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Janpath, New Delhi

<https://doi.org/10.15804/aoto202204>

SIHR UL BAYAN:
AWADH POETRY IN DELHI PAINTING
(An imperial later Mughal manuscript
from the National Museum, New Delhi)

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to study select paintings from the illustrated manuscript *Sihr ul-Bayan* (The Enchanting Story), dating back to the later Mughal period and presently in the National Museum, New Delhi (Acc. No. 60.695). *Sihr ul-Bayan* stands out in Urdu literature as one of the most famous examples of *masnavi*, a form of rhyming poetry usually dealing with love stories. It is also known as *Qissai Benazir aur Badr i-Munir* (The Story of Benazir and Badr i-Munir) and *Masnavi Benazir* (The Story of Prince Benazir). This manuscript offers a good insight into the contemporary Mughal culture.

The illustrated manuscript in the National Museum collection is a fine example of later Mughal Court paintings. It was completed in AD 1836 (1252 Hijra era) during the reign of Akbar II. Muhammad Bakhsh was the calligrapher. *Sihr ul Bayan* was originally written by Mir Hasan (1727–1786) under the patronage of Nawab Asaf ud-Daulah of Awadh. This long narrative poem of over 2,000 couplets is about the love story of Prince Benazir and Princess Badr i-Munir.¹⁾ Since then, many illustrated copies of the story have been made.

¹⁾ Russell and Islam (1968–70).

The present manuscript was produced at the Mughal court and is an exemplary representation of the story in fine calligraphy and paintings. In this manuscript, twenty paintings illustrate the main events in the story. Of these, seven are discussed here which gave us an idea of the political and social environment of the time. Before delving into the paintings pertaining to the manuscript, it would be pertinent to give a brief summary of the story.

THE STORY

Sihr ul Bayan tells the story of a Muslim king who ruled over a vast and prosperous empire and had no offspring. In his old age, on the advice of his Wazir, he sought guidance from Brahmin priests, who predicted the birth of a handsome and illustrious prince. They also foretold a difficult time that the prince would undergo. Once, Prince Benazir was sleeping on the palace roof when a *pari* (fairy) saw him. Her name was Mahrukh. She fell in love with the prince and abducted him to the fairyland. Seeing Prince Benazir unhappy in her captivity, Mahrukh-pari gave him a magical horse so that he could travel at his will, with the condition that he would never fall in love with anyone. On one of his journeys, Benazir happened to see a charming princess called Badr i-Munir. The two fell in love. In their love, the young couple was helped by the Wazir's daughter and princess' closest friend, Najm un-Nisa, „a girl of great beauty and full of the spirit of mischief”.²⁾ Mahrukh-pari came to know that the prince was in love with another woman. She ordered a *dev* (demon) to imprison the prince in a dried-up well in a desert and seal the mouth of the well with an enormous rock. Thus the prince was detained. Meanwhile, Princess Badr i-Munir waited fruitlessly for Benazir and slowly sank into profound sorrow.

Finding the princess inconsolable, Najm un-Nisa decided to undertake a journey in search of the prince in the guise of a yogini (Brahmin ascetic). She wandered in the desert in search of the prince. One night, while she was playing the veena in the desert, Prince Firuz Shah, son of the king of the fairies, saw Najm un-Nisa. He took her to the fairyland where Najm un-Nisa met his father. The king greeted her with a ceremony befitting a state guest. Meanwhile, Firuz Shah fell in love with Najm-un Nisa and proposed marriage.

²⁾ Russell and Islam (1968–75).

She put forward the condition that she would consider his proposal only if Firuz Shah could locate Prince Benazir.

Firuz Shah sent fairies to search for Prince Benazir. One of the fairies located his whereabouts. Firuz Shah then ordered Mahrukh-pari to release Benazir, failing which she would have to undergo severe punishment. Mahrukh-pari apologised for her deeds and released the prince. Firuz Shah, on his magic throne, brought Benazir to Najm un-Nisa. All three of them left the fairyland on Firuz Shah's magic throne to meet Badr i-Munir. With the permission of Badr i-Munir's father, Benazir and Badr i-Munir were married amid a grand celebration. Later, at the request of Prince Benazir, the father of Najm un-Nisa and Wazir of the empire consented to the marriage of his daughter and Firuz Shah. Their marriage was as spectacular as that of the prince and princess. The couple departed to the fairyland on the magic throne. The prince, too, left for his city with Badr i-Munir. The return of the prince brought joy to his empire.

