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Manuscript Studies

Persian Marriage Contract of an Indian Sufi Emperor: Southeast Asian Fate of the Last Mughal

Amir H. Zekrgoo¹

Abstract

Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Emperor of Mughal India, was a Sufi poet and calligrapher. He was dethroned by the British and deported to Burma, where he died in sickness and despair. Zafar married Zeenat Mahah Begum, who accompanied his husband to exile. They left behind a marriage contract, which is historically and artistically remarkable. The language, text structure, layout, and decorative elements of the contracts follow the age-old tradition of Persian marriage documentation.

This article provides an overview of the dramatic life of Bahadur Shah II, along with a detailed study of his marriage contract. A brief account of his life is presented under three headings: 'The Sufi Emperor,' 'Trail and Exile to Burma,' and 'Death, Burial and Legacy.' The Emperor's Marriage Contract has been studied at the textual and artistic levels. The textual analysis is discussed under the 'Original Text,' followed by its 'English Translation.' 'Text Structure,' 'Personalities,' 'Bride's Dower,' and 'Date' complement this section. The aesthetic evaluation of the contract is elaborated under a few headings: 'Layout,' 'Illumination,' 'Calligraphy,' and 'Seals.'

Keywords: Bahadur Shah Zafar, Mughal, India, Persian marriage contract, seals, bride's dower, *nikāh*.

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Introduction

Among the various types of historical documents within the Islamic tradition, e.g., royal decrees, endowment deeds, appointment letters, etc., marriage contracts occupy a distinct place. With an attractive appearance and multi-layered content, they function like open windows that allow the reader to peek into aspects of the personal lives of people who lived in a distant past. They help us understand that marriage was regarded as a sacred union and a divine blessing. We learn about the identity of married couples and their genealogy and are exposed to their social status. The items listed in the 'Bride's Dower' section provide an insight into the financial condition of the groom. The presence of respected elders at the ceremony, who endorsed the marriage by their seals, adds a different dimension to the event.

The scattered pieces of information that are recorded in these attractive documents stimulate the imagination to picture that memorable day and wonder if the rest of their lives were fulfilling. Did they actually live a long, happy married life, or did they end up in a bitter separation? How many children did they produce, and what was the offspring's destiny? Our curiosity often remains unfulfilled simply because of the unavailability of data about the expanse and quality of the lives of the newlyweds.

However, there are exceptional cases where the documented history is relatively abundant, and Bahadur Shah's marriage contract is among them. When I first began studying the Emperor's marriage contract, I was planning a detailed examination of the document itself, similar to the numerous marriage contracts that I had studied and introduced over two decades.² However, my long-time association with Indian art and culture and the historical significance of India's last Mughal Emperor encouraged me to make an effort to introduce the royal marriage contract against a backdrop of interesting recorded historical events.

² I have introduced over 70 marriage contracts in a book that was published some 24 years ago. See Amir H. Zekrgoo, *The Sacred Art of Marriage – Persian Marriage Certificates of the Qajar Dynasty* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2000).



Figure 1: Royal Seal of Bahadur Shah Zafar, recording the bloodline of the last Mughal Emperor.

The triangular ornamentation on the top has the following words in stylized *Naskh* script: الله هو الكافي, Below the above words, I can read the word الكافي, penned in an unrecognizable fashion. The central circle has the name of the Emperor in excellent *Nasta'liq* style against ultramarine ground. It reads:

ابو ظفر سراج الدين محمد بهادرشاه
بادشاه غازي سنة احد

The 16 circles surrounding Bahadur Shah II's name provide his lineage, in a clockwise arrangement, ending with Amir Timur on the top. They read:

1. ابن محمد اكبرشاه بادشاه
2. ابن شاه عالم بادشاه
3. ابن عالميگر بادشاه
4. ابن جهاندارشاه
5. ابن شاه عالم بادشاه
6. ابن عالم گير بادشاه
7. ابن شاه جهان بادشاه
8. ابن جهانگير بادشاه
9. ابن اكبر بادشاه
10. ابن همايون بادشاه
11. ابن بابر بادشاه
12. ابن عمر شيخ شاه
13. ابن سلطان ابوسعيد شاه
14. ابن سلطان محمدشاه
15. ابن ميران شاه
16. ابن اميرتيمور صاحب قران

The Sufi Emperor

Born in 1775 in Delhi, Bahadur Shah II, mostly known as Bahadur Shah Zafar, was a Sufi and poet destined to be the twentieth and the last Mughal Emperor of India. His lineage has been recorded in an artistically designed seal that links him, through sixteen intermediaries, to Amir Timur. (Figure 1)

He ascended the throne in 1837 at the age of sixty-two. By then, the Mughal Empire had already been reduced to the city of Delhi and its surrounding territories. The East India Company had spread the British influence throughout India, leaving its devastating mark on the empire.

Bahadur Shah married several times, but his second and most beloved wife was Zeenat Mahal – a queen known for her intelligence, beauty, and devotion to the king. He married Zeenat Mahal in 1840 when he was 64 years old. The age of Zeenat Mahal has not been recorded, but from the paintings that remain from them, we can guess that she was perhaps significantly younger than the king. (Figure 2)



Figure 2: Paintings of Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar and his Queen Zeenat Mahal Begum, c. 1840

Zafar was not cut out to be a king. He was a spiritual man with little interest in politics. Before occupying the throne, he lived like a poor scholar. An outstanding Urdu poet, Bahadur Shah's poems are still appreciated. The king was also a fine calligrapher who left behind pieces in various styles in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. (Figures 3 & 4)

