

Jahangir

## Praise for the Book

‘A stylishly and enjoyably discursive retelling of the life of Jahangir: thoughtful and psychologically penetrating, it strips away the glitter and glamour of the Mughal court to reveal a deftly sketched portrait of Jahangir the man, in all his hedonism, inquisitiveness, refinement and intelligence.’

**William Dalrymple**

‘A fascinating book, it not only retells the story of Jahangir with an objective eye to detail and characterization, but also tells us what the Mughal world was like in early seventeenth century India. Well written and properly researched, it is also a timely book: it recalls an India which – contrary to popular and false belief – was religiously tolerant, reasonably open and pluralistic. It was an India vibrant and opulent, the object of envy for the foreigner, be they Central Asian or Firangi. The important role of wise women in governance during Mughal times is especially brought home to the reader with great force.’

**Shamsur Rahman Faruqi**

‘Rich in detail and narrated with great flair, *Jahangir* offers a vivid portrait of a fascinating man and emperor, bringing alive the inner workings of the Mughal court and their unforgettable world of splendour.’

**Manu S. Pillai**

# Jahangir

An Intimate Portrait of a  
Great Mughal

Parvati Sharma

 juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS  
KS House, 118 Shahpur Jat, New Delhi 110049, India

First published in hardback by Juggernaut Books 2018  
Published in paperback 2020

Copyright © Parvati Sharma 2018

Quotes from Wheeler M. Thackston's translation of *Jahangirnama*  
copyright © Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery,  
Smithsonian Institution. Used with permission.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The international boundaries on the maps of India are neither  
purported to be correct nor authentic by Survey of India directives.

ISBN 9789353450953

For sale in the Indian Subcontinent only

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any  
means without the written permission of the publisher.

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, New Delhi

Printed at Manipal Technologies Ltd

*For Aftab Uncle  
with love*



## Cast of Characters

Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir: Fourth Mughal emperor, known as Prince Salim before his accession.

Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar: Salim's father. Third Mughal emperor, usually considered the greatest of the dynasty.

Mariam-uz-Zamani ('Mary of the ages'): Salim's mother. Sometimes called Jodha Bai. Daughter of Raja Bihari Mal Kachhwaha of Amer (later Jaipur), sister of Raja Bhagwan Das Kachhwaha and aunt of Raja Man Singh.

Mirza\* Murad: Salim's middle half-brother and Akbar's second son.

Mirza Daniyal: Salim's youngest half-brother. Akbar's third and youngest son.

Hamida Banu Begum (titled Maryam Makani, 'one who lives with Mary'): Salim's grandmother, Akbar's mother and wife of the second Mughal emperor, Humayun.

Gulbadan Begum: Daughter of Babur, the founder of the

Mughal dynasty. Half-sister of Humayun and author of the *Humayun-nama*.

Ruqaiya Sultan Begum: Akbar's cousin and first wife. Adoptive mother of Khurram.

Salima Sultan Begum: Daughter of Humayun's half-sister Gulrukh Begum. Wife and then widow of Humayun's general and Akbar's regent, Bairam Khan. Akbar's cousin and later his wife.

Man Bai (titled Shah Begum, 'king lady'): Salim's first wife and Khusro's mother. Daughter of Raja Bhagwan Das and sister of Raja Man Singh.

Jagat Gosain or Jodh Bai (titled Bilquis Makani, 'lady of paradise'): Salim's wife and Khurram's mother. Daughter of Raja Udai Singh (the Mota Raja, 'fat king') of Jodhpur.

Mihrunnisa (titled Nurmahal, 'light of the palace', and Nurjahan, 'light of the world'): Salim's favourite wife. Daughter of Ghiyas Beg and Asmat Begum.

Khusro: Salim's first son, born to Man Bai.

Parvez: Salim's second son, born to Sahib Jamal, 'mistress of beauty'.

Khurram: Salim's third son, born to Jagat Gosain and adopted by Ruqaiya Sultan Begum.

Shahryar: The more prominent of Salim's two youngest sons (the other being Jahandar, born in the same month). Husband of Mihrunnisa's daughter (and only child), Ladli Begum.



