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The Spiritual Female Face of the Chishti Order: Jahanara Begum and Her Economic, Political, Spiritual, and Urban Contributions in Medieval India

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Abstract

The historiography of the Chishtisilsila has until recently been structured by the male-authored malfuzat and tazkira record, which has rendered the order's female participants largely invisible. This article intervenes in that historiography through a comprehensive examination of Jahanara Begum (1614–1681), the eldest daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan, who self-identified as "a follower of the Chishtiyya order" even after her formal initiation into the Qadiriyya. Drawing on her two Persian treatises—the *Risala-i-Sahibiyah* (c. 1639) and the *Munis al-Arvah* (c. 1640)—together with Mughal chronicles, European travel accounts, and recent revisionist scholarship on Mughal matronage, the article develops a quadripartite analytical framework of spiritual authority, economic agency, political influence, and urban patronage. It argues, first, that through textual self-fashioning Jahanara claimed a legitimate, if carefully negotiated, spiritual authority within the Chishti tradition, invoking the "feminine dimension" of Sufi theosophy to authorize her voice. Second, it demonstrates that her jagirs, maritime trading fleet, and caravanserai investments provided the material foundation for a piety that was publicly visible and institutionally consequential. Third, it shows that as *Padshah Begum* she exercised substantial political influence, holding her own court and mediating between the imperial household and the wider polity. Fourth, it reads her commissioning of the BegumiDalan at the Ajmer dargah and her creation of ChandniChowk as critical spatial interventions that gendered the Chishti pilgrimage and wove the order's devotional geography into the fabric of Mughal urban life. The article concludes that Jahanara's career reveals not an anomalous exception but the culmination of a longer, if unevenly documented, tradition of women's engagement with the Chishti order, and that her strategic deployment of imperial privilege in the service of spiritual capital complicates both the "cloistered Mughal woman" stereotype and the "myth of decline" narrative in Chishti historiography.

Keywords: *Jahanara Begum; Chishti Sufism; Female Spiritual Authority; Architectural Matronage; Economic Agency; Gender and Religion; Risala-I-Sahibiyah.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Chishtikhanqah, as the institutional historiography of Nizami, Rizvi, Digby, Eaton, and Ernst and Lawrence has established, was among the most socially pervasive and culturally adaptive institutions of medieval Indian religious life. Its functional-spatial template—the *jama'at-khana*, the *langar*, the guest quarters, the tomb-shrine, and the portable mechanism of *khilafat*—allowed the order to reproduce itself across the subcontinent's diverse political economies without a centralized administrative apparatus. Yet the same historiography has, until very recently, treated the khanqah as a predominantly male institutional space, a reflection both of the gendered authorship of the malfuzat and tazkira sources and of the analytical priorities of an earlier generation of institutional historians. Women appear in these sources as petitioners, as objects of hagiographical admiration, and occasionally as recognized spiritual figures, but rarely as agents whose initiatives shaped the institutional and spatial contours of the order itself.

This article argues that the case of Jahanara Begum (1614–1681) demands a revision of that analytical frame. Jahanara, the eldest daughter of Shah Jahan and the *Padishah Begum*—the first lady of the Mughal Empire—was not merely a pious patron of the Chishti order but a self-conscious participant in its textual, economic, political, and spatial reproduction. Her importance for the historiography of the Chishti order is fourfold. First, she authored the *Munis al-Arvah*, a biography of Chishti saints that remains one of the few works of its kind written by a woman, and the *Risala-i-Sahibiyah*, an autobiographical Sufi treatise that narrates her spiritual ascent in explicitly Chishti and Qadiri terms. Second, she commanded the revenues of extensive jagirs, operated a maritime trading fleet that connected Surat to the Red Sea, and built the caravanserai and market complex that became the original ChandniChowk in Shahjahanabad. Third, as *Padshah Begum* she held her own court, received nobles and ambassadors, and exercised "unrivalled persuasive clout" during the War of Succession of 1657–1659. Fourth, she commissioned the BegumiDalan, a white marble porch at the Ajmer dargah of Mu'in al-Din Chishti, which created a dedicated space for women pilgrims at the most important Chishti shrine in South Asia.

