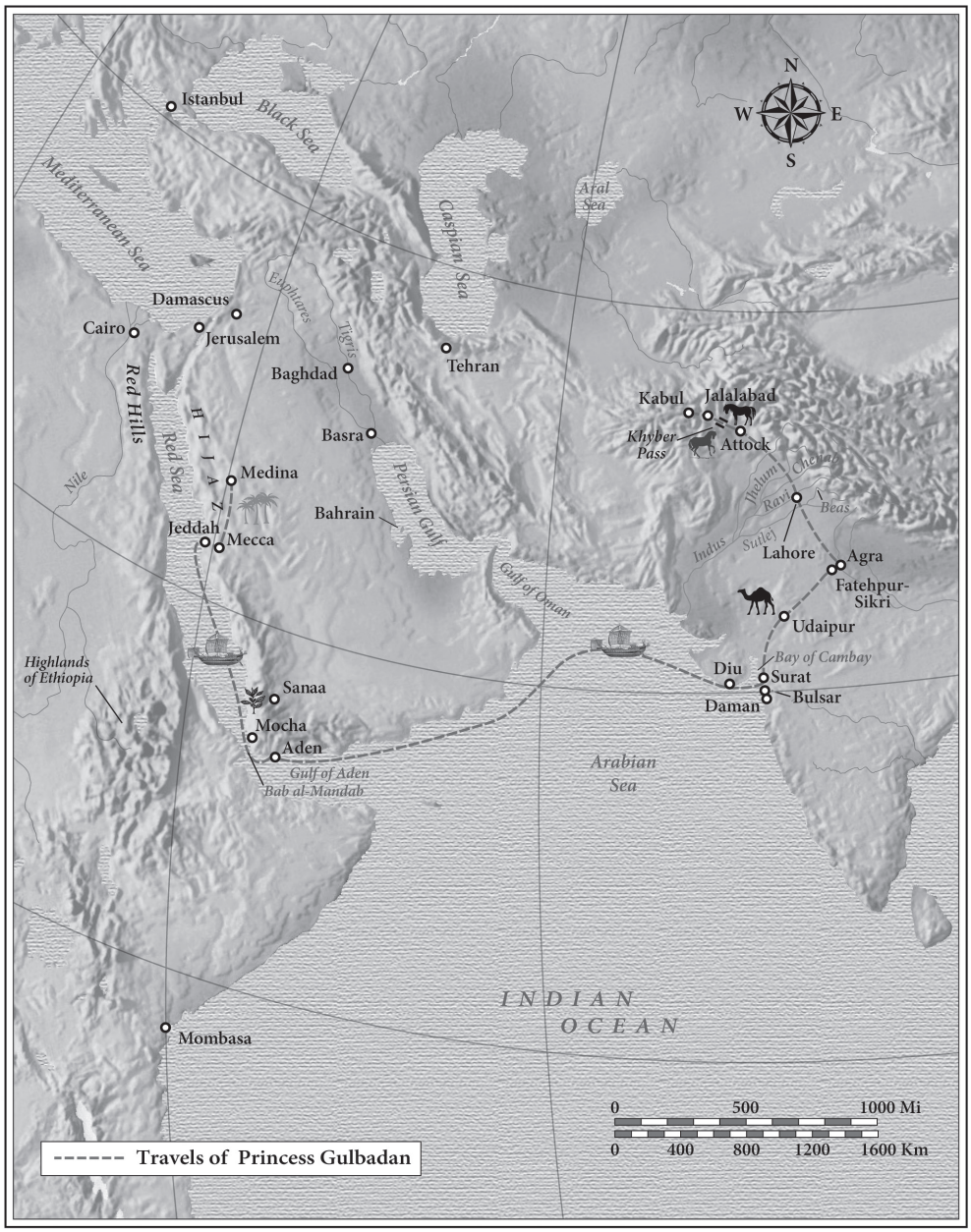
VAGABOND PRINCESS



The travels of Princess Gulbadan

VAGABOND PRINCESS

The Great Adventures
of Gulbadan

Ruby Lal

juggernaut

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Also by Ruby Lal

Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan

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Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World

For Homa Bazyar—exile-adventurer, linguist par excellence, friend, and teacher—in fond memory of lavish late-afternoon readings of Princess Gulbadan's memoir

Contents

Dramatis Personae

The following list is arranged alphabetically by first name.
I provide birth and death dates where known.

'ABD AL-QADIR BADAUNI (1540–1605)
A courtier in Akbar's court and a committed Sunni Muslim, he disapproved of the emperor's eclectic policies and politics. A prolific translator of many Sanskrit and Persian works, he wrote his history, the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh,* secretly. The work contains unusual information not found in other court documents about the times of Emperor Akbar and is a valuable counter to the panegyric *Akbarnama* of Abul Fazl.

ABUL BAQA
Amir Abul Baqa, well versed in Unani medicine, was also a close confidant of Emperor Babur. He advised both Babur and Humayun during important political and personal moments in their lives as kings.

ABUL FAZL (1551–1602)
Abul Fazl was the son of Shaikh Mubarak, a man with humble beginnings who later became renowned for his expertise in philosophy and the Islamic sciences. After his early learning with his father, Abul Fazl joined Akbar's court in 1574 and became known for his forceful debates with the jurists in the Ibadat Khana, or the house of worship that Akbar built in 1575. Here, Akbar held discussions with thinkers and leaders of many schools of thought and on varied spiritual themes. Emperor Akbar selected him to write the first official history of the Mughal court, the three-volume *Akbarnama,* including the imperial gazetteer, the *A'in-i Akbari.* At the instigation of Prince Salim, Bir Singh Bundela, later the king of Orchha, murdered Abul Fazl in 1602.

AKBAR (1542–1605)
Born in October 1542 in Amarkot (now in Sindh province, Pakistan), Akbar was one of the greatest emperors of India. The son of Hamida Banu Begum and the second Mughal king, Humayun, Akbar succeeded to the throne at the age of thirteen. A contemporary of Elizabeth I, he reigned for four decades, extending Mughal power over the greater part of India and securing the northwest frontier by recapturing Kabul and Kandahar. A humanist, he remained dedicated to Islam and took an active interest in other religions and denominations. His court drew world attention and attracted a wave of aristocrats and creative people from Persia, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. At the heart of Akbar's success was his pluralistic outlook.

