



The “Light” of the Timuria: Jahan Ara Begum’s Patronage, Piety, and Poetry in 17th-century Mughal India

Afshan Bokhari

Islamic theology and jurisprudence formed the underpinnings for the Timurid-Mughal imperial ideology and legitimized their 16th-century conquest of and expansion in India. Sufism and its mystical belief systems, on the other hand, had a significant influence on the socio-political psyche of the imperial line. The innate constructions of Sufism attended some of the most visceral and deeply felt social and spiritual needs of the Mughal elite and commoners that traditional Islam may not have addressed. Sufi saints served as political and social advisors to Mughal emperors and their retinue where their intercession was informed by religious texts and Sufi ideology and locally configured frames of spirituality. The inextricable connection of the imperial family to Sufi institutions was galvanized by marrying state to household, requiring women to “visibly” represent the pietistic objectives of the ruling house through their largesse. These Mughal “enunciations”, according to Ebba Koch, “emerged as forms of communication through a topos of symbols”¹ that “gendered” the Mughal landscape and, further, participated in what Gulru Necipoglu has described as “staging” for the performance of “optical politics” as a direct function of imperial patronage.² The highly politicized and “staged” religiosity of royal women thereby sustained the sovereign and the historical memory of the patrilineal line. Emperor Shah Jahan’s (r. 1627–58) daughter, Jahan Ara Begum (1614–81) fully participated in the patterns of political patriarchy and her father’s imperial vision by constructing her “stage” through her Sufi affiliations, prodigious patronage, and literary prowess. The princess’s contributions fully conformed to the Mughal dictates imposed on her gender and enabled her to assert her spiritual and imperial authority as an agent of her own representation.

This essay examines the Jami Masjid in Agra (1648) (figure 2) and the mosque of the Sufi saint Mullah Shah Badakhshi in Srinagar, Kashmir (1649–50) (figure 3) as “translations” or visual articulations of the dual personas of the Mughal princess Jahanara Begum, daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan (c. 1592–1666). The study explores the duality of the princess’s character as exemplified in the design of the mosques and in her biographical Sufi treatise, *Risala-i Sahibiyah*,³ as functions of the princess’s imperial obligations and her spiritual affinities within the Sufi Qadiriyyah⁴ order and as “controlled definitions” of her identity. Further, the study considers the unmarried princess’s spiritual authority as a *piri-muridi*⁵ that legitimized her “lighting the light of the Timuria” into perpetuity.⁶ The study pays particular attention to issues of identity, religion, and gender, and how these are at play in the narratives of the *Sahibiyah* and in Jahan Ara’s authorial constructions of self. According to Tamiya Zaman, the dynamics of personal narratives written during Shah Jahan’s reign were particularly conditioned by subjectivities “that existed simultaneously” as both personal and imperial prerogatives.⁷

1

“Woman with Flower”. North India, Mughal, second half of 17th century. Opaque watercolour and gold on paper; 22.8 x 15 cm. Photograph © 2008, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Asiatic Curator’s Fund, 60.1139.

While there are no verified images of Jahan Ara Begum, the author has used the formal elements of this work to conjecture or “imagine” that this may be a portrait of the princess.

