

Rising above the Common: Remarkable Women of Murshidabad's Royal Court

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ABSTRACT: A historical analysis highlighting the journey of Indian women's emancipation to their empowerment would definitely shed light on their rights and their status as well. In this perspective, it would be justifiable to gain knowledge on the rights and privileges of the royal ladies of Murshidabad, as it was one of the most vibrant political centers of India during the eighteenth century. Generally, women of Muslim royal families did not have the right to move or act freely. However, in the Royal Court of Murshidabad, some women enjoyed greater social mobility and even actively participated in public life, which is truly exceptional. Many a times, they exercised profound diplomatic influences on Nawabi politics and administration. Hence, this study reflects upon the extraordinary activities of royal women, within the traditional ambit of the late medieval patriarchal society. The article features the dynamic role of distinguished royal ladies of the Court of Murshidabad and analyzes their status quo, thus providing insight into the extent of women empowerment among the elite Muslims in early modern Bengal.

Keywords: *Gaddinashin Begum, Women empowerment, Harem, Nawabs, Politics, Bengal*

Introduction

Murshidabad, being the capital of Bengal *Subah* (a regional state), was one of the most dominant and influential political setups of eighteenth century India. During this period, there was a significant shift in power from the Mughals to the regional states, thereby marking a transition from medieval to modern times. Although the basic structure of governance of Murshidabad remained the same as it was in the Mughal court, the division of

power in the royal court was altered. Besides the *zamindars* (landlords), local nobles and *mahajans* (bankers), the royal women too held significant political influence over the Nawabs (rulers). In this regard, mainstream history has hardly addressed the involvement of royal women in politics and public administration. Scholars like T. A. Pranto, S. Chakrobarthy, T. Aftab, Abdul Majed Khan, K. M. Mohasin, Susil Chaudhury, P. C. Majumdar, N. N. Roy, Fazlul Hoque and B. N. Banerjee had discussed ‘harem life’ and the status of aristocratic women of Murshidabad, to some extent. Hence, this paper will focus on royal ladies who not only ‘adorned’ the homes of ruling Nawabs but also exerted significant influence upon the Nawabs, their administration and subsequently impacted the contemporary society. It seems that the study of women’s activities in the royal court would provide some insight into the political empowerment of aristocratic women in that era.

It cannot be ignored that the lives of the royal women of Murshidabad were largely determined by harem culture, much like that of the Mughals. The status of women in the harem was ordained by the position they held in the Nawab’s life. The Nawab’s mother and the chief queen (Begum) occupied the most significant positions in the harem, receiving the highest honor and respect and enjoying well-defined rights over the inmates. They possessed substantial wealth through regular allowances and gifts. The practice of granting *parganas* (districts) to harem women was also prevalent.¹ To mark honor and privilege, they were conferred titles reflecting their status.² Some women were appointed as *darogas* (superintendents), *mushrifs* (accountants), and *tahwildars* (writers) in the harem. Some composed verses and were well-versed in music and dance.³ They occasionally influenced the lives of ordinary residents of their communities through social welfare programs. However, a noticeable change can be observed in the Murshidabad royal court, which differed from Mughal tradition. Royal women’s involvement in court politics and administration—particularly that of the chief queen—became more common and substantial. In this respect, the history of Murshidabad is unusual not only for having royal lineages that trace their origins to commoners but also for featuring exceptionally strong women.⁴ Since the time of Murshid Quli Khan (1720s), women began to exercise profound influence over

¹Shamim, A. (2010), ‘The Status of Women in the Mughal Empire During the 16th Century’ (Ph. D. Thesis) AMU, Aligarh, pp.41-57.

² Choudhury, K., ed., (2008), *Murshidabad er Itihas (History of Murshidabad)*, Vol. 1, Dey's Publishing, Kolkatta, p.183.

³ See for details: Khan, G. H., (1975) *Siyar-ul-Mutakherin* (Vol. 2), Translated by H. Mustafa, Lahore.

