

A European Experience of the Mughal Orient: The I'jaz-i Arsalani (Persian Letters, 1773-1779) of Antoine-Louis-Henri Polier

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Author:

Muzaffar Alam

Seema Alavi

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Peter Marshall

Antoine-Louis-Henri Polier was a Swiss Protestant of French descent who served in the army of the British East India Company. The major part of his service was in northern India, beyond the area under formal British control. There he immersed himself deeply in Indian society as he pursued a career which involved him closely with Indians varying in eminence from the Mughal emperor to the numerous clerks and craftsmen whom he personally employed. Constantly on the move, Polier maintained a copious correspondence in Persian with those Indians with whom he had dealings. *The I'jaz-i Arsalani* ('the wonders of Arsalan', from Polier's Mughal title, *Arsalan Jang*, 'lion of the battle') was the name given to his Persian letter-book of copies of some 2000 of the letters that he wrote, or to be more exact, that his *munshis* wrote at his command. The *munshis* put the letters into the form appropriate to the kind of message that was to be conveyed and to the status of the intended recipient. The volume under review is a translation of half of them, written between 1773 and 1779.

The letter-book was acquired by the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. French academic institutions and the scholars attached to the French embassy in Delhi have been the generous patrons of the project for publishing the manuscript. They entrusted the work to two very well qualified scholars, Muzaffar Alam, until recently of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, now at the University of Chicago, the leading authority on Islam in India in the eighteenth century, and Seema Alavi of the Jamia Millia Islamia, who has written a

valuable book about the Company's army in North India.

How to present the manuscript evidently raised formidable problems. A full literal translation was for very understandable reasons rejected. The editors have chosen instead to give 'a summary translation of the text without ignoring any substantive part of the translation' (p. 74). Most of the elaborate embellishments and allusions that politeness in Persian letter writing required, but which would have extended the translations to unmanageable length, have been omitted along with the 'figurative and grandiose language' of certain formal congratulatory letters. Editing the text in the conventional sense of providing the reader with some sort of apparatus of notes to elucidate the letters has not been attempted either. As is made clear on the title page, readers are offered a translation and an introduction, but nothing else. They must cope with the letters as best they can.

This decision is again a perfectly understandable one. Attempting to identify the vast numbers of people mentioned in the letters would have been a dauntingly formidable task. To give an example of the difficulties, some European names, such as those of Major Marsack, Dr Thomas or John Bristow, are given in forms that anyone reasonably familiar with the period will be able to identify; others are rendered in ways that makes them virtually unrecognisable. Who, for instance, is 'Mr Math' (perhaps Thomas Motte), 'Dr Chue' or 'Major Hang' (probably Major Hannay)? A huge number of Indians, many of them relatively humble people, are mentioned, often with variations in their names. The letters also contain many apparently abstruse Persian terms, for instance for the names of kinds of textiles, of plants and birds or of revenue procedures. A glossary has been added, which is valuable as far as it goes, but perhaps inevitably due to the vast range of the subject matter of the letters, many Persian terms seem not to be covered by it. Each letter is dated according to the **Hijra** era without an equivalent in the Christian era.

How much readers will be able to derive from the great quarry of material that is being presented to them will of course depend on the expertise that they bring to it. Some of the letters will be instantly accessible to anyone with an interest in the period. These will include the letters to and about Polier's two bibis or his children by them. On a trip to Calcutta away from his household at Faizabad, Polier commiserates with the senior bibi: 'It is due to your love for me and your anxieties, as well as your loneliness which has made you averse to eating and suffer from insomnia. . However, I will soon be back . Do not lose heart and be careful about your regular food and timely sleep. Remain happy' (p. 182). Equally accessible are his accounts of situation of the Mughal emperor Shah Alam, which he witnessed at first hand on an extended visit to Delhi. The Sikhs and the Afghans were taking control of the emperor's lands, but 'Here in Delhi there is nothing except negligence and thoughtlessness. . There is only confusion, anxiety and sleeplessness. I am surprised and worried. I do not know what there is in store for the country' (p. 336). 'There is nothing left of the empire except the veneer of its name' (p.337). Those who know Polier as a collector and connoisseur will be rewarded by a series of letters concerning the painter Mehrchand, who was taken to Delhi under Polier's patronage.

