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Research Article

From Courtesan to King: The Conversion of Farzana

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One of the most interesting and famous women rulers of North India at the turn of the 19th century was known as the Begum Samru. Starting out as a dancing girl in Delhi, she became the sole ruler of the state of Sardhana for 30 years. This essay argues that her adoption of Roman Catholicism after the death of her husband played a key role in the *begum*'s personal and professional transformation into a king, in the mould of Indian sovereigns of the day. Having established herself as a military leader with the security afforded by revenue from a sizable tract of land, Farzana drew not only on the codes of Persian and Sanskritic sovereignty, but also on the affordances of 18th century-Catholicism to consolidate, exercise and expand her power.

conversion, indic, kingship, gender, Catholicism

Introduction

The Begum Samru (1750? – 1836), ruler of the small state of Sardhana about 42 miles northeast of Delhi, was a celebrity in North Indian political circles during her lifetime.[1] The Begum was a most unusual person – a woman ruler in a world ruled almost exclusively by men; a courageous warrior and military commander when women of her status lived and worked in homes and palaces; a smart political strategist and negotiator; a dancing girl from the lowest classes who climbed the social ladder of her day to its highest rungs; and a convert to Catholicism who maintained harmonious working relationships with persons from every religious background. Since her death, she has been the subject of numerous biographies and other academic studies, as well as a half dozen novels (Ghosh 2006: 149). Much of the fascination of her life arises from the fact that she succeeded in her political goals when so many – particularly those who were not British – failed. A number of recent studies have provided important insights into the reasons for her attainments (Fisher 2004, Ghosh 2006, Keay 2014). None, however, have investigated how her religious commitments were crucial for her success. This essay argues that Begum Samru's adoption of the Roman Catholic tradition of Christianity allowed her to transform herself into an Indian king. This does not mean that she adopted Catholicism only or even primarily for strategic and instrumental reasons. Yet the change in religion was accompanied by upward social mobility. The two were part and parcel of a more comprehensive change in identity, as the convert explored new ways of existing in her world, establishing for herself a new persona – that of an Indian king – in her own milieu (Kent 2004: 5-6).

[1] In historical records there are various spelling of her name, which she took from her consort: Sumru, Samru, Sumroo, etc. For the sake of consistency, I shall use the spelling 'Samru' unless quoting a text which uses another spelling of the name. The same is true of the name of her consort, Walter Reinhard, Renhard, Reinhardt, Reynard, etc. Again, I shall use the spelling 'Reinhard' unless quoting a text which uses another spelling.

The Times and Life of Farzana, later Begum Samru

The 18th century in India, especially North India, was a century of great political, social and religious change and instability. From the death of Aurangzeb, the last of the Great Mughal emperors of India, in 1707 to the conquest of Delhi by the British East India Company from the Maratha Empire in 1803, a number of Afghani, Persian, Indian, French and British political and military powers vied for control of the exceedingly rich subcontinent. Moreover, national and political allegiances did not necessarily align in this period. Many European mercenaries, for example, fought for various Indian powers against European ones, while the majority of the British East India Company's forces were made up of Indian soldiers. The political volatility of the 18th century in North India yielded a society that provided for significant social and religious flux, which was severely curtailed in the following century under British rule. The instability and flux had profound implications for Begum Samru or Farzana, who rose to prominence in the late 18th century. First, it allowed her, a Muslim Indian woman, to become the chief consort of an already married Roman Catholic European soldier, without any serious objections from their society. As one British chronicler put it, "she was united to Walter Renhard when very young, by all the forms considered necessary by persons of her persuasion when married to men of another" (Sleeman 1893: 267-68). It also allowed her to rise in political power and social status by means that probably would not have been possible in the previous or following century. Third, it allowed her to experiment with religious change as well as religious expression to a degree that would have been difficult, if not impossible in a settled society where religious leaders could more strictly regulate their communities.

Farzana was part of a cohort of Indians and Europeans who crossed cultural, social and religious lines without serious condemnation during this era, as Dalrymple illustrates (2014: x).

> The American-born William Linnaeus Gardner, had married a Shi'a Begum of Cambay, while his son James had married Mukhtar Begum, a first cousin of the Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. Together they fathered an Anglo-Mughal dynasty, half of whose members were Muslim and half Christian; indeed some of them, such as James Jahangir Shikoh Gardner, seem to have been both at the same time.

The Begum Samru, as she was known for much of her adult life, appears in historical records as Farzana at the age of 15 or so in what is now Old Delhi, India, in the year 1765 – making her birth year to be around 1750 (Keay 2014: 15). Her life before that is shrouded in mystery. Early records give conflicting accounts of her basic biographical data (Banerji 1925: 14-15). According to one dominant historical tradition, Farzana's father was a nobleman by the name of Lutf (or Latafat) Ali Khan, although one early source names him Asad Khan, while other sources claim that she was Kashmiri.[2] Lutf Khan lived in the town of Kotana, about 35 miles north of Delhi (Banerji 1925: 14). Farzana's mother was Lutf Khan's second wife – or perhaps his concubine – who according to one biographer "had originally been discovered by Latafat Khan in a kotha, a salon or brothel, in Delhi's Chauri Bazaar" (Keay 2014: 15, Lall 1997: xviii).[3] Lutf Khan had died when Farzana was about six years old. One source writes that she and her mother "became subject to ill-treatment from her half-brother, the legitimate heir, and they consequently removed to Delhi about 1760" (Atkinson 1875: 95-96). The two of them ended

[2] Ghosh (2006:14) makes the point that Farzana's 'noble' parentage appears in accounts *after* her ascension to the position of landholder in North India, which should raise questions about its veracity.

