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To cite this article: Nazreen (2026): Letters as Historical Sources: Practice, Method, and Preservation, The Research Frontline - Journal (Vol 1, Issue 2, January - March 2026) DOI: 10.66871/trf-j.v1i2.001

To link to this article: DOI: https://doi.org/10.66871/trf-j.v1i2.001

Published online: 05 May 2026.

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Vol. 1, Issue 2, January - March 2026

The Research Frontline - Journal (Vol. 1, Issue 2, January - March 2026)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.66871/trf-j.v1i2.001

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Letters as Historical Sources: Practice, Method, and Preservation

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ABSTRACT

Historians have long used letters as supplementary sources, valued primarily for the factual information they contain. This article argues that such an approach underestimates the methodological potential of epistolary materials and obscures the historical practices that shaped their production, circulation, and preservation. Focusing on Indo-Persian letter writing traditions in Medieval South Asia, the study repositions letters as a distinct category of historical sources that demand forms of reading different from those applied to chronicles or narrative histories. Drawing on historiographical debates, conceptual analysis, and a longue durée historical framework, the article traces the evolution of letter writing from early Islamic administrative practices to their institutional consolidation during the Sultanate period. By attending to genre, circulation, and compilation, the study highlights the layered mediation through which letters entered the historical archive. Methodologically, the article advocates reading letters as archives of practice rather than transparent records of events. It emphasises the importance of formal conventions, material conditions, and preservation processes. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions of source diversity and historical method, suggesting that letters, when approached critically and contextually, offer valuable insight into the routines, relationships, and institutional logics of Medieval South Asia.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 25 January 2026
Accepted: 30 March 2026

KEYWORDS
Indo-Persian Letters; Historical Methodology; Archival Practices; Source Criticism; Persianate World; Genre and Form; Textual Transmission

Introduction: Historiography and Method

In much of traditional historiography, correspondence has functioned as a supplement to more authoritative genres such as chronicles, court histories, and administrative manuals. This utilitarian approach has often treated letters as transparent records of information, extracting data while overlooking the conditions of their production, circulation, and reception. As a result, the interpretive potential of letters as historical sources has remained underdeveloped. From the late twentieth century onwards, however, scholars across history, literary studies, and sociolinguistics have challenged this narrow engagement with epistolary material. Letters are increasingly understood not merely as repositories of information but as textual artefacts shaped by social practice, institutional conventions, and rhetorical norms. This shift reflects a broader methodological turn within historical scholarship, one that emphasises the materiality of texts, the performative dimensions of writing, and the embeddedness of written communication within structures of power and hierarchy. Rather than asking only what letters say, historians have begun to ask how letters functioned, why they were written in particular ways, and what assumptions governed their form and content.

A useful framework for conceptualising this expanded approach to letters has been articulated by Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti, who identifies three major historiographical uses of correspondence.

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First, letters may be analysed as linguistic evidence, offering insight into language change, registers of expression, and patterns of vernacular and elite usage. Second, they function as documentary sources that illuminate administrative practices, institutional relationships, and the circulation of information within and across political entities. Third, letters may be studied as a literary genre, situated between pragmatic communication and aesthetic expression, governed by conventions that have evolved. This tripartite framework underscores the polyvalent nature of letters and cautions against reducing them to any single interpretive function.[i]

Building on this perspective, scholars such as Roger Chartier and David Barton have drawn attention to the social life of writing. Their work emphasises that written texts cannot be divorced from the practices that produce them: who writes, for whom, under what constraints, and within which material and institutional settings. Letters, in this sense, are not neutral vehicles of communication but socially situated acts that encode relationships between sender and recipient. Choices of language, structure, and formulaic expression often reflect asymmetries of rank, expectations of decorum, and shared cultural norms. Reading letters historically, therefore, requires sensitivity to both what is written and how it is written.[ii]

A significant scholarly contribution to the study of epistolary sources is found in a collection of papers that examines the evolution of letter writing from the fifteenth to the early twentieth century. The central premise is that letters composed in physical or temporal absence are designed to evoke a sense of presence, thereby bridging the distance between correspondents. This volume adopts a shared methodological emphasis on the materiality of the letter and its stylistic, grammatical, orthographic, and formal features, including the codified expressions of politeness that typify epistolary conventions.

