

Contesting the Colonial Gage:Memory and Representation of Zeenat Mahal Begam

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Abstract:*This article explores the multifaceted portrayal of Zeenat Mahal Begum, the last Mughal empress and consort of Bahadur Shah Zafar II. The narrative of the queen remains conspicuously absent in the male-dominated framework of history. Despite Zeenat Mahal's significant role before and during the revolt, her contributions to politics, economy, customs, rituals, and festivals are often overshadowed by the exploits of emperors, nobles, and princes. While British colonial narratives often depicted her as a manipulative and malevolent figure, these characterizations starkly contrast with her enduring stature as a "head queen" and her deep connection to the people of Delhi. This exclusion not only undermines 'her agency' but also perpetuates the erasure of women's voices, reinforcing a patriarchal perspective that reduces queens to mere footnotes in the chronicles of kings. In the tradition of historical writing, 'his story' has consistently overshadowed 'her story,' revealing the deep-rooted gender biases that shape our understanding of the past. By examining colonial records and vernacular records, this study seeks to deconstruct the image of Zeenat Mahal as an "evil woman" and contextualize these perceptions within the broader colonial agenda of delegitimizing the indigenous powers to justify imperial expansion. Accused of influencing Bahadur Shah Zafar II and conspiring against the British as well as rebels, Zeenat Mahal became a target of vilification.*

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in writings on women in pre-colonial times, a topic that had previously been somewhat neglected. Many of these studies on gender

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and women's history have often relied on the artificial and arbitrary distinction between the 'public' and 'private' spheres to understand women's roles in premodern societies.¹ This watertight compartmentalization assumes the existence of two well-defined domains of action, with men inhabiting the 'public' world of politics and women confined to the 'private' realm of the household. However, recent research has challenged this dichotomy, revealing that the separation between the 'public' and 'private' spheres was not as distinct as once believed, but rather socially constructed.² The study of Begum Zeenat Mahal challenges the adequacy of the 'public/private' and 'authority/power' frameworks in understanding the unique and complex role royal women played in the political, religious, and social life of 18th and 19th-century Delhi. These women were not merely symbols of 'power' or vessels for transferring legitimate 'authority'; they actively wielded power and were integral to shaping the political landscape of their time.³

In nineteenth-century Indian History, the event of 1857 is one of the most important episodes. It began as a mutiny in the Bengal army of the East India Company and soon grew into a popular uprising.⁴ Since then, it has occupied a good space in the academic and non-academic spheres where efforts have been made to study, understand, and explain its nature, meaning, and significance. Scholars have highlighted its various untouched aspects with rich and critical analysis, thus constantly extending boundaries.⁵ There is a rich historiography available on the revolt of 1857, but unfortunately, discussions of women's agency are still limited.⁶ The existing scholarship has extensively explored the Revolt of 1857, focusing on Delhi and the role of Bahadur Shah Zafar. However, the role and position of Zeenat Mahal remain largely overlooked. After the suppression of the revolt, William Hodson not only guaranteed Bahadur Shah Zafar's life but also extended the same assurance to Zeenat Mahal. Notably, life guarantees for Zeenat Mahal, her son Jawan Bakht, and her father were granted even before the guarantee for Bahadur Shah Zafar.

Despite being portrayed as an "evil woman" in British records, Zeenat Mahal was still treated as the 'head queen' after the revolt. She was accorded significant respect, evidenced by her traveling in her royal *rath*, a privilege denied to other royal women. Additionally, she was granted a substantial pension, far exceeding what was allocated to other royal ladies. Her treatment and fate stand in stark contrast to the general British approach toward the Mughal royal family and other female members.