⁴ Khan, A. M. (1969). *The Transition in Bengal 1756-1775*, Cambridge University Press, London.

the Nawabs of Bengal. After 1765, most chief women of the royal court assumed direct official charge of their households and maintained correspondence with officials of the East India Company.⁵

Chief Queens & Princess

Among the numerous royal women, several remarkable Begums (wives of the Nawabs), by virtue of their courage, wisdom, and personality, played significant roles in the contemporary politics and society of Bengal. They wielded extraordinary power and virtually ruled the destiny of the people from behind the *pardah*. In this respect, the most prominent figure was Nowsheri Banu Begum, the wife of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan. She demonstrated how women could become decisive actors in the royal court. From the establishment of the Bengal Subah, she actively assisted her husband in political and administrative affairs. After his death, she became even more influential in politics. She successfully negotiated the succession dispute between her grandson Sarfaraz Khan and her son-in-law Muhammad Shujauddin. By pacifying her grandson, she facilitated Shujauddin's accession as the Nawab of Bengal.⁶ In *Siyar-ul-Mutakherin*, she is depicted as a high-spirited and highly respected lady. She worked extensively to promote religious education among the women of the harem. She constructed a well-decorated mosque at Chowkbazar in Murshidabad, which included a *madrassa* providing free education to poor children.⁷ Nafisa Begum, the niece of Murshid Quli Khan, was another influential woman whose appeals and advice were frequently prioritized by the Nawab. At her request, the Nawab appointed Murad Ali Khan (son of Syed Raji Khan) as the administrative head of the Nawara Division and later as the governor of Jahangir Nagar, replacing Ghalib Ali Khan⁸

Jinnat-un-Nisha Begum, the only daughter of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, was a prominent figure in state affairs. She became active in politics alongside her mother. She first assisted in mediating the enthronement conflict between her husband, Shujauddin Muhammad Khan, and his son Sarfaraz. Acting impartially, she prevented a potential conflict that could have undermined public confidence in regional authority. She persuaded Sarfaraz

⁵ Aftab, T. (2008). "Inscribing South Asian Muslim Women: An Annotated Bibliography and Research Guide", *Hand Book of Oriental Studies*, 91, p.69.

⁶ Selim, G. H. (2007). *Riyaz-us-Salatin (Bengali translation by Sri Rampran Gupta)*, Dibbyo Prakash, Dhaka. pp.184-85.

⁷ Chakraborty, S. (2014). *Murshidabad Under the Nawabs of Benga 11704-1757*, N.E.H. University, Shilong. p.166.

⁸ Mohsin, K. M. (1973). *A Bengal District in Transition: Murshidabad 1765-1793*, The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dacca.

Khan to refrain from fighting against his father and to allow him to ascend the throne.⁹ This episode demonstrates the prudence and magnanimity of both Begums. After becoming Nawab, Shujauddin relied heavily on Jinnat-un-Nisha Begum in administrative matters. She believed herself to be the rightful heir to the *Nizamat* established by her father and held that Shujauddin ruled under her authority. Consequently, she appointed Alivardi Khan as *Naib Nazim* (Deputy Governor) of Bihar. Although Shujauddin initially preferred to appoint either Sarfaraz or Taki Khan, he ultimately accepted her decision. Unfortunately, after Shujauddin's death, Alivardi Khan killed Sarfaraz Khan at the Battle of Giria. Aware of Jinnat-un-Nisha's influence, Alivardi apologized to her and promised to honor her authority. She later moved to Dhaka and took charge of the household of Nawajis Muhammad, Alivardi Khan's son-in-law. She solely managed the *khastalk* and personal property of Murshid Quli Khan, using it for social welfare. Neither Alivardi Khan nor Nawajis Muhammad interfered. Such was her stature that they bowed before her and took their seats only after she spoke.¹⁰