'ASAS
Khwaja Muhammad 'Ali 'Asas, a devoted ally of Emperor Babur, supported the emperor in many critical times and was the first to follow him when he renounced wine. He appears at various entertainments in Babur's and Gulbadan's accounts. His last known public role was as caretaker of Babur's tomb.

'ASKARI (1516–57)
'Askari was the son of Babur and Gulrukh Begum and blood brother of Prince Kamran. After he participated in early Mughal conquests of India, Babur appointed him governor of Sambhal. He died in 1557 while he was on a hajj.

ATUN MAMA
She was an intimate assistant of Babur's mother. In 1501, when Babur lost the city of Samarkand, Atun was left behind because there was no horse for her to ride. She walked for days in the snow to be reunited with the Mughals. She was a legendary figure; Gulbadan mentions her many times and includes her in the list of women who attended her brother Hindal's wedding feast.

BABUR (1483–1556)
The first Mughal king, Babur, a poet, a wanderer, and the author of the *Baburnama,* descended from Central Asian heroes: Chingiz Khan (1167–1227) on his mother's side and Timur (1336–1405) on his father's. Babur's paternal

grandfather parceled out his empire to his sons. For much of Babur's life he fought for these provinces, controlled by uncles or cousins of varying degrees. During a protracted struggle for the coveted city Samarkand, Timur's capital, Babur lost the territory his father had bequeathed to him. By about 1504, he was driven to Kabul. Eventually, in 1526, he defeated Ibrahim Lodi of Delhi and inaugurated Mughal rule.

BAIRAM KHAN (1501–61)
Of Persian origin, Bairam Khan was a skilled military commander and a powerful statesman who served during the reigns of Humayun and Akbar. He is remembered for his role as the regent of Akbar during his boyhood years as well as his chief mentor, adviser, and most trusted ally. As Akbar began to robustly take charge of the affairs of his empire, he dismissed Bairam in 1560. Bairam was murdered en route to Mecca.

BAYAZID BAYAT
Bayazid Bayat first emerged on the pages of Mughal history when he accompanied Bairam Khan to Kabul in late 1545. From aboard his ship, Bayazid sent a letter to Gulbadan when she was stranded in Aden. He was among the officers Emperor Akbar asked to record their memories for the *Akbarnama,* which led to Bayazid's *Tazkireh-i Humayun va Akbar,* a history of the reigns of Humayun and Akbar from 1542 to 1591.

BEGA BEGUM (1511–81)
Bega was the senior wife of the second Mughal king, Humayun, and mother of Al-Aman, their first child, who died in Badakhshan soon after his birth. Bega was captured in 1539 by Sher Shah in the battle of Chausa—where she also lost her daughter 'Aqiqa—but she later returned to the Mughals. Famous in history as Hajji Begum, she was honored in the aftermath of the pilgrimage she undertook to western Arabia in 1564–65, a decade before Gulbadan led the royal women's group there.

BIBI FATIMA (B. 1490S)
A wet nurse of Humayun, she played significant roles, including as the *Ordu-begi,* an armed woman/warrior of Humayun's harem and as envoy in an important political marriage of the emperor. Some sources indicate that in the early part of Akbar's reign she may have served as the *sadr-i anas,* the

superintendent of the harem. Gulbadan mentions her repeatedly, and so does Bayazid Bayat.

BIBI MUBARIKA

Bibi Mubarika Yusufzai was the daughter of Malik Shah Mansur, the chief of the Yusufzai tribe of the Pashtuns. She was the fifth wife of Babur, the first Mughal emperor. Their marriage took place in 1519 and established friendly relations between the Mughals and the Yusufzais. Along with her co-wife Maham Begum and stepdaughter Gulbadan, Mubarika was among the first women from the Kabul household to travel to Hindustan in 1529 after Babur's victory over Delhi and Agra. She is frequently mentioned by Gulbadan; the two had a playful relationship and the princess fondly called her *Afghani Aghacha,* or the Afghan Lady.

BUWA BEGUM (D. 1528)

Mother of Sultan Ibrahim Lodi of Delhi, whom Babur defeated in the battle of Panipat. She was responsible for poisoning Babur. On her enforced journey to Kabul, she drowned herself in the river Indus.

DILDAR BEGUM

Dildar Begum's ancestry is not discussed in the contemporary records. Her marriage to Babur took place between 1508 and 1519 (these years of the *Baburnama* are missing from the manuscripts), and she came to the Kabul household as his second wife. She gave birth to Gulrang, Gulchihra, Hindal, Gulbadan, and Alwar (the last of the five children died in childhood). She shared Hindal and Gulbadan with her senior co-wife Maham Begum. Gulbadan discusses several episodes of Dildar's fine intervention and firm speech and calls her mother Acam in Turkish.

GULBADAN BEGUM (1523–1603)

Gulbadan Begum, the daughter of Dildar and Babur, traveled to Agra from Afghanistan at the age of six and a half after her father had made substantial conquests in that region. An unusual witness to the emerging Mughal monarchy, from its inception in the early conquests of Babur to its majesty in the reign of Akbar, she recorded what she had seen in her memoir, the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah* (literally, Conditions in the Age of Humayun Badshah). The *Ahval,* a unique piece of writing and the only example of prose by

a Mughal woman, is the best source describing Mughal domestic life and the character of the empire as it was taking shape. From Fatehpur-Sikri, she led the *haraman,* the women of the harem, on an unprecedented group pilgrimage to Mecca, braving the hazards of treacherous seas and unknown territories—including a year at Aden in the Red Sea after their ship was wrecked. This book centers on her life and adventures, and the scandals caused by her presence and actions in the Ottoman territories.

