

Khazada Begum

Extended Biography

You may wish to share this biography with students, or just to read it for your own information.

There is an assumption that the spheres of household and politics were separate. There is particularly a belief that this was true in the early modern Islamic states, such as the Timurid Empire, which later became the Mughal Empire. Students often learn about women in these empires as being exclusively members of the household, held in purdah (veiled) and in protected household areas such as the harem, while men ran the public space and engaged in politics. But the life of Timurid (Mughal) noblewoman Khazada Begum demonstrates that this isn't accurate, and that in fact women often played important political roles.

Khazada Begum (1478–1545) was the eldest daughter of Umar Sheikh Mirza, a descendent of the Turko-Mongol conqueror Timur and ruler of the Central Asian kingdom of Ferghana. More importantly, she was the sister of Babur, who inherited the kingdom from his father and went on to turn it into the great Mughal Empire. He was succeeded by his son Humayun, Khazada Begum's nephew.

Babur ruled in a period of great conflict in Central Asia. Early in his reign, he fought a war against the Uzbeks, who held him under siege in the city of Samarkand. His allies unable to help him, it seemed Babur would lose his kingdom. However, the Uzbek ruler, Muhammad Shaybani Khan, agreed to lift the siege in exchange for marriage to Khazada Begum, which would create an alliance between the Uzbeks and the Mughals. He allegedly said, "if you would marry your sister Khazada Begum to me there might be peace and a lasting alliance between us." Khazada agreed to marry him, and the siege was lifted.

However, Khazada Begum was more than just a diplomatic prize. While married to the Uzbek ruler, she represented her brother at the Uzbek court. Indeed, she lobbied so hard for pro-Mughal positions that eventually Shaybani divorced her and "gave" her to one of his followers. In 1510, however, the Uzbeks lost a major war against the Safavids. Khazada Begum was captured (or liberated) by the Safavid ruler Shah Ismail I. Seeking an alliance with the Mughals, the Safavids returned Khazada Begum to her brother. She then helped to negotiate an alliance between the two.

For the rest of her life, Khazada Begum served as an adviser—first to her brother, and then to his son, the Mughal Emperor Humayun. She remained involved in internal diplomacy. Some historians believe that she played an important role in convincing Humayun's younger brothers to accept his rule, telling them "[Emperor Babur] gave his throne to the Emperor Humayun... so now regard him as your superior and remain obedient to him." This action is consistent with one traditional role of women. In Mughal politics, where sons often fought for power, the roles women played as conciliators in bringing the family back together was particularly important to maintaining dynasties and the stability of empires.

Khazada Begum's career as diplomat and adviser shows that women of the royal household did play important political roles, and that the household and government were not, in fact, completely separate.



Sources

Lal, Ruby. "The 'Domestic World' of Peripatetic Kings: Babur and Humayun, c. 1494–1556." *The Medieval History Journal* 4, no.1 (2001): 43–82.