These studies highlight how letters encode hierarchical relationships among superiors, equals, and subordinates, and how such asymmetries are articulated and negotiated through linguistic and structural choices. The epistolary form is also a privileged site for accessing intimate worlds: revealing personal perceptions, emotional registers, ideological dispositions, and the socio-historical milieus of both writers and recipients. Letters, in this sense, provide a rich archive for reconstructing social ties, kinship configurations, and interpersonal networks that are often marginal or absent in formal historiography or state chronicles. Earlier historiographical approaches tended to privilege letters primarily for their factual content, treating them as repositories of names, events, and chronological data. However, more recent scholarship has focused on their rhetorical construction and the cultural logics they encode. This interpretive turn aligns with broader theoretical currents in historical anthropology and discourse analysis, in which texts are understood as vessels of information and as performances of identity, power, and social negotiation.[iii]

Dr Stephan Popp's research foregrounds the linguistic and rhetorical features of Persian letter writing in Mughal India, demonstrating how scribal style evolved at the intersection of form, function, and historical context. Through close textual analysis, Popp traces a tradition of insha writing that initially prioritised rhetorical complexity and aesthetic refinement, exemplified by the ornate, highly structured prose of Mahmud Gawan, marked by rhymed constructions, parallelism, and double izāfās rooted in Timurid conventions. He then identifies a significant departure from this style in Abul Fazl's correspondence with his brother Faizi, where inherited models such as Mahru were reworked to produce a more subjective, restrained, and intellectually attuned mode of expression aligned with the political and cultural milieu of Akbar's court. This personalised insha style, which later acquired canonical status, influenced subsequent figures such as Chandrabhan Brahman, whose prose reflected Abul Fazl's controlled use of parallelism.

[i] Del Lungo Camiciotti, Gabriella. "Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern Culture: An Introduction." Journal of Early Modern Studies 3. 2014.

[ii] Barton, D., and N. Hall, eds. Letter Writing as a Social Practice. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins. 1999. And Boureau, A., and R. Chartier. La Correspondance: Les Usages de la Lettre au XIXe Siècle. Paris, France: Fayard. 1991.

[iii] Ysebaert, Walter. "Medieval Letters and Letter Collections as Historical Sources: Methodological Questions, Reflections, and Research Perspectives (6th–14th Centuries)." Studi Medievali 50. No. 1. 2009. Reprinted in Medieval Letters: Between Fiction and Document, edited by Christian Hogel and Elisabetta Bartoli. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers. 2015.

Popp's analysis culminates in his discussion of Khalifa Shah Qanauji, whose florid and didactic prose under Aurangzeb exemplified a Baroque stylisation that would later shape colonial perceptions of "Oriental" writing.[iv] Taken together, these examples illustrate that shifts in rhetorical form were not merely aesthetic developments but were embedded in broader transformations in courtly culture, political authority, and the evolving role of the scribe within the Mughal bureaucratic order.

An examination of Persianate correspondence in South Asia must be conducted using the terminology through which this practice was historically understood. Among these, the term insha occupies a central position, its meaning shaped and reshaped by the administrative, literary, and pedagogical contexts in which it was employed. Far from denoting a fixed category, insha has encompassed a range of connotations that evolved alongside shifts in political authority, bureaucratic structures, and literary conventions. Attending to the historical semantics of this and related expressions is essential for situating epistolary practice within the broader cultural and institutional frameworks that informed its production.

