

Rewriting Sultan Raziyyat ud Dunya Wa Ud Din: Contesting Popular Portrayals and Writings Around the Figure.

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to contest the popular portrayal of the first and the last female ruler to sit on the throne of Delhi, Sultan Raziyyat ud Dunya Wa Ud Din (1236-40) of the Ilbari Dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate, using the primary source of Minhaj-i-Siraj Juzjani's account called Tabqat-i-Nasiri. Comparisons through the work of Isami would also be drawn. Contestations around her media portrayals and that she is more than just her relationship with Yakut & Mirza Altunia. It also seeks to answer questions of her cross-dressing and contesting its association to gender transformation as proposed by scholars like Alyssa Gabbay, and how the subcontinent's patriarchy affected her dethronement and not just some mere "favoring of an Abyssinian slave." It also seeks to question the lenses through which women rulers are generally viewed, as emotional beings incapable to make rational and strategic decisions and the difference in attribution by historians, challenging the existing historiography around the figure.

The paper is primarily based on the translated account of Minhaj-i-Siraj Juzjani and Isami.

Keywords: Raziya, eyewitness, Turkish tribal identity, Islam, patriarchy, media, viewing lens, female sovereignty, gender, cross-dressing.

Sultan Razziyat, the eldest child of Sultan Iltutmish belonged to the Ilbari Dynasty and as Juzjani says was bestowed with all the qualities of a sultan, Amir Khusrow even calls her a lioness against whom the brave men bow their heads. She defied not only the norms of patriarchy but also gender-specific roles, yet the popular image of her is still associated with the men in her life and the “assumed romantic relationships”. Sultan Raziyyat is a woman written through the lens of male historians and this paper seeks to challenge that lens. It seeks to question the fixation and obsession with gender when it comes to ruling that it overshadows all of one’s capabilities, it seeks to question how one’s religion becomes an obstacle in the governance of the empire and how binding are its rules and when one wishes to move away from them for the welfare of her citizens and for her reign, she is faced with dethronement and consequently assassination.

1. Historiography

Before understanding the history of Sultan Raziyyat, it’s important for us to understand the primary sources she is mentioned in.

2.1 Tabqat-i-Nasiri

The *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri* was written by the then Chief Qazi of Dihli, Minhaj us Siraj Juzjani. It covers the detailed history of the Delhi Sultanate from Qutub-uddin-Aibak’s time to Ghiyasuddin Balban. “He completed it under the Malik of Hind, Nasiruddin.”¹ The book is written across 23 volumes and the medium of language is Persian. The purpose of the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*

¹He completed it under the patronage of Sultan Nassiruddin Mahmud Shah.

was to serve as an account of the Islamic dynasties that originated in Iran and Central Asia. It can also be interpreted that Sultan Iltutmish's act of giving the Qazi ship of Gwalior to Juzjani and the patronage given to him by Sultan Nasiruddin and Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban might have been the antecedent factors for compiling their genealogy. The book tells about his religious views and his historiographical approach to Islam and Muslim rulers. For the purpose of research, volume 20 and 22 are relevant to us. The translation which is being used belongs to Major H. Raverty.

The book, according to me, is an account that is a factual record of all the events which took place in the timeline mentioned. The account lacks critical analysis which to some extent might have been favorable for our Sultan.

2.1.1 Memoir of the Author. Minhaj us Siraj Juzjani derives his name from his father and grandfather which means Lamp or luminary of the faith. After the Ghurian conquests to Lahore, his father was appointed as the Kazi of the Ghurian troops and Juzjani was born after this appointment in the year 582 H, hence comes from a long line of reputed ecclesiastics². He started his journey to India in 620 H and arrived here at 625 H alongwith Sultan Iltutmish and was given the office of Kazi, Khatib and Imam of Gwalior and its dependencies. He came back to the capital during the early reign of Sultan Razziyat. He was first given the chief Kazi ship of Delhi Kingdom and capital under the rule of Sultan Bahram Shah. Under Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah, Juzjani composed his very first verse entitled Nasiri Namah, dedicated to his patron, Balban on his expedition against Talsandah. When his patron, Ghiyas ud- din Balban assumed the throne, he was offered the chief Kazi ship once again.

