

Infantilizing Bābā Dārā: The Cultural Memory of Dārā Shekuh and the Mughal Public Sphere

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Abstract

The modernist image of the eclectic Mughal prince and patron, Dārā Shekuh (d. 1659 CE), has been almost universally positive, routinely singling him out as an exceptionally tolerant, but ultimately “ill-fated” figure. His defeat and execution by his younger, more conventionally pious brother, Awrangzib ‘Alamgīr (r. 1658-1707), is in turn lamented as a civilizational tipping point away from the Mughals’ cosmopolitan ethos of “peace with all” toward a more narrowly sectarian vision of empire—one which undermined not only the Mughals themselves, but also the entire Indo-Persian ecumene and, ultimately, the Indian nation. The early modern response to Dārā’s character and cultural legacy was, however, far more complex than this caricature of “good Muslim” tolerance versus “bad Muslim” fanaticism would suggest. This article grapples with that complexity by examining the oblique critical discourse surrounding three of Dārā’s most well-known interlocutors: Bābā Lāl Dayāl, Chandar Bhān “Brahman,” and Hakīm Sarmad.

Keywords

Mughals, Persianate world, cosmopolitanism, tolerance, statecraft, Dara Shekuh

The first-born son of King Shahjahan was the prince Dara, a man of dignified manners, of a comely countenance, joyous and polite in conversation, ready and gracious of speech, of most extraordinary liberality, kindly and compassionate, but over-confident in his opinion of himself, considering himself competent in all things and having no need of advisers. He despised those who gave him counsel. Thus it was that his dearest friends never ventured to inform him of the most essential things... He assumed that fortune would invariably favour him, and imagined that everybody loved him... [but] the haughty Dara scorned the nobles, both in word and deed, making no account of them... [he] depreciated all the nobles at the court, above all the generals and commanders... [who] showed themselves aggrieved and disgusted. All these things united were the chief causes of Dara’s ruin and death. He might have been King of Hindustan if he had known how to control himself.

—Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor* (ca. 1699-1709; I, pp. 213-18)

1

This paper concerns the cultural memory of the eclectic Mughal Prince Mohammad Dārā Shekuh (1615-59) as it developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, just prior to the consolidation of British hegemony in the Indian subcontinent. We are very familiar in our own time with the laudatory memory of Dārā, whose execution in 1659 has turned out to be one of the most overdetermined moments in South Asian historiography. It is the quintessential “what if?” moment, often viewed with modern (and postmodern) hindsight as a kind of civilizational tipping point away from Mughal policies of religious tolerance and *solh-e koll* (“peace with all,” or “absolute peace”) toward a more austere piety—many have said outright bigoted—set of imperial policies under Dārā’s younger brother, Awrangzib ‘Ālamgir (1618-1707). These latter policies are routinely said to have alienated Hindus, incited a “Rajput rebellion,” fractured political coalitions, drained the treasury, and thus hastened the disintegration of the Mughal Empire, which in turn set the subcontinent on an inexorable path (with the aid of British colonial mischief) to partition in 1947.

In this modern formulation of Dārā the “good Muslim” falling victim to Awrangzib the “bad Muslim,”¹ both men’s personalities, and Mughal politics generally, are usually reduced to a straightforward religious determinism. In an ironic reversal of the usual epithet in Mughal sources for the “Prince of Great Fortune” (*shāhzāda-ye boland-eqbāl*), Dārā is regularly described in modern scholarship as “ill-fated”²—as if all fault emanated from his stars rather than himself, whereas his own actions, personal foibles, and human frailties had no role in his failure to win the throne. Invariably juxtaposed with his illustrious great-grandfather Akbar (r. 1556-1605), with whom he is said to have “shared an admiration for Hindu culture,” Dārā is routinely praised for being “intellectually liberal and religiously tolerant” (Smith, pp. 39, 59). Admittedly, such

¹ Cf. the ironic sense of these terms suggested by M. Mamdani.

² For instance: Smith, p. 39; Chaitanya 1994, p. 81 (“...the lovable but ill-fated Dara Shikoh”), and *ibid.* 1977, p. 31; quoted in Kachru, p. 6 (“But we must not forget that Akbar and that ill-fated son of Shah Jahan, Dara Shikoh, were great patrons of Sanskrit”); Rawlinson, p. 31 (“But the great Emperor Akbar, and after him that brilliant but ill-fated Prince, Dārā Shikoh, were both keenly interested in Hinduism”); Schimmel and Welch, p. 9 (“Ill-fated Prince Dara Shikoh... who was so spiritually akin to Akbar...”); Fisher, p. 116 (“[the] ill-fated Mughal imperial prince, Dara Shukoh... was hospitable to Europeans and sympathetic to Hindus”); Johnston, p. 102 (“...Akbar’s noblest and most ill-fated descendant, Dara Shukoh...”); Kripal, p. 492 (“Akbar’s Sufi experiment with religious difference would die with his great-grandson, Dara Shikoh... Indian history would have to wait another century and a half before this vision was picked up again...”).

praise is not without considerable justification, particularly considering both Akbar's and Dārā's well-documented openness to multicultural influences, as well as both of their contributions to the intellectual history of South Asia, and indeed the world. But in Dārā's case it is simply assumed that this would have made him a good emperor, whereas, alas, we'll never know for sure.

One thing, however, is more certain. Even when it is done by well-meaning scholars out to praise them, this routine juxtaposition of Dārā with Akbar as beacons of liberal tolerance, to the near total exclusion of all other Indo-Muslim monarchs, nobles, and intellectuals who might have engaged with, patronized, shown tolerance toward, or otherwise shared a similar "admiration for Hindu culture," creates an effect in South Asian historiography whereby the two are treated not only as exceptional individuals, but in fact as *exceptions* to an implied default position of Islamic orthodoxy—an orthodox stance to which Awrangzib is often very simplistically viewed as some sort of logical "return." In turn, such "implacable orthodoxy" on Awrangzib's part is adduced almost axiomatically, framing what was actually a somewhat predictable continuation of Mughal expansionist policies rather as a fundamentalist fool's errand of "extending Islamic dominion"³—the fact that the Deccan Sultanates against which Awrangzib campaigned were *already* ruled by Muslims does not seem to matter much here—and treating the new emperor's piety not only as the sole salient feature of his own political career, but also, *tout court*, of virtually all South Asian political and cultural life in the second half of the seventeenth century.

Whatever their basis in some kernel of historical reality, the sharp dichotomies of this model could use considerable reconsideration. Indeed, some very good recent scholarship has shown that, if nothing else, there was a great deal of complexity to both Dārā's and Awrangzib's career trajectories, and while their respective religious perspectives certainly informed their worldviews—how could they not?—these perspectives were far from determinative, politically speaking, in any kind of straightforward way.⁴ *Realpolitik* still mattered, as did personalities and a great many regional, socio-economic, and historical contingencies that had little if anything to do with some final palace showdown between intellectually liberal tolerance and all-consuming dogma.

³ The quotes in this sentence are from Smith, p. 60. For other versions of this model see, among others, Wolpert, pp. 156-72; Stein, pp. 176-89; Richards, pp. 151-84.

⁴ For general discussions, see for instance Alam and Subrahmanyam; Eaton, pp. 155-202; Asher and Talbot, pp. 225-86; Faruqi, 2009. On Awrangzib's supposed "ban on music," see Brown; on the political calculations involved in Awrangzib's use of the "weapon of heresy" against Dārā, see Davis; on the culture and politics of Mughal princely competition generally, see Faruqi, 2002.

As it happens, the memory of both Dārā and Awrangzib among various early modern publics was far more complex and contested than it has been in recent times. The most obvious form of critique against Dārā was the charge of heresy and/or apostasy, leveled toward the end of his own life and in some of the historical chronicles composed during Awrangzib's reign to justify Dārā's execution.⁵ But even the deployment of this "weapon of heresy," as Craig Davis has rightly noted, has to be seen in the context of Dārā's threat to Awrangzib's nascent imperial authority, and thus as a political act—one which merely helped rationalize what was, after all, a standard Timurid practice of eliminating political rivals for *raisons d'état*. Indeed, let us not forget that Awrangzib found justifications to execute all three of his brothers, not just Dārā. Moreover, though Dārā's most vehement critics were indeed the conservative 'olamā' and various partisans of Awrangzib, these were hardly Dārā's only critics. Even some of the prince's most ardent supporters, for instance the historian Mohammad Sāleh Kamboh, acknowledged that the prince had an "arrogant and self-conceited" streak to his personality (quoted in Siddiqui). The passage from Manucci cited above as an epigraph points to another kind of discontent, one that festered among the Mughal nobility, many of whom found Dārā's superiority complex to be off-putting, boorish, immature, and downright unseemly for one with pretensions to the throne. This grouching among the nobility, which had virtually nothing to do with Dārā's eclectic religious proclivities, proved exceedingly consequential when the time came to choose sides—and change sides—during the war of succession. Rajputs such as Jai Singh were just as likely as Muslims like Mahābat Khan and Mir Jomla to have been rankled by Dārā's behavior. Thus, despite the great admiration in some circles for Dārā's intellect and cultural patronage, there was also a significant, and important, constituency of Hindu and Muslim alike that disliked him for entirely non-sectarian reasons, sometimes having to do with a belief that Dārā's narcissistic arrogance made him unfit for the throne, and sometimes out of pure personal enmity.