Mirza Muhammad Hakim: Akbar's half-brother.

Ghiyas Beg (titled I'timaduddawla, 'pillar of the realm'): Salim's father-in-law and father of Mihrunnisa. One of Salim's most trusted and high-ranking ministers.

Abu'l Hasan (titled I'tiqad Khan and Asaf Khan): Mihrunnisa's brother, son of Ghiyas Beg. Arjumand Begum's father and therefore Khurram's father-in-law.

Arjumand Banu Begum (titled Mumtaz Mahal, 'jewel of the palace'): Daughter of Abu'l Hasan, niece of Mihrunnisa. Khurram's favourite wife and mother of Dara Shikoh, Shah Shuja, Aurangzeb and Murad Baksh.

Mirza Aziz Koka\*\* (titled khan azam, 'greatest khan'): Akbar's foster brother and Khusro's father-in-law.

Raja Man Singh: Salim's brother-in-law and Khusro's uncle. Son of Raja Bhagwan Das Kachhwaha. Governor of Bengal and king of Amer.

Mirza Abdur Rahim (titled khan khanan, 'khan of all the khans'): Salim's tutor and his long-term commander in the Deccan. Son of Bairam Khan and brother-in-law of Mirza Aziz Koka. Daniyal's father-in-law and Khurram's grandfather-in-law. Also related to Abu'l Hasan through a granddaughter married to Abu'l Hasan's son.

Sheikh Abu'l Fazl: A loved and trusted friend, adviser and disciple of Akbar's and principal chronicler of his reign. Author of the *Akbarnama*, Akbar's biography, and the *Ain-i-Akbari*, a history of his administration.

Abd'ul-Qadir Badauni: A member of Akbar's court, principally employed as a historian and translator. Author of *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* (Selections from Histories).

Mu'tamad Khan: An officer in the imperial army and later Salim's 'secretary'. Wrote the last few entries of the *Jahangirnama*, from early 1623 to about mid-1624. Author of the *Iqbalnama*, which includes a history of Salim's reign.

Sir Thomas Roe: The first English ambassador to India. Represented King James I in Salim's court. His diary and letters from that time make up *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul, 1615-1619, As Narrated in His Journal and Correspondence*.

Sheikh Salim Chishti: Sufi saint of the Chishti order. Born in Delhi and spent many years studying abroad. Settled in Sikri on his return, where he foretold the birth of Akbar's three sons.

Qutbuddin Muhammad Khan: Son-in-law of Sheikh Salim Chishti and tutor to Salim. Husband of Salim's beloved foster mother and father of Khubu.

Sheikh Khubu (titled Qutbuddin Khan Koka): Grandson of Sheikh Salim Chishti. Salim's best friend.

Sheikh Ala'uddin (titled Islam Khan): Grandson of Sheikh Salim Chishti. Salim's childhood friend and his most successful governor in Bengal.

Bir Singh Deo Bundela (titled maharaja): King of Orcha and loyal friend and ally to Salim before and during his reign.

Khawaja Abdullah Khan Bahadur (titled Firoz Jang): Salim's friend and part of his rebel court.

Zamana Beg (titled Mahabat Khan, briefly khan khanan, and sometimes referred to as Madarussalatana, 'axis of the sultanate'): Salim's childhood friend and part of his rebel court.

Ali Quli Istajlu (titled Sher Afgan, 'lion-thrower'): Mihrunnisa's first husband and part of Salim's rebel court.

Rana Amar Singh: Son of Maharana Pratap, ruler of Mewar, the last Rajput kingdom to surrender to Mughal rule.

Kunwar (later Rana) Karan Singh: Son of Rana Amar Singh. Prince and then ruler of Mewar.

Kunwar Bhim (titled raja): Son of Rana Amar Singh. Part of Khurram's rebellion.

Sundar Das (titled Raja Bikramjit): First distinguished himself in Khurram's Mewar campaign and became one of his most trusted generals and advisers. Part of Khurram's rebellion.

Malik Ambar: Ethiopian soldier, general and regent in the kingdom of Ahmednagar. The Mughals' strongest foe in the Deccan.