2.1.2 Sultan Razziyat. Juzjani describes the Sultan in a very positive light. He starts his narrative by calling her "a great sovereign, and sagacious, just, beneficent, the patron of the

² Members of the clergy

learned, dispenser of justice, the cherisher of her subjects and of warlike talent and was endowed with all the admirable attributes and qualifications necessary for kings”.³ However, even though he though he is attributing these qualities to her, he is at the same time questioning her biological sex and in turn questioning her legitimacy to throne and her destiny to be the Sultan. He then mentions that Raziyat exercised some level of authority under her father, evident from the incident where she was left in charge of the affairs while he was gone in the Gwalior expedition. Minhaj then mentions the most important event which is the proclamation of naming Raziyyat as the heir to the throne.

“After my death it will be seen that not one of them [his sons] will be found to be more worthy of the heir apprenticeship than she, my daughter”⁴ and it turned out to be true.

He then describes the accession of Raziya to the throne and how she managed to turn the citizens in remembrance of Sultan Iltutmish. Few of the maliks who had earlier marched against Sultan Rukhnuddin Firoz Shah including the wazir, Muhammed Junaidi did not acknowledge her and assembled before the gate of the city and bore hostilities against her. She was however, “as the good fortune” was able to sow dissension amongst them, resolve it and arrange her government. After this two “important people” are being mentioned, one who was the main conspirator behind her dethronement, the Malik-i-Kabir, Ikhtiyar ud Din Aetkin who at this time became the Amir-i-Hajib and the other who is “romantically linked with her and seen as the cause of her dethronement”, Malik Jamal ud Din Yakut, the Habashi slave who acquired “favor” [his due promotion]. This favor incited the jealousy of the Turk Amirs which was now accompanied by her cross dressing and her public appearances. I will elaborate more about these later in the paper.

³ Siraj Juzjani 1970, 637

⁴ Siraj Juzjani 1970, 639. Sultan Iltutmish says this when Razziyat’s gender was seen as an objection in becoming the Sultan.

Then the rebellion of Malik Ikhtiyar ud Din Altuniah is mentioned which was in the sacred month of Ramzan. The Sultan was outnumbered, seized and sent to the fortress of Tabarhindah. Yakut was killed by the Turk amirs and her half brother Bahram Shah was made the Sultan. During her imprisonment, Sultan Raziyyat entered into a matrimonial alliance with Malik Altuniah and marched together with their forces against Sultan Bahram Shah to reclaim the throne. At their second attempt, the troops deserted them at Kaithal and they fell captive to Hindus and attained martyrdom. Thus, her defeat took place on 13th October 1240 and her reign extended over a period of three years, six months and six days.

2.2 Futuhu's Salatin

Futuhu's Salatin is a metrical account in Persian of the History of the Muslim Rule from the Ghaznavids to the date of composition which is 1350 AD. The author is Abdu'l Malik Isami who is contemporary from the time of Sultan Alauddin Khalji. He composed this history under the patronage of Sultan Ala'ud Din Bahman Shah of the Deccan. Isami unlike Juzjani offers a critical evaluation of the events, however it's also important to know that he was not an eyewitness of Sultan Raziyyat's reign and his account is thus based on legends, anecdotes and works of other chroniclers and thus there is always a danger of manipulation of facts. Nonetheless, the account serves as a very good source in understanding the attitude of people towards Sultan Raziyyat and if it had changed through the years. Isami's writing style is clear, simple and free from abstruseness. According to me, it is written in a very dramatized form, in a manner of a theatrical play. The translation which is being used belongs to Dr. Agha Mahdi Hussain, published at Agra in 1938. It is published in two volumes and volume 2 contains the history of our Sultan Raziyyat.

2.2.1 Memoir of the Author. Isami was born in the city of Delhi in the year 710 H. He lost his father at a tender age and since then as his name suggests, he learnt to stand on his own feet and became a self independent man. His grandfather was born in the reign of Sultan Raziyyat and according to his claims his ancestry is distinguished. When the capital shift took place Isami came to Daulatabad and then proceeded to Deccan where he joined the court of his patron.

2.2.2 Sultan Raziyyat. Isami starts Sultan Raziyyat's story with a discussion which is taking place amongst the Turk Amirs regarding the next heir to the throne. Then enters Raziyya and gives a speech on her worthiness and how she was chosen by the late sultan herself,

“It is I whom the king had chosen as his heir apparent; to me he had entrusted his seal.”⁵

Upon hearing her speech, the amirs decided that, “A daughter is better than an ill bred son,” and thus the daughter became the Sultan. Isami says that the chiefs made her the Sultan as they were determined to not repeat the same mistakes.

