

Abu'l Barakat "Munir"
Lahori, *Karnama-yi Munir*
(excerpts)

Translated by Sunil Sharma

Translator's Preface: *Munir, A Punjabi Persian Poet in Mughal Bengal*

Abu'l Barakat "Munir" Lahori (1610–44) was a Persian-language poet who was active during the reign of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58). The courts of the early Mughal rulers attracted dozens of émigré Persian poets, artists, and scholars from the larger Persianate world, especially Iran and Central Asia, due to their generous patronage. There were a number of non-native speakers in imperial service as well, especially Punjabis from Lahore such as Munir. In a short career, Munir mainly served under his patron Mirza Safi Saif Khan, who was related to the imperial family, and accompanied Saif Khan when he was appointed as governor of Bengal. Munir also lived in Agra, where he died. Munir's collected poetry encompasses *masnavis*, *ghazals*, and *qasidas*. The extracts from his works include one from a short prose treatise on literary criticism, *Karmama-yi Munir*, in which he denounces the preference for the fresh-style (*tazago*) poetics in the *ghazal*, which were marked by unusual metaphors and new verbal constructions. He describes the difficult situation of being a young poet of Indian origin in a literary culture that was dominated by Iranian émigré poets who were thought to have better credentials as native speakers of the language. The second extract is from a verse travel account of a boat trip to Bengal along with his patron. Munir describes traveling by boat down the river Ganga as an exhilarating voyage of discovery. Inspired by the Mughal literary fad of writing *masnavi* praise poems about Kashmir and other imperial places, Munir focuses on the natural landscape of Bengal and the journey itself. His style is a mixture of poetic-ethnography with traditional Persian imagery. He includes lists of the special flora and fauna of Bengal, the landscape, and the monsoon season, along with the pesky mosquitoes.

Karnama-yi Munir (Munir's commentary)

In the past, if you were a young master poet, you would be considered old by virtue of your intelligence and wisdom. If you were poor, you would be reckoned a rich man by virtue of the wealth of your poetic skills. If you were shy, you would be considered famous by virtue of your renowned verses. And if you were not Iranian, you would be considered noble by virtue of your good temperament. These days if you do not possess those four qualifications, you are considered to be nothing and your poetry valued as useless. As for being noble, especially in this age, unless a poet's birthplace is in Iran, his poetry will not be ranked high. Since I, a sun-worshipper, have risen like the full moon (*munir*) in the city of Lahore, and have obtained the right temperament and a brilliant mind from the bounty of the eternal sun, I have raised the star of meaning to the heavens. I have mastered the art of poetry, but like the deceptive sun, I am forced to lie before the ones with dark minds, claiming that I am from Khurasan so that my poetry and prose can find buyers.

Mazhar-i gul (Manifestation of the rose)

At the command of the king of the seven climes,
my lord who appreciates poetry and is intelligent
left Agra under a favorable horoscope,
with young fortune as his companion.
I was one of his servants, ready to wait on him.

I went, in short, with a hundred joys,
traversing the way swiftly and with haste.

When I reached Patna with a joyous heart
I became eager to get on the boat.
When the Ganga showed its face to me,
I prepared to become its slave (*hindu*).

The Ganga is pregnant with a hundred seas,
and heaven is lost in it like a drop of water.
No one knows it from shore to shore,
its middle is non-existent like the beloved's waist.
No one thinks of putting a bridge over it,
its water has seen nothing but a bridge of fishes.

Like a pleasure-seeker, I joined the party on the boat,
and we set off on the water as if by magic.
At night dark clouds arose and there was eerie darkness.
Dark night was dark water's comrade; the river was tyrannical.
Suddenly there was a disturbance in the water,
the wave's curls were disheveled by the wind.
When a strong wind impeded our progress,
the river curled up like a scroll.
The wind brought great turbulence over the clouds,
its tyranny became a ball and the waves a polo stick.

Wind and water were twisted together in such a way
like the sighs and tears of lovers on the day of parting.
Everyone was prostrated in all directions, with their faces facing
a *mihrāb*.

The bodies of people were like toys for the wind,
everyone was unhappy about its cruelty.
Everyone was drenched by the favors of the water,
drowned from head to toe.

On the river I suffered from the tyranny of worry
when I saw boatloads of mosquitoes there.
They were masters in drawing blood—
Why would anyone need a bloodletter?!
They buzzed around people's ears
not saying anything but words that flayed the skin.
The mosquitoes became so familiar with my blood
that my hands were fated to be the color of henna.
Where was my savior from this sorrow?

Someone to extract blood price from the mosquitoes.

When I reached Bengal by the almighty's blessing,
in search of pleasure, I saw
a paradise full of lovely flowers,
a garden like the face of *hourīs* in spring.
Its settlement was like the narcissus eye's kohl,
a flower's body was sensitive in the breeze there.
Everywhere that I went in this land
I saw nothing but hyacinths and basil.
This place is so full of greenery,
the Green City is embarrassed before it.

In the countryside there is verdure everywhere,
the earth has washed its face with emerald water.

The pearly dew became emerald
from the profusion of greenery of that felicitous land.
One had a vision of the greenery not yet sprung from the ground
with the clarity of the eye of perception.
The land is all green fields; indeed, spring is foremost here.

Thousands of flowers grow like the tail of a peacock
from the seeds that this ground kisses.
It has become weak from the burden of flowers,
no one here even knows what autumn is.

Wherever you look there is greenery:
It is spring, it is spring, it is spring!
Due to this, Bengal is a perpetual paradise,
the pleasure place of Saif Khan.

From the miraculous air there is greenery on the walls
like the down on the beloved's face.
The moisture in the air made its home here
where a fan is more like a washbasin!

The earth is watered to such an extent
that footsteps in the ground appear as a stream of water;
from the devotion of ascetics, dryness has vanished.

There are clouds here all the time,
but for six months especially there is the monsoon.
Earth, water, air—everything is rain clouds,
wherever you look, it is all water.
With so much water everywhere
the inhabitants play games in it.
Constantly beset with a flood of water,
they are like birds nesting in trees.

I heard from a wise old man that
in this land such violent winds have arisen before,
enough to uproot one village to another.
Therefore, agriculture is a losing occupation.

When it is the season of seditious fires, which flare up stormily,
it is so hot then that even water hides in shame.
Fire follows the course of the water,
which becomes fiery like wine.
When the fire turns to the garden, saplings burn like candles,
and every tree branch becomes a burning log with sparks.

Anyone who is a native of this land,
their body is like a burning candle.

Bengal is a marvelous country that
amazes the heart of a wise person.

How well the poet, worthy to address Saif Khan, has said:
This land abounds with three elements: water, fire, and wind.

Works Cited

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