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Introduction

This book seeks to construct a history of Mughal domestic life in the time of the first three Mughal kings of India, Babur (1487–1530), Humayun (1508–56), and Akbar (1556–1605). It is a study of the “domestic” as a discursive and performed site, which seeks to demonstrate the centrality of this space in the making of the Mughal imperium.

Mughal women and men were partners in the production not only of heirs but also of imperial genealogies and new royal rituals, in the establishment of new traditions, and even the practice of governance. Paradoxically, however, women are depicted as being so invested in the future of the empire – in the form of giving birth to illustrious progeny, and in the maintenance of “established” traditions – that their own present tends to be erased in the very performance of their royalty and womanhood. In a classic replica of patriarchal norms, women’s lives are not for living, but for creating other lives, for preserving and nurturing the future of the generations past, and the generations to come.

A history of Mughal domestic life has not so far been written, for reasons that I hope to clarify in the following pages. And yet ironically, while we have no sustained investigation of the details of domestic arrangements and familial affairs, we live with a widely accepted caricature of a mysterious and unchanging *haram*, which is supposed to represent the sum of Mughal private life from the beginning to the end of this remote yet magnificent imperial formation.¹

Take this statement on the *haram*, as it appears in one of the few academic studies of the subject in English:

The term Mughal Harem conjures up a vision of a sequestered place ensconcing beautiful forms in mysterious magnificence . . . the young girls were not exposed to all the celebrations in the *Mahal* [palace] in which sex orgies dominated or the master bargained for beauty and love on occasions like Nauroz and Khushroz . . . Naturally, every lady of consequence tried to win the master’s undivided love and openly

¹ Cf. R. Nath, *Private Life of the Mughals 1526–1803 A.D.* (Jaipur, 1994), a study entirely devoted to the *haram*.

competed to gain ascendancy in the harem. Women's beauty gave them a power as undefined as unique. ... There were other tensions, though not so deep in effect. These may be classed under the generic term jealousy. ... But on this we need not dwell much for the harem was not meant for the old and ailing. It was meant to be a bright place, an abode of the young and beautiful, an arbour of pleasure and retreat for joy.²

Extracted from a book published at the end of the 1980s, the above account might be dismissed as the view of a somewhat traditional historian, were its assumptions not so widely and consistently shared.

There is one sentence on the *haram* in the volume on Mughal India, published in the New Cambridge History of India series in 1993: "Ideally, the harem provided a respite, a retreat for the nobleman and his closest male relatives – a retreat of grace, beauty, and order designed to refresh the males of the household."³ Again, consider R. Nath's description of the *haram* in his *Private Life of the Mughals* (1994). Although Nath comments parenthetically that the "Mughal harem was a very delicate matter and a sweeping generalisation is hardly justified," his book delineates a *haram* that can only be described as fantasaical. "Though Akbar never indulged in excessive sex, he had a taste for young beautiful women whose company he liked. He had in his harem a large number of handsome concubines and slave-girls for his pleasure, besides more than a dozen legally married wives."⁴ The emptying of all sense of social life and contradiction continues in his sketching of the "private life" of Jahangir, the fourth Mughal king. This emperor was "a sensuous person and he excessively indulged both in wine and women ..." writes Nath. "By a routine estimate, he had nearly 300 young and beautiful women attached to his bed, an incomprehensible figure in the modern age. This shows his over-indulgence in sex and his excessive engagement in the harem."⁵

A final example, from Ellison Banks Findly's remarks on the Mughal *haram* in her biography of Nur Jahan, Jahangir's wife, should suffice to demonstrate the pervasive hold of this caricatured representation. It is notable that this is one of the first studies that engages critically with Nur Jahan's life and her exercise of power. Nonetheless, Findly continues to work with a simple, stereotypical understanding of the *haram*. "Finding a productive and satisfying place in a society where pleasure (in all its forms) was the main competitive commodity was a substantial task," she writes. The presence of women improved the business: "this process was surely a more vibrant and honest affair given that it took place in the company of women."⁶ But "pleasure (in all its forms)" remains the "main competitive commodity."

² K. S. Lal, *The Mughal Harem* (Delhi, 1988), pp. 19, 135, 139, 143, and 152.

³ John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 62.

⁴ Nath, *Private Life*, p. 13. ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 17.

⁶ Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (New York, 1993), p. 89.

Further, “the enjoyment of palace life was enhanced . . . by the frequent use of drugs and alcohol. Intemperance was the Mughal family’s main affliction, and despite public abjurations and the clear ban on the use of liquor by Islam, it remained not only a private curse but a public habit.”⁷ And finally this classic statement, worthy of the most Orientalist of colonial renderings (easily replicated in the case of other imperial *harams* the world over⁸): “Jahangir’s harem was, from all accounts, a rowdy and exuberant place to live and Nur Jahan’s fulsome charisma played out profitably against its many walls.”⁹

In these accounts, a “pleasure principle” constitutes the essence of the *haram*. There is little sense of history in the discussion of the domain of Mughal domestic relations, the establishment and institutionalization of the *haram*, its changing meanings, and contexts.¹⁰ In fact, as the following chapters will show, the *haram* as well-structured physical quarters – and as distinct feminine space demarcated from more clearly marked male domains – came to be institutionalized only during Akbar’s reign. In the chronicles of his peripatetic predecessors, we find a wide range of other terms (including the *haram*) that are carefully deployed according to specific narrative contexts. These terms evoke a discriminating sense of near and distant relatives, generations of kinsfolk at work in imperial designs, their association and invocation of a spectacular genealogy, a sense of belongingness to a named bloodline, as well as of interaction and interdependence in noble communities. What is striking in the early chronicles is that there is no fixed realm such as the *haram*; it is under Akbar that the *haram* becomes a predominant symbol of the Mughal domestic world. Despite this history, the Mughal *haram* comes to be denoted in the unchanging form that Lal and others have handed down to us.

The received image of the Mughal *haram* is an apposite entry point for the present study. It leads me straightaway to the two broad propositions that run through this book. First, I am concerned to challenge some of the assumptions that have commonly been made about the existence of separate “public” and “private” domains in the Mughal world. As noted above, our understanding of the latter has been collapsed into the stereotypical image of something called the *haram*. I examine here the complex set of relations in which women of the nobility were involved in their everyday existence, the

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁸ The following two studies provide a good critique of the stereotypical rendering of the *haram*: Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 1993); Kathryn Babayan, “The ‘Aqa’id al-Nisa: A Glimpse at Safavid Women in Local Isfahani Culture,” in Gavin R. G. Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety* (New York, 1998), Introduction.

⁹ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, p. 126.

¹⁰ Nath, *Private Life*, p. 11, makes the passing comment that the Mughal *haram* was “founded and developed, in the right sense of the term” under Akbar, but there is little detailing of this development, and as the above phrase shows, he works with a persisting sense of the essential *haram* already being given.

public-political affairs that were necessarily conducted in the “inner” quarters as well as in the (outer) courts, and through all this the very different meanings attaching to domestic life. I wish to point to the richness of many of these activities, and to their complex and contradictory character, thus showing that domestic life is not an endless journey between bedroom and kitchen, with the primary function of raising children and caring for husbands.

If domestic life is multifaceted and more contested than the flattened picture of the *haram* suggests, it is also not frozen in time. Domestic life, like political structures, is historically constituted through multifarious struggles and changes. My proposition is that the very coming into being of a more institutionalized and a regulated form of Mughal domestic world was a part of the making of a new Mughal monarchy. This book shows that there were different stages, as well as diverse and complicated procedures, that went into the making of this imperial polity. It was over time that the Mughals became the “Great Mughals” of popular text and memory. It may be noted, for example, that the *Akbarnama* was the first officially commissioned history of the Mughal era; and, again, it was only under Akbar that an elaborate network of statutes arose, regulating everything from the assignment of places to different nobles at the court to the branding of horses. Small indicators of the institutionalization of empire. Thus was the framework of a paramount, majestic polity established. The domestic world and its denizens were not likely to be exempt from this move towards regulation.

The changing political situation and power of a new dynastic regime is indexed in the domestic sphere in several ways: not only in the titles and honors bestowed upon women and other members of the household, but also in the ascription of roles and performance of activities and, indeed, in the living quarters assigned to them. When the term *haram* comes to be applied regularly to the women of the royal household (in Akbar’s time), it indicates a changed political and social situation. The term now also comes to describe the residential quarters of the women – a practice that was hardly possible in Babur’s peripatetic reign and still not noticeable in Humayun’s. It is in Akbar’s time that a clearly demarcated, “sacred incarcerated” sphere emerges as the space of the Mughal domestic – although, as already noted, this segregation is anachronistically assumed as the reigning characteristic of the Mughal domestic world for the entire tenure of Mughal rule.

In the following pages, I posit a domain of “domestic life” as a heuristic device. This domain may be thought of as a necessary reproductive, affective unit, dealing with familial relations, reproductive rights and duties, fostering and care, and suffused by a sense of a close intimate circle. This is a realm in which women have a much more obvious presence than in certain other Mughal activities, like military campaigns or the display of power and grandeur in the court. I have marked out this area of domestic life as separate, or separable, from other activities and forms of sociality that Mughal men and women were engaged in. I do this only to allow a long overdue investigation

of the formation of subjects and subjectivities, and of the making of new imperial structures, institutions and practices, in an “invisible” space that has so far been treated as always already given.

The burden of my argument in this book, however, is that no such separate domain exists during the time of the early Mughals – at least not until the establishment of Akbar’s new imperial order. I have therefore also attempted throughout these pages to adopt a strategy of writing that displaces, or questions, the very notion of a separate domestic sphere, or of distinct public and private domains, even as I use terms like “domestic life,” or “familial affairs,” or “household matters,” to point to the reproductive and affective relationships and activities of the Mughal kings’ intimate circle.

It will be clear that terms such as “public–private,” “private life,” and so on, cannot be applied readily to the lives and experiences of the people under investigation. I have used the term “domestic” throughout these pages because we need a shorthand term in order to initiate a discussion, and because this term comes with less historiographical baggage than that associated with “public and private” or “private life.” It may thus allow us to think of a multifaceted and historically changing domain without very clearly marked boundaries. For the domestic life of the early Mughals is perhaps most usefully conceptualized as a realm in which an array of old and new traditions, intricate configurations of critical power structures, and striking convergences between the prescriptive and practice come together to play a central part in the making of Mughal subjects – men and women.

It is in this context that I raise the question of the meaning of public-private distinctions and how to engage effectively with these terms in a pre-modern context. I also ask what it meant to be a mother, a married woman, a wife, a queen, an elder (or a “junior”) in early Mughal India. My hypothesis is a simple one: that the meanings of motherhood, wifehood, love, marriage, filial relationships, and sexuality, are not given to us in some fixed, unchanging form. These meanings are historically and culturally constructed – in the light of different experiences, needs, and conditions.

The question of language is important for this exercise. I analyze an extensive Persian vocabulary in the course of building my argument. The changing terminology of the contemporary records projects the extent to which differences in the physical, political, and cultural circumstances of the early Mughals affected the making of domestic relationships. Varied contexts and diverse units of reference were invoked in thinking of kin and intimate relations during the period under study. It is through an appreciation of these that the domestic world itself may be conceptualized.

This book is addressed to three kinds of audience. To begin with, it should be of interest to scholars and students working on the history of Mughal India. At the same time, I hope it will speak to two other, more dispersed, groups of scholars and students, concerned, on the one hand, with the history and diversity of different Islamic societies and polities and, on the other, with

questions of gender relations, domestic arrangements, and the organization of “public” and “private” in the pre-modern world. The very diversity of these potential audiences poses something of a challenge, since they work with rather different theoretical lenses. Let me note something of the mode of debate among each of these intellectual groups, showing thereby the possibility of my own engagement and conversation with them.

Towards a social history of the Mughals

Mainstream Mughal historiography continues to this day to be engaged in a fairly conservative manner with the political and economic bases of Mughal power. Issues of social and cultural history, not to mention questions of gender relations, have yet to find a significant place in this writing. In thinking of the reasons for the particular emphases that Mughal history writing has come to acquire, the problem of the inadequacy of source materials is often advanced as being central to the issue. “How will you write a history of the domestic life of the Mughals?” a leading historian of Mughal India asked me when I began this research. “There are no sources for it.” This book argues that, in spite of this historiographical ultimatum, a history of domestic life can be written – indeed must be written – for a better understanding of Mughal history as a whole. As I hope to show, the problem is not one regarding sources at all; it is about the politics of history writing. The archive exists for very different kinds of histories, as long as the relevant questions are asked.

