



WOMEN ON THE MOVE

"SHE was a great sovereign, wise, just and generous, a benefactor of her kingdom and dispenser of justice; the protector of her subjects and a leader of her armies. She was endowed with all the admirable attributes and qualifications befitting a king. But as she did not attain the destiny, in her creation, of being computed among men, of what advantage were all these excellent qualifications unto her?"

So lamented Minhajuddin Abu Umar bin Sirajuddin al-Gujzani (1193-1265?), the premier historian of early medieval India. Minhaj Siraj, as he is commonly known among students and scholars of Indian history, of course should know better than most. For he was not only a contemporary but also an actual participant in the affairs of the state serving, among other things, as the Chief Qazi or Justice of the capital of Delhi for no less than three terms. And the monarch on whose tragic fate Minhaj was commenting was none other than Sultan Razia, the only queen ever to have ruled India in her own right. Her father, Sultan Iltutmish, anxious to ensure future stability of the recently established Sultanate, wanted to choose the ablest from among his surviving children. He knew very well that Razia, his eldest daughter could, if given the opportunity, fill the gap admirably. The high and mighty officials of the state when told of his choice, expressed great misgivings but had to yield reluctantly in view of Razia's recognised superior abilities. Her brothers the courtiers knew to be incompetent, worthless and much given to the usual vices of the spoiled princes of the then ruling houses around all over the known world. Iltutmish, in fact, had been preparing her, so Minhaj tells us, for the future royal responsibilities ever since the sudden death of his eldest son Nasruddin Mahmud in 1229. For example, in 1231 when he left Delhi on a military expedition to Gwalior, he entrusted Razia with the administration of the capital, a job in which she, unlike her brother Ruknuddin in charge of similar responsibilities in other areas, gave a very good account of herself. So on his return from Gwalior, the Sultan, proud and satisfied, issued the royal decree nominating Razia as his heir-apparent.

Sultan Razia The Ruler who Challenged the Established Order

by Zaheda Ahmad

"History scarcely mentions her," Virginia Woolf once wrote in "A Room of One's Own", bemoaning the near invisibility of women in the pages and at various stages of history. Seeing the tragic end of Sultan Razia — the daughter of a Sultan and no ordinary woman in any sense of the term can anyone wonder at the shabby treatment meted out to other women by lords of an unjust social order?"

In view of the time and general outlook of the Muslims, particularly of the civil, military and religious establishment, the nomination of Razia was a unique and exceptionally bold move indeed. It is well known that Islamic law explicitly has excluded women from the offices of the Imam and the sovereign ruler in the person of the Khalifa. Admittedly, during several centuries of much political vicissitudes, rules excepting that on the question of a leader's sex were changed relaxing the other qualifications deemed essential for a sovereign so that "it matters not if he is ignorant, goddess, physically handicapped or even a negro slave." A leader, it is clear, always has to be a male. There were other disabilities attaching to women — as a legal witness she enjoys inferior status. Nor could she lead public prayers, a power that was one of the most original duties of the Imam and by extension also of the Sultan. In practice, however, Turkish-Iranian traditions do furnish us with examples of strong-willed, competent and successful rulers. Still, they were exceptions, nonetheless.

Faced with such formidable gender bias and surrounded by powerful enemies, Razia naturally could not expect to have a smooth sailing on her father's death. Her prodigal brother, actively helped by the machinations of his power hungry vicious mother and her supporters, seized the throne for himself. For a time, the young princess's life itself was in danger. However, the chaos and misrule brought on by the conspirators led the governors of the neighbouring provinces to come marching on the capital. The new Sultan went out of the capital to pacify the rebels leaving Razia behind — an opportunity she used to the full to her advantage.

