

Travel as Pilgrimage: South Asian Travel Writing as a Mode of Constructing Knowledge

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This paper investigates a significant travelogue penned by a South Asian female Muslim ruler, the formidable Nawab Sikandar Begum of Bhopal, India, who was also a loyal British ally in the colonial India of the nineteenth century. She wrote an intriguing travelogue describing her expedition from India to Mecca, written in Urdu, posthumously translated and published as *A Princess's Pilgrimage: Nawab Sikandar Begum's A Pilgrimage to Mecca* in only English by Mrs. Emma Laura Willoughby Osborne in the year 1869 (1870?). Interestingly, it was never published in the original Urdu. Sikandar Begum's book is counted as the first-ever account written on the Hajj pilgrimage by any ruler from India before the advent of modern transportation in the nineteenth century. She has also been celebrated as the first Muslim monarch and a female Nawab from India to undertake the most gruelling journey to Arabia successfully.

Besides narrating her pilgrimage, the pilgrim Nawab Begum also seems keen on transmitting the secreted information of Arabia's forbidden walls to her British affiliates, the inquisitive west to be precise while enunciating the limits and possibilities of travel as a remarkable elite Muslim woman and monarch from India. The fact should also be considered that before the advent of modern conveyance in the nineteenth century, she braved all the odds to fulfill the obligated religious duty with her mother and a massive caravan of about 1000 pilgrims to Mecca, the sacred Islamic land. Her pilgrimage journey from South Asia becomes even more significant, considering that this was when even the mighty Mughals refrained from undertaking a journey of an arduous and uncertain nature. Besides devoting her time for the pilgrimage, the Nawab begum seizes the opportunity to delineate her political notions in a competent power position in contrast with fallible Ottoman governance, she observed during her stay in Arabia. Therefore, the paper intends to explore how the individual desire is subdued over the collective quest for information in the process of knowledge construction of unexplored holy land. Besides, the paper also looks into the possibilities of pilgrimage when gendered self-arrives in Arabia with an aim at fulfilling individual mundane critical objectives besides the vital intention to undertake the hajj pilgrimage.

Hajj pilgrimage is considered a sacred and mandatory journey for Muslims, at least once in a lifetime, if their physical and financial circumstances permit. It is one of the five pillars of Islam. Sikandar Begum, therefore, as a faithful Muslim devotee, set off for the pilgrimage from South Asia via sea. The pilgrimage was accomplished in 1863-1864.

Traditionally the pilgrims seek forgiveness for every intentional – unintentional hurt caused to the family members, friends including acquaintances before setting off on the pious journey. Following the tradition, Sikandar Begum informed her family and acquaintances and sent out the same information to her British allies about her holy

expedition to Arabia. As soon as the news reached, Mr. and Mrs. Durands, Begum's British allies, requested her to record the first-hand impressions of her journey since it was an alien land for them because the admission of non-Muslims is banned within the sacred territories. Therefore, the exotic and mysterious pilgrimage sites had become a subject of marvel for adventurous and inquisitive travellers from the West over the period. However, only a handful of non-Muslim Europeans could successfully manage to penetrate and bring out the disguised and obscure information of these prohibited exotic lands as a written record that was again highly debatable to be considered authentic over the centuries. The British were looking forward to the colonial expansion across the world, particularly to the Middle East, but the lack of accurate information on these lands was a massive roadblock in their aspiring ambitions. Therefore, the news of Sikandar Begum's pilgrimage to Mecca from India seemed a silver line to them.

Hence, it is believed that Durands might have requested Nawab Begum, their confidante and political ally in South Asia, to maintain comprehensive documentation of Arabia and the Hajj pilgrimage to know and understand the land more closely and to strategize their impending moves towards achieving their larger political goals. As a Muslim, a highly privileged Muslim to be precise, Sikandar Begum had easy access to not only the forbidden cities, but she had the autonomy to record her impressions anywhere she likes, unlike a few earlier non-Muslim European pilgrims who were captured and sent off the land when captured by the authorities in Arabia. In addition, her proven British allegiance made her documentation more viable and apt. Therefore, it can safely be established that Sikandar Begum penned the travelogue *A Pilgrimage to Mecca* to honor the request made to her by the Durands to get an authentic and first-hand account of the prohibited land.