Since the 1950s, historians of Mughal India have concentrated heavily on the political-administrative institutions of Mughal rule. Closely allied to these are studies focused on agrarian conditions, economic change, trade relations and the attendant class struggles. There has been considerable writing in the area of what might be called a socioeconomic history, both in the context of agrarian relations and in that of trade and trading networks.¹¹

¹¹ Writings on the political-administrative institutions of the Mughals are extensive. Some of the important examples are: M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (Bombay, 1966); Satish Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court 1707–1740* (2nd edn, New Delhi, 1972); I. H. Qureshi, *The Administration of the Mughul Empire* (Lohanipur, 1973); John F. Richards, *Mughal Administration in Golconda* (Oxford, 1975); and Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48* (Delhi, 1986). For some useful recent bibliographies, see Richards, *Mughal Empire*; Hermann Kulke (ed.), *The State in India 1000–1700* (Delhi, 1997); Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal State, 1526–1750* (2nd edn, Delhi, 2000).

Among a plethora of writings on economic and social history in the context of agrarian relations, some of the most notable works are: Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556–1707* (Bombay, 1963); Michael Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat: The Response to the Portuguese in the 16th Century* (Berkeley, 1976); Ashin Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat: c. 1700–1750* (Wiesbaden, 1979); for a general survey, see Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (eds.), *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. 1: *c. 1200–c. 1750* (Cambridge, 1982).

Apart from the close and detailed investigation of politico-military, administrative, revenue and agrarian matters, the Mughal court has also been studied selectively as a site for factions and party politics. In most of the histories of the Mughal court and "political" institutions, two common features may be discerned. First, the premise for investigation is that these institutions are seats exclusively of high politics. Second, the histories show these institutional sites as fully developed from the moment of their birth, fixed, and uncomplicated in form. All one notices is a change of individuals, factions, and perhaps physical location. Many of these histories begin with Akbar, the third Mughal (whose imperium and power was truly impressive), and a time when the institutions of the grand Mughals were coming to be securely established.¹² Numerous books and articles have been written of the glory of the Mughal empire, presenting it as it appears in the hey-day of Akbar's rule from Fatehpur-Sikri and Agra, with all its regal paraphernalia given from birth: and the picture is projected backwards to cover the time of his two predecessors.

This presentation of a splendid Mughal empire as an unchanging entity for all time hardly speaks to the making of institutions and their changing character. Adjacent to the above genre are other Mughal histories in which scholars have made an effort to study the evolution of political culture built around forms of ritual sovereignty, literary pursuits, art and architectural splendor. A certain attention to ceremonial as it related to the political, and accounts of marriage aimed primarily at political aggrandizement or consolidation, may be located in these writings.¹³

What happens to the history of Mughal social life? In the received literature, this history takes two main forms. The first is a statement that appears under the generic title "social conditions and life of the people" but amounts to no more than a journalistic listing of items of daily use, festivities, and pastimes. These are described in such general, commonsense terms that they give the reader a history that seems to be valid for all times. In compendiums such as the volume on the Mughal Empire, in the Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan Series on the life and culture of Indian people, chapters entitled

¹² Alam and Subrahmanyam note that the great bulk of writings in the Mughal state focus on two periods: the reign of Akbar (1556-1605), and that of his great-grandson Aurangzeb (1658-1707). The "pre-Akbar period," the half-century after 1605, as well as the years after 1707, have been neglected in Mughal historiography. Alam and Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal State*, pp. 17-18.

¹³ To take a couple of examples: John F. Richards, "The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir," in John F. Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia* (Madison, 1978); Norman P. Ziegler, "Some Notes on Rajput Loyalties During the Mughal Period," in Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority*. In a similar way, discussions of religion are often centered on the development and place of religion in politics, and the various aspects of the religious policy of Mughal kings. Writings in this area are extensive as well. See, for example, S. R. Sharma, *The Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors* (3rd edn, New York, 1972); S. A. A. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign* (New Delhi, 1975).

“Social Condition” are usually the last ones.¹⁴ The broad entries of the chapter “Social Condition” in this particular book are dress, toilets, diet, ornaments, kitchens and utensils, intoxicants, fairs and festivals, sports, games and pastimes, customs and ceremonies, social etiquette and manners, modes of traveling and conveyance, postal system, position of women, and education.¹⁵ One cannot but be struck by the ahistoricity of a compilation of this kind.¹⁶

More directly relevant to the subject of the current investigation is a second strand in Mughal social history, which is best described as belonging to the genre of biographies of women worthies. Studies of this kind focus upon the visibility of imperial women and their power. An interesting feature of this writing is that it has come to be seen by male historians as sufficient to its subject (that is women), and there has been little attempt to rethink long-held assumptions about Mughal court and society. This reluctance to think about women’s histories as “history” is obviously not restricted to Mughal historiography alone.

Bonnie G. Smith’s point about the fate of early practitioners of gender history in the West – that “prestigious professional history based on deep reflection and weighty political topics was for men, while ‘amateurish’ women pursued a more ‘superficial’ kind of writing about the past”¹⁷ – applies equally well to the way in which Mughal women’s biographical accounts have been received. The most useful of these, aimed at “bringing women to life,” were never thought of as serious mainstream histories, nor even as an important part of thinking “Mughal history.” In general, such biographies seem to exist in a separate sphere, all of its own. At best they are seen as (mild) “correctives”:¹⁸ there were women too, of course – some of them quite talented!

There is greater irony here. While these studies of Mughal women opened up a neglected area of investigation, the women biographers themselves excluded the possibility of querying or even raising new questions about the

¹⁴ R. C. Majumdar (ed.), *The Mughul Empire* (Bombay, 1974). ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. XXI.

¹⁶ Within this genre of Mughal social histories, another remaindered category may be noted: “culture,” which refers to works of art, architecture and intellectual life. This area has become the domain of specialists, an exclusive preserve of technical “art” history, and its historians. Histories of Mughal art as well as that of architecture are represented as, in the main, the legitimizing indicator of the rule of an emperor and the glory of his rule – to be seen in wondrous art, and splendid buildings designed by his skilled craftsmen. Questioning parts of this legacy, in a recently edited anthology of essays on architectural history of India, Monica Juneja makes some important suggestions regarding the intellectual importance of architectural history for all historians; Monica Juneja (ed.), *Architecture in Medieval India* (Delhi, 2001).

¹⁷ Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), pp. 1, 6. For an extensive discussion of gender-based power struggles in (American) academic settings, see Joan Scott, “The Campaign Against Political Correctness: What’s Really at Stake,” *Radical History Review*, 54 (1992).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

accepted boundaries of family and household, public and private spheres, gender relations and political power. In biographies of Mughal women, one finds little to suggest that royal women were a crucial component of the Mughal world – of imperial designs and the making of this monarchy – and therefore that an investigation of their lives and conditions is vital to any understanding of it.

Rekha Misra wrote an early book in this style of making women “visible,” with an appropriately indicative title, *Women in Mughal India* (1967).¹⁹ It is a study of aristocratic Mughal women covering the reigns of the grand Mughals, which gives us details of their political activities, commercial engagements, education and artistic talents, construction and supervision of buildings, charities, and organization of marriages. Misra wrote about women mentioned in imperial records and in the narratives of the European travelers. The author presents her study in the form of biographical sketches of the royal women, unsurprisingly ending up replicating the sources.

Twenty-three years later this was still the dominant trend in writings on Mughal women. In 1990, Renuka Nath continued to write in the biographical mode for elite women, merely adding a few more characters to Misra’s list. The title of her book, *Notable Mughal and Hindu Women in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (1990) provides a good indication of its contents.²⁰ In 1993, the same year that Leslie Peirce’s extraordinary book on the Ottoman imperial *harem* came out (a book I take up for fuller discussion in the next section), Ellison Banks Findly produced another biography in the same mold as her biographer-predecessors. The subject here is Nur Jahan, the “Empress of Mughal India,” as Findly calls her.²¹ The historian’s chronological summary of the high points of Nur Jahan’s life in the prologue to her book is instructive:

After four years of obscurity, the woman who came to be Nur Jahan met Jahangir at a palace bazaar in the spring of 1611 and the two were married a few months later. She was in her midthirties, had already had one child, and was to be Jahangir’s last and most influential wife. Almost at once, Nur Jahan and her cohorts took control of the government as Jahangir bowed to the effects of alcohol and opium. She minted coins, traded with foreign merchants, managed promotions and finances at the court, orchestrated new developments in art and religion, and laid out many of the Mughal gardens we now know. Her power over the emperor and in government affairs was almost complete, but came at the cost of internal tensions. Midway through the reign, her stepson Shah Jahan went into open rebellion and her ruling coalition fell apart as the couple increasingly spent their months in Kashmir. By the time Jahangir died in 1627, splintering of the familial center was so substantial that she had no real chance

¹⁹ Rekha Misra, *Women in Mughal India 1526–1748 A.D.* (New Delhi, 1967).

²⁰ Renuka Nath, *Notable Mughal and Hindu Women in the 16th and 17th Centuries A.D.* (New Delhi, 1990).

²¹ Findly, *Nur Jahan*.

for power in the next reign. Nur Jahan was exiled to Lahore where she lived in seclusion with her daughter until her death in 1645.²²

In spite of its brevity, this is a classic representation of Nur Jahan's life, one that may be found (with slight variations) in several other accounts.²³ All of these histories point to the central place that Nur Jahan came to acquire in the *haram* and court of Jahangir after her marriage. Her ascent to this position is portrayed as sudden, uncomplicated and yet almost miraculous – since it fits into no expected pattern. Even at the outset, one can discern Findly's unproblematic detailing of Nur Jahan's power, and ambition, as if all of these existed in a void (or at best, became possible due to her intimate relationship with Jahangir). Although the historian mentions the "many talented [Mughal] women,"²⁴ we are led to believe that Nur Jahan's power was a bolt from the blue, that there was no forerunner in this kind of practice of authority. Given the numerous examples of traditions of strong and influential royal women in Muslim societies contemporaneous with the Mughals, Findly's historical sketch of this unique empress is not very enlightening.²⁵

Aside from the biographical histories of influential royal women, there have also been some studies of "private" life, and the *haram*. I cited extracts from a couple of these at the beginning of this chapter. Mughal private life and the *haram* appear here as nothing but a caricatured arena of fixed behavioral patterns, of unchanging and unmediated sexual and physical pleasure, a peculiarly static "feminine" domain of which a "history" is barely conceivable. The assumption behind these studies, clearly, is that activities and relationships here are fundamentally unchanging and that (almost before we start) we already know all there is to know about this domain. At the least, I hope, my book will dispel this notion by demonstrating that although there is a repetition in the activities and relationships of men and women (here as

²² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²³ See the following: Vincent A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India: From the Earliest Times to the End of 1911* (Oxford, 1920), pp. 376–377, 383, 385–386, and 394; Misra, *Women in Mughal India*, pp. 33–40; Chandra Pant, *Nur Jahan and Her Family* (Allahabad, 1978); Richards, *Mughal Empire*, pp. 102–103; Wiebke Walther, *Women in Islam* (Princeton, 1992), pp. 126–127.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁵ As an aside, one might note that the tradition of powerful, visible women extends further back to the Mongol and Timurid periods. On Mongol women, see Morris Rossabi, "Kublai Khan and the Women in his Family," in W. Bauer (ed.), *Studia Sino-Mongolia* (Wiesbaden, 1979); Mansura Haider, "The Mongol Traditions and Their Survival in Central Asia (XIV–XV Centuries)," *Central Asiatic Journal*, 28, 1–2 (1984); scholarly writings on Timurid women are extensive, see Priscilla P. Soucek, "Timurid Women: A Cultural Perspective," in Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*; Thomas W. Lentz and Glenn D. Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (Los Angeles, 1989), especially pp. 74, 80, 84. On Turkish women in Central Asia from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, see Isenbike Togan, "Turkic Dynasties: Ninth to Fifteenth Centuries," *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures: Methodologies, Paradigms and Sources* (Leiden and Boston, 2003). See also the fantastic account of Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo about his visit to the court of Timur, *Embassy to Tamerlane: 1403–1406*, trans. Guy Le Strange (London, 1928).

everywhere else), their interaction is not devoid of surprises, but creative and productive, full of interesting twists and turns. “Repetition” often gives rise to “new and distinctive assemblages,” new contingencies, new intents, where the repeated action seems to transform itself because “each iteration occurs in an absolutely unique context.”²⁶

There have of course been significant exceptions to the kind of social history outlined above. Aside from Tapan Raychaudhuri’s early and unusual investigation of social life under the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir in Bengal (which was of course not centrally concerned with the life of the Mughal dynasty),²⁷ a number of recent writings have opened up certain new avenues of investigation in the realm of Mughal social history. Muzaffar Alam’s investigation of Persian language inaugurates new possibilities for an understanding of Mughal practices and culture. Alam’s article “The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics” focuses upon the centrality that Persian came to acquire in the time of the Mughals, especially the place it acquired as the (declared) official language in the time of Akbar.²⁸ This choice of Persian, “in consideration of specific Indian conditions,” had interesting implications for the making of Mughal political identity, Alam argues in this article.²⁹ The author especially notes how the “non-sectarian and liberal feature of Persian made it an ideal forum [*sic*] through which the Mughals could effectively negotiate the diversities of the Indian society.”³⁰

Again, in a sensitive exploration of Babur’s poetry and autobiography, Stephen Dale tells us a great deal about the particular mores and values of the *padshah*’s highly dispersed society.³¹ Dale engages closely with the language of Babur’s writings, and is able to reconstruct important aspects of the literary culture of the times, and the personality of the *padshah*: what he describes as the *raison d’être* of Babur’s life and his “fundamental political assumptions, social values, religious ideals and even artistic standards.”³² Similarly, Monica Juneja’s recent commentary on art and architectural history makes a persuasive plea for the intellectual importance of architectural history for all historians, and the incorporation of such hitherto isolated subdisciplines into mainstream debates on social history.³³

²⁶ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, 2001), p. 40.