This methodological shift has been particularly significant for the study of Medieval correspondence, where writing was a specialised skill and access to literacy was unevenly distributed. Letters were rarely spontaneous compositions; they were often crafted with deliberation, shaped by established conventions, and in many cases mediated by professional scribes. Formulaic openings, invocations, honorifics, and closings were not ornamental excesses but integral components of epistolary meaning. They signalled authority, deference, intimacy, or obligation, and their omission or misuse could carry serious social or political consequences. To ignore these formal elements is to risk misreading the historical significance of the text itself.

Another important dimension of recent scholarship concerns the materiality of letters. The physical aspects of correspondence, paper quality, script, layout, seals, and modes of transmission form part of the communicative act. Letters were objects that travelled across space, were read aloud or privately, copied, archived, or deliberately destroyed. Their survival in historical archives is often the result of selective preservation rather than chance. Many letters reached us not as isolated texts but as parts of compiled collections, raising questions about editorial intervention, retrospective organisation, and the transformation of private communication into authoritative textual corpora. These processes complicate assumptions about authorship and intention and demand a critical approach to epistolary transmission.[v]

Earlier historiographical approaches tended to privilege letters for their apparent immediacy, treating them as unmediated reflections of contemporary realities. Yet this very immediacy is deceptive. Letters were written with awareness of audience, convention, and potential afterlives. They often balanced candour with caution, instruction with persuasion, and information with performance. Recognising this complexity aligns the study of letters with broader developments in historical anthropology and discourse analysis, where texts are approached as sites of negotiation rather than transparent windows onto the past.

Within South Asian historiography, this methodological reorientation has been uneven. While scholars have increasingly acknowledged the importance of epigraphic, numismatic, and literary sources, epistolary materials have remained comparatively marginal. Where letters have been used, they have frequently been subordinated to narrative histories or mined selectively to corroborate information derived from chronicles. This has limited their interpretive potential and reinforced hierarchies of sources that privilege narrative coherence over fragmentary, practice-based evidence.

[iv] Popp, Stephan. "The Development of Rhetoric Strategies in Mughal Epistolography." Paper presented at the Ninth European Conference of Iranian Studies. Free University Berlin. 2019.

[v] See Roger Chartier, "Texts, Printing, Readings," in The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); David Barton and Nigel Hall, eds., Letter Writing as a Social Practice (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999); and Walter Ysebaert, "Medieval Letters and Letter Collections as Historical Sources: Methodological Questions, Reflections, and Research Perspectives," Studi Medievali 50, no. 1 (2009).

This article adopts the view that letters constitute a distinct category of historical sources that require methods attuned to their formal, social, and material characteristics. Rather than treating correspondence as supplementary evidence, it approaches letters as archives of practice, records of how communication, authority, and knowledge were enacted through writing. Such an approach does not seek to replace chronicles or administrative manuals but to read epistolary texts alongside them, attending to what letters reveal precisely because of their constrained, situational, and relational nature.

Conceptual Vocabulary of Indo-Persian Epistolography

In Indo-Persian literary and administrative cultures, correspondence was not a loosely defined activity, but a highly codified practice governed by precise categories of form, function, and status. Terms such as insha, manshur, farmān, maktub, and ruqa were not interchangeable descriptors of writing; they reflected structured distinctions that shaped how letters were composed, circulated, and interpreted. For historians, misunderstanding or flattening this vocabulary risks obscuring the social and institutional logic embedded in epistolary texts.

At the centre of Indo-Persian epistolary culture lies the concept of insha. Etymologically derived from the Arabic root meaning “to create” or “to compose,” insha acquired a specialised meaning over time. In its early usage, the term broadly denoted composition or construction, but within Islamic bureaucratic and literary traditions, it came to signify the art of drafting letters, state documents, and official correspondence. This semantic narrowing marked an important distinction between epistolary writing and other prose genres such as historical chronicles or literary treatises. By the medieval period, insha referred not merely to writing itself but to a recognised discipline with established rules, stylistic expectations, and pedagogical traditions.[vi]

