The Humayun Nama

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The Humayun Nama

Gulbadan Begum

An Annotated Scholarly Edition of
Annette Susannah Beveridge's 1902 translation
of Gulbadan Begum's *Humayun Nama*

With an Introduction by Ruby Lal

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For Ananya, Aashna, Fanny

For Gudden and Reena

For Prabhakar and Gyan

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INTRODUCTION

GUARDIANS OF HISTORY

SURREY, 1899

A fifty-seven-year-old deaf Victorian woman was hard at work in her study on a 12-acre property in Haslemere, in southwest Surrey, 39 miles outside of London. Nearly 650 feet above sea level, Pitfold had been built as a small cottage nearly a hundred years earlier when its owner, a local hairdresser, added a front and a turret. It had an old garden and an ancient barn that had been converted into a billiard-playing and dancing room.

She had settled there with her husband and children in late 1894 after decades of adventure, grave losses and learning a complex of politics, the best of literature and several languages, including Latin, German and Bengali. Dependent on trumpets for hearing, she was now engrossed in reading a book written in Persian, a language she began learning formally in 1892 – a remarkable decision given that she couldn't hear its sound.

She diligently gardened, digging, planting and working on the aesthetics and layout. Two statues of the Buddha stood on each side of the door leading to the garden. At Pitfold, two of her children grew to adulthood, two had died earlier. There too, she joined the local chapter of the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage.[1]

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[1] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), p. 351.

George Bernard Shaw spent his honeymoon at Pitfold when the property was sublet for the summer of 1895. Becoming friends with him later, she debated him, expressing her firm opinions on the topics of the time. 'Perhaps the cleverest lady and the wickedest in her opinions that I have ever met,' he inscribed in his book *The Perfect Wagnerite*, a gift for her.[2]

What preoccupied this well-built, gentle-eyed, sharp-nosed woman was neither the expansive view of her property nor entertainment, dialogue or engagement in local politics. Entertaining friends and animated discussions were activities on the side. By the late 1890s, she was obsessing over a sixteenth-century princess. Her name was Gulbadan Begum, or Lady Rosebody, as she liked to call her. Gulbadan, the beloved daughter of Babur, the patriarch of the magnificent Mughals of India, a dynasty founded by conquest in the early sixteenth century, was also the first and only woman historian of the Empire.

For nearly five years, Annette Susannah Beveridge had been enthralled by Princess Gulbadan's extraordinary writing. Annette's husband Henry Beveridge, whom she had married in India, had chanced upon the Princess's work in the British Museum in London. At the time, Henry had been absorbed in his own undertaking, an English translation of the first official history of the Mughal Empire, the voluminous *Akbar Nama*, commissioned by the third Mughal emperor Akbar, Gulbadan's nephew. While conducting research in the British Museum, Henry came across Gulbadan's work, classified in the manuscript catalogue as Or. 166 and mentioned it to Annette.

Earlier, Annette had consulted the works of several historians of the Mughal Empire in her English translation of Friedrich August Graf von Noer's German book on Emperor Akbar. Count Noer had written his work based on an English translation of H.M. Elliot and John Dowson's compilations of the *Akbar Nama* and on an

[2] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), p. 350.

English translation by Lieutenant Chalmers of a manuscript at the Royal Asiatic Society, the latter based on an abridged version of the Persian. Clearly, Annette had some Persian skills already in the late 1880s, when she translated Noer's *The Emperor Akbar* and revised it in part with Henry's help.[3]

In 1890, their youngest child, Herman, had passed away due to seizures and a high fever. In 1893, Letty, their eldest daughter, died after a five-day struggle with influenza. Knowing that languages were Annette's forte, Henry thought that advancing her Persian would be a welcome distraction for his bewildered and broken wife.

So, this grieving Victorian woman of steely temperament began to work with this relatively new language. Her tryst with Persian, meant to help her heal after the tragic death of her beloved daughter, became a lifelong passion. At once ahead of her time yet deeply moored in its moralities, Annette had been enthralled by learning and ideas, the very attributes she shared with Princess Rosebody: a passionate witness, a playful writer and a Mughal loyalist.

And then there was India, the princess's home and the land where Annette and Henry had lived for two decades. They met in Barisal in Bengal, traveled through vast spans of the subcontinent, discussed books, took positions on politics and laws surrounding the British Raj and brought up their four children. Letty was given an Indian middle name: Laetitia Chintamani ('Jewel of Thought') Beveridge.