It is, perhaps, in such discontent that we find the seeds of a later discourse in which Dārā was regularly depicted less as an august but ill-fated sovereign who represented the last lost hope for tolerant Hindustan than as a precocious, immature youth in desperate need of good guidance. The remainder of this paper will examine this latter discourse, as it pertains to three key figures who have come, each in their own way, to be mnemonically linked to Dārā almost as a shorthand: Bābā Lāl Dayāl, *monshi* Chandar Bhān Brahman, and Mohammad Sa'id "Hakim" Sarmad.

⁵ For a detailed examination of these charges, see Davis.

2

In the autumn of 1653, Dārā Shekuh was on his way back to Delhi following a disastrous campaign to retrieve Qandahar from the Mughals' great rivals, the Safavids of Iran. His father, Emperor Shah Jahān (r. 1628-58) had already made a couple of unsuccessful attempts to retake this important frontier outpost, under the command of Awrangzib and the powerful *vazir* Sa'dallāh Khan; but for Dārā, out to prove his martial mettle to his father and some of the dubious factions at court, this was surely the most humiliating defeat on an already flimsy military résumé.⁶ And yet, despite the dismal failure of this mission, or indeed, perhaps because of it, Dārā appears to have been in no great hurry to return directly to his father's court. Instead, in the fall of that year the prince broke journey somewhere on the outskirts of Lahore, where he held a series of dialogues with a local Punjabi spiritual divine who is commonly referred to simply as Bābā Lāl.

Apart from the timing, perhaps, there is very little that is novel or remarkable about Dārā's decision to meet with a figure like Bābā Lāl. Consulting with spiritual divines of all kinds had been a longstanding Timurid tradition, one maintained by all of Dārā's Mughal ancestors in what has recently been described as a kind of "gnostic diplomacy" (Kripal). There are also several precedents from the time of the Delhi Sultanate, Mohammad Tughlaq's (r. 1325-51) close association with the celebrated Jaina monk Jinaprabha Suri being only the most conspicuous (Husain, pp. 311-39). Closer to Dārā's own time, Akbar had made a special visit to the Sikh Guru Arjun in 1598 (Grewal, pp. 55), and both Akbar and Jahāngir had famously met numerous times with a *gosain* hermit by the name of Jadrup, whose understanding of mystical precepts so impressed Jahāngir that he became convinced that *tasavvof* and Vedanta were in fact the same science (Jahāngir, p. 209). Shah Jahān, too, often surrounded himself with mystical consultants, and while he might have inclined more toward "proper" Sufis, his court was awash in mystically-inclined Hindus like Chandar Bhān Brahman, not to mention various Hindu astrologers and other divines with whom he consulted almost daily. Indeed, throughout

⁶ For details on all of these Qandahar campaigns, and their important political ramifications, see Faruqi, 2002, pp. 292-98. In a somewhat harsh but telling verdict, Faruqi concludes that Dārā's failure in Qandahar "threw a spotlight on [his] military inexperience . . . [and] revealed the prince's reliance on soothsayers and charlatans for important military decisions, his naivete, his callousness toward individual suffering, and his inability to work with any nobles assigned to his command." Even if we admit the potential for partisan hyperbole in the Persian sources Faruqi has relied on for making this judgment, the fact remains that such behavior was likely far more consequential to Dārā's ultimate doom than any of his religious investigations, particularly at the key moment "when the time came to marshal the Mughal nobility against his brother in 1658."

this entire period Sanskrit and Braj intellectuals like Siddhichandra, Keshavdās, and Jagannāthapanditarāja were continuous fixtures at the Mughal imperial court, as well as the subimperial courts of various nobles (Busch 2006, and forthcoming; Pollock 2001a, 2001b).

Many more examples could easily be adduced, and yet despite the abundance of precedent for such dialogues, Dārā's interviews with Bābā Lāl have often been folded in modern historiography into the larger narrative of exceptionalism described above—in this case as a key feature of what Louis Massignon described as Dārā's "experiment in Hindu-Muslim unity." One near-contemporary Persian source which mentions the dialogues rather matter-of-factly, however, is Sujān Rā'i Bhandāri's *Kholāsāt al-tavārikh* (1696), in a description of a town called Dhyānpur (lit. "City of Contemplation"):

Dhyānpur is the place where Bābā Lāl, a genius of mystical experience and discourse (*sarāmad-e arbāb-e hāl o qāl*) who acted as a portal to the bounties of glorious God (*mawred-e foyuzāt-e izad-e zu'l-jalāl*), had his residence. In life he was a master of erudition and godly knowledge, and in the explication (*gozāresh*) of divine Truth and gnosis he was a captain on a vast ocean of multiplicitous waves of eloquence (*marzbān-e bahr-e amvāj-e gunāgun-sokhanān bud*). Many classes of men, both elite and common, have become his disciple or devotee, and incorporated his Hindi poetry on matters of spiritual truth, mystical gnosis, and divine unity into their regular prayer litanies (*verd-vazīfa-ye =kh"od dārand*). On several occasions during his life the Imperial Prince Dārā Shekūh met with that celebrated saint and discussed the gnosis of God (*mā'refat-e elāhī*), whereupon Chandar Bhān, the *monshi* of Shah Jahān's time, committed their dialogues to the prison of the pen in an elegantly expressed Persian text (Bhandāri, pp. 68 f.).⁷

Note that the language used here to praise Bābā Lāl, even though by a "Hindu", about a "Hindu", is almost entirely drawn from Indo-Persianate Sufi idioms. The fact that Sujān Rā'i felt perfectly comfortable describing Bābā Lāl in this way is illustrative of the fact that by the seventeenth century such terminology was not always necessarily coded as Muslim, but rather had become, especially in Mughal Persian texts written in certain circles, a kind of neutral idiom available for describing mystics, and mystical experience, of all types (for further details and context, see Alam, pp. 81-114).

In addition to the familiarity with multiple religious traditions that each of the interlocutors brought with them to the meetings, there were also multiple levels of linguistic expertise at work, both in conducting and in disseminating the dialogues. A manuscript dated 1727-28 housed in Aligarh notes that the

⁷ I am grateful to Muzaffar Alam for drawing this passage to my attention. For further details on Sujān Rā'i, see Khān.

conversations themselves were conducted in some form of “Hindi”—which at the time could refer to any one of a number of possible north Indian vernaculars, including the local Punjabi—from which, as Sujān Rā’i had also noted, they “were translated into a luminous Persian” (*tarjomān-e fārsi-e jelvagar-i pazirofī*) by Chandar Bhān Brahman.⁸ This written version of the dialogues circulated widely in early modern India, and has come down to us under a variety of names: *Nāder al-nekāṭ*, *Mokālema-ye Bābā Lāl o Dārā Shekuh*, *Gosht-e Bābā Lāl*, *So’āl o javāb-e Dārā Shekuh o Bābā Lāl*, among others, and even seems to have been translated into Sanskrit with the title *Praśnottarāvali* (A Series of Questions and Answers) sometime toward the end of the seventeenth century.⁹

No matter what version one reads, however, certain features stand out. The dialogues have typically been read as simply a conversation about religion, a Muslim monarch attempting to learn about Hinduism; and, to be sure, there is much discussion of highly abstruse yogic and sufic principles. For instance, in several versions of the text Dārā’s very first “noble question” (*so’āl-e ‘aziz*) concerns the subtle difference between *nāda*, ineffable cosmic sound vibrations, the channeling of which forms the basis for a lot of yogic meditative practice, and *veda*, literally “knowledge,” but also, obviously, referring to the seminal corpus of Hindu texts. It is a very subtle distinction within Indic philosophy that, while certainly interesting, need not detain us here, but Bābā Lāl’s “perfect answer” (*javāb-e kāmel*) is quite revealing, and sets up an important pattern: “It is like [the difference between] a king and a king’s command, where the king is the *nāda*, and the command is the *veda*” (*chonānche bādshāh o hokm-e bādshāh [;] bādshāh ba-mā’ni-e nād, va hokm ba-mā’ni-e bed ast*; Aligarh ms, f. 1b).