Closely related to this was insha-pardāzi, a term for the refined art of letter composition. Unlike spontaneous or informal writing, insha-pardāzi presupposed training, rhetorical competence, and familiarity with established conventions. Manuals devoted to this art treated letter writing as a professional skill, one that demanded mastery of language, formulaic expressions, and an acute awareness of social hierarchy. The emphasis on refinement underscores the extent to which letters functioned as performances of competence and credibility, particularly within administrative and courtly settings.[vii]

Epistolary terminology also encoded distinctions of rank and relational asymmetry between correspondents. Communications issued by a sovereign occupied the highest position within this hierarchy and were designated by terms such as manshur or farmān. These were not simply letters but authoritative instruments whose language, structure, and physical presentation signalled command. The rhetorical organisation of such documents often begins with invocations, honorifics, and justification before issuing directives, reflecting the performative nature of authority itself. For historians, recognising these conventions is crucial for understanding how command was articulated rather than assuming that authority resided solely in the content of the order.

By contrast, correspondence exchanged between individuals of comparable status was typically classified as maktub. This category encompassed a wide range of letters, from formal communications between officials to more personal exchanges. While maktubāt could vary in tone and subject matter,

[vi] Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli notes that while insha originally signified “construction” or “creation,” its meaning narrowed over time to refer specifically to the composition of letters, state documents, and official papers. This semantic shift marked an important distinction between epistolary-administrative writing and continuous prose genres such as chronicles and literary treatises, situating insha as a specialised category within Persianate bureaucratic and literary practice. See Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli, The Mughal State and Culture, 1556–1598 (Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2007), introduction.

[vii] Sayyed Najeeb Ashraf Nadvi elaborates on insha-pardāzi as the refined art of composing and embellishing letters, tracing its development through the assimilation of stylistic and structural elements from earlier Arabic epistolary practices. He notes that while letter writing in early Arab society initially served primarily commercial and transactional purposes, particularly in trade, these utilitarian forms gradually evolved into more elaborate modes of expression. These refined practices were subsequently absorbed and adapted within Persian administrative and literary milieus, where insha-pardāzi emerged as a specialised discipline. See Sayyed Najeeb Ashraf Nadvi, Muqaddama Ruqqat-i ʿĀlamgīrī (Azamgarh: Darul Musannifeen).

they nonetheless adhered to established norms regarding salutations, expressions of respect, and rhetorical balance. Letters written by inferiors to superiors were subject to even stricter conventions, often emphasising humility, deference, and self-effacement. These distinctions shaped not only how letters were written but also how they were read and evaluated by their recipients.

At the informal end of the epistolary spectrum were ruqa, brief notes or memoranda used for quick communication. Although less elaborate in form, ruqa were not devoid of convention. Their brevity responded to specific communicative needs, yet they still operated within a shared understanding of propriety and purpose. The existence of such gradations within epistolary practice challenges modern assumptions that equate letters with personal or unstructured communication. Instead, they point to a continuum of forms, each calibrated to particular social contexts.

The classificatory impulse evident in Indo-Persian epistolary culture extended beyond individual letters to encompass entire genres of correspondence. Administrative manuals and compilations categorised letters according to function, appointments, congratulations, condolences, petitions, or treaties, each associated with specific rhetorical strategies. These classifications reveal an underlying assumption that effective communication depended on matching form to circumstance. For historians, such genre awareness provides an essential framework for interpreting the intent and significance of surviving letters.

Importantly, this conceptual vocabulary was not static. Meanings evolved alongside changes in political organisation, bureaucratic complexity, and literary taste. Terms retained their core functions while accommodating new contexts and administrative demands. This flexibility complicates any attempt to impose rigid definitions across long periods. Instead, it invites a historically sensitive reading that situates terminology within the institutional and cultural settings in which it was deployed.
Engaging seriously with epistolary terminology also has implications for source criticism. Modern translations and catalogues often collapse distinct categories into the generic label of “letters,” thereby erasing meaningful differences recognised by historical actors themselves. Such flattening can distort interpretation, particularly when letters are used to reconstruct administrative practice or social relations. A farmān read as a personal communication, or a ruqa treated as a formal decree, risks misrepresenting both intention and effect.[viii]