[3] I have found the claim that Farzana's mother was a former courtesan from Delhi only in Keay (2014) and Lall (1997). I am not sure whether these historians (who do not always provide documentation for their assertions) assumed this information since Farzana's mother went to Delhi after being thrown out of her house upon the death of her husband, and would have normally gone back to her 'ancestral' home.

up in Shahjahanabad, a section of what is now Old Delhi, where Farzana became a dancing girl, a profession that defies current categories of employment (Keay 2014: 19-22, Lall 1997: xvii-xix). The dancers were a combination of performing artists such as musicians and dancers, literary figures, and courtesans, who provided varying degrees of artistry along with sexual services to their customers. They achieved different levels of proficiency in the various arts (including erotica) that were possible for them in society at this time and were paid according to the level of sophistication of their various performances (Nevile 2004: 22, Fraser 1851: 285). Farzana does not seem to have been very accomplished in either literature or any of the musical arts, and so it is not unreasonable to assume that it was her beauty, charm, and charisma that made her attractive (Keay 2014: 23, Lall 1997: xviii). Thus, even by the standards of her day, Farzana's social status was a rather low one: she was a dancing girl in Delhi, a courtesan whose main merits, besides her sexual ones of which we know nothing, were her beauty and personality rather than any refined artistic skills.

In the first months of 1765, Farzana was acquired by a European mercenary, a Roman Catholic by baptism, named Walter Reinhard. There is quite a bit of information regarding Reinhard, since he was the head of between four and six battalions of troops – a mixture of Indians and Europeans – who worked for him, and he fought in many battles for various Indian, French, and British belligerents (Sleeman 1893: 272, Lall 1997: 6). He was rather adept both at choosing the losing side in a conflict, and at switching sides when he discerned the final outcome of the conflict in which he was involved.[4] Reinhard received the name 'Sombre' at some point in his life, perhaps when he was in the employ of the French, either because of his dour appearance and demeanour, or because he had named himself 'Summers' at one point when he had deserted to the British, with 'Sombre' being a corruption of that name (Sleeman 1893: 269). The name Sombre was Indianized to Samru. Exactly how Farzana came to join Reinhard's entourage is, like so much about her life, a mystery (Fraser 1851: 284). We do know that Reinhard entered Delhi in January of 1765 as part of the conquering army of the Jat ruler and warrior Rajah Jawahar Singh. Perhaps it was during this campaign that Farzana came into Reinhard's household, most probably his harem. Julia Keay (2014), who has written the most extensive biography of the Begum, strongly suggests that Farzana was purchased by Reinhard from her mistress – a not uncommon transaction in that day. Keay speculates that Farzana may very well have encouraged, even initiated this transfer – her ticket out of a difficult life of prostitution (Keay 2014: 60, Lall 1997: xx). Reinhard already had a wife and son, but he took Farzana as his consort, and she ended up being his indominable companion and finally his heir, becoming known as *Samru ki Begum* (Samru's Begum) and then 'Begum Samru' – Begum being an aristocratic, even royal title for a Muslim woman (Ghosh 2006: 150). As noted above, the lack of a formal marriage at the time was no obstacle to her being considered his wife (Fraser 1851: 285). By taking the name Begum Samru, Farzana simultaneously affirmed that she was a noblewoman, and also that she was attached to an important European soldier in India, who by the late 1760s had under his command four battalions with about 2000 soldiers for hire. Interestingly, the title 'Begum' was hardly ever used as an Indian equivalent of 'Mrs.', which is how Farzana crafted her title, or allowed it to be crafted – showing her ability to take the initiative in forging her emerging identity (Ghosh 2006: 150-151).

Once Farzana became Reinhard's consort and then acknowledged wife, she joined him in his military ventures. She became "the company's mascot, riding out with the troops on every sortie, getting as close to the action as Reinhardt would allow and learning useful lessons on

[4] For early 19th century accounts of Reinhard's career, see Atkinson (1875: 95) for a brief version, Sleeman (1893: 268-73), and Skinner (Fraser 1851: 268-73) for somewhat longer ones. For more contemporary ones, see Sharma (1985: 30-58) and Keay (2014: 33-60). Reinhard's place of origin is unsure. Atkinson says he was from Salzburg or Trier; Sleeman says from Salzburg.

how and how not to conduct a military campaign" (Keay 2014: 64). Her lack of musical and literary skills was no handicap on the battlefield, and she quickly adapted to the life of the soldier. This included not only military campaigns but learning how to live in an army encampment with soldiers, their families and their equipment for warfare. The soldiers grew to enjoy her company; according to Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Bengal, "they were enchanted by her heroism" (Keay 2014: 65). It was in those early years that she started to be known as '*Samru ki Begum'*. Reinhard or Samru, on his part, appears to have been thoroughly Indianised in his lifestyle. A Frenchman who met him in Delhi noted that "he has adopted the customs and habits of the country so thoroughly that even the Mughals believe he was born in Hindustan. He speaks all the languages of the country and even though he can neither read nor write he is much respected" (Keay 2014: 67). He was a European who dressed and lived like a Mughal without becoming a Muslim – and in this he was not unique (Fraser 1851: 284, Ghosh 2006: 154). For example, David Ochterlony (1758-1825) and William Fraser (1784-1835), both appointed British Residents (the chief representative of the British) in Delhi at various times during the first third of the 19th century, also adopted Mughal lifestyles.[5] In a previous century, Father Emmanuel Pinheiro (1556-1619), of the third Jesuit mission to the Mughal court, was known by his colleagues as 'the Mogul'. He refrained from criticizing Hindu and Muslim beliefs and practices, and engaged local Indians of various religious backgrounds in conversation (Powell 1993: 80).

Although Jawahar Singh's foray into Delhi in 1765 proved to be short-lived, for 9 years Samru and Farzana worked for him and his clan of Jats who were based in Agra and Bharatpur, providing valuable strength to his armies. However, when in 1774 the Jat armies were about to be defeated by Mughal forces led by the emperor's commander-in-chief, Mirza Najaf Khan, Samru switched sides and offered his services to the Mughals. Offer accepted, he and his *begum* moved to Delhi with their troops, to be near their new employer, for whom they worked until Samru's death in 1778. There they were able to negotiate the gift to Samru of the small state, called a *jagir* or *jaidad*, of Sardhana (Fraser 1851: 283-284). Farzana was a crucial part of the negotiations which made Samru the lord of this tract of land (Ghosh 2006: 154). Such gifts of land, which were not permanent but temporary, were standard 'payment' from kings to the leaders of mercenary troops, because the income from the produce of the land provided for the salaries of the leader and his household, the troops, the peasants working the land, and tribute to the king. The *jagir* of Sardhana covered about 800 square miles, and at the time had a gross annual revenue of about 600,000 rupees (Keay 2014: 82). It became the home of Samru and his *begum*, the latter supervising the construction of buildings for her husband's household, his troops and his military supplies and equipment (Keay 2014: 83). They had no children of their own.

