

The Empire of the Great Mughals

History, Art and Culture

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Women at Court

I have handed the business of government over to Nur Jahan; I require nothing beyond a *ser* of wine and half a *ser* of meat.

Jahangir¹

For many people the Taj Mahal, the lily-white mausoleum built by Shah Jahan for his wife Mumtaz Mahal in Agra, symbolises Mughal India, in fact the whole of India. He was inconsolable after her death, and Mumtaz, 'the elect of the palace', became the ideal of a beloved wife – an image quite at odds with the apparent role of women in the harem or in the Islamic world today.

However, Mumtaz Mahal is far from being a unique case in Indo-Islamic history. The chronicles contain a wealth of documentation on women in the imperial household, who were often as powerful as their husbands; acting as patrons of architecture, art and science; sometimes playing a role in government; having the right to issue edicts, intervene on behalf of prisoners; and much more besides.

This was also the case with the dynasties which preceded the Mughals or were contemporaneous with them – Sultan Iltutmish of Delhi (reigned 1206–1236) chose his daughter Razia Sultana as his successor, and she ruled the kingdom for four

years. Under Shah Jahan there were a number of very dynamic noblewomen, who took an active part in politics.² The brave Chand Bibi of Ahmednagar was especially famous. She took part in the defence of the fortress during a savage attack by the Mughals, spurring her soldiers on to greater efforts, until she fell victim to jealousy on the part of her own officers.

Just as the rulers were awarded honorary titles during their lifetimes and after their deaths, so were the ladies: Hamida, Akbar's mother, received the title *Maryam Makani*, 'occupying the place of the Virgin Mary'; her daughter-in-law, Manmati, a Rajput from the Amber family, who was to become Jahangir's mother, was *Maryam-i zamani*, 'Mary of her time', whilst Shah Jahan's mother Jodh Bai, likewise a Rajput, bore the title *Bilqis makani*. To some extent she also acquired the rank of Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, which is appropriate in view of the numerous comparisons of Shah Jahan with Solomon. Mumtaz Mahal, whose real name was Arjumand Begum

Banu, also bore the title *malika-i jahan*, 'Queen of the World', as well as *mahd-i 'ulya*, 'Most Elevated Cradle', whilst her daughter Jahanara, 'Jewel of the World', bore the title *sahibat az-zamani*, 'Mistress of Time', but was usually called Begum Sahib (a title which was later also awarded to her niece Zinat un-nisa).

In order to understand the prominent role of women at the Mughal court, it has to be borne in mind that women in the Central Asian regions, from which the 'House of Timur' originated, enjoyed considerably more freedom and were more active than those in the Central Islamic regions. Alanquwa, the mythical female ancestor of Chingiz Khan, played an important role in the prehistory of the Mughals, and the mythological connection between Alanquwa and light was transferred to Akbar's birth by Abu'l Fazl. The chief wife of Timur, the founding father of the Mughal dynasty, was also a highly independent person. (Timur had a special garden laid out for each of his favourite wives.) In more recent history there was Babur's maternal grandmother, Isan Daulat Begum (died 1505), the wife of Yunus Khan Mughal, who after the death of Babur's father managed everything for her grandson, took over the administration of his Andijan territories and dealt with conspirators.

When it comes to tactics and strategy, there were few

Women like my grandmother Isan Daulat Begum.

She was intelligent and a good organizer.

Most arrangements were made according to her stipulations.

Furthermore, Babur's mother, Qutlugh Nigar Begum (died 1505) was the daughter of that very energetic lady, the chief wife of 'Umar Shaykh

Mirza, and she accompanied her son Babur on many of his campaigns.

The long lists of names, confusing though they may be for the reader, show how closely related the different branches of the Timurid and Chingizkhanid families were. Babur's daughter Gulbadan provides a very interesting description of the 'mystical festival' of her half-brother Humayun on 19 December 1531. On this occasion the young Humayun, who had been the ruler for only a year, had invited a number of aunts who lived within easy reach, a few first and second cousins and a number of other unidentifiable noblewomen, so that on his right side no fewer than 87 ladies were seated, and probably about the same number on his left, all dressed in their best and no doubt wearing their elegant high Turkish hats—you can almost hear them gossiping during the banquet!

Gulbadan, the author of the vivid description of this scene, was Babur's daughter by Dildar Begum, who also bore him Prince Hindal, who was very close to Gulbadan. She was about eight years old when her father died in 1530. However, the events of the crucial early years left such a strong impression on the child's mind, that decades later, when her nephew Akbar asked her to write about his father Humayun, she was able to produce a vivid picture of his turbulent life, up to the blinding of her half-brother Kamran, at which point the manuscript comes to an abrupt end.

From Gulbadan's account we learn that childless wives of the ruler, or those whose children had died, often adopted their nieces or nephews, which rendered the already complex kinship ties still more unfathomable, at least in the case of those born after such adoptions.

Babur gave all three of his daughters by Dildar Begum a name connected with *gul*, 'Rose', so it is not always easy to distinguish between Gulrang,

'Rose Coloured', Gulchihra, 'Rose Face', and the 'Roses' of subsequent generations. However, Gulbadan, 'Rose Body', who was married to a rather insignificant man, Khizr Khan, stands head and shoulders above them. It was she who later accompanied her niece Salima, one of her nephew Akbar's wives, on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1575, together with a group of other Timurid ladies.³ Not until 17 February 1603, when she was more than eighty years old, did she 'cover her face with the veil of annihilation'.

All of Babur's daughters and a few of his granddaughters played a role in life at court, even if only in keeping the family together. One interesting example is the life of Ruqaiya, the daughter of Gulbadan's brother Hindal, who became Akbar's first wife. She remained childless, but assumed primary responsibility for the upbringing of Akbar's grandson Khurram, the future Shah Jahan.

The importance of politically motivated marriages is demonstrated by Babur's marriage to Mubarika, a woman from the Pashtun clan of Yusufzay, which was later to be a source of problems for the Mughals. He married the Pashtun woman in 1519 (the same year in which Hindal was born to Dildar Begum), which improved his standing in the eyes of the Afghan highlanders. However, Mubarika remained childless. Rumour had it that some of the other wives, being jealous of Babur's great love for her, had administered drugs to her to prevent her from presenting him with an heir. Such accounts are not uncommon. Black magic and secret methods, it was often claimed, were used to prevent the birth of a child who might be a future claimant to the throne. It was Mubarika who in the end conveyed Babur's corpse to its final resting place in Kabul.

Babur's favourite wife, however, was Maham, whose ancestral relatives included the Persian

holy man Ahmad-i Jam (died 1141). Babur married her in 1506, at the age of 22. Two years later she presented him with Humayun, who was to become his favourite son and heir. In 1529 she went to Delhi, where she was allowed to sit next to the ruler on the throne. When Humayun was enthroned two years later, she held a magnificent celebration for him. Since her other four children had died at a young age, she treated Gulbadan and Hindal as her own children.

Babur's oldest sister, Khanzada Begum, who bore the title Padshah Begum (1478-1545), was really the First Lady of the empire. On many occasions she intervened during political difficulties between her relatives, for example between Humayun and Kamran in 1541, and four years later, shortly before her death, between Humayun and 'Askari.

The ladies of the imperial harem always constituted a formidable lobby. In 1606, when Prince Khusrau, on the advice of Mirza 'Aziz Koka, rebelled against his father, Jahangir, Salima sent a message to Jahangir:

Majesty, all the ladies have assembled in the women's quarters for the purpose of pledging their support for Mirza 'Aziz Koka. It would be better if you were to come here - if not, they will come to you!⁴

There are other accounts of similar threats.

Humayun, who was surrounded by innumerable aunts and cousins, was not at all averse to the fair sex. His wives were from the most varied of family backgrounds. His first wife, Hajji Begum, was supposed to have taken care of the young Akbar when his own parents were taking flight in Iran. It was she who constructed Humayun's mausoleum in Delhi, near Nizamuddin, or at least supervised the building work.

Humayun's wife Gulbarg, 'Rose Petal', who came from the Turkmen clan of Barlas, had previously been married to the Sindhi ruler Husayn Shah Arghun. She accompanied Humayun in his flight to Sind, during which time he became acquainted with the young Hamida, whose family, like the Mahams, was extremely proud of its descent from the great Sufi master Ahmad-i Jam, known as *Zindapil*, 'the living elephant'. There are differing accounts about the marriage between the refugee ruler and the initially reluctant Hamida.⁵ The marriage was arranged by Babur's widow Dildar Begum, against the wishes of her son Hindal, and possibly against her own inclinations as well. It is hardly surprising that the young girl, barely fifteen years of age, was not exactly thrilled at the prospect of marrying a penniless emperor with no empire, who already had a number of wives, and was an opium addict to boot. Nevertheless, in 1541 the marriage took place, and on 15 October 1542, after exhausting travels in desolate regions, the young girl gave birth to a son, who would become famous as Akbar. A small memorial plaque in Umarkot, Sind, commemorates the event.

