



SULTAN JAHAN BEGUM OF BHOPAL: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF HER LEGACY AND THE LINGUISTIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE WOMEN SULTANS OF BHOPAL TO THE URDU LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The Bhopal State, founded in 1709 and joined India in 1949 after the partition of the United India, was ruled by four female monarchs who made significant progress in social and administrative fields, especially during the reign of female monarchs. The era of female monarchs, starting with Nawab Qudsia Begum (r. 1819-1837), continued with Nawab Sikander Begum (r. 1844-1868), Nawab Shah Jahan Begum (r. 1868-1901), and Sultan Jahan Begum (r. 1901-1926) who became the last female monarch to ascend the throne of Bhopal. Nawab Sikander Begum went on a pilgrimage to the Hijaz in 1864. She kept her impressions of this journey in daily notes and later penned them down under the title *Yad Dast-e-Tareekh-e-Waqai-e-Hajj* in 1864. This work is the first example of a travelogue written by women in the Urdu language. Additionally, Sikander Begum changed Bhopal's official language from Persian to Urdu. Following in her mother's footsteps in the field of writing, Nawab Shah Jahan Begum wrote poetry in the Urdu language under the pen name Shirin and also has a collection of poetry in Urdu. Her granddaughter, Sultan Jahan Begum, was known for her educational and health reforms, literary works, and efforts to preserve the Urdu language. She opened various institutions to empower Muslim women in society and financially supported these institutions. Under Sultan Jahan Begum's rule, women in Bhopal played a significant role in preserving, developing, and spreading the Urdu language. Moreover, Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum has over 40 works contributing to Urdu literature. Among her works are books covering a wide range of topics such as child development, recipes, education, politics, and religion. Sultan Jahan Begum not only contributed through her own works but also supported significant works in Islamic history, such as *Asr-i Saadat* by Shibli Nomani, which consists of thousands of pages, contributing to the development of Urdu language and literature. In this article, we will discuss the contributions of Bhopal women to the development of the Urdu language and their contributions to the cultural heritage.

Keywords

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BHOPAL SULTANI CİHAN BEGÜM: MİRASI VE BHOPAL KADIN SULTANLARIN URDU DİLİNE KATKILARI ÜZERİNE ANALİTİK BAKIŞ

Öz

1709 yılında kurulan ve Birleşik Hindistan'ın bölünmesi sonrasında 1949'da Hindistan Devleti'ne katılan Bhopal Devleti; dört kadın hükümdar tarafından yönetilmiştir. Özellikle kadın hükümdarlar döneminde sosyal ve idari alanlarda önemli ilerlemeler kaydetmiştir. Nitekim Nevvab Kudsiye Begüm (s. 1819-1837) ile başlayan kadın hükümdarlar yönetimi Nevvab İskender Begüm (s. 1837-1868), Nevvab Şah Cihan Begüm (s. 1868-1901) ile devam etmiş ve Sultan Cihan Begüm (1901-1926) Bhopal tahtına oturan son kadın hükümdar olmuştur. Nevvab İskender Begüm 1864 yılında Hac için Hicaz'a gitmiştir. Bu seyahate dair izlenimlerini günlük notlar hâlinde tutmuş ve 1864'te Hac yolculuğundan döndükten sonra Yâd Dâst-ı Târih-i Vakâyi-i Hac adıyla kaleme almıştır. Bu eser Urdu dilinde kadınlar tarafından yazılan ilk seyahatname örneğidir. Ayrıca İskender Begüm, Bhopal'ın Farsça olan resmi dilini Urduca olarak değiştirmiştir. Yazma alanında annesinin izinden giden Nevvab Şah Cihan Begüm, Şirin mahlası ile Urdu dilinde şiirler yazmıştır. Aynı zamanda Urdu dilinde bir divanı bulunmaktadır. Torunu Sultan Cihan Begüm ise eğitim ve sağlık reformları, edebi eserleri ve dilin korunması için yaptığı çalışmalarla tanınmıştır. Müslüman kadınların toplumdaki konumunu güçlendirmek için çeşitli kurumlar açmış ve bu kurumları maddi olarak desteklemiştir. Sultan Cihan Begüm'ün liderliğinde Bhopal'deki kadınlar; Urdu dilinin korunması, gelişimi ve yayılmasında önemli bir rol oynamışlardır. Ayrıca bizzat Nevvab Sultan Cihan Begüm'ün Urdu edebiyatına katkıda bulunan kırktan fazla eseri bulunmaktadır. Eserlerinin arasında, çocuk gelişimi, yemek tarifleri, eğitim, siyaset ve din gibi geniş konuları kapsayan kitaplar bulunmaktadır. Sultan Cihan Begüm, kendi eserlerinin yanında İslam tarihinin önemli eserlerinden biri olan Şibli Numani'nin Asr-ı Saadet gibi binlerce sayfadan oluşan eserlere sağladığı destek ile de Urdu dilinin ve edebiyatının gelişimine katkıda bulunmuştur. Makalemizde, Bhopal kadınlarının Urdu dilinin gelişimi konusundaki katkılarına ve bu tarihi figürlerin kültürel mirasa katkılarına değinilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