Until his death in 1778, Samru was haunted by an action of his that had occurred in 1763. In that year, under orders and the threat of death from his employer Mir Qassim, Samru and his soldiers killed a group (the numbers are not known) of British prisoners in the city of Patna (Keay 2014: 48-49). This made him a target of British anger and hatred for the rest of his life, although the British were never able to capture him. It also made him perpetually fearful of ending up in British hands. Towards the end of his life a Frenchman visiting Sardhana in 1775 described him as "devout, superstitious and credulous. He fasts on all the set days. He gives alms and orders masses. He fears the devil as much as the English" (Keay 2014: 84). His last military venture, in which Farzana did not join him, was in 1775 – 1776 with his masters the Mughals against the Jats in Bharatpur – his erstwhile employers. Here the Mughals, with crucial

[5] William Dalrymple (2002, 2005) is well known for having brought to contemporary historical light the prevalence of British assimilation of Indian cultures (and vice versa) during the 18th and early 19th centuries.

help from Samru who knew Bharatpur from the days he lived there, defeated the Jats after a 6 month siege of the city. His reward was the governorship of the city of Agra, to which he and Farzana moved, and there he died of natural causes on the 4th of May, 1778. The death of Samru should have spelled the end of his *begum*'s independence and career. She was only 28 years old, and Samru had a legitimate wife and son. The Mughal emperor Shah Alam II gave Samru's titles, armies, and properties to the deceased's son. The command of the troops was to be handled by a German mercenary, a Colonel Pauli, until the son came of age. In Samru's last recorded statement, "there was no mention of Farzana, no role for her in the brigade, no position for her at Sardhana and no provision whatsoever for her future upkeep" (Keay 2014: 90). She even had no legal title to his name, although she was known as Samru's Begum (Keay 2014: 91).

However, in the turbulent years of the last quarter of the 18th century, might could confer rights, and Farzana managed to get the army to declare her its leader and head, with the acquiescence, if not the connivance of Colonel Pauli.[6] She also had the emperor in Delhi declare her to be the rightful landlord of the *jaidad* of Sardhana. As the British soldier and government administrator, Sir William Sleeman recorded (1893: 273).

> On the death of her husband, she was requested to take command of the force by all the Europeans and natives that composed it, as the only possible mode of keeping them together, since the son was known to be altogether unfit. She consented, and was regularly installed in the charge by the Emperor Shah Alum.

Samru's son, Zafar-yab Khan, described by Sleeman as a "man of weak intellect" (ibid: 268) and by others as a person of moral turpitude (Keay 2014: 96), was no match for the Begum, who side-lined him at Sardhana through her command of Samru's troops. Yet it was neither her influence within Samru's household and army, nor her rise to primary concubine from dancing girl that was unique about Farzana's career. Rather, "what was exceptional about this begum was that she became the successor to Samru's lands and armies, rather than being the custodian on behalf of a favored son" (Ghosh 2006: 154). She ruled alone.

The Begum Samru led a highly adventurous and colourful life, as a fearless warrior and leader of her troops, as a skilled diplomat in a time of immense political turmoil, as a steadfast and wise ruler of the territory of Sardhana, as a benefactor of the poor, as a patron of the Catholic Church, and other religious institutions, until her death at the age of 86 in 1836. She did have her times of trouble, most notably when in 1793 she married a Frenchman, Le Vassoult or Le Vaisseaux, who three years previously had become the commander of her army, albeit a highly unpopular one. However, Le Vaissoult killed himself soon after the marriage, when two battalions of Samru's troops defected and rode to Delhi to ask Zafar-yab Khan to be their leader. Her husband's death allowed the Begum slowly to regain control of her estate and armies (Ghosh 2006: 156, Sleeman 1893: 278-281).

The Baptism of Begum Samru

Three years after Reinhard's death, on May 7, 1781, the Begum Samru was baptised along with her stepson Zafar-yab Khan and received into the Roman Catholic Church (Sharma 1985: 69). By this time she had positioned herself as the protector and provider of the late Reinhard's legal wife and son, while not allowing them any possibility of exercising any control over his armies or estate. At baptism she took the name of Joanna (which, however, she rarely used in life even though it appears on her tombstone); her stepson was named Louis Balthazar (Sharma 1985: 70). The question immediately arises, from both the religious and the secular

[6] Keay (2014: 96-97) claims that Farzana seduced Pauli and thus got him to go along with her plans.

historian's perspective, as to why she was baptised. Keay notes that the timing of the baptism creates a problem for those who want to argue that the Begum Samru was either somehow coerced into the baptism, or did it for gaining control of the army and land at Sardhana. She was baptised not while her Catholic husband was alive, nor when her leadership of his army was in question, nor when his lands were beyond her control, but *after* she had achieved social, economic and political stability, and honour. In fact, becoming a Catholic when she did, in 1781, involved a significant risk, given that various political powers of that era did not particularly favour Catholics (Fisher 2004: 99). Moreover, she continued to be immersed to varying degrees in a Persianate culture as a Christian, at times angering the local Catholic hierarchy. Her baptism seems therefore to have been a matter of personal conviction (Fisher 2004: 99). And yet, as will be elucidated below, it was also a public and professional matter – again, as was the norm for Indian kings. A king's personal religious choices could have profound implications for his political rule. Moreover, at times these choices defied the logic of straightforward political calculations. None other than the great Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), in the middle of his long reign, promulgated his idiosyncratic and syncretic religion, Tawhid-i Ilahi (or Din-i Ilahi), which could have threatened the religious harmony he had painstakingly established in his empire. The conversion of Raja Sawai Ram Singh II of Amber (Jaipur) in Rajasthan from Vaishnavism to Shaivism in the 1860s resulted in significant public disturbance (Clémentin-Ojha 1999). Thus Begum Samru's conversion to Catholicism, with all the risks involved, was not anomalous. In fact, as king, she would have been expected to make at least a public declaration of some religious commitment – which fits the timing of her decision. Characteristically, the Begum transformed a potential liability, her personal choice of Catholicism, into a source of strength for her developing identity and rule.