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This contradictory behaviour of the British towards Zeenat Mahal highlights several unexplored aspects of her life, warranting deeper investigation into her influence and the factors that set her apart during and after the revolt. The narrative of the queen remains conspicuously absent in this male-dominated framework. Despite her significant role before and during the revolts politics, customs, rituals, and festivals are overshadowed by the stories of the emperor and his important nobles and sons and their exploits. This exclusion not only undermines her agency but also perpetuates the erasure of women's voices in history, reinforcing a patriarchal perspective that reduces queens to mere footnotes in the chronicles of Kings. In the tradition of history writing, 'his story' has always dominated 'her story'.⁷



A MINIATURE OF BEGUM ZEENAT MAHAL⁸, ILLUSTRATED
LONDON NEWS IMAGES

Life and Times of Zeenat Mahal

Zeenat Mahal Begum was born in 1821 in Faizabad to Ahmad Quli Khan, a nobleman at the Mughal court. As noted by William Dalrymple, Zeenat Mahal was the only consort of Bahadur Shah Zafar who hailed from an aristocratic background.⁹ Bahadur Shah Zafar ascended the Mughal throne in 1837 following the reign of Akbar Shah II. On November 18, 1840, he married Zeenat Mahal, who was then 19 years old, while the Emperor was 64. She became his youngest queen, marking a significant alliance within the Mughal court. Soon after the marriage, Zeenat Mahal earned the trust of her husband and became his close confidante.

She was not only the favourite queen but also played an important role in the politics and society of that period. Zeenat Mahal Begum, determined to secure her son's position as the next heir apparent, orchestrated his lavish wedding to her niece, Zamani Begum.¹⁰ This strategic move strengthened her faction within the competitive environment of the imperial harem. The wedding, described by William Dalrymple, symbolized her power in court

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politics and aimed to enhance her son's profile as heir-apparent. Following the marriage, Zeenat Mahal successfully ousted her rival, Taj Mahal Begum, and assumed the position of head queen. She was the mother of Bahadur Shah Zafar's fifteenth son, Jawan Bakht, who was later declared the heir apparent. According to Thomas Metcalfe, Zafar has "surrendered himself so completely to the guidance of his favourite wife Zeenat... that he is induced to commit many unreasonable acts."¹¹

However, despite her efforts, Zeenat Mahal faced resistance from Thomas Metcalfe, the British political resident, who favoured Mirza Fakhruddin, the eldest surviving prince, for succession. This disagreement highlighted the tension between the declining Mughal court and British authorities. The mysterious deaths of Mirza Fakhruddin and three British officers who signed the succession deed in 1853.¹² Emily Bayley, Thomas Metcalfe's daughter, had her suspicions about Begum Zeenat Mahal's role in her father's unexpected collapse and subsequent death.¹³ Her description of Zeenat Mahal was most unfavourable,

"headed by the Queen a clever, wicked woman Her rage, therefore, when she heard that the Heir Apparent had consented to the arrangements was unbounded and she determined to take her revenge. My father knew her character well, and that she would not let any obstacle stand in the way of her ambition. My Father also knew that her revenge would not stop, and he said to us, 'The first act in the drama is played out what will be the next?'"¹⁴

Though there was no proof, the rumours were widely believed within the British community. The British colonizers regarded Zeenat's power at court as dangerous and branded her a murderer.

Zeenat Mahal's influence over the Mughal court was significant, as she not only wielded political clout but also shaped the cultural atmosphere of Delhi. She was instrumental in organizing grand celebrations that upheld the traditions of the Mughal Empire while adapting them to the changing sociopolitical context of the mid-19th century. The festivals in Delhi, particularly under her patronage, were imbued with a syncretic spirit, reflecting the rich cultural amalgamation of the Mughal era. She played an important role in the celebration of Phool Walon ki Sair, Eid, Holi, Diwali, and Muharram. Narayani Gupta argues that these celebrations were a form of soft power, allowing the Mughal court to maintain its influence over the populace despite its declining sovereignty.¹⁵

The inclusivity of the events, which often transcended religious boundaries, helped Zeenat Mahal project the court as a unifying cultural force in Delhi. The celebrations at the Mughal palace during the mid-19th century prominently revolved around the head queen,