Durdana Begum, sister of Nawab Sarfaraz Khan and wife of Murshid Quli Khan II (Deputy Governor of Orissa), exemplifies individuality, courage, and determination among the women of the Nawab family. It is said that in Orissa she enjoyed greater respect and authority than her husband. After Sarfaraz Khan's death, Alivardi Khan planned to attack Murshid Quli Khan II, who initially had no intention of resisting. Durdana Begum incited him to oppose Alivardi to avenge her brother's death. When persuasion failed, she threatened to abandon her husband if he refused to fight. She also persuaded her son-in-law, Mirza Baqir Khan, to take up arms in exchange for her wealth and the position of deputy governorship. Compelled by her resolve, Murshid Quli Khan II fought Alivardi Khan but was defeated at the Battle of Baleswar.¹¹

Sharaf-un-Nisha Begum, wife of Alivardi Khan, exemplified the benevolent and constructive influence of women in Bengal's politics and governance. Alivardi Khan relied heavily on her political counsel and entrusted her with administrative responsibilities during his absence from the capital. She was intelligent, brave, and diplomatically far-sighted. During Alivardi Khan's appointment as Deputy Subahdar of Bihar, Jinnat-un-Nisha Begum was reluctant to surrender full authority to him, but Sharaf-un-Nisha reportedly persuaded

⁹ Selim, G.H., (2007), op., cit., pp. 184-85

¹⁰ Choudhury, S. (2004). *Nawabi Amole Murshidabad*, Anando Publishers, Kolkata. pp. 88-90

¹¹ Ibid, p. pp. 90-91

Murshid Quli Khan in favour of her husband.¹² She played a significant role during the Maratha invasions of Bengal. Acting on her advice, Alivardi Khan ordered the killing of Bhaskar Pandit, the Maratha commander, in an attempt to curb Maratha incursions.¹³ When this strategy failed, she attempted peace negotiations by dispatching envoys to Raghuji Bhonsle's camp. Subsequently, she became the supreme political authority while Alivardi engaged in military campaigns. She accompanied him to battlefields, including campaigns against the Marathas and Afghans, often riding an elephant named Londa.¹⁴ She used to join the Nawab in his hunting expeditions in the Sunderban area. It has been seen many times that Sharifunnisha gave her husband courage, confidence and wise counsel. Golam Hossain, the author of *Siyar-ul-Mutakherin*, highlighted her keen intelligence. Upon learning of a possible betrayal by Afghan commanders, she swiftly acted to neutralize the threat. After Alivardi's victory at the Battle of Katwa, she dismissed Afghan commanders suspected of collusion with the Marathas.¹⁵

The wife of Gauws Khan (the chief of Sarfaraz Khan's army) was another brave and talented woman. She showed her courage in protecting the locals during the Maratha invasion in Bengal. In admiration of her bravery, Peshwa Balaji Rao presented her with valuable gifts.¹⁶

Begum Sharaf-un-Nisha also exerted considerable influence over the political career of her grandson, Siraj-ud-Daulah. She persuaded Alivardi Khan to appoint Siraj as *Naib Nazim* of Bihar, sidelining her own son-in-law, Syed Ahmed.¹⁷ Later on, both Alivardi and Sarifunnisha declared Sirajuddaulla as their heir, as they did not have any sons. Since then, she has been acting as a counsellor to her grandson. When Siraj attacked Fort William and captivated several British employees, women, and children, she personally intervened to release them. On behalf of Sirajuddaulla, she tried to make a settlement with Ghaseti Begum in order to get hold of the Motijheel Palace. Just before the Battle of Plassey, she also tried to negotiate with Mir Jafar, asking for forgiveness and support for Nawab Siraj.¹⁸ Though she was the 'Chief Lady' of Bengal, she never indulged in an extravagant life. She never

¹² Roy, N. N. (2018). *Murshidabad Kahini*, Dibyopras, Kolkata. pp.86-87

¹³ Hoque, F. (2001). *Murshidabad Nawab and Nawabi*, Hena Biswas, Murshidabad. pp.15-16.

