

ROLE OF THE ROYAL WOMEN IN NORTH INDIAN POLITICS DURING 15TH CENTURY: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE LODI AND SHARQI SULTANATE

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ABSTRACT

In history of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526 AD), the role of royal women in court politics, diplomacy and battles is a neglected field of research and whatever work has been done is solely on Razia Sultan. But since the very foundation of the Sultanate of Delhi royal women like Shah Turkan (chief queen of Sultan Iltutmish), Malika-i-Jahan (chief queen of Sultan Jalaluddin Khalji and mother-in-law of Sultan Alauddin Khalji), Makhdum-i-Jahan (mother of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq), Bibi Raji (daughter of Sultan Muhammad Shah Sayyid and chief queen of Mahmud Sharqi), Bibi Khonza (daughter of Sultan Alauddin Shah Sayyid and chief queen of Husain Sharqi), Bibi Masto (widow of Islam Khan Lodi and mother-in-law of Sultan Bahlul Lodi), Shams Khatun (chief queen of Sultan Bahlul Lodi) and Bibi Amba (Hindu wife of Bahlul Lodi and mother of Sultan Sikandar Lodi) played a very prominent role in politics, diplomacy and battles. Ladies of the royal harem played a very active role in 15th century north Indian politics especially in Lodi-Sharqi conflict and relations. In this paper an attempt has been made to shed light on the last five most influential and powerful royal women who actively participated in politics from both sides of the Lodi and Sharqi dynasties. It also highlights how the personal ego and fire of revenge of the Sharqi queens turned the course of history in favour of the Lodi Sultans.

Keywords: Sultan, Lodi, Sharqi, Chief Queen, Mother, Politics, Royal women, Delhi.

Introduction:

The history of 15th century north India is very absorbing as well as important in medieval India's transition from the Delhi Sultanate to the Mughal Empire. At the close of the 14th century Timur's invasion of Delhi paralyzed the central structure of the Tughlaq dynasty i.e. the Delhi

Sultanate (1206-1526 AD) and paved the way for the emergence of regional kingdoms in different parts of northern India. In the heartland of *Ganga-Jamuna* doab two major powers came into existence by the middle of 15th century; the Lodi Sultanate of Delhi (1451-1526 AD) and the Sharqi Sultanate of Jaunpur (1394-1484 AD). The titanic struggle between these two powers primarily for supremacy of the imperial capital i.e. Delhi and secondarily for fertile *iqtas* of *Ganga-Jamuna* doab was the major event of the political life of northern India during the second half of 15th century which is often highlighted by modern historians¹. The Lodis and Sharqis were incompatible enemy because of a number of historical, geo-political² and personal reasons. But the most important aspect of this struggle is the personal ego and vengeance of the Sayyid princess against the Lodis which is seldom highlighted by modern historians³ and the role of royal women in court politics, diplomacy and battles in 15th century north Indian politics.

In this paper the primary focus of the author is not to discuss the struggle between the Lodis and Sharqis in details but rather the role royal women had played on both sides. On the side of the Lodis *Bibi Masto*, (widow of Islam Khan and mother-in-law of Sultan Bahlul Lodi); *Shams Khatun*, (wife of Sultan Bahlul); and *Bibi Amba*, (mother of Prince Nizam Khan later Sultan Sikandar Lodi) played a very prominent role in court politics, diplomacy and battles. On the side of the Sharqis two Sayyid princesses dominated the scene namely *Bibi Raji* and *Bibi Khonza* for almost five decades in the court of Jaunpur.