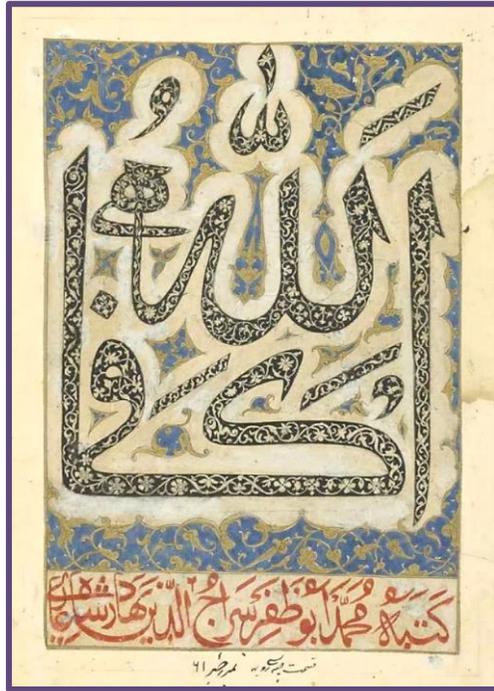


Figure 3: Calligraphic composition by Bahadur Shah Zafar. Ink, watercolor, and gold on paper are part of the mid-19th century private collection.

The expression *الله الكافي* (God is sufficient) appears in bold stylized Thuluth script. The black body of the script is decorated with scrolling arabesques. The top, the bottom, and the open spaces between the letters are decorated with floral designs on blue ground. The red writing on the lower band reads:

كتبه محمد أبو ظفر سراج الدين بهادر شاه غازی

(Written by Muhammad Abu Zafar Siraj al-Din Bahadur Shah Ghazi).

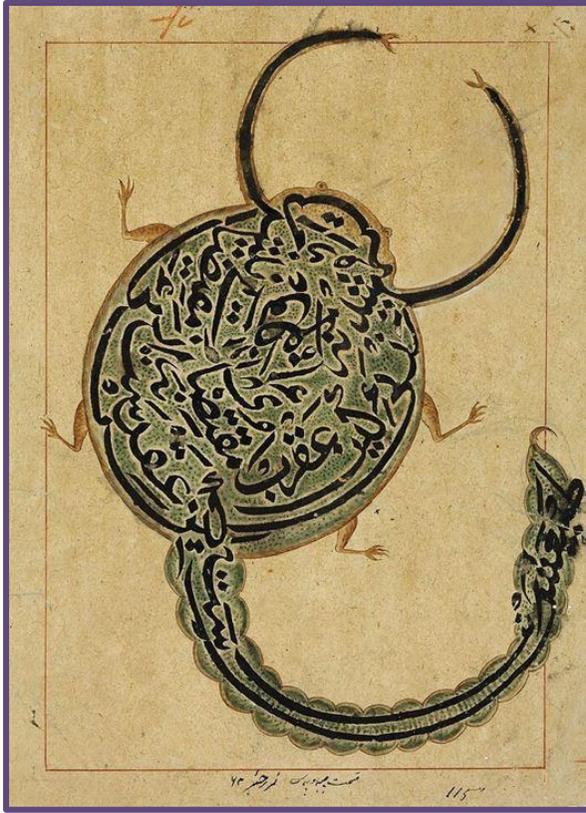


Figure 4: Calligraphic composition in the form of scorpion by Bahadur Shah. Ink and watercolor on paper, 31 x 22.5 cm. mid-19th century, private collection (Christie's).

The imaginary shape of the scorpion is eye-catching: a circular body, a long, curvy tail, a pair of thin, curvy, symmetrical feelers, and four legs that resemble a lizard's. On the scorpion's body, tail, and feelers, there is a writing inscribed in Naskh style. At first glance, the words seem random, but a close inspection reveals the following Persian couplet.

نیش عقرب نه از ره کین است مقتضای طبیعتش این است

A scorpion stings not out of aversion,
It follows nature's innate direction.

The words کتبه ابو ظفر (penned by Abu Zafar) – are creatively composed within the text.

The emperor was inspired by Sufi teachings of spiritual love and brotherhood. He even composed a verse in which he clearly stated that Hinduism and Islam shared the same essence.³ Religious tolerance was among the notable traits of the Mughals.⁴ Zafar genuinely believed in multiculturalism and celebrated many Hindu festivals.

He was also lenient towards certain East India Company officials, who he considered friends. On several occasions, Bahadur Shah presented Sir Thomas Metcalfe (1795-1853) – a civil servant of the Company as well as an agent of the Governor General of India at the Imperial Mughal court – selected poems in Persian and Urdu in his own hand-writing.⁵ (Figure 5)

Zafar was regarded as a Sufi master (*pīr*) with a circle of devout followers (*murīds*). Even after becoming the Emperor, he wore plain attire, unfit to the position. It was reported that “his appearance is that of an indigent *munshī* or a teacher of languages.”⁶ He believed, as did his followers that his spiritual powers as a Sufi master would help him perform better in state matters. But the British troops were too strong, the Mughal Empire was already on the verge of collapse, and Zafar was merely the King of Delhi.

³ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of Delhi, 1857* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 80.

⁴ Emperor Akbar (1548-1605) initiated the movement by ordering the first translation of Hindu epic of *Ramayana* to Persian. It became a trend followed by a number of Mughal dignitaries. Prince Dara Shikoh (1615-1659) authored an important treatise in Persian called *Majma‘al-Bahrain* (Confluence of the Two Seas) in which he explored the fundamental unity of Hinduism and Islam, despite their diverse outlooks.

⁵ These pieces are part of ‘Reminiscences of Imperial Delhi’, an album collected by Metcalfe, comprising a few calligraphic specimens and about 130 paintings.

⁶ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of Delhi, 1857* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 78.