With the current lack of evidence, we shall never know exactly why the Muslim Farzana was baptised into the Catholic Church. It is probably wise to think of multiple influences, rather than a single one, that went into her decision. We do know that personal relationships have played a crucial role in religious change and conversion, and they may have very well played some role in Farzana's baptism. Thus, the influence of Walter Reinhard on her religious life needs to be seriously considered. She fashioned herself as his *begum*, and in her Catholic practices we see a reflection, even an intensification of his. We do know that he continued living as a Mughal even as he became an observant Catholic in his last years, endowing masses and regularly observing fast days (Keay 2014: 115; 84). One should also consider the possible influence on her of the Carmelite monk, Father Gregorio, who baptised her. He was a constant supporter of hers until he died in 1807, almost 30 years after her baptism, visiting her as much as possible whenever he was stationed in Agra (Keay 2014: 280). He performed the marriage ceremony between herself and Le Vaissoult. Father Gregorio was a missionary who allowed his noble charge to live as a Christian with Persian Islamic influences permeating her lifestyle, as they had her deceased husband's. He was continuing the tradition laid down by at least some of the Jesuit fathers in North India in the 16th and 17th centuries, who had been very open to local cultural and religious influences (Powell 1993: 80). Finally, Catholicism offered some distinct advantages to Farzana's evolving sense of her own identity – her relationship to herself, as it were. Specifically, coming as it did after she had grasped the control of Sardhana, it provided her new possibilities to rule Sardhana in the mould of an Indian king.

The Begum as Indic King

From the 12th century C.E. onwards, ideologies and practices of Indian kingship began to be drawn from two very broad cultural streams: the Sanskritic and the Persianate (Eaton 2019: 10-18). These have also been called 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' forms of kingship, but while religion was certainly one factor in the development of kingship in India, it was not the exclusive nor even the most important one. By the 16th century C.E., Indian kingship functioned as an

amalgam of Sanskritic and Persianate royal cultures. The Arthashastra, an ancient Sanskrit political treatise on Hindu kingship, provides guidance to rulers in the fulfilment of their duties – governance of the state, economic management of the state, and foreign affairs, especially warfare (Olivelle 2013: 40-51) – and its foundational assumptions were manifest in Indian kingly rule. Yet courtly life and kingly rule in India were also deeply influenced by Persianate royal culture "in such diverse areas as military technology and strategy, political and administrative institutions, and above all, the material culture of the court" (Shivram 2005-6: 404). There were many ways that Sanskritic and Persianate modes of kingship and courtly life could combine in the reign of any particular ruler. Begum Samru, quite naturally, drew upon various contemporary Sanskritic as well as Persianate ideas, practices and aesthetics of Indian kingship to establish her rule at Sardhana, showing remarkable skill in military, political, religious, and cultural domains of kingship.

Since the Begum began her ascendance to power through her husband's army, it is fitting to describe first her career as a warrior. Indeed, it was probably her role as a warrior that kept her in charge of her state, for when she temporarily lost control of her army due to her marriage with the unpopular Le Vaissoult, she also temporarily lost her authority to rule. Upon his death, another European military commander (and rumoured former lover), George Thomas, was able to bring her army under her control, and restore her to power in Sardhana (Fisher 2004: 100-101). One mark of the Begum's kingship was her perceived maleness, which was noted by contemporaries (Ghosh 2006: 160), and was particularly salient in the domain of controlling troops and other subordinates. This was done without censure or condemnation, and sometimes with approval. So James Baillie Fraser (1783-1856), a Scottish businessman, traveler, writer, and artist, who lived for 7 years in India, commented, "By means of her uncommon ability and discretion, united to a masculine firmness and intrepidity…she managed to preserve her country nearly unmolested" (Fraser 1851: 285). William Sleeman (1788-1856), who lived and worked in India all of his adult life, said of her, "She had uncommon sagacity and a masculine resolution; and the Europeans and natives who were most intimate with her have told me that though a woman and of small stature, her *Rooab* (dignity, or power of commanding personal respect) was greater than that of almost any person they had ever seen" (Sleeman 1893: 288). William Francklin, an 18th-century chronicler, wrote that she was "endowed by nature with masculine intrepidity" (Francklin 1798: 151). The famous British traveller and diarist, Lady Maria Nugent, noted when visiting the Begum how she even dressed like a man (Cohen 2014: 216):

> Her dress was more like a man's than a woman's – she wore trousers of cloth of gold, with shawl stockings, and Hindoostanee slippers; a cloth of gold kind of dress, with flaps to it, coming a little below the knee, and in some degree doing the office of a petticoat; a dark turban, but no hair to be seen; and abundance of shawls wrapped round her in different ways.[7]

Her masculine "firmness" and "resolution" were underscored by a story that was in circulation both during and after the Begum's lifetime, regarding her execution of one or two (the number differs in various accounts) slave girl(s) who crossed her. The earliest and shortest version of this story comes from the pen of the Anglican Bishop Heber in 1824, more than a decade before the Begum died (Heber 1827: 278-279):

> One of her dancing girls had offended her, how I have not heard. The Begum ordered the poor creature to be immured alive in a small vault prepared for the

[7] See comments below on the *khilat* which note how a ruler's clothing embodied the authority of the ruler himself.