GULRUKH BEGUM

Gulrukh's family background is not mentioned in the contemporary records, and nor is the date of her marriage to Babur, which likely took place sometime between 1508 and 1519 (these years of the *Baburnama* are missing from the manuscripts). She bore Shahrukh, Ahmad, Gul'izar (all three died young), Kamran, and 'Askari.

HAMIDA BANU BEGUM (1527–1604)

It is difficult to chart Hamida Banu's family tree precisely, but sources suggest she was a descendant of a renowned saint. Revered as the mother of Emperor Akbar, Hamida fits well the trajectory of Mughal women who animated the royal circles with their presence, support, and wisdom. She married Humayun, the second Mughal king, at Paat in the summer of 1541, and gave birth to Akbar in 1542 while the royals were in exile. Hamida surfaces frequently in the Mughal sources, especially in the *Akbarnama.* She sought forgiveness on behalf of Prince Salim, future Jahangir. She did not join the party of senior women pilgrims that her close ally Gulbadan Begum led, likely staying back to support Akbar.

HARKHA BAI (1542–1623)

Daughter of Raja Bharmal, the Kachhwaha ruler of Amer, she was the first Rajput Hindu woman to marry Emperor Akbar. She gave birth to Prince Salim. Ennobled later in Akbari histories as Maryam-uz-Zamani, she lived into her son's reign.

HINDAL (1519–51)

Son of Babur and Dildar Begum, 'Abdul Nasir was born in Kabul as his father was on his way to conquer the regions across the river Hind. Taking his birth as a good omen, Babur called him Hindal—of Hind—and commemorated

the birth of his son in his memoir. He was placed in the care of Babur's senior wife, Maham Begum, as was his younger sister Gulbadan. By age nineteen, he had emerged as a strong contender for the newly emerging Mughal throne in India. Eventually he pledged allegiance to Humayun and remained faithful to him until 1551, when he died fighting for the Mughals in a battle against Kamran's forces.

HUMAYUN (1508–56)
Humayun was born in March 1508 in Kabul, the son and successor of Babur, the founder of Mughal rule in northern Hindustan. Humayun inherited in 1530 an empire that was still in the making: the Afghans and the Rajputs were only restrained but not subdued by Mughal power after his father's victories of Panipat (1526), Khanua (1527), and the Ghaghara (1529). His biggest challenge came from the Afghan Sher Shah Suri, who had consolidated his power in Bihar and Bengal. He defeated Humayun in Chausa in 1539 and at Kannauj in 1540, expelling him from northern India. After years of exile, during which time he married his beloved Hamida Banu and she gave birth to Akbar, Humayun regained Kabul and eventually returned to Hindustan. He ruled again from 1555 to 1556.

ISAN DAULAT KHANUM
Babur's maternal grandmother, she married Yunas Khan Chagatai, the Great Khan of the Mughals, around 1456. She gave birth to three daughters. Isan Daulat shared bravely the vicissitudes of her husband's career and was four times taken captive by his enemies. Sagacious and far-sighted, she was revered for her good judgment. Toward the end of her life, she lived in a garden house in Andijan.

JAWHAR AFTABCHI
Jawhar is known for his valiant act of saving Emperor Humayun from drowning during the battle of Chausa. He accompanied the exiled Humayun to Sind and Persia, and then to Hindustan. He wrote the *Tazkirat-ul-Vaqi'at,* a candid account of Humayun's reign, in response to Akbar's 1587 order.

KAMRAN (1512–57)
Son of Babur and Gulrukh Begum, he had a fraught relationship with Humayun, his half brother. After Humayun returned from the battle of Chausa,

Kamran refused to place his troops under Humayun's command. Kamran forcibly took Gulbadan during the Mughal clan's coerced relocation to Kabul, when Humayun left for Sind and eventually Persia. By 1545 Humayun took over Kabul. Although Humayun resisted pressure to put his rebellious brother to death, he was persuaded that something needed to be done, and so he had him blinded. Humayun banished him to Mecca, where he later died. Two of his daughters accompanied Gulbadan on the pilgrimage to Mecca.

KHANZADA BEGUM (B. 1478)

Khanzada Begum was the formidable sister of Babur. Accounts of her life emerge in her brother's and niece Gulbadan's histories. She is lauded in the chronicles for the "sacrifice" she made by marrying Shaibani Khan Uzbek in order to establish peace between the Mughals and the Uzbeks. She came back to her family ten years later and acquired immense respect, discussed and underlined by Gulbadan, whose rendering of Khanzada's special status as *aka janam,* "my dearest *aka,*" marked her privileged status, enhanced age, and the deference due her. Her nephews, sons of Babur, regularly sought her out as an elder. Khanzada's guidance to the fighting sons of Babur in the matter of reading their name in the Friday sermons, called the *khutba,* is memorable, and a striking statement of how senior women collaborated in the process of the promotion of kings.

KHWAJA KALAN

Among Babur's prominent men, he served in the right wing of the armed forces that fought against Ibrahim Lodi and played an important role in the takeover of Agra. After the victories, he was assigned the task of taking bounties of Hind for the royal household. Kalan served for a few years in Hindustan and then returned to Kabul. Babur, fond of and reliant on him, was loath to see him leave. The emperor sent him poems that he wrote in Agra.

MAHAM BEGUM

She was the influential senior wife of Babur and mother of the second Mughal king Humayun, but her ancestry is unknown. Babur met her in 1506 in Herat and they were married soon afterward. After Humayun, she had four other children, all of whom died. She took over Hindal and Gulbadan

from her co-wife Dildar. Gulbadan is the best chronicler of her guardian mother's life events.

MAHDI KHWAJA
The second husband of Khanzada Begum, the powerful sister of Babur, Muhammad Mahdi Khwaja served in the emperor's armed forces, against Ibrahim Lodi. It is unclear when he and Khanzada married or what the nature of their relationship was. At the instigation of Babur's senior courtier Nizam al-Din Barlas, he attempted to win the Mughal courtiers to secure nomination to the Mughal throne. But the entire saga ended terribly.