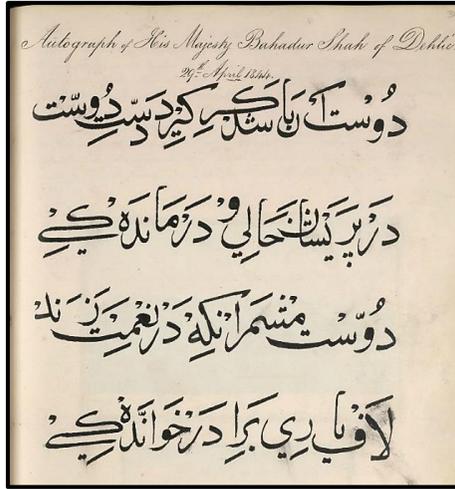


Figure 5: On 29 April 1844, Bahadur Shah presented Metcalfe with his handwritten Persian poem, expounding on the measures of genuine friendship and brotherhood. The couplet is by the renowned Iranian poet Sa'di Shirazi (1210-1291). It reads:

دوست آن باشد که گیرد دست دوست در پریشان حالی و درماندگی
دوست مشمر آنکه در نعمت زند لاف یاری و برادر خواندگی

*A real friend is one who extends a helping hand
At the time of grief, helplessness, and hardship
Consider not a friend who, at the time of plenty –
Boasts about brotherhood and friendship.⁷*

Naturally, there was resistance to British aggression among the public, and some members of the royal family – including two of the King's sons – were actively involved. Bahadur Shah reluctantly supported the rebellion, as they seemed to be the last resort for saving what was left of a once renowned mighty empire with vast territory.⁸ The clash ended in the Siege of Delhi by the British forces. Bahadur Shah took refuge in the Humayun's tomb – the burial ground of two of his great ancestors – Humayun (1508-1566) and Babur (14830-

⁷ Translation to English by Amir H. Zekrgoo.

⁸ William Dalrymple (2009), 145.

1530). His location was eventually revealed. On 20 September 1857, the king and his sons were captured by the East India Company forces led by Major William Hodson. The event became the theme of a few artworks proudly produced by the British as a memorial to their victorious occupation of India. (Figure 6)



Figure 6: Capture of Bahadur Shah in Humayun's Tomb. Steel engraving.

This picture depicts a historic event that took place on the 20th of September, 1857. Captain Hodson captures Bahadur Shah and his sons during the 'Sepoy Mutiny' (according to the British) and the 'First War of India for Independence' (according to Indians.) The old man with a turban and robe at the picture's focal point is Bahadur Shah. In front of him stands Captain Hodson in British military uniform. Behind the Emperor, his two sons can be seen with their hands tied behind their backs.

Trail and Exile to Burma

Bahadur Shah's life took an even more devastating turn after his capture. Soon, two of his sons, Mirza Mughal and Mirza Khizr Sultan, as well as his grandson Mirza Abu Bakht, were shot to death by Hodson. The princes were mounted on a bullock cart and driven towards Delhi. Near the gate, where a large crowd had gathered, Hodson stopped the bullock cart, took the three princes down, stripped their top garments, and shot them dead in cold blood, using a

carbine from his troopers. He then stripped them of their signet rings, turquoise armbands, and jeweled swords. Their bodies were ordered to be displayed for everyone to see⁹ – a shocking event that immediately became a controversial event both in India and abroad, even then.¹⁰ Upon hearing the news, the Emperor became overwhelmed with grief and went into depression.¹¹ (Figure 7)



Figure 7: *The weak Emperor Bahadur Shah right before being exiled to Burma (left) and Queen Zeenat Mahal Begum (right).*

This was followed by a series of hard blows that were going to put an end to the Mughal Empire. The king of Delhi was taken to court in the Red Fort of Delhi. The trial lasted 21 days and had 19 hearings and 21 witnesses. Over 100 documents in Persian and Urdu, along with their English translations, were presented to the court.¹²

The King was charged on the following four counts:

1. Aiding and abetting the mutinies of the troops.

⁹ Michael Edwardes, *Red Year: The Indian Rebellion of 1857* (London: Cardinal Books, 1975), 59.

¹⁰ An elaborate account is available in: T. R. Holmes, *History of Indian Mutiny* (London: Macmillan and Cop, 1898), 591-617.

¹¹ The images are part of 'Reminiscences of Imperial Delhi'.

¹² H. S. Bhatia, *Justice System and Mutinies in British India* (Deep & Deep Publications, 2001), 204.

2. Encouraging and assisting diverse persons in waging war against the British Government.
3. Assuming the sovereignty of Hindustan.
4. Causing and being accessory to the murder of Christians.¹³

After convicting him on several charges, Zafar was officially removed from the throne, and Queen Victoria subsequently assumed the title of Empress of India.

In October 1858, the last Mughal Emperor was exiled to Rangoon in the British-controlled Burma – present Myanmar.¹⁴ His wife, Zeenat Mahal, and two sons, Mirza Jawan Bakht and Mirza Shah Abbas, accompanied him. (Figure 8)



*Figure 8:
A meaningful picture of
the deposed Mughal
Emperor after being
exiled to Burma.
Behind him stand
his sons, Mirza Jawan
Bakht and Mirza Shah
Abbas. They look
displeased and restless.
On the right of the old
seated Zafar, proudly
stands William
Hodson, his captor and
the one who shot the
King's two other sons.*

¹³ An elaborate account of the court hearings is available in “Proceedings of the April 1858 Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar ‘King of Delhi’”, *Parliamentary Papers*, June 1859. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20161006215545/http://www.csas.edu.ac.uk/mutiny/Trial-BahadurShah.pdf>

¹⁴ H. S. Bhatia, *Justice System and Mutinies in British India*, 204.

