



Timurid Princesses: Historical Figures And Political Role

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ABSTRACT

This article, based on historical sources, illuminates the lives, political activities, spiritual legacies, and roles in state affairs of renowned princesses who lived during the Timurid dynasty - Sultan Bakht Begum, Gavhar Shod Begum, Shodmulk Khatun, and Khanzada Begum. Each of these women actively participated in the socio-political life of their era, with some playing crucial roles in state governance. The princesses' selfless service, wisdom, determination, and tragic fates provide important historical evidence for understanding the complex socio-political landscape of the Timurid period. Through this article, readers will become acquainted with these Timurid princesses as exemplars of the highly intellectual and resilient women of their time.

Keywords:

Timurids, Sultan Bakht Begum, Gavhar Shod Begum, Shodmulk Khatun, Khanzada Begum, Amir Timur, Shahrukh Mirza, Timurid dynasty, female politicians, medieval history, palace life, queen of the sultanate, historical figure, female heroes.

When studying the Timurid era, it is essential not to neglect the personalities and roles of the Timurid princesses. These women held an unparalleled place within the Timurid state. Each of them, through their advisory roles, empathy, and loyalty to their rulers, played a vital part not only in family affairs but also in state matters, leaving a profound mark on our history. Let us now get acquainted with them one by one.

Sultan Bakht Begum. Among the Timurid princesses, we must first turn our attention to Sultan Bakht Begum, the second daughter of Amir Temur. It is estimated that she was born between the years 1360 and 1366. Her mother was Olja-i Turkan Agha. Sultan Bakht Begum is described as naturally bold, stubborn, and possessing a temperament more commonly

attributed to men. She reportedly did not hold men in high regard and was extremely proud.

According to the Arab historian Ibn Arabshah, she behaved in a masculine manner and showed disfavor toward men. He attributes this attitude to the influence of women from Baghdad who had come to Samarkand. Amir Temur arranged her marriage to Muhammad Mirak, the son of Sher Bahram, the Amir of Khuttalan. However, Sultan Bakht Begum and Muhammad Mirak had no children during their time together. The princess did not respect her husband, and it is not an exaggeration to state that she simply did not like him. If Amir Temur had perceived any impropriety in his daughter's behavior, he would not have hesitated to correct it.

Muhammad Mirak and his brother Abu'l-Fath were accused of treason against Amir Temur and, on the orders of Umar Shaykh Mirza, were

executed. Following this, Sultan Bakht Begum was married to Amir Sulayman Shah, the son of Amir Dawud Dughlat. As is evident from her life, Sultan Bakht Begum had no children. She passed away in 1430 in Nishapur.

Gawhar Shad Begum. Among the Timurid princesses, Gawhar Shad Begum also holds a highly esteemed position. She was one of the beloved wives of Shah Rukh Mirza, the fourth son of Amir Timur. Her father was Ghiyath al-Din Tarkhan, a noble of Chagatai lineage. Gawhar Shad Begum was born in 1379 and was married to Shah Rukh Mirza at the age of fourteen. She bore him three sons and two daughters.

According to historical sources, Gawhar Shad Begum was a woman of refined taste and wisdom—intelligent, enterprising, eloquent, resolute, and of unparalleled beauty. She was so astute that she actively participated in state affairs. Shah Rukh Mirza regularly consulted with her on important matters, fully recognizing her intelligence and often relying on her judgment.

She had the authority to appoint provincial governors, name military commanders, and decide on rewards or punishments. One illustrative example is that on May 6, 1440, the famous historian of Herat (and later the court historian), Fasih Ahmad ibn Jalal al-Din Muhammad Khwafi, was sentenced to short-term imprisonment twice as a result of the queen's displeasure.

The authority of Gawhar Shad Begum was so prominent that even Shah Rukh Mirza could not reach a definitive decision on choosing an heir without her influence. Shah Rukh initially intended to appoint his youngest son, Muhammad Juki Mirza, as his successor. However, this decision did not please the queen. Gawhar Shad Begum held a stronger affection for her grandson Ala al-Dawla Mirza than for her own son, and therefore wished for her grandson to inherit the throne. Due to her fear of her eldest son, Mirzo Ulugh Beg, she sought to influence the succession through Shah Rukh Mirza rather than acting openly. Nevertheless, her resolute nature led her to ensure that her grandson was designated as the heir apparent. At that time, Shah Rukh Mirza was gravely ill.

Upon learning of this decision, Muhammad Juki Mirza was deeply hurt and resented his mother. During this period, Khorasan witnessed a notable rise in social, economic, and cultural development. Gawhar Shad Begum played a significant role in improving life throughout the region. In Herat, numerous madrasas, khanqahs, mausoleums, shrines, hospitals, and bridges were constructed. The queen herself commissioned the building of two madrasas.

Gawhar Shad Begum was known for her firmness. Under her orders, a number of Sayyids were executed in Shiraz. According to Davlatshah Samarqandi, these Sayyids had implored Shah Rukh Mirza to “conduct an inquiry for the sake of justice.” However, Shah Rukh, unable to defy his wife's will, consented. As the Sayyids were being executed, they cursed the king from the gallows. This incident illustrates that Gawhar Shad Begum's decisions always took precedence, and her wishes were invariably fulfilled.