---

\* *Mirza*: prince or nobleman of high rank

\*\* *Koka*: a term for foster brother



# Contents

Part I: Accession	1
Part II: Empire	95
Part III: Believer/Unbeliever	137
Part IV: Sun Amongst Women	159
Part V: Ambition	175
Part VI: Aesthete	207
Part VII: Blood	223
<i>Epilogue</i>	261
<i>Notes</i>	273
<i>A Note on Sources and Select Bibliography</i>	295
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	309
<i>Index</i>	311
<i>A Note on the Author</i>	320

## The Mughal Empire c. 1605



# Part I

## Accession

One day in winter, Akbar, Salim and Raja Birbal went hunting. As the sun rose and the day grew warm, the emperor and the prince began to feel uncomfortable, so they took off their coats and gave them to Birbal. The sight of Birbal walking with two such heavy coats in his arms made Akbar laugh. ‘That looks like an ass’s load!’

‘No, Your Majesty,’ Birbal replied, quick of tongue, ‘more like the load of two asses!’

An eighteenth-century Akbar–Birbal joke,  
one of the oldest in this tradition.  
Adapted from ‘Popular Jokes and Political History:  
The Case of Akbar, Birbal and Mullah Do-Piyaza’  
by C.M. Naim





Every story of Salim begins with his father, even Salim's. 'Until my father was twenty-eight years old,' he writes in the second sentence of his autobiography, 'none of his children had survived'.<sup>1</sup>

His father was Akbar; and to Salim's eternal joy and torment, Akbar was one of those rare historical figures that transcend the norm so much as to gain a suffix – in his case, 'The Great'. Akbar's ambitions and achievements were tremendous; his charisma shines through any record of his reign. His eyes, says one European writer,<sup>2</sup> flashed bright with the light of sunbeams upon the sea. He tamed musth elephants as if for fun. His empire, following one triumph after the other, grew so large and so rich it might have toppled the balance of the globe. By the end of his reign, while it wasn't clear if Akbar believed in any kind of god, there were people (Akbar possibly included) willing to believe that Akbar himself was divine.

At twenty-eight, though, all he wanted was a child. And yet this commonplace achievement, this thing that is the course of things, he could not have. A man who

had been given the world without asking, if such a man were to plead for a child, what would he not beget? Abu'l Fazl, Akbar's dedicated biographer, close friend and (depending upon one's point of view) toady-in-chief, could hardly imagine 'what sort of glorious pearl' would appear if Akbar actually asked for a boon.

Even God seemed daunted by the task at hand. 'My father,' Salim continues, 'was always soliciting dervishes and hermits', but nothing came of it. He went to holy men and he prayed, and he asked holy men to pray for him. He made a vow to his most beloved saint, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti: *Give me a son and I will walk from Agra to Ajmer and offer you my gratitude at your holy shrine.*

Finally, one day, God relented. Some courtiers came to Akbar and told him about a venerable old sage whose austerity and spiritual power the people spoke of with awe. He, too, was of the Chishti order, he lived on a hill not far from Agra, and his name was Salim.

Akbar began visiting Sheikh Salim Chishti regularly, to pray and ask for prayers, and one day, when the sheikh was in a trance, Akbar couldn't help himself and he blurted out, 'How many sons will I have?'<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps he thought it better to hear a brutal truth – 'never, none' – than to suffer an eternal wait. Or perhaps, this being Akbar, the king of kings after all, he thought that by asking the question this way – 'how many', not 'will I' – he would grab the reins of fate into his own hands.

At any rate, the sheikh didn't hesitate: 'God will give you three sons,' he said.

'Then the first shall be yours, to protect and guide.'

Not lacking in reciprocity, the sheikh replied, 'Bless him. I give him my name.'

When Akbar's nameless Rajput wife – eldest daughter of Raja Bihari Mal Kachhwaha of Amer,<sup>4</sup> called Jodha Bai (incorrectly) and Mary of the ages, Mariam-uz-Zamani (formally), whom Akbar had married seven long years ago in the manner of kings, en route from a hunt – became pregnant, he took her to live in the sheikh's home. Partly, of course, this was so that the queen and her unborn child might be as close as possible to the sheikh's protective blessings; but partly, also, it was to keep the pregnancy far from gossiping streets and stem the tide of 'curious stories'<sup>5</sup> that had begun to dog the emperor's childlessness.

