

Lambert-Hurley, Siobhan. 2007. *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage: Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum of Bhopal*. London and New York: Routledge, 256 pages. ISBN 978 0 415 40192 0.

# Lifting up women without lifting the veil: an early 20th century Muslim women's movement in colonial India

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In the 19th and 20th centuries, the central Indian Muslim state of Bhopal was led by a succession of Begums, or high-ranking Muslim women. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley's *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage*, an account of Indian Muslim women's first attempts to secure their own education and rights, tells the story of perhaps the most important one, Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum.

Though Sultan Jahan's reform movement began among the elite of Bhopali society, her ideas on women's autonomy eventually transcended community and class boundaries. Interestingly, she was quite conservative compared to other Muslim socio-religious reformers in India and other Muslim countries. Her Muslim identity evolved as she progressed in her educational reforms. She wore the veil and didn't criticise purdah, yet upheld women's rational search for self through discipline, education and a thorough understanding of their rights (as written in the Koran). Because many Islamic injunctions are interpretable, she envisioned programmes befitting women's autonomy according to her own understanding of Islam and strengthened by certain colonial imports, such as class sensibilities and health awareness. Since the reforms were initiated by Bhopal's highest authority, they were autocratic in many ways though not immune to criticism. But her stature and motivation helped her prevail over many of those criticisms, and she ingeniously mediated differences of opinion among two generations of women reformers.

## Islamic in her own way

The author uses both personal and official records, and the reports of early organisations and institutions of the Bhopal state to identify socio-political organisation by (Muslim) women. This categorically debunks the stereotypical distorted picture of Muslim women as prisoners to household drudgery and sexual frustration, and instead brings to light issues related to their socio-political status, political identity and educational development. Movement leaders pined for social and educational opportunities and to play a role in public affairs. The book reviews the administrations of previous Begums and their impact on Sultan Jahan. While all were aligned with Islamic precepts, rulers were largely tolerant of other religious and social groups, including Sultan Jahan. Her forays into politically charged Islamic universalism were essentially a product of the times, as the 1920s was an era of the Allied occupation of Turkey and the subsequent Khilafat movement. She soon realised Islamic universalism was not an intelligent choice in a state where the ruler did not share the same religion as her subjects. Moreover, as the author demonstrates, her political administration and educational programmes for women were patently different from the governments of other

Muslim countries. Reformist ulema and male and female intellectuals formed the core of her administration, its members chosen on the basis of ability rather than clan or group solidarity. She was Islamic in her own way, equally embracing purdah and English education.

Contextualising women's empowerment within the Prophet's message as articulated in the Koran and Sunna, Sultan Jahan employed Islamic rhetoric to strike a balance between a woman's domestic and official duties and her quest for knowledge. This was the best way to convince conservative Muslim parents to allow their daughters to attend school and to peacefully comply with what was essentially an educational programme imposed from on high. Bhopal was the first Indian state to take such steps.

Its programme, eventually, addressed the masses; blended modern and traditional education; highlighted areas of women's expertise – the home and the family – thus facilitating awareness among women to use their education their daily lives; and justified a course of study that was designed by women and for women, resulting in a women's movement with a distinct identity. Crucially, the programme made it possible for students to observe purdah, arranging for enclosed carriages, female staff and separate quarters to hold classes. Not long after the programme succeeded among the elite, scholarships were offered and the programme's influence spread to the poor, enrolling widows, orphans and even non-Muslim women.

In health care education, her programme again stood at the interface of modern and traditional practices. Juxtaposed with Western medicine, *unani tibb* medicine was revised and traditional health practitioners, or *hakims*, and more specifically midwives, improved their skills through proper, comprehensive *tibb* training and the introduction of certain scientific techniques. She was driven to spread knowledge about sanitation, hygiene, basic child birth, first aid and home nursing because she believed they were all essential to making women autonomous in matters related to maternity and child welfare, which, by extension, contributed to national welfare. This was how Sultan Jahan envisioned empowering women in and outside the home. After participating in the programme, elite women took on the responsibility of educating poor women, according themselves professional stature and fulfilling one of the five pillars of Islam, charity.

