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## INDIAN MUSLIM WOMEN AND POLITICS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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**Abstract:** Eighteenth century in Indian history is considered by imperialist historians as ‘dark age’ in all spheres of life. But revisionist historians consider this century as a ‘phase of transition’ and decentralization. This paper is an attempt to explore that women’s position and participation in public life was continued as earlier. During this century kings and noble’s wives, mothers and sisters played important role in politics. They participated in party politics, war, succession issues and important decision makings. In this way they set the pattern of life and moral value for the women in general.

**Key Word:** *Khilat*, Begum, Malika-i-Zamani, Udham Bai, King Makers, Qudsia Begum, Turani, Irani, *mansabdars*, *farmans*.

In the eighteenth century the Queens and princesses set the standard of political life and determined the moral values of the gentry and the common people alike. They set new trends for the development and empowerment of women by participating in politics, rule over the capital and provinces as a defacto ruler and imparting good ideas in different arena of administration and politics.

At the central and provincial government women played an important role in politics during the eighteenth century. They were the key force behind the succession of the kings at the centre and *subadar* in the provinces alike. They were also instrumental in the annihilation and liquidation of important opposition group. The famous lady **Fakhr-un-Nisa Begam (d.1733)** alias **Qudsia Begam**<sup>1</sup> mother of Mohammad Shah (1719-1748) played important role in the succession of Mohammad Shah and liquidation of famous two brother syed brothers (Abdullah khan and Hussain Ali Khan) known as

<sup>1</sup>.Widow of deceased ruler generally adopted the title of Qudsia Begam.

'king maker'. Syed Brothers after the assassination of Farrukhsiyar for the first time in the Mughal history became omnipotent in the empire. They put on the throne two weak and sick rulers Rafi-ud-Drajat and Rafi-ud-Daula for few months. After that they planned to put some other prince on the throne, and their choice fell on Prince Roshan Akhtar future Mohammad Shah, son of Jahan Shah, the grandson of Bahadur Shah I. He was living in semi-confinement with his mother at the royal palace at Delhi after the death of his father Jahan Shah in 1712.<sup>2</sup> His mother welcomes the offer and allowed her son to move for Fatehpur Sikri where he was ascended on the throne on 28 Sep. 1719, with the title of 'Abul Fath Nasir-ud-Din Mohammad Shah Badshah Ghazi,<sup>3</sup> at the age of eighteen years.<sup>4</sup> During this period theoretically king had enjoyed absolute power but in practice he was merely a puppet, and did not enjoy even the semblance of authority. The real power was in the hands of Syed Brothers, Who appoint and dismiss all public officials and to take decision about the state policies.<sup>5</sup> Their total domination over imperial government had reduced the King to a state of complete helplessness. Thus the king and his mother Qudsia Begam decided to free from the control of syed brothers. The grim deed provoked a strong and spontaneous reaction among nobles and even amongst general public throughout the empire. The king's mother decided to get help from *Turani* and Indian group of nobles as they were opponent of syed brothers. Qudsia Begam decided to visit the royal camp near Fatehpur Sikri to express the feeling of dissatisfaction. She set her eyes on Muhammad Amin Khan, the influential noble of Turani group who used to believe that ability to rule was a hereditary talent possessed only by the Mughals. The Mughal nobles and *mansabdars* had been marginalized from power and were living now in obscurity and distress. He was further convinced that their exclusion, (Turani group) from the power had undermined the distress of the Mughal dynasty,<sup>6</sup> and therefore he determined to end this state of affairs.<sup>7</sup> He persuades Mohammad Shah and his mother to take Nizam-ul-Mulk into confidence and enlist his

<sup>2</sup>Mohammad Ali Khan, *Mirat-i- Ahmadi*, Vol.II, P. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Mohammad Ali Khan, *Tarikh-i-Muzaffari*, P.186.

<sup>4</sup> Shahnawaz Khan, *Mirat-i-Aftab Nama*, P.488.