❖ **Bibi Masto or Matu:**

In 1451 A.D. Bahlul Lodi established Lodi hegemony at Delhi, and left his capital for solving problems in Sirhind and Multan. He left the charge of Delhi under Khawaja Bayazid, Shah Sikandar Sarwani and *Bibi Masto*⁴ or *Matu*⁵ (widow of Islam Khan and mother-in-law of Bahlul). In 1452 A.D. Mahmud Sharqi invaded Delhi with a powerful army and one thousand mountains like elephants. In the absence of Bahlul, *Bibi Masto*, a shrewd and diplomatic lady played a very crucial role in defending the Lodi garrison. She dressed up many women in male attire and posted them as guards all along the ramparts of the fort in order to deceive the enemy about the numerical strength of the Lodi garrison⁶. On hearing the news of Sharqi invasion of Delhi, Bahlul immediately while returning to the capital met the Sharqi forces in the battle field of Narela (a village 27 kilometers from Delhi). Despite having half forces than the Sharqis, Bahlul won the battle by dint of courage and diplomacy. The following day at Delhi people

noted from the rampart of the fort that the Sharqi army was returning in disorder. They reported the matter to *Bibi Masto*. The Bibi asked whether the army was returning as victor or vanquished, they expressed their ignorance. The Bibi asked them: “See whether, the people returning from the battle-field are going to the tent of the Sultan or turning to their respective tents and collecting their goods. When they reported it to *Bibi Masto*, she said: Go and beat the drums.”⁷

As Sultan Mahmud heard the sound of drum, he inquired from his men: ‘Why are they beating the drums? They replied inside the fort it is being proclaimed that our army has been defeated’. The Sultan ordered them to ascertain the fact. As the news was confirmed, Darya Khan Lodi arrived and told the Sultan about the death of Fath Khan Harvi and the defeat of the army. Sultan Mahmud apprehended an uprising by his defeated troops and at once decided to retreat.⁸ So from the above narration of Ahmed Yadgar and Rizqullah Mushtaqi regarding the role of *Bibi Masto* in defending the Lodi fort and leading the garrison in crucial moments against the powerful Sharqi army by no means mere achievement in those days by a woman. As consequence she saved the infant Lodi kingdom from devastation in the hands of the most powerful and hated enemy of Bahlul Lodi.

❖ **Shams Khatun:**

Shams Khatun, daughter of Islam Khan Lodi and wife of Sultan Bahlul. She played a very crucial role during the Lodi-Sharqi battles especially when her brother Qutb Khan Lodi was taken prisoner by the Sharqi forces in course of night attack march. But her influence and role in politics we cannot be understood without a brief portrait of the Lodi-Sharqi struggle.

The success in battle of Narela made Bahlul powerful and strengthened the Lodi position in and around Delhi region. His conquest of Etawah whose governor was a Sharqi vassal precipitated a fresh conflict between the Lodi and Sharqi kingdom. Mahmud Sharqi on hearing about Bahlul’s annexation of Etawah, marched upon him. In 1455 A.D. after an indecisive battle on the first day peace was concluded between the parties on the second day through the mediation of Qutb Khan Lodi and Rai Pratap on following terms- that whatever territory was in the possession of Sultan Mubarak Shah Sayyid should belong to Bahlul and whatever territory was in the possession of Sultan Ibrahim Shah Sharqi belong to Mahmud Sharqi; and Bahlul would send back the seven elephants he had captured during the previous struggle; Shamsabad was to be surrendered to a

vassal of Sultan Bahlul.⁹ However, difficulties arose at the time of implementing the terms of the treaty. Bahlul sent Rai Karan to take possession of Shamsabad, which was under Jauna Khan, a vassal of Mahmud Sharqi. Jauna Khan refused to deliver the fort, thereupon Bahlul marched to Shamsabad, expelled him and installed Rai Karan there. Mahmud Sharqi set out to challenge the Lodi Sultan. The two armies met near Shamsabad. Qutb Khan Lodi and Darya Khan made a night attack and would have succeeded in it, but accidentally Qutb Khan fell from his horse and was immediately taken prisoner by the Sharqi forces. He lived as a Sharqi prisoner for seven months under the protection of *Bibi Raji*.¹⁰