SELECT PAINTINGS FROM THE MANUSCRIPT

PORTRAIT OF EMPEROR SHAH ALAM II (PL. 1, FOLIO 8A)

The first painting in the manuscript is of erstwhile Mughal emperor Shah Alam II (1759–1806). Mir Hasan's work starts with verses in praise of the emperor, after which the story begins. Shah Alam II had resided in Awadh from 1760–1772 as a fugitive during the wazirat (prime ministership) of Shuja ud-Daula, father of Nawab Asaf ud-Daulah. Far more prosperous and politically stable than the Mughal emperors, the nawabs of Awadh were by this time not merely viceroys of the Mughals, but acted as semi-independent rulers.

In the painting, the Mughal emperor is seated in a dignified manner on a gold throne. His face is in profile, surrounded by a halo. His eyes are closed to show his blindness, having been humiliated and blinded by Rohilla chief Ghulam Qadir in 1788. The emperor is shown counting the beads of a rosary like a Sufi saint. It appears that to compensate for his lack of political authority, the emperor is claiming spiritual authority. With the acceptance of British protection in 1803 by Emperor Shah Alam II, real power fell into the hands of the East India Company. One notices that in order to maintain and legitimise their right to rule, later Mughal rulers made liberal use of spiritual symbolism.

The painting is divided into two distinct zones: the foreground and the background. The marble terrace of the fort palace at Shahjahanabad, Delhi, with fine pietra dura work, is the setting for the foreground. The emperor on his gold throne occupies the centre of the foreground. Behind him is an attendant with a fly-whisk in his right hand and a bowl in his left hand. In the front left corner is a nobleman with his hands clasped in reverence. The three figures are arranged diagonally to show depth. In contrast to the fine delineation of facial features, the treatment of hands and feet is crude. The detailed rendering of costumes, carpet, curtains, architectural components and the facial features of the emperor and his attendants follows the traditional style of Mughal painting. However, the receding landscape, shading, and use of a subdued colour palette instead of a traditional bright palette in the background indicate growing European influence. The European influence can also be seen in the fur-lined court of the emperor.

A SCHOLAR PRESENTING A BOOK TO NAWAB ASAF UD-DAULAH OF AWADH
(PL. 2, FOLIO 10A)

The second painting in the manuscript deals with the verses of Mir Hasan written in praise of *wazir* of the Mughal emperor and Mir Hasan's patron, Nawab Asaf ud-Daulah of Awadh. In his story, Mir Hasan hints that his patron is no less illustrious than the emperor himself. This is particularly evident in verses where he refers to the marriage of Najm un-Nisa, the daughter of the Wazir, being celebrated "with pomp and ceremony no less spectacular than that which had accompanied the wedding of the prince and princess."³ In the literal sense, the verse refers to the Wazir in the story, but it is also a metaphor for the power and wealth of Nawab Asaf ud-Daulah, who was the Wazir of Emperor Shah Alam II. Mir Hasan, in his verses, places Asaf ud-Daula on an equal footing with the emperor, if not above him. The painting, however, was produced at the Mughal court, and clearly conveys the subordinate position of Wazir Asaf ud-Daula in relation to the Mughal emperor.

Asaf ud-Daula is shown seated against a bolster on a carpet on a marble terrace. Unlike the previous painting where the setting of the fort palace on the bank of the river Yamuna in Delhi is clearly conveyed, the background

³ Russell and Islam (1968: 89).

here is generalised. Behind the *nawab* is an attendant with a bowl and a piece of cloth. The use of cloth instead of a proper fly-whisk indicates the subordinate position of Asaf ud-Daula, as the fly-whisk (*chauri*) signifies royalty. In the front left corner of the painting is a scholar presenting a book to the *nawab*. He probably represents the poet Mir Hasan; the book is probably his famous *masnavi*, *Sihr ul-Bayan*. There is another portrait of the poet Mir Hasan in the collection of National Gallery of Modern Art.⁴ The verses, in praise of the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II and the *nawab* Asaf ud-Daula, and the first two paintings of the manuscript reflect the contemporary political undertones prevalent at Awadh and Delhi respectively. Other paintings in the manuscript deal with the story of Prince Benazir.