<sup>5</sup> Khafi Khan, *Muntakhab-ul-Lubab*, vol.II, p. 842.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 905.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 906.

support. Accordingly, the Qudsia Begam opened a correspondence with Nizam-ul-Mulk and explained him in a series of letters the purpose of their plans against the Syeds and also informed him about a scheme being prepared by the Syeds for the complete ruin of the *Turani* group. In one of the letters Nizam-ul-Mulk was urged to emancipate Mohammad Shah from the bondage of the Syeds. He was also assured that the Emperor and his mother had full confidence in him and regarded him as the defender of the royal house. In other letter the Emperor expressed the hope that Nizam-ul-Mulk would follow the tradition of his ancestors and would not fail in liquidating the hegemony of the Syeds. Nizam held a council to consult his relatives and followers to find out ways. Thus with the help of two great veteran of *turani* leader the emperor and his mother planned to liquidate the hegemony of syed brothers. The Syed brother had suspected that Mohammad Amin Khan had secretly instigating Nizam and passing him all information and they considered him at the root cause of all the troubles. Mohammad Amin Khan was determined to strike a blow against Husain Ali Khan.<sup>8</sup> He was of the opinion that if Husain Ali Khan could be done away the whole problem would be solved. He therefore secretly hatched a plot against the life of Husain Ali Khan. Mohammad Amin Khan planned to exploit the situation and took into confidence some Mughal nobles of influence like Haider Quli Khan, Sadat Khan, Abdul Ghafoor and Mir Jumla etc.<sup>9</sup> Mohammad Amin khan was also in regular communication with the emperor's mother Qudsia Begum through Sadr-un-Nisa. Mohammad Amin Khan secured the services of Haider Beg *Kashgari* to do the deed and was promised rich rewards, if he survived and financial support to his family in case he got killed.<sup>10</sup>

On 20<sup>th</sup> September 1720 While Husain Ali Khan was returning to his tent meanwhile he was approached by Haider Beg who presented him a written petition of complaints against Mohammad Amin Khan. While Husain Ali engrossed in reading it, Haider Beg drew a dagger, plunged it into his body and killed him. After that Mohammad Shah showed some reluctance and wanted to avoid facing the skirmish. His mother, too, who initially supported the plan, was become afraid for his

<sup>8</sup> Mohammad Qasim, *Ahwal-ul-Khawaqin*, f. 175a.

<sup>9</sup> Khafi Khan, *Muntakhab-ul-Lubab*, p. 903,905

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

personnel safety. But the *Turani* group subdued the rebels and the task was over. But the fall of the Syeds was not yet completed as Abdullah Khan having raised prince Ibrahim to the throne and marched with a large army to Agra.<sup>11</sup> In this dangerous crisis Mohammad Shah and his mother turned to the support of loyal and friendly elements in the empire for military assistance. The Emperor issued *farman* to Nizam-ul-Mulk, Girdhar Bahadur, Abdul Samad Khan and Raja Jai Singh to rally round the emperor against Abdullah Khan.<sup>12</sup> The response of the governors to Mohammad Shah's contained profession of loyalty, on one or the other pretext they kept away the imperial orders. But Jai Singh sent a force of 3000 to 4000 horseman under his *diwan* Jag Ram.<sup>13</sup> The bangash nawab Mohammad Khan Bangash came to help with the 2000/3000 troops and Aziz Khan Bahadur with other Afghan chiefs. Also some petty official like Sher Afghan Khan Panipati, Byazid Khan Mewati and Kheme Jat, one of Churaman's officers also joined imperialist forces.<sup>14</sup> On November 13, 1720 both armies came face to face at Hasanpur. A pitched battle was fought in which Abdullah Khan was defeated and taken as prisoner by imperial forces.<sup>15</sup> Later he was poisoned to death on the orders of Mohammad Shah under the pressure of Mughal nobles on October 11 1720. Thus with the help of *turani* leader Qudsia Begam ended the hegemony and *wizarat* of the king maker Syed brothers.

In 1722 opposition group playing double game between Mohammad Shah and the *Wazir* Nizam-ul-Mulk, they spread the rumor that Nizam was busy in schemes to set aside Mohammad Shah and place another prince Ibrahim on the throne, and on the other hand they approached the *Wazir* and suggested him that prince Ibrahim would be better than Mohammad Shah as a king. This game created ill will between the two and resulted in estrange relation between Mohammad Shah and his *Wazir*. Again suspicion and intrigue rift at the court, Nizam ceased to attend the court.<sup>16</sup> Qudsia Begam a wise and capable lady successfully patched up differences between emperor Mohammad Shah and wazir Nizam-ul-Mulk.

<sup>11</sup> Hadi Kamwar, *Tazkirat-us-Salatin-i-Chaghtai*, f. 374

<sup>12</sup> Khafi Khan, *Muntakhab-ul-Lubab*, vol. II, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Satish Chandra, 'Raja jai Singh Sawai and his contribution to imperial politics, *PIHC*, 1948, p. 187-88

<sup>14</sup> Khafi Khan, *Muntakhab-ul-Lubab*, vol. II, p. 900-920.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 921-34.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 946.