²⁷ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History* (Delhi, 1969).

²⁸ Muzaffar Alam, “The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 32, 2 (1998), p. 325.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 348. ³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Stephen F. Dale: “The Poetry and Autobiography of the *Babur-Nama*,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 55, 3 (August 1996); *idem*, “Steppe Humanism: The Autobiographical Writings of Zahir al-din Muhammad Babur, 1483–1530,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 22 (1990); and *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India, 1483–1530* (Leiden and Boston, 2004).

³² Dale, “Poetry,” pp. 1, 39; see also, Dale, *Eight Paradises*, ch. V.

³³ Juneja, *Architecture*, Introduction, p. 2.

More obviously related to familial affairs and domestic conditions of the Mughal royalty are the works of Stephen Blake and Rosalind O'Hanlon. In his study of the Mughal imperial capital, Shahjahanabad, in the years 1639–1739, Stephen Blake makes the argument that the Mughal state was a patrimonial-bureaucratic structure, in which the emperor and his household were of overwhelming importance.³⁴ The idea of the patrimonial-bureaucratic state is based on Max Weber's prodigious work. According to Blake, a careful reading of the Mughal documents reveals a "remarkable congruence between the state Akbar organized and the patrimonial-bureaucratic empire analysed by Weber."³⁵ In his reading, the *A'in-i Akbari* depicts the Mughal emperor as a divinely aided patriarch whose household was the central element in government; members of the army were dependent on the emperor, the administration "a loosely structured group of men controlled by the Imperial household," and the emperor's travels were a significant part of administrative activities.³⁶ Historians John F. Richards, Burton Stein, Noboru Karashima, and G. Berkemer have accepted Blake's formulations, albeit with slight modifications.

The work of these scholars demonstrates that the Mughal monarchy was a personalized one, much dependent on the household, the persona of the emperor, and personal service.³⁷ Following this line of inquiry, Rosalind O'Hanlon examines Akbar's self-projection as a universal monarch, and the careful construction of imperial masculinity, as a previously neglected part of the strategy of governance under the third Mughal monarch. O'Hanlon draws attention to the essential gender dimension in the investigation of imperial politics and identity. She shows the development of patriarchal power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, calling for a rethinking of both pre-modern as well as modern Indian society and politics.³⁸

This welcome attention to the changing images of power, the wilful construction of imperial "charisma" and the related details of spatial arrangements, marital affairs and bodily regulation, still tends to remain emperor-centered. In spite of their proposition that the imperial household was the crucial domain after which images of other realms of the empire were to be built, neither Blake nor O'Hanlon pays much attention to the activities and relationships – or even the identity – of the inhabitants of the household. Thus

³⁴ Stephen P. Blake, *Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India 1639–1739* (Cambridge, 1993).

³⁵ Discussed in the Introduction to Kulke (ed.), *State*, p. 38.

³⁶ Stephen P. Blake, "The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals," in Kulke (ed.), *State*, p. 302.

³⁷ Richards, "Imperial Authority," and *idem* "Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officers," in Barbara Daly Metcalf (ed.), *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley, 1984).

³⁸ Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Kingdom, Household and Body: Gender and the Construction of Imperial Service under Akbar," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (forthcoming). I have used the version of the paper given to me by the author in 1998.

we find little discussion of how the latter adopted and negotiated the prescribed norms and values, and how these were modified in the process of negotiation.

It is almost as if everything is prescribed from an already constituted center. Even the king appears in these accounts as an abstract category, produced in the light of inherited ethical-moral texts. O'Hanlon's concentration on Akbar's construction of a heteronormative masculinity built upon his reading of ethical digests such as the *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* of Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201–74), does not give the reader an elaborate sense of the tension that went into the self-fashioning of this kingly subject. She follows the imperial chronicler Abu-l-Fazl in depicting the emperor as the “living embodiment of . . . masculine virtues and exemplar for his servants”³⁹ – wholly in conformity with the prescribed ideal. When the figure of the monarch is represented in this way, it is not surprising that the king's intimate circle, the invisible members of the Mughal domestic world – who struggled to fashion themselves, and surely contributed to the emergence of new attitudes, values, and behavior – form no part of the above investigations. Yet it is all too clear that without such an inquiry, our understanding of the evolving patterns of Mughal domestic life (and Mughal “norms”) will remain impoverished.

One final point about the dominant modes of Mughal history writing. Many of these histories are written as if the Mughal world was no more than a preamble to “modern” India. They are conditioned by questions of empire formation in relation to colonial and post-colonial history. Mughal historians have concentrated on grand themes such as the rise and fall of the Mughal state, long-distance trade (the potentialities of capitalist development), the administrative system of the Mughals, and “religious policy” under different rulers (was not Mughal India already secular?). In many of these accounts, Mughal power marks the beginning of the “modern” state, and of a “modern” economy and administration, which the British would inherit and “develop” in various ways.

This book indicates the need for raising different kinds of questions, and attempts to study Mughal history in terms other than those narrowly concerned with the emergence of a bourgeois, secular, democratic, “modern” India. One area in which the emergence of modernity – capitalism, secularism, democracy, and so on – has been relatively slow, and where change has been less readily visible, is that of familial relations, domesticity, and reproductive duties. I take this area as my focus, precisely so that we may open up other questions of social history and insist upon more careful investigation of the different locations and worldviews, struggles and aspirations, that mark not only different periods of history but every individual period of history too. One point to be borne in mind throughout such investigations is that

³⁹ O'Hanlon, “Kingdom, Household and Body,” p. 3.

Mughal history cannot be seen as simply the precursor of British rule in India, or as a pale (or less-developed) form of modern institutions and practices.

Through its investigation of the changing character of Mughal domestic life over the sixteenth century, this book attempts to show how Mughal rule itself – its procedures, its prescriptions, and its spirit – evolved over time. Even though the Mughal empire was a “Muslim” empire (in the sense of being a polity with a Muslim ruler at its head), nothing was given, predestined, or inevitable in the character of its political arrangement, its domestic relations, or its religious policy. Like other Muslim empires (and, indeed, like all empires everywhere), this one too established itself according to its particular circumstances, in its particular context.

The question of public–private

This brings me to my other potential audiences, feminist scholars working on Islamic as well as non-Islamic societies who have forcefully criticized conventional histories predicated on a presumed opposition between public and private life.

This book asks questions about the usefulness of the terms “public” and “private” for a study of Mughal society and politics, but *not* in order to suggest that we dispense with these terms altogether. Trying to invent new vocabularies by arguing that these fit local cultures and contingent histories better is, to use Michael Warner’s words, a “rather desperate solution.”⁴⁰ What we need instead is to engage in new ways with vocabularies and debates that have long sought to make sense of diverse and changing conditions.

In order to do this, I want to highlight the argument made by several scholars about the complex and shifting signs of the public and private. What seems to have been picked up from these terms is an “almost instinctual” meaning rooted in common speech.⁴¹ “So although public and private seem so clearly opposed that their violation can produce a sharp feeling of revulsion,” Michael Warner argues, “the terms have many different meanings that often go unnoticed.” Moreover, these terms are frequently defined against each other, “with normative preference for one term,” and that is not always the case.⁴² These terms are neither exact parallels, nor polar opposites. Warner sketches a genealogy of how the public and private came to be imagined as binaries, closely aligned in the liberal tradition, reaching back at least to John Locke.⁴³

Consider a range of categories that have come to be ineffaceably marked by “definitional binarisms”: secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, discipline/terrorism, canonic/noncanonic, domestic/foreign,

⁴⁰ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, 2002), p. 11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23. ⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28. ⁴³ *Ibid.*, see ch. 1, “Public and Private.”

wholeness/decadence, urbane/provincial, and so on.⁴⁴ The problem in using these binaries, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains in another context, is that the “definitional nodes in the forms of binarisms . . . has to do not with a mystical faith in the number two but, rather, with the felt need to schematize in some consistent way the treatment of social vectors so exceedingly various.”⁴⁵

Given the host of meanings and forms of public and private, and the modern complex genealogy of these terms, why is it the case that scholars working on pre- and early modern Islamic societies have carried on deploying a sensibility of binaries to the alternate formulations that they are experimenting with? Despite a critique of the public–private, particularly the strict demarcation that came to be associated with these terms, scholars have, it seems unselfconsciously, kept the ethos of the binary that emerged in the liberal tradition. Their new terms are often presented in two, neatly drawn, easily demarcated, and sometimes distinctly opposite, spheres. Is this because we cannot escape the force of modern (bourgeois) language even when we are aware that certain conceptualizations might not be relevant to the historical circumstances we are concerned with? In a sense there is no escaping from such “categories brought into play by modern forces,”⁴⁶ but there are ways in which one might engage with and produce interesting convergences with terms such as the public–private.

By emphasizing the problem in employing binarisms, I want to think about the categorization and conceptualization of the pre-modern historical instance of the Mughals. I take the issue of binaries as central to my engagements, not least because it has been at the heart of scholarly concerns in the West since the debate on public–private spheres in women’s history took center-stage in the 1970s.⁴⁷ Indeed, the binarized character of these terms has been continually tested and broadened. In an anthology entitled *Woman, Culture and Society* (1974),⁴⁸ edited by Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, an early attempt was made to identify the structural framework necessary to understand the opposition between domestic and public in psychological, cultural, social, and economic aspects of human life. Rayna Reiter took the debate forward by arguing for the socially constructed, fluid, and changeable character of separate public and private domains.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 11; cf. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, p. 11, n. 19.

⁴⁶ Talal Asad, “Conscripts of Western Civilization,” in Christine Gailey (ed.), *Dialectical Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Stanley Diamond* (Ithaca, 1992), p. 333.

⁴⁷ The issue of rethinking public and private in women’s history has been dealt with comprehensively in the following volume: Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby (eds.), *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women’s History: Essays from the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women* (Ithaca, 1992).

⁴⁸ Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, 1974).

⁴⁹ Rayna Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, 1975), pp. 12–13. This volume contained the classic essay by Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.”

The question of cultural, historical, and sexual specificity became noticeably pertinent in the debate on the public-private spheres. Rosaldo, along with other scholars, articulated the difficulties and danger of universal categories in the 1980s.⁵⁰ The debate among feminist scholars was thus marked by an investigation of the genealogy of particular conceptual categories that we use for understanding different historical moments.⁵¹

Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (1998) articulated a major challenge to the received wisdom on the origins of modern political regimes and the relation of public and private domains.⁵² Pateman argued that the original social contract was also a sexual one, a story of freedom and of subjection that established patriarchy. Liberal theorists have "naturalised political power in the social or public realm," forgetting, as Pateman put it, politely if ironically, "to discuss domestic life" and how the division of public and private is produced in the first place.⁵³

Likewise, the feminist critique of the public-private dichotomy became central to the arguments of socialist feminists who now looked anew at theories explaining class and production from the vantage point of sexuality and patriarchy.⁵⁴ Scholars working on non-Western societies had also begun to ask how the model of public and private domains, notions of domesticity and family, and propositions about the making of intimate communities, might appear in the light of historical and cultural specificities, and the extent

⁵⁰ See Michelle Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding," *Signs*, 5 (Spring 1980), pp. 389-417.

⁵¹ Susan Moller Okin, for instance, examined the treatment of women in the works of four classic political philosophers - Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Mill - to be able to understand how their conceptions of women hinged around the naturalness of family and its separation from the *polis*; Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, 1979). See also, Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, 1981).

⁵² Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, 1988).

