



THE BEGUMS OF BHOPAL: A DYNASTY OF WOMEN RULERS IN RAJ INDIA (BOOK REVIEW)

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The book “The Begums of Bhopal: A Dynasty of Women Rulers of Raj India” is authored by Shaharyar M. Khan. He was born 12 March 1934. He is a former career Pakistan diplomat who became Foreign Secretary of Pakistan in 1990 and retired from service in 1994. He served as United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General to Rwanda (1994–1996) also. Shaharyar Khan has written a number of books specially “The Begums of Bhopal” is a history of the princely state of Bhopal and “Shallow Graves of Rwanda” on his experiences on what Rwanda went through. The Begum of Bhopal, Sultan Jahan was his grandmother, and Shah Jahan Begum was his great-grandmother. Since August 1999, he served as the chairman of Pakistan Cricket Board and as the president of Asian Cricket Council in 2016. The ISBN is 9780755626144 and it was published by Bloomsbury Publishing.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

A Pearl in the Ocean of Bhopal’s History, the book “The Begums of Bhopal” written by Shaharyar M. Khan is a detailed and unique story of a dynasty ruled by the powerful women rulers in an era of male dominated society. The book deals with the story of a handsome and an ambitious boy (Dost Mohammad Khan) with ambitions to conquer and his descendants.

Dost Mohammad Khan: The story starts with the founder escaping his home to an unknown but a land full of treasures and opportunities and then with the gradual but a strong establishment of a princely state during the time of chaos followed by the death the tyranny “Aurangzeb”. The story not only includes the winnings of the founder but also the battles and dignity lost by him. As described in the book, Dost Mohammad Khan was really a fortunate **[THE BEGUMS OF BHOPAL: A DYNASTY OF WOMEN RULERS IN RAJ INDIA \(BOOK REVIEW\)](#)** by **[Nitya Shrivastava,Shambhavi Mishra,Ghousiya Parveen](#)** is licensed under **[CC BY-NC 4.0](#)**

man who was lucky to have received so many gifts i.e., personality, wisdom and ironically the state “Bhopal” itself and how he stepped on the corpses to reach his throne. In the last, the chapter deals with the problems faced by him because of his rivals who were a major threat to his state and who even managed to hinder him mentally, emotionally and politically.

The author could have written about the death of Rani Kamlapati to let the readers know about that incident too but he fairly portrayed the character of Dost Mohammad Khan as a ruthless, cruel, treacherous but a brave, ambitious and a fortunate man. The man whose only ambition was to win by hook or by crook but also a man ready to ally with powerful rulers.

Yar Mohammad Khan: In the second chapter, the author writes beautifully about the successor of Dost Mohammad Khan i.e., his son “Yar Mohammad Khan” who had a short but impactful and strong rule. The writer has written about the religious tolerance of the two starting rulers as favourite wives of both the rulers were Hindu by religion but he could have given a good clarity about whether they were converted to Islam or not? Yar became the Nawab of Bhopal at a young age of 18. The Bhopali riyasat came across a beautiful inter religion love story i.e., Yar Mohammad Khan and his consort Mamola Bai. His favourite wife was beautiful, an able administrator and a philanthropic woman. Shaharyar have written about how a boy who was held captive by his father’s rival ruled the state after his father’s death. However, the role of Nizam is not mentioned sufficiently. During his reign, the Mughal (Moghul) empire was on a swift decline and the other prime powers of Marathas and Nizam were rousing to extreme power. Yar Mohammad Khan’s reign saw Bhopal’ s support shifting deeper towards Marathas with peace being achieved at the cost of territories and finances.

Mamola Bai: The substantial justification to the title “Begums of Bhopal” begins after the death of Yar as his wife took charge as a de facto ruler of Bhopal who ruled in the name of her two stepsons, first Faiz and then Hayat. The writer has described the character sketch of Mamola in a wonderful, adorable and in a spell-bounding manner. He makes the reader feel as if the reader himself is observing the peace, love and care of the de-facto ruler. He used some of the common Bhopali sayings in such a beautiful way that one can never forget. He mentioned the conspiracies against the rulers and also the battles in a fair manner. The Battle



of Phanda, on the page no. 43 is the goose bumps sections of the book which can easily make the reader feel the strength of the Muslim rule of Bhopal. The characters of Faiz Mohammad Khan, Hayat Mohammad Khan and Chhotey Khan could have been described in a more detailed way and some incidents of Mamola's life should have been added to the book like the fostering of Chhotey and other foster children.