Sikandar Begum's narrative offers some subjective and more objective observations on the wide-ranging areas such as religious practices, societal norms, and traditions, including politics that she could manage to observe during her visit to Mecca and Jeddah cities. For instance, her narrative offers a quick peek into the diverse social practices, traditions, religious celebrations, festival celebrations, weather conditions, diet, and architecture of the cities and inhabitants' attire, including some glimpses on the different pilgrims. They came from distant places around the world. She also draws a seemingly candid picture of specific misconduct that was prevailing in these sacred cities such as the slave market, filthy streets of the cities, scarcity of water for underprivileged pilgrims, discriminatory behaviour of the officials with destitute Indian pilgrims, including widely practiced corruption at all the levels of social hierarchy by the government officials of Arabia and Jeddah cities, to mention a few. In addition, she also generously mentions her penchant for Jeddah's sweets, including her appreciative bewilderment when run across the windmills, which were not yet introduced in India.

Owing to her close contacts with the British, Sikandar Begum was deeply impacted by the British life and culture, which is vividly evident in her narrative when she compares the native Arabs and Turks with British people. Her account also provides essential information about the perilous routes and the dangers of the aspiring pilgrims they would encounter en route. Furthermore, her detailed accounts describing the elite *zenana* of Mecca and Jeddah, which are otherwise inaccessible to any male pilgrim or traveller, makes her narrative more informative and extraordinary to the readers, precisely the British and the West to whom the concept of *zenana* was more alien and full of apprehension.

Billie Melman's statement in the essay "The Middle East / Arabia: 'the cradle of Islam'" approves the significance of the pilgrimage, which had been continued to exist not only as an observance but also as one of the crucial reasons for undertaking a journey over the centuries. The re-establishment of the sincere and devoted observance of pilgrimage through the early nineteenth century was directly connected with the British's increasing attention in the Middle East. However, the further development smoothed out the troublesome route of travelling and conveyance that became more comfortable with added safety measures in the nineteenth century. Perkin in *The Age of the Railway* claims, 'the modern world began' with the railway, and further added that, 'the first conquest of physical distance by mechanical power was *the* revolution in communications from which all the rest have stemmed' (Perkin 1971). The invention of the modern conveyance facilitated mobility, an extension of the British Empire and private enterprise. It, indeed, revolutionized the individuals' nexus with and insights of the globe.

Travel writing was closely connected with the British colonization, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the significant purposes of British colonizers was to expand their colonies to Eastern countries. Therefore, traveling became a handy tool for them to understand the Middle East countries better. Therefore, the travellers were encouraged and sponsored to venture into those far-off lands and bring in first-hand information on those countries, its inhabitants, their tradition, culture, society, economy, politics and so on. As Roy Bridges aptly states,

(during this period) travel writing became increasingly identified with the interests and preoccupations of those in European societies who wished to bring the non-European world into a position where it could be influenced, exploited or, in some cases, directly controlled. (Hulme and Youngs 53)

Sikandar Begum's narration mentions various instances that established her aversion for the Arab culture, its native, their social conduct, their public misdemeanours, customs, so on and so forth. She states many instances where she blatantly criticizes Arabs. She calls them "miserly, violent tempered, hard-hearted and covetous", besides brand them as "awkward and stupid" (Lambert-Hurley 132). She goes to the extreme extent to describe them of no value. In her words, "men and women are worthless set of people" (84). She figures out that illiteracy and lack of adequate educational institutes could have been one of the reasons for having such ill-mannered populaces in the country. She further offers more detailed observations on the populace when notes, "cheating and lying prevailing to a great extent; and the children are very disorderly and noisy. There are no colleges or schools for affording them instructions" (Lambert-Hurley 84). She believed that only literacy can impart moral values in them and help them become the learned and faithful Muslim who is expected to seek, learn, and practice knowledge as much as one can during one's lifetime.

The shopkeepers' immoral and inhuman behaviour with poor pilgrims further infuriated and bothered the Nawab Begum. As an able administrator herself, she observed that the entire region lacks an apposite administration in addition to a strict and upright system to treat every pilgrim in an equal manner. Shopkeepers in the markets have their own set of rules and prices of selling and buying that varied to different consumers. There were no uniform rates set as prices of goods in the marketplace. She notices that, "there is no fixed tariff in the bazaar; every shop has its own price" (84). She further adds that the chaotic situation was prevailing in a market to the extent that a shopkeeper would beat any pilgrim if a pilgrim inquires at any shop and refuses to buy goods. Such

were common instances anyone could notice every day in those bazaars. Grotesquely, no one would dare to come forward and help an innocent victim. She cites one such instance in her narrative:

An Egyptian went into a baker's shop and asked the price of the bread. Baker seized the broom and stuck the man in the face, giving him at the same time plenty of abuse, and saying at last something so violent that the Egyptian began pelting him with stones, and threw down all the contents of his shop on the ground. (87)

Sikandar Begum established that such inhumane and brutal incidents were more of routine practice in Mecca or Jeddah's markets, usually happened between shopkeepers and underprivileged travellers/pilgrims who came from distant lands.