¹⁴ Salim, G. H. (1903). *Riyaz-us-Salatin*. (A. Salam, Trans.), Asiatic Society of Benga, Calcutta. pp.327-329

¹⁵ Khan, G. H. (1975), op. cit., pp.11-14

¹⁶ Khan, G. H. (2018). *The Siyar-ul-Mutakharin, A History of Mohammedan Power in India during the last Century* (Vol. 1), Forgotten Books, London. pp.453-54

¹⁷ Haque, F. (2018). *Benglar Masnad O Nawab Sirajuddowla* (2nd ed.), Adorn Publication, Dhaka. p.31.

¹⁸ Choudhury, S. (2004), op. cit., p.95

tolerated injustice and indulgence. Begum Sharfunnesa was very pious and virtuous, and her moral values were also strong. Once, she came to know about the illicit affairs of her daughter, Ghaseti Begum, with Hossain Quli Khan. She tried her best to bring her daughter to the right path and it has also been said that she made the necessary arrangements to kill Hossain Quli Khan to preserve the chastity of her daughter. Unfortunately, the Battle of Plassey took everything from her and forced her to live off the English Governor's allowances. She made an appeal for an increase in her allowance in 1765. She was quite capable of maintaining official correspondence with the British Governor.¹⁹

Mehr-un-Nisha, alias Ghaseti Begum, the eldest daughter of Alivardi Khan, was one of the popular figures of the Murshidabad *Riyasat*. Nawazish Muhammad Shahmat Jang, the deputy governor of Dhaka, resigned due to poor health and handed over the governance to his wife, Ghaseti Begum, and his assistant, Hossain Quli Khan. Following Nawazish's passing, Ghaseti Begum gave Hossain Quli Khan full control of Dhaka's governance. She acquired vast fortunes and political strength through her royal influence. She was known to the people as the 'Begum of Motijheel'. She stored all her wealth in the heavily guarded Motijheel Palace. She was quite successful in manipulating Hossain Quli Khan and later Rajballabh, who was in charge of the financial administration of Dhaka. From the very beginning, she was hostile to Siraj-ud-Daulah. When Siraj-ud-Daulah was being nominated to the throne of Bengal, Ghaseti Begum launched an uprising and plotted to install her second sister's son, Shawkat Jang, in his place. She feared that, following the succession, Siraj would seize all of her wealth.²⁰ Consequently, Ghaseti Begum secretly allied herself with Mir Jafar and others like Rajballabh, Jagat Sheth, Umichand, and Lord Clive to conspire against Siraj and dethrone him. She took part in several underground meetings and negotiations with the East India Company. She lavishly distributed wealth and money among the co-conspirators. After observing her dedication, Renault and Jean Law, then the heads of the French factory in Murshidabad, stated that 'the British felt that no one could stop Ghaseti Begum's party; Ghaseti will occupy the *masnad* (throne), and Siraj-ud-Daulah's downfall is inevitable'.²¹ She acted impetuously in her negative role, and her party eventually succeeded in the

¹⁹ Banerjee, B. N. (1942). *Begums of Bengal, Based Mainly on State Records*. S.K. Mitra & Brothers, Calcutta. pp.7-12.

²⁰ Choudhury, S. (2004), op. cit., pp. 97-98; Sarkar, J. (Ed.). (1948). *The History of Bengal, Muslim Period, 1200-1757* (Vol. 2), Dhaka University press, Dhaka. p.434.

²¹ Choudhury, S. (2004), op. cit., pp. 94-95

conspiracy. Ghaseti Begum's life, however, ended tragically. On Mir Jafar's orders, she was imprisoned and brutally murdered following the Battle of Plassey.

Amina Begum, the mother of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah, played a very limited but impressive role in the Murshidabad court. She was active in controlling Nawab Siraj during a dispute with the English East India Company in 1756, and recommended assessing the inner strength of the British merchants. Despite being ignored, she used to advise her young son on important political issues. While Mr. W. Watts (the British agent of Murshidabad) and his family were imprisoned at Qasimbazar, she took the initiative to secure their release from the Nawab.²² The wife of Watson had a good relationship with Amina Begum. She provided royal hospitality and security to Mrs. Watson during the conflict and planned to send her to Chandannagar from Murshidabad.²³ It has been observed that many of the begums of the Nawab's family were eager to protect the English officers, as they traded on their own accounts through foreign merchants.

