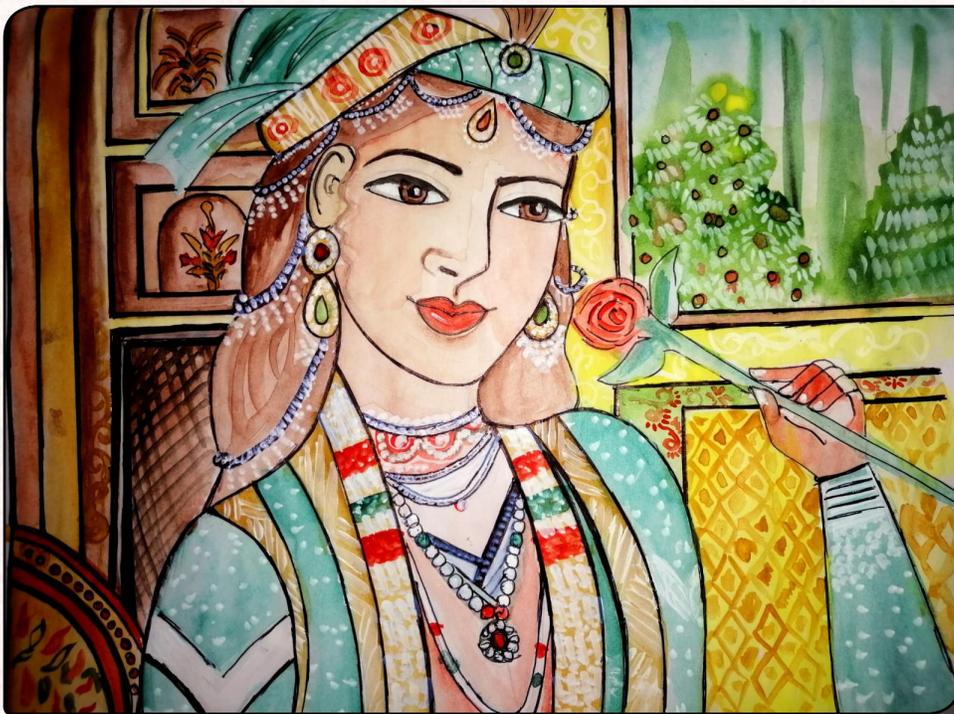


Razia Sultan: The First Female Monarch of Delhi

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‘Sultan Razia was a great sovereign, sagacious, just, beneficent, the patron of the learned, a dispenser of justice, the cherisher of her subjects and of warlike talent, and was endowed with all the admirable attributes and qualifications necessary for kings. She was endowed with all the qualities befitting a king, but she was not born of the right sex and so in the estimation of men all these virtues were worthless.’[1]

These are the well-known words in which a 13th century Persian historian, Minhaj-i-Siraj described Razia Sultan, India’s first Muslim female ruler. Generally portrayed in glowing terms by contemporaries and later writers alike, the life and times of this fifth Mamluk Sultan is nothing short of an adventurous tale. But behind this adventure lies the story of an extremely courageous and ambitious female who ruled Delhi for a short but significant span of four years, from 1236 to 1240 CE, as the Sultan herself (she refused to be called ‘Sultana’, a term generally used for the wife or mistress of a Sultan). In retrospect, Razia’s reign appears as a significant milestone in the staunchly patriarchal society of medieval India, as she managed to subvert the existing power structures at many levels.



Born Raziya-al-Din in 1205 in Badaun, Raziya was the daughter of Shams-ud-din Iltutmish and his favorite wife Terken Khatun. Iltutmish became the Sultan of Delhi in 1210 and proved to be a very competent and efficient ruler. He imparted the best military training and administrative skills to his three sons, as well as daughter Razia. And she herself turned out to be