Humayan continued to take flight, followed by his young wife. When the situation appeared hopeless, she left the baby behind in the care of Humayun's oldest wife, and accompanied her husband tirelessly on all of his travels through Iran. Together they visited the mausoleum of her ancestor Ahmad-i Jam, as well as the Shi'ite shrine of Ardabil in the northwest of Iran, the place of origin of the ruling Safavid dynasty. All in all, she proved herself to be an excellent travelling companion. In 1544, whilst they were still in flight, she bore a daughter. Not until 1545 did she see her little son again, in Kandahar. The scene where the three-year-old Akbar recognised his own mother among a group of women is one of the favourite

themes for the illustrators of Akbar's biography.⁶ For a while, Humayun left Hamida behind in the fortress of Kandahar. It was very hurtful for her that after his return to Kabul, the prince married Mahchuchak (actually, *mah chichak*, 'Moon Flower'), who was to suffer a sad fate. Her son, Mirza Muhammad Hakim – Akbar's younger half-brother – took possession of Kabul after Bayram Khan's fall. In 1563, he was attacked, unsuccessfully, by the *generalissimo* Mun'im Khan. Abu'l-Ma'ali, formerly one of Humayun's favourites, escaped from prison in Lahore, married Mahchuchak's daughter, and murdered his mother-in-law in 1564.⁷

Like most of the ladies of the Mughal household, Akbar's mother remained in Kabul, whilst Humayun gradually recaptured the Indian territories. One year after he had met his end, Hamida Banu went to Delhi, where she lived for most of the time afterwards, exerting a considerable influence on her son and grandson until her death in 1604. At her death, Akbar shaved his head and chin and gave up wearing jewellery.

The veneration of the mother was an important feature of the Mughals' culture. Jahangir gives many accounts of going to visit his mother, approaching her and bowing deeply before her, in order to honour her 'according to the custom of Chingiz Khan and Timur'. When Gulrukh Miranshahi, one of his mothers-in-law, fell ill in 1614, she gave the emperor a robe of honour, which he accepted 'out of respect for the custom (*töre*)', whereas in fact as the emperor he ought not to accept anything like that sort of robe of honour. This extreme expression of honour for the mother is of course reflected in the injunction, rooted in Islam, to honour one's mother above all other people.

In Akbar's youth he also had an extremely close relationship with Maham anaga, his *amah*.⁸ In

Islamic law treated as marry each had to be noblewoman of his life, considered the web of relationships. As Akbar's punish his a river of tears cross'. Mirza the wife of loved very anaga attended infant Akbar eight-months comforted in the hands perception

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Of all the most famous The young up with Akbar Mughal mausoleum *al-manazil*. She is said

Islamic law, foster children and genetic children are treated as equals, and they are not permitted to marry each other. For this reason a newborn prince had to be nursed for a time by a number of different noblewomen during the first few weeks and months of his life, as the children of these *amahs* were considered thereafter to be siblings. In this way a tight web of relationships and dependencies was created. As Akbar commented, when he was being urged to punish his foster brother (*koka*) Mirza 'Aziz: 'there is a river of milk running between us which I cannot cross'. Mirza 'Aziz Koka's mother was Jiji anaga, the wife of Shamsuddin Atga, whom Akbar also loved very much. In his early childhood, Maham anaga attempted to use magic to ensure that the infant Akbar would not drink Jiji's milk, and the eight-month-old Akbar is supposed to have comforted her at the time (another of the 'proofs' in the hagiographies for Akbar's supernatural perception).

Zayn Khan Koka, whose father had at one time accompanied Maryam makani whilst fleeing through Iran, was also the son of one of Akbar's *amahs*. His granddaughter later married Jahangir and presented him with his son Parwez.

The honour of nursing a prince was often awarded to a particularly trustworthy lady with strong connections to the family, which is why the mausoleums of famous *amahs* are to be found everywhere in the Indo-Muslim regions (there are particularly beautiful examples in Lahore and Mandu). Akbar himself carried the bier of his *amah* to her burial.

Of all the Mughal *amahs*, Maham anaga is the most famous. She was the wife of Nadim Koka. The younger of her two sons, Adham Khan, grew up with Akbar. Maham anaga had one of the first Mughal mosques constructed in Delhi – the *khayr al-manazil*, opposite Purana Qila, the 'Old Fort'. She is said to have managed everything in the

empire, even though Mun'im Khan was the actual *wakil*, Minister. She naturally used her position of authority to the benefit of Adham, who nevertheless managed to make himself so unpopular that Akbar singlehandedly threw him from a balcony and caused his death. Forty days later, Maham anaga followed her son into the hereafter. Akbar mourned her according to custom, and soon afterwards married Salima, the daughter of Babur's daughter Gulru (died 1613). She had been widowed as a result of the intrigues against Bayram Khan instigated by Maham anaga, which culminated in his murder.

Matrimonial politics in the Mughal era were largely based on power struggles, as can be seen from the following quotation:

Because his honourable wife had suckled Aurangzeb, his sons were promoted to the appropriate ranks.

Furthermore, when someone married Nur Jahan's sister, 'the doors of power were immediately opened for him'.⁹ Such comments frequently occur.

Even women who did not belong directly to the court played a not inconsiderable role there. Another *amah*, Fatima anaga, served as an ambassador, so as to be able to discuss possible marriages with Haram Begum, the daughter of the Timurid Mir Wayz Beg and wife of Humayun's cousin Sulayman Mirza, who was effectively ruling in Badakhshan, the northernmost point of Afghanistan. In 1529 she assisted Humayun during his expedition to Balkh, and visited him in Kabul in 1551, both to console him over the death of his brother Hindal, and also to win Kabul for her husband. She was the *de facto* administrator of the country, and had the right to order punishment to be inflicted.

Badakhshan had once before been ruled by a woman: Shah Begum, the wife of Babur's uncle Yunus Khan Chaghatay (died 1487), left the Mongol region for family reasons, and after wandering for a long time she met her step-grandson Babur in Kabul in 1505. Although she had instigated a rebellion against Babur for the benefit of her grandson Mirza Khan, Babur treated her generously and even made her the ruler of Badakhshan. However, she was captured by robbers in Kashgar and died around 1507.

After Akbar's half-brother Mirza Muhammad Hakim's brief period as regent in Kabul, Bakht un-nisa Begum, who was the daughter of Humayun and Mahchuchak, also the ruler's half-sister, was put in charge of the administration of the region. Another woman, Sarwqad, 'Cypress-stature', also deserves a mention. Gulbadan relates that she sang one night by the light of the moon, and later married the *wakil* Mun'im Khan, after which she attempted to mediate between him and other politicians.

Like the Mughals, the Arghuns of Sind also came from the Afghanistan region, from the Herat district, so a number of family connections were established between them and the first and second generations of Mughals in India.¹⁰ An Arghun woman first married Babur's foster brother, Qasim Koka, then one of her relatives, Shah Hasan Arghun of Sind. A daughter from this union married Babur's son Kamran, and stayed with him as his faithful companion after he had been blinded and banished to Mecca.

Many ladies of the first and second generation played an important role in Akbar's time, attempting to mediate between the generations. Hamida even left the fort and entreated her grandson Jahangir, 'who had spent a long time in Ajmer indulging in lust and debauchery in bad company', to honour his father and show contri-

tion for his rebellion, and to go to Bengal as he had been commanded.¹¹

Abu'l Fazl relates that after the ruler's lengthy periods of fasting, the first food he took was brought to him from his mother's house.

One of the most influential women was the Rajput Manmati, who as Jahangir's mother was honoured with the title *Maryam-i zamani*. She founded the Begum Shahi Mosque in Lahore (1611-14) and constructed a cascading fountain near the *'idgah* in Bayana (1612). When she died in 1623, she was buried in Sikandra, the final resting place of her husband Akbar.

When Jahangir was in Allahabad during his rebellion against his father, he was accompanied by his women. Shah Begum, the Rajput mother of his son Khusrau, committed suicide in 1605 because of her distress at the disloyal behaviour of her brother and the disobedience of Khusrau, and was buried in Khusrau Bagh in Allahabad. Jahangir was so distraught at her death, he apparently ate nothing for four days, and Akbar sent him a robe of honour and his own turban by way of consolation. Jahangir's sister, Sultan Nithar Begum, was also buried in Allahabad after her death in 1622.