> purpose…and, being aware that her fate excited much sympathy and horror in the minds of the servants and soldiers of her palace, and apprehensive that they would open the tomb and rescue the victim as soon as her back was turned, she ordered the vault bricked up before her own eyes, then ordered her bed to be placed directly over it, and lay there for several nights, till the last faint moans had ceased to be heard, and she was convinced that hunger and despair had done their work.[8]

The bishop was among the Begum's European critics, of whom there were a number to go along with her admirers. He did concede, though, that "her soldiers and people, and the generality of the inhabitants of this neighbourhood pay her much respect, on account both of her supposed wisdom and her courage" (Heber 1827: 278-279). As an Indic king, the Begum was both admired and feared for her "manly" courage and resolution. Such fearlessness contributed to her success as a military leader on the battlefield itself. The Begum regularly led her troops into battle, either on horseback or in her palanquin. J. Baillie Fraser, for example, writes that the Begum came to the rescue of the Mughal Emperor who had been surprised by his enemies in a battle in Gokalgarh in 1788. "Ordering up three battalions of her sepoys, with a gun, under command of a European, and accompanying them herself in her palankeen, she commenced a fire of grape and musketry—which being unexpected, was all the more alarming" (Fraser 1851: 287).[9] Eventually she helped the Emperor's army defeat his opponent, and as a result the Emperor "honoured her with a most magnificent Khilut, and called her "his most beloved daughter," in addition to her various other titles" (Fraser 1851: 287-288).[10] The giving of a *khilat* was a powerful political gesture inherited from the Persianate world. A *khilat* – derived from the Arabic word for "a garment cast off" – was a piece of cloth or clothing signifying great honor, bestowed by a superior ruler or person on an inferior one (Shivram 2005-6: 405). In fact, the *khilat* of a ruler given to a subject signified a transfer of some of the authority of the ruler to the subject, thereby cementing a deep bond between vassal and overlord (Cohn 1996: 114-115).

To return to the Begum's military prowess, Bishop Heber reports that during the Maratha Wars the Begum led her armies "very gallantly into action, herself riding at their head into a heavy fire of the enemy" (Heber 1827: 278). In 1803, when she was fighting for the Maratha king Daulat Rao Sindhia against the British East India Company, Fraser reports that it was "remarkable" that her four or five battalions "were the only part of Sindia's army that went off unbroken from the field of Assaye: they were charged by our cavalry towards the close of the day, but without effect; Colonel Maxwell, who commanded, being killed" (Fraser 1851: 286). The main aim of kingly warfare, according to Sanskritic ideals, was to add territory and riches to one's kingdom.[11] Of course, every king in the region was trying to do the same thing. In this situation, foreign policy "was of paramount importance to the king: if he failed in it, he may well lose his kingdom and even his life" (Olivelle 2013: 47). Begum Samru was not only a courageous and successful warrior; she was also a wily diplomat, able to secure and add to her territory of Sardhana in a tumultuous era of Indian history. It was she who was instrumental in the negotiations that netted the gift of Sardhana for Reinhard in the first place (Ghosh 2006:

[8] See also the account by Sleeman (1893: 274-276). Sleeman writes that the Begum did this to enforce her leadership among her troops after her chief officer, Mr. Pauli, had been assassinated.

[9] See also the description in Francklin (1798: 167-168). 'Grape' here, refers to grapeshot, a kind of weaponry. It consisted of a cluster of small iron balls, which resembled grapes, and which when fired from cannons spread out and sprayed the target area. They were particularly effective at short range against troops.

[10] This occurred in 1787; the Persian title was 'Farzand-i-Azizah', perhaps a play on her name Farzana, while other titles were 'Zeb un-Nissa' (Ornament of the [Female] Sex) and 'Umdat al-Arakin' (Support among the Pillars [of the State]): Fisher 2004: 102.

[11] An example in the early 17th century is Bhim Singh, ruler of Kota (Peabody 2003: 17-18).

154). Realizing the precarity of her situation as a woman ruling over a North Indian territory, over the years she had the Mughal emperor confirm her control of Sardhana on several occasions (Francklin 1798: 151). She did this, in well established Persianate-Mughal political tradition, by being a staunch defender in war of the emperor, "who was effectively a puppet ruler backed by powerful nobles," and who was constantly under threat or attack by Indian and European belligerents (Ghosh 2006: 155). Her aid was especially valuable since emperor Shah Alam II was such a weak and vulnerable ruler. Since the 15th century, local and regional rulers had been involved in the political workings and military activities of the Mughal Empire, and the Begum's ability to ally herself to the Mughal emperor, weakened though he was, stood her in good stead. She also benefited from her alliances with Maratha and British rulers. The Maratha king Daulat Rao Sindhia, recognizing her vital contributions to his conquests in the late 18th century, also added land to her territory (Fraser 1851: 285). When, in 1803, the British defeated their rivals the Marathas in North India, she joined the Mughal emperor in strategically shifting her allegiance to the new rulers (Fisher 2004: 101). Due to her support of British rule, in 1805 she received in writing a promise from the Governor General that Sardhana would be hers until her death (Ghosh 2006: 158). She insinuated herself into British society to extract promises and favours from the British (Fisher 2004: 104-108). As her contemporary J. Baillie Fraser noted, "she managed to preserve her country nearly unmolested, and her authority generally unimpaired, during a period of surrounding storm and tempest, which shook several great powers from their thrones" (Fraser 1851: 285).

Foreign relations did not only involve active warfare, but also the diplomatic maintenance of alliances over time. The Begum kept the British happy and on her side in the last 30 years of her life in part by throwing resplendent banquets and parties for Europeans at Sardhana.

> The begum clearly used her wealth to bestow patronage on the British, and thus to enhance her social and political relationships with them. Indeed, the begum invited almost all nearby Europeans of any stature into her presence to dine at her table. . . . Her palaces at Sardhana and Delhi became widely known as lavishly hospitable places for traveling European dignitaries and other visitors to stay as her house guests (Fisher 2004: 105).

Her Christmas feasts were legendary, beginning with high mass and lasting for days, featuring not only rich food and wine but performances by dancing girls and fireworks (Ghosh 2006: 160-161). As an insightful host, she instructed her dancing girls to modulate their moves to suit the class, gender, and race of the audience (Keay 2014: 286). Raucous European soldiers would witness performances radically different from one for Anglican clergy.[12] The Begum, however, was not only solicitous about British desires and sensibilities. With Indian guests, and in mixed company, she often conformed to Indian expectations of modesty and decency. She did so by establishing a Persianate court culture at Sardhana. She maintained Mughal *darbari* ritual at her "court in miniature" in Sardhana, and used Persian Islamic symbols of government and status, being famously painted with a large *huqqa* (a hookah, or water pipe embellished with jewels) (Powell 1993: 89). She sat behind a screen when holding audience with conservative Indian men who would object to seeing her in person, although she appeared unveiled among Europeans (Fisher 2004: 104-105, Keay 2014: 119). She was known to "exact from her subjects and servants the most rigid attention to the customs of Hindoostan" (Sleeman 1893: 288-289). Even at her "sumptuous" Christmas feasts, a chronicler reported, "the Begam usually honours the guests by presiding at the table but she does not herself partake of any food in their presence," adhering to the Hindu taboo on intercaste eating (Ghosh

[12] For a description from a soldier of a *nautch* performance, see Keay 2014: 21; for Bishop Heber's description of the performance put on for him, see Heber 1827: 320-21.

