

Constructing Jannat-ul-Firdous: The Representation of Kashmir in Persian Travel Literature

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Abstract

While Kashmir is situated in a unique position in Persian and Indo-Persian writing as a region that can be described using the language of paradise to describe its physical abundances, this paper focuses on the ways in which certain travel-related Persian writings transform the region from geographical terrain to a space of pleasure, wonder, sovereignty, and sacred-aesthetic value. As an analytical shorthand for paradisiacal discourse but not as a phrase intended to appear verbatim in each source, I will be using “Jannat-ul-Firdous.” This paper will use qualitative literary-historical analysis, and will place Jahangir’s *Jahangir Nama* at the center of the corpus, and will read it in conjunction with Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat’s *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, Abu’l-Fazl’s *Ain-i Akbari*, and Abd al-Hamid Lahori’s *Badshah Nama*. This paper will also integrate recent studies of Persianate literary method, Mughal mobility, landscapes, gardens, Kashmir’s multilingual intellectual culture, and the material history of gardens. I argue that Kashmir was described as paradise through a specific conjunction of these methods: botanical classification, an aesthetically pleasing climate, flowing water, gardens, a calendar of changing views, and a hyperbolic poetry of a majestic emperor’s movement and the transformation of the landscape into a domain of knowledge. However, the same texts contained difficult access, uncomfortable climates, and social hierarchies and made ethnographic observations. Therefore, paradise should not be considered an exact representation; it should be viewed as a selective representation, a powerful example of composing paradise, because the harmony of empirical observation and Persian-Islamic aesthetic principles, at times, contradict each other.

Keywords: Kashmir, Persian Travel Literature, Jannat-ul-Firdous, Indo-Persian Literature, Persianate Culture, Travel Writing, Landscape Representation, Mughal Kashmir.

Introduction

The scenic reputation of Kashmir is Kashmir’s prominence in Persian and Indo-Persian literature is attributable to a lot more than scenic beauty. During the Mughal period, the Kashmir valley was a travelled environment, a court retreat, an imperial possession, and a privileged literary figure. Kashmir in the Mughal period, more specifically, is important to Sunil Sharma’s conceptualization of ‘Arcadia,’ while some Persianate scholars advocate against the cultural ownership of Persian by modern Iran or its treatment as a foreign language in South Asia (Sharma; Kia; Green). The significant issue thus, is not merely the appreciation by Persian poets of the beauty of Kashmir, but the beauty of Kashmir as it was expected to be.

The representational issue that the title *Jannat-ul-Firdous* captures is that Kashmir's paradise image incorporates an Islamic ate notion of paradise, and *bāgh* (garden) or *Chaman* (meadow, garden) and spring and fragrant flowers of the garden together with *gul* (flower or rose) and *ab-o-Hawa* (shade and *āb-o-hawā*) (literally, climate or 'water and air'), in addition to *bahār* (spring), combine poetic associations of freshness, abundance, shade, fragrant flower, and cultivated pleasure. However, gardens should not be misunderstood. Their meanings also included the water systems, the costs and the labor, the patronage, and the enjoyment of the leisurely pursuit of the garden (Ruggles; Wescoat). Kashmir's paradise image must therefore be appreciated as an interaction of an observed environment and a literary convention.

Persian travel-related writings integrated Kashmir within the global cultural space via sensory observation and descriptions that employed imagery of gardens and paradises along with poetic hyperbole, imperial mobility, and territorial knowledge. The case documented the most clearly is Jahangir's *Jahangir Nama*. Memoir-history, administrative survey, court chronicle, and conquest and governance broaden the scope of the case. The result is neither pure geography nor unrestrained fantasy, but a multilayered place-making in which Kashmir could be a garden, a bastion, a province, a sacred landscape, an economic resource, and a socially differentiated home.

The construction analysis does not suggest that Kashmir's ecology was invented by discourse. Rather, representation selects, sequences, compares, and intensifies phenomena of a materially distinctive mountain valley. Landscape and representation remain distinct and, as a result, the environmental reality continues to be present. It also avoids the false dichotomy of reading travel writing as testimony and reading it as literature: Persian early modern texts undertake both of these functions simultaneously.

Kashmir in the Persianate Literary and Historical Imagination

In pre-modern South Asia, Persian functioned as a language of administration, scholarship, poetry, history, correspondence, and social intercourse among the elite. "Persianate" in this sense refers not to ethnicity, but to the networks along which genres and textual, social, and aesthetic tropes traveled across regions. Kia focuses on the relational interpretation of place and origin against the backdrop of nationalism, and Green advocates for attention to Persianate genres and social stations in a comparative key (Kia; Green). Jabbari also notes that later nationalist canons have elided literary links between Iran and South Asia (Jabbari, Making).