In Jahangir's time it was the women who encouraged the design and building of mosques, whereas the ruler himself did not instigate any large projects of this kind.

A number of legends have been woven around the story of Jahangir's rumoured love affair with a girl called Anarkali. In 1599 he was said to have exchanged adoring looks with the young lady whilst in the presence of his father, whereupon Akbar had the young lady arrested and walled up. In 1615 Jahangir had an octagonal tower erected in a garden. A cenotaph bearing the Ninety-Nine Names of God was placed in the tower, which gave its name to a district of Lahore. Today the building

is used as an archive. There is no mention of this story in the official chronicles of Akbar's time, although it appears frequently in folklore as well as modern dramaturgy.

In 1611, when he was already the father of many children by different wives, Jahangir married a Persian woman called Mihr un-nisa. At that time she was known as Nur Mahal, 'Light of the Palace', but she eventually became famous as Nur Jahan, 'Light of the World'.¹² She was born in Kandahar while her family was migrating from Iran. Her father, Ghiyath Beg, would later on, as I'timad ad-daula, play a leading role in the empire. She married the officer Shir Afkan, 'Lion Beater', who was fatally wounded in Bengal in the course of killing one of Jahangir's foster brothers – rumour had it that Jahangir had something to do with this, as he had already seen the lady and fallen in love with her. The widow, who was already nearly 34 years old, lived at first in the house of Akbar's first wife, the childless Ruqaiya Begum, who was Khurram Shah Jahan's foster mother. Nur Jahan was undoubtedly the most dynamic woman in the history of the Mughals. Ineffectual aesthetes were no match for this cunning and energetic woman, who exploited their weakness for drugs and alcohol. Eventually the government was practically in the hands of her father I'timad ad-daula and her brother Asaf Khan. The ruler accepted this state of affairs because Nur Jahan was not only clever, but also a first class rider, polo player and hunter. Her father died in 1622, four months after the death of his wife. Nur Jahan inherited his entire estate, and erected a wonderful *pietra dura* mausoleum at Agra, of white marble inlaid with rare stones, so that the cenotaph it encloses resembles a treasure chest. She also built a number of gardens, such as the Nurafshan Garden on the north bank of the Jumna, and at the castle of Nur Mahal (1618–20).

The princess was a great landowner, who bestowed a number of fiefs and cared for orphaned girls. She was the *de facto* regent, and had coins minted in her own name. She was allowed to beat the ceremonial drum in Jahangir's presence. She also engaged in trade, with her brother Asaf Khan acting as the chief agent in the administration of her ships, which she used to transport indigo and other goods from Bayana to international ports on India's west coast. Nur Jahan was particularly interested in European goods, especially English embroidery. She became an expert in Indian textiles, and also designed jewellery and goldsmiths work. Since she received a vast income from customs duties, it is hardly surprising that during the celebrations for Jahangir's convalescence, the reception she held for his official weighing, and the presents, jewels and robes of honour which she gave, were by far the most impressive.

Nur Jahan's only daughter from her first marriage was married to Jahangir's son Parwez, and so found herself in a difficult situation during the conflicts over the succession: she was seen as 'the leaven of confusion'.¹³ She turned Jahangir against his favourite son Khurram Shah Jahan, for which she is harshly criticised by some historians, whilst others blame her brother Asaf Khan for his support of Shah Jahan. Before Nur Jahan died, seventeen years after Jahangir, she had a beautiful mausoleum built for him in his beloved Lahore. Like her father's mausoleum, it was laid out in a garden. Her own simple grave lies on the other side of the Ravi, and is now separated from her brother Asaf Khan's tomb by a railway line. It is a modest plot, of which she herself is supposed to have written the following verse:

On mine, the outsider's grave,
No candle and no light,

the day of her death, and also throughout the month of *Dhu'l Qa'da*, the month of her death.

Her oldest daughter Jahanara, barely eighteen years old at the time, was at her side during her last hours, and fulfilled all her filial duties lovingly. She then became the first lady of the empire, and occupied this important position with grace and dignity. Jahanara shared an interest in mysticism with her brother Dara Shikoh, who was a year younger than her. She was initiated into the Qadiriyya order by Mian Mir's successor, Mulla Shah, with the help of Tawakkul Beg and her brother. She wrote a detailed account of her introduction to the Sufi path:¹⁵

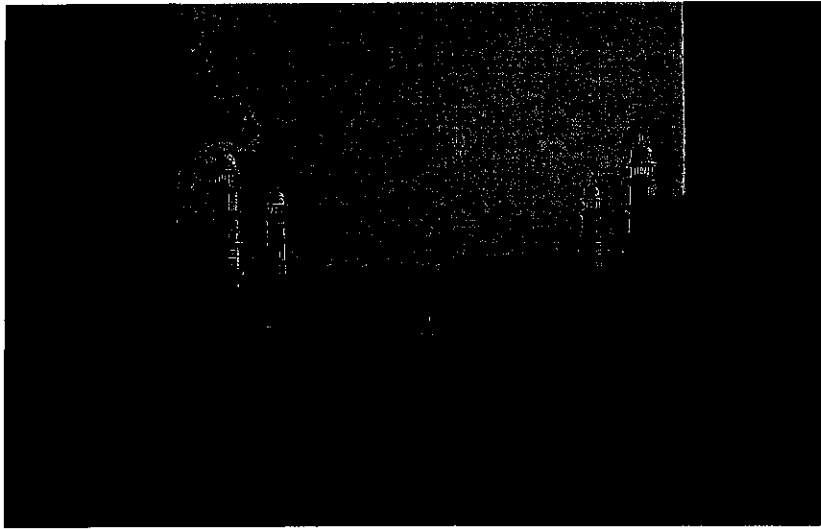
Through the intermediary of my brother, Prince Dara Shikoh, I announced my true beliefs [to Mulla Shah] and asked him to be my spiritual leader, and he performed my initiation according to the noble rules of his brotherhood. The first time I set eyes on the venerable figure of the master, from the cabinet in which I was hiding, when he paid a visit to my father the emperor when he was staying in Kashmir, and when I heard the pearls of wisdom falling from his mouth, my belief in him grew a thousand times stronger than before, and heavenly ecstasy seized my very being. The next morning, with the master's permission, my brother initiated me into the mystical exercises, which consisted of reciting the litany of the Qadiri Dervishes and the order of Mulla Shah.

In order to complete this pious endeavour, I went to the prayer room of my palace and remained seated there until midnight, whereupon I said the night prayers then returned to my quarters. I then sat down in a corner facing Mecca, and concentrated my mind on the picture of the master, whilst at the same

time keeping a description of our holy Prophet before my eyes. Whilst occupied with this contemplation, I reached a spiritual state in which I was neither asleep nor awake. I saw the holy community of the Prophet and his first disciples with the other holy ones; the Prophet and his four companions [Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali] were sitting together, surrounded by a number of important associates. I also noticed Mulla Shah. He was sitting near the Prophet, his head resting on His foot, whilst the Prophet said to him, 'Oh, Mulla Shah, for what reason have you enlightened this Timurid girl?'

When I came to my senses again, my heart opened out like a rose bud under the impact of this sign of God's grace. Full of immense gratitude, I threw myself down before the throne of the Absolute. I was filled with unspeakable happiness, but had no idea how to give expression to all of the joy in my heart. I made a vow of blind obedience to the master, saying to myself: 'Oh what exceptional good fortune, what unheard of happiness he has vouchsafed to me, a weak and unworthy woman! I bring thanks and endless praise to the Almighty, the unfathomable God, who, when my life seemed all set to be wasted, allowed me to devote myself to the quest for Him, who granted me my longed-for goal of unification with Him, and who has immersed me in the ocean of truth and the spring of mystical knowledge!'

I nurtured the hope that God would allow me to tread this path, which is comparable to the *sirat*, with firm steps and invincible courage. God be praised for allowing my soul to experience the greatest pleasure of all, that of being able to think of Him. God be praised for giving me, a poor woman, through the



48. Jahangir's tomb,
Lahore, 1627.

No burnt moth wings,
Nor nightingale song . . .

In a characteristic trope the soul is likened to a moth which flies too close to the candle and is consumed in God.

In 1614, not long after her marriage to Jahangir, Nur Jahan made sure that her niece Arjumand Banu Begum, Asaf Khan's daughter, married the designated successor to the throne, Khurram Shah Jahan.

Mumtaz Mahal, as Arjumand Banu Begum was by now known, accompanied her husband on his later wanderings through Telangana and Bengal, before he ascended the throne in 1628 after struggles over the succession. Immediately after his enthronement, the imperial seal was entrusted to her, so that she could read and seal all documents. She bore a child almost every year, and two girls and four boys survived out of a total of fourteen. In June 1631 she died whilst giving birth to her fourteenth child and 'responded to the call to "return" (*Sura* 89:27) with the open ears of submission and peace, and was united with the mercy of God'.