Sikandar Begum also draws the attention of the reader to the "dirty streets", drainage problems, including "irregular arrangement" and "bad architecture of the houses" (27) of Mecca and Jeddah cities. Cleanliness has always been considered equivalent to the half *imaan* in Islam. She was taken aback when she saw uncleanliness in these pious cities that, on the contrary, should have set the example in cleanliness for the Muslim *ummah* who come here from across the world to practice in their homelands. She also notes that the inhabitants of Mecca city were mostly found ill and/or severely suffering from a variety of diseases. Moreover, a few members of her troop fall prey to certain unknown diseases, while many have unfortunately lost their lives. To put it into her words, "there was a great deal of severe sickness . . . inhabitants of Mecca suffered considerably . . . on the pilgrimage, I lost eight altogether" (65). Muslim adherents practice cleanliness as one of the significant moral obligations; upon seeing contradictory situations in Islam's sacred lands, such as grubby streets, filthy citizens, and unhygienic living habits, Sikandar Begum felt appalling and was disgusted to the core. She also provides an account that describes an even more abysmal scenario of the slave market, again as a common practice in Mecca back in those days. It was a place called "Dakkah", where slaves of different races, like African and Georgian of both the sexes, men and women, were being sold and bought (Lambert-Hurley 77). This slave selling takes place for two days every year. This inhumane selling and buying of living beings as slaves added more agitation in her already uncomfortable self.

Sikandar Begum also provides excerpts that exhibit her profound anxiety and discomfort while witnessing the racist behaviour of native Arabs with poor Indian pilgrims. Underprivileged Indian pilgrims were treated inhumanely. Therefore, she took it as her moral responsibility as a responsible and morally upright pilgrim besides a strong-headed Nawab from India to point a firm and straightforward finger at the widely practiced and commonly prevailed disparity in her account and portrayed her fellow Indian citizens as "oppressed" and "maltreated" (29) in these holy cities. She also mentions that almost every other Indian who lands in Jeddah has a dollar or half a dollar extorted. The corrupt Arab officials consider it a meritorious act to suppress and maltreat the non-Arab, mainly Indian pilgrims. These native Arab exhibits neither kindness nor humility towards the pilgrims, their brothers and sisters considering the united Muslim *ummah* who came here, far off their lands and people, braving many life-threatening difficulties to seeking forgiveness from the Almighty.

Based upon a variety of uneventful occurrences in quick succession around her, Nawab Begum often differentiates between her, an ardent follower of the faith, her genuine religious zeal, and the deceitful devotion of Arabs and Turks. She feels that true faith infers only with the pious and innocent Indian pilgrims, not with these unfaithful Arabs.

Her biased and racist beliefs for Arabs also hints at their impious liquor drinking habits, which is strictly prohibited in Islam, the lack of educational institutions in the cities, and the dearth of right religious knowledge that is obviously expected from the citizens of Islam's holy lands. Such blasphemous intoxication practices that were publicly prevailing in Islam's holy cities flabbergasted her and made her more infuriated. Hence, she blatantly states that "all the bad characters that have been driven out of India, may be found in Mecca" (72).

Female travellers often had access to the spaces where their male counterparts have forbidden, precisely when it comes to the Middle Eastern regions. In this case, the advantage of being a female traveller, an elite and highly privileged pilgrim, provided her exclusive, through, and otherwise inaccessible information that she made available for the inquisitive readers. For instance, being a woman and the Nawab, Sikandar Begum was invited to the elite homes of Pasha and Sherif of Mecca and Jeddah cities. Hence, she could describe wives and female family members from Sherif and Pasha's homes as she found them precisely during her in-person visit. The male members of her group were not allowed to enter the *Zenana*, however. They were to the apartment made up for the man, where Sherif welcomed them.