This answer does two important things. First, it provides a useful metaphor with which to understand the distinction that Dārā is asking about. Just as a king himself is the ultimate source and prime mover of power, whereas his commands emanate from him *qua* discourse, and in turn produce action and results in the world at large, so too, Bābā Lāl seems to be saying, *nāda* is the ultimate cosmic source of all sound, whereas *veda* is a tangible emanation that has efficacy in the world. Since there can only be one king, moreover, an answer like this also hints at the monistic tendencies in Indic philosophy that allowed many sympathetic Muslim thinkers, including Dārā obviously, to recognize a kind of *tawhid* as the underlying basis of Hindu philosophy. This aspect of Dārā’s intellectual project is, of course, well known, and would

⁸ *Gosht-e Bābā Lāl Dayāl ham-rāh-e Shāh-zāda Dārā Shekuh* Aligarh MS., Azad Library, Jawahir Museum Collection, 70, f. 1b.

⁹ I am grateful to Christopher Minkowski for drawing my attention to the Sanskrit version, an undated manuscript of which is housed in the City Palace Museum, Jaipur.

culminate in his vision of the two great religious traditions as flowing into one great *Majma' al-Bahrain* "Confluence of Two Oceans."

Second, and perhaps more importantly for present purposes, Bābā Lāl's answer signals right from the outset that one of the dominant themes, perhaps *the* dominant theme, of the dialogues would be kingship itself. Merely by the nature of his questions, Dārā demonstrates that he already had an extensive familiarity with numerous esoteric Vedantic precepts and terminology, along with a deep knowledge of Puranic mythology. Thus, following on the discussion of *nāda* and *veda*, he goes on to ask Bābā Lāl throughout the dialogues about the true nature of *ātma*, *paramātma*, metempsychosis and other conventional concepts in Indic religious philosophy. He asks, as his grandfather Jahāngir had similarly inquired of a group of Brahmins, about the ultimate purpose and logic of idol-worship (*bot-parasti*; Jahāngir, p. 36).¹⁰ But just as often he inquires about such things in the specific context of their relevance to Indic models of kingship and authority, frequently with reference to the ideal king of Hindu mythology, Rāmā.¹¹ These latter questions, in turn, are themselves balanced by numerous enquiries regarding the nature of true asceticism (*faqiri*). Indeed, more than anything, Dārā seems preoccupied with the question of how to negotiate the tension between the royal exercise of worldly power, on the one hand, and a desire for spiritual fulfillment on the other. This preoccupation is evident in earlier works, too, such as *Sakinat al-awliā'*, where he had noted that "*ān-ke nām-ash az haqq faqir ast, agarche amir ast faqir ast*" (He whom the Divine has designated a *faqir* remains so, even if he be a ruler) (quoted in Davis, p. 55). It is crucial, then, to realize that Dārā is not asking Bābā Lāl to explain Hinduism to him in some dull rudimentary sense—he didn't need Bābā Lāl for that—but rather to guide him in pondering both how to be a better king and, even more significantly, how to be a better *Muslim*. In one especially revealing passage, Bābā Lāl advises Dārā to make sure that as a king he continues to seek out *ahl-e allāh*.¹² He also demonstrates a robust familiarity with all manner of Islamicate theological topoi, not just through his consistent deployment of terminology from Sufi idioms, but also, for

¹⁰ In fact, Bābā Lāl's answer is similar to the one Jahāngir had received: the idol is simply a tool to help the less spiritually advanced, who are still enchanted by external forms (*surat*) in the way that a child is fascinated by a doll, channel their heart's attention (*estebkām-e del taqarror namuda*); once a person progresses toward greater awareness, they abandon such props in order to focus on the interior reality (*bāten*). Once again, note that the overlap here with Sufi terminology comes from Bābā Lāl himself, or at the very least Chandar Bhān, not Dārā (Aligarh MS., f. 2b).

¹¹ On Rāmā's crucial place in India's medieval and early modern political imagination, see Pollock, 1993.

¹² Aligarh MS., f. 6b.

instance, in an exchange on the question of whether or not the Prophet Mohammad had a visible shadow.¹³ As if that weren't enough, he sprinkles his answers with Persian poetry, too, including several direct quotations from the *ghazals* of Hāfez Shirāzi.

In short, no matter what one's opinion of Dārā's intellectual project as a whole, or of the theological implications of the dialogues themselves, there is absolutely no doubt that this was a serious discussion, between two very serious intellectuals, concerning the relationship between esoteric wisdom and worldly power, as formulated in both religious traditions. Moreover, the emphasis on kingship in these dialogues demonstrates that Dārā was not simply curious about Hinduism *per se*, but also seeking a particular type of spiritual counsel, one that could help him formulate a political philosophy. Having just lost the battle for Qandahar, one can speculate that he was feeling the tension between his intellectual endeavors and the demands of rulership all too acutely; and thus the search for strategies to resolve that anxiety constitutes a major theme of the dialogues, lending an even greater real-world seriousness to their apparently recondite subject matter. Indeed, we have clear evidence that the dialogues were in fact read this way by some early modern audiences. For instance, in an eighteenth-century manuscript miscellany now housed in the British Library (Or. 1883), the *So'āl o javāb-e Dārā Shekuh o Bābā Lāl* (fols. 169b-175a) is juxtaposed with various texts on political history, such as an extract from *Eqbāl-nāma-ye jahāngiri* chronicling the Mughal Emperor Homāyun's exile in Persia (fols. 153-59), excerpts of *Ma'dan-e akhbār* (ca. 1610), another general history from Jahāngir's reign, and a selection from *Habib al-siar* dealing with the Mughals' celebrated maternal ancestor, Chingiz Khan. The binding also includes selections from texts on moral wisdom that come directly from the *ādāb* and *akhlāq* tradition, such as *'Eyār-e dānesh*, a collection of moral fables based on Kāshefi's *Anvār-e sohayli* prepared by Akbar's celebrated courtier, Abu'l-Fazl (d. 1602), and the *Nasihāt al-moluk* of Sa'di Shirāzi, as well as *Mer'āt al-makhlūqāt* and *Mer'āt al-haqā'eq*, two treatises on Hindu cosmology by the great seventeenth-century Sufi litterateur, Shaikh 'Abd-al-Rahmān Cheshti.¹⁴

Clearly, then, Dārā's dialogues with Bābā Lāl struck at least some early modern readers not just as an inquiry into Hindu religion, but also as fitting comfortably along a whole continuum of textual genres that related to political philosophy, rulership, and moral authority. Cultivating a higher spiritual

¹³ This exchange is notably absent from Massignon's version of the dialogues, but is there in the Aligarh MS., f. 2a.

¹⁴ For further details on this manuscript, see Rieu, pp. 1033-34. For details on the importance of such *akhlāq* texts in Indo-Persian political philosophy, see Alam, 2004, pp. 26-80.

awareness was certainly one among those varied concerns, but, even with regard to a figure so committed to religious inquiry as Dārā Shekuh, treatises containing spiritual wisdom were merely one component of a much broader curriculum of texts designed to teach the wise exercise of worldly power.

3

But the dialogues with Bābā Lāl were not always seen this way, as evidenced by a versified narration of the meetings that appeared at the end of the eighteenth century in the eclectic *Mathnavi-e kajkolāh* (1794) by a poet named Ānandaghana “Khosh” (Ethé, no. 2905, 1725). According to Lachhmi Nārāyan Shafiq’s *Tazkera-ye Gol-e rā’ nā* (1773), Khosh hailed from “among the intellectuals (*khosh-fekrān*) of Brindāban,” i.e. central north India, adding that “they say he translated the famous Hindi book *Bhāgavat* [i.e., *Bhagavad Gītā*] into Persian with the height of eloquence, but while writing this *tazkera* it was not available to me” (Shafiq, p. 4). The modern scholar S. M. ‘Abdallāh notes that Khosh also made a Persian verse translation of the *Rāmāyana*, and was “highly skilled in both Persian and Hindi” (‘Abdallāh, pp. 213 f.). A manuscript of Khosh’s *divān* of *ghazals* and *mokhammathāt*, transcribed in 1791, also survives in the British Library (Ethé, no. 2906).