When the political situation required the ruler to be in the northern Deccan, Mumtaz Mahal was with him, and the pavilion in Burhanpur in which she lived for so long is still there to this day. There is a small lake on which she was sometimes rowed, and an open pavilion in which she was initially buried, before the plot for the planned mausoleum in Agra had been acquired from its owner, Raja Jai Singh of Amber. The chronogram of her death is 'The Place of Mumtaz Mahal is Paradise' = 1040/1631.

The world is a paradise full of delights,
Yet also a rose bush filled with thorns;
He who picks the rose of happiness
Has his heart pierced by a thorn . . .¹⁴

These lines were recited at the death of the empress. The loss of his dearly beloved wife was such a shock for the ruler that his beard turned grey. He could not stop weeping for two years, so that his eyes grew weak and he needed to wear glasses for a time. He wore mourning clothes all the time at first, then later on, every Wednesday,

special attention of the holy master, the gift of full apprehension of the Absolute, as I have always wished with all my heart. For anyone who does not possess knowledge of the Absolute is not a full human being, he is one of those of whom it is said: 'They are as the animals, in fact even more ignorant' (*Sura* 7:178).

Every human being who has achieved this highest form of happiness, will, solely by virtue of this fact, become the highest and noblest of beings. His individual existence will merge into the Absolute, he will become a drop in the ocean, a mote in the sun, a particle of the whole. Achieving this state, he is beyond death, beyond future tribulations, beyond heaven and hell. Whether man or woman, he is always the perfect being. That is the grace of God, 'which He gives, to whom He will' (*Sura* 5:54).

The poet 'Attar said of Rabi'a:

She was not a woman, far more so a man
From head to toe immersed in sorrow.

The princess certainly received her own share of 'sorrow' on 5 April, when she suffered a terrible accident. She brushed against a burning candle and

as her consecrated clothing had been saturated with perfume and scented oil, the fire engulfed it completely in the winking of an eye; the flames shot up high, and in a flash the source of happiness and purity became like a moth in a flame.¹⁶

Four servant girls threw themselves on top of her. Two of them did not survive their burns. Shah Jahan was inconsolable, and donated more and

more alms so that the recipients would pray for the princess's recovery. Every time she seemed to be recovering, he donated a thousand rupees a day, and set prisoners free. He even assisted in caring for his beloved himself. Jahanara's burns kept her bedridden for four months, until finally an Iranian doctor found a way to heal them, and after eight months and eight days she was able to get up and walk unassisted. The doctor was royally rewarded, and given a *mansab* of 1500/200. At the celebrations for the recovery of 'the angelic one', Shah Jahan gave out 80,000 rupees in charitable donations. He gave his daughter 139 unpierced pearls and a large diamond, as well as the harbour dues at Surat, through which the majority of imports entered the country. Jahanara, who was a follower of the Chishtiyya, the traditional Mughal Sufi order, as well as the Qadiriyya, then went on a pilgrimage to Ajmer to offer up sacrifices in thanks for her recovery, as her ancestors had always done.

Jahanara – who was usually called Begum Sahib or Padshah Begum – had benefited from an excellent education. One of her teachers was Satti Khanum, the former lady-in-waiting of her mother, and the sister of Jahangir's poet laureate Talib-i Amuli, to whom the poet had dedicated a heartfelt poem. She gave the princess instruction in classical Persian and the Qur'an. When the teacher died in 1637, she was buried in an octagonal mausoleum near the Taj Mahal, like other women closely associated with the Mughal household; her adoptive daughter was married to Amanat Khan, the calligrapher, who provided the Taj Mahal with its exquisite inscriptions.

Jahanara shared her father's passion for building. In Shahjahanabad, a part of Delhi founded by Shah Jahan, she arranged for the construction of the Chandni Chowk – which is still an important commercial district today – as well as a palace, a bathhouse and a number of gardens.

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Between 1634 and 1640 she was occupied with alterations to a garden in Kashmir, then in 1648 she donated a mosque made of red sandstone with white marble to Agra.

Jahanara was immensely wealthy. She had inherited half of her mother's fortune, but also traded with the Dutch, who had been in competition with the Portuguese and also the British since Jahangir's time. The princess was a good letter writer, and she corresponded with the princes of the Deccan. She also saw to it that the widows of *mansabdars* were well provided for.

Jahanara made a notable contribution to the arts and to learning. Thanks to her, a series of works on Islamic mysticism was compiled, including numerous commentaries on Rumi's *Mathnawi*, the most popular mystical work of Indian Muslims.¹⁷ Having spent eight years of her life with her deposed father in the palace at Agra, Jahanara tried her best to prevent Aurangzeb from fighting against Dara Shikoh. She suggested that the empire be divided between them so that each brother would receive a share. Jahanara remained unmarried, as there was no suitable man who was her equal, which made her the subject of much gossip. Her close relationship with Dara Shikoh was sometimes wrongly interpreted, even though the crown prince loved his wife Nadira Begum, the daughter of his uncle Parwez, above all others. During the years she spent under house arrest with her father in the fort at Agra there were even rumours of incest. Bernier relates that a young man who was visiting Shah Jahan was discovered with her, so he quickly leaped into a large vessel. The emperor had caught sight of him, and so he advised his daughter to take a hot bath. He had a fire lit under the vessel, but Jahanara did not give the game away by so much as a facial expression or gesture. The same story is told by Jahanara's niece Zib un-nisa, and a few years ago it was dramatised in a moving Swedish television film.¹⁸

For all her piety and erudition, Jahanara was not averse to the lighter side of life. Manucci reports that she drank her own wine mixed with rose water, and she offered her guests alcohol served by Portuguese maids.

When she died in 1681, at her request she was buried in Delhi, where her grave, with its marble tombstone adorned with elegant *nasta'liq* script, is set among simple graves in the small courtyard of the mausoleum of the great Chishti holy man Nizamuddin Auliya.

Whereas Jahanara supported her brother Dara Shikoh, her sister Raushanara, who was three and a half years her junior, took the side of their brother Aurangzeb, who was the closest in age to Raushanara. During the crisis sparked by Shah Jahan's illness, Raushanara apparently appropriated Aurangzeb's seal to ensure that his seal was on all decrees, to establish him as his father's legitimate successor. However, the future ruler did not appreciate this meddling in his affairs.

If Manucci's salacious stories about her are to be believed, she used to hide young men in her house, and even disguised them in women's clothing and went riding with them on an elephant with a gilded *howdah*. After Aurangzeb's enthronement, she withdrew from the court until her death in 1671, when she was buried in the garden of the fort at Delhi.

Aurangzeb's daughter Zib un-nisa, who was born in 1639, was particularly close to her aunt Jahanara. She was primarily a spiritual person rather than a practical and assertive one. She devoted herself to poetry and mysticism, and like her aunt remained unmarried.

Although there is some doubt as to whether she was really the author of poems written under the pseudonym *Makhfi* ('Hidden'), these tender, melancholy verses attributed to her do have the ring of authenticity.

Oh waterfall, whom do you lament?
What worries crease your brow?
What pain drives you, like me, the whole
night long
To cry and beat your head against the stones?

She might well have lamented in this fashion in the Shalimar Gardens in Lahore, which were laid out during her childhood; perhaps even in the Garden of Zib un-nisa, named after her, of which there are only a few sad remains in Lahore.¹⁹ Her loneliness is also expressed in the following lines:

Were an artist to choose me for his model –
How could he draw the form of a sigh? ²⁰

Like Jahanara, Zib un-nisa was a patron of poets and writers. She gave 1,000 rupees and everything he needed for a pilgrimage to Mecca to Muhammad Safi Qazwini, the author of a commentary on the Qur'an with the title *Zib at-tafasir*. On his return in 1676, he dedicated a book to her, *Anis al-hujaj*, 'The Pilgrims' Confidant'. Zib un-nisa's teacher, Muhammad Sa'id Ashraf, composed a poetical *diwan* and a *mathnawi*; and other scholars in her service made copies of important works at her request.²¹ Zib un-nisa and her sister Zinat un-nisa (both names mean 'Jewel among Women') distinguished themselves as overseers of building projects. Although hardly anything remains of Zib un-nisa's gardens in Lahore, visitors can still admire the Zinat al-masajid, 'Jewel of Mosques', which Princess Zinat had constructed in c. 1700 by the riverside wall of the Red Fort in Delhi. In later decades the poets of Delhi would gather there to discuss the nascent Urdu poetry and its rules. Aurangzeb's daughters were benefactors to the devout, and provided dwellings for Sufis, such as Muhammad Nasir 'Andalib and his

son Mir Dard. Zinat un-nisa was also an advocate for incarcerated Maratha noblewomen.