After Shah Rukh Mirza's death, Gawhar Shad Begum appointed Abdul Latif Mirza as commander of the army and secretly sent a letter to her grandson Ala al-Dawla Mirza. When Abdul Latif learned of this, he placed his grandmother under arrest. This period saw an intensification of the power struggle for the throne. Despite her efforts, Gawhar Shad Begum could not achieve her goal. Taking advantage of internal conflict, Sultan Abu Sa'id Mirza, governor of Samarkand, seized the throne.

Although Gawhar Shad Begum was nearly eighty years old, she had not relinquished her ambitions. Her death was tragically brutal. She had encouraged her great-grandson Sultan Ibrahim Mirza to rebel against the ruling Sultan Abu Sa'id. Upon discovering this conspiracy, the sultan ordered her execution by beheading. In 1457, Gawhar Shad Begum was executed and buried in Baysonqur's mausoleum. Even in her final days, she did not surrender her aspirations for power, and thus her life ended in a tragic and sorrowful manner.

Shad Mulk Khatun. Another prominent Timurid princess was Shad Mulk Khatun, the wife of Khalil Sultan, the beloved grandson of Amir Timur. According to the historian Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, Shad Mulk Khatun was born in

the city of Samarkand into a family of artisans. One day, as Khalil Sultan was passing by a garden on the outskirts of the city on horseback, he happened to see her and fell in love with her at first sight. This suggests that Shad Mulk Khatun was extraordinarily beautiful and graceful.

However, Amir Timur opposed the marriage due to her belonging to the lower social class. Despite this, Khalil Sultan remained firm in his decision and married her. Due to his deep affection for his grandson, Timur ultimately forgave the transgression. After Timur's death, Khalil Sultan ascended the throne of Samarkand, but the involvement of Shad Mulk Khatun in state affairs sparked discontent among the high-ranking officials.

Khalil Sultan held great respect and affection for his wife, and he implemented many of her decisions. For example, Shad Mulk Khatun advised that the widows and favored concubines from Amir Timur's harem be married off to military leaders and high-ranking officials, and Khalil Sultan agreed to this. One of the most notable cases was the marriage of Tuman Agha, one of Amir Timur's most beloved wives, to Amir Shaykh Nuriddin following a military defeat in 1406 as part of a peace agreement.

According to Ibn Arabshah, under the secret orders of Shad Mulk Begim, Tukul Khanum and Saray Mulk Khanum were poisoned. The queen's influence over state matters became so overwhelming that she appointed individuals of lower status to high government positions, further fueling dissatisfaction among the elite. As a result, a conflict ensued, and Shad Mulk Khatun was handed over to Shah Rukh Mirza.

Some sources report that Shah Rukh humiliated and tortured her. Eventually, Khalil Sultan reached a peace agreement with Shah Rukh Mirza, in which he renounced his claim to the throne of Transoxiana and was appointed as governor of Ray. Under the terms of the agreement, his wife, Shad Mulk Khatun, was returned to him.

However, shortly after Khalil Sultan's death, Shad Mulk Khatun, overwhelmed by sorrow, took poison and died, unwilling to continue living without her husband.

Khan-Zada Begum. Khan-Zada Begum, daughter of Umar Shaykh Mirza, was born in 1478. Her mother was Qutlug Nigar Khanum, the daughter of Yunus Khan, the ruler of Tashkent. Historical sources affirm that Khan-Zada Begum was a woman of refined taste, sharp intellect, and remarkable wisdom.

Her father, Umar Shaykh, died while she was still a young woman. Her brother, Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur, driven by ambition to claim the legacy of their grandfather Amir Timur, launched several campaigns to seize Samarkand. In 1501, he succeeded in capturing the city. However, the Shaybanid forces soon besieged Samarkand, holding it under siege for six months. Despite Babur's appeals, neither his uncle Sultan Husayn Bayqara nor his maternal uncle Sultan Mahmud Khan came to his aid.

During this desperate time, Shaybani Khan proposed peace. Babur recounts the incident in his *Baburnama* as follows:

"At that moment, Shaybani Khan opened negotiations for peace. If there had been any hope from other quarters, or any provisions in the city, who would have listened to talk of peace? But necessity compelled me. After the night was two-thirds past, we departed through the Shaykzoda gate. I brought out my mother, and two other women: one was Bichka Khalifa, and the other was Minglik Kögaltāsh. My sister, Khan-Zada Begum, when she came out, fell into the hands of Shaybani Khan."

Babur's daughter, Gulbadan Begum, provides further detail in her historical work *Humayun-Nama*:

"In that dire time, Shaybani Khan sent word, saying: 'If you give your sister Khan-Zada Begum to me in marriage, peace shall be established between us, and alliance will be secured.' In the end, due to necessity, Khan-Zada Begum was given to that Khan, and they [Babur and his family] were allowed to leave the siege." This event reveals that in exchange for freedom, Babur was forced to give his sister Khan-Zada Begum in marriage to Shaybani Khan. From this union, a son was born, whom they named Khurram Beg.

After Shaybani Khan's death, Khan-Zada Begum returned to her brother Babur's court. Her son Khurram Shah passed away not long after.

Khan-Zada Begum distinguished herself at court with her intelligence and political acumen. She was unmatched in her resourcefulness and administrative insight.

Until her final years, she remained an influential advisor at the courts of both Babur and his successor Humayun Shah. Khan-Zada Begum passed away in 1544 in a place called Kabulhaq. Three months later, her remains were transported to Kabul, where she was buried beside her brother in the Mausoleum of Babur.

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