Dressed in red, the traditional colour for the oppressed demanding justice, she appeared before the people of Delhi assembled for the Friday prayers. There, like the present-day firebrand political activists she in the name of her late father made a direct appeal to them for justice and for deliverance from the oppressive misrule of her stepmother. This novel, bold, dramatic and unheard of gesture on the part of the legitimate heir to the throne produced among the citizens an intense feeling of loyalty and chivalry who led by the local army officers rose in revolt. Isami, a 14th century historian, informs us that Razia was innovative and advanced enough to enter into a covenant with the assembled citizens to the effect that if she did not prove herself "better than men" in the discharge of her royal duties they might as well sever her head off.

So carried on the wave of a popular revolt to the citadel of power, Razia assumed the title of Sultan Raziyat al-Dunya Wal-Din bint al-Sultan. She was a 'Sultan' — a monarch in her own right and not a 'Sultana' meaning the 'king's wife.' Her accession to the throne in 1236 was characterised by several striking features, one of which, already mentioned, was the leading role played by the people of Delhi in the resolution of the succession in favour of the most competent candidate. Her popularity was the main source of her strength. Not only that, she made her continuance on the throne subject to the approval of the people based on her performance as a ruler. Again, it also shows the relative importance of the theologians to

hold their own as against the political orders backed by the popular and bureaucratic elements.

But in the process, the powerful Turkish nobles, Amirs and Malikis were left out of the scene. Hitherto, they had a decisive role in the selection of the Sultan of Delhi including that of her father. This unfortunate event, through no lapse on her part, contributed not a little to her tragic downfall.

Razia's short-lived reign of 42 months (1236-1240) was a very remarkable one in the annals of India. No one can deny that she proved herself equal to the task. But her gender was her greatest disqualification and disadvantage. It is not certain if her postponed coronation was held at all but Isami gives us a glimpse of her first public court. Her throne, so he tells us, "with the consent of the nobles of Hind" was separated from the courtiers and the general public by a screen — the persons seated nearest to her being the female guards and then her own blood relations.

Details of her rule are lacking and yet the few events that were recorded prove beyond doubt her supreme qualities and her determination to be the ruler in her own house.

This was no easy task for a young woman severely handicapped by her sex and also by the machinations and intrigues of her brothers and the scheming nobles. The only steadfast and loyal support that she could count on came from the people of Delhi.

To overcome the severe handicap imposed by the observance of *parda* she, in the third year of her reign, discarded female dress in public altogether. Also, she started riding out openly on elephant

back. Holding public court every week without the female guards and the screen, she transacted state business and dispensed justice "in the manner of kings".

Such courage, excellence and devotion, in an age nearly eight hundred years ago, however, did not prove sufficient, even for an illustrious person as Razia was, in the eyes of the scheming, power hungry political wolves. All along she had to be busy fighting and felling one conspiracy after another. She even went to the extent of marrying one of them named Alkunia — the governor of Bhatinda — in the hope of gaining an ally. In the end the others seized the capital in her absence. While a fugitive, she was murdered by a band of wandering robbers on 13 December, 1240.

Thus died Sultan Razia, a lonely fugitive, unattended and far from her beloved Delhi, the only queen India had ever known. She was a queen whose qualities of head and heart place her far above the incompetent and scheming princes and nobles who knew only how to wreck. In their desperation they were mean enough to heap upon her the unjust and undeserving odium of unchaste behaviour and unwarranted intimacy with an Abyssinian slave. This campaign of vilification they started within six months of her committing the triple offence of "discarding the veil, holding public court and riding out in the city." In the eyes of these scandal-mongers her greatest fault was her disregard of all conventions in discarding the veil and thereby creating "public suspicion". This they later held out against her as proof of her unfitness to rule and reason for consequent removal.

"History scarcely mentions her," Virginia Woolf once wrote in "A Room of One's Own", bemoaning the near invisibility of women in the pages and at various stages of history. Seeing the tragic end of Sultan Razia — the daughter of a Sultan and no ordinary woman in any sense of the term can anyone wonder at the shabby treatment meted out to other women by lords of an unjust social order?"