2006: 161). Yet when she visited the English residency, which was “very frequently” according to Fraser, “she freely participated in all the good things (the residency table) afforded” (Fraser 1851: 294). She could dress like a Mughal, dress like a European, dress like a woman or dress like a man, depending upon the needs of the situation (Ghosh 2006: 159-160). Thus the Begum engaged in shrewd diplomacy and highly skilled cultural performance with a variety of different political and cultural actors in her day, keeping them pleased so that she could keep her independence.

Image 1.1: Begum Samru (between 1780 and 1815). Louvre-Lens, Galerie du Temps (2013) MAO 709. Source: Creative Commons.

An Indian king not only had to engage in war and diplomacy. He also had to manage his lands wisely. According to Hindu *shastra*s on kingship, one of the most important roles of a king was to accumulate wealth, which required careful stewardship of his lands, which in turn would yield increased crops and therefore riches for the royal treasury. To do this, government and economics were intertwined in Hindu kingdoms. As Olivelle (2013: 40) puts it:

> Given that, in an absolute monarchy, there is no clear distinction between king and government, between the wealth and property of the king and that of the state, and between governance and the enhancement of revenue to the state, the structures of government and state bureaucracy cannot be neatly separated from the economic activities of the state.

By all accounts, the Begum's management of Sardhana made it an extraordinarily wealthy state. She took various steps to make her lands prosper. Most notably, she melded together her army and the peasants into one agricultural unit, instead of pitting the former against the latter for the purpose of collecting taxes. This made Sardhana an extremely productive tract of land. She also forsook the custom of being an absentee landlord. While she had houses in Meerut and Delhi which she visited regularly, her permanent residence was in Sardhana, where she personally managed the upkeep of her military and agricultural lands (Keay 2014: 113). The net worth of Sardhana upon the Begum's death is difficult to ascertain, but it was vast. Sleeman writes that it was "sixty lakhs (6 million) of rupees" (Sleeman 1893: 286).[13] Thomas Bacon wrote in 1835, the year before the Begum's death, that her estate was "rich and cultivated, yielding a revenue of 25 lakhs annually, or £250,000, leaving her perhaps a net income of one-half, having deducted her dues to the British government and the maintenance of her army" (Keay 2014: 283). To make her lands flourish, however, she appears to have adopted the rationalised and 'modern' systems of agriculture, politics and economics introduced into India by the Mughals beginning with Akbar in the 16th century C.E. (Eaton 2019: 35; 393-395). Her contemporary William Francklin (1798: 150-51) gives a glowing report of Sardhana's agricultural systems, politics and economics:

> An unremitting attention to the cultivation of the lands, a mild and upright administration, and care for the welfare of the inhabitants, has enabled this small tract to vie with the most cultivated parts of Hindostaun, and to yield a revenue of ten lacks (one million) of rupees per annum. . . . While the surrounding lands exhibit the effects of desolation and distress, the flourishing appearance of this *jagir* impresses the mind of the traveller with sensations most gratifying.

Francklin's passing reference to "a mild and upright administration" indicates one more way in which the Begum adopted Persianate ideas of kingly rule. The goal of Persianate rule was to establish justice, thereby making the subjects prosper, which in turn would enrich the king. In fact, "justice had never been central to Indic political thought" (Eaton 2022: 26). This Persianate ideology is summed up in a medieval Indian aphorism: "To acquire wealth: make the people prosper. To make the people prosper: justice is the means. … They say that justice is the treasure of kings" (Eaton 2019: 16, 26). The Begum's wealth was also evident in the strength of her military. By the last decade of the 18th century, the Begum's military forces consisted of "five battalions of disciplined sepoys (soldiers), commanded by Europeans of different countries, and about forty pieces of canon of different calibres." She also had "about 200 Europeans, principally employed in the service of the artillery" (Francklin 1798: 151). Yet again, the Begum epitomized not only the Sanskritic but also the Persianate ideal of kingly rule, which had been absorbed into Indian political thought: "There is no kingdom without an

[13] Ghosh (2006: 158), uses the figure of Rs. 5 lakhs.

army, no army without wealth, no wealth without material prosperity, and no material prosperity without justice" (Eaton 2019: 15).

One other role traditionally exercised by an Indian king was that of supporter of religious institutions. A Hindu king was known to be especially devoted to a particular deity and its temple (Eaton 2019: 28). He would dedicate his kingdom to his chosen deity and claim to rule the kingdom as the slave or prime minister of that deity (Kawashima 1998: 18, Peabody 2003: 17). Muslim kings in India also participated in religious devotion, patronizing certain saints and orders – the Chishti order being the most closely identified in India with Islamic rule (Eaton 2000: 289-293). Yet such royal devotion to a particular deity or saintly order did not exclude support of other religious institutions or holy persons (Powell 1993: 89; Eaton 2019: 16).[14]

Image 1.2: Begum Samru and her Household (1820). Chester Beatty Library 74.7. Source: Creative Commons.