The great bulk of the letters, however, deal with very complex matters in which finance and politics were closely linked. Polier was an entrepreneur on a very large scale. He acted in partnership with other Europeans, notably Claude Martin and Dr Baladon Thomas, and employed a staff of European clerks and a huge retinue of Indian *gumashtas*, *sarkars* and other agents. To fulfil his ambitions, Polier needed to maintain his position in three Indian courts, those of the wazirs of Awadh at Faizabad and later at Lucknow, that of the emperor in Delhi and the establishment maintained by the great lord Najaf Khan. In addition, he needed to keep a sharp eye on the internal politics of the Company's Supreme Council in Calcutta and on the disposition of its Residents at Lucknow. Much of Polier's correspondence therefore reflects his need for political intelligence.

If court or Company politics turned against Polier he had much to lose. Hence his obvious sense of outrage at the report of what seem to have been slighting remarks about him made by Asaf-ud-Daula. Shuja-ud-Daula was much too 'polite and cultured' to have done such a thing (p. 371). Polier drew salaries from the wazirs for his skills as an engineer and as an experienced officer in the field, notably in expelling the Jats from the fort at Agra. He engaged in elaborate building projects for them. He seems to have raised troops for

the wazirs. He supplied their courts and imperial Delhi with luxury European goods shipped up from Calcutta. He traded in elephants. He was also a provider of girls and slave children. He hoped, for instance, to deliver to Delhi a girl that he had acquired in repayment of a debt owed to him by her father (p. 371). He evidently traded on a large scale in commodities like opium and cotton cloth, trading that required court protection if it was not to be interrupted by local officials.

The ultimate success of all these operations depended on getting paid for them. Payment from an Indian ruler usually meant the granting of a *tankhwah* or assignment on the revenue of the government. It was, however, one thing to obtain such a grant, but quite another to get it realised. A very large part of this volume consists of letters referring to the seemingly endless struggle to make Shuja-ud-Daula and later Asaf-ud-Daula or Najaf Khan honour their obligations to him. Greater financial security might come by obtaining direct access to revenue collections through the personal grant of a *jagir*. Polier brought off a considerable coup in getting a *jagir* awarded to him in person by the emperor, only to find that Najaf Khan's agents obstructed his collection of the revenue.

The editors very properly hope that their translation will be a valuable source for the 'economic and social history of the eighteenth century' (p. 74), and, they could add, for its now somewhat unfashionable political history as well. It is very much to be hoped that it will fulfil this laudable intent. Yet if the outline of Polier's activities at this stage of his life is reasonably clear, to elucidate the detail seems to require a large endowment of prior knowledge. Could the editors have made their material more accessible without an investment in scholarly endeavour that would probably have been disproportionate to the ultimate value of the text? The answer is probably no, but some things could perhaps have been attempted that would have given some support to the reader at no great cost to the editors. First of all, it regrettably has to be said that adequate proof reading would have been a significant help. The number of typographical and other errors reflects badly on all concerned. Secondly, it is no doubt deplorably Eurocentric not to be able readily to convert *Hijra* into Christian dating, but the scholars who compiled the old *Calendar of Persian Correspondence* did pander to weakness by putting Christian dating in the margin. These scholars also tried to standardise spellings and, in their later volumes, to produce an index with identifications of at least the more prominent Indians mentioned. The index to this volume is perfunctory in the extreme.

Will the long Introduction be of help to those trying to extract meaning from the text? In some respects it certainly will. There is, for instance, a valuable section that puts Polier's letter-book into the context of the evolving conventions of epistolary style in Mughal India. Much of the rest of the Introduction is, however, concerned less with elucidating the text than with, as the blurb on the cover puts it, locating it 'in the social and cultural world of the period'. This reviewer has to confess sadly that he finds much of that unconvincing and on occasions misleading.

The Introduction seeks to make several points about Antoine Polier. Beginning on the first page, he is throughout described as 'French'. It is assumed that he suffered discrimination in the British Company's service because of his Frenchness (pp.3, 5). Although the editors do not go so far as to argue that Polier openly identified himself as French, they do attribute to him without any apparent evidence a nostalgia for a French empire in India (p. 30), and they see him as adopting on occasions a 'European' identity different from a 'British' one (pp. 31-2). This seems to lead the editors to conclude that Polier was part of a 'European understanding of eighteenth-century India [which] contested with English Orientalist underpinnings of colonial rule' (p.73). Hence presumably the significance of 'European' in the title of the book; it is to signify a non-British and therefore a different 'Experience of the Mughal Orient'.