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Giving a New Lease of Life

by Rt Shafiqul Islam

IN February 1993 I met Kohinoor (17), in Deana Women's Development Project in a group meeting. She looked pale and almost half-starved. On enquiry she told me that she had appeared at the SSC examination in 1992 but could not be successful. Her father was a casual Jute Mills worker. Most of the time he remained without any work and naturally the family had to starve. Kohinoor's family consists of five members. None could be engaged in any gainful work. She heard of the Women Development Project. She went there to explore if she could do something for herself and for the family.

I wanted to know from her if another Tk 500.00 to pay off the loan taken from the money lender.

e) Finished products of per maund of ropes are sold Tk 450.00.

f) From each maund of waste jute Tk 200 stands as profit.

From the above statements it is found that Tk 400.00 could be earned in each week and an average Tk 1200.00 to Tk 1500.00 could be earned in a month. This seems to be very acceptable proposition.

She took Tk 1000.00 from the project in March 1993 for a period of one year. Within the stipulated time she had paid

of life. Taka 1000.00 is multiplied into four thousand in every month leaving aside an income of about Taka 1500.00 in every month plus a gainful occupation for all other members of her family.

Kohinoor also informed me in the meeting that she took another loan of Tk 3000.00 on 2-12-93 after repaying the first loan on 19-11-93. Out of this loan she has repaid Tk 1,200.00 so far. With the help of this loan she has increased the volume of her business. She now can buy waste jute and keep in stock for rolling the small enterprise.

In reply to a question she informed me that in less than 2 years time she has been able to



Kohinoor preparing jute for making rope

she could think of something which could give her a gainful occupation. Very promptly she responded. I was surprised to know that her family was engaged in making ropes which has a good market in Daulatpur and Khulna. As they had to live hand to mouth, they could not keep the capital for running this small enterprise. Sometimes they borrowed money from the money lenders at a very exorbitant rate of interest (for Taka 100 Taka 10 has to be paid as interest in every week). So, they could not make any profit and also could not sustain the business.

I wanted to know how much money she would require for starting the business again. She gave me an account like this:

a) Waste jute used for rope making costs Tk 250.00 per maund which is available in Jute Mills in Daulatpur.

b) She and other members of her family can use 2 maunds of waste jute in a week for rope making.

c) Ropes are made with the help of indigenous tools.

d) Tk 500.00 is the minimum capital with which she can start with and that can keep her family engaged in earning some money. Moreover, she needs

back the loan money with 5 per cent service charge. She also started saving money which is being accumulated and maintained in a Bank in the Group's account as savings. She has accumulated Tk 350.00 in less than 2 years period which she could never think of had she never been a member of the group of the project. Her performance was considered to be outstanding in her group and she was made group chairperson.

On 11 October, 1994, I along with our club president and 3 other Rotarians attended the quarterly group chairpersons meeting in the project office at Deana. I was quite surprised to see the changes in Kohinoor. She was nicely dressed and looked pretty. She seemed to be very confident and hopeful of her future. She narrated to me that she had attended three training courses organized by the project which gave her some insights and now she made herself responsible for her own future. She is aware that with her 10 years of education she cannot expect a job in this scarce job market but the self-employment opportunity which the project has offered to her given her and her family a new lease

earn a profit of about Tk 20,000.00 from this rope making business. Her mother and sister all work in this enterprise. The seed money which she received was the only missing factor in her enterprise. The income the family earns is used for food staff. She also helped her father making the dwelling house with 'Golpata'. Previously the roof was covered with polythene and it got wet during raining. Now the condition has improved.

In reply to another question she informed me that the Women Development Project has given her a gainful occupation, a standing in the community and a hope for survival with dignity. Initially when she joined in a group she faced criticism from the neighbours. But the neighbors could never show her a way to live. Now she and other hundreds of women of Deana by participating in the project could change the way of their life. Now they are thinking of making a Federation of all 29 groups having a total women members of 1073 to take their own decisions with support from the Rotary Club of Khulna North.

The writer is past-president, Rotary Club of Khulna North.