A poet like Ānandaghana Khosh thus in many ways reflects the best tendencies and potential of Indo-Persian literary cosmopolitanism. He was highly educated in multiple linguistic traditions, and, like so many Indian intellectuals before him, chose Persian as the literary medium through which he hoped to reach the widest possible transregional audience. The pressure on Indian Persian in the eighteenth century from both within and outside the subcontinent—from Urdu and other vernaculars, on the one hand, and from Iranian chauvinism and the emerging *bāzgasht* movement on the other—has been well documented.¹⁵ But in Ānandaghana and so many others like him, we see that for all the widening fissures in the cosmopolitan Persophone ecumene, a great many Indian intellectuals still placed a premium on laying claim to, and maintaining expertise in, the classical literary canon of ‘Ajām. For evidence of this sentiment, one needs look no farther than the first line of *Mathnavi-e kajkolāh*: *beshnaw az man chun hekāyat mikonam // shokr guyam na shekāyat mikonam* (listen to me, how I narrate // I utter thanks, not complaints), which clearly announces Khosh’s *mathnavi* as a legatee of Rumi’s celebrated master text, playfully adapting the famous first line of the latter in a way that would be obvious to any reader with even a modest acquaintance with Persian litera-

¹⁵ See for instance Alam, 2003; S. R. Faruqi, 1998; Kinra, 2001.

ture. And, like Rumi, Khosh goes on to present his reader with a variety of tales, anecdotes, witticisms, and dialogues. Some are descriptive, such as his lovely ode to Benares and the river Ganges (which he refers to as *daryā-ye sharif*); some are narrative, including a brief autobiographical sketch and several quasi-historical parables about the lives of various sultans; and a great many are either tales of the exploits of various Sufis, mystical parables such as the “tale of the goose and hawk” (*dāstān-e qāz o bāz*), or mystically-inflected renderings of Biblical and Koranic stories, including a biography of Jesus, the story of Moses and the Bedouin’s wife, and several anecdotes about King Solomon.

Nestled among all these eclectic, erudite, and often playful tales is a clever versification of none other than Dārā’s conversations with Bābā Lāl (Ethé, no. 2905, ff. 12a-15a; no. 1725, ff. 42b-43b). Khosh might very well have been acquainted with Chandar Bhān’s prose version of the dialogues, but, as we will see, his version differs so much from the former in tone and substance that it is just as likely that he knew of the conversations only secondhand, or perhaps read about them in a secondary source like *Kholāsāt al-tavārikh*. We’ll probably never know for sure, but given the fact that he makes no mention of Chandar Bhān anywhere in his version—a significant omission, as will become clear below—it is safe to say that a commitment to historical accuracy was not among his chief goals. Of course, *Mathnavi-ye kajkolāh* is a literary text first and foremost, so a considerable amount of leeway for poetic license has to be given with regard to its portrayal of the key *dramatis personae*; and besides, what is most interesting is the *way* in which Khosh remembers Dārā, not so much his fidelity to actual events or lack thereof.

More than anything, Khosh’s depiction of Dārā narrows the scope of the prince’s interest in Bābā Lāl’s counsel almost exclusively to matters of the flesh. Gone are the high-minded discussions of the relationship among cosmic sound vibrations, the soul, asceticism, and kingship; in Khosh’s *mathnavi* Dārā Shekuh is characterized as little more than a frustrated adolescent. We get a hint of this characterization right from the first section heading, which explains that this will be the “story of the carefree (*bi-anduh*) Dārā Shekuh and Shah Lāl Sāheb-e Kamāl.” It is not necessarily intended to demonize Dārā, for this heading is followed by a prefatory section which does actually have a fair amount of praise for the prince, who is lauded as “a knower of Truth, stalwart as a mountain” (*haqqshenās o dar tahammol hamcho kuh*), “a *darvish* in the guise of a king” (*dar lebās-e shāh ān darvish bud*) who “kept the society of Truth-knowers, and was himself ever in search of Truth” (*sobbat-i bā haqqshenāsān dāsh t ān // dar talāsh-e haqq bovad ān dā’emān*).

But after this salutary opening, even though Khosh never unambiguously criticizes Dārā, the narrative takes a decidedly coporeal, almost prurient turn.

The section heading announces that Dārā's first question will concern his inability to control his sensual appetites (*shahvat-e nafsāni*). This might seem like an ordinary enough problem, but in the narration that follows we see that by *shahvat-e nafsāni* Khosh really means, specifically, Dārā's untamable sexual urges. After noting that both he and Bābā Lāl consume similar food and drink, wear comparable clothing, etc., Dārā continues:

So why has lust so overpowered my heart
That I am ever in search of the pleasures of women?

Day and night I keep the company of women
Indeed, I do not even have the patience of one day away from them

I am a prisoner of the tresses of these beautiful ladies
O, and so too am I ensnared by their lovely lashes

Day and night my heart longs for them
And lust has completely conquered me

My heart cannot endure (*del nagirad sabr*) the absence of women
So how is your heart forever able to bear it?

Just like me, you need constant food and clothing (*kb^w or o push*)
So how does your heart remain so blissfully free of lust?

In other words, Dārā's problem, according to Khosh's literary imagining, was that all the courtly finery and power that surrounded him proved to be such a powerful aphrodisiac that he simply could not restrain himself sexually. He is so addled by lust that he cannot understand why others, too, are not similarly addicted to love.

Considering the exceedingly serious nature of Dārā's actual conversations with Bābā Lāl as described above, or at least what we know of them from Chandar Bhān's version, it is hard to read this passage as anything other than jarringly demeaning. Of course, in Khosh's defense, this is a Sufi *mathnavi*, and in that context it makes perfect sense to focus on 'eshq, the 'āsheq's longing for *mā'shuqs* both worldly and divine, and so on. But the brazen literalism of his descriptions nevertheless strikes the reader almost immediately as being suggestive of far more than mere metaphors for divine love. Indeed, after Khosh narrates Bābā Lāl's predictably wise response, which is described as helping the prince to get a hold of himself (*ke dar ān khāter-jam' gashht*), the very next section continues the theme of sexual misadventure, in this case in the form of a parable about a "young man" (*javān*) who came close to ruin because of his untamable longing for a certain courtesan (*lulī*) who demanded a lavish fee of one thousand *ashrafis* per visit—which, alas, he could not afford (*in qadr-e maqdūr nadāram*)."

In response to this dilemma Khosh has Bābā Lāl, in good Sufi fashion, offer a lengthy and sobering discourse replete with stories within the story, on topics as varied as existential doubt, spiritual devotion, life and death, pleasure and pain, worldly (*majāzī*) and true (*haqīqī*) love, and numerous other typical themes of Sufi *mārifat*. But the image that the reader has of Dārā is basically fixed by that point, and remains so for the rest of the text. For instance, when the interview picks up again in the next volume of *Mathnavi-e Kajkolāh*, Dārā does present the sage with some less puerile questions (for instance, he asks why Hindu and Muslim rosaries have slightly different numbers of beads); but even regarding these ostensibly more serious questions, Bābā Lāl responds to Dārā almost entirely in terms of the prince's material urges and inability to think beyond physical passions, exhorting him at one point: 'You are forever drowning in worldly thoughts // O, where in your heart is there room for true meaning?' (*gharq to dā'im ba-fekr-e donyavi // ay kujā dar dil-e to fekr-e mā'navi*). In other words, far from the high-minded but ultimately "ill-fated" intellectual hoping to use his scholarly pursuits and patronage of other great mystics and scholars to find the common foundation of *tawhid* in all Indo-Muslim religious traditions, Dārā is portrayed here simply as an oversexed adolescent in need of adult supervision.

4

Where did this image, so contrary to the modern image of Dārā as the spiritual savant and liberal idealist *par excellence*, come from? One might very easily dismiss Ānandaghana Khosh's portrayal as an outlier, as one person's odd way of remembering the prince in order to suit his own clever narrative aims. But Khosh was far from the only eighteenth-century intellectual to infantilize Dārā in this way. Many *tazkera* accounts of people who came to be associated with Dārā, very likely drawing on gossip and anecdotes that circulated in the literary salons, coffee houses, and *bāzārs* of the emergent Mughal public sphere, became crucial in the construction of collective memories about Dārā himself. And the associative memory of few such figures was more consequential to this oblique critique than that of the celebrated *monshi*, Chandar Bhān "Brahman" (d. 1662-63).

Chandar Bhān has been widely acknowledged as one of the greatest seventeenth-century Mughal litterateurs, so accomplished in prose composition (*enshā'*) that he is often described as second only to Akbar's great courtier Abu'l-Fazl in that art.¹⁶ *Chahār chaman*, his florid, semi-autobiographical

¹⁶ For a detailed study of Chandar Bhān's life, career, and place in Indo-Persian intellectual history, see Kinra, 2008.

account of life at Shah Jahān's court, is one of the masterpieces of Mughal prose; and his collected letters, the *Monsha'āt-e Barahman*, continued to be widely circulated and emulated as models of Persian epistolary composition well into the nineteenth century, even among East India Company officials. Scores of manuscripts of his poetic *divān* are scattered in archives around the world, and, as we have noted above, among Chandar Bhān's many other miscellaneous writings was the Persian version of Dārā's conversations with Bābā Lāl. This is very likely one reason that the two came to be associated in the minds of many early modern literati and other intellectuals. But things are, unsurprisingly, a bit more complicated than they might at first appear.