So it was that the Rajput queen of a Mughal monarch moved from the royal fortress of Agra into the hillside home of a Sufi saint. These new arrangements were not, as one can imagine, without their challenges. A bit of gossip from the time suggests that the sheikh's daughters-in-law were particularly unhappy by the sudden – and seemingly constant – presence of an anxious emperor in their midst. When the sheikh's sons and nephews brought up the marital strife they were having to endure at the hands of their flustered wives, they received little redress. After all, now that Akbar's own wife was lodged in his zenana, the sheikh could hardly deny the emperor access to it; and Akbar himself just laughed off their complaints. 'There is no dearth of women in the world . . . seek other wives!'<sup>6</sup>

The exigencies of propriety would not stand between the emperor and his heir, nor would the dark designs of fate. One day, the baby stopped kicking. At first, perhaps, the queen felt only a nagging strangeness, a sense of something missing; then, as it dawned on her, her mind fell numb and her body shivered under its skin; she could not speak and she clutched for her nurses. 'In a dither,' writes Salim, 'the nurses reported the situation to His Majesty.'

What could Akbar do? He'd promised a pilgrimage to Ajmer, he'd submitted to the protection of the sheikh, why now this final test? Perhaps he was meant to give something up, something he loved for something he craved – perhaps it was a sacrifice that was demanded of him.

Like most royals, Akbar loved to hunt, and the kind of hunting he loved most was that rare and spectacular sport of hunting with cheetahs.<sup>7</sup> Cheetahs, tame and trained, were among the jewels of Akbar's menagerie, riding in stately array into hunts, sitting straight-backed and alert upon carts from which they would spring after their prey when released, padding softly within striking distance to make their final, lethal leap. Much like their emperor, they rarely missed.

What did it matter now, though, the thrill of the hunt? This was time for new life, not death! As it happened, the day was a Friday, and Akbar vowed that if only his baby would move again, never again on a Friday would he hunt with cheetahs.

And never again he did: mid-morning on a Wednesday, in the monsoon of 1569, Akbar's nameless queen delivered

the boy who would, one day, sit on Akbar's throne; half-Mughal, half-Rajput, they named him Salim – intact, unblemished and whole.

Reading the various accounts of Salim's birth, one gets the impression that Akbar brought it about by sheer force of will, his prayers and vows hammering at God's door like cannonballs at a fortress until there was nothing for it but to give him the son he demanded. And yes, Akbar was a man of strong will – he kept all the vows he made – but his hardest resolve was probably made after Salim was born. In deference to a popular idea that it was unlucky for fathers to meet their newborn children, Akbar did not gallop to Sikri as he must have longed to.

Instead, since there is only so much self-control a joyful father can have, celebrations burst upon Agra like lightning upon a rain-ripe sky. 'Heaps and heaps of gold were scattered,' says one writer.<sup>8</sup> Prisoners in dungeons across the empire were set free. For days, poets composed odes to the prince, the most stylish of which was by Khwaja Hussain Haravi – each couplet of his poem had a chronogram<sup>9</sup> for Akbar's accession as its first line and for Salim's birth as its second, thus beginning: 'God be praised for the glory of the king / A splendid pearl came ashore from the ocean of justice.'

'Pearl' was the favoured metaphor for Salim; in various other chronograms, he was 'a royal pearl of the great ocean', 'a pearl of the Shahenshah's mansion', 'a pearl of Akbar Shah's coffer' – each yielding the year of his

birth. Not to be outdone, Abu'l Fazl titled this breathless chapter of the *Akbarnama* 'The auspicious birth of the world-illuminating pearl of the mansion of dominion and fortune, the night-gleaming jewel of the casket of greatness and glory, namely, of Prince Sultan Salim'.

