Persian city poetry (and Urdu to the extent that it drew its inspiration from Persian, with which it had a paradoxically complementary yet competitive relationship) as a medium for the transmission of knowledge about various modes of cultural and social interaction in urban centers of power, described in a special poetic language embedded in tradition, but at the same time reflective of a new historical mode of thought. The chronological framework of this study is from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, which happens to correspond to a period of Persian literary innovation and experimentation known as the *sabk-i Hindi* (the Indian style). I shall take into account the works of selected Iranian émigré poets writing for Indian patrons, as well as Indian poets who wrote in Persian and Urdu.

A useful term that is often employed in the discussion of Persian poetry about cities is *shahrashub* or *shahrangiz* (city disturber), which is more often a topos than a literary genre.<sup>3</sup> The *shahrashub* was originally an appellation for a beautiful beloved in a lyric poem, but also a short bawdy lyric addressed to a young boy who is engaged in a trade or craft and coquettishly offers his wares to the love-struck poet. One of the earliest instances of this kind of poetry is found in the *divan* of Mas'ud Sa'd Salman (d. 1121), whose *shahrashub* poems, although replete with useful information on the crafts and trades prevalent during his times, represent a metaphorical city and are not...



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#### SUNTL SHARMA

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