On Mahmud Sharqi's sudden illness and death¹¹ (1458) hostilities between Delhi and Jaunpur were suspended for some time and a treaty was concluded on the basis of status quo.¹² After this agreement Muhammad Shah returned to Jaunpur and Sultan Bahlul started for Delhi. As he reached the vicinity of Delhi, *Shams Khatun*, sent a message to the effect that as long as Qutb Khan should remain in Muhammad Sharqi's prison, rest and repose and sleep should be unlawful for the Sultan.¹³ Bahlul took the message to heart and turned back to accomplish his unfinished task. The new Sharqi Sultan, Muhammad Shah¹⁴ had not been able to consolidate his position and there were nobles hostile to him. A battle took place in Rapri near Sarsuti, but an accident facilitated a temporary truce and the cessation of hostilities. Prince Jalal Khan, a younger brother of Husain Sharqi who had succeeded on the throne of Jaunpur, had hurriedly marched at night to join his brother and mistaken Bahlul's army for the Husain's camp. He had been immediately arrested and this arrest provided the basis for the exchange of Qutb Khan Lodi. Husain Sharqi summoned Qutb Khan from Jaunpur and sent him to Bahlul with great honor and valuable gifts. The latter also made Jalal Khan happy with honors and favors, and sent him to Sultan Husain.¹⁵ From the above events narrated by the Persian chroniclers we can say that, *Shams Khatun* had huge influence on the minds of Bahlul in matters of battles, diplomacy and politics.

❖ **Bibi Amba or Zeina:**

Another very influential royal woman in the Lodi politics was *Zeina*¹⁶ or *Zaiband*¹⁷ or *Bibi Amba*¹⁸, was a daughter of Hindu goldsmith. Bahlul, while governor of Sirhind, used to live in a villa outside the fort and was attracted by her matchless charm and beauty. He married her after ascending the throne of Delhi. She was the mother of Prince Nizam Khan later Sultan Sikandar Lodi. After the death of Sultan Bahlul near Jalali in 1488 A.D., she summoned Nizam Khan from

Delhi and also addressed the assembly of nobles from behind the curtain in favor of her son.¹⁹ For the purpose of proper understanding of *Bibi Amba's* influence and role in the accession of Sikandar Lodi, we should elaborate the events and politics of the prominent Afghan nobles after the death of Bahlul Lodi.

A day after the death of Sultan Bahlul, the powerful nobles were divided into groups to support their favorite princes for the Lodi throne. The members of every group wanted to raise the Prince to sovereignty from whom they expected greater favour and benefit. Isa Khan Lodi, the nephew of Bahlul conspired with some other Afghan nobles to set aside Prince Nizam Khan in favour of Azam Humayun, the grandson of Bahlul.²⁰ They summoned Nizam Khan from Delhi on behalf of the late Sultan while he was on death-bed. But his mother Bibi Amba and Umar Khan Sarwani, the *Wazir*, informed Nizam Khan about the conspiracy and thus saved him from falling into their trap.²¹ Having unsuccessful in their plans, the Afghan nobles under the leadership of Isa Khan Lodi held a council to which all the important and influential persons were invited to settle the issue of succession. Bibi Amba, mother of Nizam Khan, also came and said to the nobles from behind the curtain:

“Pidrum liyaqat badshahi darad wa ba shumaa suluk naykoo khwahad namud”

(My son deserve kingship and he would treat you well).²²

Thereupon, Isa Khan Lodi used abusive language against her:

“Pisar dukhtar zargar badshahi daa nashayad”

(The son of the daughter of a gold-smith is not fit for Kingship).

It displeased *Khan-i-Khana* Farmuli who asked Isa Khan to be respectful towards the widow of the Sultan. Isa Khan, a hotheaded Afghan, rebuked him also for interfering with the relations of the Sultan while he was only a servant. The *Khan-i-Khana* also replied him in harsh words: “I am a servant of Sultan Sikandar and not anybody else.”²³ *Khan-i-Jahan* Lodi also decided to support the cause of Nizam Khan. Being powerful nobles they frustrated the plan of Isa Khan Lodi. They took away the dead body of the Sultan to Jalali, where they invited Nizam Khan and enthroned him with the title of Sultan Sikandar Shah on 17th July, 1488 A.D.²⁴