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Introduction

The historical princely state of Bhopal, located on the Indian subcontinent and a significant dominion in the annals of the region's history, is currently included within the boundaries of the state of Madhya Pradesh in present-day India. It is postulated that the nomenclature 'Bhopal' has its etymological roots in 'Bhoj-pal,' a term that translates as 'the dam of Bhoja¹.' The city of Bhopal, often dubbed the 'City of Lakes,' owes this moniker to the copious number of lakes within its confines ("Brief History of the District Bhopal", t.y.). The dam constructed by Raja Bhoja,

¹ Raja Bhoja was a king belonging to the Paramara dynasty, who reigned in the region of Bhopal from 1010 to 1055.

known as 'Bhoj-pal' or 'Bhoj-tal', not only meets the water needs of the city of Bhopal, but also plays a key role in maintaining the ecological balance of the area.

Bhopal, which has attracted the attention of different powers throughout history with its strategic location and natural resources, this time caught the attention of a leader of Afghan origin in the early 18th century. In fact, Dost Mohammad Khan, who hailed from the Afghan-origin Mirzai tribe and distinguished himself in the Mughal Army, was esteemed for his steadfast loyalty to Mughal Sultan Aurangzeb. He is particularly renowned for his unwavering allegiance to Mughal Sultan Aurangzeb. Following the news of Aurangzeb's demise on February 20, 1707, he relocated around Bhopal to avoid the succession conflicts among the Sultan's sons. In 1709, he founded the State of Bhopal (Husain, 2001: 309-310). Thus, in the early 18th century, Bhopal fell under Afghan control and was governed by their progeny for nearly two centuries.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the State of Bhopal, particularly during the era of female sovereigns, left an indelible historical and cultural mark on the identity of Bhopal. ("Bhopal", t.y.) The first woman to ascend the throne of Bhopal's rulership was Nawab Qudsia Begum (1819-1837), who pioneered social reforms during her reign. Subsequently, Nawab Qudsia Begum's daughter, Nawab Sikandar Begum (1844-1868), took over the throne of Bhopal and, during her dominion, recognized the Urdu language as the official language of the country. Her daughter, Nawab Shah Jahan Begum (1868-1901), composed poetry in the Urdu language. The last female ruler of the State of Bhopal, Sultan Jahan Begum (1901-1926), implemented educational and health reforms and contributed to Urdu literature. Two years after India gained independence in 1947, the State of Bhopal merged with the State of India.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the State of Bhopal experienced a notable political shift. Between 1816 and 1819, Nazir Muhammad Khan ruled as the sovereign, during which he established strategic diplomatic ties with the British, culminating in treaties that ensured British protection. Upon the death of Nazir Muhammad Khan, his wife, known as Gauhar Begum or Qudsia Begum, successfully seized political authority ("Brief History of the District Bhopal", t.y.). This development marked the ascent of female leadership in Bhopal and signified the beginning of substantial changes in the state's political structure. The strategic foresight and diplomatic acumen of Nazir Muhammad Khan, followed by the assertive rise of Gauhar Begum, not only fortified Bhopal's political stature but also heralded a new era of female empowerment and governance that would shape the state's destiny for decades to come.

An Analytical Study of Contributions of the Women Sultans of Bhopal to the Urdu Language

Nawab Qudsia Begum reigned as the first female sovereign of the State of Bhopal from 1819 to 1837. In her twenties, during her husband's funeral, she delivered a powerful speech calling for unity, which not only quelled familial tensions but also saw her assume the mantle of leadership and state administration. In her address, she invoked the will of her late husband, Nawab Nazir Muhammad Khan, declaring that their infant daughter, Sikandar Begum, then only fifteen months old, should be recognized as the ruler, and that she herself would serve as the sovereign until her daughter came of age and married, thus inaugurating the first female rule in Bhopal. Her tenure was characterized by strategic alliances with throne rivals, showcasing her leadership prowess and mastery in governance (Khan, 2000: 71). Nawab Qudsia Begum's ascension to the throne as Bhopal's first female ruler was not merely a historical turning point for the region but also set a precedent for women's leadership and governance. Skilfully navigating through internal family strife and political rivalries and taking decisive steps to fulfil her late husband's testament, she reflected her strong leadership qualities and strategic expertise in statecraft. Her reign marked the beginning of a transformative era in Bhopal, paving the way for future female rulers to continue her legacy of robust and effective governance.

