

WOMEN AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS DURING THE TIMES OF BABUR AND HUMAYUN.

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ABSTRACT

The historical narrative of Babur and his family underscores the pivotal yet often underappreciated role of women in the political arena of the Mughal dynasty. Ehsan Daulat Begam's exemplary leadership during Babur's formative years not only safeguarded his claim to power but also demonstrated the significant influence women could wield within a patriarchal framework. Her ability to navigate complex political challenges and maintain stability in the court reflects a broader theme of women's active participation in governance during this era, countering prevalent stereotypes of female passivity. Moreover, figures such as Mahim Begam and Bibi Mubarika illustrate how women were not just supportive figures but key players in the shaping of political strategies and alliances. Their involvement in military campaigns, diplomatic relations, and the management of the household highlights the multifaceted roles women occupied, significantly influencing the direction and consolidation of Babur's rule and, by extension, the Mughal Empire. The contributions of these women extend beyond their immediate context, resonating through generations and impacting the political landscape of their time. Their legacies serve as a reminder of the essential need to reassess historical narratives, recognizing and valuing the instrumental roles women have played in shaping history. This nuanced understanding enriches our comprehension of the socio-political dynamics of the past and emphasizes the importance of inclusivity in historical discourse. Thus, the accounts of Babur's family indeed reflect not only the complexities of power dynamics within their immediate context but also the enduring capacity of women to influence and determine the course of history, challenging the traditional paradigms of leadership and authority.

Key words: *War, Women, Empire, Wife, Loyalty.*

The family of Babur, who inherited the rich traditions of the great conquerors Chingiz Khan and Timur, maintained a progressive stance regarding the political involvement of their women. While they allowed their female relatives certain political rights and opportunities to engage actively in the political landscape, they notably stopped short of granting them the right to sovereignty. This nuanced approach reflected a blend of tradition and pragmatism in a patriarchal society, allowing women to influence decisions and participate in governance while reserving the highest powers for men. (Tripathi, 1966)

In 1494 A.D., following the death of Umar Shaikh Mirza, Babur found himself thrust into a turbulent political landscape at a tender age of eleven. The young prince was faced with two formidable armies vying for control within the borders of his ancestral homeland, Farghanna. The gravity of the situation could have easily overwhelmed him, but he was fortunate to have the guidance of his grandmother, Ehsan Daulat Begam. Her sagacity and experience played a pivotal role during this critical juncture.

Ehsan Daulat Begam acted not only as a grandmother but also as a skilled political advisor, orchestrating the administrative challenges that arose in the wake of their loss. Her strategic abilities allowed Babur to navigate the immediate threats to his rule effectively. She took on the mantle of leadership in administrative affairs, ensuring that decisions were made judiciously and timely. (Willams, 1918, p.34) By addressing pressing problems with a cool head, she managed to maintain stability in Babur's court, even amid chaos. Remarkably, only five or six months after the initial threat, a conspiracy emerged within his ranks, led by an officer named Hasan, who aimed to dethrone the young prince. Again, it was Ehsan Daulat Begam who rose to the occasion, demonstrating exceptional leadership and loyalty. She rallied loyal officers around her, meticulously organizing a plan to confront the conspirators. Through her decisive actions and strategic thinking, she successfully apprehended those who sought to undermine Babur's rule, thereby safeguarding his position and reinforcing the legitimacy of his claim to leadership. Her efforts not only thwarted immediate dangers but also instilled a sense of confidence in Babur, who benefitted greatly from her wisdom and support in running the affairs of the state. (Willams, 1918, pp.15-16). Ehsan Daulat Begam's role exemplifies the often-overlooked influence that women held in historical political contexts. She was not merely a

silent figure behind the scenes but an active participant in shaping the path forward for Babur and his governance. Her contributions encapsulate the complexities of power dynamics within the family and the broader political landscape of the time, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities present for women in positions of influence. Ultimately, her legacy lived on in her grandson, setting the stage for Babur's eventual rise as a formidable leader and founder of the Mughal Empire in India.¹

The significance of Ehsan Daulat Begam's active role in contemporary politics highlights a broader historical context within the Mughal dynasty, where women were not mere figures in the background but played crucial roles in governance and strategy. This engagement was not an isolated event; indeed, the contributions of women in the Mughal family can be traced back to its founder, Babur, whose lineage included several influential figures. Babur himself was greatly supported by his mother, Qutluq Nigar Khanum. Her presence during his military campaigns and journeys reflected the deep-rooted tradition of family support in the Mughal ethos. She not only provided moral backing but also embodied a sense of continuity and resilience that was essential for the turbulent times they faced.²