**Badshah Begam** (c. 1703 – 1789) was an empress consort of the Mughal Empire from 1721- 1748 as the first wife and chief consort of the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah.<sup>17</sup> She is popularly known by her title **Malika-uz-Zamani** ("Queen of the Age") which was conferred upon her by her husband, immediately after their marriage in 1721.<sup>18</sup> In April 1748, Muhammad Shah died, Badshah Begum, concealing the news of his death, sent message to her step-son Ahmad, who was in camp with Safdar Jang near panipat to return to Delhi and claim the throne. On Safdar Jang's advice, he was enthroned at Panipat and returned to Delhi a few days later.<sup>19</sup> Badshah Begum was greatly respected by the court and the people as even after the Emperor's death.<sup>20</sup> The grandson of Najib Khan, Ghulam Qadir, with his Sikh allies forced Shah Alam II to appoint him as the Grand wazir of the Mughal Empire. During the Afghan occupation of Delhi, which lasted for two months and a half from 18 July to 2 October 1788, hell was let loose on Shah Alam II and the imperial family. He was deposed on 30 July 1788 and he himself blinded Shah Alam II on 10 August 1788 and behaved with gross brutality to the emperor and his family.<sup>21</sup> Ghulam Qadir took out Prince Bidar Bakht, son of Ahmad Shah, the ex-emperor from the imperial prison and made him the new puppet emperor with the title of Jahan Shah. He is said to have received 12 lakhs of rupees from Badshah Begum to wreak her vengeance against Shah Alam II, whose father Alamgeer II had secured the throne by deposing and blinding Ahmad Shah.<sup>22</sup>

**Qudsia Begum** (d. 1765), was a wife of Mughal Emperor Mohammad Shah and mother of emperor Ahmad Shah. She was an administrator and served as de facto regent of India from 1748 to 1754. She may have been born of Hindu origin with her initial name being *Udham Bai*.<sup>23</sup> She was first introduced to the Imperial Court as a dancer/entertainer and used this position to gain favor among its members. The emperor Muhammad Shah eventually grew fond of her and took her as his third wife. She was later appointed as a *mansabdar*, a high ranking position in the Emperor's army that was used to enforce his rule and maintain his authority, especially during his absence.

After Muhammad Shah's death in 1748, her son Ahmad Shah (1725–1775) became emperor. As a widow, she took the title *Qudsia Begam*. Ahmad Shah Bahadur proved to be an ineffective ruler and was strongly influenced by his mother. A series of defeats and internal struggles led to his downfall. It was rumored that

<sup>17</sup> . Sarkar, Jadunath (1997). *Fall of the Mughal Empire* (4th ed.). Hyderabad: Orient Longman. p. 169.

<sup>18</sup> . Malik, Zahir Uddin (1977). *The reign of Muhammad Shah, 1719-1748*. London: Asia Pub. House. p. 407.

<sup>19</sup> Edwards, Michael (1960). *The Orchid House: Splendours and Miseries of Oudh, 1827-1857*, Cassell. p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> . Latif, Bilkees I. (2010). *Forgotten*, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> . Misbah Islam ( 2008). *Decline of Muslim states and societies*, p. 392.

<sup>22</sup> . Mehta, J. L. (2005). *Advanced study in the history of modern India, 1707-1813*, p. 595.

<sup>23</sup> . Latif, Bilkees I. (2010). *Forgotten* , , p. 50.

she had an affair with the Bahadur Javid Khan, who was the superintendent of the *harem*.<sup>24</sup> Javid Khan was later assassinated. When the Nawab Imadul Mulk reached Delhi in 1754, the emperor and his mother were arrested and imprisoned.

In the provinces women too played important role in the politics among them the most important was Mughalani Begam also known as Murad Begam the daughter of Itimad-ud-Daula Qamruddin Khan, and the wife of Muinul Mulk, the governor of Punjab (1748-53), was a noted women politician of those days. In November 1753, Mir Muinul Mulk was killed in a horse accident and his infant son Mir Momin was appointed the Governor of Punjab by the Mughal Emperor Ahamad Shah. Mughlani Begum became regent to the infant Governor and garnered all the powers in her hands. But within a short time her infant son died. Hence she got her son-in-law Khawaja Musa Ansari appointed as the deputy. When she came to know that Bhikari Khan Rustam Jang, who conducted the affairs of the state, was conspiring to get the governorship in his own name from Ahmad Shah Abdali, she called him to palace and got him imprisoned. She countered successfully several political moves with the help of local officials but in the end she herself was imprisoned by Imad-ud-Mulk with whom she betrothed her daughter on political ground.<sup>25</sup> She was in close relation with Ahmad Shah Abdali and invited him to invade India to get her father's treasure buried at palace. On this invitation Ahmad Shah Abdali invaded India and it was owing to her recommendation that Imad-ul-Mulk escaped.<sup>26</sup>