The imprints of India were manifold. Annette's connection with India's women had begun in her late twenties. Now, three decades later, she was engaging with one of the Mughals, the lead thinker of the most distinguished court of Asia.

3 Friedrich August Graf von Noer; Annette Susannah Beveridge, translated and in part revised, *The Emperor Akbar, A Contribution Towards the History of India in the 16th Century* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.; London, Trübner & Co.1890).

UNITARIAN STOURBRIDGE, RADICAL LONDON, 1842–1872

Born in winter 1842 in Stourbridge, a small town west of Birmingham, Annette Akroyd grew up Unitarian in religion, a pathway that emphasized the oneness of God, which could coexist with rational thoughts and science. She was radical in politics – a predecessor of a new generation of impressive and accomplished women, such as Beatrice Webb and Gertrude Bell. Her father, William Akroyd, was a self-made man of the rising English middle class, 'an early Victorian with a post-Georgian outlook.'[4] Sarah Walford, her mother, was the daughter of a livery stable keeper and the first funeral director of Stourbridge. Having given birth to six children, Sarah passed away in 1849. Annette's father remarried a woman named Jemima – 'Mama' to Annette and her siblings.

The Sunday Tribune, Wikimedia Commons

Annette Susannah Ackroyd

[4] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), p.75.

'Physically a tiny creature,' Annette, her father's favorite, was 'upright as a ramrod and every inch of her radiated pure energy and indomitable will.'[5] At eighteen, she was determined that she wanted higher education. Her father strongly endorsed her desire. There were no university degrees available for women, but Bedford College in London admitted them for higher education. In 1860, she enrolled at Bedford, where she learned mathematics from Richard Holt Hutton, the first editor of *The Spectator*, and attended lectures on Greek literature and Latin. Three years later, when she returned to Stourbridge, armed with accolades and certificates, there was nothing on offer for this energetic person. Chapel, Sunday school, balls and social engagements did not entice her, nor did the prospect of looking for a husband. In 1869, her father passed away, and Jemima decided to live separately from Annette and her siblings. Annette's life changed. She often spent time with her two sisters. They had a modest inheritance, no regular career, but the world was open before her.

Bedford, though nondenominational, had a strong Unitarian influence. British Unitarians had a special interest in India and embraced members of the Brahmo Samaj, a monotheistic reform movement founded in Calcutta in 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore's grandfather. Annette became acquainted with many reformers, among them Keshab Chandra Sen, the head of one of the branches of the Samaj.[6]

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[5] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), p. 78.

[6] There is a great deal of scholarly writing on the Brahmo Samaj. For general introduction to the movement and its history, David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Kenneth Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). On Keshab Chandra Sen, there is extensive work. For general sketch of his life, Gouri Prasad Mazoomdar, *A Glimpse of the Life of Keshub Chunder Sen* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1912); and Tapan Raychaudhuri, 'Sen, Keshub Chunder (1838–1884),' Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Online; Oxford University Press, 2004). For deeper reading of the subject of reform, Sumit Sarkar, *Essays of a Lifetime: Reformers, Nationalists, Subalterns* (SUNY series in Hindu Studies; SUNY Press, 2018).

While teaching as a volunteer at a London college, Annette started to read Sen's eloquent speeches. He had come to London in 1866 and was warmly received by Unitarians for his attempt to incorporate Christian theology within the framework of Hindu thought. Annette was curious about Sen's call to women of England to help educate women in India without trying to proselytize them. They needed 'an unsectarian, liberal, sound, [and] useful education,' he said in a fiery speech at a meeting of the Victoria Discussion Society on 1 August 1870. Annette was not at the gathering, but she heard about it. She went to listen to Sen's next address at Stanford Street on 14 August. He had just returned from a private interview with Queen Victoria. Annette was, as her son later remarked, 'in Keshab's net.'[7]

[7] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), pp. 84, 85.

Andhra Patrika, Wikimedia Commons

Keshab Chandra Sen

While enthralled by Sen, her decision to go to India was mindful and unhurried, and she prepared for her journey with characteristic meticulousness. She met more visitors from India. She reviewed her plans with Mrs Aubrey, to whom she often went for advice. And she began to learn Bengali from a man named Krishna Kumar Gupta.

On 25 October 1872, she boarded *Xantho*, a steamer bound for Calcutta.