MURAD III, OTTOMAN SULTAN OF TURKEY (1546–95)
From 1574 until his death in 1595, Murad III ruled the Ottoman Empire, which included, among other places in Arabia, the Holy Cities Mecca and Medina, and Egypt to the north. He ordered the eviction of the Mughal royal ladies who had gone on a pilgrimage under the leadership of Princess Gulbadan, charging that the royal visitors as well as the caravans of Hind had overcrowded the Holy Cities. But the story was more complicated, as this book shows.

NIZAM AL-DIN BARLAS (KHALIFA)
Along with his wife, he received the six-year-old Gulbadan in Aligarh in 1529, when she arrived there from Kabul. His brother was married to Babur's half sister, and he and the emperor were friends of long standing. Initially he was opposed to Humayun's accession to the throne, but eventually he endorsed his rule.

RUQAYYA BEGUM (D. 1626)
One of the longest-living matriarchs of the Mughal Empire, she was the first wife of Emperor Akbar. She was also the emperor's first cousin, a Mughal princess by birth. She had no children of her own and raised Akbar's grandson Khurram. As a senior Mughal woman, she was instrumental in forging peace between Akbar and her stepson Jahangir, paving the way for his accession to the throne. Jahangir wrote fondly of Ruqayya in his memoirs and recorded her death. Her burial place is in the Garden of Babur (Bagh-e Babur) in Kabul.

SALIMA SULTAN BEGUM (D. 1613)
Salima was the granddaughter of Babur. In 1557 she accompanied Gulbadan and Hamida Banu to Agra. Shortly after that she was married to Akbar's regent Bairam Khan. After Bairam's death 1561, Salima married her first cousin Akbar. A senior wife, she was central in pleading for forgiveness on behalf of Prince Salim and wielded much influence in his eventual succession to the throne. She was one of the senior women who accompanied Gulbadan on the hajj. Along with Ruqayya, she guided Mihr-un-nisa—future Mughal co-sovereign Nur Jahan—upon her arrival in the harem. There is some uncertainty about the date of her death, but Jahangir records it as 1613 in Agra. Mentioning her repeatedly as a cultured and wise woman, Jahangir notes particulars of her birth and descent, her marriages, and her death.

SHER SHAH (D. 1545)
Founder of the Suri dynasty in Bihar, he was born Farid Khan. A brilliant strategist and a gifted administrator, he defeated the second Mughal king Humayun in the 1540s, which led to the migration of the Mughal clan to Kabul and Sind. His monetary, fiscal, and administrative reforms were the bedrock for Mughal rule in Hindustan.

VAGABOND PRINCESS

Introduction

Complex Messages

August 1997
The British Library, London

I WAITED WITH NERVOUS ANTICIPATION AS I SKIMMED through the card catalogue in the tall wooden cabinets behind the service desk of the Asian and African Studies reading room. A majestic, high-ceilinged rectangular room, it had several long tables, each of which could comfortably seat up to four readers on each side. Lamps with light-blue shades stood in contrast to the yellow tables. Large portraits of Indian rajas and other aristocrats from the former British colonies dominated one side of the high walls. Rows of bookshelves holding printed guides and other catalogues drew patrons' attention. Every now and then, the library staff looked toward the area where readers pored over the special collections.

Earlier in the day, I had asked to see the sixteenth-century princess Gulbadan Begum's book, classified as Or. 166 in the British Library. Gulbadan, literally "Rosebody," was the beloved daughter of Babur, the patriarch of the magnificent Mughals of India, and the first and only woman historian of the Mughal Empire. Writing as events unfolded, she captured the gritty and fabulous daily lives of ambitious men, subversive women, brilliant eunuchs, devoted nurses, gentle and perceptive guards, and captive women and children who died in war zones. Yet Gulbadan's stellar book was relegated to the margins of history—to mere footnotes in volumes on Mughal politics, war, economy, and agrarian histories, all written by men.

Before I left India for Oxford, I had seen a 1902 English translation of Gulbadan's work by Annette Beveridge, a British colonial-era scholar. It was obvious that Gulbadan was a woman of many quests and journeys. Yet her work had been sidelined by modern historians, who shared Beveridge's publisher's belief, articulated in a letter accepting the translation for

publication, that it was "of unique interest. . . . A little history . . . it is but a little thing."[1]

The "little history" of men's and women's daily lives that enraptured the princess is in fact a masterpiece that came out of an insightful witnessing of hard politics and much more. No distant bystander, she was close to the people whose lives she chronicled. Thus her book was both hers and theirs, a lively prose work that shines with unrivaled granular details of Mughal wandering life.

On that August 1997 morning, as I waited to hold the book of this adventurous woman, I did not yet know the depth of her radical thinking, her daring life story, tied intricately to one of the greatest adventures in the late sixteenth-century world. Two decades would pass before I joined together the pieces of her fascinating life.

My curiosity was piqued. I dug through the British Library's resources and discovered that it housed over eleven thousand Persian manuscripts. This vast pool included the princess's father's poetry and thousands of miniature paintings, such as the one in which he greets courtiers at 'Id, his slender face captivating the viewer. In another, Gulbadan's nephew Emperor Akbar, seated on a boulder under a tree, instructs his courtiers that the slaughter of animals must cease. Scores of breathtaking Mughal works and others from the wider Islamic world can also be found in this collection—folktales, allegories, so-called morals for the heart, human, animal, vegetal terrestrial worlds, both pictorial and written. Much later, I would find a magnificent miniature drawing in which Gulbadan stands in profile holding her book. The artist captured the special status that the princess clearly enjoyed by placing her at the edge of the central frame, which immediately attracts the viewer's attention.[2]

In 1868, the British Museum purchased Gulbadan's manuscript from the widow of Colonel William Hamilton, who had collected nearly a thousand manuscripts from Lucknow and Delhi. The Delhi collection, which includes 1,957 Arabic, 1,550 Persian, and 157 Urdu manuscripts, represents what remained in 1858 of the famed Mughal Imperial Library—those items that had not been gifted, sold, or seized during constant raids and incursions, beginning with Nadir Shah's invasion of Delhi in 1739. India's British colonial government acquired the collection, estimated at 4,700 volumes, at a sale in 1859. In 1867 another 1,120 less valuable items were sold. The remainder was to be given to the newly completed Indian Museum in Calcutta, but

instead everything ended up in the India Office Library in London in 1876.[3] Gulbadan's book was in one of the trunks holding the lesser items from the Delhi collection.