A particularly notable figure among Babur's wives was Mahim Begam, a Shia princess connected to Sultan Husain Baqarah. Her marriage to Babur in 1506 A.D. marked the beginning of a partnership that greatly influenced Babur's expansion and consolidation of power. Mahim Begam was more than just a spouse; she actively participated in various campaigns, offering both emotional and strategic support. The honor of accompanying Babur was significant, underscoring her importance, and her unique position allowed her to sit beside

¹Babur, Emperor of Hindustan 1483-1530, and Annette Susannah Beveridge. *The Babur-Nama in English (Memoirs of Babur); Volume 1*. Franklin Classics, 2018. p. 43. About his grandmother Babur writes: Few amongst women will have been my grandmother's equal for judgment and counsel. She was very wise and farsighted and most affair* of mine were carried through tinder her advice, ". hence forth B.N.(Bev).

²B.N. (Bev.) Vol. 1, p. 23. About her Babur writes, "she was with me on most of my guerilla expeditions and throneless time. Few of her sex excelled her in sense and sagacity"

him on the throne in Delhi—an unprecedented honor for a queen during that period. Following Babur's death, Mahim Begam continued to engage in political affairs for two and a half years, demonstrating her unwavering commitment to the Mughal legacy and her influence in shaping the political landscape of the time.³

Another important figure was Bibi Mubarika, whom Babur wed in Afghanistan in 1519 A.D. As the daughter of Mallik Suleiman Shah of the Yusufzai tribe, her marriage was not merely strategic, but also integral in easing tensions between Babur's regime and the fractious Afghan tribes, known for their volatility. Bibi Mubarika effectively acted as a bridge, facilitating dialogue and conciliation with the Yusufzais, particularly their chief, Malik Shah Mansur. Her diplomatic efforts helped solidify Babur's control in Afghanistan, proving that the power of women in the Mughal court extended into the realms of diplomacy and tribal politics. (Banerjee, 2021, p.322)

Transitioning to the reign of Humayun, Babur's legacy of strong women continued through Khanzada Begam, Babur's eldest sister. Following the death of Mahim Begam in 1532-33 A.D., Khanzada Begam assumed a prominent role in the imperial harem, receiving the title of Padshah Begam. Her influence was not only recognized within family matters but also extended to the political realm, which was evident in her close relationship with Humayun. He often turned to her for counsel when facing familial disputes and the broader challenges of governance.⁴

The fraught dynamics among Humayun and his brothers, notably Hindal and Kamran, showcased the tensions within the royal family, often exacerbated by external pressures and rivalries. In 1541 A.D., Khanzada Begam was tasked with a difficult mission: to mediate between Hindal, who had taken control of Qandhar, and Kamran, who sought to reclaim it with Humayun's support. Though she was determined and poised, her intervention did not yield the desired

³B.N. (Bev.), Vol 1. p- 358

⁴B.N. (Bev.), Vol 1. Pp. 314-315

outcome, illustrating the limitations even a respected figure like her faced in navigating the intricacies of royal politics.⁵

In 1545 A.D., following Humayun's return from Iran, the siege of Qandhar escalated, highlighting the familial strains that had profound implications for the Mughal empire. Amidst these conflicts, Khanzada Begam's role evolved further as she was requested to negotiate peace, demonstrating the persistent expectation that women could serve as peacemakers even in times of considerable strife. Despite her efforts to advocate for leniency towards Askari and Kamran, Humayun's resolve was firm, reflecting the tragic dichotomy women experienced—while their contributions were valuable, the harsh realities of power often dictated their limitations. (Prasad, 1956, p.222)

Thus, it is seen that the historical roles of the women in the Mughal dynasty depicted a complex interplay of support, strategy, and resilience. Figures like Mahim Begam and Bibi Mubarika not only influenced their husbands' reigns but also shaped the political contours of their time. Meanwhile, Khanzada Begam's experiences illuminated both the possibilities and constraints facing women in power, showcasing their significant, albeit often underappreciated, contributions to Mughal governance and diplomacy.

Khanzada Begam, as the principal lady of the harem for twelve years during Humayun's reign, played a pivotal role in the political landscape of her time. Her involvement extended beyond mere domestic affairs; she took a keen interest in the broader political issues facing the empire and wielded significant influence over not just Humayun but also his brothers. Despite the limitations placed on women in her position, Khanzada Begam made efforts to assist Humayun during his most challenging periods, showcasing her commitment to the welfare of the emperor and the stability of the empire.