Akbar's mother, Hamida Banu Begum, brought a bit of diversity to the affair by giving the newborn a magnificent ruby of 190 carats, no less. Akbar wore it in his turban while he ruled, then Salim, until it became almost a symbol of succession and, as Salim would describe it years later, a 'good luck charm' for the dynasty.

At the time of its giving, of course, what it symbolized was that without Salim there would be no dynasty. Not only had the emperor had his first child, he'd had a boy; and it was no wonder that Akbar 'issued a proclamation for enjoyment / invited the world as his guest'<sup>10</sup> for a celebration at which no expression of delight could possibly be too much.

Once under way, the sheikh's prophecy did not take long to come true: both Salim's younger brothers, Murad and Daniyal, were born within the next three years, though neither of them was greeted with such unbridled joy. It is apparent from Abu'l Fazl's chapter titles: 'The auspicious birth of Prince Shah Murad' he announces tersely for one, while Daniyal, the youngest, is merely the 'nosegay of fortune's Spring'.

Salim was special from the day he was conceived; and in his life, or so Abu'l Fazl hoped, Salim would be 'fortunate by pleasing His Majesty, which is a sign of pleasing God'.

Meanwhile the infant Salim, unaware as yet of all the hopes that rested on his newly breathing soul, slept and suckled, slept and suckled, nestled in the arms of his wet nurse, the sheikh's own daughter, watched over by the sheikh and his family, to whom he would be forever tied, not only by the binds of the life he'd been given, but also by the death he would bring.

The first casualty was the sheikh himself. A venerable ninety years old when Akbar first went to him, the sheikh was not, presumably, long for this world. Still, for some reason, one day Akbar asked him for his exact age and how long he would live.<sup>11</sup> At first, the sheikh evaded a reply: 'God – exalted be he – knows all mysteries and hidden things.' But Akbar was nothing if not persistent and the sheikh complied. It was hardly the reply Akbar would have wanted. Pointing at the infant Salim – was he, perhaps, in Akbar's lap? – the sheikh said, 'When the prince, either by instruction of a teacher or someone else, memorises something and speaks it aloud, this will be the sign of our demise.'

For a while, like a cursed prince in a fairy tale, Salim was kept from learning anything at all by heart. The prophecy was hardly likely, however, to take effect while its carrier was a baby; and inevitably, as Salim puts it, 'two years and seven months passed'. One day, Salim was alone in the harem when a waiting woman walked by. She was carrying wild rue, a flower that when dried and burnt is

said to drive away evil spirits.<sup>12</sup> It was her habit to burn some of this incense in the prince's quarters every day, to keep him safe.

Finding the toddler all alone, she began to play and recite him some rhymes. In the process, she taught him the first line of a Persian romance, *Yusuf and Zulaikha*: 'Unfold, O God, the bud of hope; disclose / From thine eternal Paradise one rose'.<sup>13</sup>

Later that day, Salim, toddling innocently up to his tutor, spilled out his new-found learning. The tutor, writes Salim, 'leapt up from his place and ran to His Majesty' – while in Sikri, the inevitable happened. The sheikh caught a fever. He sent word the next day, asking if Tansen might be sent to sing to him, hoping, perhaps, that the great singer's melody would soothe the pain of his final illness, or knowing, perhaps, that he would miss that legendary voice in paradise. Having heard, one last time, Tansen's music fill the air of Sikri, the sheikh asked for Akbar.

When the emperor arrived, the sheikh had only one, final message for him. 'Farewell,' he said, and taking the turban from his own head, he placed it on Salim's. 'We have made Sultan Salim our successor and entrust him to God.'

The fever lingered; or maybe it was the tension of the sheikh's illness and Salim's own part in it that made it seem so. At any rate, the adult Salim remembers that it was 'a very, very long time' before the sheikh took one last shuddering breath of the world, and died.



Salim doesn't say who the tutor was, the one who leaped in alarm at the child prince's fateful recitation. The sheikh died sometime in 1572, when Salim couldn't have been older than three, and the custom then was to begin a boy's education when he was exactly four years, four months and four days old. Perhaps some kind of informal guardianship had been assigned. At any rate, the beginning of Salim's formal learning was an elaborate affair: amidst much feasting and celebration, the newly appointed teacher would have 'taken' Salim, literally raised him upon his shoulders in a symbolic and customary gesture. This first teacher was well into his seventies however, and his shoulders did not bear the prince very long: he barely had time to teach Salim the alphabet before he died.