The incorporation of Kashmir into the Mughal Empire was a narrative process. Hassan's study of Perso-Sanskrit accounts discusses the gradual opening-up of politics, the environment, diplomacy, local partnerships, and different representations of the Mughal *taskhīr-i Kashmir* (Hassan). In Abu'l Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari*, regions are depicted through imperial categories of knowledge, and Kashmir is located in the dynastic movement, ceremony, and ritual in Lahori's *Badshah Nama*. In addition, Mirza Muhammad Haidar's *Tarikh-i-Rashidi* places Kashmir among mobile Central and South Asian political domains, rather than considering it a closed valley (Abu'l-Fazl; Lahori; Dughlat).

The valley was also multilingual. Sanskrit historical accounts, Kashmiri vernacular poetry, courtly and religious Persian, and later Urdu writings intersected in various ways. Truschke and Bazaz illustrate why vernacular and elite Classical languages enable and constrain the possibilities for the political and sacred historical imagination. Yaseen's later studies confirm the ongoing presence of this kind of multilingualism. Persian travel poetry was important, but never exhaustive.

Mughal patronage of the arts and the mobility of the court reinforced the convergence of literature and geography. Courtly movement of poets, secretaries, and administrators along with their supply systems, moved into new frontiers to be written as imperial space. Kinra's work is important here as it locates courtly ideals as integral to the everyday management of a multi-ethnic and multilingual empire. This restrained and ordered the combination of the emperor's pleasure, or, patronage, and pragmatic knowledge of the empire's resources.

Review of Literature

Recent Persianate research has moved away from national literature toward circulation, genre, mobility and shared forms. Green considers the Persianate as a comparative-literary problem; Fani and Schwartz, Jabbari and Hemmat also emphasize transregional continuity and internal difference (Green; Fani and Schwartz; Jabbari, "From Persianate Cosmopolis"; Hemmat). This approach allows for a

reading of Kashmir where local adaptation of Persianate forms is emphasized, rather than viewing it as a passive recipient of an external culture.

Travel and landscape scholarship provides a second perspective. Khazeni demonstrates how Indo-Persian travelers preserved their observations through political knowledge and wonder, while Zadeh demonstrates that marvels could function as a means of organizing knowledge (Khazeni; Zadeh). For the Mughal landscapes, Nath's "peripatetic kingship" connects royal movement to sovereign performance, and Wescoat restores labor and hydraulics to gardening history; Hosseini sets his Safavid study within a framework of water as infrastructure, spectacle, and affect (Nath; Wescoat; Hosseini).

Kashmir-focused scholarship has made the politics of representation especially visible. Sharma demonstrates the valley's importance in the Mughal Persian literary paradise; Sohal demonstrates the much later political afterlife of Kashmir's nature; and Bazaz demonstrates a vernacular mystical archive that does not fall into courtly aesthetics (Sharma; Sohal; Bazaz, "Vernacular Apocalypse"). The more neglected question is how Persian travel-related genres themselves constructed Kashmir in paradisiacal terms, but also recorded the sovereignty, labor, social order, and environmental rigor.

The existing literature cautions against equating paradise with the same symbol across all times and cultures. Ruggles and Wescoat, for example, demonstrate that the Islamic Garden is a more complex subsystem than an iconographic analogy with Heaven (Ruggles, Wescoat). In contrast, Sharma demonstrates that Mughal Persian literary paradise was indeed productive (Sharma). This study focuses on the flexibility of representation of paradise. That is, paradise can heighten sensory pleasure, authorize comparison, bring imperial geography under imperial control, and embrace disunity and disharmony.

Research Objectives

- To examine Persian representations of Kashmir's landscapes, climate, water, vegetation, gardens, and paths.
- To analyze how Persian-Islamic artistic vocabulary constructs Kashmir as a terrestrial paradise.
- To study the nexus of description of travel, Mughal sovereignty, courtly mobility, and comprehensive cognizance of the realm.
- To assess how Kashmiri society, religion, crafts, and everyday life compare with and complement depictions of the Paradise landscape.
- To recognize the environmental and social discrepancies that define the paradise narrative.

Research Questions

- How does Persian travel-related writing use Kashmir's geography to construct a culturally meaningful landscape?
- How do literary and sensory devices make the valley legible as paradise?
- How do water, gardens, seasons, *bāgh*, *bahār*, *gul*, *Chaman*, *āb-o-hawā*, and what structures of representation do they make possible?
- How do the movements of the empire construct Kashmir as a desirable and governable space?
- How would the representations of the Kashmiris explain or challenge the paradise ideal?