Nawab Qudsia Begum implemented reforms aimed at strengthening the social, educational, and administrative structure of the State of Bhopal and enhancing the welfare of its people. She made significant efforts to improve the status of women in society and empower their participation and development in social life. To ensure easy access to drinking water for the people of Bhopal, she initiated the construction of water channels. She began building a railway to connect the Bhopal region with Mecca, the holy city for Muslims. She also facilitated free accommodations for Bhopal citizens during the Hajj in Mecca and Medina (Çiftsüren, 2023: 82-83). Nawab Qudsia Begum and her daughter, Sikandar Begum, presented a thousand riyals² to the Ottoman Sultan (Korucu Üçüncü, 2019: 83). Nawab Qudsia Begum's comprehensive reforms not only fortified the State of Bhopal's socio-educational and administrative edifice but also catalysed the enhancement of women's societal standing, thereby fostering their empowerment and societal development. The provision of complimentary accommodations for Bhopal's pilgrims during the Hajj, along with the diplomatic gesture of presenting a thousand riyals to the Ottoman Sultan by Nawab Qudsia Begum and her daughter, Sikandar Begum, exemplify their commitment to both their people and the broader Islamic community.

² For riyal, see Bölükbaşı (n.d.).

Although Qudisia Begum did not have a literary persona, she held poets, writers, and scientists in high esteem, which led to the progression of science and literature during her reign. The advancement of Urdu literature and other scientific fields in the State of Bhopal in her era is documented by Nawab Shah Jahan Begum in her work titled *Taj-ul-Iqbal* as follows:

"Under the administration of Nawab Qudisia Begum, there was notable progress among the literati. Eminent figures such as Judge Shehzad Messiah, Raja Khosh Waqt Rai, and Chand Kayasth mathematician, writer, and diarist led the way in advancements. Scholars of the era included Mawlavi Abdul Qadir, Mawlavi Shehabuddin, Mawlavi Rauf Ahmed, Mawlavi Imdat Ali, Mawlavi Judge Khadim Hussein, Peshkar Munshi Bakaulah Khan Hyderabad, Judge Gulzar Ali Khan, and Judge Bahadur Ali Khan" (Efşan, 2012: 47).

After Qudisia Begum, her son-in-law Nawab Jahangir Muhammad Khan ascended to the throne of Bhopal in the period between 1837-1844. Regarding Jahangir Muhammad Khan, the Urdu literature critic and writer Saleem Hamid Rizvi³ states the following in his work titled *Urdu Adab ki Tarakki mein Bhopal ka Hissa*:

"He assembled the populace of Delhi and distributed extensive tracts of land and other benefits to scholars and intellectuals. He established a modern settlement, which he named Jehangirabad, created gardens in the English style, and constructed mansions. He integrated the English into the administrative structure of Bhopal. Nevertheless, alongside these developments, certain elements began to corrupt the previously unblemished civilisation. Similarly, the tendency towards extravagance and indulgence, which had previously been confined to the Nawabs of the East, began to manifest itself more widely. As a result, prostitution began to flourish, drinking assemblies were convened, and the market for dance and entertainment rose. A considerable number of dancers and singers from outside the region settled in Bhopal. Nawab Bey also evinced a keen interest in poetry and poets. He himself was a poet with a divan and appointed poets to significant positions in the palace. Consequently, many poets from outside arrived during his tenure. Bhopal, like Delhi, Lucknow, and Tonk, became a major centre for poets" (Çiştî, 1981: 54).

