

# RAZIYA SULTAN: THE FIRST LADY MONARCH OF INDIA

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The political theory of Islam is brief in character; therefore it does not dwell explicitly on the question of women's eligibility to the throne. What is noteworthy is that for the secular and ecclesiastical purport leadership centred around the office of *imam* or *caliph*. The orthodox jurists adhered to this formula, however certain modifications were incorporated as and when the need arose. As for instance, the Abbasid caliphate was followed by the independent states.<sup>1</sup>

This paper entails the theme related to Raziya, her enthronement, her difficulties related to enthronement and after coming to the throne. And the main focus is on her administration, dealing with the nobility, curbing the power of the Turks, which had become a threat to the crown, her coin and currency system, and how she ruled over the country where there was almost no reference of any woman ruling over the country at least in India. But regarding her fall, there are factors related to woman ruling over the male chauvinism, which created problem for her. The nobility which was powerful since the time of Sultan Iltutmish, conspired against her and brought an end to her glorious reign.

Here, I have based my work on the primary sources as *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri* of Minhaj-us Siraj, *Rehla* of Ibn Battuta, *Tarikh-i- Ferishta* of Abdul Qasim Ferishta and *Futuh-us Salatin*, of Abdul Malik Isami etc.

There appears to be the difficulty regarding her inability to lead. In a purely theoretical sense a female ruler, could not lead congregational prayers. This was a duty imparted by the *imam* or Sultan. The other difficulty was her status as legal witness. It is learnt that the

former duty came to be delegated to *khatib* and Sheikh-ul- Islam. The *imam* addressed rare ceremonial occasions.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly enough, from the Turkish ascendancy over Islamic world, no constitutional principle or regulation forbade female sovereign. As a matter of fact, the Turkish Sultans included unmanumitted slaves and individuals with physical handicaps also.<sup>3</sup>

The Turkish racial traditions did not restrict female sovereign. In the Twelfth Century the Khitai Turkish women ruled certain principalities. Example of the widow of the deceased Gur Khan and his daughter Koyunk Khatun<sup>4</sup> can be cited in the context. Minhaj-us Siraj provides information of one of the feudatory rulers of *Khwarizm* (Khiva) who was succeeded early in the same century by a daughter, who enjoyed the power and title even after her marriage. Safia Khatun, widow of the Ayubide prince, Malik al- Zahir son of Salahuddin<sup>5</sup> and Shajarat al- Durr are other examples. The latter bore the title *Malikat al-Muslimin*, and issued coins and edicts and had the *Khutba* read in her name along with that of the Abbasid Caliph, al- Mo'tasim.<sup>6</sup>

Queen Humai or Khumai, daughter of Bahram, who succeeded her father and abdicated after a reign of thirty years<sup>7</sup> in a legend of the Median dynasty shows all sort of examples can be cited in the context.

During Sultanate period the political structure and the ruling elite did not encourage women to participate in politics. In spite of this we get references when females of the royal household exercised authority in the political sphere.

It will be borne out by our discussion in this subsequent paper that in spite of the widely prevalent *Purdah* system which was strictly adhered particularly in royal families, women did participate in politics usually indirectly and rarely directly. The role of Raziya Sultan is remarkable from this perspective as she was the first lady to be elevated to the throne in Delhi during the Sultanate period. She is admired by the chroniclers like Minhaj and Ferishta of the Sultanate period for her military and political acumen.

Sultan Raziya, the only woman in India crowned as queen in her own right had a brief though eventful reign. She was de jure the fifth Muslim ruler of Delhi but de facto the third, two predecessors, one of them her brother, whose reign was short lived and not worthy of note.

Raziya had the unique distinction of being the only women who ever occupied the throne of Delhi. She ascended the throne in 18th Rabi I, 634 A.H. / 19th Nov. 1236 AD.<sup>8</sup> She was from Turkish Seljuk's ancestry and fifth Mumluk Sultan of Delhi Sultanate. She was the very first woman ruler in Muslim and Turkish history. Raziya was elevated to the throne solely because of her merit and talent.<sup>9</sup> It was a paradigm shift considering that the throne was considered as a monopoly of males.

As regards her early life, suffice to say, that she was the daughter of Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish from his most respected and favoured wife, who was the daughter of Qutbuddin Aibak.<sup>10</sup> She had benefited from the tutelage of her father when she had lived with him in the *kushk-i firozi* (royal palace). We find only brief sketch of her early life in the contemporary sources. Since her childhood, she had shown her interest in learning the art of warfare and she had learnt to command armies. As a child and adolescent, Raziya had little contact with the other women of the *harem* so she had not adopted the customary behaviour of women in the Muslim society.