Continuities in Letter Writing from the Early Islamic World to the Sultanate Period

The development of epistolary practice in South Asia cannot be understood in isolation from earlier Islamic administrative and literary traditions. Letter writing in the Islamic world emerged alongside the formation of political authority and bureaucratic governance, evolving in response to changing institutional needs. Tracing this longue durée from the early Islamic polity through the Umayyad and Abbasid periods to the Sultanate in India reveals how correspondence gradually became a regulated, professionalised, and culturally embedded mode of communication.

In the early Islamic period, writing assumed practical urgency rather than literary distinction. The expansion of the Muslim polity necessitated mechanisms for issuing commands, negotiating treaties, collecting revenue, and maintaining communication across geographically dispersed regions. Letters functioned as instruments of governance, drafted to convey clear instructions and ensure administrative continuity. Brevity and directness characterised much early correspondence, reflecting an emphasis on clarity and efficiency rather than rhetorical elaboration. Writing, at this stage, was not a universal skill but one concentrated among a limited group of trusted scribes who mediated between authority and administration.[ix]

[viii] The classification of letters according to form, function, and rank is most clearly articulated in a range of Persianate compilations and modern historical studies. Collections such as Amir Khusraw Dihlavi’s Ijāz-i Khusravī illustrate the categorisation of correspondence into distinct genres, while later scholarly works contextualise these classifications within broader administrative and political frameworks. Together, these sources demonstrate that letter writing in Indo-Persian traditions was governed by established conventions rather than ad hoc practice. See Amir Khusraw Dihlavi, Ijāz-i Khusravī (digitised by McGill University Library, 1876); Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli, The Mughal State and Culture, 1556–1598 (Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2007); Sayyed Najeeb Ashraf Nadvi, Muqaddama Ruqqat-i ʿĀlamgīrī (Azamgarh: Darul Musannifeen); and K. A. Nizami, Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1974).

[ix] Hitti, Philip K. History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2002; and Husaini, S. A. Q. Arab Administration. Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli. 1949.

As administrative responsibilities expanded under the Umayyads, correspondence became more formalised. The establishment of diwāns introduced a degree of institutional structure to state writing, while the later Umayyad reforms that replaced local administrative languages with Arabic further standardised official communication. These developments created conditions for the emergence of a specialised scribal class whose authority rested on linguistic competence and familiarity with bureaucratic procedure. Letters were no longer merely functional texts; they became artefacts through which the authority of the state was articulated and maintained.[x]

The Abbasid period marked a decisive shift in the stylistic and conceptual dimensions of epistolary practice. As the bureaucracy grew more complex, so too did the expectations placed upon official writing. Prose style became increasingly elaborate, drawing on rhetorical devices, formulaic expressions, and conventions of politeness that distinguished formal correspondence from everyday communication. This transformation reflected both the maturation of administrative culture and the influence of Persian courtly traditions, which emphasised ceremonial expression and aesthetic refinement. Letter writing, now firmly associated with professional expertise, was conceptualised as a learned art rather than a mere technical skill.[xi]

Within this context, insha emerged as a recognised discipline, supported by manuals that articulated principles of composition, structure, and stylistic propriety. These texts codified distinctions between types of correspondence, prescribing appropriate language according to the relative status of sender and recipient. The emphasis on training and imitation underscores the extent to which epistolary writing was governed by convention rather than individual spontaneity. Letters functioned as predictable yet adaptable forms, enabling communication within hierarchical systems while allowing for contextual variation.

The diffusion of Persian as a language of administration and culture further reshaped epistolary practice. By the eleventh century, Persian had gained prominence across large parts of the eastern Islamic world, including South Asia. This linguistic shift carried with it established literary norms and bureaucratic traditions that influenced how letters were written and understood. Persian epistolary prose combined administrative clarity with stylistic elegance, reinforcing the association between effective governance and refined expression. Writing in Persian thus became both a practical necessity and a marker of cultural capital.[xii]

These developments found fertile ground in the Sultanate period in India, where epistolary practices were consolidated and adapted to local political conditions. The establishment of Turkic and Afghan dynasties introduced new administrative demands that required reliable systems of written communication. Correspondence played a central role in managing provincial administration, issuing appointments, collecting revenue, and maintaining relations between the centre and the periphery.