⁵³ Cited in Helly and Reverby (eds.), *Gendered Domains*, p. 9, as part of a discussion of Pateman's work. In a parallel move, Joan Landes built on the theoretical framework of Jürgen Habermas, exploring the extent to which the bourgeois political life of France rested upon the renaming of public space as male; Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988); for a study of the implications drawing on the opposition between public and private spheres in the context of the Old Regime in France, see Dena Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime," *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 31 (1992), p. 15. Of course, Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989) has been the subject of a much larger debate, including some reductive readings. For a cogent summing of debates on Habermas, see Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, pp. 46-56.

⁵⁴ Some examples of the earliest works in this direction are: Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life* (New York, 1976); Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory* (New Brunswick, 1983); and the influential work of Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class* (London, 1987). For one of the earliest close readings of feminist anthropology and of material bases of structural difference, see also Joan Kelly, "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," *Signs*, 1 (Summer 1976), pp. 809-823.

to which Western paradigms were relevant to the study of non-Western societies.⁵⁵

Cynthia Nelson made an early argument of this kind in relation to pastoral and sedentary societies in the Middle East. She suggested that the “domestic” concerns of women in such societies were nothing if not political, and looked at wide-ranging ethnographic instances to show how women “negotiated their social order.” She emphasized women’s part in marital alliances, their participation in warfare, in elaborate networks of friendship and gift-exchange, and in the practice of sorcery, to speak of the “influence” of women “without exaggerating” their importance in public life.⁵⁶

Lila Abu-Lughod’s 1986 study of Bedouin women’s ritual poetry complicated the question of public–private distinctions. By looking at Bedouin women’s poetry and codes of behavior, Abu-Lughod showed how these women were not “confined” to a “domestic” sphere; they were dynamic individuals who used highly valuable cultural forms to express their sentiments, apparently acknowledging an alternative system of beliefs and values, and constituting through these, forms of dissent and subversive discourse.⁵⁷

Investigations of the early modern Islamic courtly world, more directly relevant to the subject of this book, were at the fore in developing this kind of critique. Leslie Peirce’s book, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (1993), was one of the first to challenge the applicability of the public–private model to the Ottoman setting.⁵⁸ This study has made a major contribution to our reevaluation of the Ottoman state, and the sources of its royal women’s authority, family politics, and gender relations in the *haram*. I consider Peirce’s work extensively for two reasons: one, this was the first work that provided a clear demonstration of the problems that arise in working with a simple public–private model for courtly societies. Second, Peirce’s *Imperial Harem* is the only comprehensive history of gender relations at the Ottoman court, and is an excellent sounding-board for my own inquiry.

Peirce asks what the idea of the “private” “might have meant to an Ottoman man or woman.”⁵⁹ She reflects at one point on the “language that Ottomans themselves used to describe divisions in their society.” She reports briefly on the levels of the meanings of a vast terminology that is available to her:

“the *hass* and the *amm*” had both an abstract level of meaning – the private, particular, or singular versus the universal – and a sociopolitical meaning – the elite versus the

⁵⁵ See the writings of Michel Foucault, Joan Scott, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as path-breaking instances of this new kind of work that challenged the existing modes of analysis.

⁵⁶ Cynthia Nelson, “Public and Private Politics: Women in the Middle Eastern World,” *American Ethnologist*, 1, 3 (August 1974), pp. 551–552, 553, 555.

⁵⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986). For a more recent analysis on connections between gender, politics, and the public sphere, see Nilufer Gole, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor, 1996).

⁵⁸ Peirce, *Imperial Harem*. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

common, the ruling class versus the ruled. The word *hass*, however, presumably aroused a more complex range of associations because of its additional meaning of “that which is associated with or belongs to the ruler,” that is, anything royal. Many of the institutional manifestations of the royal power were denoted by the word *hass*: for example, the sultan’s privy chamber, the *has oda*; privileged attendants of the sultan, male and female, who bore the title *haseki*; and the royal domains, known simply as “hass”. . . . More prevalent in the Ottomans’ self-description is the dichotomy of inner and outer, the interior and the exterior. Two sets of words, one Turkish and one Persian, were commonly used to describe this division: *ic/iceri* in Turkish and *enderun* in Persian, for the inner or the interior, and correspondingly, *dis/disari* (or *tasra*) and *birun* for the outer or exterior.⁶⁰

While Peirce’s move opens up a critique of the anachronistic (and normalizing) use of the public–private dichotomy and attendant notions of family, and private life, her doubts about the public–private dichotomy remain suspended for the rest of her book, and she lapses into binaries of her own. Her assemblage of alternative terms such as the *hass* and the *amm* are dichotomous, as are *ic/iceri*, *dis/disari*, and *enderun/birun*. Peirce’s other contention, that “power relationships in Islamic society are represented by spatial division more horizontal than vertical, in contrast to Western metaphors: instead of moving *up*, one moves *in* towards greater authority,”⁶¹ also does not escape the sensibility of binarism: up and down or in and out still remains a binary.

Peirce says at one point that the Ottoman society of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries “was dichotomized into spheres characterized less by notions of public/commonweal/male and private/domestic/female than by distinctions between the privileged and the common, the sacred and the profane – distinctions that cut across the dichotomy of gender.”⁶² Recall Sedgwick’s warning about the context of the network of normative “definitional binarisms”; Peirce’s “privileged and the common, and the sacred and the profane,” in fact, can easily be situated along this continuum of neatly distinguishable terms.⁶³

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9. ⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² The only spatial (and institutional) category that the author stays with is the *haram*. In fact in working extensively with the *haram*, Peirce digs out the many layers of power and authority in the Ottoman context – beyond the seemingly exclusive power of the male sultan, thus bringing out the many dimensions of the *haram* system.

⁶³ In a separate article on the subjects of the Ottoman Empire, specifically the Anatolian Turkish-speaking peoples, Peirce investigated a variety of words used by them to denote female and male (*liz*, *avret*, and *hatun* for females, and *oglan*, *ergen*, and *er* for males). The most interesting feature of this vocabulary, Peirce illustrated, was the attention given to individual life-stages, and Ottoman society’s notions of normative and problematic sexual behavior. Moreover, this vocabulary showed that it was hegemonic neither for males nor for females. Leslie P. Peirce, “Seniority, Sexuality, and Social Order: The Vocabulary of Gender in Early Modern Ottoman Society,” in Madeline C. Zilfi (ed.), *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era* (Leiden, 1997).

Several other scholars have undertaken parallel investigations of public–private dichotomies in other locales complicating our readings. In an article entitled “Slippers at the Entrance or Behind Closed Doors,” Dina Rizk Khoury investigates the use and perception of space by women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Mosul, part of Ottoman Iraq at the time.⁶⁴ By using court records involving cases of litigation on division of domestic space, she analyzes the meanings of domestic space for women of different social classes. In this regard, Khoury warns us right at the start that although there was no doubt that “urban-based Islamic scholars articulated a discourse on boundaries between men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims,” the distinctions between the public and private are “more a product of our century’s sensibilities than the realities of the early modern period.” She argues elsewhere that the discourse of the urban-based Islamic scholars, until the late nineteenth century, was quite flexible, being shaped by the political and economic conditions of specific societies at specific times.⁶⁵

Khoury observes that

there was a clear distinction in the vernacular of Mosulis between one’s domestic space and that of one’s neighbor. The multitude of proverbs that stress the importance of getting along with one’s neighbor while maintaining one’s sense of privacy, points to the constant tension between what takes place behind closed doors and how it is perceived within women’s immediate surroundings. . . . Scholars have debated the place of the quarter in the urban hierarchy of public and private spaces. Some have posited that while the quarter was public space, it was made private by women’s use of it for domestic and familial chores [the author cites Erika Friedl]. Certainly for Mosuli women, the quarter was a familiar but public space in which they participated in public life in a ritualized and negotiated manner [*sic*]. To a large degree, their definition of what was private and public in the quarter depended on whether they wore veils or not.⁶⁶

It is easy to note that a commonsensical (“almost instinctual”⁶⁷) reading of domestic, privacy, and public–private seems to structure Khoury’s interpretation of Mosuli texts. The only moment when the author invokes a plurality of meanings of public–private is when she suggests that these were intersecting spaces. This is also the moment when she points to the contingencies that might be at play in the making of spaces, public or private.

⁶⁴ Dina Rizk Khoury, “Slippers at the Entrance or Behind Closed Doors: Domestic and Public Spaces for Mosuli Women,” in Zilfi (ed.), *Women in the Ottoman Empire*, pp. 105–106. This is the only article of Khoury that I discuss here. She raises very similar questions in another article, “Drawing Boundaries and Defining Spaces: Women and Space in Ottoman Iraq,” in Amira El Azhary Sonbol (ed.), *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse, 1996), pp. 173–187.

⁶⁵ Khoury, “Slippers,” pp. 106–107. See also Khoury, “Drawing Boundaries and Defining Spaces.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 115–116. ⁶⁷ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 23.

Special mention may be made here of Kathryn Babayan's investigation of the world of urban women in Isfahan through the '*Aqa'id al-Nisa* (Beliefs of Women), a book of social critiques by females, probably written by a cleric called Aqa Jamal Khwansari during the reign of the Persian king, Shah Sulayman (1666–94).⁶⁸ Although Babayan does not directly engage the public–private debate, her article is suggestive in relation to the construction of pre-modern Muslim women's spaces in Iran. She locates the '*Aqa'id al-Nisa* in the time before the accession of Shah Sultan Husain which witnessed "a radical shift in mood" in Isfahan reminiscent of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In the sixteenth century, Babayan argues, many different cultural traditions and tendencies provided the background for the construction of attitudes concerning gender and gender-differentiated space, and gives an example of a decree from 1694–95 to illustrate the imperial reaction to the "more eclectic and tolerant . . . culture of the classical Safavid era."⁶⁹ These were the new paradigms and new "locations of authority" that according to the author formulated the roles of women in dynastic politics as members of the royal household.⁷⁰

The "colorful view of the female sex through five Isfahani women"⁷¹ is analyzed in this cosmos. Through the '*Aqa'id al-Nisa*, Babayan engages the reader in the possibilities of negotiation of fluid physical and mental boundaries as the Isfahani women go about their daily activities. She investigates the performance of local rituals and belief systems of the different confessional groups of Isfahan, demonstrating how the Safavid society was geared towards "communal socializing."⁷² The author unpacks the dynamics of this Isfahani community as described by Aqa Jamal. Babayan's attempt to conceptualize the notion of intimacy between members of the same sex, both men and women, is particularly notable. She does this by working out the meanings of terms such as "*khwahar khwaneh*," which has come to "imply a lesbian [*tabaq zan*] in modern Persian literary usage,"⁷³ and argues that in fact "same-sex relationships were not only about sex . . . [but also] involved a sharing of things intimate and personal, a fusion of emotions, and antiquated friendships that are rare in the modern world."⁷⁴

These studies help us to ask: once the critique of the public–private dyad has gone so far, what sense does it make to retain the use of this dichotomy – with or without inverted commas? Is it not necessary at this point to consider alternative ways in which to engage with these terms and conceptualize domains of political contest and intimate relations in some other way that

⁶⁸ Babayan, "The '*Aqa'id al-Nisa*," p. 349. The spelling and English translation of the text '*Aqa'id al-Nisa* are the author's.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 358–359.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 350–351. Babayan elaborates these ideas in her book, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

⁷¹ Babayan, "The '*Aqa'id al-Nisa*," p. 362. ⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 366.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 370. ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

might bear closer resemblance to the concepts employed by our historical Others? Perhaps I should add that this demand is easier to make than to execute. It requires, to use Sedgwick's words, "a painstaking process of accumulative reading and historical de- and recontextualization."⁷⁵ It is to this slow and painstaking process that I hope this book will contribute.

In summary

Like several of my predecessors, I started research on the domestic life of the early Mughals with an attempt to frame the stories from the Mughal texts in the context of the debates around public and private spheres. I tried to examine the extent to which there existed a private domain (family, *haram*), clearly separated from the public (court). In studying the lives of Mughal men and women, it appeared that public-private were originally different parts of the same courtly life, and that the "private" closely intersected with and spilled over into the "public." The private was never completely segregated, or exclusively residential. Many activities took place in this public-private space, a large number of which were of great political significance. In fact, one could argue that there was no distinction between the public and the private – in the sense of the physical separation of the court and the *haram* – in the time of the peripatetic kings Babur and Humayun. The strict demarcation of physical spaces came about only in the reign of Akbar. Alongside, another sense of the "private" emerged: of a royalty "beyond the reach" of, and "mysterious" and inaccessible to, the rest of the population: the majestic emperor, his secluded *haram*, and the aura of his centralized authority.

