

# The Resilient Begums of Bhopal

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Seldom in history do we come across narratives of women's lives, especially tales associated with their quest for power and challenge to the patriarchal set-up. It is more because of this abandonment and obliviousness that stories like that of the enigmatic Begums of Bhopal still surprise and inspire us. Bhopal State, the second largest Muslim state of India (Hyderabad, was the first) during the British Raj, was one amongst more than 500 princely states which enjoyed autonomy in lieu of loyalty towards British Crown. Founded in the early 18th century by an Afghan, Dost Mohammad Khan, Bhopal gained the status of a princely state around March 1818. This was followed by an unprecedented and exceptional turn of events which ultimately brought women to the helm of the power structure in Bhopal. For more than a hundred years, between 1819 and 1926, Bhopal came to be ruled by four progressive and influential women or "Nawab Begums" (as they preferred to call themselves after been granted the male elite appellation "Nawab", by the British). The significance of the successful disposition of power by these women rulers can be gauged from the fact that this was a time when political organizations in India were completely male centric. Qudsia Begum (1819-1837), Sikander Begum (1843-1868), Shah Jahan Begum (1868-1901) and Sultan Jahan Begum (1901-1926) governed the State with remarkable strength, administrative capability and audacity.

Qudsia Begum (1819-1837), the first in the line of these female rulers, took over the reins of the empire upon her husband, the young Nawab Nazar Muhammad Khan's assassination. The rise to power of this woman who was illiterate and had strictly observed purdah from her youth, didn't go unnoticed and was in fact initially opposed by the English East India Company. But Qudsia was not someone to be budged so easily and she soon emerged as a headstrong ruler who ultimately gave up purdah (this action of hers obviously met with astonishment, given the times). She took over the empire at the young age of 18 and justified her rule by quoting Queen Victoria as her inspiration and model. Soon after assuming political supremacy, Qudsia Begum declared that her 15-month old daughter Sikandar will succeed her to the throne. Her declaration, in front of the male members of the royal family, at her husband's post-death ritual, was a powerful challenge to prejudice and patriarchy. She displayed her diplomatic skills in ultimately managing to convince the State Qazi (judge) and Mufti (one who was entitled to give legal opinion), and powerful men in the family, to issue a legal document recognizing women's right to power, thereby becoming the first woman in South Asia to assert the right of Muslim women to rule.

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Throughout her reign, Qudsia Begum was engaged in a constant struggle to prove her mettle as a ruler capable of handling the State in times of political instability and war, to her enemies within the ruling family. Personally, she was a strict adherent of Islam and adopted a very simple lifestyle. She indulged in a lot of public and charitable work, including the construction of Bhopal waterworks and laying of pipelines throughout her State, and issued a number of religious benefactions. She trained in horse-riding and military techniques and is known to have frequently participated in hunting and other martial activities.

Although Sikandar Begum (1847-1868) was declared the successor to the throne, the deal was that she would soon be married, after which her husband would take control over the empire. Qudsia Begum enjoyed the authority of a decision-maker here and wanted to keep the affairs of the State in her control. She went to the extent of issuing a warning to her future son-in-law to always please and obey her. But call it fate or 'veiled opportunity', Sikandar's husband Nawab Jahangir Muhammad Khan Bahadur died after ruling for six years in 1844, and she came to the throne, playing a pivotal role in the First War of Indian Independence (1857-1858). In this battle, she chose to ally with the British (even though most members of the royal family were against it), and it was in lieu of her assistance and claim to be invested as Ruling Chief of the State that the British government declared her a sovereign in her own right and made her the only female knight besides Queen Victoria in the British Empire. Furthermore, her

decision to side with the British during this troublesome time earned the status of a favored and valued loyalist State for Bhopal. Lord Canning credited her entirely for this, in a speech delivered in a durbar held in 1861 he extends his gratitude in the following words, "when the State was beset and threatened by our enemies, you, a woman, guided its affairs with a courage, an ability, and a success that would have done honour to any statesman or soldier."

Destined to be a ruler, Sikandar Begum was trained in martial arts since childhood, and defying gender norms, she also indulged in playing polo, practicing archery and went hunting. She is believed to have inherited the headstrongness of her mother as she decided to leave the Nawab after he disagreed with her giving up of purdah and inflicted a sword wound on her hand. She went to Islamnagar fort and it was here that she gave birth to her daughter Shah Jehan Begum. Apart from being an able ruler and tough army commander, Sikandar Begum believed that there should be progress in culture, education and administration, too, and worked towards women's education and health reforms. She founded the Victoria School where girls were taught basic academic subjects and were also trained in vocations such as handicrafts. Sikander Begum is known to have performed the Haj to Mecca and also maintained a diary to record events during this pilgrimage, which was later translated and published as 'A Pilgrimage to Mecca.'