All these propositions invite a degree of scepticism. 'French' was clearly an elastic term in the eighteenth century. Polier, although evidently completely fluent in English and willing to assume the name 'Anthony Polier' in the Company's records, was no doubt French-speaking by choice. But he was not a subject of the king of France. He called himself of 'a family of French origin but established and naturalised in Switzerland' and was called a 'Swiss' by a French contemporary (Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'The Career of Colonel Polier and late eighteenth-century Orientalism' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser. X (2000), 45, 48). It is most unlikely that his British contemporaries thought of him as French. Warren

Hastings gave him permission to become engineer and architect to the wazir to prevent the job going to Gentil 'and the other Frenchmen under him' (Bengal Secret Consultations, 19 Dec. 1774, Oriental and India Office Collections, P/A/23, p. 463). For the British Polier would have been a 'foreign Protestant', a category that they understood very well. Officers with Huguenot, Dutch, Swiss or German Protestant backgrounds had long served successfully in the British army. One of them, Lord Ligonier, was commander-in-chief of the British army during the Seven Years War, when there was extensive recruitment of foreign Protestants to fight both in America and India. Polier's uncle was commissioned in the Swiss infantry of the Company in 1751. Antoine went to India as a cadet no doubt to benefit from his patronage. During the war the Company also recruited a lot of French soldiers and a few genuine French officers like Martin, who deserted from the defeated army of Lally. Foreign Protestants were generally well treated. An act of parliament of 1762 extended naturalisation to those who had served for two years in America. One or two of them rose to high office. The Swiss Frederick Haldimand, who became Governor of Quebec, was the most conspicuous example. By contrast, the East India Company imposed a restriction on the promotion of foreign officers beyond the rank of Major in 1766. There is, however, no evidence that this was a specifically anti-French measure. It is likely that the directors wished to ensure that lucrative senior rank went to people within the British world of patronage. Polier suffered by this prohibition, until it was later circumvented in his favour, but in other respects he seems to have made a successful career until he was caught out by the seismic shift in Calcutta politics brought about by the arrival of the new councillors in 1774. They disliked Warren Hastings's informal and, they believed, corrupt diplomacy in northern India. Evidently assuming that Polier was Hastings's agent they ordered his recall. He resigned the service in protest, but nevertheless, with the evident connivance of all sides in Calcutta, he was permitted to remain in Awadh on an unofficial basis to pursue his various enterprises.

If it seems unlikely that Polier thought of himself or was thought of by others as French, it seems even less likely that he regarded himself as a 'European' in the sense that this was a category from which the British were excluded. None of the evidence cited in the Introduction supports that assumption and it seems to have been a concept totally alien to eighteenth-century usage. 'European' was an inclusive term for the whole continent of Europe and for all white men or *firangis* in India. In his own eyes and in those of others, Polier was undoubtedly 'a foreigner', even if a favoured one, in the British world. Foreigners, however, came in many different forms rather than constituting a single category and it is surely as an individual rather than as part of some larger entity that Polier should be assessed.

If Polier differed from his British contemporaries in his response to India, the explanation for any difference is more likely to lie in his personal experience of India than in any sense of identity that can be retrospectively attributed to him. At a time when relatively few Europeans lived for any length of time in northern India Polier almost certainly immersed himself more deeply in the Indo-Persian culture of its elite than did any of his contemporaries. The *I'jaz* is probably therefore a unique record. Martin seems to have kept something similar and it is perhaps possible that Richard Johnson or William Palmer did the same. It was not, however, until some years later that men like Ochterlony or William Fraser were to make themselves as thoroughly at home in Delhi as Polier had done in Faizabad or Lucknow.

The assumptions that the editors seem to be making that there was a 'sharp contrast' (p. 57) between the outlook of the 'European' Polier and of his British contemporaries seem to rest on distorting generalisations about the British. The British are said to have been excessively concerned with high culture rather than with 'ordinary folk and the subaltern classes' (p. 39), to have 'compartmentalized' Indians into rigid categories of Hindus or Muslims or Hindu castes and to have 'shunned the Mughal regime as despotic and abstracted from Indian society' (p. 65). None of these propositions stands up to close examination. The collections of books and pictures by Hastings and Johnson were, for instance, as 'eclectic' as Polier's. Hastings's admiration for the what he called 'the original constitution' of the Mughal imperial system is made clear in his minute commending Gladwin's translation of the *Ain*, and his reverence for those who occupied the Mughal throne was to be demonstrated by his reception of the prince Jawan Bukht at Lucknow in 1784.

Polier was a remarkable man and his *I'jaz* is a work of great interest. What potential readers need is not dubious interpretations of Polier's milieu, but as much help as possible from editors who are singularly well

qualified to enable the letters and the man to speak for themselves. It is very much to be hoped that the editors will soon be able to follow this volume with a second to complete the project.

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