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**Abstract**

Household archives as sources of Mughal history: challenges and possibilities

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Although once upon a time, Persian was the language of courtly culture and administration, in the present day, few people in India are able to read Persian. However, there are thousands of short documents, written in Persian and sometimes in other languages such as old Hindi, Marathi in Modi script and so on, that are scattered all around the country. Some were collected by national and state archives in the decades after India's independence, but many more still remain with the families that own them. Although between the 1940s and 1980s, eminent historians of Aligarh and other universities used them to write about Mughal administration, today there are very few historians interested in such materials. This is because, firstly, these documents, being written in shikasta or the 'broken' Persian script, are very hard to read. Secondly, the materials are fragmentary and local. They do not relate to the royal court or great saints; instead, they record the petty concerns of unknown merchants, landlords and villagers. Moreover, the events they record – a sale of a piece of land, a minor dispute over village boundaries – seem very minor and hard to place in the broader historical narratives about things that matter. In this paper, I will argue that such fragmentary Persian materials are valuable resources for writing the history of Mughal India as a people's history. I will show how such documents can be collected, organised and analysed so that they can be used to piece together rich and dramatic stories, about the lives of ordinary people who lived in Mughal India. In doing so, I will urge listeners to pay attention to their own family's histories and collections of Persian and bilingual documents, to consult with those who can read them, and to make them widely available, so that we can retrieve more of the history of Mughal India and save it from being forgotten.

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