As I stood by the catalogues and open shelves, I looked beyond the service desk, imagining a secret crypt that held prized books and manuscripts. "Or. 166—Ruby Lal": my musings were interrupted by a gentle call from an Englishwoman in her fifties. I gave her the counterfoil of the library request slip, and she instructed, "Please take it to the special collections table." I barely listened to her; my eyes were on her hands. She opened the gray cloth folded over the manuscript. The princess's book! Bound in faded wine-red leather with gold rim, it evoked the splendor of another age.

Taking it to my table and placing it atop a wooden book stand, I began turning the pages very slowly, as if seeking blessings from a sacred text. A little book with no frontispieces or margins. The pages, which included blank flyleaves, were impossibly thin. Later I found out the exact dimensions: 229 by 140 millimeters (9 by 5½ inches) per leaf. There were eighty-three folios with approximately fifteen lines on each page. Although there was no colophon or date, based on the state of the paper and the writing style the British Library dated the text to the seventeenth century.

Each day as I returned to Gulbadan's writing, I experienced a deeper affinity with the soft texture of the book, the light golden pages dotted with faint coffee-colored blemishes, the aging inside and outside, the words penned in coal black ink, and the cursive, or *nasta'liq,* script. As I touched Gulbadan's book, its contents, familiar from the Beveridge translation, felt new. I felt a direct communication with the woody aroma of the pages, which brought the scenes Gulbadan described to life. Amid the Persian sentences, I spotted a few Turkish words as well as Hindavi ones—the language from which modern Hindi evolved. I could hear Gulbadan speak thus, heir that she was to intermingled languages. A word here, a phrase there making its way into a sentence in another language, like humans moving from one place to another, establishing homes in foreign lands.

Gulbadan was sixty-four when she wrote this unique book, the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah* or Conditions in the Age of Humayun Badshah, popularly called the *Humayun-nama.*[4] Like that of her migratory ancestors, Timur (Tamerlane) and Chingiz Khan through Babur, the landscape of her childhood was fluid, dynamic, and flooded with awe-inspiring ancestresses. Arriving in India in 1529 at age six, Gulbadan was the first Mughal girl to travel in a royal caravan

across the dangerous Khyber Pass and the massive river Indus on the way to be reunited with the militarily victorious Babur. As she came of age in mansions by the river Yamuna, strong women peopled her world.

Her poised and reserved Aunt Khanzada had been captured by her father's ardent foe and kept as booty in war, married to the enemy for over a decade. Her mother, Dildar, who had given birth to five children, generously shared her daughter the princess, with her co-wife, the woman of Babur's affection. Gulbadan thus grew up with both a biological and a guardian mother in a big clan with multiple generations and many staff members. There were no splendid permanent palaces then. Rather, it was a garden society: much of life and its activities, including get-togethers and strategic discussions, took place outdoors.

Perennial warfare was part of young Gulbadan's environment. She witnessed the turbulent exile of her brother Humayun, the second Mughal emperor and father of Akbar. She was married during this period to her second cousin, Khizr Khwaja Khan, a grandee of Humayun's court. She tells nothing about her husband except for relating a couple of difficult conversations with him in the context of momentous political events. With Khizr she had a son. When her family was routed from Agra in the late 1540s, she escaped to Kabul. From the splendor of the Afghan mountains, she returned a decade later to Hindustan, the land of her girlhood and youth.

As the weeks passed, I became increasingly immersed in the sheer physicality of Gulbadan's book. Is this her handwriting, I wondered, or that of a male or female scribe? I touched her lines, her words, intimate with the tactility of the paper that she likely once held. Her writing felt direct, as if it were speaking to me. I was looking *in* it, not *at* it. I saw her immersed in chronicling courtly life. Each page conveyed the physicality of the cross-section of humanity she lived with. A visual, visceral world: brocade tents; rhubarb picnics; gifts to be distributed in a set of nine; matriarchs putting pressure on young wives to populate their mansions with children; women arguing with kings over their visits to the elderly aunts; sour-faced men and grim-eyed women, kind eunuchs, children dying in war; Afghans and Iranians looking longingly to Al-Hind, the land beyond the river Indus.

By the end of the month, I had reached folio 83, nearly the end of Gulbadan's manuscript. Humayun, the princess's half brother and the second Mughal emperor, was having a difficult conversation with his courtiers,

military and civilian officers, about the younger Prince Kamran. Those assembled unanimously agreed that "when one is an emperor and ruler, one cannot be a brother." "If you want to give special treatment to your brother," they said, "you must abdicate." The courtiers urged the emperor to give orders to blind his half brother. The charges were serious: Kamran had wounded Humayun at a pivotal moment in his career. Kamran had murdered the youngest prince, Hindal. Kamran had imprisoned people and terrorized families, disgraced and defamed people. "This is no brother; he is the emperor's enemy," the men said. Humayun listened to their arguments and asked those present to sign a document stating their views. Kamran was sentenced to be blinded. "The order was executed at once," wrote Gulbadan. I read on. "After the blinding, His Majesty the emperor . . ."[5]

I turned the folio of the Persian manuscript. There was nothing more. The sentence was incomplete. The *book* was incomplete.

I sat with it a little longer. Then took it to the desk.

"All done?" the man at the desk asked.

"Yes," I said hesitantly.

Autumn 1999
The British Library

Inside the main entrance of the British Library, readers and visitors approach the building's three floors via marble steps or steely escalators. As you move up, everything stands in your line of sight, especially the centerpiece of the library, a floor-to-ceiling black rectangle that holds prized gold-bound books and manuscripts. Centuries of splendor. The Ka'ba of books, I said to myself as I walked up.

