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A Conventional, Religious, and Progressive Muslim Woman

The Life of Begum Akbar Jehan Abdullah

In two decades, Begum Akbar Jehan Abdullah, my maternal grandmother, has been glorified, vilified, venerated, held in contempt, and iconicized. Historically, female icons have been “appropriated for contradictory causes. . . . Confronting these shifting meanings, some people wonder whether history has any meaning at all” (Ulrich 227).

Whether or not Akbar Jehan’s work was transformative and resplendent in its revision of women’s roles, education, and professionalization; whether or not she could have played a more agential role post the inception of armed insurgency and counter-insurgency in Kashmir, I would venture to say that you—dear reader—would be the best judge. Empathy might not come easily to you, because Akbar Jehan moved beyond the pigeonholes that conventional narratives have constructed for women. Narratives of women living complacently in traditional frameworks can be found a dime a dozen. I don’t recall seeing her whiling away her old age rocking on the front porch, nor do I recall her baby sitting her grandchildren or cooking elaborate meals for them, nor do I recall her awaiting another trajectory in her sons’ narratives. Akbar Jehan was neither obscure nor was she unfulfilled. This biography is not an attempt to redeem her, but to fathom the state of wonder that I am drawn into when I contemplate the elusivity of a woman who was not afraid to live an unpredictable life, all the while seeking presence in absence, meaning in meaninglessness, and purpose in an existence that constantly threatened to fall apart.

In my book, *The Life of a Kashmiri Woman*, my attempt is to steer clear of delimiting and conscripting narratives about Begum Akbar Jehan Abdullah. The reason I am so interested in studying her life and work is because, to my mind, there is a historical value in revisiting and challenging the historical narratives about the political personages of pre- and post-1947 Jammu and Kashmir and the movement for an independent Kashmir. I think it is important to reshape historical memory so that it includes the humanitarian and pluralistic endeavors of leaders of the movement at that critical junction post-1948.

Can Akbar Jehan's life trajectory be viewed in ways other than the determinant ones? Unfortunately, the family archive isn't as much of a treasure trove as I would have liked it to be. I did find plenty of photographers, more from diasporic members of the family, but there was a terrible dearth of letters, journals, and other sources that could have provided rich interpretations and echoes of the multiple narratives surrounding Akbar Jehan. Despite the paucity of material on Akbar Jehan, I attempt to read her life more open-endedly, "to the threshold of possibility she herself envisioned at various turns" (Hirsch and Spitzer 61). I admit that I feel like a sort of Charon, ferrying between the past and the present, encumbered with the task of conveying the souls of the dead across the river Styx. As Professor Myra Jehlen rightly observes, a woman's selfhood is contingent on her "ability to act in the public domain" (17). Akbar Jehan declared acceptable, in a conservative society and in a conservative age, that women were capable of exercising control and power. The model of hierarchy between men and women might be institutionalized in legislations made and executed by the state or in Muslim Personal Law, but gender ideologies are neither impenetrable, nor do they remain fixed till kingdom come. Even when cultural values and religious law are incorporated into legislations, they are capricious and subject to personal discretion (Doumata 228).

Given the substantive role that Akbar Jehan played in public events, she cannot slink into the shadows or be memorialized into the realm of abstractions. I do not wish to make a case for her canonization, but I employ memory, particularly mine and Mother's, and I rely on written sources, particularly works authored or coauthored by Grandfather, some of which have not seen the light of day in a long time, to add layers of understanding to the tumultuous events that molded the history of J & K. Feminist historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich makes a beautiful observation about the reconstruction of history, which speaks to my work,

"In the heat and confusion of events, people on all sides of an issue mine old stories for inspiration, enlightenment, or confirmation. Their efforts add to the layers of

understanding attached to the original events, shaping what later generations know and care about. Scholars sometimes call these popular reconstructions of the past “memory” to distinguish them from formal history. But serious history is also forged in the tumult of change. History is not just what happened in the past. It is what later generations choose to remember.” (xxii)

One might espouse or discredit the politics embraced by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and Akbar Jehan, but one would be hard-pressed to deny that the destinies of these political actors were inextricably intertwined with the history of the state, particularly the Kashmir Valley. It is challenging to reconstruct women’s lives, even those who have been visible in the public arena, because women are conditioned to wipe away their footprints and end up leaving very few traces of the kind that historical exploration would accept as legitimate. But the life of the woman I write about was so intricately tied with the political trajectory of J & K that delving into the labyrinthine issue of the Kashmir conflict and the part she played in it afforded me the glimpse, into her life, which I was seeking. In writing about her, I could not gainsay the tempestuous life and political career of her husband. Some of the choppy events of that life have been recorded, where-as others lie hidden in the catacombs of history, leaving the younger generation oblivious to the momentous changes in the regional political structure and collective psyche of the people brought about by those events. I am not interested in chronology, but in the ability of a conventional, religious, and progressive woman whose work was a powerful assertion of her convictions.

Akbar Jehan created a self whose destiny offered more possibility than most women of her generation could envision for themselves. Professor Carolyn G. Heilbrun reminds students of literature that, “Acting to confront society’s expectations for oneself requires either the mad daring of youth, or the colder determination of middle age. Men tend to move on a fairly predictable path to achievement; women transform themselves only after an awakening” (118). In addition to ensconcing herself within classic patriarchal structure, that is, she married, bore children, and encouraged her husband to succeed in the world, Akbar Jehan’s imagination was stimulated by “dreams of some other life: of personal accomplishment, of the understanding and control of hard facts and complex problems, of a place in a community where women were in sufficient numbers to render the accomplished woman neither lonely nor an anomaly” (Heilbrun 119). It is with faith in your sensitivity, patient reader, and with unflinching trust in your empathy that I write about the wish of my subject to inscribe and imagine the possibility of different destinies

for women in a world that was not governed by the aspirations and wishes of those women.

I do not hesitate to share with the reader my opinion that had Akbar Jehan played a more assertive political role in Jammu and Kashmir in the nineties, the organization founded by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, the National Conference (NC), would have maintained its representative character and would not have witnessed the painful corrosion of its mass base in the Kashmir Valley, which it did post-1987. I am, perhaps, toeing an unconventional line by allowing the theme of a woman's accomplishments to dominate the narrative, but I cannot do Akbar Jehan the gross injustice of relegating her responsibilities and ambitions to the background. I shrink from exploiting, what Professor Patricia Spacks observes in the writing of twentieth-century women's autobiographies, "a rhetoric of uncertainty" (113-114). Akbar Jehan, although a paradox, had the strength to inscribe narratives of women's possibilities, ambitions, and accomplishments. She saw women collectively, not individually, not ensnared in a familial framework, which wouldn't allow for an evolving consciousness.