[x] Scholars have noted that the Umayyad period witnessed a significant refinement of public oratory and administrative prose, developments that would shape later Islamic and Persianate traditions of official writing. Philip K. Hitti highlights the growing rhetorical sophistication of Umayyad governance, while Ibn Khallikān's biographical accounts, as translated by de Slane, illustrate how administrative reforms under Abd al-Malik and his secretaries fostered a distinctive style of official correspondence characterised by formalised courtesy and elaborate phrasing. Complementing this perspective, Gulfishan Khan observes that Arabic insha literature up to the Umayyad period remained largely functional and direct, even as a gradual inclination toward sajʿ (rhymed prose) influenced by Quranic language became increasingly evident. Together, these studies demonstrate that Umayyad administrative reforms marked an important transitional phase in the evolution of bureaucratic writing. See Philip K. Hitti, History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Ibn Khallikān, Vafayāt al-Aʿyān, trans. William MacGuckin de Slane, vol. 2 (Paris, 1843–1871); and Gulfishan Khan, Insha-i Mahru: Documents Relating to the Appointment of Officers (M. Phil. diss., Aligarh Muslim University, 1984).

[xi] Khan, Gulfishan. Insha-i Mahru: Documents Relating to the Appointment of Officers. English translation with annotations. M. Phil. Diss. Aligarh Muslim University. 1984.

[xii] Scholars of medieval India have shown that the adoption of Persian as a language of governance was part of a broader process through which political culture and elite formation were reshaped across Indo-Islamic polities. Muzaffar Alam argues that Persian functioned as a shared idiom of power and ideological expression, while its adaptation through translation and engagement with local traditions produced what he terms the "Indianisation of Persian." I. H. Siddiqui similarly emphasises the emergence of a composite cultural milieu, highlighting the reciprocal exchange through which Persian literary and administrative practices were reshaped by indigenous idioms. Riazul Islam's documentary work further demonstrates how these processes found practical expression in correspondence, where letters became key instruments for articulating authority and sustaining political relationships across regions. See Muzaffar Alam, "The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics," Modern Asian Studies 32, no. 2 (1998); Muzaffar Alam, The Languages of Political Islam in India c. 1200–1800 (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004); I. H. Siddiqui, Composite Culture under the Sultanate of Delhi (Delhi: Primus Books, 2012); and Riazul Islam, A Calendar of Documents on Indo-Persian Relations (1500–1750), vol. 1 (Tehran: Iranian Culture Foundation; Karachi: Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1979).

Letters circulated within an expanding bureaucratic apparatus that relied on trained secretaries capable of navigating both linguistic and institutional expectations.[xiii]

The Sultanate period is particularly significant for the preservation of epistolary material in the form of insha compilations. These collections, often assembled as instructional or model texts, offer valuable insight into the norms governing official writing. Rather than representing isolated examples of correspondence, they functioned as repositories of exemplary forms, demonstrating how letters should be structured under specific circumstances. The didactic nature of these compilations highlights the extent to which epistolary practice was systematised and transmitted through formal instruction.[xiv]

Importantly, these manuals and collections reveal that letter writing during the Sultanate was not limited to high political communication. Alongside royal decrees and official orders, they included petitions, memoranda, and personal correspondence, reflecting a broad spectrum of administrative and social interactions. The coexistence of multiple genres within a single epistolary framework underscores the flexibility of letter writing as a medium that can accommodate diverse functions while remaining governed by shared conventions.