Recall that in the passage cited above Sujān Rā'i Bhandāri had described Chandar Bhān specifically as a *monshi-e shāh jahāni*, i.e. 'a *monshi* of Shah Jahān's reign,' or alternatively, 'Shah Jahān's *monshi*.' This is careful wording and, as it happens, matches both the historical record and the internal evidence from Chandar Bhān's own writings, all of which suggest that Chandar Bhān's ties to Dārā Shekūh came very late in his career, and, even then, were incidental at best. He was born in late sixteenth-century Lahore, to a family of Punjabi Brahmans, and spent his formative years at the height of Akbar's reign. His professional career began in the service of one Mir 'Abd-al-Karim, who at the time was the Mughal superintendent of buildings (*mir-e 'emārat*) for Lahore, but who, incidentally, went on to become one of the primary overseers of the Taj Mahal construction. Chandar Bhān moved into a higher echelon of the Mughal subimperial administration when he became secretary to the powerful *vazir* Afzal Khan. When Afzal Khan died in 1639, a grieving Shah Jahān traveled personally to offer his condolences to the Khan's family and servants, and, as a proud Chandar Bhān relates twice in *Chahār chaman*, this audience gave the *monshi* an opportunity to showcase his calligraphic talents for the emperor's "alchemical gaze" (*nazar-e kimiā-athar*), and present this quatrain for His Majesty's "blessed ear" (*sam'-e mobārak*):

shāh-i ke motī-e u do 'ālam gardad
har-jā ke sar-i 'ast bar dar-ash kham gardad
az-bas-ke ba dawr-ash ādami yāft sharaf
kh^uāhad ke fereshta niz ādam gardad

For a king to whom both worlds have submitted,
 Everywhere that there is a head, it bows at his door;
 So much is a man ennobled in his era,
 That even angels would prefer to become men! (Brahman, pp. 6, 109 f.).

These efforts were "pleasing to that difficult-to-please nature" (*pasand-e tab'-e moshkel-pasand oftād*), in reward for which Shah Jahān recruited Chandar

Bhān directly into his personal service as the court's *vāqé'a-nevis* and the emperor's personal diarist (*khedmat-e tastir-e bayāz-e khāssa-ye pādshāhi niz ba in niāzmand moqarrar gasht*; *ibid.*).

During his time at court, Chandar Bhān continued to serve a series of powerful patrons besides the emperor, including the prime ministers Eslām Khan, Sa'dallāh Khan, Mo'azzam Khan, and Ja'far Khan (Brahman, pp. 19-33). Along the way, he earned both honorific titles such as "Rā'i" and increased responsibilities, including a key diplomatic assignment, and ultimately the distinction of *mir monshi*, i.e. the head of the Mughal chancellery (*dār al-enshā*). This diligent and dignified career lasted through the end of Shah Jahān's reign and into the early years of Awrangzib's, when, in one of several extant and cordial letters to the new emperor, Chandar Bhān cited his old age and begged leave to retire to his home town of Lahore, where he appears to have spent the last few years of his life helping to manage the upkeep on the former emperor Jahāngir's tomb complex.¹⁷ Nowhere, in any of his extant writings, does Chandar Bhān do so much as mention working for Dārā Shekuh, at any point in his career.

These biographical details are far from trivial because, much like the jarring disconnect between the "actual" Bābā Lāl dialogues and Ānandaghana Khosh's version of them, there is a similar disconnect between the historical record on Chandar Bhān and the anecdotes about him that emerged in the early modern *tazkera* tradition and, in some cases, have persisted even in modern scholarship. For instance, Mohammad Afzal Sarkhosh's *Kalemāt al-sho'arā* (1682) acknowledges that Chandar Bhān "had an upright character" (*tab'-e rasā*), that he "was a treasure among the Hindus" (*dar henduān ghanimat bud*), and that "he composed poems that were clear and distilled in the style of the ancients (*shér ba-tarz-e qodamā shosta o sāf migoft*)." But this last comment could easily be seen as damning the *monshi* with faint praise, especially in a literary cultural context wherein "speaking the fresh" (*tāza-guyi*) was considered the *summum bonum* of the poetic craft.¹⁸ Indeed, Sarkhosh's suggestion that Chandar Bhān was a capable enough litterateur, at least "among the Hindus," hints at a broader antipathy that will be confirmed by the story which he goes on to tell:

One day, the order for [Chandar Bhān] to recite a poem came down from the Seat of the Imperial Caliphate [i.e., from Shah Jahān]. He recited this verse:

¹⁷ *Monsha'āt-e Barahman*, Aligarh MS., 'Abd-al-Salām collection 294/64, fols. 8a-10a.

¹⁸ For an examination of *tāza-guyi*, *sabk-e hendī*, and Chandar Bhān's place in the literary historiography of both concepts, see Kinra, 2007.

*marā del-i[st] ba-kofr-āshenā ke chandin bār
ba Ka'ba bordam o bāz-ash barahman āvardam*

I have a heart so acquainted with infidelity that, however many times
I took it to the Ka'ba I brought it back still a Brahman.

The Emperor Shah Jahān, protector of the faith, became angry and declared: 'This ill-starred infidel is a heretic. He should be executed.' Afzal Khan suggested that 'The following couplet of Hazrat Shaikh Sa'di is an appropriate rejoinder':

*khar-e 'Isā agar ba Makka ravad
chun biāyad hanuz khar bāshad*

[Even] if Jesus's donkey goes to Mecca
It's still just a jackass when it comes back.

The Emperor smiled, and turned his attention elsewhere. Meanwhile, they quickly escorted him [i.e. Chandar Bhān] out of the privy chamber.¹⁹

Now, there is no evidence, either from Chandar Bhān's own extensive writings or from any other contemporary source composed during his lifetime, to corroborate that an encounter like this ever actually took place. Indeed, until *Kalemāt al-sho'arā*, Chandar Bhān's relationship with Shah Jahān had never been described by any source as anything but friendly and affectionate, and in any event Sarkhosh's chronology simply doesn't work; as noted above, Chandar Bhān didn't begin his tenure at court until *after* Afzal Khan had died.²⁰ Infact, if anything the anecdote seems to be a clever inversion of Chandar Bhān's own autobiographical account (cited above) in which quite the opposite happened: far from offending the emperor with an antinomian verse, he impressed the *bādshāh*, at Afzal Khan's funeral no less, with a witty panegyric quatrain.

What we do not know, of course, is whether Sarkhosh himself invented the story, or if this sort of inversion of Chandar Bhān's image was already circulating as gossip and Sarkhosh was simply the first to write it down.²¹ Regardless, the more interesting question here is what work the anecdote does, culturally

¹⁹ Sarkhosh, *Kalemāt al-sho'arā*, Aligarh MS., University Collection no. 95 (Farsiya Akhbar), f. 8a-b.

²⁰ For a more comprehensive analysis of this anecdote, its meandering afterlife, and the evidence against its veracity, see Kinra, 2008.

²¹ The potential in collective social memory for such a total inversion of the salient "facts" of an incident has been amply demonstrated by modern social psychologists, most famously in Gordon Allport and Leo Postman's seminal study, *The Psychology of Rumor*. For further details, see for instance Edy, pp. 123-27; Stewart and Strathern, pp. 40-43; and the various essays in Dovidio et al., eds.

speaking, by way of oblique political critique. We get further clues in this regard from Shir Khan Lodi, another *tazkera-nevis* who included the story in his expansive compendium *Mer'āt al-khiāl* (completed in 1690-91) and made some very telling elaborations. The most significant addition, particularly for present purposes, is Lodi's insertion of Dārā Shekuh into the narrative, recasting the entirety of Chandar Bhān's career as nothing but a lucky result of the prince's largesse. He begins:

Chandar Bhān, the sacred thread-wearer (*zonnār-dār*), was among the residents of Akbarābād [i.e. Agra], took the *takhallos* 'Brahman,' and was not devoid of mystical temperament (*vārastagī*). His entrée into the *monshi*'s profession occurred in the office of the Prince of Great Fortune, Dārā Shekuh, and due to the gift of his supple tongue he advanced by means of this association. His poetry and prose found favor with the Prince. Among his writings the work *Chahār Chaman* provides evidence of his rhetorical skill and clarity of expression (*matlab-navisi o sādagi-e 'ebārat*), without masking the silky artificiality of his verse (*qomāsh-e nazm-ash nīz poshida nīst*) (Lodi, p. 122).