Lutf-un-Nisha, alias Raj Kanwar, wife of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah, was a prominent figure in the Murshidabad royal family. Despite being a slave, she was admired for her virtue and devotion and became the chief begum of the Riyasat.²⁴ Due to her influence, her brother Raja Mohanlal received promotion in the royal court. After defeat in the Battle of Plassey, Lutf-un-Nisha supported the Nawab and managed to escape from Murshidabad to Patna. She tried hard to keep her husband safe until he was killed, and in doing so she faced anguish and harassment from enemies. She spent seven years of captive life in Dhaka. Afterwards, she appealed to the Company to arrange *masohara* (monthly allowances) for her family's livelihood. In response, Lutf-un-Nisha was given the responsibility of overseeing the tombs of Alivardi Khan and Siraj-ud-Daulah at Khoshbagh in lieu of 305 rupees per month. In 1787, she again appealed to the Governor-General, Lord Cornwallis, and requested an increase in her wages. She was quite capable of maintaining regular communication with the East India Company through correspondence and petitions.²⁵

Shahjadi Begum, also known as Shah Khanam, the second wife of Mir Jafar, was renowned for her intellect and courage. A highly respected figure within the royal harem, her marriage significantly enhanced Mir Jafar's early political standing. When Nawab Siraj-ud-

²² Khan, G. H. (1975), op. cit., p.381

²³ Hyde, & Barry, H. (1901). *Parochial Annals of Bengal*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta. p.158

²⁴ Banerjee, B. N. (1942), op. cit., p.31

²⁵ Ibid., pp.36-37

Daulah imprisoned Ghaseti Begum, Shahjadi Begum strongly protested, an action that further strained her relationship with the Nawab.²⁶ Contemporary sources describe her as possessing a magnetic personality and being well-versed in royal etiquette. She was also known for her compassion toward the lower classes. During the conflict between the British and her son-in-law, Mir Qasim, the British regarded her as a conspirator.²⁷ It is rumored that through her diplomatic skills, Mir Jafar was able to secure the position of the second Naib Nazim of Bengal.

Gaddanashin Begum

After 1765, the British East India Company formally recognized the chief wife of the Nawab Nazim of the Bengal Subah with the title *Gaddanashin Begum* (Chief Lady of the State). The designation *Gaddanashin* had earlier been conferred upon the chief and capable queens since the reign of Alivardi Khan. Holding an important political position, the Gaddanashin Begum exercised significant authority in matters of governance, social welfare, and women's education and empowerment.

Gaddanashin Begums were economically independent, as they owned several *mahals* (estates). They enjoyed remarkable autonomy, including the freedom to travel without the accompaniment of their husbands. In some cases, they acted as political guardians of their minor or adopted sons and consequently wielded substantial political and financial power within the state. Notably, the Nawab had no right to interfere in their authority.

As a political office, the *Gaddanashin Begum* received crucial state information at the earliest stage, such as the appointment or resignation of British governors, declarations of war, and peace negotiations. Alongside these responsibilities, they supervised the major household affairs of the Nizamat family. Some *Gaddanashin Begums* also patronized the construction of public and religious buildings. Between 1765 and the early nineteenth century, a total of seven *Gaddanashin Begums* were directly appointed by the British authorities.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid. p.8; Ghosh, I. (2005). *The Riyasat of Murshidabad: A tale of its departed glory, 1704-1740*, Pragatishil Prakashok, Kolkata. p.199.