A MARRIAGE OF TWO MINDS IN VICTORIAN INDIA, 1872–1893

While aboard the ship, Annette met Mrs Goldie, a Scottish woman traveling to see her recently widowed son-in-law, Henry Beveridge. After studying at Edinburgh Academy, the University of Glasgow and Queen's College, Belfast, Henry passed the public exams for the Indian Civil Service (ICS). He left for India in 1857. Allotted the Bengal cadre, he served as a judge in many of its districts.

Determined to work with Keshab Chandra Sen, Annette arrived in Calcutta in mid-December 1872, a few days after her thirtieth birthday. Teaching girls in India was on her mind. She stayed initially with Manmohan Ghose, a well-known lawyer. She met Henry Beveridge, courtesy of Mrs Goldie, but she would have met him even without the latter's involvement, as he was a close associate of her Bengali tutor Krishna Kumar Gupta. Henry quickly became a supporter in Annette's teaching venture. Among the first on her list of contributors, he gave a large donation for the school she wanted to establish – 100 rupees and an additional ten rupees per month, though he had some family responsibilities and not much discretionary income.

As the months passed, Annette sensed a chasm between Sen's public positions on the status of women and his private life. Sen's life story was extraordinary. Born into a Vaishnava *vaidya* (physician) caste in Calcutta, he had a Westernized education. In

1858, he joined the Brahmo Samaj. In 1862, Debendranath Tagore, a Brahmin, initiated Sen as the organization's first non-Brahmin teacher. Subsequently, a group of more radical thinking Brahmos, as they were called, aligned with Sen and rejected traditional Hindu practices such as caste hierarchy and distinctions. While rejecting missionary Christianity, Sen experimented with religious practices (a personal synthesis of Christian and Hindu elements) and became increasingly indifferent to social reform. In 1878, he married his thirteen-year-old daughter to the fifteen-year-old crown prince of a British princely state in a traditional Hindu marriage ceremony. This apparent approval of child marriage, and what his comrades regarded as idolatry, led to Sen's abandonment by many of his followers.

Annette was surprised when she met Mrs Sen, the 'wife of the great apostle of women's emancipation in India … ignorant of English and covered with a barbaric display of jewels, playing with them…. like a foolish petted child.' In a public meeting addressed by Sen, there were only three women among the 2,000 attendees. In 1873, amidst a host of administrative and funding problems, Annette opened one of the earliest all-female boarding schools for girls, the Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya. Sen joined the committee formed to launch her school, but soon resigned. Newspapers aligned with him criticized Annette for her intervention in women's education. Her critiques of India mounted, and she moved away from the idea of working closely with Sen. 'For the first time I realized how uncivilized are their notions about women,' she observed.[8]

What Sen embodied was typical of the visionary men of his time: experimental, politically radical and socially conservative. This was a vital historical detail that Annette had missed. Henry urged her to try to understand a reformer's complex sociopolitical situation. 'I fancy Keshub is a good man but the leader of a party is always to a certain extent its slave…. I venture to suggest to you as a matter of

[8] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), pp. 89, 90.

policy that you should keep in as far as possible with Keshub and his party.'[9] But Annette and Sen parted ways.

Annette continued her work with the help of Henry and her other Indian allies: reformer Durga Mohan Das and Maharani Swarnamoyee, the great philanthropist and queen of Cossimbazar. Friends, including High Court judge Mr John Budd Phear and his wife Mrs Phear, helped her, too, with the latter serving on her school board. Yet, it remained an uphill task. Back home in East Worcestershire, the local paper, the *Brierly Hill Advertiser*, celebrated her work: 'Among the most hopeful plans for societal regeneration in India … the education of the women … has been projected by Miss Annette Akroyd … throwing herself into the work with all the characteristic energy and self-devotedness of her father …'[10]

The Sunday Tribune, Wikimedia Commons

Annette Akroyd with the students of Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya, 1875

[9] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), pp. 99, 100.

[10] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), pp. 92.

Meanwhile, Annette and Henry grew close. They exchanged courteous letters when he was on judicial assignments and other related travels. He was concerned about her school and the ongoing difficulties. They wrote about the social reform movement in India, about Mrs Goldie and about Henry's memories of Scotland. Yet they often disagreed on politics, reform and colonial rule.