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Zeenat Mahal, who played a pivotal role in overseeing the arrangements and decorations for these grand festivities. As the chief figure in the royal harem, Zeenat Mahal commanded significant authority, and her involvement was central to the organization and execution of the palace's ceremonial events. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones emphasizes that Zeenat Mahal's patronage extended to the performers and artisans who played an essential role in the festivities. From nautch girls to master chefs, she ensured that the celebrations were marked by a high standard of artistry and craftsmanship. This patronage not only enhanced the splendour of the events but also provided livelihoods for those who depended on the Mughal court for sustenance.¹⁶

Every other royal lady was required to present herself before the commencement of any celebration, adhering to strict protocols of decorum and hierarchy.¹⁷ These gatherings were meticulously arranged, with all women of the harem seated before the queen in a manner that reflected their rank and status.

"Wearing all their finery, the ladies present themselves before the current head queen, pay their respects, and sit down with utmost decorum. The queen bedecked from head to toe in jewellery, yellow in gold, and white in pearls, is seated on her throne. There is silence everywhere. The khwajasaras, maids, servants, and others are lined up with folded hands. The wardrobe maids come with trays heaped with clothes. Look, the queen is distributing clothes with her own hands".¹⁸

The political and symbolic importance of Zeenat Mahal is evident from several grand gestures associated with her. For instance, sixteen horses were used to pull the carriage of the emperor, while eight horses were employed to draw the carriage of Nawab Zeenat Mahal Begum Sahiba, showcasing her status.¹⁹ She was also known as "Danka Begum," a title that reflected her prominence. This name is derived from the practice of drumbeaters announcing her arrival wherever she went, symbolizing her influence and prestige in the imperial court.²⁰

On 11 May 1857, the soldiers from Meerut reached Delhi and declared themselves under the Mughal emperor's sovereignty. From the beginning of the rebellion, there were simmering undercurrents of tension and resentment among the soldiers on one side, and the emperor and the begum, with their councillors on the other.

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THE BRITISH FORCES STORMING THE CITY ON 14TH SEPTEMBER (A NEWSPAPER ILLUSTRATION)

Begum Zeenat Mahal was a controversial figure during the uprising of 1857, as she was distrusted by both British officials and the rebels. Throughout the rebellion, the soldiers in Delhi viewed her with suspicion, accusing her of collaborating with the British.²¹

“Queen Zinat Mahal communicates with the British

Letter from a spy, 9 September

This morning Mirza Saheb summoned me and said that Begum Sahiba had called him at night and said that while as far as I am concerned, I accept whatever you suggest. But the arrangement should be official, however it is done. She said, whether Maulvi Rajab Ali is called or Mazhar Ali Saheb is summoned, whatever aid they request, I will give them; whatever they desire, will be accepted. Without their advice, nothing can be done. All precautions will be taken for their security, my confidants will guide them along the way and bring them here safely. And should you come in accordance with the sarkar's permission, then everything will be all right. And whatever is necessary today, please enquire about it and let me know the response today itself as I am waiting. The other thing is that I went to Kashmiri Gate today and saw the front from this side; because of the field, there will be a more or less equal contest with guns, etc. But at Lahori Gate or Kabuli Gate, there will be great mayhem, and the least loss of lives of troops is desired, for the rest, whatever the blessed one sees fit.²²”

On May 29, 1857, the rebels confronted Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, alleging that the Begum, in collusion with Mahommed Saur Ali Khan, had arranged for powder and shot to be sent to the English.²³ Both the emperor and the Begum harboured ambivalent feelings toward the mutineers, as evidenced by an account from Munshi Jiwan Lal, the agent of the governor-

