

MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE SUB-CONTINENT

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Abstract

The political history of the sub-continent in the medieval age is mainly the history of struggle between male heirs to the throne or between two different dynasties. The participation of women in the struggle for power is very rare. But in every struggle between two male heirs or two dynasties, women have seen actively supporting the cause of their sons, husbands etc. They have been even seen actively participating in administration on behalf of their husbands and sons. Their involvement produced both—positive and negative impact on the politics of the era. This research paper focuses on the role of Muslim women in the power struggle, their impact on the administration, their contribution towards the strength of empire and efforts to keep homeland free of foreign domination.

Key Words: Power Struggle, Regent, Status of Women, Sub-continent, Political Participation

Introduction

Generally it is believed that patriarchy has been the integral part of the culture and society of the Indian Sub-Continent and women were forced to confine to the traditional role of household and housekeeping. But looking at the history it is evident that at different times and different places women played a greater role and commanded great respect (Vardhan, 2014). When the Muslims came to Sub-Continent, they brought with themselves different laws of inheritance, divorce etc. In spite of that difference in laws Hindu and Muslims both give a distinct

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preference to male over female. The functions and the position of a woman were distinctly subordinate and in the long run came to be understood as the service provider to make and depend upon him in every stage of life. With the Delhi Sultanate, the Muslim rule began in India. Under Delhi Sultanate five Muslim dynasties ruled over large parts of India. Although the women in that era had a subordinate role in the society, still there are instances of women actively participating in the affairs of the empire (Hassan, 2009). After Delhi Sultanate, Mughals ruled the sub-continent and here too women were seen very active on political front. Along with Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire a number of independent states also witnessed women active in political struggle. History shows that Indian women played significant role in the struggle for power between different dynasties and rulers before the arrival of British rule and after the arrival of British they played active role in the freedom struggle as well. Sometimes these were women who actually run the affairs of the empires on behalf of their minor sons or other heirs to the throne. At other times even in the presence of a mature ruler, they would skilfully administer different affairs on part of their husbands and fathers. They were even seen as the actual rulers of the empires in the sub-continent.

The following pages describe the Muslim women who came to forefront in political activities in the sub-continent.

Delhi Sultanate³

The social status of women in Sultanate period was low in both communities of Hindu and Muslims. They were considered to be the property of men. Females from the nobility have to observe *Purdah* (veil) and mostly have to stay at home and do not go outside home frequently. During Taghluq dynasty one ruler

³ Delhi Sultanate was an Islamic empire based in Delhi and ruled by five different dynasties for 350 years.

prohibited women from visiting the shrines for it was opined that if they will go outside they will indulge themselves in immoral activities. Polygamy was in practice and rulers and nobles married many women at a time and kept slave girls as well. Although women were not treated very well they were considered as honour of the men (Hassan, 2009). Women from lower background had no freedom and were suppressed. Peasant women had to work at home as well as in the fields. Their life was very hard and without love and respect. But women from nobility had some privileges as well. They had the chance of getting education at home and have some freedom (Altekar, 2009). There have been women who got the opportunity to play important roles in politics and the administration. The personality, political situation, family connections and the character of the ruler greatly influenced the position of women in politics at that time. The women of that time played a significant influence as a mother, wife or sister of the ruler having great influence in the questions of succession. Sometime with their intelligence, skills of diplomacy and administration they strengthened the Sultanate, but on other occasions the self-seeking nature, intrigues and ambitions for political power created problems for the sultanate.

Shah Turkan

Though the existing structure and the ruling elite at that time did not encourage women to participate in politics, but the influence which the institution of *harem*⁴ enjoyed provided opportunity to the women to influence political decision. One such lady was Khudavand-i-Jahan Shah Turkan. She was the Chief Queen of Altutmish. As she was the in charge of Harem, she had considerable influence in the administration of harem.

⁴ The part of house allotted to women. The sultan used to keep his wives, concubines and other female relatives there.