²⁷ Chakraborty, S. (2014), op. cit., p.170

²⁸ Mirza, S. A., & Mirza, R. (2018). "Subha Benglar Gaddinashin Begum" (Chief Lady of the Bengal Subha), in *Murshidabad Sondesh (E- Journal)*, 1 (1), pp. 54-59

The first Gaddanashin Begum (1772–1813) was Munni Begum, also known as Mani Begum, the wife of Nawab Mir Jafar. She was regarded as one of the shrewdest, most intelligent, and politically astute women of the Murshidabad royal household. Her remarkable rise—from a childhood marked by poverty in Sikandra, through adolescence as a slave and early adulthood as a dancer, to becoming the Chief Queen of Bengal—was extraordinary. She was widely known as the “Mother of the East India Company” and maintained close relations with Lord Clive and Warren Hastings, then Governor of Bengal.²⁹

From the outset, Munni Begum took a keen interest in court politics. While her husband conspired with the British East India Company against Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah, she acted as an intermediary and ambassador. To maintain cordial relations with the Company, she frequently presented valuable gifts to Lord Clive and other British officials. During Mir Qasim’s attempt to usurp state power, Munni Begum conducted political negotiations with Company officials who were determined to depose Nawab Mir Jafar. However, she failed to preserve the throne due to her reliance on the inefficient and unscrupulous Itbar Ali in royal affairs.³⁰ Following Mir Jafar’s death, Munni Begum skillfully ensured the enthronement of her two sons in succession by bribing Company officials. Owing to her influence, the Calcutta Council of the East India Company rejected the legitimate claim of Mubarak-ud-Daulah, the son of Babbu Begum. During the reigns of her two minor sons, Munni Begum effectively exercised complete control over the administration of the state. However, her power was somewhat curtailed in 1765 with the English appointment of Reza Khan as Naib Subah.³¹

In August 1772, the Committee of Circuit appointed Munni Begum as the chief lady and directress of the Nawab’s household. Raja Gurudas was appointed as her *diwan*, and Babu Jagat Chand as her *peshkar* (assistant). On this occasion, her annual honorarium was fixed at 1,40,000 rupees. Munni Begum performed her duties as guardian of the household with exceptional diligence, exceeding even the expectations of the Company, until her dismissal by the Calcutta Council in 1774.³² She received a monthly allowance of 6,000

²⁹ Haque, F. (2018), op. cit., pp. 121-122.

³⁰ Bhalla, P. N. (1943). “The Mother of The Company”, in *Journal Of Indian History*, 22 (2/3), pp.128-144

³¹ Choudhury, S. (2004). op. cit., p.102

³² Mukhopadhyay, S. C. (2024). *British Residents at the Darbar of Bengal Nawabs at Murshidabad, 1757-1772*. Gian Pub. House, Delhi.

rupees, paid directly from the treasury of the Bengal Subah. Following the death of Nawab Nazim-ud-Daulah, this allowance was increased to 12,000 rupees per month, which she continued to receive until 1813.³³ As the chief lady of the state, Munni Begum was responsible for the disbursement of approximately 23,000 rupees per month for various expenses, including servants' wages, the maintenance of women in the palace, hospitality for visitors, and the observance of religious ceremonies and festivals.³⁴

Subsequently, a false charge of financial embezzlement was brought against Munni Begum, which she contested vigorously. After a formal investigation, she was declared innocent and responded by filing a counterclaim against the Company amounting to fourteen lakh rupees. She remained deeply concerned with the financial management of the Nizamat and urged the Company to recover an outstanding debt of 195,000 rupees owed to the Nizamat by Rani Bhavani, the zamindar of Rajshahi. However, the Company showed little interest in pursuing this recovery.³⁵ Munni Begum was widely known for her charitable activities, particularly her support for widows and the impoverished. Over her lifetime, she amassed a considerable fortune, estimated to be worth nearly one crore rupees. She bequeathed all her wealth and possessions for public welfare, which were consolidated into the *Munni Begum Fund*, later merged with the *Nizamat Deposit Fund*.³⁶ These funds were utilized for various educational and social initiatives. She founded the Nawab Bahadur School and the Nizamat Hostel. Her estates were handed over to the British East India Company on the condition that the regular interest accrued would be used to sustain these institutions. In 1767, she also constructed a mosque at Chak Bazaar-known as the *Chak Masjid*- which stands as a testament to her architectural patronage.³⁷

Bablu Begum, the principal wife of Mir Jafar, occupied the position of *Gaddanashin Begum* until 1810 and served as the political guardian of her son. Nawab Faij-un-Nisha Begum, the wife of Nawab Mubarak-ud-Daulah, became the third *Gaddanashin Begum* of Bengal, holding the position from 1813 to 1820. She was succeeded by Ameer-un-Nisha

³³ Mirza, S. A., & Mirza, R. (2018), op. cit.