Ghous Mohammad Khan: In the book, after the death of Hayat Mohammad Khan, he was succeeded by his heir Ghous Mohammad Khan who had a spoilt character. He became the fifth Nawab of Bhopal. Shaharyar M. Khan wrote about the ill-decisions and Ghous's bad policies. His reign was quite short but very devastating for Bhopal. Ghous's character is described by the author in such a hateful and just manner that the reader can actually feel the uselessness and foolishness of the fool Nawab. During his reign, Bhopal faced a massive siege from the joint forces of Gwalior and Nagpur. This siege is an epic in Bhopal's history which is still a sort of folklore in Bhopali custom. The siege gives thrilling suspense to the reader will Bhopal survive with the heroic of an able commander? Or will be handed over to mighty Marathas.

Wazir Mohammad Khan: Wazir Mohammad Khan's epic triumph in resisting the siege of Bhopal left him undisputed hero, saviour and off course the de facto ruler of the state. Author miraculously described the sacrifices, hard work and the valour showed by the people of Bhopal and especially by the women. He describes Wazir as a brave man of extraordinary qualities who was gifted in physique, noble and dedicated to the family's dignity and honour.

Author has mentioned some other brave stories of Wazir to make the reader feel about his immense courage and valour. Apart from all the good qualities mentioned by Shaharyar, he also talks about Wazir's addiction to alcohol which gradually deteriorated his health and eventually led to his early death.

He briefly mentions about the Bhopal's connection to the French Bourbon family, descendants of which still live in Bhopal and the contribution as well as the honesty of Bourbons towards the Bhopali Riyasat. Although, he mentions an illogical and unclear sort of a love story which involved Bourbon and an already married noble! Which is quite far away from getting into mind. The story also deals with an afghani tribe i.e. Mishti-Khel Clan who

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are described as a symbol of honesty and loyalty. Wazir Mohammad Khan, cleverly set up a marriage alliance to make his son a whole sole ruler unlike him. His son Nazar Mohammad Khan succeeded him and he had a quite balanced and proper character. The books tell that he had inherited his father's qualities of leadership, dignity, charisma and nobility. He fought bravely during the siege too. Nazar was married to Qudsia Begum who would then succeed him after an unpredictable incident or an accident!!!

Qudsia Begum: Qudsia Begum became the first authorized and full flesh ruler of the state which leads to the legitimate and a proper justification to the title "The Begums of Bhopal", so the second largest muslim ruled princely state get its first legal and authorized woman ruler as Qudsia. During the first Begum's rule, author describes the tug of war like situation in the state between the family powers and he also portrays the Begum's far sightedness and her able administration. The author has written about the loyal Quartet of Qudsia which included finest of the four loyal administrators of Bhopal who were ready to risk their lives for Qudsia and for Bhopal as well. The author also depicts the growing interference of British in the state and also of the Begum's relations with them. The writer describes Qudsia as a bold lady who abandoned the veil and led from the front. She was a consummate politician, listener of townsfolk, people's ruler and importantly an able and clever administrator. She introduced reforms that transformed Bhopal into one of the better run princely states of India. She built mosques, dispensaries and installed water works to provide free drinking water to the citizens of Bhopal. The writer has beautifully portrayed all the characters and is exceptionally well in the portrayal of Qudsia Begum.

Sikandar Begum: Sikandar Begum (daughter of Qudsia Begum) took over the reign of Bhopal after abdication of Qudsia Begum. Although, Qudsia Begum was appointed as regent for her daughter. The writer terms Sikandar's rule as "THE GOLDEN RULE" which can seem something unpleasant as compared to other rulers for the reader. The relationship of Begum with several family members is explained in a proper manner and in a just way without being biased. Begum's personality and especially the physique is described in such a way that the reader can imagine the exact look of Begum. Sikandar's story is narrated in a very detailed demeanour along with all the gifts and good things done by the Begum for

Bhopal. Her relationship with her own daughter seems quite peculiar to the reader. The ups and downs in her life are mentioned with special care. The Pilgrimage of Makkah is elucidated with a quite wonderful hierarchy, the reader could feel the actual toughness of the tour and the agony of the Begum while reading the section. The exchange of letters between Sikandar and The Rani of Jhansi can create a ruckus for the reader and can make the reader feel the strength of two really powerful women of the time. Sikandar's character is explained as a bold woman of justice who wishes to keep her head high with dignity and respect. Her reign is mentioned as the reign of good and fair governance which saw a massive growth and development of the state. The described character can create an actual confusion among the readers about the real personality as if she was Megalomaniac or just an over protective mother?