Interestingly, Khanzada Begam was not the only woman who carved a niche for herself in a male-dominated political environment. Outside the imperial harem, there were other women who actively engaged in political matters. One of the

⁵B.N. (Bev.), Vol 1. P. 103 Akbarnama

most notable was Haram Begam, the daughter of Mir Wais Beg⁶ and wife of Humayun's cousin, Sulaiman Mirza.⁷ Known by the title of Wali-Niamet, meaning "lady of beneficence,"⁸ Haram Begam was marked by her ambition and administrative prowess. She often overshadowed her husband in matters of state, to the extent that Sulaiman Mirza and their son, Mirza Ibrahim, frequently sought her counsel.⁹

Haram Begam's first major foray into politics came in 1549 A.D. when Humayun initiated a military expedition to Balkh. Responding to his call for aid, she mobilized a formidable army at short notice and led them a considerable distance to support the exiled emperor in his endeavors. This act not only reflects her determination but also highlights the capabilities she possessed, which were far from traditional expectations of women in her era. (Prasad, 1956, p.303)

In 1551, Haram Begam visited Kabul, (Biyat, p.223) ostensibly to mourn the death of Mirza Hindal, but her true motive was to escape domestic strife and explore the political situation in Kabul. During her stay, she astutely assessed the evolving dynamics and saw a chance to seize Kabul. She persuaded her husband to embark on a military campaign to conquer the city, which seemed achievable under the circumstances. However, her plans ultimately did not materialize.¹⁰

Following Humayun's death, Sulaiman Mirza, emboldened by Haram Begam's ambitions, made yet another attempt to take Kabul but faced failure once again. A decade later, in 1566 A.D., she found herself again embroiled in the political intrigue of Kabul. Noticing the city's lack of defenses, she counseled her husband to besiege the fort of Kabul. Meanwhile, she reached out to the young prince through intermediaries, attempting to win him over with flattery and coax him into a trap at Qarabagh, a tactical move aimed at detaining him. Unfortunately for her, a breach of trust occurred—one of her attendants betrayed her and

⁶Abū al-Faḥl ibn Mubārak, *The Akbarnama*. Translated by H. Beveridge, vol. 2, Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1907, p. 200. Henceforth A.N.(Bev)

⁷Beveridge, vol. 2, Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1907, p. 212.

⁸Ibid., p.240

⁹Abul Fazl says, "Without her Haram Begum concurrency the Sulaiman Mirza could not conduct any state business, and whom, he, out of weakness, had made ruler over himself". A.N.(Bev), p. 39

¹⁰A.N. (Bev), p.41

conveyed her intentions to Mirza Hakim, who had already set out for Qarabagh. Upon learning of the plot, Hakim promptly altered his course to ensure his safety.

Haram Begam's endeavors demonstrate not just her ambition but also her skill in the diplomatic arts. Her desire to take a more active role in governance even extended to the administration of Badakhshan, territory assigned to her husband. In this capacity, she proved adept in managing the kingdom and its military forces, earning the authority to administer punishments, which she executed with an iron fist. Her involvement in Kabul's administration, though not as successful, still reflects her desire to influence political matters actively.¹¹

She was recognized as a woman of exceptional strength and integrity, earning respect and admiration from both nobility and members of the royal family. Haram Begam's life showcases the complexities of female agency in a historical context where such roles were typically constrained. Her ambitious pursuits and political maneuvering speak to the remarkable capabilities of women during this era, who, despite the societal limitations, made indelible marks on history.¹²

The Mughal era was marked by the involvement of several influential women in politics, notably during the reign of Humayun. Among these notable figures was Lad Malika, the wife of Taj Khan Sarang Khani, an Afghan noble. Taj Khan was appointed by Sikander Lodi as the Governor of the fort of Chunar. Lad Malika was renowned not only for her exceptional beauty but also for her remarkable strength and talents. Her presence in the political sphere was significant, as she garnered admiration and jealousy in equal measure from her co-wives. This jealousy led to a sinister plan among them to eliminate her, a scheme that tragically resulted in the death of Taj Khan himself. (Fida Ali, 1926, p.344)

In the wake of this tragedy, Lad Malika proved her political acumen and resilience. She cleverly garnered the support of the soldiers and nobles loyal to her late husband, leveraging her influence to establish control over Chunar. Through a combination of political savvy, generosity, and benevolence, she managed to solidify her position and instill loyalty in her sons. Her rise did not go unnoticed; as time unfolded, Sher Shah sought to marry her, which enabled

¹¹A.N.(Bev), Vol III, pp. 212-13.