In the chronicles of the Mughal times, there is a constellation of concepts for "domestic" – giving us a sense of the pre-history of the Mughal *haram* – before the term *haram* came into frequent use in the imperial histories of Akbar. The *ahl va 'ayal*, the *khanivadeh*, or the *kuch va oruk* of Babur's time, and the *ahl-i haram* or the *haraman-i padshah* of Humayun's time (to take but a few examples), evoke flexible structures and the many layers of a peripatetic world. These terms indicate the number and kind of people, the particularity of the inhabited physical spaces, the importance of ancestral connections, the well-entrenched hierarchies in relationships, and emerging patterns of kinship.⁷⁶ In this Persian vocabulary, there is a history of the shifting physical-political-cultural circumstances of the nobles, as well as their shifting relationships. None of this vocabulary demarcates a fixed set of relations or bounded spaces which can be reduced to our understanding of the "family" or the "private." These alternative ways of classifying social life project the variable associations that characterize the fluid early Mughal world.

⁷⁵ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, p. 12.

⁷⁶ There is an extended discussion of these and other cognate terms in chapters 5 and 6. I do not want to provide a quick translation here since any brief translation would be misleading.

Properly understood, this vocabulary cannot be reduced to binaries of any kind.

As I became increasingly aware of the richness and unfamiliarity of this world, I became more hesitant about using the public-private distinction. A binary implies much about ways of thinking and being that are not to be found in the historical conditions that I am concerned with. Moreover, a framework that dichotomizes assemblages that are multiplicitous tends to erode much of the history and individuality of domestic life at the time of the Mughals. My central concern in this book is to excavate a domain, the boundaries of which are very unclear. Part of the purpose of marking out such a domain is to bring to life the denizens of a hitherto invisible Mughal world: the mothers of the royal children, their nurses, and servants, and others who formed part of these (changing) intimate circles.

The place of women in this history is obviously crucial. The activities of women, the very construction of more permanent domestic quarters, the conceptualization of the *haram*, all of these were part of the making of the new regime, and of establishing its power. That the women eventually became *pardeh-giyan* (veiled ones), and were restricted to secluded quarters called the *haram*, does not alter the point that their status and conduct were of critical importance in the establishment of imperial traditions and imperial grandeur, indeed an intrinsic part of the becoming of a (grand) monarchy.

I discuss instances of autonomy and power exercised by Mughal women. It is in this extensive tradition of matriarchal authority that the most conspicuous symbol of influence and supremacy for Mughal historians – Nur Jahan, the so-called Empress of Mughal India – may be appropriately situated. Contrary to what Findly and others would have us believe, Nur Jahan's empress-status is thus far from an ordinary moment in the complex history of the making of institutions, mores and practices – courtly or domestic.

A crucial question, then, is that of the extent to which Mughal power was concentrated exclusively in the person of the emperor. An investigation of Mughal life immediately shows the many points of initiative and influence that continued to function throughout this period, the tensions that arose, and the contrary claims of different nodes of power that needed to be resolved in the context of new challenges and new crises. What emerges from this is a history of rich and diverse relations, complicated by the workings of different personalities and the limitations of the sources. What emerge also are clear indications of change over time.

The chapters that follow are an attempt to construct an analysis of Mughal domestic life, of Mughal women and men in their personal relations and activities. This history, I should emphasize, is not a comprehensive account with a neat beginning, middle, and an end. The point here is to bring to life moments of another era. Sometimes, in order to do this, one has to bring together historical moments in ways that do not meet the demands of chronological history. For this reason, and to explain the struggle involved in this

exercise, chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with the way in which Mughal domestic life has been represented and the manner in which the archive has been constructed and used.

Having laid out the historiographical context of this work in these initial chapters, I then proceed to two sets of two chapters each. One deals with the period of Babur and Humayun, and the other with the time of Akbar. In each set, the first chapter seeks to map the broader political-intellectual configuration of the court society of the time, while the second chapter provides a more detailed account of the domestic arrangements and activities within the domain that might be described as that of a family or intimate circle.

The concluding chapter of the book draws out some of the implications of the findings presented in the earlier chapters, in part by undertaking a comparison of domestic life in the three great sixteenth-century “Muslim” kingdoms – Mughal India, Ottoman Turkey, and Safavid Iran.

The question of the archive: the challenge of a princess's memoir

The received image of the Mughal *haram* has been powerful in blinding historians to the density and variation of domestic life projected in the contemporary records. Consider a couple of extracts from one of these records, Gulbadan Banu Begum's *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah*, which I use as my central counterpoint here. After the battle of Panipat in 1526, which gave Babur a foothold in India, his close friend, Khvajeh Kilan, expressed a desire to return to Kabul. As Babur (reluctantly) gave him permission to go, he asked him to carry "valuable presents and curiosities [*tuhfeh va hadyeh*] of Hind" to his relations and other people in Kabul.¹

Two generations later, when asked to record her memories of the Mughal forefathers towards the imperial history, the *Akbarnama*, Babur's daughter, Gulbadan Banu Begum, reconstructed Babur's conversation with Khvajeh Kilan as follows:

I shall write a list, and you will distribute them [the gifts] according to it. ... "To each begam is to be delivered as follows: one special dancing-girl of the dancing-girls of Sultan Ibrahim [Ibrahim Lodi, the king Babur defeated at Panipat], with one gold plate full of jewels – ruby and pearl, cornelian and diamond, emerald and turquoise, topaz and cat's-eye – and two small mother-o'-pearl trays full of *ashrafis*, and on two other trays *shahrukhis*, and all sorts of stuffs by nines – that is, four trays and one plate. Take a dancing-girl and another plate of jewels, and one each of *ashrafis* and *shahrukhis*, and present, in accordance with my directions, to my elder relations the very plate of jewels and the self-same dancing-girl which I have given for them [*sic*]. I have made other gifts; convey these afterwards. Let them divide and present jewels and *ashrafis* and *shahrukhis* and stuffs to my sisters and children and the *harams* and kinsmen, and to the begams and aghas and nurses and foster-brethren and ladies, and to all who pray for me."²

¹ Gulbadan Banu Begum, *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah*, British Library MS Or. 166; Annette Susannah Beveridge (trans.), *The History of Humayun: Humayun Nama* (2nd edn, 1902; rpt. Delhi, 1994); hereafter cited as Gulbadan, *Ahval*, and Beveridge, *Humayun*, respectively. Beveridge, *Humayun*, p. 94; cf. Gulbadan, *Ahval*, fol. 9b.

² Beveridge, *Humayun*, pp. 95–96; cf. Gulbadan, *Ahval*, fols. 9b–10b.

Gulbadan's record of her father's inventory is striking for several reasons. It brings to life questions of correct deportment in the preparation of gifts and the manner of presenting (and accepting) them – so central to the sensibilities of the Timurid-Mughal world.³ It is particularly notable for depicting Babur's domestic life. In setting these out, the Begum also gives us glimpses of the range of Babur's domestic relationships and associations, with the old as well as the young. The list of gifts is a pointer to the centrality, and the hierarchical character, of these relationships. Babur gave clear instructions about what should be given to whom, and in what order. So the elder relations (*vali-uni'matan*) were to be given the following presents first: a dancing-girl, a plate of jewels, and a plate each of *ashrafis* and *shahrukhis* (designation for coins), to be followed by "other gifts" that Babur had listed for them. Similarly, his sisters, kinsmen and their wives, heads of households, nurses, and children were to receive presents later in accordance with Babur's list.

The Begum's memoir pays a great deal of attention to such illustrative inventories. In Gulbadan's elucidation, the details of presents and invitations serve not merely as a descriptive catalog, but as symbols of the privileges of seniority. They index the creation and maintenance of hierarchical relationships, as also the importance of building alliances and reinforcing kinship solidarities.

At another point in her memoir, Gulbadan discusses the time Humayun spent with the royal women when his court was settled for a while in Agra:

On court days, which were Sundays and Tuesdays, he used to go to the other side of the river. During his stay in the garden, *ajam* (Dil-dar Begam) and my sisters and the ladies (*haraman*) were often in his company. Of all the tents, Ma'suma Sultan Begam's was at the top of the row. Next came Gul-rang Begam's, and *ajam*'s was in the same place. Then the tent of my mother, Gul-barg Begam and of Bega Begam and the others. They set up the offices (*kar-khanaha*) and got them into order. When they had put up the pavilions (*khaima*) and tents (*khar-gah*) and the audience tent (*bar-gah*), the Emperor came to see the camp and the splendid set-out, and visited the begams and his sisters. As he dismounted somewhat near Ma'suma Begam's (tent), he honoured her with a visit. All of us, the begams and my sisters, were in his society. When he went to any begam's or sister's quarters, all the begams and all his sisters used to go with him.⁴

Note the careful attention paid to precise rules: designated days to go to the other side of the river, the careful arrangement of the tents of women, the *padshah* himself coming to see the arrangement, the manner and timing of his visits, and the deportment required of those who accompanied him.

³ Whenever I use the word Timurid-Mughal (not just Mughal) it is to underline Babur's concern, which he continuously expresses in his memoir, to retain the link with his paternal forefather, Timur. He does not entirely do away with his familial connection with his maternal forefather, Chingiz Khan, yet his rivalry with his Uzbek clansmen (direct descendants of Chingiz Khan) perhaps required that he make a powerful declaration of his Timurid identity. For details, see chapter 4.

⁴ Beveridge, *Humayun*, pp. 129–130; Gulbadan, *Ahval*, fols. 29b–30a.

These extracts, which could be set by the side of many others in Gulbadan's text, reveal a *haram* far different from that commonly presented to us. The complexity of relationships, and the sense of a multifaceted and intimate community that emerges here, is notable. By contrast, academic accounts of the *haram* that are available to us appear devoid of any historical depth, and unaware of the complex web and intricacy of relationships and activities found in the Mughal domestic world.

As noted in the introduction, historians have claimed that part of the reason for the absence of particular kinds of social history – specifically the history of the Mughal domestic life – lies in the inadequacy of available source material. I shall demonstrate here that the sources exist for very different kinds of histories as long as “different” kinds of questions are asked.

In thinking about early Mughal domestic life, I have not unearthed any new sources. Instead, I have returned to sources that have been available all along (imperial chronicles, ethical digests, visual representations, and architectural remains). This revisiting has involved listening to peripheral stories and voices, “drowned in the noise of statist commands.”⁵ It has also meant looking at well-known but neglected sources⁶ – such as Gulbadan's memoir – and using them more centrally. The return to the mainstream official chronicles in the light of these “peripheral” sources is no less instructive for the many new “insights” it allows. On the basis of this “rediscovered” archive, then, I suggest a number of ways in which another history may be brought into view. I hope that this will be a gendered and more self-consciously political history that cannot simply be hived off as “supplementary,” and that accounts such as the one I put forward here will serve to reopen other questions of central importance to Mughal history.

The question of sources

The first thing to do is to challenge the received wisdom that surviving sources are inadequate. The term “inadequacy” itself requires some unpacking. Are the sources scarce in the sense of being absent, or insufficient in quantity to provide an answer to specific questions? Are there not other important, though related, questions of inadequacy? How have the most “important” Mughal sources become available to us? In translation? What happens to these sources in translation? How much are the content and context transformed in the very process of translation? How do particular ways of

⁵ Ranajit Guha, “The Small Voice of History,” in *Subaltern Studies IX* (Delhi, 1996), p. 3.

⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam has also made the point that many different dimensions of Mughal history could be more fully explored through an examination of a wider range of known but, in all sorts of ways, neglected sources; Subrahmanyam, “The Mughal State – Structure or Process? Reflections on Recent Western Historiography,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 29, 3 (1992).

collating, editing, translating, and analyzing affect the way in which a text is "situated" and "received"?

The discussion that follows, centering on the question of the archive in the time of the first three Mughal kings – Babur, Humayun, and Akbar – should help to show that the inadequacy of source materials is only part – and perhaps a small part – of the problem. Let us begin with an examination of the records that make up the accepted archive for early Mughal times. For Babur, his memoir, the *Baburnama*,⁷ and the *Tarikh-i Rashidi* of his cousin Muhammad Haydar Dughlat,⁸ have remained the most popular texts for scholars. Babur wrote the *Baburnama* mainly between 1526 and 1529 in his native Turkic language, known today as Chaghatay. The text was translated into Persian in the court of Babur's grandson Akbar. Babur's "unadorned prose," Stephen Dale says, "seems closer in style to the freshness and informality of the diary or court memoir than to any standard literary or historical format."⁹

Muhammad Haydar Dughlat spent some part of his career in Kabul. He was in close contact with Babur during this period, and his work (composed in 1545–46) is valuable as it highlights the political-cultural intricacies of those parts of Central Asia and Afghanistan that Babur was dealing with at the time. Details of religious scholars, poets, calligraphers, painters, singers, geographical descriptions of countries, and the associations and networks of diverse tribes are sprinkled through Dughlat's account; in that sense, it is a close accompaniment to the *Baburnama*.