Here too, even more overtly than Sarkhosh, Lodi seems to be damning Chandar Bhān with faint praise, incorrectly crediting Dārā with starting and advancing his career, but at least acknowledging that Chandar Bhān did indeed have a modicum of literary skill. Lodi is, however, nonetheless suspicious of this Hindu *monshi*'s success, explicitly wondering how Dārā could have favored Chandar Bhān over the more "capable men" (*mostā'eddān*) at the Mughal court. To this mystery, he can only venture to suggest that "either the prince had a special affinity for his [simple] style (*tarz*), or [Chandar Bhān] achieved this status through sheer luck."

Even though Chandar Bhān is the overt target here, no early modern reader could miss the fact that Dārā is implicated too. Lodi's chauvinistic assumption that Hindus *a priori* cannot achieve true mastery of literary Persian collides squarely with the otherwise indisputable fact of Chandar Bhān's successful administrative and literary career, and thus he resorts to deftly insinuating that there was some kind of Brahman trickery lurking behind Chandar Bhān's success. Concomitantly, he virtually takes for granted that Dārā was in fact a naive, gullible, and ultimately unwise personality, susceptible to the malign influence of mediocre, irreligious, and ignoble charmers. And, just as Dārā's ungentlemanly behavior in real life rankled many members of the nobility, so too in Lodi's depiction he rebuffs the "capable men" of the court in favor of Chandar Bhān's "plain language" (*sokhan-e sāda*), which again, as with Sarkhosh, has to be taken in pejorative contrast to the *tāza-guyi* that was all the rage. Lodi then continues the theme with a subtle retelling of the same anecdote first penned by Sarkhosh:

They say that once one of [Chandar Bhān's] couplets greatly impressed the prince. One day . . . he mentioned to [Shah Jahān] that a 'wonderful new couplet has been composed by Chandar Bhān Monshi. If ordered, I will call him to your presence.' By this method Dārā Shekuh had an eye toward demonstrating [Chandar Bhān's] talent and ability. The Emperor ordered him to present himself, and when [Chandar Bhān] arrived, [the emperor] commanded: 'Recite that couplet of yours that Bābā liked so much today.' Chandar Bhān recited this verse:

I have a heart so acquainted with infidelity that, however many times
I took it to Mecca I brought it back still a Brahman.

Upon hearing this, the faith-protecting, *sharī'a*-following Emperor was enraged, wrung his hands and said: 'Can anyone answer this infidel?' Among the esteemed gentlemen Afzal Khan, who was known for being quick with an answer, came forward and said: 'If requested I will respond with a couplet from the master.' The Emperor nodded, and Afzal Khan recited this couplet of Hazrat Shaikh [Sa'di], that had refuted it 400 years in advance:

[Even] if Jesus's donkey goes to Mecca
It's still just a jackass when it comes back.

The Emperor's blessed heart relaxed and, thanking [Afzal Khan], he said: 'It was by the power of the faith, may Allāh be propitious and bless it, that you offered this sort of rejoinder, otherwise I might have killed him in anger.' He [the emperor] ordered gifts for Afzal Khan, warned the prince not to bring such decadent nonsense (*mozakharafāt*) into his presence again, and had Chandar Bhān removed from the privy chamber (Lodi, p. 123).

The basic structure and elements of the anecdote are the same as that of Sarkhosh, but by casting Dārā as the overeager facilitator of Chandar Bhān's alleged transgression, Lodi throws a spotlight on Dārā's willingness to flout—indeed, his total cluelessness about—a certain presumed standard of acceptable decorum. Surely this would have resonated with a readership that had a living memory of the prince's occasional bad behavior, hints of which are reinforced at every stage of Lodi's version of the story, from infantilizing the prince as "Bābā" to the patronizing warning not to traffic in such *mozakharafāt*. Indeed, by framing the anecdote in this way Lodi subtly shifts much of the story's attention to Dārā, making Chandar Bhān himself into almost an afterthought.

At this point Lodi adds another twist to the story which would also become part of the standard repertoire of mnemonic images of Chandar Bhān, and, by extension, of Dārā as well.

At any rate, the aforementioned [Chandar Bhān], having renounced his employment after the death of Dārā Shekuh, went to the city of Benares and busied

himself there with his own [i.e. 'Hindu'] ways and customs, until finally in the year 1073 [1662-63] he became ash in the fire-temple of annihilation.

Now, as noted above, Chandar Bhān's own extant writings indicate clearly that he continued to serve Awrangzib—as did plenty of other Hindu secretaries and administrators, such as Rāy-i Rāyān, Raghunāth Rāy—for several years even after Dārā's execution, before finally retiring to Lahore. And no source prior to *Mer'āt al-khiāl*, to my knowledge, had ever mentioned Chandar Bhān retiring to Benares much less being so close to Dārā that he would have renounced his imperial service on account of the latter's death. This little epilogue thus appears very clearly calculated to further reinforce Lodi's image of Chandar Bhān not as a historical figure, but rather as a kind of imaginary ideal of a Hindu—the sort of devoted Hindu for whom a final pilgrimage to Benares, a city inextricably linked to the religio-cultural imagination of and about Hinduism like no other, 'the capital of the Sanskrit seventeenth century,'²² was the logical next move after his too-indulgent benefactor was no longer around to advance his career.

The fact that this portrayal of Chandar Bhān and his relationship with Dārā can, for the most part, be debunked on strictly empirical grounds does not in any way eradicate its long-term historical importance, because some version of Lodi's narrative gets transmitted by virtually every eighteenth-century *tazkera* that has an entry on Chandar Bhān. A few, like Kishan Chand Ekhlās's *Hami-sha bahār* and Āqā Hosaynqoli Khan "'Āsheqi" 'Azimābādī's *Neshtar-e 'eshq* (1818) were skeptical but included the anecdote anyway. More typically, 'Aliqoli Khan "Vāleh" Dāghestānī's copious and enormously influential *Riāz al-sho'arā* (1748), Shaikh Ahmad 'Ali Hāshemi Sandelvi's *Makhzan al-gharā'eb* (1803-04), Mir Hosayn Dust Sambal's *Tazkera-ye Hosayni*, Qodratallāh Gopamavi's *Natā'ej al-afkār*, Navvāb Sadiq Hasan's *Sham'-e anjoman*, and 'Ali Ebrāhim Khan Khalil's *Sohof-e Ebrāhim* were just a few of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century *tazkeras* that reported this encounter between Chandar Bhān and Shah Jahān as the most salient, and often the *only* salient, thing worth remembering about the *monshi's* career. Most of these later reports borrowed explicitly from Lodi's ur-version of the event, sometimes acknowledging him as a source, often reproducing his exact words, and along the way transmitting a potent cultural memory of "Bābā" Dārā as well. In fact, we can plausibly argue that a sizable percentage of eighteenth-century literati—including, perhaps, Ānandaghana Khosh—would have been far more familiar with these *tazkera* anecdotes than with the autobiographical portions of Chandar

²² Pollock, 2005: 13.

Bhān's actual oeuvre. And thus, in the process, this almost certainly fictional encounter becomes absolutely critical not just for how Chandar Bhān was remembered, but also Dārā Shekuh.

5

One cannot try to wish away the fact that there was a powerful undercurrent of religious conservatism, even outright intolerance, at work in Lodi's condescending attitude toward Chandar Bhān and Dārā Shekuh. After all, even if one tries to argue, as I have done here, that Lodi's larger point is to emphasize the prince's immaturity, perhaps as a way of echoing earlier chronicles that reported some of the prince's bad behavior, it is nonetheless significant that he chooses to gloss that immaturity specifically in terms of Dārā's openness to non-Muslim religio-cultural influences. Only a childish mind, he seems to suggest, would be so easily lured into such heterodoxy.

But we cannot, in turn, ourselves be lured into uncritically interpreting an account like Lodi's, or its staying power in the eighteenth-century Indo-Persian cultural imagination, solely in terms of Hindu-Muslim communal tension. For one thing, it is clear that not all *tazkera*-writers who passed the story along during the eighteenth century were doing so out of hostility to non-Muslims; indeed, some of the very writers who kept the story alive were themselves Hindus. For another, the example adduced above of Ānandaghana, who never even mentions Chandar Bhān in connection with his portrayal of Dārā Shekuh, suggests that such anecdotes had a way of contributing to a larger, generalized collective memory of Dārā's immaturity that was far in excess of any particular version of the trope, or any particular writer's personal religious or political biases. Even if we decide that Lodi was a bigot, in other words, we would be hard pressed to say the same about Ānandaghana.