In the court of Murshidabad, the harem ladies of the Nawab were not averse to playing important political role. Nafisa Begam sister of Sarfaraz Khan, who had adopted her nephew Aqa Baba Kuchak as her son and she entered into the service as a governess in the house of Nawazish Ahmad Khan Shahmat Jang,<sup>27</sup> the eldest son of Haji Ahmad and used her influence to support her nephew's cause.<sup>28</sup> Mehr-un-Nisa Begam better known as Ghasiti Begam (d.1760) the widow of Nawazish Ahmad Khan Shahamat

<sup>24</sup> . Ibid, p.50

<sup>25</sup> . Anonymous, *Tarikh –i-Ahmad Shahi*, ff 105b-110b; Ghulam Ali Azad, *Khazina-i-Amira*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>26</sup> . Ghulam Ali Azad, *Khazina-i-Amira*, p. 53; Siyar, III, p. 898.

<sup>27</sup> Ghulam Hussain Salim, *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, Eng. trs.pp. 292, 354.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pP. 363.



Jang the *naib* Nazim of Dhaka and eldest daughter of Nawab Alivardi Khan, resided at the Moti Jhil, opposed the accession of Siraj-ud-Daula, as *nazim* of Bengal.<sup>29</sup>

But the most striking influence in politics and society exercised by the Muslim ladies in Bengal may be cited, the case of Durdana Begam the wife of Murshid Quli Khan II, the governor of Orissa. Murshid Quli Khan was reluctant to fight against Alivardi Khan due to his sense of feebleness but his wife Durdana Begam encouraged him and inspired him to fight out in order to avenge her brother Sarfraz Khan's death. She declared that in case her husband failed to do so, she would raise her son-in-law, Mir Baqar Ali Khan to the *masnad* of Bengal. It was under these circumstances the Murshid Quli Khan resolved to fight against Alivardi Khan.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, Alivardi Khan's wife occasionally appeared in the battlefield with her husband on the same elephant. It shows that the Muslim ladies also took part in the battle and those them had not all succumbed to system of seclusion. Alivardi's wife played the role of a supreme political officer in Bengal, when her husband in the battle with the Marathas.<sup>31</sup> She encouraged her husband when the later had given way in-despair owing to the treachery of his Afghan general and the death of *Haji Ahmad* and *Zainuddin*.<sup>32</sup>

Holwell praise her "A women whose wisdom magnanimity, benevolence and every amiable quality, reflected high honor on her sex and station; she much influence the usurper's council and was consulted by him in every movement in the state affair. She would oppose as she ever condemned them".<sup>33</sup>

Zebun Nisha, the wife of Nawab Shujauddin, took an active part in the administration. It was she who invested Alivardi Khan with a *khilat* and with the patent for the deputy governorship of Bihar.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ghulam Hussain, *Siyar –ul-Mutakhrin*, vol. II, p. 525; Yusuf Ali Khan, *Tarikh-i-Bangal-i-Mahabat Jangi*, pp. 56-7.

<sup>30</sup> Ghulam Hussain Salim, *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, (Eng.tras.) pp. 327-8 .

<sup>31</sup> . Ibid, P. 329; Mohabbat Khan, *Akhbar-i-Mohabbat*, p. 579. Stewart, *History of Bengal*, p. 511.

<sup>32</sup> Ghulam Hussain, *Siyar-ul-Mutakhrin*, vol.II, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> . Ibid, pp. 170-171.

<sup>34</sup> . Ibid, vol. I, p. 282.

### Conclusion:

Thus during the eighteenth century women particularly Muslim women in India played important role in politics. They participated in succession issues on various occasion and successfully resolve the problems and prove their ability to handle intricate problems. They are participated in war by making strategies and motivate their husband and sons to wage war and follow their plan in the battlefield. Women also played effective role in politics as a governor of provinces such as Mughalani Begam also known as Murad Begam the governor of Punjab (1748-53), was a noted women politician of eighteenth century. Therefore women of ruling families set the pattern of life and inspire women in general to participate in politics and public life.