Among the chronicles most extensively used for information on Humayun's reign is the *Qanun-i Humayuni* (also called *Humayun-nama*), composed in 1534 under Humayun's patronage by one of his officials, Khvandamir. The author spent time at the court of 'Abdul Ghazi Sultan Husain bin Mansur bin Bayqura, the ruler of Herat (1468–1505), and in Khurasan and Persia, before joining Babur in 1528. His last days were spent in the court of Humayun. Khvandamir's memoir is, by his own claim, an eyewitness's account of the rules and ordinances of Humayun's reign, accompanied by descriptions of court festivities and of buildings erected by the *padshah* (king).¹⁰ The *Tazkirat-ul-Vaqi'at* (also called the *Tarikh-i*

⁷ W. M. Thackston (trans. and ed.), *Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur Mirza: Baburnama*, Parts I–III, Turkish transcription, Persian edition, and English translation (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); and Annette Susannah Beveridge (trans.), *Babur-nama (Memoirs of Babur) of Zahir'u'd-din Muhammad Babur Padshah Ghazi* (1921; rpt. Delhi, 1997); hereafter cited as Thackston, *Baburnama*; Beveridge, *Baburnama*. Cf. Dale, *Eight Paradises*, Introduction.

⁸ Sir E. Denison Ross (trans.) and N. Elias (ed.), *The Tarikh-i Rashidi of Muhammad Haidar Dughlat: A History of the Moguls of Central Asia* (London, 1895).

⁹ Dale, "Steppe Humanism," p. 41. For an extensive discussion of Babur's poetry and autobiography, see Dale, *Eight Paradises*, ch. V.

¹⁰ M. Hidayat Hosain (ed.), *The Qanun-i Humayuni of Khwandamir*, Bibliotheca Indica Series 260, no. 1488 (Calcutta, 1940). Persian edition; hereafter cited as Hosain, *Qanun-i Humayuni*; see the preface to the text.

Humayun or the *Humayun Shahi*) was put together in 1587 by Jawhar Aftabchi, Humayun's ewer-bearer. Composed in a "shaky and rustic" Persian, the text was subsequently revised by Ilahdad Fayzi Sarhindi.¹¹ This contemporary and rather candid account by a servant has been one of the major source books for the reconstruction of the life and times of the second Mughal, although it has not been adequately explored in some respects.¹²

Next in the corpus of well-known sources, the *Tazkireh-i Humayun wa Akbar* by Bayazid Bayat, which was completed in 1590–91, is a history of the reigns of Humayun and Akbar from 1542 to 1591. The author was a native of Tabriz who later joined the army of Humayun. He was apparently suffering from paralysis when he wrote the memoir, and therefore dictated it to a scribe.¹³ The biographies by Jawhar and Bayazid owe their origins to the time when materials were being collected for an official history during Akbar's reign. It was in this same context that Gulbadan Banu Begum, the aunt of the emperor, wrote the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah* upon which I focus in the next section.

The first official history of the Mughal court was commissioned by Akbar. The *Akbarnama* (completed in 1596) – a history of Akbar's life and times – and its official and equally voluminous appendix, the *A'in-i Akbari* – an administrative and statistical report on Akbar's government in all its branches, written by a close friend and minister of the emperor, Abu-l Fazl 'Allami – have remained the most important sources for all histories of his reign.¹⁴ Apart from the imperial history, 'Abd al-Qadir Badauni's three-volume *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* has also been very important.¹⁵ Badauni, a severe critic of Akbar's policies, wrote his history in secret. The text was hidden, and was copied and circulated after the death of Akbar. Historians have found this chronicle a useful counter to the panegyric account of the court chronicler, Abu-l Fazl, and have used it to crosscheck Abu-l Fazl's "facts" and to get a "fuller picture" of the political and religious issues of the time. In the same vein, of obtaining a more "objective" picture, students of

¹¹ Hermann Ethé, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1903), p. 222.

¹² Major Charles Stewart (trans.), *The Tezkereh al Vakiat or Private Memoirs of the Moghul Emperor Humayun* (1832; rpt. Lucknow, 1971); hereafter cited as Jouher-Stewart, *Tezkereh*.

¹³ B. P. Saxena, "Baizid Biyat and His Work – 'Mukhtasar,'" *Journal of Indian History*, 4, 1–3 (1925–26), p. 43. Other Persian and English editions of Bayazid Bayat that I have used here are as follows: M. Hidayat Hosain (ed.), *Tadhkira-i Humayun wa Akbar of Bayazid Biyat*, Bibliotheca Indica Series 264, no. 1546 Persian text (Calcutta, 1941); B. P. Saksena, "Memoirs of Baizid," *Allahabad University Studies*, 6, 1 (1930), pp. 71–148; H. Beveridge, "The Memoirs of Bayazid (Bajazet) Biyat," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 62, 1–4 (1898), pp. 296–316. These editions are hereafter cited as Saxena, *Mukhtasar*; Hosain, *Tadhkira*; Saksena, *Memoirs*; and Beveridge, *Biyat*.

¹⁴ The following translations are most widely used by scholars: H. Beveridge (trans.), *The Akbar Nama of Abu-l-Fazl*, vols. I–III (1902–39; rpt. Delhi, 1993); H. Blochmann and H. S. Jarrett (trans.), *The A-in-I Akbari*, vols. I–III (1873, 1894; rpt. Calcutta, 1993).

¹⁵ George S. A. Ranking, W. H. Lowe, and Sir Wolseley Haig (trans. and eds.), *Muntakhab-ut-tawarikh*, vols. I–III (1884–1925; rpt. Delhi, 1986).

Akbar's reign have found a neutral middle ground in the cautious, even-handed manner of description of the *Tabaqat-i Akbari*, written by another member of Akbar's court, Nizam al-Din Ahmad.¹⁶

For a long time now, a canonical position has been ascribed to these kinds of sources. The choice of certain sources as basic and central has in turn tended to perpetuate certain kinds of histories. The interest in agrarian-administrative-institutional histories for example has made chronicles like the *Akbarnama* and the *A'in-i Akbari* appear essential to any undertaking in Mughal history. Relying on texts like the *Akbarnama*, historians have often uncritically reproduced the primary sources themselves, and therefore duplicated one or another chronicler's assessments of the empire, imperial relations, and other related matters. In this way, many of our modern histories have turned out to be not very different from the primary text (or texts) out of which they are constructed.

One has to ask why it is that the *Akbarnama* and the *A'in-i Akbari* immediately capture the historians' attention when they turn to a reconstruction of the history of Akbar. Why is it that the Mughal miniatures found in museums across the globe, and the architectural sites of the time, located in Afghanistan, Central Asia, India, and Pakistan, do not figure in our minds in the same way? Akbar and his successors had the existing royal biographies, and other important volumes of histories and legends, including the *Baburnama* and the *Akbarnama*, illustrated – so that miniature paintings form a striking and important part of the historians' most prized sources. However, these other sources – visual materials, architectural remains, the anecdotal and poetic accounts of women and servants – have been marginalized by modern historiography, which allots them to separate, more specialized disciplines, or dismisses their concerns as “trivial.”

The *Akbarnama* and the *A'in-i Akbari* have been singled out as “foundational” sources in this way, not only because of their supposed “accuracy” and “objectivity,” but because they are official compilations dealing directly with political-administrative matters – and closest in that sense to a modern state's archive. Hence Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi: “The foundations of any historical study of Akbar must rest solidly upon Abu-l-Fadl's *Akbarnamah*. It is full, detailed and mainly authentic, because it was written by a man who was fully familiar with the official policies and actions of the government and enjoyed not only the confidence but actually the friendship of the emperor.”¹⁷

Harbans Mukhia's well-known study entitled *Historians and Historiography During the Reign of Akbar* serves to illustrate my point about the pivotal position ascribed to certain Mughal sources.¹⁸ The arrangement of this book is

¹⁶ B. De and Bani Prasad (trans.), *The Tabaqat-i Akbari of Khwajah Nizammudin Ahmad*, vols. I-III (1936; rpt. Delhi, 1992).

¹⁷ Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *Akbar: The Architect of the Mughul Empire* (1978; rpt. Delhi, 1987), pp. 2, 6.

¹⁸ Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography During the Reign of Akbar* (New Delhi, 1976).

telling. In the three central chapters of the book, the author discusses the three “major” historians of Akbar’s empire: Abu-l Fazl, ‘Abd al-Qadir Badauni, and Nizam al-Din Ahmad. After a detailed discussion of the texts of these chroniclers, Mukhia, in his penultimate chapter, goes on to discuss “Some Minor Historical Works Written During Akbar’s Reign.”¹⁹ Here he refers, among others, to the memoirs of Jawhar Aftabchi and Bayazid Bayat. While reading this chapter, I expected to find Gulbadan’s text among the “minor historical works.” Instead, all we find is a footnote in which the author says, “I have not included a study of the *Humayun Nama* of Gulbadan Begam in this chapter though it falls in the same class of [‘Minor Historical’] works as the three mentioned above. The reason is that I feel I have practically nothing to add to what its translator, Mrs. Beveridge, has said in her introduction to the translation.”²⁰

It is striking that Mukhia provides no more than a single footnote on Gulbadan’s text, and his comment that he has nothing to add to what its translator said in 1902 invites some reflection. Two suggestions might be made in this connection. Mukhia’s reasons for not including the Begum’s memoir in his monograph stems partly from the fact that the author distinguishes between major (political-administrative, and emperor-centered) and minor (of royal women, servants, and so forth), privileging the “hard politics” of the former against the “soft society” of the latter, thus neglecting to see the power-relations that go into the making of such categories. The presumption of the supposedly central character of some sources, as opposed to the peripheral (or minor) status of others, derives in this case from a belief that despite limitations, certain texts like the *Akbarnama* are authentic because they were based upon “official documents as well as memoirs of persons involved in, or witness to, the events.”²¹ As I have noted, Mukhia is not alone in this belief in the “authenticity,” and hence “reliability,” of these sources.

In addition, however, Mukhia is possibly aware of the challenges posed by feminist perspectives and questions in history writing; he does not know what to do with Gulbadan’s unusual memoir – or those challenges. Therefore in his writing, the Begum’s text becomes even more peripheral than the other so-called minor historical works. What this amounts to is a refusal to take on the task of looking anew at sources, and to acknowledge major developments that had occurred in history writing even before his book was published in 1976.

It is in this context of a rather simple (transparent) reading of the Mughal archive that I wish to explore the “minor” text, the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah*, left to us by Gulbadan Banu Begum, and to show by a critical engagement with it, how many hidden dimensions of Mughal history may yet be probed.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xvi. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154, n. 1. ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

The challenge of a princess's memoir

Gulbadan was the daughter of Babur, sister of Humayun, and aunt of Akbar. She was born in 1523 in Afghanistan, and traveled to Hindustan (to Agra) at the age of six-and-a-half (1529), after Babur had made some substantial conquests in that region. Her mother was Dildar Begum, but Maham Begum, the senior wife of Babur, took charge of her.²² As her memoir reveals, Gulbadan witnessed the early turmoil of Babur's and Humayun's reigns. She and her husband, Khizr Khvajeh Khan, seem to have spent much of their time wandering with what may be described as her peripatetic Mughal family home. "She spent her childhood under her father's rule in Kabul and Hindustan; her girlhood and young wifehood shared the fall and exile of Humayun; and her maturity and failing years slipped past under the protection of Akbar," as her translator, Annette Beveridge, put it in 1902.²³

Gulbadan was thus a close witness to the making of the Mughal monarchy, seeing it through many vicissitudes – from the inception of the Mughal kingdom in the early conquests of Babur to its established splendor in Akbar's reign. She came to write about all this at the behest of her nephew, Akbar, whose efforts to consolidate and institutionalize Mughal power included the command that a comprehensive and authoritative official history be written of its early stages and of his reign.