Death, Burial, and Legacy

A couple of years after his exile in Rangoon, the old king became critically ill. In October 1862, his condition deteriorated, and on Friday 7th of November, at 5 am, he passed away. He was buried at 4 pm on the same day. Having been buried far from Hindustan, the Sufi Emperor gradually faded away from memories. Some 150 years later, on the 16th of February 1991, his tomb was recovered and a proper shrine known as Bahadur Shah Zafar Dargah was erected which attracted visitors who paid homage to him.¹⁵

Zafar, despite his catastrophic defeat by the mighty British forces, is very much a celebrated figure in contemporary India:

The last Mughal Emperor stands in our memory as a symbol of a lost era of a pluralistic India. Though he was not much of a ruler, the Delhi darbar being confined to only a few miles, he was the chosen leader of Hindus and Muslims alike, unanimous in their anger and rejection of British rule during India's first war of independence in 1857.¹⁶

The Emperor's Marriage Contract

At first glance, the beautiful marriage contract of Bahadur Shah Zafar and Zeenat Mahal Begum appears to be of Iranian origin. This should not be of any surprise, for there has been an uninterrupted relationship between Iran and India since ancient times.¹⁷ Cultural

¹⁵ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, 474.

¹⁶ Sami Rafiq, "Zafar's legacy," in *Hindustan Times*, May 12, 2007.

¹⁷ The seals that were produced in Mehengo-Daro have been found in the Persian Gulf -region, testifying to maritime trade between the Indus Valley Civilization and the people of Persia. The similarities between the Hindu *Vedas* and Zoroastrian *Avesta* reveals striking parallels between the religions of ancient Iran and India. This connection is also evident in the areas of art and architecture. A study of Ashokan pillars in India (3rd century BCE), compared with those of the Persepolis (6th century BCE) shows that the Ashokan capitals were most probably carved under the supervision of Achaemenid craftsmen. See Amir H. Zekrgoo, "From Cyrus to Ashoka: A Comparative Study of Ancient Arts and Beliefs of Persia and India," (Persian), *Honar Nameh* 1, no. 1 (1998): 2-19.

connection became most prominent during the Islamic period of India, especially during the Mughal era when Persian was the official language of refined conversation and state correspondence. Even the British officials carried seals upon whom were carved their names and positions in Persian language and *Nasta'liq* script – an Iranian style of Islamic calligraphy.¹⁸

The style of the Indian miniature paintings of this period is often referred to as Indo-Iranian or Indo-Persian. Mughal manuscripts, in terms of their general outlook – layout, decorative elements, and calligraphic style – have a close affinity with their Iranian counterparts.

A study of historical Persian marriage contracts unveils an intricate structure carefully crafted to serve various purposes. This structure comprises the following components:

1. **Praise and thanksgiving:** This section begins with the eloquent and reverent Arabic language, offering heartfelt praise and gratitude to the Lord for bestowing the blessings of marriage upon the people.
2. **Preface:** In this segment a harmonious blend of Persian and Arabic is employed. The languages complement each other, weaving a tapestry of words that sets the stage for the contractual content.
3. **Introduction of the marrying couple:** As the tone gradually shifts from religious and poetic to practical, the document begins the process of formal documentation. Here, meticulous records of the names of the newlyweds and their respective fathers are entered.
4. **Bride's Dower:** This section transitions away from the floral language and poetic elements, focusing solely on the financial aspects. It provides a comprehensive inventory of the items included in the bride's dower, such as silver, gold, cash, land, real estate, houses, carpets, kitchenware,

¹⁸ I have introduced seals belonging to British officials (Alexander Honey and of Edward Charles Ross) in one of my writings. See figures 7 and 8 in Amir H. Zekrgoo, "An Introduction to Persian Seals: Special Reference to Devotional Seals from an Eighteenth-Century Manuscript," *Al-Shajarah* 27, no.1 (2022): 153-170.

furniture, streams, walnut trees, and even male and female servants. Additionally, it meticulously records the payment from the groom's side and the receipt from the bride's side for any portion of the total dowry.

5. **Prayer and date:** The document concludes with a prayer and a date, sealing the agreement with solemnity and reverence. The legitimacy of the contract is affirmed through the seal impression of respected community members who were present as witnesses during the ceremony. 19

A comparison between Bahadur Shah's marriage contract with the ones produced during the Qajar period (1789-1925) reveals a strong resemblance.²⁰ In terms of general appearance, layout design, text arrangement, decorative elements, language, and calligraphic style, Bahadur Shah's marriage contract – produced during the same period (1840) – closely follows the Qajari model. (Figure 9)

What follows is a careful examination of the Emperor's marriage contract, beginning with the main text, which is penned in 17 lines and is composed of a combination of Persian and Arabic. The numbers within square brackets [] indicate the line in the original document.

¹⁹ A detailed account is available in Amir H. Zekrgoo, "The Persian Tradition of Marriage Documentation: Pre-Islamic & Islamic Marriage Contracts," *Al-Shajarah* 12, no. 2 (2007): 143-160.

²⁰ The greatest number of documented historical marriage contracts belong to the Qajar period. I have studied numerous marriage contracts of the period, preserved in museums, archives, and private collections, and have introduced some eighty pieces in my book. See Amir H. Zekrgoo, *The Sacred Art of Marriage – Persian Marriage Certificates of the Qajar Dynasty* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2000).