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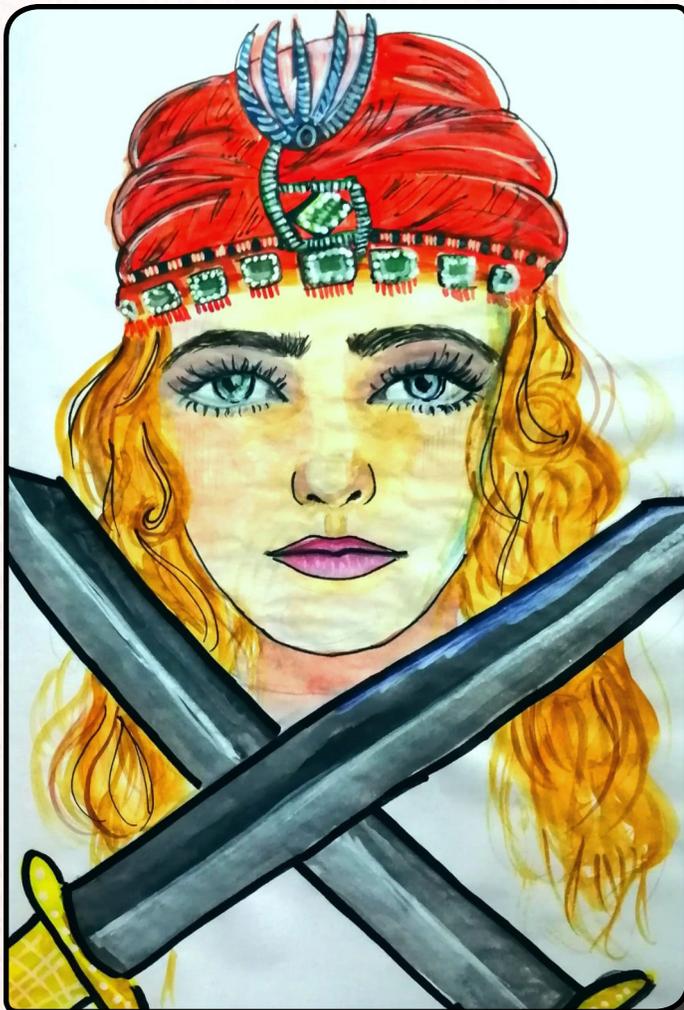
the most sincere and skilled among all his children. Iltutmish realized this quite early and therefore took a historic decision of naming Razia as heir apparent. This was the first time in Indian history that a ruler had chosen a woman to succeed him to the throne. And the fact that it was his 'choice' and not out of any 'political pressure' is even more significant. Minhaj-i-Siraj quotes Iltutmish to have said: 'My sons are devoted to the pleasures of youth, and not one of them is qualified to be king. They are unfit to rule the country, and after my death you will find that there is no one more competent to guide the State than my daughter.'[2]

A brief account of Iltutmish's own tryst with rulership gives a self-explanatory background to this decision of his. Iltutmish himself arrived in Delhi as a slave of the then Sultan Qutb-ud-din Aibak, and it is on account of his immense bravery and proficiency that Qutb-ud-din raised him to the reputed position of a provincial governor. After Qutb-ud-din's death, the Turkish nobility, who were the real decision makers in those times, also recognized his caliber and therefore favored Iltutmish over the Sultan's own son (Aram Baksh) for accession to the throne. Having gained the right to rule on account of his capabilities alone, it is not surprising that Iltutmish too decided to make Razia his heir apparent because she turned out to be the most capable for this position among all his children. Unfortunately, not everybody was ready at that point of time in history to concentrate upon her capabilities alone. Traditionally, succession has always been reserved for males and it was for the first time that a female was nominated to rule. As a result, upon Iltutmish's death on 30 April 1236 CE, the Muslim nobility vehemently opposed Razia's appointment as Sultan. The opposition was solely based on the fact that they thought it inappropriate to accept a woman as their ruler. Razia fought this staunchly patriarchal attitude and proved her mettle in the short span of time that she ruled over Delhi, but before that her half-brother Rukn al-Din Firuz Shah was declared Sultan.

Solely engrossed in enjoying royal privileges and pleasures of the court Rukn al-Din turned out to be a debauch and extremely incapable ruler. Razia then decided to take the reins of control in her hands. She got dressed in red clothes as a plaintiff (Iltutmish instituted a policy whereby anyone seeking justice should wear dyed clothes, in contrast to the commoners who wore white garments) and appeared before the congregation gathered in the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque for Friday prayers. In front of this huge gathering she reminded people of her father's time and his benevolence towards them and appealed for justice. The people trusted her, and she was made Delhi's fifth Sultan, while her brother Rukn al-Din was imprisoned and executed along with his mother Shan Turkan. Making the most of the existing circumstances Razia claimed what was rightfully hers from the start, the authority to rule. Upon ascending the throne, Razia adopted the formal title Jalālat-ud-Dīn Raziya.