So from the above chain of events recorded by Ferishta, we can say that, *Bibi Amba* or *Zeina*, a Hindu wife of Bahlul, played enormous role in protecting Sikandar Lodi from a conspiracy and also addressed the assembly of nobles to demand the rightful sovereignty for her able son. By doing so she not only placed the best Sultan of the Lodi dynasty but also produced one of the finest Sultan of the Delhi Sultanate. Being a Hindu gold-smith daughter, our general perception is that, she must have an inferior position in the *Harem* and politics of the Sultanate, but the opposite happened. When we consult the Persian sources, we see that, *Bibi Amba* was the most influential and powerful royal woman during the latter part of Bahlul's reign and off course in the beginning of Sultan Sikandar's period.

❖ **Bibi Raji:**

Bibi Raji, daughter of Sultan Muhammad Shah Sayyid (1434-45) and was married to Mahmud Sharqi (1440-57), son of Sultan Ibrahim Shah Sharqi in 1437 when he laid siege the imperial city of Delhi.²⁵ In the history of Sharqi dynasty *Bibi Raji* was the most influential and powerful royal woman. She actively participated in court politics, diplomacy and even battles. To understand her influence, power and achievements in the court of Jaunpur, we have to divide her activities into two halves. Firstly, the relations between the Lodi and Sharqi Sultans and their struggle for the supremacy of imperial city of Delhi. Secondly, the internal court politics in Jaunpur Sultanate and the succession of Sharqi Sultans in the throne of Jaunpur after the death of Mahmud Shah Sharqi. In following lines we would try to measure *Bibi Raji's* influence and power from the major events of her political career noted by the contemporary chroniclers.

Mahmud Sharqi was provoked to attack Delhi after the establishment Lodi hegemony by his chief queen *Malika Jahan Bibi Raji*, daughter of Sultan Muhammad Sayyid. She represented to her husband that, the kingdom of Delhi had belongs to her father and grandfather, who was Bahlul, that he usurp their domination? If her husband would not advance, she herself would bind on her quiver, and oppose his pretensions²⁶. Being galled by these taunts, Mahmud Sharqi came to invade Delhi in 1452 A.D. with a powerful army, and one thousand mountains like elephants²⁷. At that time Bahlul was away from the capital but the diplomacy of Sayyid Shamsuddin and strong leadership of *Bibi Masto* saved the Lodi garrison. Sayyid Shamsuddin cleverly appealed to Darya Khan's Afghan sentiment and shrewdly won him over his side²⁸. Thereupon Darya manipulated the situation in favour of the Lodis and diverted the attention of

the Sharqi forces from Delhi to the battle field of Narela. Bahlul defeated the Sharqis in the battle of Narela by means of courage and diplomacy. At this turn of event, Mahmud Sharqi unable to bear this calamity and hurriedly returned to Jaunpur²⁹. The second attack of Mahmud Sharqi on Bahlul Lodi was also instigated by *Bibi Raji* for annexing Etawah³⁰. During an engagement occurred at Shamsabad, Mahmud Sharqi fell ill and died within two or three days. A treaty was concluded through the mediation of *Bibi Raji* with Bahlul Lodi on basis of status quo³¹.

After the sudden death of Sultan Mahmud Sharqi in 1458 A.D. *Bibi Raji* who was a sagacious, wise and gifted woman, placed Prince Bikham Khan on the throne of Jaunpur with the agreement of the nobles and conferred upon him the title of Muhammad Shah³². After the accession Muhammad Shah commanded the *kotwal* of Jaunpur to put to death, his brother Hasan Khan and Qutb Khan Lodi, brother-in-law of Bahlul who was a prisoner in Sharqi jail. The *kotwal* wrote back saying that, *Bibi Raji* had taken both of them under her protection and he was powerless to bring about their death³³. On learning the contents of this letter, Muhammad Shah wrote craftily to his venerable mother, “My brother Hasan Khan is suffering great privation in jail. It would be very nice, if you my adored mother, could bring about reconciliation between me and my brother and then concede a portion of the kingdom to him.”³⁴ In compliance with this idea, *Bibi Raji* set out on the mission and left Jaunpur. When she passed a few stages, the *kotwal* assassinated Prince Hasan Khan in accordance with the *farman* of Muhammad Shah.³⁵ *Bibi Raji* received the news at Kanauj, performed the mourning rites there and went back, without meeting Muhammad Shah. When the latter heard the news of his mother’s return, he wrote to her another letter saying, “Why do you grieve for one son’s death. If all the *Shahzadas* were stuck down at one place, my venerable mother, you would be able to mourn for them all at once.”³⁶