Although he initially addressed her as 'my dear Miss Akroyd,' Henry gradually began to use more intimate forms of address, such as 'My dearest….' He began concluding his letters with 'yours affectionately.' In proposing marriage to Annette on 13 March 1875, he wrote a candid message saying that he could not promise her 'a brilliant future … I don't think I will ever get much higher in the service than I am now … I fear [I shall] be at daggers drawn with some of my superiors … [and] always be looked upon as an unsafe man ... I am also resolved to stick to India, and probably the most unpopular part of it – Eastern Bengal …'[11]

[11] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), pp. 106, 107.

Henry and Annette in March 1875

India Called Them, Wikimedia Commons

They married soon thereafter, on 6 April 1875, in a Calcutta registration office under a new law, the Act of 1872, which provided the option of civil marriage, as Henry objected to a church marriage. Annette closed her school and began a new role as the wife of a district officer in Bengal, attending to her duties at home and raising children amidst long separations from Henry. Annette valued her new role as wife and mother – very much in keeping with nineteenth-century Victorian family values. The epistolary was to be a form of communication the couple would never leave. Stacked in boxes, nearly 200 of their letters, including many to their children, close friends and literary colleagues, are housed in the British Library in London.

Theirs was a household of books. Henry's *The District of Bákarganj: Its History and Statistics*, a gazetteer-cum-history that he was working on at the time, was the subject of extended discussion, as were books by William Makepeace Thackeray, Indian dailies such as the *Brahmo Public Opinion*, Alfred Lord Tennyson's poems, Plutarch's *Marcus Cato* and Seneca's *De Constantia Sapientis*.

Their daughter, Laetitia Santamani, was born in Rangpur in July 1877, in a house frequented by cobras. In the same house, their son William Henry was born two years later. He was called *bhaiya* or *bhai* ('brother'), an affectionate form of address for a son in many parts of eastern India. In 1880, when Henry moved to Bankipur near Patna, an easier to access station compared to his earlier posts, their daughter, Annette Jeanie, or Tutu, was born. Annette would later give birth to Herman, her fourth child.

Amidst long separations, Annette brought up her children: in Rangpur, on the banks of the Ghangot and the Teesta River (now in Bangladesh); in Bankipur; in Darjeeling; in Mussoorie in the Himalayas; and in Shillong in the Assam Hills. She would travel with her children on treacherous journeys to see Henry, feeling embittered at being apart from him. The trip from Rangpur to Darjeeling, for example, took five days. Rangpur was not on a railway line. They started their journey on a *palki* (a palanquin or cushioned and covered carriage) and continued it on a horse-drawn

tonga. Their servants had been sent ahead of them. 'Rain, rain, rain,' she wrote on 6 September 1877.[12]

Strong of character, Annette and Henry both held firm opinions. Henry was not ambitious, as he had indicated to Annette. Part of this had to do with his holding views that were unpopular among the high and mighty of the colonial regime. His sympathy for Indians was clear. He travelled a great deal, was a dedicated worker and read voraciously. He never focused on promotions or attractive postings. A year into his marriage with Annette, he completed *The District of Bákarganj*. A decade later, while Annette was busy with their home and children, Henry published *The Trial of Maharaja Nanda Kumar, Narrative of a Judicial Murder*, in which he dived into a century-old dispute about an East India Company–appointed tax collector, Nand Kumar, who leveled corruption charges against Governor General Warren Hastings. Henry's possibilities dwindled even further. His postings were tough. There were two furloughs during which he spent time in England, while Annette stayed on in India with the children.

He loved his children and was keenly interested in their life. He argued with Annette against Sunday school but agreed in the end with her view that it would give the children another community. But the management and expenses of their home and the sicknesses and challenges of nurturing children were Annette's business. Civil disagreement always remained central in their relationship, a rare feature in a nineteenth-century colonial marriage. Yet, as their son William later wrote: '… it may be surprising to learn from her letters how submissive she was to my father in India, how she trembled at his frown, and sat up all night to answer his reproof.'[13]

Then came 1883. Annette and Henry differed openly on the Ilbert Bill proposal, which was to enable senior Indian officers of

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[12] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), p. 155.

[13] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), p. 374.

the ICS to try British people in criminal cases in their jurisdiction. Prior to this bill, Europeans and British people appeared before a British or White magistrate; if one was not available in the area, the case would be led where a British magistrate was present. The first Indian had qualified for the ICS in 1864, and by the 1880s, there were several senior Indian officers in the districts. The bill caused an uproar among Europeans, especially in Calcutta, the seat of the British government. Many British men and women protested, carrying out a campaign in the newspapers in India and in Britain.