Many other women closely connected to the Mughal household were able to put their position to good use for pious works, such as Shah Jahan's *amah* Dai anaga (died 1671), who had the beautiful tomb of Gulabi Bagh constructed, which can still to this day be admired in Lahore.

Sahibjee, the daughter of 'Ali Mardan Khan, the governor of Kabul, and his wife Amir Khan, was very competent in both political and financial matters. She managed to conceal the death of her husband until Aurangzeb's son Shah 'Alam had been chosen as his successor, for which she was very highly honoured by Aurangzeb. She had no children of her own, so she took the children of her husband's concubines under her wing. She spent the last years of her life in Mecca.²²

During the declining years of the Mughals there are numerous stories of dancing girls and other remarkable 'ladies' who captivated the rulers, Jahandar Shah's affairs being a typical example. Koki Jiu, the supposed foster sister of Muhammad Shah, was so influential that for a time she even had the imperial seal at her disposal. Her influence was no doubt also due to her friendship with Muhammad Shah's favourite, Qudsiyya Begum (the former dancer Udham Bai). The astute Qudsiyya Begum managed to ensure that her adoptive son became the ruler, under the name of Ahmad Shah, in 1748. She then enjoyed all the privileges of rank, while the 'genuine' widows of the deceased ruler lived out their lives in poverty.²³ Although she enjoyed the support of the eunuchs in maintaining her position of power, before too long she was put to death by strangulation.

There were also brave and determined women in the provinces, for example Munni Begum, the wife of the *nawab* Mir Ja'far in Bengal, who managed her husband's entire household and was the

motive force behind the construction of one of the most important mosques in Murshidabad.²⁴

In the Punjab at the same time there was the dynamic Mughalani Begum,²⁵ also the noblewoman Sharaf un-nisa, who became famous in the eighteenth century for her stand against the Sikhs. Her small mausoleum in the form of a tower still stands in Lahore, adorned with cypress motifs. Iqbal praised this brave woman, who relied only on the 'Qur'an and sword', in his *Javidnama*, in which she appears as one of the denizens of paradise.

There were also impressive women among the Hindu princesses, such as Tulsi Bai, a Maratha who led a mighty army into battle, or Rani Durgawati of Gondwana, famous for her courage and cleverness. The widow of the Raja of Srinagar, who ruled with a rod of iron in Shah Jahan's day, was particularly fond of ordering the noses to be cut off men who were judged to be guilty.²⁶

What were the lives of women actually like at that time? Mirza 'Aziz Koka, 'who did not control his tongue', is supposed to have maintained that

Every man should have four wives: a Persian, with whom he can converse; a woman from Khurasan for the housework; a Hindu woman to raise the children, and one from Transoxiana, whom he can beat as a warning to the others.

Although this was never adopted as a principle, the private quarters – *zananas* – of princes and nobles contained representatives of many tribes and races. There were a vast number of women in the entourage of the Mughal rulers. According to Abu'l Fazl,²⁷ more than five thousand women lived in the women's quarters in Fatehpur Sikri, each with her own apartment. The concubines each had their own houses, the names of which

indicated the days when the ruler could visit them. In addition there were the prostitutes, for whom Akbar constructed an entire city district called Shaytanpura, 'City of Satan', with strict regulations for its enjoyment.

The palaces and private quarters – the *zanana* – of the women were 'gilded cages', which were extremely luxurious, at least for the high-ranking women. Jahanara's rooms, which were close to those of her father, were decorated with murals of flying angels, and the marble or tiled floors were covered with valuable carpets. Many rooms had running water, and fine screens let in fresh air. Illustrations of life at court show that the women's quarters were surrounded by gardens, which were situated beside a watercourse and divided into regular beds planted with fragrant plants, cypresses or small orange trees.²⁸

The princesses received a sizable allowance (between 1,028 and 1,610 rupees, according to Abu'l Fazl), which was precisely accounted for. As already mentioned, they could also conduct trade on their own account, and could own land. In addition, they were provided with food and other necessities of life. The cash they received was referred to as *barg baha* – '(betel) leaf money'. In addition, the women possessed vast quantities of jewels. Half of their income was in the form of cash from the treasury, the rest from their landed property.

Babur is supposed to have been the first ruler to provide his women with land. Jahangir raised the allowances of the women considerably as soon as he came to power. The princesses also received gifts from external sources, especially, in the case of those who engaged in trade, from merchants who wished to win their favour. Sir Thomas Roe and other Europeans – traders and diplomats – brought presents for all members of the court, including Nur Jahan and the other ladies.

In later times, as the Mughal household became steadily more impoverished, the women retained a share of the market and conducted trade; however, at times the situation was so bad that the ladies of the harem all threatened to throw themselves into the Jumna if they did not receive their allowances!²⁹

The leading woman in the harem – the *mahaldar* – enjoyed very high status and influence. Aqa aqayan, who was the same age as Akbar, became the *mahaldar* of the *zanana* after Jahangir's wedding. When she invited Jahangir to her house in Delhi, where she spent her declining years, he issued an order:

the governor should ensure that no dust of any kind be allowed to settle on the hem of her contentment.³⁰

Aurangzeb treated his son's *mahaldars* with great respect. When A'zam Shah did not take his *mahaldars* with him on a journey to Ahmedabad, he reproached him in a letter and fined him 50,000 rupees for his foolish behaviour, to be paid into the state treasury.³¹

It was not only the most prominent ladies of the *zanana* who had an important role to play – the women were protected by respectable armed female guards, often of Abyssinian or Uzbek extraction. (In fact, the ruler himself also had female bodyguards, with archers in the front line.)

There were Georgians and Portuguese among the employees in the women's palace. According to Bernier, the women 'were guarded by innumerable old crones and beardless eunuchs'. In fact miniatures often show fat eunuchs, mostly black, standing or squatting in front of the women's quarters, and at a distance, trustworthy Rajput soldiers, such as the guards of the *ahadis*, standing at their posts.

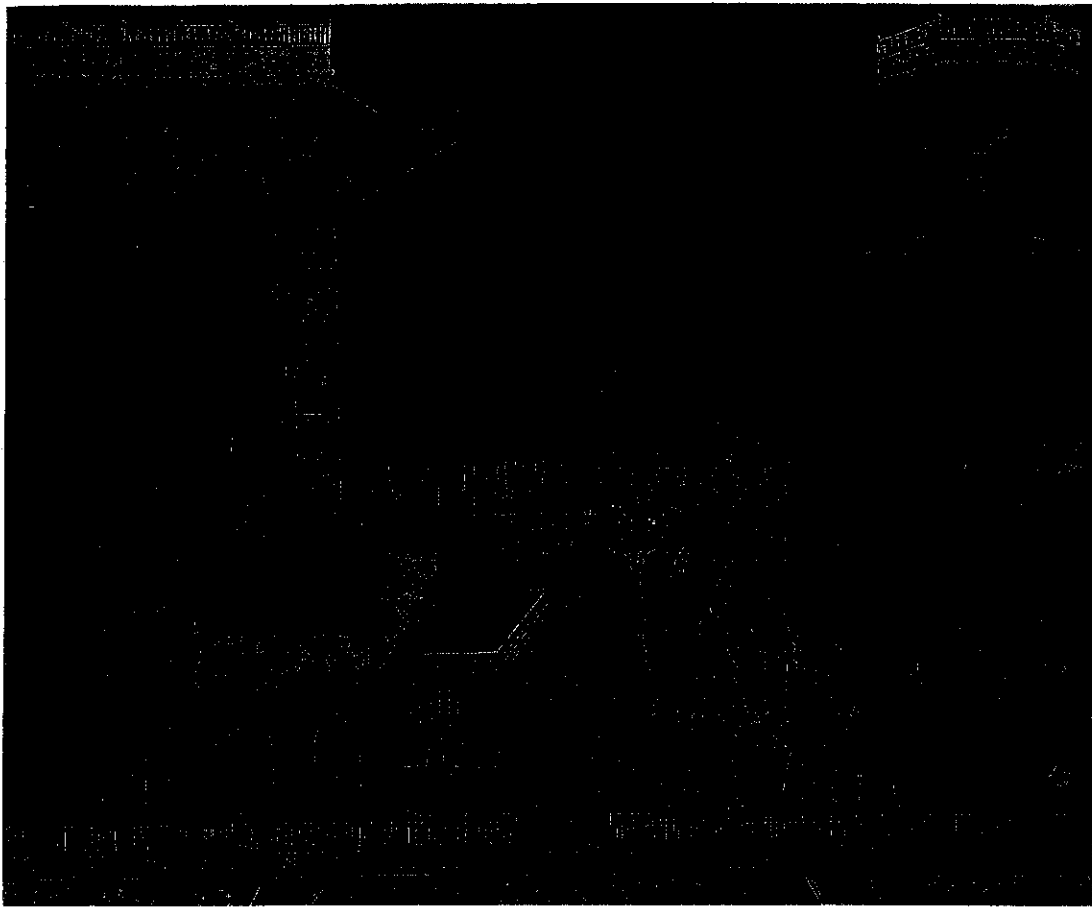
At the end of the sixteenth century, there was one *mansabdar* who kept 1,200 women in his harem, and every time he left to go to court, he sealed the fastenings of their trousers. But he seems to have been a unique case, and his women soon sealed his fate with poison.³²

The female guards had to report to the *nazir*, 'overseer'. When visitors called, they had to obtain a permit. The *mahaldar* held the position of greatest responsibility, and had to report anything at all unusual to the ruler. There were also secretaries working for the ladies, and when the ruler went to the women's quarters at midday, or, more usually, in the evenings, they presented the women's reports and requests to him.