BRAHMIN PRIESTS PREDICTING THE BIRTH OF PRINCE BENAZIR
(PL. 3, FOLIO 18A)

In this painting, brahmin fortune tellers are shown in the court of the king. This pertains to the episode of the story in which the king had fallen into despair at his childlessness and fortune tellers were summoned to the court by the prime minister to make predictions as to whether a child would be born. Once the king was convinced of their merit, wishing to know if he would ever have any offspring, he invited the fortune tellers to be seated and consult astrological books and horoscopes. The poetic verses and representation reflect the cultural synergies between Hindus and Muslim culture during the nineteenth century, just before the British took over the country.

The scene unfolds on a marble terrace where the king is shown seated on a golden throne placed diagonally under a brilliant red canopy decorated with gold. The marble pavilion behind the king, decorated with inlay work, further highlights him. On the right side of the king are *chauri*-bearers and on his left are a group of four men. One of them standing near the king appears to be a high-ranking minister, which is indicated by staff and a handkerchief hanging from his waistband. There are several paintings of the *darbar* of Mughal rulers where important nobles and ministers are shown with their hands resting over a staff (for instance paintings from *Padshahnama*).

⁴ Company Painting (2021: 82).

The main event takes place in the foreground, where four *brahmin* astrologers are grouped to discuss the fate of the king. Three are seated together, whereas the fourth is on the opposite side. All four of them belong to different sects and have mastery over different branches of astrology, as indicated by the variety in their costumes and professional equipment.

The Brahmin dressed in bright yellow attire and white turban is explaining, with his raised hand, the position of the stars from the horoscope placed over a *chauki*. There is also a *pothi* (sacred book) wrapped in a chequered cloth and tied with a yellow thread. A similar *pothi* is also with the Brahmin, standing among the courtiers and dressed in a yellow garment.

Of the three Brahmins seated together, the central one appears to be the chief Brahmin because of his dominant scale and elegant black shawl. He holds a manuscript in his left hand and participates in the discussion. In front of him is a brilliant orange board which probably represents a *yantra* (device) for forecasting the future. Beside him on the left is an expert dressed in indigo blue who threw dice on the floor to predict the future of the king. On his right is the Brahmin with the barely covered upper body over which his sacred thread can be seen. He sits cross-legged with his right hand firmly placed over his thigh. Unlike the others, he wears a distinguished cap.

NAJM UN-NISA, DISGUISED AS A YOGINI, LEAVES THE PALACE IN SEARCH
OF PRINCE BENAZIR (PL. 4, FOLIO 92B)

Badr i-Munir, the princess, was devastated by her separation from Prince Benazir, and had dreamt of his captivity in an unknown place. In order to comfort her friend, Najm un-Nisa decides to set off in search of the prince in the guise of a Shaivite yogini.

She carries a veena (a stringed instrument) on her left shoulder. She wears a knee-length dhoti (loincloth) as her lower garment. Unlike the princess and her attendant, she is barefoot. In order to hide their identity, aristocratic Muslim ladies sometimes disguised themselves as yoginis and went outside the palace to accomplish their mission. This fact is again evidence of the fluidity between Hindu and Muslim cultures during that time. Here one may note that several paintings of such yoginis are known from the Deccan. Social hierarchy is maintained by showing the princess standing on a *chauki* outside a secluded entrance. She holds a handkerchief, an old Islamic symbol of kinship.

FAIRY PRINCE FIRUZ SHAH MEETS NAJM UN-NISA (PL. 5, FOLIO 97B)

This painting depicts the meeting of Najm un-Nisa, disguised as a yogini, and Prince Firuz Shah of the fairies. The topography evokes a mood of total peace. The still water of a river, undulating ground shown in bright yellow and green with tufts of grass and the distant rocky terrain with no one around are all part of an ideal setting for a Shaivite yogini. Apart from her costume and ash-smeared skin, her Shaivite affiliation is asserted by the tiger skin upon which she is seated. She plays the *veena* under a banyan tree at the bank of the river. The leaves and flowers of the tree are rendered with great detail and sensitivity, and lyricism. In front of her is Firuz Shah, seated with folded legs. That the fairy is a prince is conveyed through the handkerchief that he holds in his left hand. His royalty is also conveyed through his costume and jewellery. He looks at Najm un-Nisa with lovelorn eyes and a gentle smile on his face, having perceived that she is not a real yogini. The magical flying palanquin of the prince is also partially shown near the river. The palanquin yet again represents the material culture of the Mughal period. One may note that the Later Mughal rulers frequently used palanquins for travelling.

The use of perspective, realistic treatment of rocks and boulders, and a subdued colour palette in the distant landscape contrast with the stylised figures and landscape in the foreground.