Like a Hindu king who lavishly bestowed gifts on the temple and priesthood of his deity, or Indo-Muslim ruler who endowed the hospice (*khanqah*) of a favoured Sufi order, the Begum Samru spent great sums of money on the construction of Catholic buildings and institutions, and on providing for the material well-being of Catholic priests and laity. She built a magnificent basilica at Sardhana, hiring an Italian architect for the job and spending lavishly (Rs. 400,000) on the construction, while also setting aside an endowment of Rs. 100,000 for its upkeep (Sharma 2009: 81, Sharma 1985: 160, Sleeman 1893: 286-287). She sent Rs. 150,000 to Rome

[14] For Hindu kings' endowment (and control) of Christian churches in 17th to 18th century Tamil Nadu, see Mosse 2012: 40-41. For Mughal support of Hindu temples, see Eaton 2000: 302-305. Kings, however, did not look kindly upon all deities and temples. They were hostile to the personal deity of enemy kings: and so traditionally one of the first acts of conquest by a king, whether Hindu or Muslim, was to destroy the temple and the deity of the vanquished king, or to capture the deity and bring it back to the victor's home (Eaton 2019: 28-29).

for a charity fund to be administered by the Pope. She also gave Rs. 100,000 to establish a seminary to train Indian Catholic priests. In addition, she gave Rs. 100,000 to each of the three Catholic churches in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. She gave Rs. 30,000 to the Catholic church in Agra and built a "handsome chapel" for the Catholics in Meerut, close to Sardhana (Sleeman 1893: 287). And this was not by any means the sum total of her generosity to the Church. For example, there were over 2000 Christians who lived and took refuge at Sardhana while she was the ruler there, while Catholic priests were invited to and well received at her court (Powell 1993: 89, Fisher 2004: 103). In gratitude for her generosity, the Pope sent her relics from the Vatican, including a piece of the true cross of Christ (Powell 1993: 89, Fisher 2004: 104). He also elevated Sardhana to a bishopric, appointing her personal chaplain as bishop (Powell 1993: 89). However, like any Indian king of her day, the Begum's benevolence was not confined to her own personal religious institution, even though it received the majority of her bequests. At various times she gave Rs. 50,000 for the poor in Sardhana, Rs. 50,000 to the Archbishop of Canterbury for the poor (1/3 of the amount she sent to the Pope for the same purposes), and Rs. 100,000 to the Anglican bishop of Calcutta to provide teachers for poor Protestants in that city (comprising mostly of mixed race and therefore socially very low-ranking children). She also sent Rs. 50,000 to Calcutta "for the poor in that city, and for the "liberation of deserving debtors."(Sleeman 1893: 287). Besides the Catholic chapel in Meerut, she had a church built for the Protestants at a cost of Rs. 10,000. All these were in addition to generous funds she set aside for her family members, as well as Hindu and Muslim institutions (Sleeman 1893: 286-287, Ghosh 2006: 162, Keay 2014: 287).

While many benefitted from the Begum's generosity, there were criticisms of her understanding of Christianity. The main critique of her was that she lived like a Muslim, and patronized different religious institutions, even though she professed being a Catholic. In her old age, when religious boundaries were hardening and religious categories crystalizing, one of her chaplains wrote to the Propaganda Fide, the Vatican office in charge of missionary work, "it is true that this princess is a Christian because she has been baptized, but to all intents and purposes she is still a true Mohammedan" (Powell 1993: 89). Some of her rituals were unorthodox: for example, she insisted on having communion presented to her "dressed up as a flower bouquet" (Keay 2014: 118). At one point she was almost excommunicated by the Vicar Apostolic of Agra – for her financial support to Hindus and Protestants (Fisher 2004: 104). Indeed, for some in the Catholic hierarchy at least, the fact that she patronised Protestants seems to have been as much a blot against her Catholicism as her refusal to give up certain Muslim cultural practices. This was not simply a matter of cultural bias of European priests, it seems, but rather also of the theological regulations of the times (Ghosh 2006: 162).

There was one more way in which the Begum filled the role of an Indian king, and that was in determining her successor. Indian kings did not adhere rigidly to a right of primogeniture. Rather, they looked for the boy who they thought would be the worthiest successor to the throne, and if he was not a legitimate son they would 'adopt' him. Numerous kings of North India were adopted sons of the previous king. The Begum, in similar fashion, chose David Ochterlony Dyce, a great-grandson of Walter Reinhard, as her heir.[15] The Begum took the child away from his parents when he was but 6 weeks old, declaring him to be her son, and brought him up to be a proper English gentleman by entrusting his education to an Anglican priest (Keay 2014: 274-275). Unfortunately for her, as with other Indian rulers, her plans for

[15] The Begum named him after David Ochterlony, the British Resident of Delhi from 1803 to 1806 and from 1818 to 1820, and a good friend of hers. As noted above, Ochterlony lived as an "Indianized European" (Keay: 265, 274-275)

continuing her line did not come to fruition. In David's case, the full force of 19th century British racism destroyed him when he went to Europe to seek a new life (Fisher 2010).

Catholicism and Kingship of Begum Samru

What has been demonstrated so far is how the Begum Samru, over her lifetime, formed and shaped her identity to conform to the pattern of an Indian king. What is not clear, however, is how, or if, her Catholicism contributed anything specific – rather than a religious tradition in general – in this process of self-transformation. What possibilities would life as a Catholic have offered to Farzana as she became the ruler of Sardhana, negotiating the complexities of that role? What resources did Catholic Christianity offer her as she rose to power and authority? There are three general characteristics of Catholicism in 18th century India that allowed the Begum to rule as a Sanskritic-Persianate Indian king. The first was Catholicism's (and Christianity's) promise of the possibility of a completely new life. This possibility is well articulated in the imagery that is associated with baptism – imagery of death and resurrection, of death to an old self and life to a new self. Such an understanding of baptism is grounded in key scripture verses used in the baptismal liturgy, such as Romans 6:4: "We have been buried with (Christ) by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life," and Colossians 2:12: "Buried with (Christ) in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." Moreover, the baptismal liturgy included, among other rituals, an exorcism of Satan and prayers for God's presence and protection in the life of the one being baptised. Of course, Christianity is not the only religious tradition that promises new life – indeed, any tradition that receives outsiders promises new life to new believers. However, if Farzana was looking for a religious tradition that would extricate her from her ties to Islam, then the Catholicism of Walter Reinhard would have been a compelling option for her. Moreover, the 'new life' of Christianity would have brought her more fully into the family of Europeans in India. She was able to draw on these familial relationships to promote not only her own cause but also the cause of her family members, for example when she arranged for marriages of Reinhard's grandchildren and great-grandchildren to Europeans (Fisher 2004: 104-108).