By the end of the Sultanate period, epistolary practice in South Asia had become a mature and highly codified tradition. The convergence of Islamic administrative precedents, Persian literary norms, and local political requirements produced a sophisticated system of written communication. Letters were embedded within institutional routines, shaped by professional training, and sustained by a shared conceptual vocabulary. This historical trajectory did not culminate in rupture but in continuity, providing the foundations upon which later regimes would build and refine existing practices.

Understanding this development is essential for interpreting letters as historical sources. It reveals that correspondence was neither incidental nor peripheral but integral to the functioning of governance and social organisation. Letters emerged from specific historical conditions, evolved through institutional consolidation, and carried with them assumptions about authority, hierarchy, and propriety. Approaching epistolary material with awareness of this historical depth enables historians to read letters not as isolated texts but as products of enduring traditions that structured written communication across centuries.

Letters in Practice: Genre, Circulation, and Preservation

While conceptual vocabulary and institutional history provide essential frameworks for understanding epistolary traditions, letters acquire historical meaning through their practical use. Correspondence was written, transmitted, read, copied, archived, or discarded within specific social and administrative contexts. These processes shaped not only how letters functioned at the moment of composition but also how they survived to become historical sources. Attending to practices of circulation and preservation is, therefore, crucial for assessing what epistolary materials can and cannot reveal.

Letters in Indo-Persian contexts operated across a spectrum of genres, each calibrated to particular communicative needs. Formal administrative documents, petitions, advisory letters, and brief memoranda coexisted within a shared epistolary culture governed by convention rather than spontaneity. Genre distinctions determined tone, length, structure, and rhetorical strategy, ensuring that correspondence aligned with the relative status of sender and recipient. These conventions facilitated communication within hierarchical systems by rendering written interactions predictable and legible to their intended audiences.

[xiii] Muzaffar Alam discusses how the Mughal dynasty, succeeding the Afghans in the sixteenth century, became exceptional patrons of Persian literary culture. Under their rule, India witnessed an unparalleled flourishing of Persian poetry and prose, whose thematic richness and sheer volume arguably surpassed the literary output of any earlier Muslim dynasty in the subcontinent. See, Alam, Muzaffar. The Languages of Political Islam in India c. 1200–1800. Delhi: Permanent Black. 2004.

[xiv] Rashid, Rohma Javed. “Persian and the Persianate World in the 15th Century Deccan: A Study of the Letters and Networks of Mahmud Gawan.” Shaqufa-e-Adbiyat-e-Farsi, Proceedings of the International Seminar on Legacy of Persian Literature in 15th and Early 16th Century A.D. Institute of Persian Research. 2020.

Circulation formed a central component of epistolary practice. Letters were designed to traverse distance, often moving through complex networks of messengers, scribes, and intermediaries. Transmission was rarely instantaneous or secure, and writers were acutely aware that correspondence could be delayed, intercepted, or read by unintended recipients. This awareness shaped the language of letters, encouraging strategic ambiguity, formulaic expression, or coded references. The risks associated with circulation underscore the extent to which letters were composed with an eye toward multiple potential readers rather than a single, private addressee.[xv]

Preservation constitutes another critical dimension of epistolary practice. The survival of letters is rarely accidental. Many correspondences entered the historical record through deliberate acts of compilation, often undertaken long after the original exchange. Insha collections, archival registers, and anthologies of exemplary writing reorganised letters according to pedagogical or bureaucratic logic, detaching them from their immediate contexts. These compilations privileged certain types of correspondence while excluding others, shaping the contours of the epistolary archive available to modern scholars.

Compilation also introduced layers of mediation that complicate questions of authorship and authenticity. Editors selected, modified, or standardised letters to suit instructional or ideological purposes. Formulaic elements may have been amplified, while contextual details were abridged or omitted. In some cases, letters functioned less as records of specific exchanges than as models illustrating ideal forms of communication. For historians, this raises methodological challenges: epistolary collections must be read not only for what they contain but also for the principles governing their assembly.