Shah Jehan Begum (1868-1901) succeeded to the throne after her mother Sikandar Begum's death. The archival evidence suggests that unlike her



predecessors, Shah Jehan Begum was distinctly feminine. She repulsed training in the martial arts and in fact wanted to be a poetess. She was fluent in Arabic and Persian language and had also acquired formal training in handling account and state affairs. Further, her strong inclination towards art and literature transformed the State of Bhopal into a cultural and literary center, with her reign still regarded as a 'Golden Period' in the State's literary and poetic history. Shah Jehan is credited with the composition of several Urdu poems (under the penname Shirin) and also the text 'Tahzib un-Niswan wa Tarbiyat ul-Insan', a reformist manual dedicated to women, containing a range of topics from women's work to their status in Islam. Her competence and capability as a ruler were in no way impacted by the fact that she chose to embrace purdah. She was a strong administrator and contributed towards the improvement of education, health, housing and technology. Following her mother, she took special interest in the propagation of education, spending enormous funds on schools and Madrasa.

Her daughter and successor, Sultan Jahan Begum (1901-1926) is undoubtedly one of the most interesting and audacious female personalities of the 20th century. She ascended the throne at the age of 43, three weeks after her mother's death. From the beginning of her reign, she had to face a lot of difficulties (an empty treasury, instances of maladministration, etc.) but overcoming all obstacles she ultimately managed to establish a successful administration. As a child, Sultan Jahan had been well prepared to assume the role of a ruler. Her grandmother Sikandar

Begum educated her and instilled strict discipline from the very beginning. Her daily timetable included morning exercise, reading of the Quran, practicing writing and learning languages like English, Persian, etc., practicing arithmetic and physical training in the form of horse riding and fencing. Thus, the routine was similar to any male member of the royal household, both physically and academically.

Like her predecessors, Sultan Jahan is acknowledged for her contribution to the field of education and modernization of the Bhopal State. She presided over the All Women's Conference on Educational Reform and was the founder and first Chancellor (and till today the only female Chancellor) of Aligarh Muslim University. She organized several social and educational campaigns for women's emancipation and worked towards the reformation of other sectors too, for example, the police, judiciary, army, taxation, agriculture and health and sanitation.

However, Sultan Jahan's most noteworthy contribution can be seen in the restoration work at Sanchi, an important ancient Buddhist site of ancient India, situated in Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh. Her interest in antiquities can be traced back to 1903 when on her return from a pilgrimage to Mecca, she brought religious relics and organized a ceremonial display of the same at the Moti Masjid. As for Sanchi, it had figured prominently in her public life. Repair efforts at Sanchi started in 1904 under the supervision of H B Cook, whose manner of execution proved extremely destructive. John Marshall, the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India at that time, instead



shifted the blame on Muslim chowkidars, who in his opinion were unable to look after Buddhist monuments and therefore suggested to employ Buddhist chowkidars in their place. The Begum however strongly refuted Marshall's suggestion and felt that by raising alarm in this manner Marshall was questioning her capacity to look after Bhopal's monuments.

Thus, their association started on a 'sour note', but it was to go a long way, as in due course the Begum became Marshall's chief benefactor and his Sanchi volumes are dedicated to her memory. This however remains the classic case of historical neglect till date, as although the Begum provided all necessary financial and logistical support for the restoration work, she is not at all acknowledged for her contribution. The museum at the foot of the Sanchi hill, which was in fact sanctioned by her, contains nothing to remind visitors of her contribution. A photo exhibition organized as late as in 2006 'remembered' a range of people associated with the site, but there was no mention of the Begum's patronage to Sanchi.

Despite such neglects and attempted erasures, the memory of these independentminded and strong-willed Begums of Bhopal, who fought for and inspired thousands of women during and after their lifetime, has survived. All four of them practiced Islam, but their religion and gender never came in the way of their vehement rejection of the constraints imposed by a patriarchal society. We find a lot of instances when they invoked Tradition or interpreted the tenets of their faith according to their suitability and desire. Their long rule was characterized

by benevolence and a pioneering reformist zeal, which brought radical changes in the cultural, educational, and political structure of Bhopal for centuries to come.

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