PRINCE BENAZIR AND PRINCESS BADR I-MUNIR IN THE HAREM AFTER THEIR NIKAH (WEDDING) (PL. 6, FOLIO 127B).

In this painting, Prince Benazir and Princess Badr i-Munir are shown in a royal chamber after their *nikah*. The scene is set against an exquisite marble wall with a door. The wedding ceremonies take place under an elaborate *shamiyana* (tent). The ornamentals motifs on the wall remind one of the marble palaces of the Shahjahani period. On a rich blue patterned carpet with a gold border, the prince and the princess are shown seated facing each other. Between them on a wooden stand is the holy *Quran*. A black curtain with a diaper pattern in front of the door indicates the privacy of the place where the wedding ceremonies occur.

Dressed in a patterned yellow garment, the prince sits against a bolster. He wears a plain, bright orange shawl with a border. His head is adorned with a turban bedecked with an aigrette, and he wears several floral ornaments.

From the turban dangles the floral *shehra*. There is no trace of hair on the face of the young prince. With a gentle smile on his face, the prince looks at the princess.

The young and slim bride sits, with her legs tucked under her, against a blue bolster. Her entire body is covered with a patterned yellow dupatta through which only the sleeve of her right arm, resting on a cushion, can be seen. The artist has captured the shyness of the young bride through the curve of the back, downcast face, lovelorn eyes and gentle smile. She, too, wears a long floral *shehra*. Besides the princess sits a woman, probably the bridesmaid, dressed elegantly in a choli, divided skirt, long transparent *kurti* and transparent *dupatta* through which her breasts can be seen. Her right hand is extended toward the princess in assistance.

Companions of the bride occupy the left and right sides of the painting. A considerable amount of space in the middle of the foreground is left empty to display various objects in beautiful gold and silver vessels. These include apples, oranges and pomegranates, guldastas (flower baskets), betel leaves, and flower baskets. Several ladies are shown carrying guldastas in their hands. Such guldastas are also seen in the wedding processions depicted in the Padshahnama. The artist has delicately delineated the charming figures of the ladies. Their dresses and jewellery are executed with delicate details. Not only that, the artist has precisely painted the ornamental motif on the walls and floors. The painting captures the festivities of the wedding very well.

RETURN OF PRINCE BENAZIR AND MEETING WITH FATHER
(PL. 7, FOLIO 132A)

Respecting one's father is considered one of Islam's highest virtues. The painting shows Prince Benazir touching his father's feet after he returns to his kingdom. With his retinue, the king stands on the bright amber ground outside the palace gateway. He holds a staff in his left hand and blesses Benazir with his right hand. Behind him are peacock fan bearers. The man standing at the left corner of the foreground appears to be the Wazir of the empire, for he, too, holds a staff and wears an elegant robe. Prince Benazir occupies the centre of the painting. Behind him also stand peacock fan bearers and an official with a staff.

The most intriguing aspect of this painting is the landscape in the background. It reflects realism and a clear understanding of perspective. The

foreground and the background do not integrate. It is possible that two different artists worked on this painting. One may also note that the landscape in the background reminds of Deccan terrain rather than the topography of north India.

CONCLUSION

This illustrated manuscript of *Masnavi Benazir*, produced at the Mughal court during the first half of the nineteenth century, represents the intertwining of the Mughal and European painting styles. The format of the paintings is conventional, but there is a definite attempt to draw realistically through the use of perspective, which can clearly be seen in the rendition of landscapes. Definite attempts at portraiture are seen in the paintings of Mughal emperor Shah Alam and Nawab Asaf ud-Daulah of Awadh, respectively. The characters of the story are generally treated as types. One does, however, notice the artist's concern in bringing out the professional and ethnic backgrounds of the characters. Though the astrologers called in the court of Benazir's father were all Brahmins, the artist carefully brought out their sectarian differences through their costumes and instruments to predict the future. Hierarchy remains a matter of concern throughout the manuscript, and there is an attempt to glorify royalty. For example, a rebellious noble publicly humiliated and blinded Emperor Shah Alam II. At one point, he also lived as a fugitive in the court of his noble at Awadh. Nevertheless, in the painting, the emperor is projected to preside over both the political and spiritual domains.

Also, important to notice is the harmony between Hindu and Muslim cultures in eighteenth and nineteenth century Mughal India. In the story, a Muslim king invites Brahmin priests to his court. He seeks their advice. Similarly, an aristocratic Muslim lady, without any hesitation, disguises herself as a Shaivite *yogini* (pls. 4, 5). Muslims and Hindus are shown together in imperial service as soldiers, attendants and officials. The cultural life of Delhi is also reflected through these paintings. The architectural setting, its ornamentation, and the layout of the garden reflect the Red fort of Delhi.