The ladies had the right to approve appointments. Nur Jahan was even permitted to sign the *farman*, the ruler's own decrees. A few decrees issued by other princesses have survived, including one which is not particularly important, but is fairly typical, which grants Hamida Banu Begum's permission for a Brahman to graze his cows in a particular area. What is more significant is the fact that the princesses were able to seal the rulers' *farmans*, for the *uzuk*, the round seal, was kept in the harem.³³

It seems incredible now that the Mughals took their women with them on to the battlefield, at least in the early days, as we learn from Babur's memoirs; they sat on elephants behind the army and watched the battle, which sometimes resulted in casualties among them. During Humayun's battle against Sher Khan Suri at Chausa, several of the women were killed or 'went missing', possibly having drowned in the Ganges. Gulbadan's descriptions of her half-brother's mediocre career contain a few scenes about the women's participation in his field campaigns.

Even without such adventures, the princesses' lives were far from monotonous. Like women



49. Mir Kalan Khan, 'Queen Udham Bai and her ladies being entertained by actors in Portuguese costumes', album leaf, 1742, gouache and gold on paper.

on the subcontinent today, they loved arranging festivities, especially weddings. Weddings were often celebrated in the palace of the ruler's mother, who would then indulge her grandchildren or nephews. The wedding preparations were very thorough, and were usually carried out either by the mother of the bridegroom, or in Dara Shikoh's case, by his older sister. The birth of a baby, especially a prince, was another occasion for a celebration, and pictures of these events are an excellent source of information about life in the

zanana.³⁴ In one, the prince's mother can be seen lying in a magnificent bed; a dignified elderly woman is seated next to her, almost certainly the proud grandmother; the baby is wrapped in swaddling bands, as is customary in the East, and the ladies of the family are standing outside the birth chamber. A large number of women are playing music and dancing. The astrologers are sitting in the courtyard, and a woman is telling them the exact time of the birth so that they can prepare the infant's horoscope according to both

Indian and Islamic astrology. Beggars are waiting at the entrance to the castle for their share of the alms to be given out as thanks offerings.

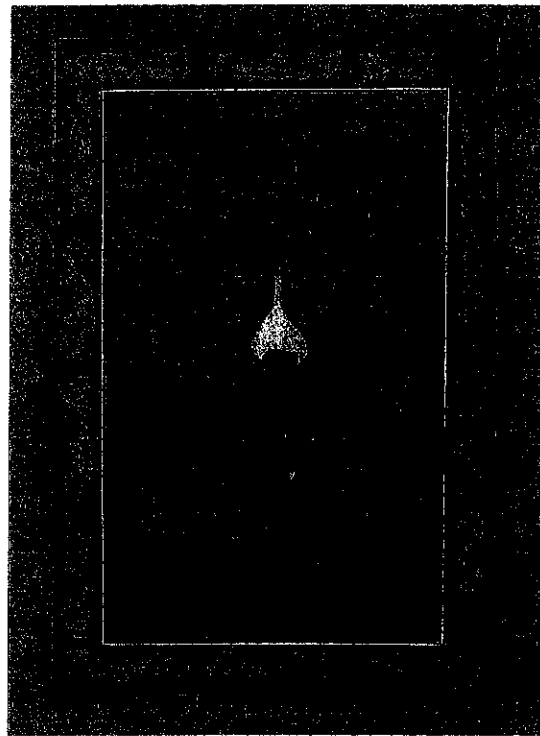
Artists have painted many moving scenes of mothers nursing their infants, and the many Mughal pictures of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus appear to have been influenced not only by European examples, but also Hindu pictures of the infant Krishna at his foster-mother's breast.³⁵

Women were allowed to have abortions. One mother who had given birth only to daughters, and whose husband was threatening to throw her out, asked Hamida Banu Begum if she could get rid of the child she was carrying. Akbar, who was still a child himself at the time, is said to have talked her out of it, and in fact she brought the longed-for son into the world.³⁶

Young boys were circumcised according to the *sunna*. When Akbar was circumcised in 1546 at the age of three and a half, all of the Begums of the Mughal household took part in the festivities, which were described by his aunt Gulbadan. The ritual weighing of the prince began at the end of his second year.

From time to time the ladies would organise a mini-bazaar in the palace grounds, at which they would sell their own handicrafts, luxurious fabrics, jewels and other items, attempting to obtain the highest prices from their customers, who were the ruler and his retinue. This custom appears to have originated in Akbar's time. Women in Indo-Pakistani society still enjoy organizing such bazaars.

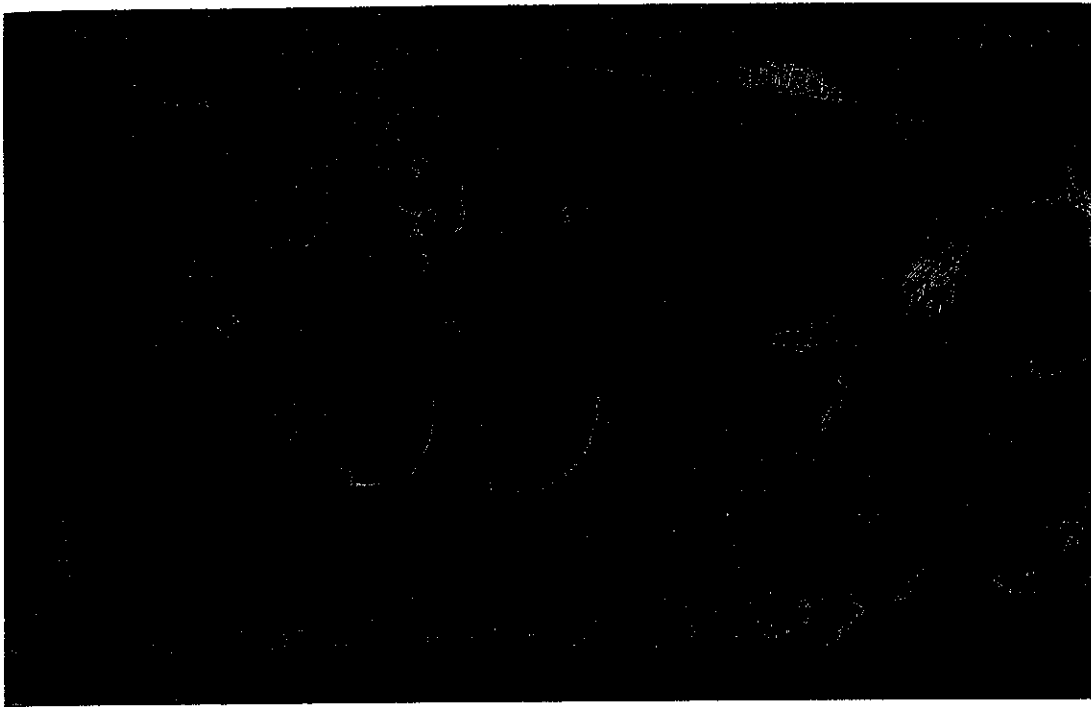
During quiet periods, the ladies played games together. Many pictures show women playing board games (chess and *chaupasi*). They also enjoyed listening to music, and some of them went in for weaving, drawing and painting. However, in the entire Mughal history there was only one notable female artist, Sahifa Banu,



50. Sahifa Banu, A portrait of Shah Tahmasp, early 17th century, gouache on paper.

around 1620.³⁷ There is a fine drawing from the time of Shah Jahan, which depicts a female artist among the other women, capturing her surroundings on a drawing block.³⁸ However, it was more customary for women to devote themselves to calligraphy. Jahangir was given a copy of the Qur'an that had been written by a great-granddaughter of Timur, Shah Mulk Khanum, in fine *rihani* script.³⁹

