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Research Article

Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum: A Pioneer of Muslim Women's Education in Colonial India

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Abstract. This paper explores the life, contributions, and legacy of Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum—one of the most visionary and reformist Muslim women leaders in the Indian subcontinent during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the ruler of the princely state of Bhopal, she played a pioneering role in promoting female education, public health, social reform, and women's empowerment. Through the establishment of educational institutions, development of a culturally sensitive yet modern curriculum, and authorship of over forty scholarly works, she laid the groundwork for a balanced synthesis of Islamic values and modern education. Her contributions were not confined to her state but impacted the broader Muslim society, especially in the field of women's intellectual and social awakening. This study examines her personal life, educational philosophy, institutions, literary works, and the lasting impact of her reformist agenda.

Keywords : Education, educational institution, Books, educational thoughts, women,

INTRODUCTION

In the early twentieth century, the role of several Muslim women in India became prominently visible in the fields of education, social reform, and politics. Among these courageous women, one distinguished name is that of Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum. She was not only a wise and visionary ruler of the princely state of Bhopal but also a remarkable and exceptional woman of her time. Along with ensuring political stability in her state, she rendered invaluable services for public welfare, particularly in the promotion of women's education.

Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum was the first Muslim woman ruler of the Indian subcontinent who transformed her governance into a center of reform. During her reign, numerous educational institutions were established with a special focus on female education. She considered female education as a stepping stone to progress and was determined to provide every possible resource to achieve this goal. Her efforts sparked a new wave of educational awareness among Muslim women not only in Bhopal but throughout the subcontinent.

Historical Background

Nineteenth-century India was undergoing profound political, social, and cultural transformations. Muslims played a prominent role in the War of Independence of 1857, as a result of which the British government came to regard them as its principal adversaries. Consequently, Muslims were not only excluded from government employment but were also deliberately kept out of modern educational institutions. This had a direct impact on their social status and educational progress. During this period, Muslim educational institutions primarily consisted of maktabas and madrasas, which focused on religious instruction. Modern subjects such as mathematics, science, and English were either completely neglected or given only secondary importance.

Formal education for women was virtually non-existent. Their learning was mostly confined to the home, where elder women or female Qur'an teachers (Qariyah) would provide basic instruction in Qur'anic recitation, elementary Urdu, moral advice, and domestic skills. It was a widely held belief that if women received formal education, they would become independent, thereby compromising their ability to be good wives and mothers. The strict observance of purdah (seclusion) was another major barrier to the advancement of education. According to the census of 1881, among men, approximately 90 out of every 1,000 individuals were literate, whereas among women, the number was merely four per 1,000.

Amidst this scenario, some reform-minded individuals began striving for women's education. Foremost among them were the Begums of the princely state of Bhopal. Nawab Shah Jahan Begum and her successor Sultan Jahan Begum established several key institutions and made persistent efforts to promote education for women

Biographical Sketch

Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum was born on July 9, 1858, in the princely state of Bhopal. She belonged to the royal family of Bhopal and was the eleventh ruler of the state and the fourth female sovereign among the Begums. The state of Bhopal held a distinguished position in the fields of reform, education, and leadership. Her mother was Nawab Shah Jahan Begum and her father was Nawab Baqi Muhammad Khan.

Sultan Jahan Begum received her early education at home, which included religious studies along with Urdu, Persian, English, mathematics, and other subjects. In 1875, she married Nawab Ahmad Ali Khan, who proved to be her close confidant and a trusted advisor in every respect. He supported her on numerous occasions in administrative affairs. However, their companionship did not last long, as Nawab Ahmad Ali Khan passed away in 1902. After the death of her mother in 1901, she assumed control of the state of Bhopal and ruled until 1926. This era is regarded as a golden period for women's leadership and welfare. Under her rule, Bhopal became one of the few princely states where women were given opportunities to play an active role in social life. In 1926, she abdicated the throne in favour of her son, Hamidullah Khan. She passed away in 1930. Her tomb still stands in Bhopal, and her services in the field of women's education and welfare remain a milestone in history.

Educational Institutions Established by Sultan Jahan Begum

Sultan Jahan Begum established several institutions to promote education, especially for women. Notable among these are:

1. Sultania Girls School

This was the first modern educational institution for women in Bhopal. Subjects such as Urdu, Persian, Islamic studies, domestic science, medicine, and mathematics were taught. Free accommodation, food, and books were provided to the students. The school maintained strict purdah (seclusion), and female teachers were appointed for instruction.

2. Madrasa Sultania

This was a religious educational institution where girls and women were taught the Qur'an, Hadith, Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), the life of the Prophet (Seerah), and ethics. The institution produced many female huffaz (Qur'an memorizers) and scholars.

3. Dispensary and Institute of Women's Medicine

Sultan Jahan Begum also focused on women's health and medical education. She established the first medical institution for women to train female doctors and nurses.