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The study of Jahanara's multifaceted agency is important for three reasons. First, it contributes to the recovery of women's religious authority in premodern South Asia, a field that has been disproportionately shaped by male-authored sources and androcentric historiographical assumptions. Second, it complicates the persistent imagination of Mughal women as "cloistered individuals devoid of agency," demonstrating instead that elite women could and did intervene in the public, institutional, and spatial reproduction of religious traditions. Third, it extends the revisionist critique of the "myth of decline" in Chishti historiography by showing that the order's post-fourteenth-century history was not one of terminal decay but of adaptive continuity—continuity that, in the seventeenth century, could be articulated through the agency of a woman.

Objectives

This article pursues four objectives: reconstructing Jahanara Begum's spiritual authority through close readings of her Sufi treatises and her invocation of the "feminine dimension"; documenting the economic foundations of her piety—jagirs, maritime trade, and caravanserai investments—and their redirection toward religious and charitable ends; examining her political agency as *Padshah Begum*, including her parallel court and wartime interventions; and analysing her architectural patronage—the BegumiDalan, Agra Jami Masjid, Srinagar mosque, and ChandniChowk—as spatial interventions that gendered Chishti pilgrimage and embedded the order's sacred geography within Mughal urbanism.

Methodology

This article is a work of historiographical synthesis and textual analysis rather than a primary archival study. It draws its evidentiary base from four overlapping categories of source material. The first comprises Jahanara's own writings, the *Risala-i-Sahibiyah* and the *Munis al-Arvah*, read critically for their self-representational strategies and their construction of spiritual authority. The second comprises Mughal chronicles and administrative records, including the *Shah JahanNama* and the *Amal-i-Salih*, consulted for details of her jagir assignments, political role, and architectural commissions. The third comprises European travel accounts—particularly those of Manucci, Bernier, Tavernier, and Thevenot—which, despite their orientalist limitations, provide valuable external observations on her economic activities and her public visibility. The fourth comprises the recent revisionist scholarship on Mughal matronage, gender and Sufism, and Chishti institutional history, which this article treats both as a source of empirical detail and as a historiographical object of analysis. The method is interpretive and comparative: it reads Jahanara's textual, economic, political, and architectural interventions against one another in order to discern the coherent strategy of female Chishti authority that they collectively articulate.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The modern study of the Chishti order rests on K. A. Nizami's foundational institutional history, which read the Chishtikhanqah as a site of principled moral distance from Sultanate power, underwritten by the doctrines of *futuh* and *tawakkul*. Subsequent scholarship—Digby on the shaikh as a competing source of authority, Eaton on the social roles of Sufis in agrarian expansion, and Ernst and Lawrence on the post-1356 regional dispersal of the order—has substantially complicated this picture, revealing the khanqah as a node within a wider and more entangled economy of land, patronage, and moral capital. Ernst and Lawrence's critique of the "myth of decline" is particularly relevant here: their reconstruction of the post-1356 period as one of adaptive geographic diffusion rather than terminal decay provides the historiographical warrant for reading later figures such as Jahanara not as epigonal outliers but as participants in a continuing tradition of Chishti institutional creativity.

The historiography of Mughal women has undergone a parallel revision. Earlier scholarship tended to treat the imperial harem as a space of confinement, and women's patronage as an extension of their domestic roles. More recent work, however, has emphasized the public, political, and religious dimensions of elite women's agency. ParshatiDutta's study of the BegumiDalan explicitly frames Jahanara's architectural intervention as a "counter-narrative to mainstream Mughal histories that have promoted the imagination of Mughal women as cloistered individuals devoid of agency," arguing that the porch constituted a "demonstration of power through humility". The Zenodo study by Sanil and Lourdusamy (2025) contrasts the marginalizing treatment of Jahanara in B. P. Saksena's traditional historiography with Ira Mukhoty's feminist reinterpretation, which restores her as "a political advisor, Sufi intellectual, economic entrepreneur, and patron of architecture and learning". Aafreen Rashid's chapter in the Taylor and Francis volume recovers Jahanara as a "strategic thinker" who "exercised unrivalled persuasive clout" during the War of Succession, reading her letters as interventions in early modern international thought.