KAPASIA

thana town in Gazipur district is better known as a business centre. There is a big market place on the bank of the river Sitalakkhya. At the northern part adjacent to the market there is a ferry ghat. Boats are waiting for carrying passengers to cross the river. The river Sitalakkhya is considerably broad at this point. Straight to the other side is Torgaon ferry ghat. Just six kilometers away from Torgaon is the Baghia village where fishermen live in. The earth-built road along the river side gradually became narrower and turned into a footpath as if, it has lost importance at the point of entering into the less important village of the fishermen. On the right side of the road there is a cluster of houses that belongs to the poor fishermen. One of the houses is owned by Luxmi Rani Barman.

As I stepped into her house, Luxmi Rani (38) and a widow, came out and received me cordially. She let me sit on a chowki (bedstead) placed in the courtyard. Luxmi's courtyard covers a very small area. On its western side there is a tin-shed room with mud walls. This is the only bed room of the family. On the northern side of the courtyard there is a narrow thatched kitchen fenced with jute stalks. And on the south-west corner five to six big empty earthen containers of dry fish are placed in order. There are many trees in Luxmi Rani's homestead including coco-nut, betel-nut, mango, jack-fruit, papaya and banana trees. Big clusters of bananas are hanging on the banana trees and the betel-nut trees have just begun producing nuts.

Luxmi Rani's entire life has been a struggle. Her parent's house is in Ikuria village another fishing community which is also within Kapasia thana. The condition of her father was very miserable. Luxmi's childhood was full of scarcity and hardship. She read up to class III in the local primary school after which she engaged herself in house-hold works at her parents' lodge. At the age of only 14 she was married off and sent to the house of her in-laws. Till today that sweet innocent girl has been dragging the yoke of the distressed family. The goddess Luxmi (goddess of wealth) never did take pity on Luxmi Rani.

Learning the Way of Life

by Md Mustafa Kamal

Ten years ago, her husband Sattvyendra Chandra Barman suffered long from various diseases and died. He left Luxmi with a heavy burden of 5 minor children. But Luxmi Rani did not bow down with this burden. She has been earnestly discharging her responsibility with patience.

At the time of Luxmi's marriage her parents gave her husband a wrist watch, a gold ring and a new dress despite their hardships. They also gave her a pair of earring and

Laily Begum, came to this fishermen's community. She paid door to door visits and talked to the distressed fisherwomen. On hearing about Luxmi Rani she went to her house. Sitting together Laily listened attentively to the tragic story of Luxmi and consoled her. She advised Luxmi to form a group (Samity) unitedly with other distressed women to bring about changes in their condition. She further informed that if they form group, ASA would extend help

4,000 again for the 3rd term as credit from the organization. This time she gets strength in her mind. She purchases one full container of dry fish through Monindra. It costs Tk 3,000 only. Monindra does not take the carrying cost from Luxmi Rani.

Luxmi also raises poultry and rears goats in her house. She had 12 hens, but out of those 3 have been taken away by fox. She also had 5 goats.



Keen to learn

some utensils for domestic use. Luxmi got gold bangles, one ring and one *oppel* from the part of her in-laws. Now she possesses nothing of those ornaments. She sold everything for her husband's treatment.

After the death of her husband Luxmi spent her days through untold sufferings. There was none to earn in the family of six members. The eldest son Sajal was then only of 12 years and the youngest Subodh merely a child of one year. Accepting help from every possible corner she barely kept her children survive. Luxmi Rani specially cannot forget the help of Monindra Chandra, her husband's younger brother. Monindra at his best extended financial help and also influenced other relations to come forward for rescuing the distressed family.

Four years ago, a field worker of the NGO — Association for Social Advancement (ASA), named

and work in their favour. Being encouraged 20 distressed women of the fishermen's community got together and formed "Baghia Jele Para Landless Women's Group". The house of Sabitra was selected as the weekly meeting place of the group. Laily Begum used to remain present in each weekly meeting on Sundays. For proper management of groups one chairperson, one secretary and one cashier were selected by the group members from themselves.