PERSIAN MARRIAGE CONTRACT OF AN INDIAN SUFI-EMPEROR:
SOUTHEAST ASIAN FATE OF THE LAST MUGHAL

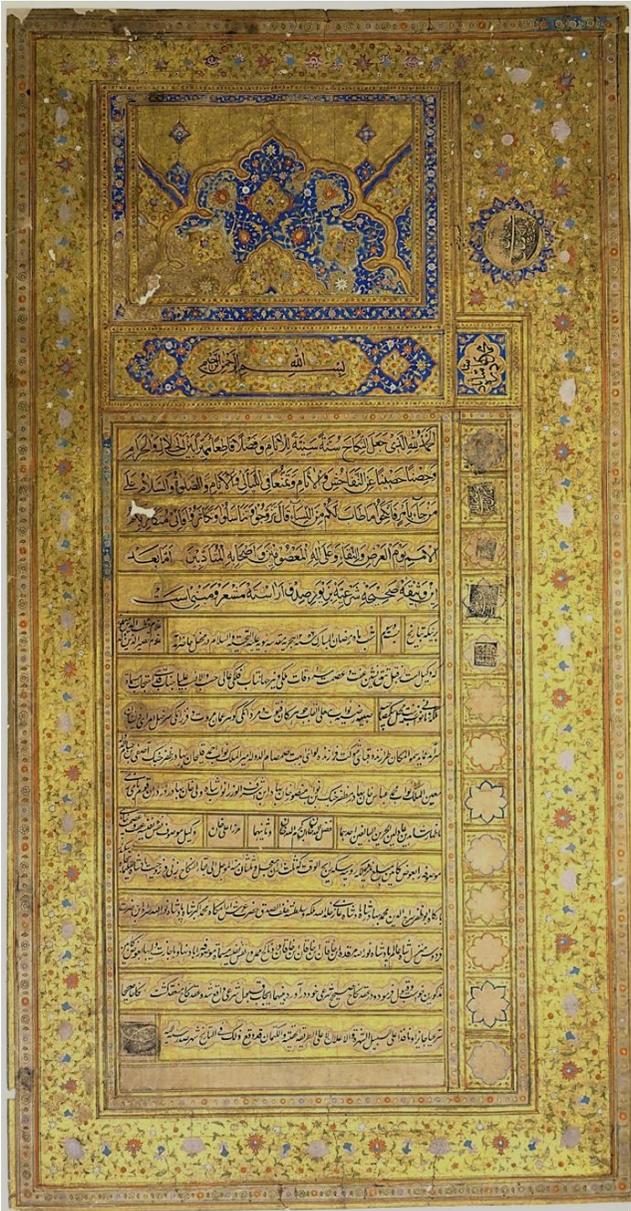


Figure 9: Marriage contract of Bahadur Shah Zafar, from the British Library Collection

Original Text

[1] بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ [2] الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي جَعَلَ النِّكَاحَ سُنَّةً سَيِّئَةً لِلْأَنَامِ وَفَصَلَاً قَاطِعاً مُمَيَّزاً بَيْنَ الْحَلَالِ وَالْحَرَامِ [3] وَحِصْناً حَصِيناً عَنِ النَّفَاحِشِ وَالْأَنَامِ وَتَمْتَعاً فِي اللَّيَالِي وَالْأَيَّامِ وَالصَّلَاةِ وَالسَّلَامِ عَلَيَّ [4] مَنْ جَاءَ بِأَمْرِ فَأَنكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ قَالَ تَزَوَّجُوا وَتَنَاسَلُوا وَتَكَاثَرُوا فَإِنِّي مُتَكَاثِرٌ بِكُمْ [5] الْأَمَمِ يَوْمَ الْعَرْضِ وَاللَّقَاءِ وَعَلَى آلِهِ الْمَعْصُومِينَ وَأَصْحَابِهِ مُتَادِّبِينَ - اما بعد [6] ابن وثيقه صحیحہ شرعیہ بزبور صدق آراسته مشعر و مینی است [7] برینکه بتاریخ بست و سوم شب ماه رمضان المبارک سنه 1256 هجریه مقدسه نبویه علیه التحیه والسلام در محفل حاضر آمد - «غلام نصرالدین، ولد غلام قطب الدین مغفور [8] که وکیل است از قبل تئق نشین عفت و عصمت سرادقات ملکی و تیر جهانتاب فلکی، عالی حسب، والا نسب علیا جناب، قدسی احتجاب مسماء [9] «ملکه زمانی نواب زینت محل بیگم صاحبه» صبیہ رضیه نواب معلی القاب جوهر کان فتوت و مردانگی، گوهر عمان مروت و فرزاندگی، سرخیل امرای ذیشان [10] سرآمد عماید سموالمان طرازنده قباى شوکت، فرازنده لوای ابهت، صمصام الدوله امیرالملک نواب احمد قلیخان بهادر ظفرجنگ آصفی بن حسام الدوله [11] معین الملک نواب محمد عباس خان بهادر مظفر جنگ بن نواب منصور خان بهادر ابن شرف الوزرا نواب شاه ولی خان بهادر دُرُ دُرَّان قوم نامی زئی [12] به اظهار شاهدین عادلین الحرین البالغین، احدهما فضل الله خان ابن کرم الله خان و ثانیاً مرزا علی خان، وکیل موصوف نفس نفیسه عفت و عصمت پناهی [13] موصوفه را بعوض کابین مبلغ پانزده لکه روپیہ سکه رایج الوقت که ثلث از آن معجل و ثلثان منه الموجل الی بقاء النکاح بزنی و زوجیت پادشاه سلیمانجہ سکندر [14] بارگاه ابوظفر سراج الدین محمد بهادرشاه، بادشاه غازی خلدالله ملکه و سلطنته خلف الصدق حضرت عرش آرامگاه محمد اکبرشاه پادشاه نورالله سره ابن حضرت [15] فردوس منزل شاه عالم پادشاه نورالله مرقدہ ابن خاقان ابن خاقان داد ناکح ممدوح نفس نفیسه مسماء موصوفه را باذنہا و باجازات ولیها بعوض کابین [16] مذکورین خواست و قبول فرمود و در عقد نکاح صحیح شرعی خود در آورد بینہما ایجاب قبول شرعی واقع شد و عقد نکاح منعقد گشت - نکاحا صحیحا [17] نکاحا صحیحا شرعیاً جایزا و نافذا

