

## Book Review

Rajani, Shayan. *Leaving Legacies: The Individual in Early Modern South Asia*. 298pp. Cambridge University Press 2025.

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*Leaving Legacies: The Individual in Early Modern South Asia*, composed in elegant prose, is essential reading for historians of South Asia and Pakistan. Rajani situates the history of the individual not in a European notion of self but in Persian and Mughal cultures of literary and material production. He offers both the history of the idea of the individual in Sindh and a history of Sindh through texts and literary production. The individual, he argues, is immanent in texts, in architecture, and in family legacies that date to the premodern period in Sindh from the beginning of the 17th century to the end of the 18th. This period is commonly associated with a South Asian cultural fatalism and apathy about the self that was understood to have been dispelled by the British empire. Rajani delicately unpacks the motives and context for the creation of epigraphs, monuments, and literary works in Persian and Sindhi. These sources reveal evolving notions of self, and of community and place in Sindh. Their creators interacted with texts, law, and the Mughal state, and with women, workers, and religious others. These men sought to leave legacies, Rajani argues: they were motivated by a sense of individualism and interiority, and the legacies that they left gradually fashioned an idea of Sindh as a part of the Mughal empire, as a place knitted out of the excellence and the power of its people, and as a region connected to a wider world.

The study opens with the story of Mir Muhammad Masum (d. 1606), a Sindhi noble who served the Mughal emperor Akbar and left an inscription at the Mughal monument of Chihilzina, a chamber carved into a mountain near Kandahar. Masum's inscription dating to 1599, 75 years after the monument was built, included a list of Mughal dominions, a prayer for the Mughal family, and a personal introduction. Together with other inscriptions left by members of the Mughal royal family, Masum's poetic contribution revealed political intrigue as well as presenting

new visions of the world in its orientation and its map like arrangement. Masum was deferential to the emperor by composing a testament to his sovereign power while at the same time making a case for individual recognition, Rajani argues, through his awareness of the visual impact of his inscription at the site.

The history of Mir Muhammad Masum's contributions at Chihilzina are the subject of chapter 1; chapter 2 turns to the Masum's broader efforts to create legacies. These were foregrounded, Rajani emphasises, by the Mughal mansabdari system under Akbar that restricted intergenerational transfers of power and conferred rank on the basis of individual merit. Examining Mir Masum's legacies across different media, including his numerous contributions to the built environment, books, a funerary complex and a son, Rajani presents his concern for both this life and the afterlife. He wrote poetry under the penname Nami and featured his verse in epigraphs he left at various monuments from Delhi to Isfahan and in lower Sindh, ensuring that whoever encountered these traces would know and remember him. And he also wrote about his concern for his son's education and career. By weaving together these varied elements of Masum's work as an intent to create a legacy, Rajani complicates an understanding of elite cultural production in early modern South Asia that has otherwise been examined as the cultivation of power. These lifeworks were intended as a means to extend oneself beyond death, Rajani explains, drawing on a mid-17th century biographical dictionary of Mughal notables composed by Shaikh Farid of Bhakkar that catalogs books, monuments, and sons left by Mughal nobles and explicitly makes the case that these creations made it possible for noblemen's names to endure.

Chapter 3 turns to a study of books produced by Yusuf Mirak (fl. ca. 1634), son of the Mughal mansabdar Abdul

Qasim Namakin, as material traces that constituted his family, allowing him to create a legacy despite not achieving a rank in the Mughal administration. This chapter presents Rajani's historical detective work through which he identifies Namakin's more prominent sons by way of regional histories and links Mirak through his single extant manuscript, *Mazhar-i Shahjahani*, to Namakin's family. The gifting and preservation of Mirak's manuscript constituted a legacy and an intergenerational family in a manner quite different than the way a title and the administration and inheritance of patrimonial lands would have done. Rajani also presents a review of Mirak's text itself and characterises it as a new form of literary production, "counsel." It included an ethical treatise on kingship and an eyewitness report on Mughal administration in Sindh, particularly Sehwan where Mirak was in the employ of the Mughal mansabdar.