¹²Ibid., p. 215

him to gain access to the fort of Chunar and to the riches that Lad Malika had collected during her reign. (Fida Ali, p, 116)

Another prominent figure in this turbulent political landscape was Rani Karmavati, the wife of Rana Sanga of Mewar. Rani Karmavati wielded considerable influence over her husband, utilizing her position to secure substantial jagirs (land grants) for her sons, Bikram and Lida. She adeptly maneuvered in the political arena, even initiating secret communications with Babur, seeking his assistance in solidifying her sons' claims to the throne of Mewar. However, her efforts were met with disappointment, as the Mughal Emperor did not provide the support she desperately sought.¹³

In 1531 A.D., her son Vikramaditya ascended to the throne of Mewar. Unfortunately, he proved to be an incompetent ruler, neglecting the administration and alienating the Rajput nobility, leading to a deterioration of the political situation. Rani Karmavati stepped in to stabilize the situation, demonstrating her remarkable political foresight and tactical ability. However, matters worsened when Bahadur Shah of Gujarat threatened to invade Mewar. In a desperate bid for assistance, the Rani sent a bracelet known as a Rakhi to Humayun, appealing for help, but ultimately, he was unable to provide substantial aid. (Sharma, 1954, pp,44-47)

To avert immediate disaster, Rani Karmavati was compelled to negotiate peace with Bahadur Shah by offering him Malwa along with a substantial sum of money, horses, and elephants. Although this maneuver provided a temporary respite, the underlying issues within Mewar persisted. Vikramaditya's incompetence encouraged Bahadur Shah, who launched a second attack on Chittor in 1535.(Sharma, 1954, pp,51-)

Rani Karmavati made one final attempt to defend the fort. She mobilized the Rajput nobles to assemble forces and mounted a staunch defense against the invading army. Unfortunately, the superiority of Bahadur Shah's artillery, commanded by Rumi Khan, proved devastating. Despite their bravery, the Rajputs faced overwhelming defeat. In a tragic conclusion, Rani Karmavati chose to perform *Jauhar*—a ritual of self-immolation by royal women to protect

¹³B.N. (Bcv) vol.2, pp, 612-13

their honor—from the invading forces when defeat seemed inevitable. (Sharma, 1954, p.39)

The political landscape during this era was profoundly affected by the active roles played by women like Rani Karmavati and Lad Malika. Their stories exemplify not only their ability to navigate the intricacies of power but also their unyielding commitment to their families and realms. Through their intelligence, strategic acumen, and ultimately their sacrifices, they left an indelible mark on the history of Mewar and the Mughal Empire, highlighting the significant yet often overlooked contributions of women in the political realm of their time.

The exploration of Babur's family reveals significant insights into the role of women in the political landscape of the Mughal Empire, highlighting a complex interplay of tradition and progressive ideals. The narrative centers not only on Babur's ascent but also emphasizes the indispensable support and influence of key female figures, particularly Ehsan Daulat Begam, Mahim Begam, and Bibi Mubarika. Their contributions demonstrate that women in this historical context were far from passive observers; rather, they were active participants whose decisions and actions played critical roles in governance and the stability of the realm. Ehsan Daulat Begam's strategic leadership during Babur's difficult early reign is a case in point. Her ability to effectively manage political crises—especially during her grandson's formative years—underscores the significant authority women could wield even within patriarchal constraints. She not only provided emotional support but also engaged in practical political maneuvering, which laid the groundwork for Babur's later successes. This challenges the conventional historical narratives that often overlook or downplay women's influence in governance. The examples of Mahim Begam and Bibi Mubarika further illuminate the essential roles women played in the consolidation of power and diplomatic relations. Mahim Begam's participation in military campaigns and her continued engagement in political affairs post-Babur's death exemplify a commitment to the Mughal legacy that transcended her role as a wife. Similarly, Bibi Mubarika's marriage to Babur was not merely a union of alliances; it was strategic in bridging connections with the fractious Afghan tribes, showcasing how women could act as mediators in significant political negotiations.

Moreover, the historical context reveals that the active participation of women in the Mughal dynasty was not an isolated phenomenon. It reflects a broader potential for women's influence across various cultures and periods, urging contemporary scholars and historians to reconsider the roles women have played throughout history. Their narratives highlight the multiplicity of power dynamics that can exist within a family, particularly in political contexts.

In conclusion, the legacies of Ehsan Daulat Begam, Mahim Begam, and Bibi Mubarika illustrate the profound impact women had in shaping the Mughal Empire's political landscape. Their stories enrich our understanding of the complexities surrounding gender roles in historical narratives, advocating for a more inclusive perspective that recognizes women's contributions as vital to the fabric of governance. As we reflect upon these insights, we gain a deeper appreciation for the interplay of gender and power, and the ongoing need to challenge historical paradigms that may misrepresent or undervalue the influence of women in shaping the course of history. This not only honors their contributions but also inspires future generations to acknowledge and strive for equal representation and participation in all spheres of society.

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