He gives a detail of the coronation ceremony which took place in 635 H, and the title which was conferred upon her was Raziyatuddin.⁶ He then explains her dedication towards the state affairs and proceeds to call her act of striking independent coins as malicious. He then comments on her removal of purdah. Isami was told that the Sultan discarded her purdah, in turn discarding her modesty and became jovial. She held public durbars for the next 6 months and everybody could see her face. He then describes the proximity between Jamal ud din Yakut, the ethiopian slave and the Sultan, which invited the envy of the amirs. Due to these incidents Isami presents a dialogue between the turk amirs, the nature of which is extremely sexualising and tells us about the gender associated roles of those times. The views held about women were so low and just confined to

⁵ Isami,1976. Verses 2505-2517

⁶ We know the title through her coins.

treating women as an object who needs to be controlled by a man and not the vice versa. Isami tells us that the amirs devised a plan to kill Yaqut and dethrone the Sultan. The execution of which went accordingly. Yaqut was killed in the durbar and the Sultan was seized and sent in heavy chains to Tabarhindah. A year and a half passed in the imprisonment and then Isami tells us about a man named Latuna⁷ who stormed into the fortress of Tabarhindah, captured it, took Raziya out of the prison and married her. Then the readers are told about a dialogue between Raziya and Latuna where she shares her “cherished secret” of being a Sultan for 3 years and 3 months. She urges him to fight for her cause, and left with “no alternative” Latuna gives his consent for the war. She paraded her troops towards the capital. When the news reached Sultan Bahram Shah, he summoned his army chiefs and asked them to help him against his “wicked sister” and assigned Balban as the commander for his troops. Under his leadership “defeat was inflicted on the battlefield on the troops of Raziya. She took to flight and proceeded to Tabarhindah”⁸.

However, Raziya was not killed and after 3-4 months she again organized an army and marched towards Delhi. The powerful Balban who had defeated her forces once was confident that he could do it again and he eventually did it. Raziya’s forces fled and according to Isami she herself fled towards the direction of Kaithal where a group of robbers captured and killed the couple.

2. Differences in the narratives

Both the works differ in their narratives at many instances. The first one being the accession to the throne. Juzjani has described the struggles Raziyya had to face in order to sit on the throne, he has also described the role people played in helping her to ascend and how truly she was the

⁷ Isami 1976, verses 2618-2627. Latuna is Altunia, it’s a persian word which has been arabicized

⁸ Isami, 1976. Verses 2661-2663

Sultan of the people. He mentions the disapproval of the wazir of the kingdom and how she had to create dissent amongst the amirs in order to firmly establish herself. No such struggle has been mentioned by Isami and the account starkly differs.

“Should I acquit myself as ruler better than man, you might keep me on the throne.

Should you yourselves see things otherwise, you may remove the crown from my head”.

He projects that it was easy for Raziya to gain the throne and refuses to acknowledge her struggles and proposed that her succession was only possible because the Turk amirs agreed to it and that they had no better choice. The other instance is the elaborate description of the coronation ceremony [where she has been objectified⁹] which took place and has no mentions in Juzjani’s account, although it might be a possibility that later a coronation ceremony did take place, which Juzjani hurriedly left to mention. The portrayal of the act of removing of the purdah also differs in the account, Juzjani briefly just describes the instance and doesn’t give his personal opinions, neither does Isami but he twists it by saying “I’m told” and then goes on to say that the act “discarded her modesty and made her jovial”. After this verse, he drops the respect of the Sultan and calls her “that daughter of a renowned king”. He then goes on to explain the closeness between Jamaluddin Yaqut and the Sultan which was not so elaborately explained by Juzjani and was dismissed by saying that he “acquired the favor of Sultan”. Isami in this way is very smart, he doesn’t explicitly write his dismay to the relationship but portrays the relationship in such a derogatory way to bring down the reputation of the Sultan and shows her weak who needs the help of a slave even to mount on the horse. The other important event where the accounts totally differ is the imprisonment of the Sultan. Juzjani says that the imprisonment took place when the Sultan went to crush the rebellion of Malik Altuniah but Isami’s account says that the Turk nobles seized

⁹ Words such as gentle breeze and venus have been used to describe her.

her in the public durbar, chained her and sent her to the fortress as a prisoner. Isami has nowhere mentioned the rebellious act of both Altuniah and Malik Kabir Khan. The only similarity in the accounts are the ‘strategist turk amirs’ who were in both cases able to depose the Sultan. This thus jeopardizes her reputation, again portraying her to be weak in defending herself and her people. The other instance is the capturing of the fortress of Tabarhindah by a man named Latuna¹⁰ who saved Raziyya from the prison and then married her. Neither the man is mentioned in Juzjani’s account nor the instance of the capturing the fortress is, in fact the very opposite to it is mentioned which is that Malik Ikhtiyar uddin Altuniah and The Sultan came into a marriage contract for their own reasons. By not mentioning the alliance Isami is trying to project that the Sultan needed the saving of man without whom she would have neither made out of the prison and nor be able to raise an army to reclaim her throne, he shows that out of compulsion Latuna had to give in his consent for supporting the cause of Raziya but Juzjani’s account says otherwise, it was a matrimonial alliance to which both the parties chose to enter, keeping in mind the benefits of it.