A new type of book, the Sindhi book, emerged at the beginning of the 18th century, signaling a valorisation of Sindhi writing within a regional Persianate literary sphere. These books, vernacular texts on prayer, took inspiration from Aurangzeb's *Fatawa-i Alamgiri* which sought to discipline the moral lives of Mughal subjects. In chapter 3 Rajani presents his study of several texts: the izzat corpus of pedagogic verse composed from 1657-1659; Abdul Hasan's (fl.1689) *Muqaddamat al-Salvat Sindh* (The Sindhi Introduction to Prayers); and Makhdum Muhammad Hashim's (1692-1761) *Madhnama-i Sindh*. These texts all had distinct written audiences; the first two were guides for oratory and preaching and the last was a response to an Afghan text that abused Sindhis as uncouth, infidels, and without honor. All three texts, constituting legacies through their readership, presented an idea of a non-hierarchical community that was constituted by way of the region. Rajani does not examine the nature of the individual elite male within this community suggested by these texts. However, the discussion in this chapter does do very interesting work in presenting a regional and place-based analysis of social and cultural transformations. The production of instructive religious texts in early modern South Asia is often glossed over as reformism; the approach Rajani takes in this chapter, focusing instead on pious bodies as subjects of law and textual strategies for bringing together a regional community, offers many compelling insights.

Later texts reveal an unraveling of the self. Rajani explains in chapter 6, as he examines self-effacement and radical egalitarianism in Shah Abdul Latif's (1688-1751) *Risalo*. The period of Kalhora rule from 1737 till 1782 was the age of Fakirs who ruled the region and shaped social and cultural life. Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's poetry presented an ethical framework that drew on the ethics of women, Hindu ascetics, and Shias, and valorised agricultural labor. Latif's poetry presented the family as an institution

of control of women's sexuality and of youth that relied on violence to maintain its hold. Latif rejected individual legacies in the form of sons and presented the bonds of love as constituting community. Latif presented what Rajani terms female pedagogy, women's counsel to one another, as an instructive framework in his poetry that valorised radical love. He reflects, however, that this was accompanied by an ambivalence about the role of women in his commune, warning fakirs against interacting with them and recommending that they take the veil. Still, Latif repudiated the dominant male hierarchical order and acknowledged women's presence, labor, knowledge, and ethics as exemplary.

A final chapter entitled "Regional Man" examines the literary works of Mir Ali Shir Qani, particularly his *Tuhfat al-Kiram* (1767), a geographical and biographical dictionary. This text presents a geography and imagining of the world, a work of textual placemaking that exceeded the local and regional imagination of many other authors and texts in this period. The central focus of this chapter relates to the way in which this text revitalised individual male legacies and presented these within the scaffolding of family lineages and social groups. Qani's presentation of social organisation in Sindh was not so much a reality as an ideal, Rajani says, that proposed a formulation of elite power mustered from below. Qani's literary works were distinguished from earlier Persian prose works by the absence of the Mughal state as mediating the relationship between the individual and society. He intentionally and methodically identified and listed men of distinction; his work marks a succession to the Mughal era of imperial discernment and attribution of consequence.

The intent to leave legacies, Rajani tells us, signals self-awareness and individualism and moves us towards a new understanding of monuments, family legacies, and extant manuscripts in Sindh today. He makes the case for the intentionality and self-consciousness of early modern men in Sindh who confronted the fleeting nature of life and sought to influence their descendants in times to come. This book offers many other riches as well. It contains a lively history of Sindh from the beginning of the 17th century to the end of the 18th century, setting the stage for the start of the colonial period. It presents careful readings of key Persian and Sindhi texts that are a valuable guide for any scholar of the region. It presents frameworks for examining the family in early modern Sindh. And it gives conscious and consistent attention to women in this historical and literary landscape. Methodologically, Rajani combines textual analysis with historical archaeology, epigraphy, and the examination of extant manuscripts, showcasing a unique and diverse range of skills. *Leaving Legacies* is an important contribution to the field and opens up new areas for historical study.