To sum up, the paintings of the manuscript *Sihr ul Bayan* are among the few last grand projects undertaken in the tradition of refinement at the Mughal court. These paintings follow the established Mughal conventions while subtly absorbing European influences. Despite the meandering personal destinies of the emperors and the vicissitudes of political conditions, these

paintings continued to project the grandeur and opulence of royalty. Finally, both poetry and paintings illustrate the cultural synergies and harmony between Hindus and Muslims.

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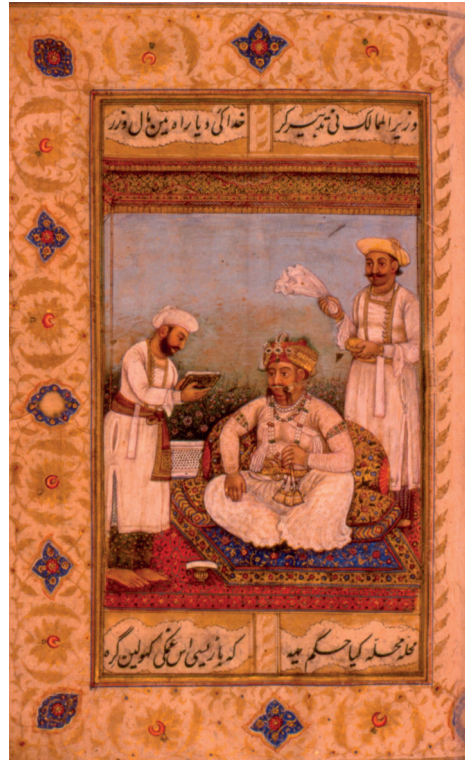
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Acknowledgement

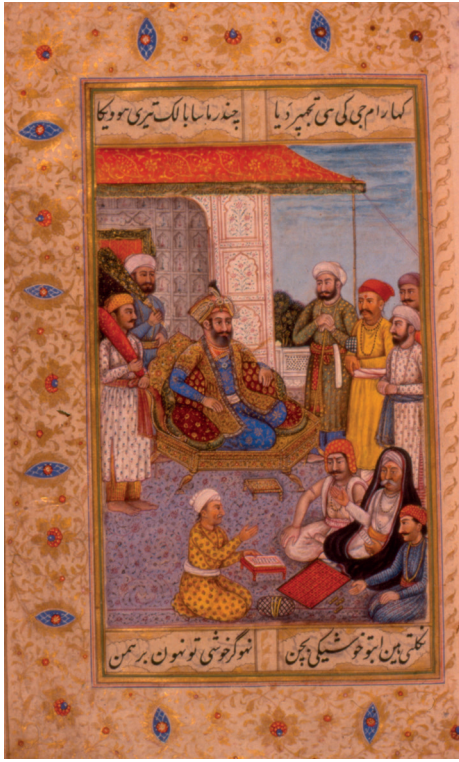
I am grateful to Dr. Naseem Akhtar, former Curator of the Manuscript Department, National Museum, New Delhi, for translating the manuscript and granting permission for photography.



1. Portrait of Emperor Shah Alam II, folio 8a, Sihr ul Bayan, Acc. No. 60.695, National Museum, New Delhi.



2. A scholar presenting a book to Nawab Asaf ud-Daulah of Awadh, folio 10a, Sihr ul Bayan, Acc. No. 60.695, National Museum, New Delhi.



3. Brahmin priests predicting the birth of Prince Benazir, folio 18a, Sihr ul Bayan, Acc. No. 60.695, National Museum, New Delhi.



4. Najm un-Nisa, disguised as a yogini, leaves the palace in search of Prince Benazir, folio 92b, Sihr ul Bayan, Acc. No. 60.695, National Museum, New Delhi.



5. Fairy Prince Firuz Shah meets Najm un-Nisa, folio 97 b, *Sihri ul Bayan*, Acc. No. 60.695, National Museum, New Delhi.



6. Prince Benazir and Princess Badr-i-Munir in the harem after their nikah (wedding), folio 127 b, *Sihri ul Bayan*, Acc. No. 60.695, National Museum, New Delhi.



7. Return of Prince Benazir and meeting with father, folio 132 a, Sihr ul Bayan, Acc. No. 60.695, National Museum, New Delhi.