I was back to consult Gulbadan's book one more time before putting the finishing touches to my doctoral thesis. I had been pondering an epilogue to my thesis, in which I would write that Gulbadan guided a group of harem women to the shores of the Red Sea. In the mid-1570s, along with other Mughal women, Gulbadan came to live behind the red sandstone walls of the newly built harem in Fatehpur-Sikri. New regulations, including the elevation and confinement of generations of Mughal and non-Mughal women, were put in place by her nephew Akbar, the third Mughal emperor. Unaccustomed to such grand seclusion, the princess, a highly influential matriarch

by this time, devised a plan to travel to western Arabia for the annual Muslim pilgrimage, the hajj. She organized older and younger women and led them across the waters of the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

From behind the red sandstone walls to the Prophet's land in Arabia, it was the first collective hajj of royal women from a sixteenth-century Muslim court, a momentous event recorded in the official history, the *Akbarnama,* and those of other court historians such as Badauni and Nizam al-Din Ahmad. I knew nothing more about that journey. But the little I knew was startling. I could visualize how it took place.

Early 1576
Fatehpur-Sikri

The fifty-two-year-old Princess Gulbadan sat across from her nephew Emperor Akbar, waiting for her turn to speak. She was of average height, somewhat stocky in build, with distinctive straight eyebrows shading her penetrating kohl-lined eyes. She was dressed in a long flowing shirt over loose trousers, a scarf thrown over her chest and shoulders, her face exposed. Ruby and pearl necklaces adorned her.

The emperor was fully cognizant of Gulbadan's status as a powerful elder, a key dynastic witness, and a memory holder. Bearing the wisdom of the migratory decades she spent in Afghanistan and India with her father and brother, the first two Mughal kings, she was now a matriarch in her nephew's harem.

Elder and younger Mughal women, Hindu Rajput wives of the emperor, princes and princesses of many generations, sons and daughters of wives and concubines, eunuchs and midwives—all lived in different sections of the harem, which was studded with domes and cupolas raised on columns, tucked behind the walls that parted it from the imperial court. Gulbadan had spent much of her life on the move, in open country. Living behind dauntingly high harem walls was part of a recent state policy. Akbar, the mighty and all-powerful emperor, had built secluded quarters for the women of his dynasty and instituted elaborate regulations for their routine and welfare. Housing them in the splendid isolation of the new harem, he declared these peripatetic ladies to be sacred and untouchable, and hence to be kept strictly out of public view. Unapproachable women enhanced the emperor's strength and allure. Akbar publicly dubbed them *the veiled ones.* By the mid-

1570s, a few years into the building of Fatehpur-Sikri, all of the women had moved into their designated harem apartments. The Mughal harem was fundamental to Akbar's plan to broadcast his image as a strong and invincible sovereign: the head of the empire, whose revered women couldn't be seen. No longer able to travel as they had in the time of Akbar's forefathers, the women were now harem-bound. Thus Akbar advertised his own grandeur.

The emperor hadn't agreed to the meeting with his aunt just to pay his respects to her. Nor was it an occasion to discuss senior women's intervention in cases relating to princely disaffections or rebellions, disagreements with near or distant kin, or scandals such as the recent case of bribery implicating the chief judge of the court.

Clad in a knee-length gold-embroidered silk cloak tied at the waist with a delicately embroidered *kamarband,* the imperial dagger at his side, the broad-shouldered thirty-four-year-old Akbar sat beside his aunt, his head bent toward his right shoulder as was his wont, his eyes bright, his small nostrils wide open. On the left, between his nose and upper lip, was a dark mole.

It is likely that his mother Hamida, the dowager empress, was there, along with the astute and vivacious Salima, the emperor's second wife (who was more like a mother-wife, having been previously married to Akbar's boyhood mentor Bairam Khan), and Ruqayya, his first wife, also older than he. The women sat atop a soft Persian carpet with intricate red, green, and blue floral patterns, lilies and roses etched on a soft lemon-yellow background, and round bolsters to support their backs, as were popular in the Mughal world. Women attendants stood ready for any command.

The emperor listened intently as Gulbadan spelled out an idea. Long ago, she told him, she had made a vow to visit the Holy Places. Now she wished to travel across the seas to Mecca and Medina to fulfill her pledge to God.[6] Akbar knew that Gulbadan had traversed the vast, dangerous roads linking Afghanistan and northern India, had seen settlements and resettlements, had been part of caravans traveling amid welcome news as well as news of devastation, exile, and migration. Lately, living in her nephew's harem, she had counseled the young monarch and his associates on key domestic and political affairs. It would serve Akbar's interests if he had such an experienced and esteemed senior as an ally.

While the aunt and nephew sat talking about the hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage, each embodied a different perspective. The vagabond princess Gulbadan was inquisitive. Born into a long line of peripatetic rulers, she

valued movement as beneficial to freedom and to the flowering of mind and body. For most of her life, she had not known the comfort that Akbar's stately residences provided. She had lived happily enough in tents, citadels, and gardens. Her relocation to Agra brought her to a new land, new languages, and new relationships. Rich and wondrous as Al-Hind was, it was difficult at times, especially in the exile and confinement of Akbar's new capital Fatehpur-Sikri.

In contrast, Akbar had established the unquestioned grandeur of the Mughal Empire and tested the bounds of inherited religion and politics. A curious mix of ambition and ferocity, he was also an ardent seeker of truth and religion. Massive tension arose between the experimental emperor and the orthodox Sunni clergy. He was the first to marry numerous Hindu Rajput women to strengthen political networks. Those strategic marriages were key to his expansionist projects. His Sunni advisers, suspicious of Akbar's eclectic inclinations, in their disapproval were insulting to Shi'a migrants from Persia and other parts of the Islamic world. Clerics weren't the only critics. Historian 'Abd al-Qadir Badauni, who served in the emperor's court, secretly wrote a huffy counter-narrative to the official (emperor-sanctioned) history the *Akbarnama.* "Hindustan is a wide place," Badauni observed, "where there is an open field for all manner of licentiousness, and no one interferes in another's business, so that everyone can do as he pleases."[7] This was not meant as a compliment.