Miniature painters took great care when depicting women's clothing, which was for the most part much the same as it is today: the popular *shalwar qamis*, consisting of long trousers worn with a blouse-like over-garment, the length of which fluctuated according to changing fashion. Many of the miniatures depict transparent top garments made



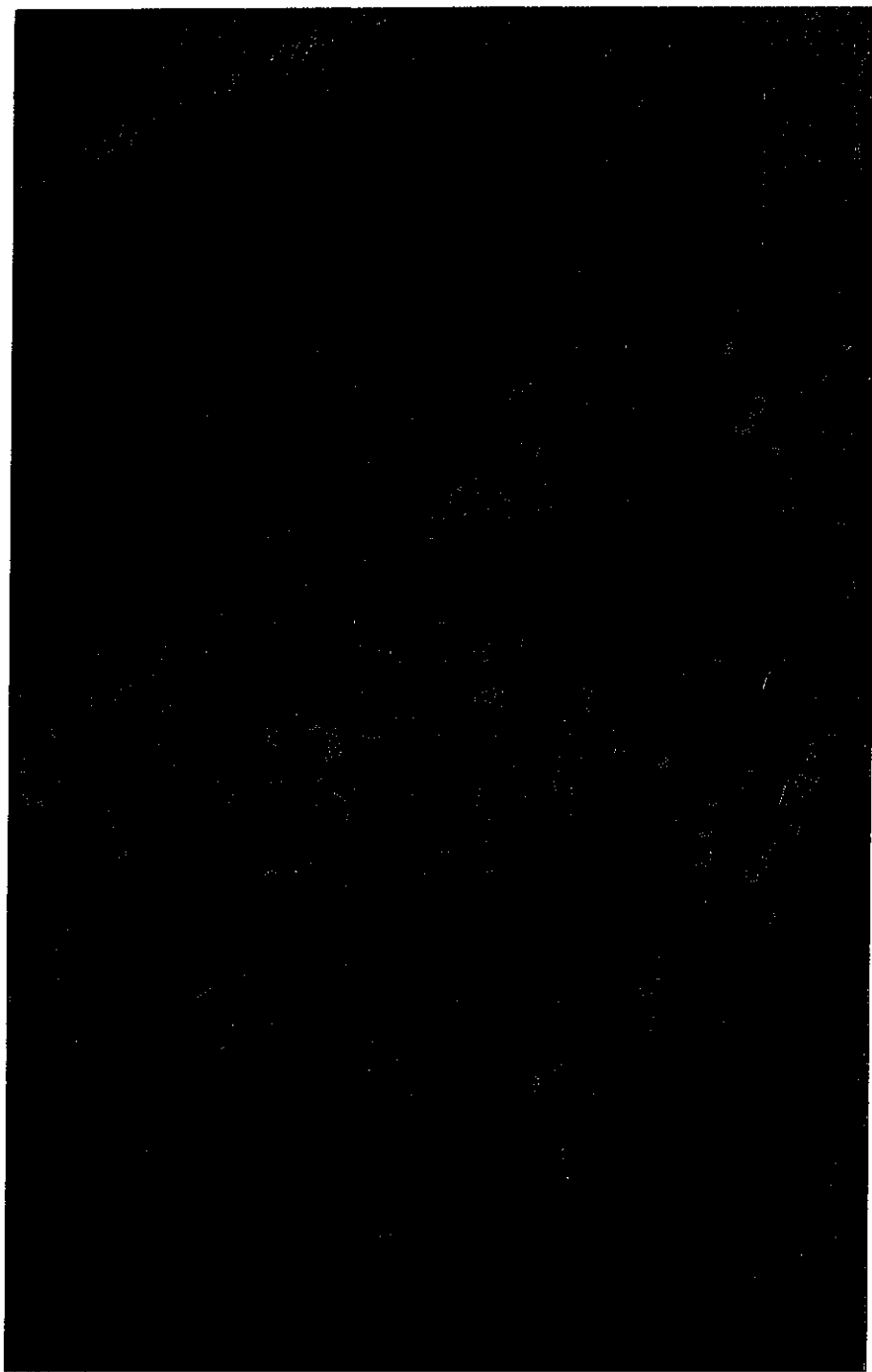
51. 'Baz Bahadur and Rupmati on horseback', c. 1740, gouache on an album leaf.

of extremely delicate fabric revealing a slim figure beneath. Shah Jahan is said to have criticized his daughter on one occasion for her indecent costume; her response was to show him that she was in fact wearing seven layers of gossamer-fine fabric! Such fabrics, which usually came from Bengal, were aptly described as 'woven air'. Clothing was usually worn just once (which was also until quite recently the custom with noble women on the subcontinent). In the early Mughal period, the noble women almost always wore tall Turkish hats, often with small veils attached to them. Later on, they wore extremely fine veils which permitted a suggestive glimpse of their hair.

It must be borne in mind that artists were never allowed to enter the inner regions of the women's quarters, so that their portrayals of girls and women are based on contemporary ideals –

although it was generally known what the aristocratic Mughals looked like. Some portraits seem true to life. There is one colourful portrayal of a beloved older lady, gazing at a visitor with a maternal, somewhat ironic but warm-hearted expression. Her curved hat feather reveals her to be a high Mughal lady. This and some others are likely to be genuine portrayals of their subjects.⁴⁰

As well as playing games together, the ladies spent time playing with their cats and birds. However, their chief occupation was adorning themselves. The elaborate bath facilities in Agra, Delhi and the fortress at Lahore, with hot and cold running water, demonstrate that their bathing culture was highly advanced. There are a few miniatures which depict women in transparent clothing enjoying themselves splashing about in ponds or bathtubs.⁴¹



52. Attributed to Govardhan, 'Jahangir with (?)Nur Jahan at a game of *Holi*', c. 1615-20, pigment and gold on paper.

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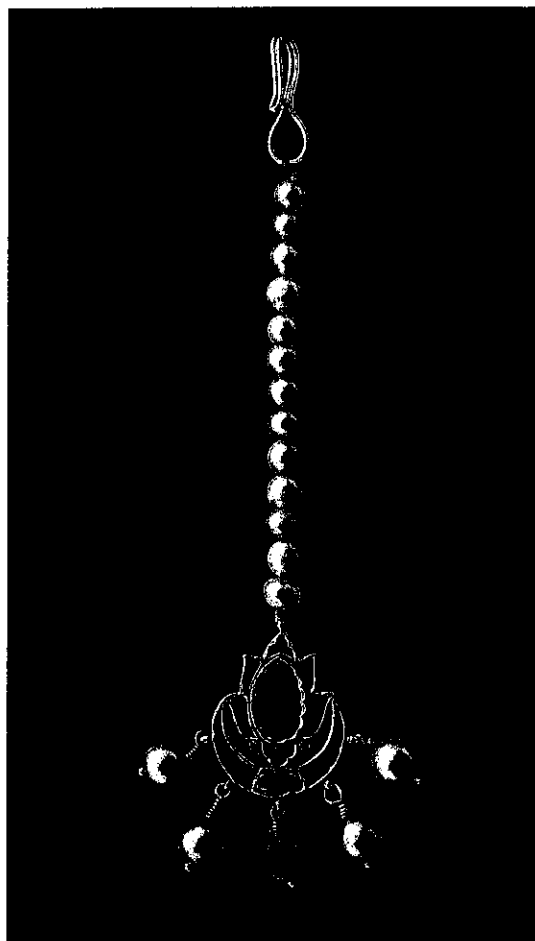
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After bathing, they were massaged with scented lotions. Particular attention was paid to the feet, which were rubbed with an earthenware foot rasp or a loofah. There is a famous story about an artist being handsomely rewarded by the *khankhanan* 'Abdu'r Rahim for his miniature of a beautiful lady, in which he has captured to perfection the delighted facial expression of someone having the soles of their feet rubbed with a foot rasp.⁴²

Henna was often applied to the skin, and reddened hands and soles of the feet were common. The 'henna night' before a wedding was a highly enjoyable celebration, then as now. The bride's hands and feet were painted with delicate patterns (books of examples of such patterns can still be bought), giving the appearance of gloves or lace stockings, and the young women also threw the henna at each other, leaving permanent marks on their clothing. Also, when women started to go grey, they would henna their hair along the parting.

Women oiled their hair to make it smooth and shining, and their long plaits were braided with a silk band, gold threads or fresh flowers. Collyrium (*kohl*) was used as eyeliner to emphasize their eyes, and in later times, to elongate them. Many women also used *masy* (dentifrice) to blacken their teeth, something quite incomprehensible today. Heavy perfumes were always applied, especially attar of roses, the invention of which is attributed to Nur Jahan's mother.