Nawab Sikandar Begum (1844–1868): Administrative Reformer and Linguistic Pioneer

Sikandar Begum was trained instruction from her mother in the arts of warfare and diplomacy. Upon assuming the role of ruler in Bhopal, she initiated a series of

³ Saleem Hamid Rizvi has made a significant contribution to Urdu literature, publishing a substantial body of work comprising critical essays, short stories and articles. His oeuvre predominantly examines the evolution and advancement of Urdu literature, with a particular emphasis on the Bhopal region. ("Urdu Books of Saleem Hamid Rizvi", n.d.)

reforms across various sectors, including the military, administrative, and judicial. Additionally, she introduced postal services and spearheaded the transition of the official language in Bhopal from Persian to Urdu. She placed a premium on infrastructure projects, such as road construction, and for the benefit of the populace, she established hospitals and places of worship for the region's diverse religious communities. She was a proponent of railway construction, although the inaugural train service commenced during the tenure of Shah Jahan Begum (r. 1868-1901). In 1861, the British government bestowed the Order of the Star of India upon Sikandar Begum, conferring upon her the title of Knight Grand Commander of the Star of India (GCSI) ⁴ (Çiftsüren, 2023: 83). Sikandar Begum established a medical school and appointed an Unani medicine specialist. ("Begums of Bhopal", t.y.) She was instrumental in the establishment of the first official press in Bhopal and opened numerous schools. (Konukçu, 2000: 560-561) By establishing the official press and opening schools, she contributed to the developing Urdu language. Thus, the reforms and improvements carried out by Sikandar Begum ensured that Bhopal preserved its Islamic traditions and culture while also being open to modern advancements.

On 6 January 1864, Sikandar Begum commenced a pilgrimage to fulfil her Hajj obligation. She documented her observations during the journey in a work titled *Yad-dasht-i-Tarikh-i-Vaqayi-i-Hajj*. This work, which has also been translated into English, is regarded as the inaugural travelogue written by a woman in Urdu. In her work *Ayin-i-Sikandari*, written in Persian with an accompanying Urdu translation, Sikandar Begum set forth the qualities that she considered essential for a ruler. This work was published by her daughter, Sultan Jahan Begum (Çiftsüren, 2023: 84-85). These contributions illustrate the pivotal role played by Sikandar Begum in the literary and cultural development of her era.

During Sikandar Begum's reign, notable advancements were made in developing the Urdu language. Initiatives were undertaken to substitute Persian with Urdu as the official language and to guarantee the appropriate and pervasive utilization of Urdu. Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum elucidates this context in her work *Hayat-i-Sikandari* as follows:

"She was gifted in the Urdu language, and her writings were devoid of affectation; she always wrote exactly as she spoke. Despite her proficiency in Persian, she wrote very little in that language. According to her, the words used in daily conversation should be written and put on paper. Therefore, every order she issued was written in the exact words she spoke, and those working under her administration were instructed to follow this practice" (Efşan, 2012: 59).

⁴ Iskender Begum's daughter was also honoured with the same title during her reign.

This oppressive political atmosphere, coupled with the cultural dislocation caused by British policies, paradoxically gave rise to renewed local efforts to preserve and promote indigenous languages such as Urdu. In Bhopal, Sikandar Begum's reign stood out as a remarkable example of such cultural resilience. The reign of Sikandar Begum, while these developments were taking place in Bhopal, the British brutally suppressed the Sepoy Rebellion that broke out in the subcontinent in 1857, capturing and exiling Bahadur Shah Zafar, who threatened their dominance in the region. Following the transition of the British from traders to rulers in India, an oppressive and divisive influence was exerted on the social, political and cultural life of the local population (Çakmakçı, 2024: 94).

The British thus took complete control of India, and the Turks no longer had any even symbolic sovereignty in India. A deathly silence fell over every corner of the subcontinent as a result of the killings and plundering that took place, and cries of anguish were heard everywhere. The British succeeded in pitting local governments and local powers in India against each other in wars and power struggles, while strategically inciting those fighting in these conflicts against each other to protect their own interests. During this period, the British policy of 'divide and rule' led to the weakening of local powers in India and the consolidation of British dominance. However, the state of Bhopal, by establishing friendly relations with the British over time and becoming a princely state of British India in 1818, remained largely aloof from the conflicts on the subcontinent.

Following the death of her mother, Sikandar Begum, in 1868, Shah Jahan Begum ascended to the throne of Bhopal. Given that Bhopal had reached a high level of advancement in military, administrative, and political aspects, Shah Jahan Begum directed her attention towards the promotion of cultural and artistic activities, as well as the patronage of poets, writers, and musicians. She also devoted her attention to the advancement of public health and education, while simultaneously directing resources towards infrastructure development. Her decision to replace Persian with Urdu as the official language of Bhopal was a transformative act that had lasting linguistic and cultural consequences. This strategic move not only made administration more accessible to the local population but also reinforced Urdu's position as a vehicle of Muslim identity in colonial India. She initiated the construction of significant structures, including the Taj-ul-Masajid Mosque, and accelerated the construction of railways, thereby connecting her state to India's national railway network. She constructed facilities for Indian pilgrims in Mecca and was awarded the Order of Compassion by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in recognition of her assistance during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. In addition to these activities, Shah Jahan Begum also engaged in literary pursuits, writing poems under the pen name *Shirin* and publishing a divan in Urdu in 1872 (Çiftsüren, 2023: 85-86). She made arrangements for pilgrims in Mecca to reside permanently and declared Urdu to be the official language of Bhopal, replacing