Rumors spread that the emperor had turned against Islam. Reports that he had committed sacrilege, claiming to be the new Prophet, traveled to Persia, Central Asia, Portugal, and Spain. His true motivation was perhaps more spectacular. According to scriptural predictions, in 1591 an Islamic messiah would inaugurate a new epoch of peace and prosperity. Like the Ottoman Turkish sultan and many other Islamic monarchs and saints, Akbar dreamed of being declared the long-awaited *Mahdi,* the Renewer who would banish evil and usher in a just world order. Whichever philosophical basis for his sovereignty appealed to Akbar the most—the "Perfect Man" of philosopher Al-Arabi, the scriptural notion of the Mahdi, or the concept of divine light—all converged in the belief that he was an agent of God who would maintain the "rhythm and balance of the cosmos."[8]

By 1577 Akbar was getting closer to his Infallibility Decree, the pronouncement that made him the supreme arbitrator in civil and ecclesiastical matters. As a godlike king, he would be the final authority on any opposition

to his imperial dictates and commands. In these audacious times, he needed the blessings and support of elders like Gulbadan.

And so, when Gulbadan proposed her voyage to western Arabia, Akbar accepted the idea. He knew that navigating the waters to the Holy Cities nestled upon the Red Sea was a mammoth undertaking. Pirates regularly attacked pilgrim ships. No Mughal emperor or other Muslim monarch of the time made the pilgrimage. As heads of their respective domains, they had to stay away from such risky adventures to safeguard their lands and peoples. It was the women of royal families who often went on the pilgrimage, thus accruing blessings for the entire dynasty. A royal Mughal women's visit would consolidate Akbar's standing as a great and blessed Muslim emperor.

The Muslim world would take note of the fact that a large, well-mannered group of women from Akbar's grand harem undertook the extensive journey. Over centuries, royal and aristocratic women had traveled to the Hijaz: Mecca, Medina, and other Holy Cities, accompanied by staff and attendants. A fourteenth-century matriarch based in northwestern Iran (not directly related to Gulbadan but of the same ancestral pedigree) traveled to the revered Muslim cities on a palanquin fastened atop a camel. Princess El-Qutlugh changed transport over the course of her travel, completing her journey on a horse, a quiver fastened on her waist and a parasol raised above her head.

Gulbadan would be the first royal Muslim woman in the history of Islamic courts to initiate a group pilgrimage for women. She knew that although the majority of pilgrims were devout, the hajj was not just about piety. Trade, politics, and religion intertwined in Mecca, a mercantile republic, precursor to Venice, Pisa, and Genoa. Seekers and mystics traveled there simply to wander and absorb the aura of the desert land where many prophets were given revelations. Sojourners, or *mujawirs,* spent years learning, wandering, and living in the sacred Arabian cosmos. Scholars went to gain expertise in the traditions (*hadith*) of the life and times of Prophet Muhammad in some of the finest schools in the Holy Cities.

Gulbadan's idea bore fruit. Once she had Akbar's consent, she began to work on the details. Her party would consist of eleven close female relatives and associates as well as reliable servants. The dowager empress was not to be one of the group. Once a dynamic woman, Hamida had lately grown accustomed to the pomp and ceremony of the royal court, relishing the adoration Akbar lavished upon her. The court leader of the hajj and three other

men were to accompany the convoy, along with a Turkish artillery officer, who would serve as an interpreter, and scores of soldiers, attendants, cooks, and other staff.

Autumn 1999
The British Library, London

Back in the British Library, I had Gulbadan's book in my hands again. After rereading parts, I reached the end of the manuscript. I turned its pages again and again, hoping the missing pages had somehow miraculously returned. Perhaps I had overlooked something. Most of the official records of the court had references to Gulbadan's hajj trip. She must surely have written about her Arabian domicile. But there was no sign that she had.

Earlier I had focused on the singular detail that she guided her harem companions across the seas to the Muslim Holy Cities. Now I noted the striking fact that the princess and her companions stayed in the Arabian Desert for four years. What had they been doing? At the time I had no idea of the veritable scandal that erupted while Gulbadan was in Arabia.

Since I first had held the fragile pages of Gulbadan's chronicle, the mystery of the missing pages had never left me. Beveridge had made a cursory remark about the void, having searched in vain for a possible second copy of the work, given the standard Mughal court practice of having several copies of every important work, including any by persons of royal or high rank.

I was the first scholar to work closely with the princess's rarely consulted chronicle. While I gleaned unparalleled details from Gulbadan's writing, it was really the incomplete manuscript that struck me as magical. Five years after Gulbadan returned from the hajj, around 1587, Akbar made an important announcement. In keeping with his world-conquering ambitions, he commissioned the writing of a comprehensive history of his empire. It would be *the* official history, a state-sponsored record of Mughal glory unmatched in scope.

For this first-time history, the emperor asked servants of the state and old members of the family to record their memories of the Mughal dynasty. There was one woman among the invited contributors: not Hamida, a learned elder and an impressive library owner whom he adored. Rather, Akbar selected the enormously accomplished Gulbadan, now sixty-three. She had spent her life as a royal witness, partaking in the ventures of her

kith and kin along with her own magnificent initiatives. She was one of the best sources whom Akbar could have asked about their dynasty—a direct witness, family member and, like Hamida, an erudite library owner, astute and highly regarded. Gulbadan noticed people, things, and happenings, and had a fantastic memory. While it was normal for aristocratic women to be literate, she was revered as a learned elder.

Once back inside the harem, Gulbadan launched into another unprecedented adventure, writing the book I was holding in my hands. Although the emperor expected his aunt to write about the grand achievements and epic moments in the career of the Mughal dynasty, and Gulbadan's writing is indeed expansive, she chose to call her work the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah,* or Conditions in the Age of Humayun Badshah. Thus she emphasized the wider itinerant life force of Mughal kingship.