Sikandar Begum provides a meticulously described account of her *zenana* visit. She notes that female slaves were placed at short distances on the way to *zenana*. A few amongst them were Georgian, whereas servants of the female family members were Egyptian. The Sherif has seven wives, of whom she could meet with four. She then provides a comprehensive observation of those four wives' attire and appearance and compliments their charming personalities. She notes,

Of these, two were Georgians, very handsome and beautifully dressed . . . covered with diamonds from head to toe. Their heads were enriched with a wreath, composed of jewels . . . underneath their diadem, they wore on their heads very small, fine handkerchiefs, such as English ladies carry in their hands; these were thickly embroidered with jewels, and tied in a coquettish way. From their neck to their waist, they were adorned with gems in the same fashion . . . the third wife was an Arabian . . . the fourth was an Abyssinian. (107)

Interestingly, she finds comparable similarities between the attire donned by Sherif's Georgian wives' with that of the English female she knew from India. She also notices one peculiar disparity that out of all the wives present there, only those who can bear children for the Sherif were allowed to sit in his presence, whereas the ones who cannot give birth to children would stand in his presence 'with their hands put together' (Lambert-Hurley 107). To her amazement, she recalled that this bizarre custom was essentially followed that the oriental attendants and people of the lower social grade in the presence of the people who belong to the higher social order. That brought her to another understanding that the wives of the elite class also bears seeming discrimination in their family, besides being treated with lesser respect, almost like the Sherif's attendants.

Subsequently, towards the end of the chapter, Sikandar Begum narrates her visit to Pasha's house. This time she was not only interested in looking at the *zenana* but was also keen on comparing the womenfolk of the Sherif and the Pashas' houses. But She could manage to describe only seeming details of the family that,

Most of the women were Turkish . . . the ladies' dresses were not richly ornamented with jewels as were those of the Sherif's wives. The Pasha has two wives: one a Georgian, the other a Turkish woman. His son has one wife, also Turkish. (Lambert-Hurley 112)

Britain was more fascinated with the lifestyle, culture, and trade of the Middle Eastern Countries. To expand its frontiers in this part of the world, too, as by the nineteenth century half of the world was already under their rule, they needed to understand it thoroughly. As in India, the colonizer could get allies like Sikandar Begum, who stood by them even in the most taxing time across their colonies. Colonizer could also successfully manage to prepare Indian allies like Sikandar Begum, who modelled their administration strategies, lifestyle, manners, and behaviours after the British. The Nawab Begum was deeply influenced by the colonial system that she looks at Arabia and its people, including various aspects of its society, in line with the British as a model. A loyal British subject and aficionado of the British way of living life, the Begum's account also seemingly reflects similar emotions. For instance, she recurrently finds parallels with the colonizers in Arabia on various occasions.

Besides some British allies like Sikandar Begum in South Asia, a handful of western travellers such as the celebrated Victorian explorer Sir Richard Burton also penetrated that region in the guise of a Muslim pilgrim, to bring out comprehensive first-hand information about the Middle East. The travelogue penned by Burton on his successful expedition to the Mecca and Medina cities as to date been considered the most accurate account ever written by any non-Muslim in the nineteenth century. In addition, travellers like Richard Burton became the mediator between the East and the West. Their writings explored and brought to light the then-existing diplomatic and political setbacks of Arab states in detail to facilitate British requirement since the West wanted to construe the Middle East, take it over, and rule it.

Sikandar Begum was a fearless, courageous, and influential monarch of Bhopal, India. She never followed any gender-stereotyped as a Muslim woman and later as a ruler. She was a skilled administrator who has been associated with many revolutionary modernizations that were introduced in her state during her reign. Indeed, becoming a ruler of such a big state like Bhopal, India, was a radical phenomenon in itself for a South Asian Muslim woman in the nineteenth century. She was an intrepid and able Nawab, who manage to go to Mecca with her mother and a massive caravan before the modern conveyance was invented despite knowing all the grave probabilities she may encounter en route. This was why even the great and mighty kings, including Mughals from India, have passed over the idea of venturing to Arabia. Furthermore, there she was, Nawab Sikandar Begum, who went head on to confront every challenge that may come her way and fulfil her vow to Allah and performing the blessed pilgrimage. However, despite being a valiant monarch, she was practical enough to take calculated risks, hence, cancelled her visit to Medina, the Prophet Mohammad's city, due to security reasons, notwithstanding anticipating broader criticism.

To sum up, Sikandar Begum's travelogue is an important document that records the pilgrimage journey of a remarkable South Asian female monarch Nawab Sikandar Begum of India, in the intriguing nineteenth century. Besides, her travelogue has been considered a comprehensive and critical record that exclusively documents Arabia of the nineteenth century. Thus, *A Pilgrimage to Mecca* is a significant record in South Asian Travel literature on *Hajj* pilgrimage.

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