Research Methodology

This study will rely on qualitative literary-historical analysis and combine methods of close reading, theme, and historical analysis. The first-person royal travel memoir is Jahangir's *Jahangir Nama*, and will be used in this translation by Wheeler M. Thackston. As a mobile memoir-history, Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat's *Tarikh-i-Rashidi* will be used, as will Abu'l-Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari*, as an imperial administrative-geo-historical survey, and Abd al-Hamid Lahori's *Badshah Nama* as a court chronicle of dynastic travel. These works will be used as travel-related topographical and imperial comparisons, and should not be mislabeled as independent travelogues.

Close reading will be conducted based on ten categories: landscape, paradise imagery, seasons, water and fertility, gardens, sacred imagery, local society, the imperial gaze, the aesthetic, and contradictions between idealized and observed space. "Jannat-ul-Firdous" is an analytical category, and is not a statement that the phrase recurs throughout the corpus. In the assessment of other statements, I will quote only from the verified texts from Thackston's edition. Other statements will be paraphrased rather than supported with invented Persian passages or page references.

Comparison is done at the level of function rather than assuming the same goals of the author. A royal memoir, an administrative compendium, a conquest narrative, and a court chronicle are designed to be read by different audiences and satisfy different institutional considerations. Their shared focus on routes, resources, climate, cultivation, and the presence of the royal court is therefore analytically significant because it crosses genres. Conversely, differences in the tone or emphasis are maintained, rather than harmonized into a single Mughal voice. This approach ensures that the study maintains a focus on the Persianate conventions across different periods and the individual texts.

Table 1: Selected Persian/Indo-Persian Travel Texts and Their Representations of Kashmir

Author/Traveler	Text	Period	Context of Visit/Description	Dominant Representation of Kashmir	Key Themes
Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat	Tarikh-i-Rashidi	Mid-16th century	Memoir-history shaped by mobility, warfare, and first-hand political engagement with Kashmir	Mountain frontier and contested political landscape within Central–South Asian mobility	Routes; conquest; governance; topography; society
Abu'l-Fazl	Ain-i Akbari	Late 16th century	Imperial administrative-geographical description after Mughal incorporation	A province rendered legible through ordered imperial knowledge	Survey; resources; routes; administration; classification
Jahangir	Jahangir Nama	Early 17th century	First-person royal travel memoir recording repeated movement through Kashmir	Perennial garden, abundant waters and flowers, seasonal spectacle, defensible valley	Sensory observation; wonder; climate; botany; royal mobility; society
Abd al-Hamid Lahori	Badshah Nama	Mid-17th century	Court chronicle of Shah Jahan's reign and dynastic mobility	Courtly-imperial landscape connected to patronage and royal circulation	Ceremony; royal travel; court geography; patronage; sovereignty

Note. Genre labels are kept distinct: only the Jahangir Nama is used here as the principal first-person royal travel memoir; the other works function as memoir-historical, administrative-topographical, or court-chronicle comparators.

Constructing Jannat-ul-Firdous: Representation of Kashmir in Persian Travel Literature

• **Kashmir as a Terrestrial Paradise**

Jahangir is able to synthesize realistic description with literary idealization in a superior manner to others. Jahangir writes of Kashmir, “a perennial garden and an ironclad bastion” (Jahangir 332). The phrase captures Kashmir's gardened and peaceful beauty as well as its protected and bounded nature. Jahangir continues the phrase by adding other elements to the metaphor such as ‘meadows’, ‘springs’, ‘water’, ‘roses’, ‘violets and ‘narcissi’ (Jahangir 332–33). Sharma's Mughal Arcadia notes that Kashmir, within the jurisdiction of the Empire, could become the materialization of the ideal Persian garden (Sharma). Through analogy, Jahangir is personifying Paradise. The metaphor does not imply beauty nor does it contain a beautifying principle. Rather, it expresses an experience of environmental enjoyment consistent with the form of a mobile court. It is the repetition of descriptive phrases that expresses a courtier's praise rather than vague, empty comments.