4. Female Teachers' Training Institute

Since women's education was not widespread, there was a shortage of female teachers. Sultan Jahan Begum established a training institute where women were trained in teaching methods, discipline, and child psychology. This institute later served as a model for other regions.

5. Libraries and Reading Rooms

She established special libraries for women that included books on Islamic studies as well as science and literature.

6. Victoria High School

This institution was originally founded by Nawab Shah Jahan Begum, but Sultan Jahan Begum restructured it along modern lines and established a separate wing for female students.

7. Adult Education Programs

She initiated evening classes for older women, which included Qur'an reading, Urdu literacy, and domestic training.

The institutions established by Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum were not merely centers of education but also centers of reform, where the foundation was laid to make women aware, independent, and dignified individuals. She presented a practical model of a harmonious blend of education, values, and modernity.

In addition to these institutions, Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum was actively associated with other prominent educational organizations. She served as the lifelong Chancellor of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (later Aligarh Muslim University) and provided unwavering support for its growth and stability. She also patronized the Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu (Society for the Promotion of Urdu) and offered it financial assistance.

Educational Philosophy of Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum

Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum is counted among those exceptional Muslim women of the Indian subcontinent who not only rendered remarkable services during their own era but also opened the doors of intellectual and practical guidance for future generations. She became the voice of women during a time when they faced severe deprivation in educational, social, and economic spheres. She made

women's education her mission and laid such foundational principles that continue to serve as a source of guidance even today. Her reformative thinking and educational services can be compared to the reform movements of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Maulana Shibli Nomani, and Maulana Hali. Her style of governance, intellectual insight, and reformative strategies serve as an exemplary role model for Muslim women.

Her most prominent achievement was the promotion of a synthesis between Islamic values and modern education. Sultan Jahan Begum believed that if a woman is educated, she will also educate her children and turn her home into a cradle of knowledge and culture. She consistently worked to establish schools for girls where both religious and worldly knowledge could be imparted.

She was a staunch advocate of the idea that Islam not only emphasizes women's education but that the Qur'an and Sunnah repeatedly stress the importance of acquiring knowledge. Based on this belief, she made religious studies a compulsory subject in the schools and madrasas she founded, so that the education of girls would be based on religious and moral foundations. The curriculum she designed for women gave special importance to subjects such as the Qur'an, Hadith, the Prophet's biography (Seerat), Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh), ethics, domestic training, courteous behavior, modesty (Hijab), cleanliness (Taharat), and Islamic etiquette. According to her, only a religious and conscientious woman can become a better wife, mother, and citizen.

While addressing a session of the Muslim Educational Conference, Sultan Jahan Begum strongly emphasized the need for girls' education, saying that while boys earn a livelihood, girls turn the four walls of a house into paradise. Her goal was to develop a curriculum that would aid girls in their intellectual development and enable them to play a constructive role in society and the economy. (Razia Hamid,, p. 143)

About her educational philosophy, Razia Hamid writes:

"Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum truly belonged to the group of Sir Syed in terms of her commitment to the promotion of knowledge, reformative thinking, ideologies, and interests." (Razia Hamid, p. 143)

The core principle of her educational policies was to integrate religion and modernity. She was not opposed to Western education; rather, she believed in adopting its positive aspects in alignment with Islamic principles for the intellectual growth of women. In her view:

"Just as air and water are essential for human life, education is equally necessary." (Razia Hamid, p. 143)

She did not see education merely as a means of employment but as a source of personal, moral, and intellectual development. She believed that by providing

women with knowledge and awareness, they could be empowered to play a dignified and meaningful role in society.

At one point she states:

"Women's education and training is just as important for men's progress as steam is for a running engine. It is an established fact that no nation has achieved true progress unless its women have participated in the means of development." (Razia Hamid, p. 146)

He further says "If the daily routine is examined, it becomes clear and beyond any doubt that the carriage of the world runs on two wheels — man and woman. If even one wheel is damaged, it is impossible for the carriage to move forward. For this reason, all reforms and arrangements that are necessary for men are equally essential for women as well." (Seema Sagheer, p30)

Sultan Jahan Begum not only established schools but also ensured the availability of a quality curriculum, trained female teachers, and provided free books, meals, and accommodation for female students. She strongly supported a curriculum that combined Islamic values with scientific skills. She believed that education should be imparted in the mother tongue to make the learning process more effective. According to her:

"As long as education is not in the mother tongue, it cannot be truly beneficial. The real progress of education in every country has only been achieved through instruction in the native language." (Razia Hamid, p. 155)

She also emphasized that for promoting education, it is essential to have intelligent, virtuous, and experienced female teachers.

She viewed religious education as a means to understand human rights, adopt moral values, and live a righteous life. Her scholarly, social, and educational services not only transformed the state of Bhopal but also gave new direction to the women's education movement throughout the Indian subcontinent.