عليالسييل الشهرة والعلان لا على الطريقه الخفيته والكتمان قد وقع ذلك في تاريخ شهر
صدر سنه اليه

English Translation

[1] In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful [2] Praised be Allah (ﷻ), who established marriage as a revered institution for mankind and made it a distinct and decisive exercise that distinguishes between the permissible and that which is forbidden, [3] and a fortified garrison that protects us from vulgarities and sins, and made with it delightful our nights and days. And prayers and peace be upon [4] the Prophet who commanded it. So, marry the women that you are pleased with, as He said, “marry and produce offspring, and multiply, then know that I shall boast your numbers [5] on the day of Presentation and Meeting (Day of Resurrection) – and [prayers and peace] be upon his infallible family and respectful companions. [6] This complete agreement that is sanctioned by Shariah and adorned with honesty, declares [7] that on the evening of the twenty third of the auspicious month of Ramadan of the of the year 1256, from the holy emigration of the Prophet (ﷺ) – upon whom be highest salutations and peace – became present in the gathering: Ghulām Naṣr al-Din, son of the forgiven deceased Ghulām Quṭb al-Din [8] who represents the [lady] who is veiled by modesty and chastity, and dwells within the royal curtains: the luminating sun of the realm, of exalted lineage and dignified family, her exalted highness [9] “Malika Zamānī, Nawwāb Zeenat Maḥal Begum Ṣāhibah” the praiseworthy daughter of the Nawwāb of eminent titles, the jewel of the mine of generosity and courage, the pearl of the sea of humanity and wisdom, the chief of the dignified princes, [10] the grand master of high-ranking chiefs, the embroiderer of the robe of majesty, the elevator of the banner of glory, Ṣamṣām al-Dawlah Nawwāb Aḥmad Qulikhān Bahadur Zafar Jang Āshifī, son of Ḥisām al-Dawlah [11] Mu‘īn al-Mulk Nawwāb Muḥammad ‘Abbās Khān Bahadur Muzaffar Jang, son of Nawwāb Maṣṣūr Khān Bahadur, son of the glory of the ministers, Nawwāb Shāh Walī Khān Bahadur, who is the most prominent pearl of the renowned Za‘ī tribe; [12] as testified by two just, noble, and mature witnesses: firstly Faḍl-Allah Khān, son of Karam-Allāh Khān; secondly Mirzā ‘Alī Khān – who

represent the aforesaid precious soul of modesty and purity, [13] to bring her into wedlock – in exchange for a dower of fifteen lakh Rupees of the current coin, a third of which is paid and the remaining two third to be settled during the marriage – with the emperor of Solomon ranking [14] and Alexander grandeur “Abu Zafar Sirāj al-Din Muḥammad Bahadur Shāh Bādshāh Ghāzī,” may God extend his dominion and kingdom to eternity – the rightful successor of the one whose resting place is the [divine] throne, Emperor Akbar Shāh – may the Divine light elevate his station – son of [15] the Paradise dweller, Emperor Shāh ‘Ālam, may the Divine light illuminate his grave – son of Khāqān, son of Khāqān, son of Khāqān, son of Khāqān – on behalf of the marrying man) the Emperor) asked for her hand in marriage with her permission and that of her father, in exchange for the dower, and accepted the conditions. Thus, the correct and lawful *nikāḥ* was performed. [16] The statements of *ījāb* (proposal) and *qabūl* (acceptance) were uttered by the two sides according to the Shari’ah, and the tie of *nikāḥ* was bond [17] in a valid, lawful and permissible manner, recognized by the public – not conducted in secret or concealed – on the exalted month of the mentioned year.

Text Structure

A close study of the contract’s content reveals the following five-layered arrangement, which exhibits similarities with the Qajar marriage contracts.

1. **Praise and thanksgiving:** The first five lines that begin with the *BismiLLāh* on the ornamented heading are written eloquently in Arabic. It praises the Lord for blessing the people with the boon of marriage and ends with greeting the holy Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and his family. This section is penned in excellent *Naskh* script.
2. **Transitory statement:** Line 6 is a brief announcement introducing the nature of the document, i.e., ‘an agreement that is sanctioned by the Shari’ah.’ It smoothly moves the reader’s attention from the introductory praise to the main theme. This line visually blends with the previous section, as it is also executed in *Naskh* style. The language, however, is

a mixture of Persian and Arabic words that follow Persian grammar.

3. **Introduction of the marrying couple and date of the Ceremony:** The largest and the most informative section of the document is composed in lines 7 to 12. This part is dedicated to recording the names of the principal personalities involved in the process of the *nikāḥ* ceremony: the marrying couple, their fathers and lineage, the representative (*wakīl*) who pronounced the wordings of the *nikāḥ* on behalf of the newlyweds, and the two prominent witnesses. This part is visually distinct from the previous parts because it is written in Persian and penned in the Nasta'liq style of calligraphy.
4. **Bride's Dower:** In line 13, the amount of the bride's dower and the agreed method of payment is recorded.
5. **Concluding statement:** The concluding lines, 14 to 17, confirm that the *nikāḥ* is valid and lawful, as it has been performed according to the requirements of religious law.