• **Water, Gardens, Fertility and Persian Aesthetic Imagination**

In Kashmir, water is a shifter and shapes the environment in varied ways. It can be a pathway to springs, rivers, waterfalls, and lakes or a route to cultivated areas. Sachsen Maier demonstrates that beyond the theological, water can signify the economy, technology, and infrastructure. Hosseini's Safavid case also considers water and its relation to infrastructure and affect. In travel writing, these material

systems are often signifiers of freshness and fertility. Thus, bāgh and Chaman include courtly patronage. Ruggles points out that Islamic gardens should not be understood as mere faithful representations of paradise. Similarly, Kashmir has the potential to be paradise and this is not the slightest literal interpretation of it. It combines sacred poetry, sacred texts and philosophical discourses of paradise and fertility. This accounts for the fact that in the text, the formal gardens and the entire valley can mirror each other. Culture provides a frame through which one can read nature. It appears that Kashmir is more fertile than the garden as a bounded architectural space.

- **Seasons, Climate, and Landscapes of the Senses**

Kashmir's beauty is seasonal and not static. Jahangir depicted the different seasons, showcasing the changes in the cool air and snow, rain, and the growth of vegetation. He stated, "The flowers of Kashmir are beyond counting or enumeration." (Jahangir 328). Jahangir establishes an observation and arc of abundance. The climate is relative, and for a court moving from the hotter plains, a sigh of relief is a cool āb-o-hawā. Dampness, cold, wet roads and passes are an uncomfortable mix. The same environment that is pleasant can slow movement. Paradise is a selective arrangement of contradictory sensations rather than a denial of material geography. Change of seasons offers a narrative of temporality. Kashmir is not just observed from a particular point, it is observed by the arrival, the waiting, the blooms, the rains and the cold and by the renewal of movement, so that climate is about traveling in itself and becomes part of the travel story.

- **Poeticization of the Kashmiri Landscape**

Travel prose contains elements of poetry. This becomes more obvious in any description where enumeration is inadequate. Gardens, springs, roses, and nightingales gain a language of their own in an aesthetically cultivated leisure. In this context, flowers, waterfalls, fragrances, and greenery all become part of this Persian grammar of Aesthetics. Poeticization of Kashmir is a case in point. Its beauty is so complete that it is poetry. This type of beauty is so complete that it transcends into poetry. Kashmir is extraordinary because it fits into all the forms of beauty so perfectly. In one of his studies, Zadeh analyzes wonder and empirical marvel (Zadeh). Jahangir's methods of observation, counting, comparing, and wondering belong to that of wonder and marvel. Insofar as Green's comparative method is concerned, it becomes much easier to understand how the memoir, chronicle, topography, and poetry can be interwoven with metaphors without losing their individual identity. In this respect, when we describe an object which is beyond the ordinary, the use of hyperbole is extremely important. Literary hyperbole in travel writing provides the energy, strength, and intensity to writing.

- **Sacred Geography and Paradisiacal Imagery**

The vocabulary for Paradise brings a religious charge, but doesn't refer to just one thing. Jannat and Firdaus refer to a watered and abundant paradise. In Persian literature, this kind of language is used to describe the most favored garden or city. Therefore, the sacralization of Kashmir must be differentiated from a simple doctrinal description. It also transcends the imperial Persian categories. Taz's and Yaseen's work show the later co-existence of Kashmiri, Persian, and Urdu religious and literary expressions. Persian travel writing was a part of a larger and more diverse sacred geography. This is important because courtly praise can borrow sacred language. This doesn't necessitate that every description of land becomes devotional theology. Sacred language and worldly evaluation can reside in the same phrase while being distinct and separate from each other.

- **Travel, Empire, and the Political Geography of Kashmir**

Royal Travel Broadens Territorial Boundaries and Transforms Space into Performative Action. Royal Travel Broadens Territorial Boundaries and Transforms Space into Performative Action. Nath discusses the travel of Akbar and illustrates how the "peripatetic" movements of kingship fuse the presence, ceremony, and sovereignty (Nath). During his travel, Jahangir evaluates sites, assesses resources, interacts with staff and peasantry, and appreciates and patronizes cultivated spaces. Abu'l-Fazl's Ain-i Akbari provides an administrative logic in parallel to Jahangir's travels and provides a description and classification of Imperial territories (Abu'l-Fazl). Hassan's study of the accounts of conquest narratives indicates that the annexation of Kashmir was politically problematic and rhetorically contained (Hassan). With the combination of territorial desire and the principles of imperialism that include fertility, defensibility, climate and beauty, there is a seed of paradisiacal luxury. Although curiosity, pleasure, and politics should not be confused, the very act of traveling named routes and assessing sites

creates the geography of access. The beauty of Kashmir is not just the valley, it is also the Imperial capacity to go there, describe it, and provide it and return.