Writings of Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum

Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum was not only a successful and enlightened ruler, but also a scholar, author, and eloquent speaker. Her intellectual stature is evident from the fact that she wrote over forty (40) scholarly, reformist, and literary works during her lifetime. Her writings are significant not only for their historical and political value, but also for covering important themes such as women's education, ethics, household management, and child upbringing.

Her literary contributions can be categorized into the following areas:

Biographical and Historical Works

Tuzk-e-Sultani

This is her autobiography and is considered her most important and intellectually significant work.

In this book, she narrates her birth, childhood, education, marriage, children, and political experiences in detail. She also elaborates on her reformist ideas, educational initiatives, women's issues, and state administration. It is regarded as a political, social, and intellectual document that reflects her political awareness, religious insight, and social understanding.

Gohar-e-Iqbal

In this notable work, she meticulously documents various aspects of her rule from 1901 to 1909. The book sheds light on Bhopal's history, political and administrative conditions, and social changes. It also includes a brief but comprehensive biography of her mother, Nawab Shah Jahan Begum, highlighting the legacy of female leadership in Bhopal. The book reflects not only historical importance but also her literary and intellectual depth.

Akhtar-e-Iqbal

This work continues the narrative from 1909 to 1913, detailing her personal observations, administrative decisions, educational and social reforms, and public welfare projects. It serves as a valuable document on Bhopal's progress and growing educational consciousness. Through this book, readers gain insights into the state as well as into Sultan Jahan Begum's thoughtful and visionary personality.

Hayat-e-Qudsia

A biographical account of Nawab Qudsia Begum (the first female ruler of Bhopal), written with a scholarly approach. It discusses her life, governance, reforms, and moral virtues in detail. This work is not only a biography but also offers a glimpse into the religious consciousness and leadership of female rulers.

Hayat-e-Shahjahan

This biography focuses on Nawab Shah Jahan Begum (Sultan Jahan Begum's mother), highlighting her rule, contributions to education, reform initiatives for women, and her social persona. It indicates that efforts for women's welfare and education in Bhopal began even before Sultan Jahan's time.

Hayat-e-Sikandari

This biography of Nawab Sikandar Jahan Begum (her grandmother) explores her life, key aspects of her reign, religious inclinations, and reformist attitude. It aims to preserve the intellectual and political legacy of Bhopal's female rulers.

Tazkira-e-Baqi

A biography of her father, Nawab Baqi Muhammad Khan. In "Tazkira-e- Baqi", she tried to portray the nightly and daily personal qualities, habits, lifestyle, and character of her father, Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan, with utmost sincerity. She even admitted that the attempt remained incomplete in fully representing the essence. The author herself acknowledged:

"Events and incidents have been narrated from within, but due to a lack of proper conditions, circumstances, and observational data, even after sincere effort and analysis, they appear incomplete. The regret of not being able to portray him completely still remains." (Seema Sagheer, p. 60)

Religious and Literary Works

Seerat-e-Mustafa (PBUH)

One of her major religious and literary works, this book is a collection of her speeches delivered during Rabi' al-Awwal in 1917 at the "Prince of Wales Ladies' Club" in Bhopal. The focus was the noble life and character of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

She also compiled several collections of her speeches, such as:

Sabeel al-Jinan

A collection of speeches on religious topics. In these, she insightfully discussed the spirit of Islam, morality, and the role of Islamic teachings in women's lives.

Khutbat-e-Sultani

A compilation of speeches delivered between 1901 and the early 1930s on various social, educational, political, and reformist topics. This collection reflects her strategic thinking, governance vision, and deep intellect.

Silk-e-Shahwar

This collection includes speeches specifically focused on women's education, rights, and social issues. Through these, she encouraged Muslim women to pursue knowledge and training and attempted to chart a progressive path for them.

In addition to her historical and biographical writings and these compilations of speeches, Sultan Jahan Begum also authored many other important works on education, ethics, household management, health, and women's training. The core aim of her works was social reform, the promotion of women's education, and the establishment of order and structure in domestic life.

Important Reformist and Instructional Books

Khanah Daari (Household Management)

This was a four-part series, each part focusing on different domestic and ethical themes:

Hadiyah al-Zawjain: it is the first part of Khana daari and it discusses the mutual relations between husband and wife, household responsibilities, and etiquette of marital life.

Hifz-e-Sehat (Health Preservation): Second part is on healthcare and it offers guidance on hygiene and maintaining health.

Part Three is divided in two sections. These are following:

Ma'eeshat (Economy): Covered budgeting, household income and expenses, and financial management.

Mu'asharat (Social Conduct): Highlighted social manners, women's roles, and ethics.