Around 1587, when Akbar commissioned an official history of his empire, several "servants of the State" and "old members of the Mughal family" were requested to write down or relate their impressions of earlier times.²⁴ Gulbadan herself notes: "There had been an order issued, 'Write down whatever you know of the doings of *Firdaus-makani* [posthumous title for Babur meaning "dwelling in paradise"] and *Jannat-ashyani* [posthumous title for Humayun meaning "nestling in paradise"].'"²⁵ It was in accordance with this instruction that Bayazid Bayat, Jawhar, and Gulbadan Banu Begum produced their memoirs.²⁶

What Gulbadan wrote, however, was no panegyric. Her writing was markedly different from anything that other official chroniclers or servants of the king produced at the time, as the list of the sources used for the compilation of the *Akbarnama* shows.²⁷ Other memoirists tended to favor genres that have been labeled as *tarikh*, a word referring to annals, history, or chronological narrative; *tazkireh*, written in the form of biographies and memoirs; *name*, included biographies and exemplary accounts, aside from histories, epistles, and accounts of exemplary deeds; *qanun*, written in the mode of normative accounts or legal texts; and *vaqi'at* meaning a narrative of happenings, events,

²² Beveridge, *Humayun*, pp. 1, 8–9. ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2. ²⁴ *Akbarnama*, I, p. 29.

²⁵ Beveridge, *Humayun*, p. 83, and n. 1; cf. Gulbadan, *Ahval*, fol. 2b.

²⁶ Beveridge, *Biyat*, p. 296. ²⁷ *Akbarnama*, I, see Introduction, especially pp. 29–33 and notes.

and occurrences.²⁸ Interestingly, the genre title that Gulbadan chose was different from all of these: it was *Ahval*, a word meaning conditions, state, circumstances, or situations.²⁹ Does this title index a different conception of what a “history” of the times should be?

It is not possible to give a straightforward answer to this question. One disadvantage is that only one copy of Gulbadan’s *Ahval* survives today. This manuscript, now held at the British Library, is incomplete, ending abruptly some three years before Akbar’s accession. Annette Beveridge, the translator of the *Ahval*, noted in 1925 that her search for a second copy of the *Ahval* that began in 1902 was unsuccessful.³⁰

Turki was Gulbadan’s native language, and one can trace many Turki words in the Persian manuscript. Yet we do not know if she wrote both in Turki and in Persian. From Humayun’s time on, the influence of Persian had clearly increased in the Mughal court.³¹ Gulbadan Begum, his sister, is almost certain to have learnt the language as she grew up in these surroundings. Indeed, two lines of poetry by her in Persian are preserved in the work of Mir Mahdi Shirazi.³² By the time Gulbadan wrote her memoir, Persian had already been declared the language of administration at all levels. As Muzaffar Alam puts it, it had emerged as “the language of the king, the royal household and the high Mughal elite.”³³ The nomination of Gulbadan to write a memoir of the times, as well as the Persian verse attributed to her, indicates her standing as a “learned” person.³⁴

For all that, we know little about Gulbadan’s total literary output, her education, or the circumstances of the composition of her memoir. We cannot know, therefore, what models Gulbadan drew upon to write her own text. It certainly does not show adherence to any available format, differing markedly in this respect from most court chronicles of the time. It is without any didactic purpose, and lies outside the “mirror for princes” genre, which seems to have been prevalent then. Gulbadan read some contemporary memoirs and chronicles of kings, including her father’s memoir,³⁵ but the *Baburnama*

²⁸ For the meanings of the words, see the following: S. Haim (ed.), *Dictionary English–Persian Persian–English* rev. edn; F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian–English Dictionary*, 2nd edn; and S. Haim, *Shorter Persian English Dictionary*, 3rd edn, s. v. “tarikh,” “tazkireh,” “name,” “qanun,” “vaqi’at.”

²⁹ Steingass, *Persian*; Haim, *Shorter Dictionary*, s. v. “ahval.”

³⁰ British Library, MSS Eur C176/ 221, 1–2; M. A. Scherer, “Woman to Woman: Annette, the Princess, and the Bibi,” *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 6, 2 (1996), pp. 208–209.

³¹ For the importance of Persian among the Muslim elite in India even in the pre-Mughal period, and its remarkable growth under the Mughals, see Alam, “The Pursuit of Persian,” pp. 317–350. The observations of the Jesuit fathers in the time of Akbar tell us a great deal about the everyday usage and popularity of the language. See, Monserrate, *Commentary*, and Correia-Afonso, *Letters*.

³² Beveridge, *Humayun*, p. 76.

³³ Alam, “The Pursuit of Persian,” pp. 324, 325 (emphasis Alam’s).

³⁴ For an early comment on Gulbadan’s life, see Annette Susannah Beveridge, “Life and Writings of Gulbadan Begam (Lady Rosebody),” *Calcutta Review*, 106 (1892), pp. 346–347. Hereafter cited as *Gulbadan Begam*.

³⁵ Beveridge, *Humayun*, p. 83; cf. Gulbadan, *Ahval*, fol. 2b.

was clearly not the literary model for her *Ahval*. Annette Beveridge tells us that the Begum had a copy of Bayazid Bayat's *Tazkireh-i Humayun va Akbar* in her library, and that she found a copy of Khvandamir's *Qanun-i Humayuni* inscribed with the Begum's name.³⁶ Yet Gulbadan did not imitate the styles of either of these accounts, which were in any case contemporaneous with her own, and thus perhaps unavailable at the time of her writing. The *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah* might thus be classed as an "open" text belonging to no recognized genre.

Whatever we may conclude about the problems of authorship, and of personal memory, given the uncertainties surrounding the Begum's memoir, one thing is clear. If most chronicles of the age aimed to be authoritative histories in the manner of the generic (panegyric) histories of rulers, Gulbadan moved away from this genre to produce an account of far more "modest" incidents in the lives of Babur and Humayun. Her account of the everyday lives of this royal family in peripatetic circumstances is a unique piece of writing. Gulbadan creates an unusual space in her writing to compose a picture of many areas of Mughal life very different from that provided in other sources.

Even a brief description of the contents and the organization of *Ahval* serves to illustrate this point. The surviving copy of the memoir is divided into two parts. In the first part, Gulbadan discusses the period of the life of her father, Babur. This includes detail quite similar to that contained in Babur's memoir, about his wanderings in parts of Afghanistan, and Hindustan, his wars and victories at the time, and the early years of his establishment of Mughal rule in Hindustan. The specialness of the Begum's memoir, however, is to be found in the images she provides of her father's "home" life: extensive information about his marriages, his wives and children, his relationships with his kith and kin, especially the senior women of the Mughal lineage. The memoir is remarkable not only for this rare account of domestic life, but also for the complexity that the author brings out in those episodes that are discussed in other chronicles of the time. Consider the inventory of gifts and instructions for their presentation that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. In his own brief discussion of the same event, Babur makes only a casual, and far less interesting, mention of the presents.³⁷

Gulbadan begins a substantial discussion of the reign of Humayun, her brother, from the nineteenth folio. Alongside a discussion of the king's expeditions and reconquest of Hindustan, the memoir provides here, too, other kinds of fascinating information. We learn of Mughal women lost during wars, as well as of Akbar's birth in the harsh circumstances of the itinerant life of Humayun and his wife, Hamideh Banu Begum. Gulbadan's

³⁶ Beveridge, *Humayun*, pp. 76 and 78.

³⁷ Thackston, *Baburnama*, pp. 634–635; and Beveridge, *Baburnama*, pp. 525–526.

record of royal women's articulations about how they should marry is telling. So is her elaboration of Humayun's frequent visits to the senior women of the family, and the tension that arose between him and his wives as a result of these visits. Add to these the impressive detail provided of the celebrations and feasts held by the senior women on occasions such as Humayun's accession, and at the time of the wedding of his stepbrother, Mirza Hindal, and we have a lost world of the court in camp brought to life in a way that no other chronicle of the time even approaches.

Gulbadan lists all sorts of people, and details substantially the activities of several Mughal women – in moments of marriage, childbirth, and “adoption,” in the celebration of feasts, on occasions of death, in times of intimacy, strategy, and planning – thus illuminating the practices involved in the making of early Mughal monarchy. In her memoir, we hear of forbidden feelings, hierarchical but intimate relationships, and acts contrary to the logic of imperial power. In this way, we are reminded of the flesh and blood of historical figures, wellknown and not so wellknown, as well as the limitations and inventiveness of their lives. What the text provides is a rich, inflected sense of the domestic lives of the early Mughals.

The two extracts from the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah* cited in the first section of this chapter are enough to indicate the kinds of questions that the text immediately raises, and that it is necessary for us to ask about the imbrication of the Mughal domestic world in the everyday life of the courts and kings, or equally, the imbrication of courts and kings in the everyday life of the domestic world. Let me point to one more episode to delineate further the potential of Gulbadan's memoir. The event concerns the participation of the *haraman* (women of the *haram*) in relation to matters of kingship. Gulbadan sets this episode during the period when Humayun was on the run owing to the challenge of the Afghan ruler Sher Shah. Humayun's movements through various parts of Hindustan and Central Asia at this time were complicated by the struggle for power with his own stepbrothers, Mirza Kamran and Mirza 'Askari, who were often accomplices.

At one point during this struggle, Mirza Kamran suggested to 'Askari that they should work together to take Qandahar from Mirza Hindal, the third stepbrother of Humayun. On hearing of this, Humayun approached Khanzadeh Begum, his paternal aunt (elder sister of Babur), and requested her to go to Qandahar to advise Mirza Hindal and Mirza Kamran that since the threat of their rival clansmen was immense, it was best to be friends among themselves. Khanzadeh Begum traveled from Jun to Qandahar, and Kamran arrived there from Kabul. Mirza Kamran urged Khanzadeh Begum to have the *khutba* read in his name. As regards the matter of *khutba*, he also wrote to Hindal's mother (and his stepmother), Dildar Begum, who suggested he asked Khanzadeh Begum, their elder kinswoman, “the truth about the *khutba* [*haqiqate khutbeh*].” When Kamran finally spoke with Khanzadeh Begum, she advised him as follows: “as his Majesty *Firdaus-makani* [Babur]

decided it and gave his throne to the Emperor Humayun, and as you, all of you, have read the *khutba* in his name till now, so now regard him as your superior and remain in obedience to him.”³⁸ This extract focuses upon an influential aunt playing a key role in the reading of the *khutba* – the decree for the proclamation of kingship. I shall deal with this episode in greater detail in a later chapter; I cite it here only to ask whether we could have a more striking statement of how senior women collaborated in the process of the promotion of kings.

Questions of translation

The colonial scholar Annette Beveridge accomplished the truly commendable task of unearthing, translating and presenting to the scholarly world the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah*. Yet it would be surprising if, a hundred years on, we did not have some questions about the way in which that work was done. The process by which Gulbadan's memoir was made available to us, and the mutations that took place in the course of that process, need to be borne in mind by the modern historian. Much would be gained from considering carefully what happens to the content and context of sources in the process of collation and translation.³⁹ While this will have to be the subject for larger investigation, a brief discussion of it here, in relation to the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah*, should indicate further the existing possibilities of rethinking Mughal social history.

As a first step, it will help to keep in mind Annette Beveridge's own social and intellectual context. She was born Annette Akroyd (1842–1929) in Stourbridge, a small town just west of Birmingham. A daughter of “a self-made man of England's rising middle class,”⁴⁰ she was brought up as a Unitarian in religion and “radical” in politics. In 1861, she enrolled at the Unitarian supported Bedford College in London. Her education was premised on the notion of “evolution” and “progress” alongside a Victorian grooming with an emphasis on domestic and personal life, and the ideology of nineteenth-century scientism with its constituent components.⁴¹ She also shared the nineteenth century's unquestioned belief in science's objectivity

³⁸ Beveridge, *Humayun*, p. 161; cf. Gulbadan, *Ahval*, fol. 51b.

³⁹ My concern is not only with accuracy in the translation of individual words and phrases, which is, of course, important; cf. Shahpurshah Hormasji Hodivala, *Studies in Indo-Muslim History: A Critical Commentary on Elliot and Dowson's History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, vols. I–II (Lahore, 1979).

⁴⁰ Scherer, “Woman to Woman,” p. 198.

⁴¹ Pat Barr, *The Memsahibs: The Women of Victorian India* (London, 1976), pp. 188–189; see Scherer, “Woman to Woman,” p. 197, for a discussion of what she calls Annette Beveridge's “sturdy Victorian temperament.” Scherer also refers to Beveridge's interest in Christian Science during the years of her translation of the *Ahval*; “Woman to Woman,” p. 209; also, Scherer, “Annette Akroyd Beveridge: Victorian Reformer, Oriental Scholar” (unpublished Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1995), ch. II, especially, pp. 96–99, 118–122.

and its ability to “represent” reality. In this triumphalist vision, the institutions, practices, traditions and belief-systems of the West were rational, and those of other (non-Western) parts of the world were presented as being backward, if not uncivilized. Annette Beveridge’s public opposition to the Ilbert Bill of 1883, seeking to empower Indian civil servants with criminal jurisdiction over European subjects in country stations, was very much in accord with these views.⁴²

How does this self-confident colonial context affect Beveridge’s translation of the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah*? The first point to note is that the Victorian translator’s fixed frame of knowledge also “fixes” the stories she reads in the *Ahval*. As a result, numerous interesting nuances are lost and what appears before the reader is a flattened picture of early Mughal domestic life. This may be witnessed in many instances of Beveridge’s literal paraphrasing and in her attempt to find exact English equivalents of Persian words that have complex histories and associations. It may also be seen in the “aristocratic” (yet colonial bourgeois) sensibility with which she regards the characters of the memoir.

