

BOOK REVIEW

The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam

By A. AZFAR MOIN (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2012), xv + 343 pp. Price HB £38.00. EAN 978-0231160360.

Too seldom does a plodding dissertation become transformed into an elegant monograph. This 2010 dissertation is the rare, and welcome, exception. *The Millennial Sovereign* surveys a broad range of historical narrative from sixteenth century Mughal India, with frequent, productive references to parallel developments in Safavid Iran. It appears in a series focusing on 'South Asia across the disciplines', the avowed intent of which is to open up new archives and/or show how new methods apply to data from the Indian subcontinent. The author has conducted deep archival research with an accent on visual history and astrology. He demonstrates the intense competition among numerous elites for millennial legitimacy, that is, becoming the single figure who consummates the thousand year stretch of Muslim history, from 622 to 1582 CE or 1 to 1000 AH, in South Asia.

At the core of this book's argument are twin themes, highlighted in the subtitle: sacred kingship and (charismatic) sainthood. Both reflect what is variously called 'the spectacle of empire and the theater of sovereignty' (p. 110) or simply 'the theater of empire'. There is ample visual evidence, especially from commissioned paintings at the courts of the Great Mughals (Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan), which displays the eruption of a post-Timurid, Islamically validated image of the divine sovereign.

Though the book's chronological range is broad, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, its central thesis hinges on the evidence of four monarchs—Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Their legacy is mediated through Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb, the two elder sons of Shah Jahan, who competed with one another to become the next Great Mughal. Alas, this competition receives scant attention. Dara occupies less than two pages (pp. 213–15), while Aurangzeb becomes the reluctant legate of the theatre of empire bequeathed to his sons and heirs through messianic rituals, linked to public and popular performances (pp. 233–9).

Yet the brief section on Aurangzeb is as welcome as it is revisionist. Contrasting to the dour image of a puritanical ruler who tried to mitigate clashes amid subjects as well as defeats from opponents, we find an exuberant picture of both court customs and the everyday life of Hindustan under Aurangzeb. Despite strictures, it seems that both royalty and the populace at large frolicked, enjoying an ambient pluralism in the shadow of the Great Mughal's once dominant court. 'Despite his exhortations to the contrary', we are told, 'Aurangzeb's sons still celebrated the Persian New Year and had themselves weighed against gold and

silver on their solar and lunar birthdays. Astrologers continued to dominate public and private affairs. Music was patronized and enjoyed throughout the realm. Poets wrote raunchy satires on the duplicity of the ruling elites. Naked mendicants roamed the streets mocking the pious and powerful' (p. 234).

Aurangzeb, in short, could not and did not stem the tide of popular sentiment for the tradition of Timurid sacred kingship, one crafted by his forebears and still observed, albeit reduced, among his successors.

The elements that are foregrounded again and again in the attractive narrative of this book are the crucial themes of millennial fixation, astrological indulgence, and visual projection. All related to, were initiated by, and became supportive of, royal authority. It was in the affective realm, not the cognitive domain, that kingship became sacralized, its persistence assured, at least for a time.

Yet there are omissions from this broad, often bold, effort at historical revisionism. Poetry and music are cited as two of the tropes of everyday 'messianism', yet in the detailed, often exhaustive assessment of the character of the Great Mughals, neither poetry nor music finds other than cursory mention. In dealing with Fazlallah (p. 49) or an Uzbeki bard scorning Babur (p. 87), poems are cited, but without any comment on their significance for those who heard them. The *Shāhnāma*, and its Safavid iterations, are noted, yet other major Persian poets, like Rūmī, who enjoyed huge popularity in Hindustan, are totally ignored. Consider the example of *fānāma*, books portending an omen for crucial decisions, whether marriage, coronation or warfare. Many of them were linked to poetry; indeed, the *Dīwān* of Ḥāfīz, a thirteenth-century Persian poet, was the most popular resource for divination among all the Great Mughals, yet neither Ḥāfīz nor his *Dīwān* are broached as evidence supporting the author's thesis. Similarly, music, especially the Chishti tradition of *samā*, favoured by three of the Great Mughals—Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan—is ignored, as is the role of major *dargahs* in supporting that tradition, with appeal to masses as well as elites. A solitary reference to the now much critiqued monograph of Peter Currie on Shaykh Mu'īn ad-din Chishti of Ajmer (p. 298, n. 66) is the single acknowledgement of Chishti presence in the larger ambit of Mughal and courtly *adab*. Indeed, even the concept of *adab* is missing from the author's otherwise shrewd analysis. While John Richards' superb essay on the *adab* of Mughal courtiers is noted, there is no reference elsewhere to the volume edited by Barbara Metcalf in which it appears, or to the larger theme it introduces, on the concept of *adab* (p. 303, n. 20).