She patronized men of letters, Ulema and pious men. Through this she was successful in getting the support of a section of nobility in the court of the King (Chatterjee, 1998). It is said that when Sultan Iltutmish wanted to declare Razia, Daughter of Iltutmish, as the heir to the throne instead of his son Feroz ul Mulk, the nobility opposed this move on the behest of Shah Turkan who was an intriguer and had won the support of many nobles in the court. After the death of Iltutmish Shah Turkan with the help of nobility who were opposed to the succession of the Razia, get her son crowned as Ruknuddin Feroz Shah. He indulged himself in the life of pleasure and luxury and the powers went into the hands of Shah Turkan who administered the Sultanate in the name of her son. She started to take revenge from her opponents and tried to secure the throne for her son by any mean. When a young prince Qutubuddin was blinded and later on put to death, rebellions broke out in different parts of the sultanate. In this situation Ruknuddin lost the throne and was imprisoned and later on put to death. Shah Turkan was also imprisoned (Chatterjee, 1998).

Razia Sultana

The most prominent lady shined on the political horizons of that time was Razia Sultana—the daughter of Iltutmish. Her father gave equal opportunities to his male and female offspring to flourish. Once when his father left for an expedition, he entrusted Razia with the responsibility of the administration of the Sultanate. On his return Iltutmish wanted to issue A *farman* (order of the ruler) to declare Razia as the heir to the throne but due to the opposition of the nobles this *farman* was not executed. They objected over the surpassing of a grownup male heir to the throne (Chatterjee, 1998). Later on Ruknudin Feroz Shah sat on throne after the death of Iltutmish. When the activities of Feroz Shah and his mother Shah Turkan incited the nobles to rebel against him, Razia also took advantage of the situation and

asked the people of Delhi to capture Shah Turkan. Thus the common people of Delhi, who were neither from nobility nor from the army sided with Razia (Chatterjee, 1998). This shows the first glimpses of democracy in the sub-continent, that common people arose in favour of a Sultan.

Malika-i-Jahan

When Alauddin Khilji murdered his uncle Jalaluddin Khilji and seized the throne, he had to face the rebellion of Malika-i-Jahan—the wife of Jalaluddin Khilji. She tried to secure the throne for her son Rukh-nuddin Ibrahim Shah (Raman, 2009). Before this as wife of Jalaluddin Khilji, she wielded great influence. He will consult her in important political decision. She played an important role in straining the relations between Jalaluddin and Allauddin. She convinced Sultan to believe that Allauddin wanted an independent state for himself. This created rifts between Allauddin and Jalaluddin. Upon the death of Jalaluddin, she supported her younger son Qadr Khan for the throne ignoring the claims of elder son Arkali Khan and enthroned Qadr Khan with the title Ruknuddin Ibrahim Shah. Her move caused dissatisfaction among nobles, who liked to have a mature on the throne. She concentrated all powers in her hands and practically ruled in place of her son. She tried to win over the nobles through the grant of important offices and lands but to no avail. The nobles in this situation extended their support to Allauddin. In this situation she asked for help from Arkali Khan, but he did not pay any heed. In this situation Allauddin marched towards Delhi and secured the throne for himself (Farishta, 2008).

Makhdama-i-Jahan

Makhduma-i-Jahan was the wife of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Tughluq and the mother of Sultan Mohammad-bin-Tughluq. She enjoyed great influence in the political affairs of the empire.

During the absence of the emperor, she had to receive envoys and royal guests. She received Ibn Batuttah in the absence of emperor and had a very lavish banquet for him. She received gifts and presents from the guests and distributed them to others with an open heart. A separate department was organized which kept an account of her gifts and grants. She was famous for the charity. She maintained several hotels type places for the comfort of the travellers (Farishta, 2008). Several families survived only on her charity.

Khudavand Zadai

Khudavand Zadai was the sister of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq. After the death of Muhammad bin Tughluq, she put claim to the throne for his son Dawar Malik against Firuz Shah Tughluq. The nobles opposed the claim Dawar Malik and tried to convince her that at the moment a competent and mature person can save the sultanate from disintegration and Dawar Malik did not suit this situation. But she pressed for her son succession. At last she withdrew the agitation on the insistence of nobility but never gave up the idea of enthroning his son. Firuz Shah tried to have cordial relations with his aunt (Farishta, 2008). But as she never left the idea of enthroning his son, she planned to murder Firuz Shah. The plan failed and Firuz Shah survived. In spite of all this she was treated by Firuz Shah very well (Afif, 1938).