Ever since she was a little girl Iltutmish ensured that Razia is imparted training in the art of warfare, horsemanship, diplomacy and administration at par with his sons. His trustworthy and accomplished Abyssinian slaver Malik Yaqut was assigned the responsibility to look after her training. As a result, Razia spent little time in the harem (with women of the household) and therefore never really embraced the customary behavior prescribed for contemporary Muslim women. She actively participated in the affairs of the State, assisting her father on a number of occasions. Having gained a place of authority and veneration Razia made conscious efforts to dissociate herself from being simply a female, as women in those times were not considered deserving of authoritative positions. She wanted people to think of her as a Sultan, a true leader and monarch. She is known to have lifted off the veil (purdah) and chose to display her face in public, much to the resentment of the orthodox elements at court. She also shrugged off feminine clothes and instead wore the robes, tunic, and turban of a man, or as was proper for a Sultan.

As envisioned by Iltutmish, Razia turned out to be a strong and confident ruler. She



was a very brave warrior who led forces from the front in battles and captured new domains, adding to the glory and strength of her kingdom. Legend has it that she openly rode an elephant into battles as chief of her army. And like a strong leader she chose to assert her authority with ease by issuing coins in her name as in those times minting coins was one of the signs of sovereignty and rulership in the Muslim world. In the early years of her reign, the coins carried both her father's name as well as hers, strengthening her legitimacy as Bent-al-Sultan (Daughter of the Sultan). But by 1238 she had these coins minted in her own name, 'Al-Sultan al-Muazzam Radiyyat al-Din.'

Razia also worked towards the welfare of the populace at large by laying the foundations of a number of educational institutions and public libraries. Her

approach throughout was secular, as the curriculum in these institutions was designed in such a manner that they imparted knowledge in traditional works in the field of science and literature from several other cultures.

However, her appointment of Malik Yaqut as Amir-e-Akhur (commander of the horses) was taken as an insult by the Turkish nobles as it was a very important position in those times, generally reserved for Turkish nobility.

Popular culture is filled with stories of romance between Razia and Malik Yaqut, with all movies and television serials presenting it as the fundamental aspect around which her entire life revolved. Interestingly, contemporary historian Minhaj-i-Siraj doesn't mention any such romantic link between Razia and Malik Yaqut in his works. It is a few decades later that Ibn Battuta (1304-1368) states that there were suspicions of romance between them. Apart from this we do not come across any other historical details on the issue in works composed during that time.

There is a high possibility that Razia's trust in Yaqut has been misconstrued and sensationalized over generations. The fact that she was an independent woman with a mind of her own may have been the reason behind this exaggeration. After all, brave and ambitious women are often seen with suspicion as people find it difficult to believe that they are capable enough to assert authority on their own, instead of relying on a man's support. Razia generally followed her father's policy of distributing power among loyal personages so as to dissociate people from establishing powerful local ties. Her elevation of Malik Yaqut could well have been a part of this policy of hers. However, the Turkish nobles created a great fuss about Malik Yaqut's elevation and caught the opportunity to bring her down as being governed by a woman had been a matter of embarrassment for them throughout.

Malik Altunia, the governor of Bhatinda, was the first to rise in revolt against Razia. When she went out to battle against him other Turkish nobles revolted. They killed Malik Yaqut, while Razia was captured and imprisoned. Without further ado the rebel nobles raised her brother Bahram Shah to the throne in April 1240 CE. Meanwhile, Razia is said to have won over her captor Altunia, who proposed marriage to her, and she accepted the offer. They then marched together to recapture Razia's lost throne and attacked Bahram Shah in September 1240, but their army was defeated and Razia was killed at the young age of 35.

Controversy surrounded Razia even after death with some arguing that her tomb is in Kaithal (modern-day Haryana) while others suggesting instead that it is located in the narrow lanes of Old Delhi near Turkman Gate. The second view is widely acceptable now. Razia died as she had lived most of her life, fighting to regain her legacy and right.

Being the first woman monarch of Delhi, Razia still enjoys enormous fame in popular culture. Many books have been written on her life and times and she has also been the subject of several Bollywood movies and television series over the years. But very few of these works actually offer a holistic account of the brave and ambitious woman that she was. A female who even though living in a staunchly patriarchal set-up managed to carve out a space for herself, who followed her heart and did not care what people would think, one who did not need the support of a father, husband or son to rule, who strove to improve not just her own condition but of every female living in her dominion by setting a strong example. She did not silently confirm to the established norms but challenged them at every point and therefore it will be grave injustice in my opinion to reduce the memory of such a remarkable woman into a sensational love affair. As a woman and as a ruler, Razia Sultan is and will always remain an inspiration for the coming generations of males and females alike. After all, while compiling the long list of rulers in Iltutmish's dynasty, Razia is the only one whom Minhaj-i-Siraj credited as a Lashgarkash, a war-leader.[3]

Notes and References

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