Muhammad Shah proved himself as ferocious, wrathful and blood-thirsty ruler. The nobles were afraid, terrorized and insecure under him. Owing to the assassination of one brother and the flight of another, Muhammad Shah became anxious that Prince Husain should go back to Jaunpur and stir up a rebellion. Unable to make a stand against Sultan Bahlul’s army, Muhammad Shah started for Kanauj. Bahlul pursued him as far as Ganges and returned with a quantity of spoils, consisting of equipment and baggage³⁷. In 1458 Prince Husain Khan came to his mother *Bibi Raji*, alienated from Sultan Muhammad, she with the concurrence of nobles and chiefs of kingdom now placed Prince Husain on the throne of Jaunpur³⁸. He deputed Malik

Mubarak Ganj, Malik Ali Gujrati and a number of nobles against Muhammad Shah who had marched to the bank of the Ganges near the fort of Rajgarh³⁹. At the approach of Sultan Husain's army, some of the nobles who were displeased with Muhammad Shah, deserted him for Husain. Thereupon Muhammad Shah retreated with a hundred picked horsemen to an orchard nearby which was surrounded by Sultan Husain's army. As Muhammad Shah was a peerless in archery seized the bow and arrow. Previous to this event, *Bibi Raji*, had induced Muhammad Shah's armour-bearer to remove the heads from the arrows in his quiver. He shot the arrow in order to do execution, but they were bereft of their heads. Eventually he took up the sword and slew a number of men. Then an arrow shot by Mubarak Gang struck him in the throat, and he fell from his horse and died⁴⁰.

So from the above description of major events from the political career of *Bibi Raji*, we can surely say that, she was the most influential and powerful royal woman of the Sharqi dynasty who actively participated in court politics and diplomacy. *Bibi Raji* played a multi-dimensional role as a daughter of Sultan Muhammad Sayyid, as a wife of Sultan Mahmud Sharqi, and as mother of Sultan Muhammad Sharqi and Sultan Husain Sharqi. So her three-dimensional political activity and career span more than three decades which is seldom highlighted by modern historians. Her activities and achievements in the field of politics and diplomacy was unparalleled not only in the history of Jaunpur but also whole of 15th century north India.

❖ **Bibi Khonza:**

*Bibi Khonza*⁴¹, daughter of the last Sayyid Sultan Alauddin Alam Shah and the chief queen of Sultan Husain Sharqi. *Bibi Khonza* was the most influential and powerful woman after *Bibi Raji* in the court of Jaunpur. From the very beginning of Husain Sharqi's reign she used to incite him to take vigorous action against the Lodis who usurped the imperial throne of Delhi. Her influence on the mind of her husband Husain Sharqi's political decision was vividly described by Rizqullah Mushtaqi on the context of Delhi invasion.

Sultan Husain decided to march for the conquest of Delhi with all his army and allies. He summoned all the *Zamindars* and *Rays* along with the armies of the *parganas*. He called *Malik Suman* for consultation. *Bibi Khonza* was also sitting behind the curtain. The Sultan said to the malik: "We intend to march for the conquest of Delhi, what is your opinion about this plan"? The malik replied: "the idea is very good; but you should not be restless and hasty in this matter. You

should station your army on the frontier this year and collected forces there. Thereafter, leaving your *vilayet* (territory) behind, you should turn towards the country of Delhi. The territory of Delhi would become desolate and devastated; people and soldiers of the region would come and join your servants. Next year you should encamp inside the limits of the territory of Delhi, chaos and confusion will prevail there in consequence. Driven to straits, Bahlul will either take to flight or be forced to fight. Thereupon, his people will not remain loyal to him. All of them will look after their own interests. When the rival is thus weakened, you should do whatever you like'⁴².