Shams Khatun

Shams Khatun was the wife of Sultan Bahlol Lodhi. She wielded great political power during her husband reign. During the struggle between Sharqi Kingdom and Lodhis of Delhi, her brother Qutab Khan was taken as captive by the Sharqis. When Sultan Bahlol Lodhi sought a treaty with Sharqis and was on the way back to Delhi, she wrote to him not to sought any peace treaty until her brother has been freed. This provoked Sultan to

march towards Jaunpur once again. Thus she became the cause of renewed conflict between Delhi and Jaunpur (Iftikhar, 2016).

Bibi Ambha

Another wife of Sultan Bahlol Lodhi, the daughter of a Hindu Goldsmith, also played a very significant political role during the Lodhi period. After the death of Sultan Bahlol Lodhi she pressed for the right of her son Nizam Khan for the throne. Isa Khan, son of Tetar Khan, rebuked over her connections with the Hindu Goldsmith. This infuriated the nobles and they supported Nizam Khan who succeeded his father with the title Sultan Sikandar Lodhi (Sharma, 2016).

Women of Political Influence in other states contemporary to Delhi Sultanate

Apart from Delhi Sultanat there was large number of independent states in different parts of the sub-continent. These states also witnesses powerful women influencing the politics of the states.

Bibi Raji

Bibi Raji played a noteworthy part in the politics of the Sharqi kingdom⁵. She belonged to the Sayyid dynasty and married to the crown prince of Sharqi dynasty. She wielded great political power not only during her husband but after his death as well. She assumed all administrative powers in her hands during the rule of her son, Sultan Hussain Shah Sharqi, and was much concerned about the welfare and wellbeing of the people. The overthrow of Sayyids by Lodhis was felt by her and she compelled her husband to avenge the defeat by acquiring the throne of her ancestors. For this she compelled his husband to

⁵Sharqi Kingdom was founded by Malik Sarwar in Jaunpur in 1399 after the death of Firuz Shah Taghluq.

undertake expedition against the Lodhis. On her insistence Sultan Mahmud Sharqi marched towards Lodhis and defeated them. Later on peace treaty was concluded between them.

After the death of her husband Sultan Muhammad Sharqi, She with the help of nobles enthroned his son Bhi Khan under the title of Muhammad Shah Sharqi. Later on she realized his mistake because the new sultan had no respect either for his mother or other relatives. He killed one of his brother and planned to get rid of all others. Thus Bibi Raji changed his behaviour towards his son and with the help of some nobles murdered Muhammad Shah Sharqi and elevated another son Hussain Shah Sharqi to the throne. Hussain Shah had great respect for his mother and took her wise advice in every matter (Nizami, 1997).

Bibi Khunza

Bibi Khunza was the wife of Sultan Hussain Shah Sharqi. She belonged to the Sayed Dynasty and was the daughter of the last Sayed ruler Sultan Allauddin Alam Shah. She was an ambitious and intriguing women. She persuaded her husband to march on Delhi against Sultan Bahlol Lodhi, as she consider it her right being the descendant of Sayed dynasty to capture the throne of Delhi. She threatened her husband that in case he is unable to march towards Delhi, she would herself lead the army. Sultan Hussain Shah was reluctant but on her persuasion he undertook the campaign. This campaign resulted in disaster for the Sharqi Kingdom and a large booty fell into the hands of Lodhis (Sharma, 2016).

Chand Bibi

Chand Bibi was the daughter of Hussain Nizam Shah of Ahmednagar and married to Ali Adil Shah of Bijapur. She had great intellectual and administrative skills and her husband used

to take her advice in administrative matters. After the death of her husband his minor nephew, Ibrahim Adil Shah, succeeded the throne and she became her regent. At this time she was the real ruler of the Kingdom. This made the nobles jealous of her and she was imprisoned. Later on they realized their folly and were set free. She was restored to her former position. This time to counter the influence of Deccani nobles she appointed an Abyssynian as minister. Due to the rivalry of Deccani and Abyssynian nobles the situation at Bijapur and Ahmadnagar deteriorated. In this situation Ibrahim Adil Shah was killed and a young prince Ahmed Shah was put on the throne. One of the Amir then invited Mughal prince Murad for help against Chand Bibi but later on realized his folly and entered into alliance with Chand Bibi against the Mughals. She very bravely repulsed the siege of Mughal prince Murad, who was impressed by the bravery of Chand Bibi. Later on she faced Mughals several times and kept them at bay until her death (Srivastau, 2003).

Women of Power during the Mughal period

The Mughal dynasty have seen many women played active role in politics and remained in power behind the actual ruler to influence political decision throughout its rule.