One figure around whom many of these discursive and memorative threads coalesce, and yet also have a way of confounding some of our historiographical expectations, is the flamboyantly irreverent seventeenth-century wanderer, Mohammad Sa'id "Hakim" Sarmad (d. ca. 1661-62). Stories about Sarmad and his mystical exploits are far too widespread, conflicting, and varied to analyze in any detail here.²³ But the one common thread, in virtually all early modern and modern accounts, is the routine assertion that Dārā's openness to Sarmad's heterodoxy played a crucial role in the prince being charged with

²³ The most complete account of his life and career is L. Rai. See also Rizvi, II, pp. 475-79; Troll; Hashmi; Wali; Katz; Hansen, pp. 396-412. For further context, see Athar Ali; Friedmann.

heresy, and thus, by extension, was a proximate cause of Dārā's execution; concomitantly, Sarmad's own execution made him "the most notable victim" of Awrangzib's zeal "for punishing those liberal holy men of his creed whom Dara had favored" (J. Sarkar, p. 93). Before concluding this paper, let us briefly contextualize these claims.

Despite his somewhat enigmatic character, there is actually a relative consensus among the various sources about the basic trajectory of Sarmad's biography. He was born into a Jewish (or, less likely, Christian) trading family that was originally from Armenia, possibly from the great poet Nezāmi's hometown of Ganja, although he himself was either born in or later moved to Kāshān. There he studied multiple literary and religious traditions, purportedly with the likes of the renowned scholars Mollā Sadrā and Mir Abu'l-Qāsem Fenderski (Rizvi, I, p. 475), in both Arabic and Persian, and his deep knowledge of Jewish traditions suggests that he knew a good deal of Hebrew as well. Virtually all sources agree that he adopted Islam during this time in his life, though they also tend to agree that he remained deeply invested in other gnostic traditions. These scholarly pursuits notwithstanding, Sarmad also seems to have remained a very successful merchant, and it was in this capacity that he left Kashan for India, where he made port in Thatta, Sindh, sometime in the early 1630s. In Sindh he arrives at a sort of crossroads, for it was in Thatta that he fell in love with a Hindu youth by the name of Abhay Chand, a fixation so powerful that it apparently caused him to become a total renunciant (*majzub*), abandoning all material pursuits and social decorum once and for all. Lodi's account of this moment in *Mer'at al-khiāl* is typically colorful, expertly using the language of commerce for metaphorical effect:

... through the medium of a Hindu boy (*ba-vasātat-e hendu pesar-i*), the Sultan of Love gained control over the country of his heart, and plundered the merchandise of his sense and intellect, which are the stock-in-trade of the treasury of mankind. In that external passion and internal struggle, he gave whatever he had over to the beauties. He didn't even keep a cover for his private parts (*ser-e 'awrat bar kh'od nadāshbt*), and from then on lived completely naked, and kept on pissing and shitting in sight of all creation (*bawl o ghā'et dar nazar-e khalq kardī*) (Lodi, p. 124).

Some sources, such as Mo'tamad Khan's *Eqbāl-nāma-ye jahāngiri*, suggest that this infatuation was unrequited at first, or attribute the initial failure of Sarmad's romantic overtures to resistance on Abhay Chand's parents' part (Rai, pp. 19 f.). In either case, eventually Sarmad does win the young man's affections, and they begin a peripatetic mystical career together. Those travels took the pair to Lahore, c. 1634-35, where Mo'tamad Khan claims to have encountered them in one of the city's gardens busily reciting Persian poetry, finding

the pair to be unabashedly unkempt and complaining that Sarmad talked too much (Rai, pp. 24 f.). They eventually made their way across India to Hyderabad, in the Deccan, where they seem to have stayed for a number of years, and managed to ingratiate themselves to the local intelligentsia and nobility. Among their most prominent interlocutors was the author of *Dabestān-e mazāheb* (attributed to Mohsin Fāni), a voluminous compendium of information about the world's various religious traditions, for which Sarmad appears to have served as the primary informant on the tenets of Judaism (Fāni, II, pp. 293-304.) We know next to nothing about Abhay Chand, but there is a fair amount of evidence that he himself was quite learned, or at least became so during the course of his relationship and travels with Sarmad. The author of the *Dabestān* tells us that he met the pair in 1647, and that Abhay Chand had "read the book of Moses, the psalms of David, and other books" with Sarmad, whom he describes as a "Rabbi," though he doesn't clarify in which language they read such texts. He adds, too, that it was in fact Abhay Chand who "translated a part of the Mosaic book" for him, which was then corrected by Sarmad and revised by the author himself before inclusion in the text. It is also from *Dabestān* that we learn that Sarmad developed a notable following among the Qotbshāhi nobility. Shaikh Mohammad Khan, the chief minister of Sultan 'Abdollāh Qotb Shah, was one such follower, as was the celebrated itinerant merchant adventurer turned Mughal grandee, Mir Mohammad Sa'id "Mir Jomla" (d. 1663). According to the author of the *Dabestān*, who claims to have been present for the encounter, Sarmad correctly predicted Shaikh Mohammad Khan's imminent death in a shipwreck while en route to Mecca, as well as Mir Jomla's rise to prominence soon thereafter. No doubt, this apparent gift for prophecy further enhanced Sarmad's reputation as a visionary.

It is only after all this, i.e. after some two decades wandering the subcontinent and making a name among mystical and political circles, that Sarmad and Abhay Chand made their way to Delhi sometime in the mid-1650s. We should not lose sight, therefore, of the fact that Sarmad had an extended career as an itinerant mystic long before he ever met Dārā Shekuh. Figures like Chandar Bhān and Sarmad are regularly juxtaposed as being members of Dārā's "circle" (for instance, Schimmel, pp. 362 f.), but in both cases we have seen that they had a number of other liberal and tolerant benefactors too, many of whom very likely—almost certainly, in Chandar Bhān's case—had a much bigger impact on their careers than Dārā ever did. In a very non-trivial sense Sarmad was no more a part of Dārā's "circle" than he was that of the Qotbshāhi elite, Mir Jomla, Mo'tamad Khan, or any of the other notable patrons and interlocutors he might have had along the way. Whatever the *tazkeras* might say about them, when scrutinized carefully the careers of Chan-

dar Bhān and Sarmad actually militate *against* the historiography of Dārā's exceptionalism, rather than corroborate it.

In any event, Sarmad's reputation almost certainly preceded his arrival in Delhi, and it would have been that established reputation as a renunciant and poet with the gift of prophecy that probably earned him an audience with Dārā in the first place. In fact, one can plausibly argue that Awrangzib would have known about him too, especially given his lengthy experience in the Deccan and close ties to Mir Jomla—described by the latter's modern biographer as Awrangzib's "instrument and mouthpiece, his friend, philosopher and guide, safeguarding his interests, both in diplomacy and in war" (J.N. Sarkar, p. 84).

This prior success on Sarmad's part lends an added potency to the political implications of his relationship with Dārā. For instance, in Vāleh's account of Sarmad in *Riāz al-sho'arā* (pp. 314 f.) the author records that once Sarmad reached Delhi and they were introduced, Dārā Shekuh treated Sarmad with great 'fondness and devotion' (*rosukh o e'teqād*), while Sarmad, for his part, 'watched kindly over the Prince's affairs.' Vāleh continues:

Accordingly, one day during the course of their conversation Sarmad said, 'You will become emperor'; in the end, when Mohammad Awrangzib 'Ālamgir [became emperor instead], that generous prediction which Sarmad had made in favor of Dārā Shekuh kept the royal temperament averse to him (*mezāj-e aqdas az taraf-e vay enherāf dāsh*).

For all of Sarmad's wacky behavior, in other words, it was this prediction that Dārā would inherit the throne that lay at the heart of Awrangzib's antagonism toward him. Such a prediction was no trivial matter, particularly in a context wherein the predictions of religious divines were taken extremely seriously anyway, *a fortiori* in the case of Sarmad, who had already proven so prescient in the case of Awrangzib's own ally, Mir Jomla. And, given Sarmad's celebrity in and around the capital, such a provocative statement constituted a threat to the very legitimacy of Awrangzib's nascent political authority.

Of course, Vāleh's account was not written until nearly a century after the events in question. But this in itself underscores the fact that the political context of Awrangzib's hostility to Sarmad was not lost on the early modern Indo-Persian intelligentsia, and continued to shape the memory of his relationship with Dārā Shekuh. Manucci's account seems to corroborate that Awrangzib had this sort of provocation in mind when he confronted Sarmad after the succession struggle was over:

After the death of his brother Dara, Aurangzeb ordered them to bring to his presence Acermād (Sarmad), the atheist, to whom Dara had been devoted, and asked

him where was his devoted prince. He replied that he was then present, 'but you cannot see him, for you tyrannize over those of your own blood; and in order to usurp the kingdom, you took away the life of your brothers, and did other barbarities.' On hearing these words, Aurangzeb ordered his head to be cut off (Manucci, pp. 363 f.).