The second resource of the Catholicism of her day was its cultural pliability and flexibility, which paradoxically modulated the new life promised by baptism, offering continuity with the old life from which the convert was coming. While the Catholic Church in other regions of the world was known for its strictness and rigidity, in most of Asia the Church was experimenting with a pluriform cultural identity.[16] The famous experiments in indigenization of Jesuit missionaries Matteo Ricci (1552 – 1610) in China, Alessandro Valignano (1539 – 1606) in Japan, and Roberto de Nobili (1577 – 1656) in India, as they attempted to interpret Christianity in local cultural, linguistic and ideological idioms, gave rise to vigorous and long-lasting debates about the limits and boundaries of Catholic Christian identity. In the 17th and 18th centuries, these were known as the Rites Controversies.[17]

What is notable in the context of India is that first of all, there was in fact a controversy – that Catholicism's cultural expression was not set in stone but was in fact contested domain within the Church. Secondly, the controversy opened up a space in which religious persons – whether European missionaries or Indian Catholics – could indeed experiment with cultural hybridity and polyvalency. While certain European clerics may have disapproved of the Begum Samru's highly Islamic and idiosyncratic religious practices, it is important to note that she was

[16] One could argue that this was not true in the Catholic enclave of Goa, where the Inquisition had been established.

[17] There were two famous rites controversies in Asia: the Chinese rites controversy and the Malabar (India) rites controversy.

never excommunicated, and in fact was sent important signs of approval from the Holy See (which, granted, probably did not know everything she was up to). Thus, the Begum's ability to absorb and play with multiple identities – religious, cultural, gender, status – was given sanction, even if at times reluctantly, by a Catholicism which was open to cultural experimentation.[18]

The third resource that was available from Catholicism was several authoritative stories of women with power and authority. The Bible, for example, contains the stories of Queen Esther who saved her Jewish people from Persian rulers, and the wealthy merchant and head of household Lydia, who was baptised by the apostle Paul. We do not know how many stories of these and other women Farzana knew. However, there are two women in the Christian tradition about whom she most probably knew something. The first was Joanna, which is the name that Farzana took at baptism, and the second is the Virgin Mary to whom she dedicated her basilica in Sardhana. Perhaps Farzana took the name Joanna because it was reminiscent of Joan of Arc, a Catholic woman who was a warrior and saint (Powell 1993: 88).

However, there is in fact a Joanna in the Bible, and she appears in the gospels twice, both times in the gospel of Luke (Luke 8:2-3, Luke 24:10), a writer known to highlight the lives, importance, and agency of women in Jesus' day and in the early church. Both times Joanna is portrayed as a woman of some social status and economic means, as Farzana strove to be. And both times she provides materially for her Lord Jesus – as the Begum Samru provided for the Catholic Church, the ongoing presence of Christ in the world. The Virgin Mary is an extremely significant figure in Catholic piety and theology, so much so that Protestants complain that she usurps God in the Catholic religious imagination. Among her many attributes she is the Mother of God and the Queen of Heaven. However, the Queen of Heaven did not begin her religious journey in the royal courts of her country. Rather, she was socially insignificant, yet chosen by God to be the most important woman in all of history. In the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), also well known in Catholic piety, Mary declares that she is the ultimate symbol of social status reversal:

> God my Saviour has looked down with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me . . . . (God) has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

As noted earlier, one of the unique aspects of Farzana's career is that she ruled not as the female power behind a titular male, but as a ruler in her own right. Women rulers were rare both in India and Europe; the Maharashtrian queen Ahilya Bai Holkar (1725 – 1795) is one example and may have inspired the Begum Samru (Keay 2014: 107-109). The four begums who ruled Bhopal from 1819 to 1926 may in turn have been inspired by the Begum Samru. But even these exceptional women rulers were part of the aristocratic class, having grown up in the milieu of courtly life. Farzana, on the other hand, had come from the lowest classes of society, as had the Virgin Mary, and had been elevated into a position of power and authority.

[18] Again, this is not to imply that only Catholicism or Christianity more generally provides spaces for social and cultural experimentation. For example, the first two (in terms of age) begums of Bhopal, who ruled from 1819 to 1836, "had ruled in a sense as unisex Pathan chiefs. They wore male dress and were known for their talents in riding, shooting, and directing their own troops" (Metcalf 2011: 6). Note, however, that these begums ruled *after* Begum Samru had well established herself, and "it was only British hegemony that allowed females to serve as regent, let alone chief, among these Pathans" (Metcalf 2011: 5, fn. 9).

This is not to suggest that the Begum Samru viewed the Virgin Mary as some sort of role model for herself.One can hardly find two greater contrasting images than that of the Virgin Mary depicted in the famous Pieta, where as the sorrowful mother of Jesus, she is holding her son's limp, dead body after it has been brought down from the cross, and that of the Begum Samru lying on her bed atop a chamber where her wayward slave girl is dying a slow and agonizing death. The Begum's role model was the prototypical Indian king, not the Christianised and Europeanised Queen of Heaven. But the Virgin Mary, and the Catholic faith that so elevated her, could provide religious inspiration and legitimation for a lowly dancing girl with intelligence, determination, charm and beauty, as she converted to the role of uncontested ruler of a North Indian state during a time of much turbulence and change.

Conclusion

The conversion of Farzana into the Begum Samru was not a momentary event, but rather a gradual one. It involved a change in religion, as well as a change in social status and its accompanying culture. Over the long duration of her adult life, however, one can clearly see the beginning and the end – both in terms of time and goal – of this conversion. Farzana began as a courtesan sold, like a slave, into the harem of a warlord. She ended her life as a ruler of a substantial and flourishing estate in North India. From courtesan, she had become king. Part of this process of conversion was a change in her religious identification and commitments. Once she took up the reins of power and authority in Sardhana, she was baptised into the Catholic Church. Moreover, her Catholicism was neither nominal nor lukewarm. She may have been unusual in her practice of Catholicism – as were well known Jesuit missionaries – but she spent a significant portion of her fortune to build up the Church not only in North India, but around the world. She also cultivated both ecclesial and personal relationships with other members of the Christian community in India. Clearly, her Catholic faith was important to her. In it she found religious resources that would be integral to the new life that she successfully cultivated for herself.

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