Tandurusti (Health and Well-being)

A comprehensive and informative book on health. Divided into three chapters:

Chapter 1: General hygiene and health tips

Chapter 2: Contagious diseases and preventive measures

Chapter 3: Principles of caregiving, clean air, water purification, and filter use.

This work not only promoted public health awareness but also served as practical guidance for women.

Other notable works include:

Tarbiyat al-Atfal az Ifadah: A scholarly book on children's education and upbringing.

Rahbar-e-Niswan: A guidebook for women.

Sultan Jahan Begum was a prolific writer who authored works on a diverse range of subjects including horticulture, ethics, etiquette, and moral conduct. Among her notable contributions to Urdu literature is her travelogue, which documents her pilgrimage to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. In October 1903, she undertook the Hajj for the second time, accompanied by her son. During the journey, she halted briefly in Jeddah and ultimately returned safely on April 4, 1904.

Her travelogue, composed in two distinct parts, presents both empirical observations and personal reflections. The first part offers a comprehensive account of the geography, political structures, and administrative systems of Arabia and India, alongside detailed commentary on local customs, traditions, and social

etiquette. The second part provides an elaborate narrative of the sea voyage, experiences aboard the ship, and a meticulous description of the rituals and spiritual significance of the Hajj pilgrimage. This work not only exemplifies her literary acumen but also reflects her intellectual engagement with religious, cultural, and geopolitical dimensions of the early 20th-century Muslim world.

A close study of all these works shows that Sultan Jahan Begum was well-versed in modern knowledge and actively applied her learning for the reform, education, and welfare of women. Her books address diverse subjects such as religion, society, education, health, and morality in a highly effective manner.

Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum did not limit herself to writing books or founding educational institutions—she also created the environment, opportunities, and intellectual atmosphere necessary for women to become dignified, conscious citizens. Her writings, speeches, reformist ideas, and educational efforts continue to serve as a beacon of inspiration. Her life is a living testament to the fact that with firm resolve and intellectual maturity, no societal barrier can hinder the path of education and progress.

Impact of Sultan Jahan Begum's Reforms and Works

Sultan Jahan Begum's educational and social reforms left a profound and long-lasting impact, not only within the princely state of Bhopal but also across the broader socio-cultural landscape of British India. Her initiatives laid the foundation for a progressive and inclusive model of women's empowerment rooted in Islamic values, indigenous culture, and modern educational principles.

Perhaps the most significant impact of her reign was the normalization of women's education in a conservative Muslim society. At a time when women's literacy was negligible, her establishment of girls' schools, training colleges for female teachers, and adult literacy programs dramatically increased educational access for Muslim women. This helped challenge the prevailing belief that formal education was incompatible with a woman's modesty and domestic role.

According to census data, while literacy among Indian Muslim women remained low throughout the colonial period, Bhopal consistently showed higher female literacy rates compared to many other princely states. This was a direct result of Sultan Jahan Begum's emphasis on structured, accessible, and culturally sensitive educational reforms. Her government created a comprehensive educational ecosystem—from primary schools to teacher training institutes and women's libraries. These institutions were not only physical spaces of learning but also symbols of a new gender consciousness in Muslim society. The model she established became an example for other princely states, and her policies were often discussed in reformist and educational forums across India.

Sultan Jahan Begum linked education with public health, recognizing that educated women would be better caregivers and community health agents. The

establishment of dispensaries, midwifery schools, and women-only hospitals ensured that healthcare became more accessible, especially in rural areas. Her emphasis on hygiene, child care, and sanitation became part of the curriculum in girls' schools, integrating practical life skills with academic education.

Her reforms helped gradually reshape societal attitudes toward women's public roles. Educated women in Bhopal began participating in social work, health campaigns, and even administrative roles. While purdah remained prevalent, the Begum redefined it as compatible with empowerment, creating a model of the "educated, dignified Muslim woman" who could contribute to society without compromising religious values.

Sultan Jahan's efforts laid the groundwork for later 20th-century women's movements in Muslim society.

CONCLUSION

Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum was far more than a royal figure; she was a transformative leader, visionary educator, prolific writer, and a committed reformer. Her life and work reflect a rare blend of intellectual depth, religious conviction, and social commitment. At a time when Muslim women were largely confined to domestic spaces, she boldly challenged societal norms, establishing a precedent for women's participation in education, healthcare, and governance. Her institutions laid the foundation for structured female education in the region, while her writings offered practical guidance on everything from moral development to public health and domestic management.

Her philosophy of integrating Islamic values with modern education remains relevant to contemporary discussions on women's empowerment in Muslim societies. Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum's legacy is not just historical—it is inspirational. She proved through her life that social transformation is possible when guided by knowledge, integrity, and an unwavering belief in the power of education. Her journey continues to illuminate the path for generations to come.

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Razia Sultana

Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum: A Pioneer of Muslim Women's Education in Colonial India

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