Although most women devoted themselves primarily to their appearance and adornment, they did also engage in intellectual pursuits. Akbar took an interest in the education of women and established a school for girls in Fatehpur Sikri, so women did sometimes receive a literary education. Seal imprints in a variety of fine Persian scripts indicate that a few princesses, such as Akbar's wife Salima, had their own libraries. The



53. Gold forehead ornament, set with rubies, diamonds and emeralds, strung with pearls, with pearl and ruby pendants; probably 17th century.

women of the harem received instruction, at least for a time, in reciting the Qur'an and in religious duties, and, most important of all, Persian, especially classical poetry. Many of the women became active patrons of *literati* who wrote in Persian, and some actually wrote poetry themselves, for example Zib un-nisa. The Royal Asiatic Society has a charming drawing of a group of Mughal women reading and writing under the guidance of a



54. 'A lady holding a bottle and a cup', c. 1630-40, gouache with gold on paper, from a Dara Shikoh Album.

bearded, bespectacled *mulla*, and glancing out of the window at the garden from time to time.⁴³

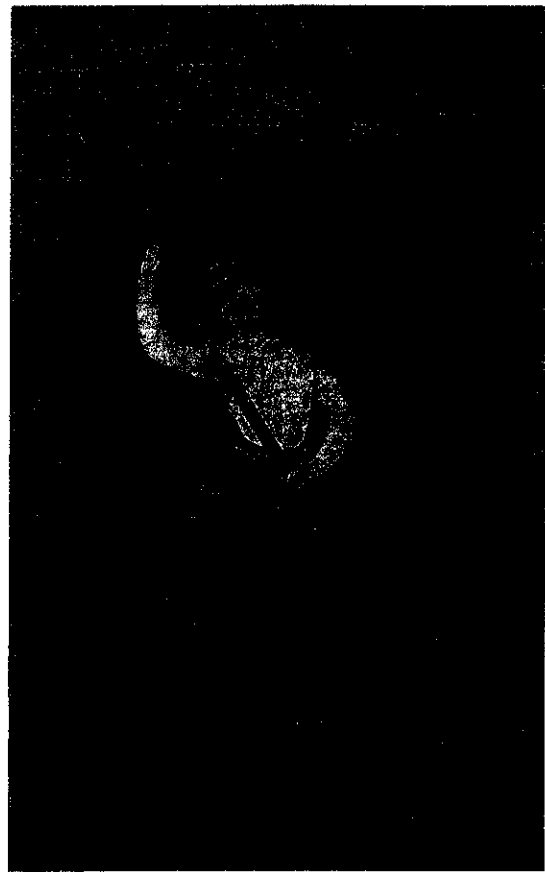
The women also took part in sports on occasion. Nur Jahan was an expert polo player, which she played with other women in the garden. Women also sometimes took part in hunting expeditions, and here once again it was Nur Jahan who distinguished herself with her accurate aim.

Sometimes the women went out on excursions. Gulbadan wrote an amusing account of an early trip to Afghanistan by Humayun's women, during which they visited a particularly beautiful waterfall. The women were determined to see the *rawaj* (a kind of rhubarb with long stems of pink flowers) in bloom in the meadows near Kabul. They were so insistent that they even annoyed the easy-going Humayun. The most beautiful miniature of Humayun shows him going on one of these trips into the countryside, with the colourfully dressed women in the background.⁴⁴

Jahangir also describes an enjoyable excursion to Mandu with his women, and also a boat trip to a melon field near Ajmer, where he shared his love of nature with them.

When the women were travelling away from home, they were either carried by eight men in a sedan chair covered by red fabric – red satin in the case of imperial ladies; or in a *chaudoli*, a kind of sedan chair similar to those in use in Europe at the time, which could be carried by two servants, and were painted in bright colours and adorned with all kinds of silk decorations. Sometimes larger sedan chairs were carried between two elephants or two camels, but they were uncomfortable to ride in unless the animals walked exactly in step with one other.

Usually the imperial ladies sat in richly decorated *howdahs* carried by elephants – female ones only! – in full ceremonial regalia. When women



55. Abu'l Hasan, 'Nur Jahan Begum with a gun', from a Jahangir Album.

visited one another, they used a one-person carriage, apparently a sort of rickshaw, which had to be pulled by ladies in waiting, because, as Tavernier pointed out, male sedan chair carriers were not allowed into the harem. Nur Jahan was given an English carriage by Sir Thomas Roe, which she greatly enjoyed using.

There are a number of descriptions of these excursions by Europeans, from which we learn that eunuchs acted as messengers for the ladies, who acknowledged receipt with some betel to be taken back to the sender.

On longer journeys, such as to Kashmir, the women set off last but arrived first, as they travelled by a shorter route so that they could be there to congratulate the ruler on his safe arrival.

Needless to say, not all the women in the palace lived in luxurious conditions. Children from poor families, especially orphans, were often taken in, with the intention of helping them to lead a 'normal' life eventually. The court ladies provided a dowry for the girls, dowries still being customary in traditional families. Jahangir once told Hajji Koki, his father's foster sister, to bring all the women who had no land or money to him, in other words primarily the widows of serving officers or employees. He then established a sort of widows' benevolent fund for them. In times of famine or natural disaster, the ladies would help out with the relief efforts, for example by distributing food.

There was one absolutely inescapable fact of life in the palace, which was the total lack of privacy. When a lady went to bed, several female servants kept watch the whole night while she slept. Even when couples made love, a pair of female servants would be present to keep watch and to look after them.⁴⁵

It is an interesting question whether any lesbian relationships developed. It was extremely rare for any man to enter the sanctity of the women's quarters, so many of the women must have been frustrated. However, historical sources are silent on this subject,⁴⁶ although some miniatures do give a hint of it.

The wealth of information about the life of the princesses and aristocratic ladies is matched by the paucity of information about the women of the middle and lower classes. Even so, there is a wealth of documentation about the *madad-i ma'ash* sometimes given to women from respect-

able families, especially from the educated classes. This was a form of stipend, either in cash or else in the form of land, so that they could live off the income from it.

In devout Muslim families, girls received religious instruction. They might be taught how to recite the Qur'an, as well as domestic science, and they were permitted a certain amount of play as they learned their duties as future housewives and mothers. However, education for girls was rare, and even if schools had existed, attendance would have been impossible for girls due to the very early age of marriage. According to tradition, a girl should be married straight after the menarche. Weddings were celebrated with great festivities, so it can be imagined that they must have plunged as many families into debt as they do today.

When middle-class girls left the house, they had to cover their heads. The *burqa*, the tent-like costume covering the entire body with only a small grille for the eyes, was in use at the time of the Mughals. An instructive miniature from the time of Akbar depicts a group of women wrapped in *burqa*s, queueing in the bazaar to consult an astrologer.⁴⁷ When Muslim women had an opportunity to leave the house, they frequently sought solace at the tombs of holy men, just as Hindu women are depicted in miniatures visiting *gurus* or *yogis*.

There is little mention in Mughal sources of Hindu women, with the exception of the wives of the rulers. We know that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was a series of Hindu women who wrote mystical love poetry in Hindi, Rajasthani, Braj and Gujarati in the *bhakti* tradition. Religious themes especially popular with women were the veneration of Krishna, Krishna's romantic dalliances with the *gopis*, and his love for Radha.

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56. 'Ladies visiting
a female ascetic',
c. 1760, gouache
with gold on an
album leaf.



Even though Akbar tried to abolish the burning of widows, the custom survived. It is on record that when his chief associate, Man Singh, died in 1614, no few than sixty women committed *sati*. A town or fort that was about to be conquered would be burned to the ground, so that the women inside were all immolated. This custom, which was known as *jauhar*, was practiced in Akbar's time, for instance during the conquest of Chitor.

The lives of poor women in both religious communities hardly differed. When they went out, they carried their smallest child on their left hip as they do today. Some miniatures depict scenes of poor women at work, hauling stones, dressed in long loose trousers topped by an abbreviated blouse, looking much the same as they do on building sites today, carrying mortar, stones and clay while wearing their entire wealth in the form of innumerable bracelets. Some pictures, especially illustrations in the margins of albums, show them carrying pitchers, bowls and flower-pots on their heads, as if the march of time had stood still.

Akbar viewed women carrying water as a symbol for the human heart:

Hindu women carry water from rivers, cisterns or wells; many of them carry several pots on their heads, one on top of the other, while talking and gossiping with their companions, and making their way over uneven ground. If the heart could maintain the balance of its vessels in the same way, it would not be affected by suffering. Why should one be more lowly than these women in one's relationship to the Almighty?⁴⁸