What she delivered was no simple memoir of an elderly lady—she penned in exceptional detail the ragged and robust lives of the people of her dynasty. Her writing is effortless, written as if it were being spoken, animating people and their actions in vivid characterization. Her genre is unclassifiable—not at all like her father's poetic memoir, the *Baburnama,* which she had read and admired, or the hagiographies of kings that others had written.

Her book is unique also as the only prose work written by a woman of the Muslim courts, including Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Iran, and Mughal India, where women mostly wrote poetry. A recent translator noted, "It is one of the first [prose] works ever written by a woman."[9] Not surprisingly, it yields information otherwise effaced from the official Mughal record. Her work informed my first book, a feminist history that brought to the fore the deeply embedded politics in the creation of the stone-walled Mughal harem whose dynamic denizens engaged in the advancement of the grand empire.[10]

Atlanta, Georgia
December 2022

Two decades later and three books on, I continue to wonder what happened to the rest of Gulbadan's manuscript. What was in the missing pages? During national and international promotional events for *Empress,* my biography of Mughal co-sovereign Nur Jahan, readers repeatedly asked me about Gulbadan, who appeared in the early pages of the book getting ready to go

to Mecca as baby Nur was making her way to Akbar's India. I shared with listeners my ongoing obsession with the missing pages. When I told them that she had stayed in Arabia for four years, they wanted more.

And so I found myself gazing simultaneously at two facts: the four years of Gulbadan's stay in Arabia and the lost pages of her manuscript. The more I dug, the more I was persuaded that a biography of Gulbadan would demand that I probe closely the challenge involved in writing a history of disappearances and the story of a scandal.

Within a year of the princess's arrival in Mecca in 1578, Sultan Murad III of Turkey, the sovereign of the Holy Land (the Ottomans had been masters of Egypt and the Hijaz area since 1517), issued an imperial order to evict Gulbadan and her companions. He did so again two years later, in 1580. Five such orders are preserved in the National Archives in Istanbul, Turkey.[11] There may have been more.

The Mughal women had become a prominent spectacle in public places, a circumstance, according to Murad, that was throwing the area into chaos. The matriarchs became the talk of the town. Around the Great Mosque, in places such as markets and fountains, and in other cities, ordinary folk stared at and crowded around Gulbadan and her companions. The hubbub spread to areas far beyond the sacrosanct Ka'ba. According to Badauni, Gulbadan and her party also went overland to the Holy Iranian cities, such as Mashhad, and to other cities in Arabia.

The problem, as Murad saw it, was that Gulbadan and her group had surpassed the permissible boundary and propriety of being in the Holy Places. Their presence was indecorous. They violated the very source of the authority of Sultan Murad. They created *fitna* (chaos). (I will discuss in greater detail in later pages of this book what Murad dubbed the "un-Islamic" activities of Mughal ladies.) Among those he warned in his orders about the women, asking them to ensure that the ladies left the sacred area, was the sherif of Mecca, who wielded considerable prestige and political and diplomatic authority.

There was not a word from Akbar in response to Murad's charges, even though the Red Sea and the Indian coast were closely knit and in constant contact. Tradesmen and pilgrims went to and fro, and news traveled with them. Although there are no surviving records of any exchange between Akbar and Murad, it is noteworthy that soon after Murad's 1580 eviction

edict, Akbar appointed Khwaja Yahya, a venerable courtier, as the next head of pilgrimage, commissioning him to escort Gulbadan and the other royal women back to India.

In March 1580 the princess, Yahya, and the women boarded the *Tezrav,* or Swift One, and headed south from Jeddah. But near the port of Aden, the ship was wrecked. Gulbadan, other Mughal women, and officers stayed in Aden for over seven perilous months. To top it all, the governor of Aden did not behave well toward the royal guests. Yet all of Murad's edicts as well as a stray entry in the imperial history of Akbar record the women's reluctance to leave Aden. Despite the rough conditions, they lived as a community amid natural surroundings in open country. By all accounts, they felt free and happy.

That Murad labeled the Mughal women's activities "un-Islamic" and directed them to leave was nothing short of a disgrace for the Mughals. No wonder Akbar and his historians refused to record the details of what Mughal women did. Instead, the chroniclers wrote sanitized descriptions celebrating the homecoming of the royal aunt, a hajji back from her pilgrimage—not someone who had infuriated a contemporary Islamic monarch ruling in that region.

Thus four extraordinary years vanished from Mughal history. In this fading, many things disappear: the lush worlds that Mughal men and women inhabited, made, and lived; networks, explorations, and wonders that pilgrims and sojourners experienced. The lost years take with them the rich experiences of Mughal women—the history of half of humanity, as is now often said. Moreover, we lose the traces of inimitable experiences and the sense of the vast terrains, people, animals, and sacred geographies of Mughal India, the Red Sea, and the desert land of Arabia.

Were the latter pages of Gulbadan's manuscript lost or deliberately removed? Were they *disappeared?* Why aren't there more copies of her work? If "disappeared" history is not a scandal, what is?[12]

And yet, to some extent we can restore and reanimate these spectacular moments, beginning with Gulbadan's birth in a mud citadel in Kabul. The visual, textual, architectural, and legal sources from Mughal India, Ottoman Turkey, and Ottoman Arabia—you can learn more about my method and sources in the "Note on Sources" at the end of the book—are rich with traces, fragments, and clues to Gulbadan's audacious life. And that is all

we have for most of history: fragments, inklings, messages. The histories and biographies we write work with these, assembling relevant facts and surmises with meticulous care.

Unusual figures and disappeared histories require us to look, above all, where we don't habitually look. "To look afresh at, and then to describe for ourselves, the frescos of the Ice Age, the nudes of 'high art,' the Minoan seals and figurines, the moon-landscape embossed with the booted print of a male foot. . . . To do this kind of work takes a capacity for constant active presence, a naturalist attention to minute phenomena, watching closely for symbolic arrangements, decoding difficult and complex messages left to us by women of the past."[13]

That is what I intend to do here: to tell Gulbadan's life in full color and, for the very first time, to reassemble her missing history.