Vāleh's further account of this same exchange, in turn, makes clear that even Sarmad's notoriously garish public nudity—which offended the European sensibilities of a squeamish Francois Bernier, too—was remembered less as a religious offense in its own right and more as the pretext for this larger confrontation over political authority.

[Awrangzib] instructed Mollā Qavi the chief *qāzi* at the time, to go to Sarmad and ask him why, in spite of his perfection of learning and intellect, he went around naked without covering his private parts. Qāzi Qavi obediently went and posed the question. Sarmad, by way of an answer, replied that *shaytān qavi* ^{ast},²⁴ and quickly followed with an extemporaneous quatrain:

Something wonderful from above has made me so low;
 Eyes like two goblets have made me beside myself;
 He is at my side, yet still I search for Him;
 A strange thief indeed has robbed me of my clothes!

Mollā Qavi became extremely angry, quickly left, and upon arriving at the emperor's service issued a *fatvā* authorizing Sarmad's execution. The emperor ordered that he be brought to the imperial court, where the wise men of the age could have a discussion with him, and if it be found necessary to execute him according to legal maxims, he would be executed (Vāleh, pp. 314-16).

Contrary to the modern image of Awrangzib as a vengeful, hotheaded extremist bent on eliminating all of Dārā's partisans and every trace of heterodox behavior at the earliest opportunity, Vāleh portrays him, actually, as somewhat restrained. He obviously knew about Sarmad's refusal to wear clothes, but instead of having him arrested and executed right away, he sent one of his agents to inquire into the matter—even acknowledging, at least in Vāleh's narration, Sarmad's "perfect learning and intellect" (*kamāl-e fazl o 'elm*). And after that informant returns, himself enraged by Sarmad's risqué cheekiness, even then Awrangzib does not accept the *mollā's* death sentence as decisive. Instead he issues a *habeas corpus* writ of sorts, ordering a further debate between Sarmad and the wise men of the age (*fōzalā-ye 'asr bā vay goftogu konand*), in

²⁴ I.e., both "Satan is powerful," thereby causing me to go astray, and "Mollā Qavi is the devil."

Awrangzib's own presence, to determine whether it would even be legal to execute him. Once all these learned men are assembled, and Sarmad is brought to court, Awrangzib's line of questioning shows that he's not really even interested in Sarmad's nudity, much less his disrespect toward Mollā Qavi:

The emperor informed [Sarmad] that 'your promise of a kingdom to Dārā Shekuh has been broken.' Sarmad replied that 'Glorious and exalted God has given him an eternal kingdom (*u-rā Haqq, jalla va 'alā, saltanat-e mo'abbad dād*), and thus my promise has not been broken.' The emperor found this statement very disagreeable. In short, although the wise men at court pleaded with him to repent and put on some clothes, he would not agree. Finally, a legal decision ordering his execution was given, and they sent Sarmad to the execution grounds (Vāleh, pp. 314-16)

Admittedly, an account like this does not bring us any closer to proving to a verifiable certainty whether religion or politics was Sarmad's ultimate undoing. Perhaps the honest answer is simply that it was both. But in either case, Vāleh's is just one of scores of early modern sketches of Sarmad's life and career, many of which contradict one another, but all of which added to his legend by transmitting his poignant *robā'iyāt* and narrating vignettes about his visionary mystical genius. Many such stories, unsurprisingly, depict Sarmad's esoteric wisdom triumphing over the exoteric dogma of the conservative '*olamā'*. Stories also circulated depicting direct encounters not only between Sarmad and Awrangzib, but also, for instance, between Sarmad and Princess Jahānārā (Rai, pp. 49-62). The *mise-en-scène* of many of these tales places them chronologically after Dārā's death, and a number of them could be interpreted as portraying Sarmad subtly guiding Awrangzib toward repentance for usurping the throne. Thus again, while it is certainly possible to interpret the memory and legend of Sarmad solely in terms of his spiritual journey, as most modern scholarship tends to do, in the Mughal public sphere the politics were never far behind.

6

Bābā Lāl, Chandar Bhān, and Sarmad thus all contributed to a complex early modern image of Dārā Shekuh, each in his own particular way. Anecdotes about these figures circulated both orally and in texts, often taking on forms that were totally at odds with the more properly historical sources that would have been available at the time. But the ahistorical, folksy nature of many of these stories does not in any way diminish their historical importance for us.

They tell us a great deal about how the momentous political events of the mid-seventeenth century were understood by, and continued to be relevant to, various early modern publics.

The oblique criticism of Dārā Shekuh in many of these traditions tells us, moreover, that though he was certainly beloved and revered by many, there was also a widely shared sense that he had been too immature to win the throne and govern effectively. Some of those critiques, for instance in Lodi's account of Chandar Bhān, appear to be clear cut cases of reactionary religious conservatism. But others, like Ānandaghana's reduction of the Bābā Lāl dialogues to a kind of adolescent sex therapy, can only be read as part of a larger cultural memory of Dārā's immaturity. Perhaps some of this was a retroactive rationalization for Dārā's political failures, perhaps not. But the two strands come together, and become very difficult to disentangle, with the subset of these tales that deals with Sarmad. Many of the stories about Sarmad are completely neutral *vis-à-vis* Dārā Shekuh; for instance, Mohammad Bakhtāvar Khan's *Mer'āt al-'Ālam*, a chronicle from Awrangzib's reign, does not even mention Dārā in connection with Sarmad (pp. 594 f.). Other accounts, like that of *Kalemāt al-sho'arā*, simply note Dārā's "friendship" (*dusti*) with Sarmad matter-of-factly, before moving on to discuss Sarmad himself (Sarkhosh, pp. 50 f.). Still other accounts, like Vāleh's above, foreground the politics of Sarmad's encounters with Dārā and Awrangzib in a way that is difficult to ignore.

Shir Khan Lodi, too, foregrounds the political dimension of Sarmad's story in *Mer'āt al-khiāl*, in an account which, not insignificantly, is placed directly after his account of Chandar Bhān. Here again, Lodi emphasizes Dārā's immaturity, meanly insisting that "because the heart of Sultān Dārā Shekuh inclined toward madmen (*majānin*), he partook of Sarmad's company." But, for all his crude orthodoxy, Lodi's interpretation of the larger political implications of the events that followed is instructive:

For a time, [Dārā] was intoxicated by [Sarmad's] charms (*tarsifāt*), until fate had other designs (*tā ānke ruzgār tarh-e digar andākht*), and in the year 1069 the throne of the Caliphate and governance became decorated (*mozayyan gardid*) with the Grace-Adorning Presence, Abu'l-Mozaffar Mohyi-al-Din Mohammad Awrangzib Bahādur 'Ālamgir Bādshāh Ghāzi, may God keep his power and sultanate forever.

Thereafter, the resounding voice of divine worship descended on the world. The customs of Akbar and Jahāngir dwindled, and the innovations (*bed' at-hā*) of Dārā Shekuh and Morād Bakhsh were set aside (*yak-su shod*). From fear of the whip of justice (*az haybat-e derra-ye 'adl*), the black beauty-mark seducing good people into infidelity (*khāl-e kāfer-kish-e khubān*) conformed to prayers in the archway of

the *mehrab*, and from dread of fate's tribunal the blood-spilling wink of the idols became a hermit in the chamber of the eye. The naked betook themselves to precious raiment, and men clothed [in falsity] were denuded of their robes of borrowed wisdom... During these times of glorious beginning and prosperous result, in which every day the true religion (*din-e mobin*) has a fresh luster, and every hour the shining faith has an immeasurable luster they urged Sarmad to clothe himself. But due to his mad temperament he paid no mind. Within a few months, he was condemned in the year 1072 to die by the sword of the command of the illustrious *shari'a*... (Lodi, p. 124).

As hostile as he clearly was, Lodi does not see Dārā's transgressions as his alone. Akbar, predictably, but also Jahāngir and even Morād Bakhsh come in for sharp criticism. And, though we cannot ignore the fact that Lodi unequivocally champions Awrangzib's piety, we are nevertheless free to use his very logic and turn it on its head. By Lodi's own rationale, Awrangzib was the exceptional one, not his more tolerant older brother Dārā. It is, perhaps, one of the great ironies of Mughal historiography that some of Dārā's harshest critics might help us to see this basic reality more easily than the work of his many admirers. Needless to say, for all the examples I have adduced above, I count myself as one of the latter.

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