

JAHANARA BEGUM (1614-1681), *RISALA-I-SAHIBIYAH* (1639) AND *MUNIS AL-ARVAH* (1640)

Introduced by Afshan Bokhari

INTRODUCTION

Jahanara Begum (1614-1681), the first surviving and daughter of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658) and empress Mumtaz Mahal (1593-1631) was born on March 23rd, 1614 C.E, in Ajmer, the auspicious Sufi pilgrimage city and final resting place of the principal guide of the Chishtiya order, Shaikh Khvaja Mu'inuddin Chishti (1143-1235). Ajmer was not only Jahanara's birthplace but later served as her spiritual *axis mundi* and inspired the passionate and pious narratives of the princess' two Sufi treatises: *Risala-i-Sahibiyah* (1639) and *Munis al-arvah* (1640) and the commission of the Begum Dalani (1637) portico and enclosure of the Ajmer tomb mausoleum. Shah Jahan's daughter's birth in the politically and spiritually rich context of Ajmer was a blessed moment and portends the princess' unprecedented and prolific social, spiritual and political participation in the emperor's imperial vision of his kingship and the Timurid-Mughal legacy.

Upon her mother's untimely death in 1631, the seventeen-year-old princess was assigned her mother's role as the head of the imperial harem and the keeper of the royal seal. In her role as the *de facto* consort queen to the powerful emperor Shah Jahan, her immediate duties included arranging the marriage preparations for three of her younger brothers, as well as assisting her father in the supervision and design of her mother's tomb mausoleum, the Taj Mahal. Shah Jahan sought emotional, spiritual and political comfort from his eldest daughter and frequently took her advice on a myriad of concerns. Shah Jahan's high esteem of the princess is indicated in his entrusting her with the imperial seal as well as giving her fiscal freedoms that were unprecedented for imperial women. Shah Jahan's fondness for his daughter was reflected in the multiple titles he bestowed upon her, which included Sahibat al-Zamani (Lady of the Age) and Padishah Begum (Lady Emperor) or Begum Sahib (Princess of Princesses). The imperial largesse assigned to Jahanara Begum, allowed high profile commissions alongside the works sponsored by the emperor including the first female-sponsored congregation mosque, *khanaqah*, *hammam*, caravanserai and several gardens. These works dotted the imperial landscape, were particularly spiritually and politically significant sites, and served as Jahanara's agents of representation.

In her twenties, Jahanara Begum was introduced to Sufism by her Sufi-devout brother and heir apparent, Dara Shikoh (1615-1659). The ruler/prince-mystic connection pre-dates the Mughals to their Persian ancestors, the Timurids, and was formally implemented in India by Jahanara's great-grandfather, emperor Akbar (1542-1605). Mystical associations and practices were inextricably connected to Timurid and Mughal rule and accommodated the social, political and spiritual needs of the imperial family in a more nuanced manner than traditional Islam. Jahanara Begum and Dara Shikoh continued the spiritual traditions under the spiritual tutelage of the renowned masters Mulla Shah Badakhshi (d. 1657) and Mian Mir (d. 1635), respectively. The Sufi princess took her brother's lead and wrote the two Sufi treatises mentioned above that outlined and detailed her own journey into Sufism.

EXTRACT FROM *RISALA-I-SAHIBIYAH* (1640)

Translated by Sunil Sharma

Since my twentieth year I have had a sincere resolution and firm belief in the ... order of the masters of Chisht (may their secrets be sanctified) and the ring of discipleship and servitude to the guiding *pir*, who is the pole of the saints, leader of the perfect sages, is marked on the ear of the soul of purity. Before this for a few years I went to Hazrat Ajmer for a pilgrimage of the illumined pure garden that Hazrat *pir* had and affection and servitude to him becomes focused, and increased day by day. Praiseworthy and almighty God out of his generosity and grace inspired zeal to seek the true path in my heart so that in the year 1049 A.H. [1639] I came to Lahore in the service of my great father (may God preserve his kingdom and power) on whom God almighty bestowed extreme grace of devotion, worship, and immense gratitude, the greatest happiness that his father and grandfather had been deprived of... (page 1)

With much praise and immense gratitude to the one God almighty I have wasted my life and seeking to regain the lost honorable time to a high degree, I became fortunate from this lofty station in understanding the oneness and sated from the limpid sea of truth and the spring of gnosis. They say that the blessing of truth is the unending wealth. I hope God almighty, by way of kindness and generosity and grace, keeps me firm and straight on this just path that is the *sirat al-mustaqim*. May he grant complete blessing of generosity in the action, occupation and *azkar* that are usual in this royal honorable order. May he render the pleasure of his remembrance sweet on the palate of my soul. May he increase beyond limit the zeal for seeking him (*amma nawalahu*) in my sincere heart.

Hazrat—may my life be sacrificed over his name—has great affection and kindness for his disciples and followers. As a father and mother of this gentle group, especially to me he shows attention and affection beyond limit. The lofty letters that he writes to me are filled with perfect kindness and affection, and they are not without hints and points. He has written about truths and knowledge with a clear style and lucid expression that no *pir* has used with his disciple. I derive complete benefit and indisputable enjoyment from them. In describing truth and gnosis and with regard to influence my Hazrat Akhund sahib has no peer. This is the influence of the special glance of my king. He also often sends me tokens of his blessing. (page 11-12)

EXTRACT FROM *MUNIS AL-ARVAH* (1640)

Translated by Carl Ernst

Know that, after the performance of religious duties, requirements, and the recitation of the Holy Qur'an, this weak woman who hopes for salvation regards no action as nobler than the remembrance of the spiritual states and stations of the revered saints (may God sanctify their spirits). Therefore, I have spent a portion of my time in reading books and treatises that contain the felicitous accounts of the great ones of religion and the mighty ones of certainty. This *faqira* had such perfect sincerity and

devotion that I wrote a summary of the career of the revered master who took my hand in discipleship, as well as the chief successors of that revered one (may God inspire their spirits).

Praise and favor be to God, for by the assistance of God the Knower, the Powerful, and with the helping grace of the revered master who took my hand, I attained this desire of mine, and this treatise *The Confidant of Spirits* was edited and put on the robe of completion on the 27th of the blessed month of Ramadan, 1049 (January 21, 1640).

The lives of these great ones, who are the close ones of the court of Eternity, having been extracted with great care from well-known books and treatises, have been committed to writing. In the belief of this weak woman, whatever is affirmed in this text is completely correct. I hope that readers will have the full blessing and benefit of it ...

Source:

The complete annotated translations of the *Risala-i-Sahibiyah* and *Munis al-arvah* by Sunil Sharma will be published with essays by Afshan Bokhari and Supriya Gandhi, as *Mughals and Mystics: Jahanara Begum and Dara Shikoh's Sufi Embrace and Writings* by Fons Vitae Press.

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