Thereafter, Salim had two guardians, or *ataliqs*: Qutbuddin Muhammad Khan, husband of Salim's foster mother<sup>14</sup> and father of his best friend, Khubu; and Abdur Rahim, literary, military and diplomatic genius, who would rise to be the khan of all the khans, the khan khanan. Of course, there would have been other teachers, too, appointed for specific subjects. Salim remembers, for example, learning religion from Sheikh Abdun Nabi and fencing from a lord of the Deccan (whom an adult Salim would title Warzish 'Exercise' Khan); not to mention the extracurricular lessons he derived, like many children of privilege, from the staff – most notably, drinking from a 'wonderful gunner'<sup>15</sup> called Ustad Shah-Quli.

Of all his teachers, though, the one who watched him with the keenest eye was his own father. 'The wise

sovereign,' writes Abu'l Fazl, 'kept his children under his own care' and Salim was therefore 'constantly acquiring various outward and inward excellences in the society of His Majesty', learning 'the rules of justice . . . the secrets of the spirit and . . . the wondrous clarifications of the heart'.

When Salim was five, Akbar took the boy along with him when he sailed down the Yamuna to quell a rebellion in Patna. It was as much a pleasure cruise as a mission of chastisement, a whole parade of boats sailing in majestic convoy, manned by sailors who could make 'the birds of the air and the fish of the water . . . dance'.<sup>16</sup> Often, the emperor disembarked to hunt; at night, when the ships cast anchor, there was discussion and debate and music. On the way, they even had time to stop in Allahabad, where Akbar inaugurated the building of the great fort that still stands in that city.

Not long after, when Salim was about eight or nine years old, Akbar spoke glowingly of his 'obedience, good disposition, prudence, and endurance'<sup>17</sup> and gave him a military rank of 10,000 zat and 10,000 suwar.<sup>18</sup> Given that Akbar himself became king at fourteen, putting pre-pubescent princes in charge of armies was hardly out of place; instead, in the obscure but troubled history of Akbar and Salim, what stands out is that bit of praise. Never again would Akbar express such kind thoughts about his eldest son with such abandon.

For the moment, however, this 'nursling of dominion', as Abu'l Fazl calls him, held the highest rank in Akbar's court; no amir at the time was ranked higher than 5000 zat, and the two younger princes, Murad and Daniyal, were ranked at 7000 and 6000 respectively. About three

years later, when Salim was thirteen or so and Murad was twelve, the two boys were told to lead men, not just command them, and put in nominal charge of subduing a rebellion in Kabul.

It is in Abu'l Fazl's account of this campaign that one first gets a sense that something between Akbar and Salim was beginning to slip.

For one thing, it was Murad who went galloping off with the advance forces, while Akbar and Salim followed at a more stately pace. Suddenly, news arrived of a change of plan by the Kabul rebel Mirza Muhammad Hakim (who was, incidentally, Akbar's relatively unknown and undistinguished half-brother). Mirza Hakim had decided to attack the imperial forces, knowing they were led by a boy and the main army was far behind. At this, naturally, Akbar went dashing forth, but before he could quite reach, Mirza Hakim attacked – and Murad retaliated.

The battle was short and victorious and for Murad clearly a triumph. 'In spite of his youth,' writes Abu'l Fazl, '[he] showed such courage and steadfastness that veterans remembered his firmness and his exertions.'

Akbar and Murad took a moment to visit the great sights of Kabul, pay their respects at Babur's grave and admire his gardens, the proud father no doubt telling Murad stirring tales of ancestral valour. Back in the main camp, meanwhile, 'babblers' were spreading all kinds of rumours about the recent battle, suggesting that Mirza Hakim had led Akbar on a wild and dangerous chase northwards. The amirs were debating whether to hurry after them or wait for word, when Akbar and Murad rode in, the dust flying off their triumphant hooves.