Persian. Shah Jahan Begum also provided financial support to the educational efforts of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, the founder of Aligarh and a significant contributor to the development of the Urdu language (Ebrahim, 2016: 99). This period marked a significant cultural and infrastructural development in Bhopal, which serves to illustrate Shah Jahan Begum's dedication to the welfare and progress of her state.

Subsequent to the demise of Shah Jahan Begum on 16 June 1901, her daughter Sultan Jahan Begum assumed the throne of Bhopal. She made notable contributions to the emancipation of women in India, establishing an arts school for widows and orphaned women in 1905 and being elected president of the All-India Muslim Ladies Conference in 1914. She provided support for museum and archaeological projects. Her most significant legacy to date is the establishment of Aligarh Muslim University in 1920. She was the founding rector of Aligarh University and the first Indian woman to hold the title of rector of an Indian university. She authored numerous works on education and health ("Begums of Bhopal", t.y.). This period saw a significant advancement in women's rights and education in India, largely due to Sultan Jahan Begum's progressive initiatives and leadership.

The strengthening of political, economic, and cultural relations between the Ottoman Sultanate and the Bhopal Nawabate occurred under the reigns of four female rulers. The rulers in question were Qudsia Begum (reigning 1819-1837), Sikandar Begum (reigning 1844-1868), Shah Jahan Begum (reigning 1868-1901), and Sultan Jahan Begum (reigning 1901-1926). These rulers' administrations were notably distinguished by their profound interest and dedication to the Hejaz region under Ottoman governance. In this context, the Bhopal administration upheld the tradition of sending gifts to the Hejaz on an annual basis during the month of Ramadan (Üçüncü, 2019: 252-253). These gifts demonstrated not only the political and economic dimensions of the relationship between the two regions but also their religious and cultural aspects. This practice by the Bhopal rulers contributed to the Ottoman-Bhopal relations and was regarded as a sign of the long-standing friendship between the two states. The strong relations established with the Ottoman Sultanate laid the groundwork for deepening cultural and religious ties between the two states.

According to the records of the Egyptian scholar and historian Ahmed Teymur Pasha (1871-1930), during the reign of Sultan Mehmed Reshad, twenty-four of the forty-three sacred relics known as the "Sakal-i Sherif" (holy beard hairs of the Prophet Muhammad) housed in the Topkapı Palace were distributed to different regions of the Ottoman Empire. The same records indicate that during the visit of the Bhopal ruler Sultan Jahan Begum to Istanbul, one of these holy relics was presented to her by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed Reshad (Bozkurt, 2009: 2). The mutual exchange of gifts between the two rulers is indicative of the level of diplomatic and mutual relations.

Conclusion

The state of Bhopal, which was established in 1709 and became part of the Indian state in 1949 after the partition of United India, was ruled by four women rulers. During this period, especially under the rule of the women rulers, significant progress was made in the social and administrative spheres. In the second half of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, Bhopal stood out from other regions of India for the development of the Urdu language, the revival of Islamic culture, and the implementation of modernisation and reforms, and became a symbol of this progress. Nawab Sikander Begum's pilgrimage to the Hejaz for the Hajj in 1864, which she documented in her diary, became the first travelogue written by a woman in the Urdu language. Sikander Begum also changed the official language of Bhopal from Persian to Urdu. Nawab Shah Jahan Begum wrote poetry in Urdu under the pseudonym 'Shirin' and compiled a divan. Her granddaughter, Sultan Jahan Begum, is known for her work in education and health reform, literary works and efforts to preserve the language. She established and financially supported various institutions to strengthen the position of Muslim women in society. Under the leadership of Sultan Jahan Begum, the women of Bhopal played a significant role in the preservation, development and spread of the Urdu language. In addition to her contributions to Urdu literature, Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum wrote books on a wide range of subjects, including child development, recipes, education, politics and religion. Her support for the publication of important works of Islamic history, such as Shibli Nomani's *Asr-i Saadet*, also contributed to the development of Urdu language and literature. The legacy of Bhopal's women rulers demonstrates the profound impact women can have on cultural and social progress, setting an example for future generations.

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