³⁴ Chakraborty, S. (2014), op. cit., p.176

³⁵ Mohsin, K. M. (2018). *A study of Murshidabad district 1765 – 1793*, Proquest LLC, Michigan. pp.276-78

³⁶ Mirza, S. A., & Mirza, R. (2018), op. cit.

³⁷ Mukherjee, A. (27.11.2014). "A Queen's Taps, A King's College, And a Moth", in *The Telegraph* (online edition).

Begum, also known as Dhoolin Begum, the wife of Nawab Ali Jah, who served as the fourth *Gaddanashin Begum* from 1820 to 1858. Dhoolin Begum owned several *mahals* (estates), and during the coronation of Nawab Fardun Jah, she granted him thirty-three *mahals*. Following the death of Dhoolin Begum, Najir-un-Nisha Begum briefly assumed the role of chief lady of the state, holding the position for only one year.³⁸ Rais-un-Nisha Begum, the wife of Nawab Humayun Jah, was the next and one of the most powerful *Gaddanashin Begums*, serving from 1859 to 1893. A former *tawaiif* (courtesan), she was highly educated and a trained performer. She composed and recited poetry and was capable of critically analyzing the works of others. Like the Japanese *geisha*, she was an independent woman who exercised control over her household and personal affairs. It was customary during this period to send young Nawabs to *tawaiifs* to acquire refined manners and social sophistication.³⁹ Rais-un-Nisha Begum was deeply committed to the education of her son, Mansur Ali, whom she sought to prepare for his future role as Nawab Nazim. British Agent Colonel Mackenzie's wife, Helen Mackenzie, later described her as "a very perverse person, who, having been a dancing girl, stands to arms with a peculiar alertness in defense of her dignity and decorum."⁴⁰ On one occasion, she openly revolted against her husband, and the matter became widely known beyond the palace walls. She brought financial charges against him during the construction of the Hazarduari Palace and publicly voiced her objections—an unprecedented assertion of female political agency in contemporary society.⁴¹ Rais-un-Nisha Begum received a pension of one lakh rupees and was in charge of several *mahals*, *duri*, and *nizamats* estates. She played a significant role in social welfare activities and left behind a substantial fortune. At the time of her death, her properties were valued at approximately Rs. 2,90,37,091.⁴²

Nawab Samsi Jahan Begum, the wife of Nawab Syed Mansur Ali, was the last *Gaddanashin Begum* of Bengal, holding the position from 1893 to 1905. She was among the most popular and widely respected Indian women of her time. In 1888, she undertook a

³⁸ Ray, A. et al. (1995). *Murshidabad Affairs, 1821-1850: Records of Berhampur Collectorate, West Bengal*. K. P. Bagchi, Calcutta.

³⁹ Innes, L. (2021). *The Last Prince of Bengal: A Family's Journey from an Indian Palace to the Australian Outback*. Westbourne Press, London.

⁴⁰ Mackenzie, H. (1884). *Storms and Sunshine of a Soldier's Life* (Vol. 2), David Douglas, Edinburgh. p.219

⁴¹ Dhar, D. (1994), *Krishnanath, R. Wheelar O Somosamoyik Murshidabad Samaj*, Islampur, Murshidabad. p.57.