Having heard the advice of Malik, *Bibi Khonza* started speaking from behind the curtain: '*What is come over these soldiers and nobles? What has happened to them that they are showing lack of courage and talking like coward? Where have their heads fallen in the battle field that they are showing cowardice and lack of courage? Why has fear overcome them?*'? The Malik retorted: "*Bibi please refrain from uttering such words and do not consider the loss of heads on battle field easy; when this (Malik's) head will be chopped off in the battle, the worst will happen*". Having said these words, the Malik stood, made obeisance and then departed, saying: '*When your majesty always act upon her advice, why should you consult me?*'? Ultimately, when he reached Delhi, the Sultan of Jaunpur sustained defeat after a fierce fighting. Malik Suman was killed, while *Bibi Khonza* fell as prisoner into the hands of the Afghans⁴³.

From the above conversation between Husain Sharqi and Malik Suman, for the planning of invading Delhi, reflected many sides of *Bibi Khonza's* influence in court politics and battles. Firstly, her vengeance against the Lodis who usurped her ancestral kingdom of Delhi and her passion for regaining the lost glory. Secondly, *Bibi Khonza's* keen interest and involvement in matters of politics and battles. Thirdly, Husain Sharqi had given more importance to her queen's advice rather than a senior noble and chief counselor of the Sultanate. So we can clearly show that, *Bibi Khonza* was the most influential and powerful woman during the reign of Husain Sharqi and also the real power behind the scene in matters of politics.

❖ Conclusion:

In making history of regions and empires in different parts of north India women had played a vital role but the contemporary Persian chroniclers of medieval India did not give much importance to their achievements and just casually mentioned the facts. In this paper the present author discusses and attempts to highlight about five most influential and powerful women of the

15th century north India from two contemporary but rival dynasties. In the history of the Lodi dynasty three royal women namely *Bibi Masto*, *Shams Khatun* and *Bibi Amba* had played important role in defending their kingdom, saving own brother from enemy prison and placing her able son on the throne. In this capacity they also played different duties of womanhood as mother-in-law, sister, wife and mother apart from politics. On the other hand, in the history of the Sharqi dynasty two royal women namely *Bibi Raji* and *Bibi Khonza* had played tremendous role in making and unmaking of the Jaunpur Sultanate. *Bibi Raji* had played multi-dimensional role of a womanhood as daughter of Sultan Muhammad Sayyid, she tried to recover her forefathers kingdom from the Lodis; as devoted wife she always incited her husband Mahmud Sharqi to recapture Delhi and accompanied him in critical moments of life; as dutiful widow she negotiated with Bahlul Lodi after the sudden death of her husband in midst of battle; as a wise mother she first placed Muhammad Shah on the throne but when he proved himself incapable she not only removed but also punished him for misdeeds and placed Husain Sharqi on the throne of Jaunpur. So in the history of 15th century north India, *Bibi Raji* was not only the most influential and powerful but also a distinguished woman. *Bibi Khonza* largely played a destructive role as a chief queen and adviser of Husain Sharqi rather than a constructive role in the whole Lodi-Sharqi struggle for the supremacy of Delhi. In consequence Husain Sharqi lost his own kingdom to the Lodi Sultans and died as fugitive king in Bengal in 1505 A.D. Whenever modern historians⁴⁴ discuss about the role and achievements of royal woman in the history of Delhi Sultanate, they solely emphasis *Razia Sultan*, the only empress in the whole period of the Sultanate. We never highlight the highly influential and powerful royal women like *Bibi Masto*, *Shams Khatun*, *Bibi Amba*, *Bibi Raji* and *Bibi Khonza* in the later part of the Sultanate. They might not be the empress of India but they were very influential and powerful figures and exercised their power from behind the curtain.

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