## Balancing act: increasing autonomy, but not at the expense of custom or social duty

For Sultan Jahan, separate spheres for men and women were crucial, as a woman's self-actualisation had to take place in an environment where women edu-



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cated other women. She strongly felt that women interacting with women, exchanging bodily knowledge no less than religious knowledge, was a source of female autonomy. She appealed to Islamic and early Muslim history to buttress her educational reforms, promoting Islamic learning and adding doses of English education. The latter was necessary to broaden her reforms beyond a strictly religious model and provide mothers and wives with practical training. Once Sultan Jahan instilled a woman's official and domestic duties, she addressed cultural and other scholarly activities with élan.

Sultan Jahan was a visionary whose reformist discourse within a traditional context was a model for women to change their perception of themselves. It was made possible, as the author emphatically states, because the reforms emanated from the highest state authority – the Sultan herself. Her success lay in emphasising female domesticity and training capable housewives and good mothers – roles that received God's admiration. The author discusses at length the initiatives taken

to compose the curriculum, which overlapped other socio-religious reformers' justifications for promoting female education. Her programmes created a constituency of women within the Bhopal state who were educated and could look beyond community, religious and gender boundaries. She encouraged preparing (especially poor) women for practical female occupations, training housewives and wage earners rather than offering a strictly academic curriculum, which was quite unsuitable to the poor's socio-economic conditions. This prevented them from falling into disreputable jobs. More than anything else, it was Sultan Jahan's efforts to educate lower class adult women that set her apart from her fellow Muslim reformers.

Though she endorsed incremental change within the traditional context, Sultan Jahan was not averse to the West. She encouraged women to be selective in their approach to new ideas and Western culture. Her aim was to increase female political participation without compromising their social duties or the institution of the veil, which was why radical (women) reformers of later generations questioned her ideas, especially her approach to the veil, and sometimes labelled her conservative. But she didn't allow her programme to be overcome by internal fissures and accepted the idea that women could take part in public affairs without wearing the veil. This never meant that she compromised her orthodox ideas; she neither called for radical change nor gave up the veil herself. A paradox, perhaps, but to her the veil did not obstruct women's literary skills, leadership abilities or political wisdom.

Another interesting facet of Sultan Jahan's – and, for that matter, of the Bhopal state's – administration was the viability of the institution of kingship. Sultan Jahan maintained her loyalty to the British and proclaimed everlasting allegiance and submission to the king. Nevertheless, her

administration's particular traits, reflected in her reforms, reveal an ongoing negotiation between colonial power and the princely state. She used English education to advance and fit into the imperial structure, and negotiated with a range of colonial and Islamic models to empower women.

## Unveiling a visionary

Lambert-Hurley has contributed an interesting perspective of a movement that placed Indian Muslim women on the cusp of a new feminism that crossed boundaries and strengthened the social and intellectual bonds of the women involved. An all-female sphere provided leadership roles and opportunities to organise and build networks, which, the author remarks, prepared them for future political activity.

In my understanding, Sultan Jahan wanted to create female camaraderie through issues that permeated their lives, and she drew on a wide range of reformist models – those provided by the colonial state, Aligarh modernists and Deobandi Ulema – but in the end her enterprise could not be bridled by any of them, as her main aim was to assert women's autonomy in a hitherto unknown way. Commendably, the author imparts this originality. Sultan Jahan was able to negotiate with Islamic conservatism and colonial discourse with ease, and engage with Western scientific knowledge and adapt it to address the specific concerns of Indian Muslim women. The Bhopal women's reformist discourse responded to its colonial counterpart by extracting the best from it and then blending it with indigenous traditions to speak for the movement and other women. In sum, the author has deftly unveiled the poorly known story of Sultan Jahan.

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