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general at the Mughal court. He noted that the emperor summoned Mirza Mogul Beg, Mirza Abu Bakr, and Mirza Abdulla, expressing anger at their sympathy for the Sepoys and warning them that they would face hanging when the English retook the city. Fear of British reprisals weighed heavily on them. According to Jiwan Lal's daily diary (*roznamcha*), the soldiers were growing restless over delayed payments, and the Begum feared they might plunder the palace.²⁴ In an attempt to appease rebels, she sent jewellery worth a thousand rupees to the emperor, requesting that he use it to pay the Sepoys.²⁵ However, the emperor refused, sarcastically remarking that as long as he lived, he would bear the burden of indigestion and trouble. His impatience with the soldiers' incessant demands was becoming increasingly evident.

Apart from that, she played an important role during the revolt. she was responsible for the payment of the salary of the Badshahi army.

“Soldiers hold court to depose the King and appoint Jawan Bakht instead

Letter from a spy, 3 September

One fellow was arrested on suspicion of spying. His lips and all his teeth were broken and he was so mercilessly beaten that he is now beyond description. One Khaki, that is, a British soldier, was arrested at the front and brought here. He was tied up and so severely beaten by men of the Nimach platoon that his whole body was in bits. In the evening, about a hundred soldiers of the Hindustani horsemen and soldiers of some platoon gathered at Daryaganj bazaar and were holding court that all these princes should be suspended and Jawan Bakht, son of Zeenat Mahal, should be anointed the successor and, once we achieve victory, the king. And the old man, meaning the King, should be dismissed. On that promise, you can collect all the salary from Zeenat Mahal Begum. This devoted one himself witnessed this meeting. They continued the discussions till the evening. Let us see what is decided. It is difficult to believe that the Begum Sahiba will agree to this plan.”

The British entered the city on 14th September 1857, and the battlefield shifted from the outside to inside the city. Here, the colonial army came to find itself in a new kind of war, a war that was being fought at the street level, and where overnight victory was not possible and required a different zeal for victory.²⁶ Until 16th September, they were unable to reoccupy the area beyond Kashmere Gate, as their mortality rate had suddenly increased.²⁷ The fear of losing their lives led the inhabitants of the city to leave it as soon as possible.²⁸ The army's slow but advancing steps coincided with terror, and bayonets created a background in their favour, where soldiers were roaming through the narrow streets and entering the houses from which the fire was more than usual severe and 'putting to death without mercy all who were found inside'.²⁹

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During this period, it is worth noting that Hodson had independently finalized his agreement with Zeenat Mahal and her father, Mirza Quli Khan³⁰. Zeenat Mahal Begum was the most powerful Begum of the harem. She could influence Zafar's decision-making process. Hodson evaluated this element before undertaking a significant task. It is important to mention that Zeenat Mahal and Mirza Quli Khan were residing in Zeenat Mahal's haveli located in Lal Kuan at that time. Following a period of considerable deliberation, it was ultimately agreed upon to undertake efforts aimed at convincing Zafar to capitulate. This agreement was reached on the condition that the lives of Zeenat, her father, her son Mirza Jawan Bakht, and her husband, Zafar, would be safeguarded. In a rather astute manner, Zeenat and her father engaged in negotiations that resulted in a guarantee, which, notably, excluded any offspring of her husband from previous matrimonial unions. She did not mention other wives and children of Bahadur Shah Zafar.³¹



THE ARREST OF BAHADUR SHAH ZAFAR

Letter from W.L.R to C.B.Saunders

Translation of the Guarantee given by Captain Hodson to the Begum Zeenut
Muhul

After compliments states that the punishment of parties who have taken part in the insurrection is desirable, but that the lives of herself, her son Jawan Bukht and her father are guaranteed to them and they need not be apprehensive, but continue to occupy their premises [in Lal Kuan] as usual. That as he is to make some particular enquiries, and requests that some trustworthy man from herself may be sent to him immediately and that a guard will be furnished for the protection of her house.³²,

After the life guarantee of Zeenat Mahal Hodson went and provided a life guarantee to Bahadur Shah Zafar. After the arrest, Bahadur Shah Zafar was still honoured as an emperor.