Shahjehan Begum: After Sikandar comes her daughter Shahjehan Begum but surprisingly for a second time. Shahjehan's rule is described as a puppet rule with real power vested in the hands of really inefficient and religious bigots.

However, her goods and bad both are mentioned with equal justice and without getting drowned in feelings. The writer mentions the relationship of Begum with several people in quite a different way. Her character is somewhat described as an emotionally vulnerable and also makes the question in her character to arise in the reader's mind. But her affairs are mentioned in an unpleasant and unclear manner which can lead to several questions. Then there comes Syed Siddiq Hasan, a hero or a villain? The consort of Shahjehan, not the first surprisingly! The writer describes a shady character of the man and also talks about the odd decisions and behaviour of the couple. His character is quite confusing but a lot more interesting and important in the history of Bhopal as mentioned in the book. The Rift could have been explained in a better way but the story has appropriate information about all the things.

Sultan Jahan Begum: Sultan Jahan Begum, the heir of Shah Jahan Begum took over the reign after a series of quite interesting way with a huge difficulty. The writer expressed the dilemma of Sultan Jahan because of a third person in a mother daughter relation who came out of nowhere. The expression of words and feelings is so good that the reader can actually



feel it. The writer has beautifully compared the characters of mother and daughter with utmost care and in a delicate manner. Shaharyar mentioned the incidents in mother-daughter relation that widened the cracks in the relation.

The story explains the continuous shocks and tragedies faced by the Begum in each of the possible way i.e., mentally, emotionally, physically and politically. The story also deals with some of the less important incidents that could seem boring to the reader but overall, it gives a smooth flow of feelings to the reader. Apart from all these problems, the story mentions the swift and serious decision making of the Begum. In short, Sultan Jahan Begum was the most unfortunate but the most sacrificing ruler in the history of Bhopal who kept aside her personal life for the welfare of citizens of Bhopal. The story describes the hard-work of Begum to transfer her power into the right hands and to the righteous heir. The writer portrays the character of Sultan Jahan as an unfortunate woman who works hard, works for the people, far sighted, a simple and a justice loving woman.

Hamidullah Khan: Hamidullah Khan was the youngest son of Sultan Jahan Begum but was coronated as the Nawab of Bhopal and also the last authorized Nawab of Bhopal. The writer has written about the last competing claims to the succession for the throne and how Sultan Jahan worked day and night, months and years to make Hamidullah her successor. The writer has used the political terms in an effective manner and made easy for the readers to understand the situation. The relations of Hamidullah could have been explained in a better way especially with her daughters and her wife. The author did a fine job in portraying the freedom struggle of India especially with reference to Bhopal and the involvement of Britishers.

CONCLUSION

“The Begums of Bhopal” offers the first balanced history of the state, and in dealing with the British imperial relations with the princely states. The book is written in a very systematic and a handy manner with a sequential order. Map of Bhopal in the starting gives a familiar view to those who have seen the localities and surroundings of Bhopal and gives a basic idea how the things actually were. The assessments give a brief but effective idea of the involved personalities’ characters. The writer has sufficiently discussed the cases and the dilemmas in **[THE BEGUMS OF BHOPAL: A DYNASTY OF WOMEN RULERS IN RAJ INDIA \(BOOK REVIEW\)](#)** by **[Nitya Shrivastava,Shambhavi Mishra,Ghousiya Parveen](#)** is licensed under **[CC BY-NC 4.0](#)**



a proper and a balanced manner. Overall, the books reflect the unique mixed culture of Bhopal because of the Golden Rule of Begums of Bhopal even in a male dominated society.

As this book deals with the work and piece of history, it attracts any history buff, enthusiast or student specially the one interested in the history and culture of Bhopal. This book also deals with the achievements of women rulers in such a male dominating society, women leaders dealing with male dominance and breaking various stereotypes pertaining at that time and today also this legacy is still passing on. This book actually shows how a true feminist looks like and what is real feminism. So, the women folk is specially recommended to read this book and admire true women power because somewhere or the other it motivates women to come forward and rule the world and to make our society a better place to live in, in the most idealistic manner.