Luxmi Rani became the cashier. The meeting is treated as the development education class. All practical issues are discussed. It aims to develop educational, health and nutritional, economic, social, political and cultural awareness, through holding participatory discussion. Each of the group members also has to deposit Tk 2 only as weekly thrift.

In the month of February 1993 Luxmi Rani gets Tk

Divorce Spells Discrimination for UN Wives

Eve Koudri Kuhn writes from Vienna

ALTHOUGH this is the United Nations International Year of the Family, when it comes to abuse among the families of its own employees the world body turns a blind eye, critics say.

Wives of UN employees are often thought of as a privileged group. But they are virtually migrants with few rights, says Nana Apeadu, a New York consultant for African refugees.

As a result, when anything goes wrong with their marriage, they can find themselves out in the cold. The UN does not allow alimony to be deducted from employees' salaries. It does not help destitute wives or children.

The story is now familiar within the UN: the newly-divorced wife of an employee is summarily packed off to her home country on a one-way ticket, without the means of livelihood or household necessities. She can no longer live in the country where she and her husband have lived for decades. Nor is she entitled to health insurance, pension or any other type of income.

The wife of a UN official in New York recalls her husband screaming, "Who are you going to tell? Nobody cares about you. You have no rights. You have no status. Who do you think you are? You are a parasite. You should just go home."

A UN pensioner in Vienna refused to give his wife of more than 25 years her ticket home and would not share his pension, secure in the knowledge that the UN will not put any pressure on him.

The UN is keen on declarations about the sanctity of the family and the elimination of discrimination against women. But, reports Gemini News Service, many women in the UN system say that the world body makes life tough for UN wives.

"I personally had to collect money so that a wife of a high-ranking official could survive in New York," said Apeadu, a member of a small group of women who meet in New York to work on the problem.

Cases of abuse, neglect, abandonment, enforced repatriation and withdrawal of support for children have been documented by the UN staff welfare office. But demands for action — which came into the open in 1991 with a public appeal by Padma Venkataraman, Vienna representative of the All India Women's Conference — have fallen on deaf ears.

Most of those cases are male.

The UN insists these are personal matters. It looks after the employee, not the family.

Nathalie Tschyrkow, a Geneva human rights lawyer married to a UN staffer, has been trying to get the UN Federation of International Civil Servants to take up the issue of pension rights. This year she also renewed requests to the UN Joint Pension Board to rule that when employees die, benefits should be paid to dependents, including divorced spouses.

The board has been considering the issue since 1978, but always defers a decision.

Among the changes demanded by campaigners are:

- Wives and divorced wives should be allowed to work. Spouses who are not allowed to seek employment in the country in which their partner is posted should be reimbursed for lost wages and pension while abroad.
- Health insurance, education grants and dependency allowances should be paid directly to the dependent or, if there are children, to the school.
- The lifting of diplomatic immunity so that court settlements can be reached on domestic disputes, wages should be subject to garnisheering for spousal or child support and divorced wives should be entitled to a portion of their ex-husband's pension.
- Domestic violence should not be ignored by the UN. Help, including a telephone hot-line, should be provided.

A small glimmer of hope is that the UN is considering a tiny dependency allowance of about \$500 per year to be paid directly to spouses or dependents. But officials say they are hesitant to talk about it because of internal resistance to the proposal.

Most women who spoke to Gemini News Service said they had little hope of the UN voluntarily changing its rules. The women's only hope was that public exposure and pressure from UN members would embarrass the organisation into action.

"The pressure will have to come from outside," said Jennifer Roehl, a UN staff counsellor in New York who has been documenting such cases for years, with little results.

— Gemini News

The writer is a freelance journalist based in Vienna.

The gender gap



● Total jobs: 2,573	
● N. America and Caribbean:	228
● Europe:	225
● Asia and Pacific:	163
● Latin America:	78
● Africa:	74
● Middle East:	29

Source: UN
As on 30 June 1993