- **Representations of Kashmiri Society and Culture**

Jahangir appreciated Kashmiri society and culture through descriptions of shawls, food, houses, crafts, music, religious groups, and ascetics. However, his observations combined appreciation and sharp elite criticism (Jahangir 334). This combination exemplifies the imperial gaze. A picturesque vista can be appreciated, but the subjects of that vista can be assessed with reference to the court's civility, gender, religious, occupational, and aesthetic considerations. Persian was not the only voice of Kashmiri culture. Truschke's Sanskrit and Bazaz's vernacular sources also offer alternative viewpoints of political and spiritual life, respectively. Gandhi's study of Persianate publics is a caveat against assuming that Persian involvement in the Kashmiri case extends Persian involvement to overly simplified communal boundaries (Truschke; Bazaz, Nund Rishi; Gandhi). Therefore, the image of paradise is socially exclusive. This is an important methodological observation. With regard to landscape descriptions, they have been appreciated in themselves and commonly have been appreciated without the social assessments. However, a holistic appreciation shows that the admiration of beautiful landscape does not equal social inclusivity and cultural intimacy.

- **Paradise and Its Contradictions**

Jahangir's itinerary tells the strongest opposing account. Jahangir incurs many difficulties before reaching the much-lauded valley scenes. These include steep approaches, troubles with transportation, treacherous passes, and heavy rains (Jahangir 327–28). Getting to the "perennial paradise" is a lengthy process. Some of the other contradictions are equally instructive. At times, there are inexplicable floral abundance. The imperial wisdom strives to catalog. There is an abundance in the flower world juxtaposed against the social order. The pleasure of beauty is connected to the labor required to build and maintain gardens and water systems. Nature of Kashmir respectably was, and still is, politically potent (Sohal), demonstrating the methodological point. Landscape is given potency through its narration. "Jannat-ul-Firdous" is a discourse that organize selected observations into a presentation of an ideal while keeping what opposition it resists. It should not be considered that contradictions mean the paradise trope has no value. The text should view hardships as a passage to a spiritually beautiful land while keeping the necessary friction to remind the reader that paradise is a place that is governed and populated.

Discussion

The corpus shows the mediation of Persian travel is evident. Among the real, sensory elements, there are waterfalls, flowers, cool air, snow, mountain passes, crafts, and settlements. However, the value of these materials is situated within the Islamic paradise and Persian poetic languages. Thus, the travel experience undergoes so many transformations before achieving its shape in text. Kia, Green, and Jabbari, in their critiques of national literary divisions, offer support to this position: the Persianate image of Kashmir is transregional, but remains situated in a specific locale (Kia; Green; Jabbari, Making).

Aesthetics and power coexist yet are not the same. The royal ability to move, classify, build, sponsor, and write informs what is visible. With regard to peripatetic kingship, Nath demonstrates that sovereignty is expressed through the ability to move; meanwhile, Wescoat demonstrates that the elegantly constructed garden's aesthetics conceal a great deal of work. Furthermore, Abu'l-Fazl and Lahori demonstrate how a territory is made both administratively and ceremonially legible. Persian travel literature constructs Kashmir as paradise by integrating environmental abundance and literary and sacred heritage. However, harsh terrain, social critique, and local multi-lingual traditions mean that the image remains fragmented.

Conclusion

Texts exploring the history and culture of the Kashmiri people demonstrate that the Persian and Indo-Persian travelogues documented the picturesque Kashmir region, and in the process developed a cultural terrain. Jahangir's memoir has numerous descriptions that range from travel routes to rivers, flowers to weather, craft to community, and extend to a garden of such abundance that it is beyond description. The Composite History of India and General Administrative Survey corroborate this from other points of view, where pleasure is associated with the knowledge of the territory and the space of the empire.

Kashmir's conversion to Jannat-ul-Firdous is due to the combination of Islamic Aesthetics, geography, Islamic ate representations of paradise, sensory traveling, poesis, and imperial power. Water and greenery served as the material for the metaphor. Garden vocabulary supplied the aesthetics. Movement and surveys of imperialism supplied the politics. The garden metaphor and imperial aesthetics were constrained by the climate and the social order, which was structured and labor intensive and comprised of many different groups. The relevant question is not if Kashmir is literally paradise on earth. The relevant question is how travel narratives and observations constructed metaphor and power to persuade the argument. In this, Kashmir's literary paradise should be appreciated as a dynamic representation of Persianate seeing, as much as the valley itself.

This study also illustrates how one should keep genres distinct. The individual accounts of Jahangir, Abu'l Fazl, Lahori, and Dughlat speak differently about the same things. They can be usefully juxtaposed since each account presents a different way in which space is culturally made. Read together they can help us understand how different space can be made through different accounts, and how there is a great deal of diversity to be understood.

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