To Annette, the problem with the proposed change was that it would allow British women to be tried by Indian magistrates. In a letter to *The Englishman*, she wrote that she was not afraid to assert that her feelings were shared by all English women in India. 'It is not pride of race that dictates this feeling,' she wrote 'but the pride of womanhood.'[14] How could the government subject English women to the jurisdiction of those who, in her view, had not done much for their own women? To Henry, she wrote that as an Englishwoman, she would 'call uncivilized a people which cares about stone idols, enjoys child marriage and secludes its women and where at every point the fact of sex is present in the mind.' Exposing English women to the jurisdiction of Indian judges was 'an insult' not to 'pride of race' but to 'the pride of womanhood,' she declared.[15]

Historians have reviewed Victorian as well as late colonial attitudes and the manner in which systems of power played out in the thinking of privileged white persons.[16] Scholars have

[14] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), p. 228.

[15] T.C.A. Raghavan, 'The Whispering Past,' *Open*, 11 August 2023, https://openthemagazine.com/cover-stories/the-whispering-past/; Retrieved 14 June 2025.

[16] See, for example, Pat Barr, *The Memsahibs: The Women of Victorian India* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1976), pp. 188, 189; Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 58–60; M.A. Scherer, '*Woman to Woman*: Annette, the Princess, and the Bibi,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 6 (July 1996), pp. 197, 209; also, M.A. Scherer, 'Annette Akroyd

simultaneously considered the work of a panorama of women missionaries, social activists, theosophists, Orientalists, teachers, doctors and reformists, signalling a mixed and complex history of race, class and gender in colonial India and of the 'burdens' that English women carried.[17]

As to Annette's response to the Ilbert Bill, her liberal friends, both in India and in England, were dismayed. Henry was a supporter of the Ilbert Bill – a minority among the British. He didn't think it necessary to press Annette on her views even though he disagreed with them.

Scientism – with the added sanctity of domestic life that was at the heart of Annette's views – infused the convictions of people of this era. The remarkable evolution of science from the sixteenth century through the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution brought substantial economic, ideological and political changes in the nineteenth century. It marked a pivotal transformation in Western civilization, which its ideologues frequently contrasted against the earlier, more rudimentary phase of the so-called Dark Ages, and strengthened the belief that the Western world's civilizing mission alone could enlighten darker times, places and peoples. With the objective of uncovering new peoples and territories, scientists diligently gathered data, scrutinized and categorized various plant and animal species and human skulls as they sought to map the planet's vast diversity. Botany, anthropology, hydrography,

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Beveridge: Victorian Reformer, Oriental Scholar' (Unpublished PhD dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1995) Chapter II. I discuss the nature of Annette's translation and the wider ethos of Scientism. Ruby Lal, 'Historicizing the *Harem*: The Challenge of a Princess's Memoir,' *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 30, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2004), pp. 590–616.

[17] Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Also, essays in part two of Antoinette Burton's, *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing, and Teaching British Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), a volume that looks at unusual Victorian encounters with India and Indians, such as Mary Carpenter's role in 'colonial reform' in India, as reflected especially in her *Six Months in India* (1866).

mapmaking and geology were tools in the exploration of foreign lands, keys to the representation of little-known people.[18]

The *other* – non-white, different – appeared darkly in this triumphalist vision, in which the institutions, practices, traditions, belief systems and men and women of the West were seen as true, rational humans. Those of the non-Western world were perceived as backward and yet to be civilized. Annette Beveridge's public opposition to the Ilbert Bill of 1883 and her views on Sen's position on Indian women were in accord with these views. These robust contradictions, unquestioned stances and deep commitment to causes she thought urgent made Annette the person she was – forceful, clear-headed and determined.

In January 1893, at the end of Henry's ICS tenure, the Beveridge family left India. Henry went home via Italy, where he had promised to see his brother. Annette went on her own with her son and two daughters. Her deafness was very advanced, and she was still grieving the loss of her youngest son, Herman. Henry cut short his time in Italy and joined his family in February, eager to be with them as they began a new life in England. Then, in April of 1893, Letty died.

Amidst layers of loss, the scholarly Annette gradually emerged – an 'imperious lady,' strong-minded yet soft, as her contemporaries observed.[19] She held on to her Victorian views, but other worlds now completely absorbed her. Curious and deeply observant about a bookish princess, she began to create another life for herself.

At that time no one knew anything about Gulbadan or her chronicle of her times. Annette gradually uncovered her remarkable history.