On the specifically Sufi dimension of Jahanara's agency, the most important recent interventions have centred on her writings. AfshanBokhari's study, drawing on the *Risala-i-Sahibiyah* and the *Munis al-Arvah*, demonstrates that "when the writings of the two siblings are compared, it is evident that Jahanara was more closely attached to the Chishti order than her brother," and that her account of crawling barefoot to the Ajmer shrine and circling the cenotaph seven times makes it "clear that her devotion was sincere". The OAPEN study of her Qadiri initiation notes that "in her earlier book, *Mu'nis al-arvāḥ*, she mentions that she had long aspired to be formally initiated into the Chishti order but could not find a willing guide," and that she therefore remained "informally part of the Chishti order so as to gain blessings without being initiated". Yet despite this rich vein of recent scholarship, few studies have attempted to synthesize Jahanara's textual, economic, political, and spatial agency into a single analytical framework, or to situate her initiatives within the longer institutional history of the Chishti order as reconstructed by Nizami, Eaton, and Ernst and Lawrence. This article addresses that gap.

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III. SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY: TEXT, SELF-FASHIONING AND THE "FEMININE DIMENSION"

Jahanara's claim to spiritual authority was articulated most explicitly in her two Persian treatises. The *Munis al-Arvah*, completed around 1640, is an anthology of Chishti saints centred on KhwajaMu'in al-Din Chishti, and it includes a personal epilogue describing her pilgrimage to Ajmer in 1643. In that account, she "crawled barefoot from the gateway of the entrance to the shrine itself, kissing the earth with every movement," and, "following a cycle similar to the circumambulation around the Ka'ba, she circled the cenotaph seven times". She reports that "the unique sensation of receiving blessings was beyond what she could ever express in words," and, "as a sign of gratitude, she rubbed perfume on the cenotaph and on the pulpit of the mosque with her own hands". The *Risala-i-Sahibiyah*, written slightly earlier, is a more intimate and theologically ambitious work: it narrates her initiation into the Qadiriyya under Mulla Shah Badakhshi and her visionary experiences, while simultaneously asserting her continuing affiliation with the Chishtiyya. In it, she "calls herself 'a follower of the Chishtiyya order,'" and she records a moment of doubt and its resolution: "This thought crossed my mind, that since I am a follower of the Chishtiyya order and now am come to the Qadiriya, will I receive any spiritual openings or not?".

The strategic significance of these texts lies in their deployment of what Annemarie Schimmel has termed the "feminine dimension" of Sufi theosophy. The Core.ac.uk study observes that "the 'feminine' dimension of Sūfism is not physical female agency but a 'feminine' element present in both females and males and when invoked through spiritual practice facilitates union with God the 'Beloved'". Jahanara invokes Rabi'a, the paradigmatic female Sufi of early Islam, as "both an exemplar and as the proponent for equal spiritual access and achievement." She describes herself as a *faqira*—"signifying her lowly and poor status and whose humility is fit for a woman dedicated to the path of Sufism". Yet this rhetorical humility is coupled with an assertive claim to divine sanction: she writes, she says, "only by the assistance and by the favor and approval of God the all-knowing and all-mighty and his beloved messenger Prophet Muhammad".