Personalities

Names of thirteen people are mentioned in the contract. Their names, positions, and relations are organized in Table 1:

Table 1: Names of People Listed in the Marriage Contract

	Names and Titles of Honor	Position / Relation
1.	Abu Zafar Sirāj al-Din Muḥammad Bahadur Shāh Bādshāh Ghāzī	Emperor
2.	Emperor Akbar Shāh II	Emperor's Father/Predecessor
3.	Emperor Shāh 'Ālam	Father of Akbar Shāh II, grandfather of the Emperor

	Names and Titles of Honor	Position / Relation
4.	Malika Zamānī Nawwāb Zinat Mahal Begum	Queen
5.	Şamşām al-Dawlah Nawwāb Aḥmad Qulikhān Bahadur Zafar Jang Āşifī	Queen's father
6.	Ḥisām al-Dawlah Mu‘īn al- Mulk Nawwāb Muḥammad ‘Abbās Khān Bahadur Muzaffar Jang	Queen's grandfather (Father of Şamşām al-Dawlah)
7.	Nawwāb Manşūr Khān Bahadur	Queen's great-grandfather (Father of Ḥisām al-Dawlah...)
8.	Nawwāb Shāh Walī Khān Bahadur	Queen's great great grandfather (Father of Nawwāb Manşūr Khān Bahadur)
9.	Ghulām Naşr al-Din	Performer of <i>Nikāḥ</i>
10.	Ghulām Quṭb al-Din	Father of <i>Nikāḥ</i> performer (Ghulām Naşr al-Din)
11.	Faḍl-Allah Khān	Official witness 1
12.	Ghulām Quṭb al-Din	Father of official witness 1 (Faḍl-Allah Khān)
13.	Mirzā ‘Alī Khān	Official witness 2

Bride's Dower

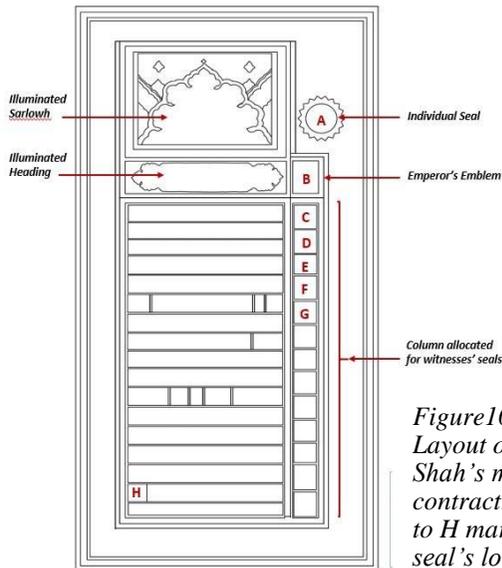
‘Fifteen lakh (1.5 million) Rupees of the current coin’ is the amount stated as the bride's dower. One-third of the total sum has been paid and resolved by the time of marriage, while the remaining two-thirds were intended to be settled throughout the course of marriage.

Date: 23rd of Ramadan of 1256 AH. /17th November 1840

Artistic Dimension

Layout:

Following the typical Qajari marriage contracts, the main structure is asymmetrical. The decorated *sarlowh* and the following text are laid out slightly to the left. (See a detailed account under ‘Seals.’) This addition, along with the large seal on the top right-hand side of the *sarlowh*, has visually balanced the setting. (Figure 10)



*Figure 10:
Layout of Bahadur
Shah's marriage
contract. Letters A
to H mark the
seal's location*

Gold is the dominating color of this scroll-type marriage contract.²¹ The entire surface surrounding the text area is meticulously decorated with floral patterns painted in white, blue,

²¹ Historical marriage contracts were prepared in two formats: scroll-type and booklet-type. The earlier ones were prepared on a sheet of paper that could be rolled and stored, like royal decrees, waqf deeds, etc. From the second half of the 19th century the booklet-type contracts became popular. The oldest scroll-type Persian marriage contract that I have studied and introduced is dated 1792, while the earliest booklet-type dates 1868. See Amir H. Zekrgoo, *The Sacred Art of Marriage*, p. 30 and p. 86.

and red for the flowers and greenish grey for the leaves. Hair-thin lines travel through the decorated area, forming the stems that delicately connect the floral pattern.

Illumination

The highly illuminated top section of the contract, the *sarlowh*, is decorated with fine floral designs painted with lapis lazuli, cinnabar, gold, and white against gold background. It is divided into two parts. The upper part displays an ornamental arch at the center, typical in Mughal architecture. To its right, a large seal can be seen. (Figure 11) The lower part of the *sarlowh* features an attractive elongated escutcheon that frames the most used expression at the beginning of any Islamic manuscript – In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. (Figure 12)



Figure 11: Upper part of the sarlowh, with a large seal on its right



Figure 12: Lower part of the sarlowh with Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim in stylized Naskh script. On the right is Bahadur Shah's emblem.

Calligraphy

Naskh and *Nasta'liq* are the two calligraphic styles used in the scroll. The Arabic text that fills the first six lines, including the *BismiLLāh* heading, is penned in *Naskh*. The remaining eleven lines are in *Nasta'liq*.

Seals

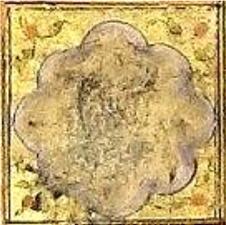
There is a total of seven seals. On the right-hand side of the text, a column is stylishly designed to accommodate the seal impressions of the esteemed witnesses to the ceremony. These witnesses are in addition to the two official witnesses – Faḍl-Allah Khān and Mirzā ‘Alī Khān – whose names are stated within the text to fulfill the legal requirement of the *nikāh*.²²

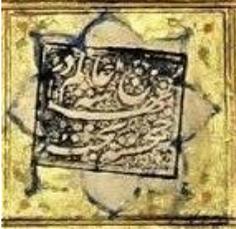
The column is divided into thirteen squares; each square is decorated with a simple eight-petalled rosette to accommodate the seal impression of a witness. However, only the five top boxes have been filled out, and the remaining eight are left blank. A much larger and more eye-catching seal can be seen high up on the right-hand side of the *sarlowh*. It is beautifully framed within a sixteen-petalled rosette. (Figure 11) In the lower-left corner, a peculiar fish-shaped seal impression is noticeable immediately after the last word of the text.