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He was taken in his *palanquin* and Zeenat mahal in her *rath*. The proliferation of disorder within the city caused Zafar to doubt the likelihood of his survival being guaranteed. They're existed potential scenarios wherein Zafar, in his capacity as the leader of the vanquished military force, could have faced humiliation. In addition to ensuring the preservation of Zafar's life, Hodson made a commitment to the King that he would safeguard him from any form of disgrace or personal indignity (be-izzat).³³



Zeenat Mahal;s House at Lal Kuan

This was the event from the Mughal emperor became a prisoner of the Britishers. Hodson chooses eighty-four men to look after the Ex-King. He took the emperor into the city and ensconced him in the mansion of Zeenat Mahal at Lal Kuan.³⁴ During the period in which the British troops were consolidating their authority over the city subsequent to the occupation of the Red Fort, Hodson was actively engaged in the pursuit of the emperor and his family³⁵. According to Amar Farooqui Hodson was after the jewellery carried by Zeenat Mahal³⁶. In one of his letters, Hodson gave a passing reference to these jewels³⁷.

Even after his trial and during their subsequent travels, Bahadur Shah Zafar and Zeenat Mahal continued to be treated as the emperor and the head queen, underscoring their enduring symbolic significance. The British, gripped by a fear of potential uprisings, exercised extreme caution in handling their exile. They were acutely aware of the risks associated with keeping the imperial couple within the Indian subcontinent, as their presence could inspire resistance. To mitigate this, the British carefully selected Rangoon as the place of exile, ensuring they were removed from the Indian populace and minimizing the possibility of any attempts to rally around them. The severity of the suppression of the revolution was such that individuals were deterred from investigating the status or whereabouts of the former royal family due to the extreme brutality employed. People refrained themselves even talking about the revolt due to its brutality even in the 1890's. After the exile, the authorities were very concerned about not mentioning the names of the

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Royal family. The members of the royal family were classified as the 'state prisoners of the first rank'.

Zeenat Mahal's fate was arguably more tragic than that of Bahadur Shah Zafar. Following her death in 1882, she was interred in an unmarked grave near her husband's burial site. Much like Zafar's grave, hers was neglected and eventually lost to history, symbolizing the erasure of a once-powerful dynasty's legacy. Buried near a tree, her resting place became a poignant reminder of the fall of the Mughal Empire and the ignominy of its final days, where even in death, the queen who once wielded influence and authority was consigned to anonymity. This obscurity reflects the deliberate marginalization of their symbolic power, ensuring that the memory of their reign was diminished, a reflection of the colonial narrative to sever ties with India's imperial past.

After the exile of Zeenat Mahal, her belongings were massively looted, scattered across the world, and found homes in various museums, serving as fragmented remnants of her once-grand legacy. Her haveli at Lal Kuan, built by Bahadur Shah Zafar in 1844, faced an even grimmer fate. This exquisite palace, celebrated by Zafar himself in his poetry as the most beautiful in Delhi, symbolized opulence and architectural splendour. However, the Revolt of 1857 marked the beginning of its tragic decline. During the uprising, the British desecrated the palace, using it as a dump yard for dead bodies—a horrifying chapter in its history that lasted until 1862. After the revolt, the palace was sold to the Maharaja of Patiala, who transformed it into a school.³⁸ Despite these efforts, the building's reputation remained haunted by the grim stories of its past, leading to its eventual abandonment. In 1900, the government acquired the property, reviving it as a functioning school. Today, what remains of Zeenat Mahal's haveli stands as a poignant reminder of its layered and turbulent history, encapsulating both the grandeur of its origins and the trauma of its desecration.

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³⁸ The Maharaja of Patiala acquired numerous properties during his reign and was recognized as a steadfast ally and loyalist of the British Empire.