

MUHAMMAD SHAYBANI KHAN'S WIVES (15th–16th Centuries)

Shukurova Sevinch

Second-Year Student, Department of History University of Information Technologies and Management

Abstract: This article examines several queens who lived during the Shaybanid dynasty, their activities, identities, roles in political life, status and prestige in society, lineage, circumstances of their deaths, and burial places. The study is based on various historical sources and scholarly materials.

Keywords: Muhammad Shaybani Khan, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, Umar Shaykh Mirza, Ismail Safavi, Humayun, Khurramshah, Sayyid Hadi, Qutlug Nigar Khanum, Khanzada Begum, Aisha Sultan Khanum, Movarounnahr, Kabul, Kandahar, Merv.

Historical sources often focus on great rulers and their achievements, providing either brief or detailed information about their fathers. However, very little information is usually available regarding their mothers, their identities, and their contributions. There is abundant information concerning how rulers governed their states, their political strategies, and military campaigns, yet the lives of their wives are rarely discussed openly. Nevertheless, history remembers many remarkable women who were not only wives, mothers, and queens but also made significant contributions to the prosperity of the state and the welfare of the people. Among such distinguished women were the queens of the Shaybanid dynasty.

According to historical records, Muhammad Shaybani Khan, the founder of the Shaybanid dynasty, had six principal wives.[1] In addition, numerous concubines were present within the royal court. It is well known that great importance was attached to noble lineage and ancestry when establishing a family. Rulers and princes paid close attention to a woman's lineage when selecting a future queen. Similarly, women also considered lineage and status in marriage. If they had to choose between becoming the wife of a prince or that of a reigning ruler, they often preferred the ruler, even if he was significantly older. Becoming the queen of a sovereign ruler, rather than merely the wife of a prince, was considered more prestigious and advantageous.

One notable example is Khanzada Begum, the sister of Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, who became one of the wives of Muhammad Shaybani Khan. Historical accounts indicate that Khanzada Begum was compelled to marry Shaybani Khan in order to save her relatives and her people.[2]

But what was the reality? At that time, the authority of her brother, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, had weakened considerably, and his throne was under serious threat. Shaybani Khan, on the other hand, was a ruler of noble lineage who had established a powerful dynasty. Following Shaybani Khan's death, Khanzada Begum returned to her brother. By that time, Babur had become a great ruler who had founded a new state and a new dynasty. Political instability had emerged within the Shaybanid realm after Shaybani Khan's death, leaving Khanzada Begum with little reason to remain in Movarounnahr. As a widowed queen, it was natural for her to return to her brother's court. Therefore, it can be argued that she chose to return after considering these circumstances. In Babur's state and court, she lived with honor, respect, and dignity until the end of her life, enjoying the status of a highly esteemed queen.

Khanzada Begum lived between 1478 and 1544. She was born as a Timurid princess and later became a Shaybanid queen through her marriage to Muhammad Shaybani Khan. Her father was Umar Shaykh Mirza (1456–1494), the Timurid ruler of Fergana, while her mother, Qutlug Nigar Khanum (1457–1505), was the daughter of Yunus Khan, the ruler of Tashkent. In addition to her beauty, Khanzada Begum was known for her intelligence, wisdom, and political acumen.



In 1501, she married Muhammad Shaybani Khan. Some historical sources claim that she was forced to marry him after being taken captive.[3] Other sources, however, regard the marriage as part of an agreement between two dynasties and as a right exercised by the victorious side. Thus, the marriage is interpreted differently across various historical accounts.

Muhammad Shaybani Khan and Khanzada Begum had a son named Khurramshah. However, he died at a young age. His father, Shaybani Khan, appointed Khurramshah as the governor of Balkh Province, but it is believed that he died around 1511–1512, shortly after his father's death. When Khanzada Begum returned to her brother's court, her son Khurramshah did not accompany her and is said to have remained under the care of the Shaybanids. In his memoirs, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur wrote with regret that his nephew died not long after his mother had departed.

During the early years of her life in Shaybani Khan's court, Khanzada Begum enjoyed a high status. She was counted among the chief wives of Shaybani Khan and became one of the most influential women of the palace. The birth of Khurramshah further strengthened her position within the court, as he was an heir born from the bloodlines of two great dynasties.

At the same time, not everyone in the palace viewed Khanzada Begum favorably. One of her principal rivals was Aisha Sultan Khanum, the daughter of the Khan of Moghulistan and another wife of Shaybani Khan. Their rivalry was not merely a matter of personal jealousy but also of political influence and supremacy. In particular, competition for the position of chief consort intensified because of Khanzada Begum's elevated status as a Timurid princess. As a result, Aisha Sultan Khanum frequently opposed her and organized intrigues against her.

One such intrigue involved accusing Khanzada Begum of treason. Aisha Sultan Khanum informed Muhammad Shaybani Khan that Khanzada Begum was allegedly acting as a spy for her brother, Babur Mirza. As a consequence, in 1507 Muhammad Shaybani Khan divorced Khanzada Begum and married her to one of his military commanders, Sayyid Hadi. Such treatment was considered unworthy of a noble princess. Similar examples can be found throughout history, where rivalry, hostility, and competition among royal women were common and continuous phenomena. Such struggles were not limited to the Shaybanid court but occurred in many dynasties and royal courts throughout history.

In 1510, Muhammad Shaybani Khan was killed during the battle against Shah Ismail Safavi. At that time, Khanzada Begum was in Merv. Sayyid Hadi was also killed in the same battle. When the Shaybanid harem was taken captive, Shah Ismail encountered the Timurid princess Khanzada Begum and treated her with the respect and honor befitting a queen. He subsequently arranged for her to be sent to her brother Babur Mirza's court in Kunduz. The primary reason for this gesture was that Shah Ismail was seeking an alliance with Babur, and such an act of generosity would strengthen friendly relations between them.

Upon returning to her brother's court, Khanzada Begum was not merely a royal lady but became actively involved in numerous political and educational affairs. She devoted the remainder of her life to strengthening the state established by Babur and his successors. When a struggle for power arose among Humayun's relatives, particularly Kamran and Hindal, Humayun regarded Khanzada Begum as a unifying figure and sent her to Kandahar to mediate between them. Despite being approximately sixty-five years old at the time, she traveled long distances on horseback in an effort to reconcile her nephew Kamran with the ruling family. However, in 1545, she died on the journey before reaching him. In history, Khanzada Begum has become a symbol of "a princess who sacrificed her personal happiness for the sake of her dynasty, family, and people."

After Humayun ascended the throne, he conferred upon his aunt the title of "Padshah Begum" and granted her numerous important political privileges. These privileges included authority over all women of the royal harem, the right to affix her seal to important state documents, and participation in political consultations as an adviser to the ruler. Following her



death, she was initially buried temporarily. Later, by Humayun's order, her remains were transferred to Kabul and interred beside her brother Babur Mirza in the Bagh-i Babur mausoleum.

Khanzada Begum carried out many charitable activities throughout her life. Nevertheless, she is remembered primarily as an influential diplomat and wise stateswoman who played an active role in politics, state affairs, foreign relations, and the complex dynamics of court life.

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