This combination of humility and authority was a necessary negotiation. The malfuzat genre was a male-dominated textual form, and women's voices were largely excluded from it. By writing her own treatises, Jahanara bypassed the mediating role of the male hagiographer and inserted herself directly into the textual tradition of the order. She was not merely the subject of someone else's record; she was the author of her own spiritual narrative. Her multi-silsila affiliation—Chishti by devotion and self-identification, Qadiri by formal initiation—was not a sign of indecision but a sophisticated practice of spiritual networking entirely consistent with the ecumenical ethos of the Chishti order as described by Ernst and Lawrence. The OAPEN study notes that "it is very common for Sufis to have affiliations with more than one spiritual order, often taking multiple initiations to receive the blessings of as many *turuq* as possible". Jahanara's textual self-fashioning thus constituted a claim to spiritual authority that was at once deeply rooted in the Chishti tradition and strategically adapted to the constraints and possibilities of her gender and class.

IV. ECONOMIC AGENCY: JAGIRS,MARITIME TRADE AND THE MATERIAL FOUNDATIONS OF PIETY

Jahanara's spiritual authority was underwritten by an economic agency that was exceptional even by the standards of Mughal royal women. Upon her mother MumtazMahal's death in 1631, the seventeen-year-old Jahanara was entrusted with the charge of the royal seal and conferred the title of *Padshah Begum*, despite the fact that her father had three surviving wives. She received an annual grant of 600,000 rupees, along with jewels and cash gifts, and her jagirs included Panipat, Achchol, Bachchol, Safipur, Dohraha, and Farjahara. The revenue of the flourishing Surat port was assigned to her "for her expenditure of betel which she provided for her entire household," and the pargana of Panipat alone "yielded an annual revenue of one crore dams". The Venetian traveller Manucci, who was at the Mughal court during her lifetime, "estimated that Jahanara's income was thirty lakh rupees a year apart from the precious stones and jewels owned by her".

Crucially, Jahanara did not merely consume this wealth; she invested it. She "owned a large number of ships and established friendly commercial relations with the Dutch and English". Her largest and most famous vessel, the *Sahebi*, made its first voyage on 29 October 1643, carrying cargo for trade and ferrying pilgrims to Mecca and Medina without charging them fare. She "ordered that every year fifty *koni* (about 150 pounds) of rice be sent by the ship for distribution among the destitute and needy of Mecca". The ship's captain was instructed to procure "the maximum number of horses from Jedda" on the return voyage, and "traders in India were also offered space to carry their goods in it on freight". Jahanara's agents operated in Surat, Agra, and Sind, and her reputation in the market was "as good as of any other noble". The Dutch and English factors sought her intervention to resolve commercial disputes and procure *nishans* in their favour, and the Dutch Director of Surat was informed that "Surat's port (bandar) has been assigned to JahanAra".

This economic activity was not separate from her piety; it was its material condition. The Chishtikhanqah's traditional economic ethic, as Nizami emphasized, was based on *futuh*—unsolicited alms—rather than *in'am*, the state land grants that the Suhrawardiyya and other orders accepted. Jahanara, as a Mughal princess, could not replicate the mendicant austerity of a Nizam al-Din Auliya. But she could redirect imperial surplus toward religious ends in a manner that was recognizably Chishti in its emphasis on public accessibility and social incorporation. Her provision of free passage and food for pilgrims, her endowment of Sufi *ribat* or *zawiya*, and her large-scale almsgiving all extended the khanqah's traditional functions of hospitality and charity into the more formalized, bureaucratic idiom of Mughal imperial philanthropy. The material foundations of her piety were thus both a

departure from and a continuation of the Chishti economic ethic: a departure in their scale and their imbrication with state revenue, but a continuation in their ultimate orientation toward the support of devotional life and the welfare of the community.

V. POLITICAL AGENCY:THE PADSHAH BEGUM AS MEDIATOR AND STRATEGIST

Jahanara's political role has been systematically underestimated in traditional historiography, which has tended to confine her to the domestic and familial sphere. The revisionist scholarship, however, has recovered a far more complex picture. As *Padshah Begum*, she was "the most powerful woman in the empire" at the time, and she "wielded major political influence during her father's reign". She was "allowed to live in her own palace, outside the confines of the Agra Fort, and formed her own court where she entertained nobles, ministers, officers, clerics and ambassadors and discussed government affairs or their requests". She "attended councils and discussed important aspects of state and governance from behind her curtained seat," and she "oversaw domestic and international trade, and even mediat[ed] courtiers and foreigners to communicate with the emperor".