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[18] For an introduction to writing on science and the nineteenth century, which is a vast field of debate and literature, Catherine Delmas, Christine Vandamme and Donna Spalding Andréolle*, Science and Empire in the Nineteenth Century: A Journey of Imperial Conquest and Scientific Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[19] William Henry Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1947), p. 374.

POWERHOUSE PRINCESS

In 1868, the British Museum purchased Gulbadan's manuscript from the widow of Colonel William Hamilton, who had brought back nearly a 1,000 manuscripts from Lucknow and Delhi. These became part of the Delhi collection, which included 1,957 Arabic, 1,550 Persian and 157 Urdu manuscripts, representing what remained in 1858 of the famed Mughal Imperial Library – the 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, they acquired another 1,120 less valuable items.[20] The trunks holding the lesser items from the Delhi collection ended up in the India Office Library in London and contained Gulbadan's book.

The princess's work was in the catalogue of the manuscript collections that Charles Rieu, the legendary Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Museum, set about making in 1871.[21] Busy digging the collections for his translation of the voluminous *Akbar Nama*, Henry chanced upon Gulbadan's work. At the time, he didn't know that the story of the production of the *Akbar Nama* and Gulbadan's work were intertwined.

Writing in real time, the princess captured the gritty and fabulous daily lives of ambitious men, subversive women, brilliant eunuchs, devoted nurses, gentle and perceptive guards, captive women and children who died in war zones, royal gatherings, feasts, messy arguments between Mughal men and women and their joys and sorrows.

Gulbadan was sixty-four when she wrote her unique book, the *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah* or *Life Conditions of Emperor Humayun*,

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[20] https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/the-delhi-collection; Retrieved 14 June 2025.

[21] Charles Rieu, *Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the British Museum,* Vols I–III (London, British Museum, 1879, 1881 and 1883).

popularly called the *Humayun Nama*.[22] The book that we have today is small by comparison with the large books of Gulbadan's era. There is no frontispiece or margin. The pages, which include blank flyleaves, are impossibly thin, 229 by 140 millimetres per leaf. There are eighty-two folios, or pages, with approximately fifteen lines on each page. The state of the paper and the writing style date the text to the seventeenth century.

The language of Gulbadan's girlhood and of her kith and kin and elder generations was Chagatay Turkish – called so to distinguish it from modern Turkish, to which it is only distantly related – and the language in which her father wrote his memoirs, the *Baburnama*, which she read. Much later, in 1594, her father's memoirs were translated into Persian at Akbar's court. While she wrote her *Ahval* in Persian, the language of the court, among the Mughal family, and its wider circles by this time, there are Turkish and Hindavi words – from which modern Hindi evolved – to be found.

Like her migratory ancestors, from Timur (Tamerlane) and Chingiz Khan through Babur, the landscape of her childhood was fluid, dynamic and flooded with awe-inspiring ancestresses. Gulbadan arrived in India in 1529, at age six. She 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 being 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

[22] For a critical analysis of the history of the production of Gulbadan's book, and Annette Beveridge's translation, Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), especially Chapter 3. For Gulbadan's biography in relation to the political scandal surrounding her book, Ruby Lal, *Vagabond Princess: The Great Adventures of Gulbadan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2024). For an analysis of Mughal texts and literary genre, Taimiya R. Zaman, 'Instructive Memory: An Analysis of Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 54, no. 5 (2011), pp. 677–700.

enemy for over a decade. Her mother Dildar Begum had given birth to five children and generously shared her daughter, the princess, with her co-wife, the woman of Babur's affection. Gulbadan grew up with a biological and a guardian mother, 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, a man named Khizr Khwaja Khan, a grandee of Humayun's court. She doesn't write much about her husband, except for a couple of difficult conversations with him in the context of momentous political events. With Khizr, she had a son who is mentioned in her memoir. In the late 1540s, when Humayun lost his territories to Sher Shah, the Afghan ruler, her family was driven out of Agra. 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.

After the robust itinerant years spent between Afghanistan and North India, in the mid-1570s, Gulbadan came to live in the newly built red sandstone harem in Fatehpur Sikri, just outside Agra. New regulations, including the seclusion of generations of women in grand new quarters, were put in place by her nephew Akbar, the third Mughal Emperor.

Unaccustomed to such restraint, the princess, a highly influential matriarch by this time, devised a plan to travel to western Arabia for the annual Muslim pilgrimage. She organized older and younger harem 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 pilgrimage of women from a sixteenth-century Muslim court.