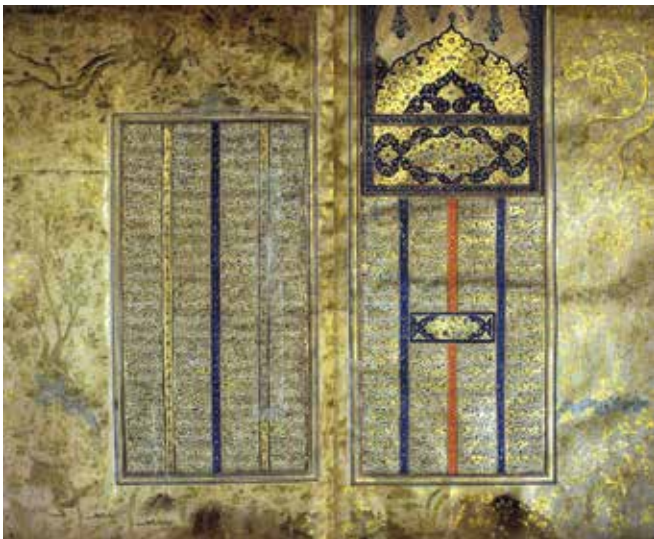


The Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library In Patna, Bihar, India

By Shalini Mukerji

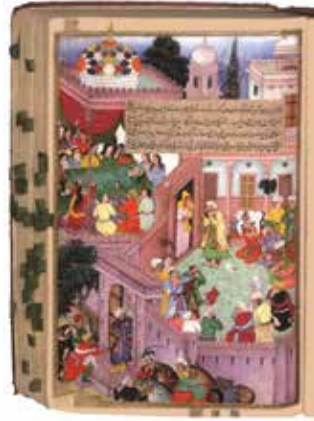
Invariably stuck in a jam on the road that runs parallel to the river Ganga in Patna, I always noticed a building that seemed far removed from the complicated world playing itself out on this chaotic shop-fronted street. Stepping inside one day, I discovered how the collection in this museum, library and research centre brings the world to you, with its varied narratives of love, war and empire, art, discovery and science. The Khuda Bakhsh collection of manuscripts, miniatures in the Mughal, Rajput, Awadh, Turkish and Iranian styles, artefacts and books specialises in the study of comparative religions, medieval and Asian history, Islamic studies, medieval science, Unani medicine, biographies, Islamic mysticism and the Indian Independence Movement's literature, as well as the Urdu, Persian and Arabic languages.

First, I noticed Nader Shah's sword now resting peacefully in a glass-fronted cabinet (if you gaze long enough, it might speak to you of the wars that shaped Asia). My eyes were drawn away by the collection of 12 antique scientific instruments: an exquisite carved astrolabe inscribed in Persian with the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan's name, sundials, a celestial globe, a quadrant-cum-nocturnal and a pair of surgical forceps that revealed the scientific advances of the 'pre-modern' world, when Lahore was the centre for the manufacture of astrolabes and celestial globes and Patna the centre for sun-dials.

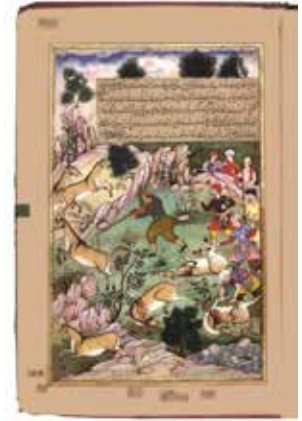


Unwan, or decorated opening page from the Shahnamah of Firdausi. This image is from a manuscript that belongs to the Iranian school of painting and was once in the library of the Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan

What's unique here is the collection of 20,615 rare, ancient manuscripts written in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Turkish, Pushto, Sanskrit, Hindi and the extinct Mithilakshara script on palm-leaf, deerskin, cloth and paper. Among them is the 16th century *Tarikh-e Khandan-e Timuriyah* manuscript, on hand-made paper with an ivory sheen and recognised by UNESCO as a 'Memory of the World Heritage'. It is the only existing illustrated history of Timur's dynasty and his descendants to 1579, when it was commissioned by the Mughal emperor Akbar. Painted in gold and colours obtained



Leaf from *Tarikh-e Khandan-e Timuriyah* depicting the death of Timur



Leaf from *Tarikh-e Khandan-e Timuriyah* showing Akbar chasing wild asses

from flowers and bark are stunning scenes of battle so vivid in gore and guts that you'll break out in goosebumps.

Another manuscript I was thrilled to see was the *Diwan-e-Hafiz*, a collection of *ghazals* (verses) by the celebrated Persian poet Hafiz of Shiraz. Over 300 bands of gorgeous decorations separate the different verses and the margins are filled with notations by Mughal emperors who consulted the book whenever decisions were taken. Opening a page while blindfolded, they placed their fingers on the page; the couplet the finger rested on revealed the way forward. Here, you'll find a rare copy of the *Padshah Namah*, commissioned by Shah Jahan; it contains a painting of the Taj Mahal in ivory. Yet another treasure is the *Kitab-al-Hashaish*, an Arabic version of *Materia Medica*, the Greek dictionary of medicine composed by the Greek physician and pharmacologist Dioscorides, drawing upon his experience as a surgeon with the armies of the Roman emperor Nero.

Just when you think you couldn't be more overwhelmed, your eyes might rest on a page of the Quran written on deerskin, dating back to the ninth century CE. Words in the *Kufi* script are worked in black soot collected from the lamps that once illuminated the darkness.

This treasure grew from the personal collection of bibliophile Maulvi Mohammed Bakhsh's 1,400 manuscripts, which his son Khuda Bakhsh inherited and added to throughout his life. The Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library was formally instituted in 1891 with a collection of 4,000 manuscripts, dedicated to the people of Patna. The library continues to run from the former residence of Khuda Bakhsh, preserving not only memories of the world that was, but also offering a space for learning, reflection and wonder.

To access some digitised manuscripts and artefacts, visit: <http://kblibrary.bih.nic.in/>

Shalini Mukerji is an independent writer and editor, with an interest in nature, art, literature, history and development.

All photos courtesy of the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library.