Her political agency was most consequential during the War of Succession of 1657–1659. Jahanara "was an ardent partisan of her brother, DaraShikoh, and supported him as her father's chosen successor". When Shah Jahan fell ill and Aurangzeb placed him under house arrest, Jahanara "joined her father in Agra Fort" and "took care of Shah Jahan till his death in 1666". Aafreen Rashid's study of her letters from this period argues that Jahanara "exercised unrivalled persuasive clout as part of her strategy in the Mughal Empire, especially during the War of Succession period," and that her correspondence constituted "a scathing condemnation of the institution of war" and "a series of alternative interpretations of international politics". Even after Aurangzeb's victory, Jahanara's political standing was such that "Aurangzeb, the victorious brother, had reinstated her as Pādishāh Begum".

The ChandiniJaswal seminar paper captures the significance of this political durability: "By re-reading her works and analysing her patronage activities," it argues, it becomes clear that "Jahanara had carved a political space for herself in her father's Empire," successfully "juggling her obligations as Pādishāh Begum—arranging celebrations, counselling her brothers and safeguarding her position". Her political agency was thus not a departure from her spiritual vocation but its complement: the same skills of mediation, negotiation, and strategic self-presentation that she deployed in the imperial court were also those she brought to her negotiations with the Sufi masters, the management of her commercial agents, and the design of her architectural commissions.

VI. URBAN PATRONAGE AND THE GENDERING OF SACRED SPACE

Jahanara's most enduring intervention in the spatial politics of the Chishti order was the BegumiDalan at Ajmer. The Ajmer dargah of Mu'in al-Din Chishti had been the object of imperial pilgrimage and patronage since Akbar, who made fourteen pilgrimages to the shrine between 1556 and 1579. But the tradition of constructing immediately around the tomb chamber itself remained, as Dutta has shown, "the prerogative of the emperors, with only one exception made for Shah Jahan's daughter, Princess JahanAra, likely in the 1050s/1640s". Her intervention was "deliberately minimal yet critical": a white marble pillared porch, the BegumiDalan, which provided a dedicated space for female pilgrims to perform rituals such as barefoot circumambulation and prayer.

The significance of this porch cannot be overstated. It was not a monumental mosque or a grand tomb, but a portico—an architectural gesture that was modest in scale yet transformative in its spatial logic. By creating a permanent, architecturally differentiated space for women at the heart of the most important Chishti shrine in South Asia, Jahanara effectively gendered the pilgrimage. She made women's devotional presence visible and institutionally recognized within a sacred landscape that had hitherto been designed primarily for male pilgrims. As Dutta argues, the porch "continues even today to enable women pilgrims to claim sanctuary within a wider environment designed primarily for men," and it thus constitutes "a case study in the practice of feminism through religiosity and the demonstration of power through humility".

This spatial intervention was complemented by her broader urban patronage. ChandniChowk, which she built around 1650, was not merely a commercial venture but a carefully conceived sacred-secular axis. She "constructed an elegant caravanserai on the East side of the street with gardens in the back," and "to the north of this pool, Jahanara built a caravanserai (an inn for accommodation of caravans) and to the south a hammam (a communal bathhouse)". The complex "anchored her name to the commerce of the city," and the bazaar led to the Jama Masjid at one end and the Red Fort at the other, weaving together the commercial, the devotional, and the political in a single urban fabric. She also commissioned the Jami Masjid in Agra (1648) and the mosque of Mulla Shah Badakhshi in Srinagar (1649–50). These commissions reveal a coherent spatial strategy: to embed Chishti devotional sites, Sufi lodges, and congregational mosques within the fabric of Mughal urban life, and to position herself as the pious patron who mediated between imperial power and sacred authority.