The selective nature of preservation has significant implications for historical interpretation. Letters that survive tend to reflect institutional priorities, elite perspectives, or didactic aims, while more ephemeral forms of correspondence are disproportionately lost. This asymmetry cautions against treating epistolary archives as comprehensive representations of past communicative practices. Instead, they should be approached as curated corpora shaped by historical processes of valuation and exclusion.

At the same time, the very constraints of epistolary survival offer analytical opportunities. Letters often preserve traces of everyday administrative routines, social obligations, and communicative norms that are absent from narrative histories. Their formulaic repetition, far from diminishing historical value, provides insight into the expectations and habits that structured written interaction. Recurrent expressions, conventional openings, and ritualised closings illuminate the shared assumptions that underpinned communication across diverse contexts.

Recognising letters as products of practice rather than isolated texts thus enables a more nuanced engagement with epistolary sources. It foregrounds the processes through which correspondence was produced, circulated, and preserved, highlighting the multiple layers of mediation that shape what historians encounter in the archive. Such an approach neither romanticises letters as unfiltered voices nor dismisses them as derivative documents. Instead, it situates them within the material and social worlds that gave them meaning.

Conclusion: Rethinking Letters as Historical Archives

This article has argued for reconsidering letters as a distinct and indispensable category of historical sources. Rather than approaching correspondence as supplementary material used to corroborate narrative histories, it has been proposed that letters be read as archives of practice texts shaped by institutional norms, social hierarchies, and historically specific conventions of communication. Such an approach foregrounds not only what letters record but how they functioned within the worlds that produced them.

[xv] Alam, Muzaffar, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. “The Making of a Munshi.” Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 24. No. 2. 2004.

By situating Indo-Persian epistolary traditions within a historical framework, the study has demonstrated that letter writing in South Asia was neither incidental nor informal. From early Islamic administrative correspondence to the codified practices of the Sultanate period, epistolary writing evolved in tandem with the development of bureaucratic institutions, professional scribal classes, and refined rhetorical norms. Letters emerged as regulated forms of communication, governed by precise distinctions of genre, status, and purpose. Recognising this historical depth is essential for interpreting correspondence as more than isolated textual artefacts.

Central to this reassessment is the conceptual vocabulary that structured epistolary practice. Terms such as insha, farmān, manshur, maktub, and ruqa encoded assumptions about authority, hierarchy, and communicative intent. Treating these categories as historically meaningful rather than merely descriptive enables a more accurate reading of epistolary materials and guards against anachronistic interpretation. Conceptual precision thus becomes a methodological necessity rather than a philological exercise.

The article has also emphasised the importance of attending to epistolary practice, how letters were circulated, read, preserved, and compiled. Processes of transmission and selection shaped the survival of correspondence and introduced layers of mediation that complicate questions of authorship, audience, and intention. Epistolary archives are therefore curated corpora rather than transparent repositories of past communication. A critical awareness of these processes allows historians to engage with letters more reflexively, acknowledging both their evidentiary value and their limitations.

Taken together, these interventions point toward a more integrated approach to epistolary sources. Letters do not merely supplement chronicles or administrative manuals; they offer access to dimensions of historical experience that other genres often obscure. Their formulaic language, relational structure, and situational constraints reveal the routines, expectations, and negotiations that underpinned governance and social interaction. When read alongside other sources, letters illuminate the textures of historical life without claiming interpretive primacy.

This study does not seek to elevate correspondence above other forms of evidence, nor to romanticise letters as unmediated voices of the past. Instead, it calls for methodological attentiveness to the specific qualities of epistolary texts and the traditions that shaped them. By restoring letters to the centre of historical analysis on their own terms, historians of South Asia and beyond can expand their source base while refining the tools for interpreting written evidence.

In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on source diversity and methodological innovation in historical research. It suggests that letters, when approached critically and contextually, constitute a vital archive for understanding the practices through which authority, knowledge, and relationships were articulated across time and space. Such a reorientation invites further exploration of epistolary materials not as marginal documents, but as central witnesses to the historical processes they helped sustain.