Consider the following passage, which evokes marriage practices in the time of Humayun. In the memoir, the conversation between Maham Begum and others is placed two years after Babur’s death (1532) when Humayun was trying to retain and expand his father’s territories in India. Gulbadan writes:

My lady, who was Maham Begam, had a great longing and desire to see a son of Humayun. Wherever there was a good-looking and nice girl, she used to bring her into his service. Maywa-jan, a daughter of Khadang (? Khazang), the chamberlain (*yasa-wal*), was in my employ. One day (after) the death of his Majesty *Firdaus-makani*, my lady said: “Humayun, Maywa-jan is not bad. Why do you not take her into your service?” So, at her word, Humayun married and took her that very night.

Three days later Bega Begam came from Kabul. She became in the family way. In due time she had a daughter, whom they named ‘Aqiqa. Maywa-jan said to Lady (*Aka*) Maham Begam, “I am in the family way, too.” Then my lady got ready two sets of weapons, and said: “Whichever of you bears a son, I will give him good arms.” . . . [She] was very happy, and kept saying: “Perhaps one of them will have a son.” She kept watch till Bega Begam’s ‘Aqiqa was born. Then she kept an eye on Maywa-jan. Ten months went by. The eleventh also passed. Maywa-jan said: “My maternal aunt was in Mirza Ulugh Beg’s *haram*. She had a son in the twelfth month; perhaps I am like her.” So they sewed tents and filled pillows. But in the end everyone knew she was a fraud.⁴³

“My lady Maham Begam, had a great longing and desire to see a son of Humayun,” Gulbadan tells us. In this world, as elsewhere, it was the role of the younger wives to produce heirs: in their turn, at a later stage, they themselves instructed younger wives about such responsibilities. This duty

⁴² Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 58–60; cf. Scherer, “Annette Akroyd Beveridge,” ch. V.

⁴³ Beveridge, *Humayun*, pp. 112–113; cf. Gulbadan, *Ahval*, fols. 21b–22a.

of elder women to advise the young, and of the young to carry forward the name of the family through reproduction, was of no small moment in the Timurid-Mughal world. Miveh-jan and her "services" would fit this tradition. The production of royal children was a much-desired event: for such an esteemed birth meant the perpetuation of the eminent Timurid-Mughal family. The task was especially crucial in the time of Babur and Humayun when the risk of the disappearance of the family was very real, on account of the Uzbek threat that Babur faced in Central Asia, and later because of the Afghan challenge encountered by Humayun in Hindustan. It was an urgent requirement in these circumstances to preserve the lineage, and to achieve that, marriages and the birth of children were essential. It was in this context that Maham Begum made the point about male heirs. She looked for wives for Humayun for the momentous task of producing heirs to the throne.⁴⁴

In a separate article on Gulbadan Begum's life and writings, the revised version of which was to later become the Introduction to her translation, Annette Beveridge drew the following picture of Maham Begum while discussing the episode described above:

Maham Begam was a clever woman, and both as wife and as widow made herself felt in her home. Lady Rosebody [Gulbadan Begum] lifts the *parda* and shows us the Empress-mother busied in duties not often thus disclosed to the outside eye. In telling the story, which for the sake of its many special points we quote in full, she has no air of being indiscreet, and is, as may be seen, quite matter-of-fact.⁴⁵

Beveridge sees in Maham's activities more "a clever . . . Empress-mother" than a senior woman with wisdom, status and authority, who would have seen it her duty to advise and guide her younger kinsfolk, and to sustain the name and honor of her family. She elevates this "elder" to a rarefied and singular position that is far removed from the projection of plural, and sometimes overlapping, circles of intimates and authorities in the peripatetic Mughal world of Gulbadan's memoir.

Gulbadan describes many different kinds of royal women, and marks the different ways in which they worked to preserve the lineage and its practices. The senior women helped make dynastic linkages through marriages by which the name of the Timurid-Mughals was carried forward. Younger wives produced heirs. The function of senior women was neither sexual nor reproductive, although as young mothers, they too had been expected to give birth to children. Tradition was preserved (and perpetuated) by their bodily, reproductive functions in their youth, but also by their role as elders and advisers. They were inheritors and transmitters of tradition, in both roles.

There were, within the intimate circles of the Mughal kings, nurses, servants, and grooms, with their respective commitments to Mughal royalty.

⁴⁴ Beveridge, *Humayun*, pp. 111–112 and nn. 1, 2; Gulbadan, *Ahval*, fol. 21b.

⁴⁵ Beveridge, "Gulbadan Begam," pp. 353–354.

Take the example of nurses who fed, fostered, and cared for Akbar. Many of them were tied to the family of Humayun, not by birth or kinship but by acts of loyalty. Jiji Anageh, for instance, was married to “the nobly-born” Shams al-Din Muhammad of Ghazni who had helped Humayun up the steep banks of the Ganges when Sher Shah defeated him.⁴⁶ Fakhr-un-Nisa Begum, who also fed Akbar, seems to have been Humayun’s attendant from his childhood. Gulbadan Begum lists her as one of those who attended the wedding feast of Hindal Mirza.⁴⁷ Likewise, another nurse who fed Akbar was Kuki Anageh, the wife of Tuq Begi, who is referred to as *Tuq Begi Saqi*, i.e., page or cup-bearer by Bayazid Bayat.⁴⁸

In this context of highly open and variegated domestic relations, the attribution of “cleverness” and “singularity” to Maham Begum by Beveridge is perhaps too hasty. One example of this kind of slanting, which is accompanied by an assimilation of early Mughal society and mores into something more recognizably Victorian, is the use of the honorific “My Lady” for *Akam*, and other cognate terms. This form of address is found dispersed throughout the translation, as also in the first line of the extract from Gulbadan that we have been considering here. Beveridge ponders over the meaning of “*Akam*” at one point. She writes: “the Turki Aka is used as a title of respect from a junior to a senior. It has also the sense ‘elder brother,’ which makes application to a woman doubtful. Babar uses the word ... and Mr. Erskine [a contemporary scholar of Annette Beveridge, known for the first English translation of the memoir of Babur] suggests to read ‘my Lady’ [*sic*].”⁴⁹

Beveridge declares it hard to apply the connotation of respect embedded in the word *akam* to a woman, and instead chooses “My Lady” – with its implications of elevation and romance in the likeness of late medieval European (knightly) traditions, which are not readily instantiated in the Timurid-Mughal world. Gulbadan, in fact, uses the word *akam* with a great sense of affection and respect in her descriptions: *akam*, or “my *aka*.” *Aka*, a Turki word (used for men), is very close in essence to *khanum* or *begum*. Reverence, privileged status, and deference (that came with enhanced age) are marked characteristics of all of these words.

In a similar way, we might ask questions about the word *havasak*, in the translation cited above. In the last line of the passage, the word “fraud” is used for the Persian word *havasak*. The latter, which is not found as such in Persian dictionaries, is an affective diminutive of *havas*, meaning desire, caprice. While Beveridge interprets *havasak* as a pejorative, Miveh-jan’s craving for a child is hardly unexpected, given the Timurid-Mughal context of the politics of marriage and reproduction, and the quick dismissal of her

⁴⁶ *Akbarnama*, I, p. 130, n. 1; Beveridge, *Humayun*, p. 142, and n. 4; Gulbadan, *Ahval*, fol. 37b.

⁴⁷ Beveridge, *Humayun*, pp. 122, 185; cf. Gulbadan, *Ahval*, fols. 26a, 71a.

⁴⁸ *Akbarnama*, I, p. 130, n. 1. ⁴⁹ Beveridge, *Humayun*, pp. 89–90, n. 4.

state as “fraudulent” – rather than, say, as a case of hysterical pregnancy – amounts to a reduction of the ambivalence and tension that marks Gulbadan's text.⁵⁰

Despite the evident problems of translation, it is not difficult to see the memoir's rich potential in helping us comprehend the processes at work in the making of the Mughal monarchy and its domestic world. Against the background of fragments from the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah*, it is therefore possible to consider the conditions and ways of domestic life under the early Mughals. Gulbadan's documentation of the roles and positions of Mughal men and women allows us to explore the meanings of relationships among them: the extremely varied, and mostly hierarchical, nature of these relationships, the kinds of conflict, and the solidarities making for diverse forms of community. Different kinds of relationships are indexed in the participation of women and men, in the making of marriages, in festivities and other celebrations, and in the observance of customs and rituals at births and deaths and more everyday occasions. It is through an excavation of these relationships and events that we are likely to be able to delineate forms of Mughal sociability as well as think through other concepts, those of motherhood and wifehood, for instance, the ways in which marriages were effected (and why in those ways), or the prevailing notions of duty, loyalty, and love.

Concluding thoughts

If the multiplex character of Gulbadan's memoir opens some fascinating arenas for us, it also helps us to read other Mughal chronicles very differently, for these too are richer in meaning and content than the historians have made them out to be.

In histories of the Mughals, there is a sharp focus on the personality and politics of the Mughal kings and their most prominent lieutenants. The emperor, his nobles and their political-administrative-military exploits are explored over and over again; other worlds are hardly even noticed. There are two problems that flow from this. First, as feminist writings have shown in so many other contexts, a large part of the human experience falls outside

⁵⁰ The context of Timurid-Mughal reproductive politics might allow us to read *havasak* as a condition applicable to women who become desirous of having children and begin to have symptoms of pregnancy (swelling breasts and stomach and milk) without any biological conception of a child (termed hysterical pregnancy in current medical terminology). This condition, which occurs due to a keen desire for motherhood, can change. Of course, hysterical pregnancy, medically speaking, is a fairly complex phenomenon. There are several realms in the spectrum of hysteria, thus acquiring many forms and conditions. *Couvade* or “hysteria by proxy” is one such form: a factitious disorder since there is some awareness on the part of the agent that they are not really pregnant. “Malingering” is “deliberate faking” of pregnancy. *Pseudocyesis* falls in the third realm of this scale: compulsive disorder where the patient completely believes that her condition of pregnancy is true. I am thankful to Dr. Ajay Wasan (research fellow at the Harvard Medical School) and Simone Taubenberger for these details.

are remarkable examples of the high profile of the senior Mughal women and their wielding of authority – instances that are rarely detailed in other court chronicles of the time. This, in itself, should serve as sufficient invitation for us to explore further why European travelers' accounts carry such details, and how they might contribute to a better understanding of Mughal society and culture.

In a similar way, a concern with “domestic” affairs and changing relationships could lead to new readings of some of the miniature paintings made in Akbar's atelier (and subsequently, on an even larger scale). Mughal miniatures are among the few documents that provide us with a rich body of materials for the study of the Mughal court and society. Yet, even where their importance as sources has been recognized, the questions asked have been chiefly about processes of production, and about authorship and dates.⁵⁵

Thus, the easily available but neglected memoir of a Mughal princess enables us to raise questions about a Mughal “becoming” that Mughal historians have all too often skirted. This relates both to the coming into being of an empire, and to the simultaneous institution of an archive. By making it possible for us to see how one of the most vaunted Mughal sources (the *Akbarnama*) came into being, rendering its own “sources” peripheral as it did so, the memoir opens up the question of the *making* of sources, even as it raises questions about the assigned limits of Mughal history.

The Begum's text challenges some of Mughal historiography's most beloved propositions, such as the one that the sources are simply not available for this or that inquiry. Sensitized by the Begum's account of the struggles involved in the establishment of a new royal life and culture, one also learns what other (“central,” official) frequently mined sources are capable of telling us about these processes. For what Gulbadan's *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah* suggests very clearly indeed is the fact of the fluidity and contestation that went into the founding of this new polity in its new setting – not only its new power and grandeur, but also its new regulations and accommodations, its traditions and its hierarchies. Her writing points to the history of a subjectivity and a culture, of political power and of social relationships, struggling to be born. Historians wishing to extend the frontiers of Mughal history cannot but ask, as part of this endeavor, for a more sustained history of everyday lives and associations based on sources like Gulbadan's memoir, but hardly on that alone.

⁵⁵ Cf. Juneja, *Architecture*.

Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World

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