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VII. DISCUSSION: NEGOTIATING PATRIARCHY, CLAIMING AUTHORITY

Jahanara's career raises a central analytical question: how did she, as an unmarried woman in a patriarchal imperial household, negotiate the constraints of gender to claim the authority she did? The answer lies in her strategic deployment of what the Core.ac.uk study calls "imperial hierarchies." Jahanara's "close affiliation with the Sufi leaders along with her initiation and engagement in the orders came from a place of privilege," and her "elevated position in the imperial hierarchy may have sanctioned a 'weaker' parda hold" on her, "allow[ing] her to fully participate in the socio-religious public landscape not as a veiled spectator but as an active contributor". Her very exemption from the normative expectations of marriage and domesticity—she never married—freed her to occupy a public role that was simultaneously spiritual, economic, and political.

Yet privilege alone does not explain the success of her self-fashioning. Jahanara worked actively to construct a persona that could command respect in both the imperial court and the Sufi assembly. She presented herself as a *faqira*, humble and poor in spirit, even as she commanded the revenues of provinces. She wrote herself into the Chishtisilsila through hagiography and autobiography, claiming a place in the textual tradition that had largely excluded women. And she intervened in the sacred landscape at Ajmer in a way that was architecturally modest but symbolically momentous. Her achievement was real and consequential, but it was achieved through the strategic use of the very hierarchies—imperial, familial, and religious—that constrained her.

This reading also has implications for the "decline" narrative in Chishti historiography. If the post-1356 period is understood, following Ernst and Lawrence, as one of regional dispersal and adaptive continuity rather than terminal decay, then Jahanara's activities in the seventeenth century appear not as a late, attenuated echo of a vanished golden age but as a further phase of Chishti institutional creativity—one in which a woman, for the first time, occupied a central and publicly visible role. Her multi-silsila affiliation, her endowment of Sufi institutions, and her gendering of the Ajmer pilgrimage all represent extensions of the Chishti order's characteristic capacity for social incorporation, adapted to the very different political and cultural conditions of the Mughal imperium.

At the same time, it is important to resist the temptation to read Jahanara's career through a romanticized lens of proto-feminism. Her patronage operated within an explicitly Islamic framework, and her interventions at Ajmer were aimed at facilitating women's participation in Islamic ritual, not at dissolving religious boundaries. The "feminine dimension" she invoked was a theological and literary resource within the Sufi tradition, not a secular ideology of gender equality. As Dutta cautions, her intervention is best read as "a case study in the practice of feminism through religiosity"—a negotiation conducted within, rather than against, the patriarchal structures of her time.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Jahanara Begum constructed a distinctive and institutionally consequential form of female Chishti authority through a quadripartite strategy of textual self-fashioning, economic agency, political mediation, and architectural matronage. Her writings, particularly the *Munis al-Arvah* and the *Risala-i-Sahibiyah*, claimed a legitimate place for a woman's voice within the Chishti textual tradition, drawing on the "feminine dimension" of Sufi theosophy to authorize her spiritual experience. Her economic resources—jagirs, maritime trade, and urban property—provided the material foundation for a piety that was public, visible, and institutionally embedded. Her political role as *Padshah Begum* demonstrated that a woman could exercise substantial influence in the Mughal court while remaining publicly identified with the Chishti order. And her commissioning of the BegumiDalan at Ajmer gendered the most important Chishti pilgrimage site in South Asia, creating a permanent space for women's devotional presence that endures to the present day.

Jahanara's career should be understood not as an anomalous exception but as the culmination of a longer, if unevenly documented, history of women's engagement with the Chishti order. What distinguishes her is the scale of her resources, the sophistication of her textual self-presentation, and the permanence of her spatial interventions. By bringing these four dimensions of her agency into a single analytical frame, this article has sought to contribute both to the historiography of the Chishti order and to the broader project of recovering women's religious authority in premodern South Asia. Future research might profitably pursue systematic archival work on the waqf endowments associated with her foundations, comparative studies of other Mughal women's Sufi patronage, and a longue-durée history of the BegumiDalan as a gendered space of pilgrimage.

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