⁴² Mirza, S. A., & Mirza, R. (2018), op. cit.

pilgrimage to Mecca and, on her return journey, visited Bombay and Calcutta. She assumed leadership as the female head of the Murshidabad *Nizam* while also administering several estates. The colonial government granted her a pension of one lakh rupees per annum along with additional privileges. Later, she settled permanently in Calcutta, where she became a prominent social figure. Several Lieutenant Governors and other high-ranking British officials, accompanied by their spouses, regularly paid her visits. Renowned for her exceptional generosity, Samsi Jahan Begum donated approximately seven lakh rupees for public welfare. She actively participated in public movements and acted as patroness to several social institutions. Notably, she served as Vice-Patroness of the Countess of Dufferin Fund,⁴³ reflecting her deep commitment to women's health and welfare. Highly conscious of the condition of women in Bengal, she worked extensively for the upliftment of widows and impoverished women by promoting elementary education, vocational training in handicrafts, financial assistance, and the establishment of shelter homes. On 9 September 1898, she dedicated all her properties and estates to a Waqf Trust for the welfare of the poor of Bengal. She holds the distinction of being the first Muslim woman to prepare a Waqf Nama specifically for women's education and to establish a Girls' Madrasa in Calcutta. She also initiated and encouraged the practice of presenting congratulatory addresses from the women of Bengal to distinguished individuals on ceremonial occasions. After her death in 1905, the Samsiya Zanana Madrasa was established at Metiabruz (Calcutta) from the income of her Waqf properties.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In examining the royal women of Murshidabad, two distinct yet equally compelling patterns emerge. Some Begums were gracious, wise, and guided by high ideals; they supported and advised their husbands through royal duties and political crises. Others were shrewd, ambitious, and self-serving, unhesitant to employ intrigue to achieve their objectives. Yet, irrespective of temperament, both groups demonstrated exceptional ability, political awareness, and personal authority, which contributed significantly to their prominence and popularity. The role of these enigmatic royal women—particularly in court politics—was remarkable. Their ideas and counsel profoundly influenced the rulers, and in several

⁴³ Khan, M. S. (2008). *Murshidabad O Banglar Najim (Najim of Murshidabad & Bengal)*, Punthipatra Private Limited, Calcutta.

⁴⁴ Campbell, A. C. (2003). *Glimpses of Bengal: A comprehensive....* Sandeep Prakashan, Delhi. pp.41-42

instances, they effectively governed the state from behind the scenes. Defying the constraints of patriarchal kingship, religious orthodoxy, and entrenched social prejudices, these women exercised decisive, empowering, and transformative authority—an intervention largely unprecedented in Indian political history.⁴⁵ The purdah or veil did not restrict their agency or expression. Rather than lineage alone, it was their competence, intelligence, and political acumen that determined their status at court. These Begums possessed the autonomy to make independent decisions, including adopting children and designating them as legal heirs. Nawab Syed Ashraf Ali Khan, for instance, was adopted by his aunt Nafisat-un-Nisha Begum; Nafisa Khanam adopted her nephew Kuchak Khan and managed the harem of Nawjis Muhammad Khan; and Ghaseti Begum adopted her nephew Ekramuddaulah.⁴⁶ Several Begums, renowned for their piety and public spirit, used their personal allowances to construct religious institutions such as mosques and madrasas. Notable examples include Nowsheri Banu Begum's Mosque, Azim-un-Nisa Begum's Mosque, Badr-un-Nisa Begum's Mosque, Shaha Banu Begum's Mosque, Minia Bibi's Tomb, and the Bibi Alijan Juma Masjid.⁴⁷

Together, these examples underscore the extraordinary political, social, and cultural influence exercised by the royal women of Murshidabad, whose legacy continues to challenge conventional narratives of gender and power in precolonial and colonial India.

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⁴⁵ Kumar, K. P., & Jaffer, A. (2015). *Maharanis: Women of Royal India*, Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad

⁴⁶ Selim, G. H., (2007). op., cit., pp.191-192 & 202

⁴⁷ Islam, S. Z. (2018). "Women Empowerment through Muslim Architecture Which Built by Name of them in Bangladesh during Mediaeval Period: A Preliminary Survey Report", in *American Economic & Social Review*, 3 (1), pp.12-17.