The neglect of *adab* is more than just a missed opportunity; it also undercuts some of the effort to differentiate among the Great Mughals, in their choices for self-representation. The author examines how Jahangir, after having opposed his father, came to resemble him in some of his own practices once he ascended to the throne. Deftly we are drawn into the distinction between the portrait of Jahangir in his own *Memoirs*, and that in a related memoir authored by one of his courtiers (Abdus Sattar). The first was for a public, the second for a private, audience. The chief difference is Jahangir's claim to be the Universal Manifestation, a title hinting at divine parentage and therefore celestial authority for Timur's descendants. It occurs in the private memoir by Abdus Sattar, while

Jahangir himself is totally silent about such claims in his public *Memoirs*. Trying to evoke Jahangir's motives, the author notes that: 'it was considered bad form to discuss one's own life and accomplishments. Social etiquette dictated the use of profuse praise for others and abject humility for oneself' (p. 180). The etiquette depicted but not cited here is *adab*. It is a matter of reflexive attention to hierarchy. Every educated or elevated person is expected to know, without ever declaring, one's own status and rank, both in the society of men and in the portals of heaven. Not only the Great Mughal but also all those in his court were educated in the rhythms and requirements of *adab*. To introduce the term, and then expand on its broad appeal and importance, would have enhanced analysis of *The Millennial Sovereign*.

The same deficit of attention to *adab* weakens the later portrait of Shah Jahan as one who introduced the 'viewing window' (p. 219) into his court appearances. The author makes the claim that introducing this practice was even more important than Shah Jahan's construction of the Taj Mahal. Both were statements of imperial architecture, but the 'viewing window' compelled a new view of the Emperor's status, specifically, his claim to divine linkage. The emperor's sacrality, we are told, was enacted through the medium of discipleship, 'in his embodied performance of sovereignty' (pp. 218–19). Much that follows relates how fixated Shah Jahan was on the creation of symmetrical order as his architectural paradigm. His focus on axial divinity, for instance, derived from, and engaging the sun could have originated from, Hermes/Idris, yet in his subjects' perception of the Emperor's divine bona fides the notion of deference to the God-man was framed as *adab*, not unlike that accorded a Sufi master by his disciples. Elsewhere the analogy is made but not here, and its absence is striking. Rather than a refutation of the intended argument, it entails a diminution of its rigorous local appeal. What Shah Jahan projected would have been recognized as the visualization of *adab* in a new form, at once dramatic and compelling.

To the extent that *adab* is always about reciprocity, its use, instead of its neglect, would have enhanced the bold, creative, insightful depiction of Shah Jahan's talismanic art in connection with 'the viewing window'. Here we are told about a Holy Trinity impact of the Father, the Spirit and the Son (in this case, Jahangir), but with the added image of his major minister in attendance, and we are told that in exchange for giving the emperor a jewel, the minister gets his own gift, imperial sacrality (p. 233). Yet at the heart of this exchange is the principle of *adab*: one acknowledges hierarchy and one's own place within it because the return, the reciprocal gift, is always greater than what the lower status servant offers the higher status master. This also replicates the *baraka*, the blessing that the *murid* or disciple, gains from declaring *bai'at* to a Sufi master or *murshid*, but the governing tone in every case reflects the pervasive impact, and reflexive use, of *adab*.

The Millennial Sovereign does deliver on its promise, 'to recover some of these lost modes and genres that had once anchored notions of sovereignty' (p. 240). The thin line between exalted kingship and lower case divinity is made thinner, almost invisible, and those who participated in the royal courts of Safavid Iran as well as Mughal India were largely successful in sequestering the symbol of

sovereignty to themselves and their descendants. When their empires ceased, it was to a different sacred centre, the individual Muslim self, that reformers directed their attention, but without the benefit of *adab*.

Bruce B. Lawrence

Duke University

E-mail: bruce.bbl@gmail.com

doi:10.1093/jis/etu072