

# MASTERPIECES

AT THE JAIPUR COURT

*edited by*

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NIYOGI  
BOOKS



MAHARAJA SAWAI MAN SINGH II MUSEUM TRUST

Manuscript of the *Praśnottarāvalī* or  
'Series of Questions and Answers', unidentified scribe

Ink on handmade paper,  
late 17th century or later, 35.4 x 15 x 1.2 cm, P7668

प्रश्ना ३  
१  
ॐ श्रीगणेशाय नमः श्री १०८ महाराजाधिराजराजराजेंद्रवर्षाणां प्रसादार्यम् वावा लालदयान्नोर्यवनाधिपेंद्रशा  
हनकोसुताराशिकोदस्यवप्रयोगात्तगावलीदेववागपातत्यते तत्र प्रश्नाः दाराशिकोदः पृच्छतीत्यर्थः उत्तरं नाम वावा  
लालदयात्तः प्रतिवक्तोत्यर्थः प्रश्नाः नादवेद्योः कोभेदः उत्तरं राजराजशासनयोरिवतयोर्भेदः यथाराजातया  
नादः यथाचराजशासनंतयावेदरति १ प्रश्नाः यवनपहतिमूलकारशास्यश्रीमुहम्मदकलेवरस्यातपादिपुच्छायाना  
विरभूत् यच्चवस्तनगतीतलेस्मितस्यसर्वस्यापिप्रतिच्छायाभवति तत्र कोदित्यर्थतदीयकलेवरस्यच्छायानाभवदि  
ति उत्तरं मुहम्मदकलेवरं श्रीभगवतः परमेश्वरप्रतिविंबरूपमभवत् तैजसप्रतिविंबस्यचतमोरूपाच्छायानयतती  
तिप्रसिद्धमतस्तकलेवरस्यतेजोरूपस्यच्छायानमोरूपानाभवत् तत्र तत्कलेवरेमल्लिकानोपविवेशेतिश्रूयते

चुकिंनिमित्तं नदिदर्पणादिपुनिपत्यभित्पादिप्रतिफलितेसूर्यादिप्रतिवि  
वेमलिकोपविशतितस्तकलेवरस्यतैजस प्रतिविंबरूपत्वात्तत्रमल्लिकानिवेशः २ प्रश्नाः भगवतश्चंद्रमंडलेप्र  
काशः कोटशः श्वेतं च किं नैत्यं च किं मवेत्यते उत्तरं चंद्रमंडलेवस्ततः प्रकाशः श्वेत्यादिबर्णोवानास्तिकेवलं दर्पणा  
दिवत्स्वच्छद्वयमेवास्ति तत्र प्रकाशश्चतसूर्यमंडलतः प्रतिफलित उपलभ्यते नैत्यं च भूमिच्छायाशौक्यं च जलाभासः  
प्रतीयते तत्र सर्वस्मिन्स्वच्छेद्रयेप्रतिविंबोदृश्यते इति नियतं यदिशशिमंडलेभृच्छायादिकं दृश्यते तदारविमंडले  
पितर्किंनदृश्यते श्विमंडलस्यापिस्वच्छतासमानैवेति स्यात्तदशशिमंडलेजलाशयसमंश्विमंडलेचापिजंडसमं प्रति  
विंबश्चनलेदृश्यते नक्षत्राणावितिप्रख्यातमेवजगत्यामिति ३ प्रश्नाः प्रभोयवनैरुच्यते यत्कलमामं वपठनात्त्रयोनिः

The *Praśnottarāvalī* ('Series of Questions and Answers') is a slender Sanskrit account of a dialogue between the Mughal prince Dara Shukoh and Baba Lal Dayal. The undated, striking manuscript was likely penned between the late 17th century and the early 19th century, based on a Persian version of the same conversation. The work's opening indicates that it was written at the pleasure of a king, probably one of Jaipur's rulers. The *Praśnottarāvalī* appears to be unique in the world and is an underappreciated part of Indian intellectual history.

The Mughal prince Dara Shukoh held a series of discussions with Baba Lal, a mystic, in the autumn of 1653 in or near Lahore. The two men spoke to each other in an early modern version of Hindi or Punjabi. As scholars such as Supriya Gandhi and Rajeev Kinra have pointed out, we should understand the Persian narratives of their exchanges, not as documentary records that are true in every detail, but rather as literary memorialisation. The *Praśnottarāvalī* is even further removed from the Mughal context and it arguably tells us more about its production in Jaipur rather than about Dara Shukoh. The Sanskrit text has not been published, and only a few scholars—primarily Christopher Minkowski—have worked on the manuscript to date.

The *Praśnottarāvalī* begins with a traditional homage to Ganesha and then details 29 questions from Dara Shukoh, along with Baba Lal's answers. From the start, the work is about both spiritual and political matters. For instance, Dara's first question is: 'What is the difference between

*nada* (inaudible cosmic vibration) and *veda* (knowledge)?' Baba Lal answers: 'It is similar to the difference between a king and his orders. The king is the *nada*; his orders are the *veda*.' Dara asks further questions about spiritual matters, such as the difference between *atma* and *paramatma*. Dara also asks about Hindu stories, such as the finer points of the *Ramayana*, and about the spread of Islam on the subcontinent. Most of the exchange is also found in Persian versions of the conversations. The *Praśnottarāvalī* shows fluency in basic Islamic religious and cultural knowledge, mentioning Muhammad, the Quran, and Persian books (*parasigrantha*). The text refers to Muslims as *yavana*, an old Sanskrit word for Greeks that was later used to refer to Muslims.

The manuscript of the *Praśnottarāvalī* is lovely. Its opening page contains some gold lettering, and throughout it marks the questions and answers using lavender ink (perhaps faded from what once appeared more reddish). The manuscript is written in a smooth hand. It attests to the circulation of texts and ideas between Rajput and Mughal courts, something also indicated by other works in the Jaipur City Palace collection. For instance, the *pothi khana* (manuscript store) houses several copies of an 18th-century Hindi translation of Abul Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari*. The Palace also contains the master copies of the Persian *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, translated and illustrated for Akbar's court in the late 16th century. The *Praśnottarāvalī* is a little-known gem that deserves to be treasured.

**Audrey Truschke**