On the top of the witnesses’ column, at the same level as the highly illuminated ‘*BismiLLāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*’ – the Emperor’s name is composed within an escutcheon. Though this is a handwritten work, not a seal impression, it has similarities with the seals in terms of size and layout composition; as such, I decided to include it here. (Figure 12) A systematic account of the seals and the Emperor’s calligraphic emblem is provided in Table 2.

²² Presence of two witnesses has been a mandatory condition for a *nikāh* ceremony to become official. However, there has been a tradition to invite respected members of communities to bless the occasion by their presence, and by leaving their seal impressions on the documents. It is worth noting that the endorsement of marriages by revered elders was not merely a polite gesture or social etiquette. This action somehow engaged the witnesses to share the responsibility of looking after the newlyweds’ affairs and provide them with proper guidance at critical times during their married life.

TABLE 2: SEALS

Seal	Location / Inscription
	<p><u>Seals A:</u> This circular seal appears on the right-hand side of the <i>sarlowh</i>. It is written in excellent <i>Nasta'liq</i> style, composed in two levels separated by an extended ya (ے). On the upper part, the word '<i>al-Mannān</i>' (المنان) can be read. The letters on the two sides are faded. The lower part bears the name 'Abd al-Karīm Khān (عبدالکریم خان).</p> <p>The seal is stamped inside a hollow circle enclosed within a 16-petal rosette. The rosette is ornamented with floral motifs against an ultramarine ground.</p>
	<p><u>Seals B:</u> (Emperor's Emblem) Located on the top, above the column of witnesses, on the right-hand side of the highly illuminated '<i>BismiLLāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm</i>,' the Emperor's name (محمد بهادر شاه بادشاه) is creatively composed by connecting strokes of different letters, penned in an average stylized <i>Naskh</i>. The writing is set within an escutcheon against ultramarine blue, decorated with stylized floral motifs.</p>
	<p><u>Seals C:</u> Located on the 2nd top row, on the column dedicated to the seals, right below Bahadur Shah's emblem, this faded and smudged seal is in the form of a vertical oval. The <i>Nasta'liq</i> illegible inscription is stamped inside a stylized 8-petalled rosette, surrounded by fine floral motifs against gold background.</p>

	<p><u>Seals D:</u> Located on the 3rd top row, on the column dedicated to the seals, is a square seal in excellent <i>Nasta'liq</i> style, stamped on an 8-petalled rosette surrounded by fine floral motifs against gold background. It reads: Sāhib Qarān Jamshīd Bakht Ibn Shāh 'Ālam (جمشید بخت ابن شاه عالم صاحبقران) The owner of the seal could be one of Bahadur Shah's uncles, as the inscription introduces him as "son of Shāh 'Ālam."</p>
	<p><u>Seals E:</u> Located on the 4th top row, on the column dedicated to the seals, this illegible square-shaped seal is stamped in an eight-petalled rosette surrounded by fine floral motifs against the gold background.</p>
	<p><u>Seals F:</u> Located on the 5th top row, on the column dedicated to the seals, this square-shaped seal, in excellent <i>Nasta'liq</i> style, is stamped on an 8-petalled rosette surrounded by floral motifs against the gold background. It reads: Sāhib Qarān Jamshīd Bakht Ibn Shāh 'Ālam (خجسته بخت بهادر بن عالم سنه) The seal owner was perhaps one of Zafar's uncles, as the inscription introduces him as "son of Shāh 'Ālam" – a case similar to Seal C. Both seals share the same style of calligraphy and composition.</p>

	<p><u>Seals G:</u> Located on the 6th top row, on the column dedicated to the seals, this square-shaped seal is stamped within an 8-petalled rosette surrounded by floral motifs against the gold background. The writings are in stylized <i>Naskh</i> script, creatively composed to form a lattice. I could not read the text since the available image does not provide a clear visual inspection.</p>
	<p><u>Seals H:</u> Located on the lower left corner of the text, this rectangular seal has a fish design, with a faded inscription in <i>Nast'aliq</i> script.</p>

Conclusion

The life of the last Mughal Emperor had multiple social, political, cultural, and artistic dimensions worthy of revisiting. From the viewpoint of cultural heritage, Bahadur Shah Zafar linked Iran and India to Burma in Southeast Asia. The emperor was a Sufi poet and calligrapher. He had a dramatic life with a sad ending. Arrested by the British army and taken to court, he was charged with assuming sovereignty for India. This was followed by the exile of the dethroned Emperor and his family to Burma, where he died and was buried. He was forgotten for quite some time, but in 1991, 150 years after his demise, his tomb was recovered, and a proper shrine was erected in his commemoration.

Bahadur Shah Zafar may not have been a strong ruler, but Indians remember him as a symbol of a lost era of a pluralistic and integrated India. He was the chosen leader of Hindus and Muslims alike, unanimous in their anger and rejection of British rule during India's first war of independence in 1857.

Revisiting history through artifacts puts the events in a different light. Bahadur Shah's marriage contract is an attractive and informative cross-cultural artifact with religious, linguistic, financial, legal, and artistic edges. It contains detailed data on a wide range of

subjects. In terms of layout, composition, and decoration, the document follows the model of Persian marriage contracts of the Iranian Qajar period. The use of the Persian language and *Nasta'liq* script testifies to the deep cultural, linguistic, and artistic ties between Iran and India. This beautiful illuminated scroll records the names of 13 people, including the Emperor, the Queen, their ancestral lineage, the official performer of the *nikāh*, and two official witnesses. Detailed documentation of the amount of the bride's dowry, as well as a clear statement that a third of the amount was already settled by the time of *nikāh* and that the Emperor had committed to pay the remaining two third during their married life, reveals a strictly financial aspect of the marriage. The contract also bears seal impressions of seven dignitaries, most of whom were members of the royal family. They attended and witnessed the ceremony and, by putting their seals on the contract, gave additional credibility to the marriage.

AL-SHAJARA

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