Thus, Isami’s writing, though elaborate, attempts to put forward a very negative view of the Sultan which might have been influenced by the later narratives of Turkish bandagans over the span of approximately more than a century. Isami sees Sultan Raziyyat no more than a woman whereas Juzjani respects her as a Sultan, and does not hold a cynical view. The comparison and differences between both the sources also tells us about how the acceptance of the notion of female sovereignty changed over time, how legends, exaggerations and personal biases change the course of history writing.

¹⁰ Isami,1976. Verses 2618-2627, Latuna in both the manuscripts is Altuniya of the chronicles. It’s a turkish word, seemingly arabicized.

3. Gender and Religion, the purdah that hid the rest

Gender and Religion, two important social categories which have considerably influenced the flow of history. Gender in the time period which we are talking about refers to a category based on the biological sex of the individual and not on what the individual identifies themselves as, thus Sultan Raziyyat's gender according to this was female. Scholars like Alyssa Gabbay suggest otherwise, she suggests that Sultan Razziyat identified herself as a male given the instance of her cross dressing. However, I'm of the view that by cross dressing she just wanted to portray herself as a Sultan because identifying with a gender other than your biological sex is a modern notion and she was just wearing the garb fit for her position, if your school uniform included pants for girls, you would have to wear it and since pants being essentially a male garment, would wearing it make you less feminine? Would it imply that you are identifying yourself as a male? Similarly, why would Sultan Raziyyat want to wear anything else besides what Sultans essentially wear? Why is she wearing the dress fit for Sultans called cross dressing in the first place? Doesn't this term instill the fact that the position of Sultan was only for males, even if it wasn't in her time?

Both the writers, especially Isami was so obsessed with her gender and attribute all the wrongdoings to it that they ignored to write about the political accomplishments of the Sultan, one such being that the Mongols never caused any trouble at the western frontier during her entire reign. Isami's extremely cynical view towards women is evident from the dialogue between the turk amirs. In his narrative, he has not given the Sultan her due respect instead has sexually objectified her and women in general. He has reduced her to only her gender.

Religion, another social category which played a huge role in Sultan Raziyya's portrayal. Islam has essentially been a very patriarchic religion which tends to control everything in women from her clothes to her body. In Sultan Raziyyat's case the religion not only debarred her from

sitting on the throne but also inhibited her from performing her duties as a Sultan. One of the major factors in her dethronement was the removal of purdah, holding public durbars and riding out in the public which A.B.M Habibullah calls as the triple offense. This religious practice of purdah inhibited the Sultan to carry out her duties and be more closer to the people and when she tried to oppose it she faced dethronement. Another instance was when she set out against Malik Altuniah in the month of Ramzan. Due to the fasting her troops were unable to put up a fight and travel the distance, thus she lost. Here religion clouded rationality.

Thus, religion played a major role in being an obstacle in the governance, “The notion that women were unsuited to rule is exemplified in a hadith attributed to the Prophet Mohammad, who, upon hearing that the Persians had appointed Bōrān to the throne, allegedly said, “Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler,” and in the Seljuk statesman Nezām al-Molk’s (d. 1092) advice to kings to refrain from allowing women to assume power, “for they are wearers of the veil and have not complete intelligence”.¹¹ These descriptions speak for it.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it had always been difficult to rule an empire but more so if the person is a woman, not because she is incapable but because every action of hers would be reduced to gender and no matter how talented they might be, they would always face backlash for the same. Facts and Narratives would be twisted in order to please the patriarchal society and to maintain the power status quo. Thus, as students of history and women ourselves, it’s important to challenge it and offer a different view not only for ourselves but for the honor of our ancestors and future young

¹¹ Gabbay, 2011.

women. Throughout her life, Sultan Razziyat constantly fought for the respect of the Sultan which she deserved despite her gender and it's about time that she be given that.

(Word Count: 3300)

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