Even in her father's lifetime, she used to be active in the affairs of the state, and exercised great authority and influence.<sup>11</sup> She took keen interest in male sports unlike the other aristocratic ladies who preferred to remain behind *pardah*. Raziya Sultan was encouraged by her father to take interest in the army organization and assuming command that developed in her leadership qualities, responsibility and bravery as her characteristics. She preferred the adornment of male attire instead of traditional regarding dressing of Indian Muslim women.<sup>12</sup>

Iltutmish found his sons incompetent and saw in Raziya the quality befitting a ruler. During her father's reign, Raziya displayed courage and ability to participate in the state affairs<sup>13</sup>. She was the first female Muslim ruler of South Asia. Iltutmish nominated her to the throne of Delhi as he, faced with the choice of a successor on the untimely death of his

eldest and most capable son, Prince Nasiruddin Mahmud in 629 A.H. / 1229 A.D. He selected his daughter Raziya, as she was the eldest of his surviving children, and had already been marked out for uncommon sagacity and political insight.

To try her still further, Sultan Iltutmish left her incharge of the administration during the year he was engaged in operations against the Parihara ruler of Gwalior in 1231 A.D.<sup>14</sup> She must have discharged her duties singularly well,<sup>15</sup> for immediately on his return announced his choice and ordered Tajul Mulk Mahmud, the *Mushrif-i- Mumalik*, to issue a *farman* elevating Raziya as heir to the Sultanate.<sup>16</sup> And a proclamation to that effect was ordered to be drafted. A commemorative coin was also struck in silver, possibly issued as a medallion, with the name of the crown princess inscribed along with that of Iltutmish.<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Raziya occupies a remarkable place among the Thirteenth Century Turkish rulers of India. Among the successors of Iltutmish, she was the ablest and the most worthy to the office of the sovereign. She made considerable amends for the disorders of the reign of Ruknuddin and despite fierce opposition, consolidated her position by her tact and ability.

If she had been born a man she would have greater success, because in that case there would neither be an opposition from the side of *wazir* and other nobles nor could there be the scope for conspiracy on ground of suspected intimacy with Yakut. She had reduced the power of the Turks and was carefully building up an alternative group but her reign was suddenly cut short. Her success therefore was only partial up to 1238. She succeeded almost in every undertaking but since 1239, opposition began to gain momentum and she failed to overcome it.

Various factors contributed to her failure. Medieval historians ascribe it principally to her gender. But an equally or more important reason was the selfishness and strength of the nobility. The Sultans of those days could never count on the support of the masses who regarded them as aliens and followers of a different faith.

**References:**

1. *Al- Mavardi*, quoted by Arnold, *Caliphate*, p. 71. Cf. Habibullah A.B. M., ‘Sultanah Raziah’, *Indian Historical Quarterly*, December, 1940, p. 750.
2. Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddama*, p. 208. Cf. *Sultanah Raziah*, op. cit., p. 751.
3. *Sultanah Raziah*, op. cit., p. 752.
4. Juzjani Minhaj –us Siraj, *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri*, Tr. Raverty H.G., Vol. II., Oriental Books, New Delhi, 1970, pp. 927-28.
5. Abul Feda, *Tarikh* ( Egyptian ed.) III, p. 171. Cf. Habibullah A.B.M., *Sultanah Raziah*, op. cit., p. 752.
6. Cf. *Sultanah Raziah*, op. cit., pp. 752- 53.
7. *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri*, Tr. Raverty, Vol. I., op. cit., pp. 3-4.
8. *Tarikh-i- Ferishta*, Vol. I., op. cit., p. 68. But Isami in *Futuh –us Salatin*, curiously enough, places her accession in 635 A.H./ 1237 A.D., op. cit., p. 133.
9. *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri*,Tr. Raverty Vol. I. op. cit., p.637.
10. *Ibid.*, Vol. I., p. 638.
11. *Political History and Institutions of the Early Turkish Empire of Delhi (1206- 1290)*, op. cit., p.195.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Juzjani Minhaj-us- Siraj, *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri*, Vol. I., eds. Abdul Hai Habibi, Anjuman-i- Tarikh-i-Afghanistan, Kabul, 1963. p. 458; *Futuh-us- Salatin*, op. cit., p. 133; *Tarikh-i- Ferishta*, Vol. I., op. cit., p. 68.
14. *Tarikh-i- Ferishta*, Vol. I., op. cit., p. 68.
15. *Ibid.*; *Futuh –us Salatin*, op. cit., p.133.
16. *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Vol. I. op. cit., p.458; *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, Tr. Raverty, vol. I., op. cit., p. 638
17. Wright, Nelson, *The Coinage and Metrology of the Sultans of Delhi*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1974. no. 161 A, p. 40.