Nur Jahan

Nur Jahan real name was Mehrunisa Begum. She was the chief queen of Mughal emperor Jahangir. She was the defacto ruler of India during Jahangir reign. Taking advantage of her position she elevated her father and brother to important position in the Mughal court. She favoured women property holders and gave generous dowries to orphan girls upon their marriage. Her influence on the state policies appears from the fact that her name appeared with Jahangir's on gold coins. Due to her influence on Jahangir, she manipulated her husband and was the cause of quarrel among his sons for the throne. She is considered to be

behind the rebellion on of prince Khurram against his father as she poisoned his ears against his son. She married Ladli begum from her first husband to Shahriyar, the fourth prince and son of Jahangir, and supported his succession to the throne after the death of Jahangir in order to remain in power even after the death of Jahangir (Raman, 2009).

Jahan Ara Begum

Jahan Ara begum was the elder daughter of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. During the war of succession among the sons of Shah Jahan, She sided with Dara Shikoh and tried her best to dissuade Aurangzeb from defying her father and ousting Dara from his rightful place of throne. But in this struggle when Aurangzeb succeeded in getting the throne, she completely cut off herself from the court (Srivastau, 2003).

Roshan Ara Begum

During the war of succession, Aurangzeb's claim to the throne was supported by Roshanara Begam. She was the daughter of Shah Jahan and sister of Aurangzeb and acted as the spy of Aurangzeb in court. Roshanara's letters informed him of their father's distrust and kept Aurangzeb well-informed of the latest political plans to enable him to seize power (Raman, 2009).

Zaibunnissa

Zaibunnisa was the talented daughter of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. She was a scholar and contributed to Urdu and Persian literature. Her life was changed due to a succession struggle in the Rajput state of Marwar. When Marwar resisted against the subjugation of Aurangzeb, he sent prince Akbar to subdue Marwar. Prince Akbar was greatly attached to his sister Zaibunnisa. The Rajputs of Marwar convinced Prince Akbar of their support if he rebelled against his father's conservative rule. Prince Akbar corresponded frequently with Zebunnissa and she

supported his rebellion. Prince Akbar crowned himself emperor in 1681 with the help of the Rajputs. However, later on his forces surrendered and he fled to Persia. As Akbar's rebellion failed, Zaibunnissa was imprisoned for helping the prince in rebellion and she died in prison in 1702 (Raman, 2009).

***Begums*⁶ of Bhopal**

Due to the absence of male heir to the throne, Qudsiya Begum, (1819-44), Sikandar Begum (1819-1868) Shah Jahan Begum (1838-1910) and Sultan Jahan Begum (1858-1930) ruled Bhopal as Begums of Bhopal. When Nawab Nazar Mohammad Khan, husband of Qudsiya Begum died, she became regent for her daughter Sikandar Jahan. When Sikandar Jahan sat on the throne, her mother continued to guide and counsel her daughter. Her aim was to show and prove that woman could rule as efficiently and competently as a man. She abandoned the veil, learned to ride the horse. She also led her forces during wars. She did not have good relations with the British. She knew the importance of maintaining good relations with them, but she also resented their meddling in her government. For over three quarters of a century, Bhopal had been ruled by Muslim women (Abidi, 2013).

Begum Hazrat Mahal

She was also known as Begum of Awadh, the wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow. During the War of Independence, she led an army against the East India Company. She was a strategist and brave fighter. She fought in close association with other leaders of the War of Independence. Initially she was able to seize the control of Lucknow but later on when British captured Lucknow and the whole of Awadh, she took asylum in Nepal (Abidi, 2013).

⁶ Begum is a female royal and aristocratic title in central and south Asia.

Conclusion

History shows that sub-continent has been ruled mostly by male rulers. Women were kept aloof from power and male heir was considered to be the sole rightful successor to the throne. But in spite of the norms and popular traditions of the time, women were able to leave their mark on the history of the sub-continent. They had acted as advisors to their husband and sons and fully participated in the administration of the empire. As regent of the minor sons and grandsons, they had full control over the affairs of the country. They also had fought and led battles to save the country from foreigners thus proving their capabilities of general ship. They even were able to be crowned as the ruler of the empire at one time but the general attitude of the society towards a female ruler did not allow it to continue in this role. It could be concluded that in medieval era the women indirectly participated in politics but their role was significant and commendable.

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