



Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, ed. *A Princess's Pilgrimage: Nawab Sikandar Begum's A Pilgrimage to Mecca*. Translated by Emma Laura Willoughby-Osborne. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 248 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35194-4; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22003-5.

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Sikandar Begum's pilgrimage

The book under review, *A Princess's Pilgrimage*, is the English translation of the original Urdu travelogue of the Hajj pilgrimage written by the ruler of Bhopal, Nawab Sikandar Begum. The translation from Urdu to English was completed by Emma Laura Willoughby-Osborne, wife of a British colonial officer, in 1869 and published in 1870 by W. H. Allen & Company. The editor of the current edition, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, provides an introduction, which runs into well over fifty pages, in which she details the significance and process of Hajj.

Bhopal was one of the largest independent fiefdoms that emerged during the decline of the Mughal Empire. In the seventeenth century, Afghan Sardar Dost Mohammed Khan, a commander in the Mughal army posted in the area, took advantage of the disintegration of the Mughal Empire and established his quasi-independent fiefdom of Bhopal. Bhopal became a princely state in British India as a result of the Anglo-Bhopal Treaty of 1818.

An unusual feature of the Bhopal state was that between 1819 and 1926, it was ruled by four women rulers or Begums. Qudsia Begum was the first woman ruler, who was succeeded by her only daughter, Sikandar Begum (the author of this travelogue), who in turn was succeeded by her only daughter, Shahjehan Begum. It was Shahjehan Begum who kept the manuscript of this travelogue in the royal archives of Bhopal and the translator

acquired it from her.

Women rulers of Bhopal were proud of their pure Afghan ethnicity, unconventional initiative in being rulers, leaving purdah, involvement in matters of state, and language and cultural refinements. Sikandar Begum's Hajj travelogue vividly reflects all of these notions. She demanded respect not only from her own subjects, but also from Turkish rulers, their governors, and bureaucrats in Mecca and Jeddah. She reported taking them to task if she was inconvenienced or arrangements failed to show due regard for her rank. The most striking feature of this travelogue is the fact that a woman—a Muslim woman who lived almost two hundred years ago—was able to see so much, observe so much, and then had the good sense to remember her experiences and document them so skillfully.

She was a keen observer. Everywhere she went she noted how people talked, dressed, ate, drank, and generally behaved. Some of her accounts are really hilarious and extremely entertaining for the reader. At one point, for example, a group of Arab bandits nearly abducted her mother and her property, and she very skillfully directed her servants and saved the situation.

Here are some excerpts that attest to the points listed above. It is amazing how keenly the author of these passages observed architecture down to the finer details

of construction material and inherent lack of safety in the construction. "The day on which I landed in Jeddah was the 14th of Shâaban, A.H. 1289, corresponding to the 24th of January, 1864, of Christ. The evening of that day was the Shab-i-Barat (or night of Record) and that is an occasion of rejoicing among the Mussalmans. Every house was illuminated, either by hanging lanterns or wall-lights, and there was a considerable firing of guns. When I asked the people the reason of this demonstration, some of them replied that it was in honour of the birthday of the Sultan of Turkey; others asserted that it was merely on account of the festival of Shab-i-Barat. The foundations and walls of the buildings in Mecca are very strong, being composed of either bricks and mortar or stone; but the roofs and floors are roughly constructed after this fashion:- branches of the date palm are laid cross-wise over the beams and rafters, and over them is spread a layer of earth, so that if any porous vessel containing water be placed on the floor, the drippings percolate through in to the rooms below; or should there be a pan of fire for cooking placed on the floor, the house is in danger of being set on fire. After rain it is common to see grass growing on the roofs. Every house has a kitchen, bath room and other offices of masonry, the remainder of the building being composed of mud" (pp. 27-29).

About the customs of buying and selling in the bazaars, she brings interesting description as follows: "The manner of buying and selling is after this fashion:- whenever anyone looks at an article admiringly, or asks any question about it, it is immediately handed to him by the seller, and the price demanded; however much he may protest that he was only looking at it, he is not heeded, and if he disputes any further, they spit in his face and insult him. In transactions of this nature the tradesmen are all in collusion, one supporting the other. In short the manners of these people resemble those of the Gonds in India of former days, who were rough mountaineers that lived by rapine and deeds of violence" (pp. 29-30). And again, she wrote: "The magistrates and judges are greedy after bribes" (p. 30).

About the womenfolk in Mecca, she stated: "In Mecca the people can neither sing nor dance, but most of the women whistle, clapping their hands and snapping their fingers as an accompaniment. On the occasion of weddings, ladies sing comic songs and dance, they do both so badly, that one has not the slightest pleasure in hearing or seeing them, but is rather disgusted than otherwise" (p. 70). Sikandar Begum also discussed local social etiquette: "The etiquette of paying and receiving visits is the same as in India, but most people only exchange them for self-interested motives; wealthy persons

seeking for introductions with the expectation of making money thereby, — there is no interchange of sincerity and friendship. Every one is well off, but they are all miserly and covetous; it is no disgrace to anyone to beg; high and low, young men and old, women, boys and girls of all grades, are more or less beggars. Give them what you will, they are never satisfied. Even when work-people are paid for their labour, they do nothing satisfactorily, and demand their pay before their work is complete. The employers also, on their part, cheat as much as they can" (pp. 70-71). She even had a caustic view of Indians residing in the holy city: "Almost all the bad characters that have been driven out of India, may be found in Mecca" (p. 72).

Numerous such episodes documented in this book give the reader a comprehensive picture of Arab society of that time in Jeddah and Mecca. We get an opportunity to compare the Arabia of the nineteenth century with today's Arabia. The Hajj has become much safer and more convenient for the average Muslim foreigner.

Willoughby-Osborne's translation is perfect except for occasional slips on some Urdu words, such as *istikbal* and *shab-i-barat*. She confused *shab-i-barat* with *Shab-i-Qadr*, which can be translated as "the night of record"; *shab-i-barat* literally means "the night of exception," but she did have the right description. In the footnote on page 37, she wrote: "Istikbal, literally meeting. It is the custom of the East for people of rank to be received at some distance from the destination by a deputation from the house of the host." *Istikbal* as a noun refers to an "advance welcome party (to meet a guest)," and as a verb it means "welcoming a guest." Again, however, her description of the practice is correct. It is clear that even though she did not know the exact linguistic definitions of the terms, she understood the social implications of these terms fully. Her translation is an interesting example of English people in India who made a successful effort to learn Urdu.

In her detailed introduction, Lambert-Hurley tries to bring out the value of this work for students and teachers of South Asian studies. Lambert-Hurley examines this travelogue from a number of diverse aspects. She views it as a study in women's empowerment; as a study in Muslim women travelers breaking social and religious barriers by seeing and experiencing much more than one would expect of them two centuries ago; and as a study of the colonial period of India, illustrating how the British managed princes and princesses who turned out to be loyal to them. The book definitely opened a new chapter in the study of royal women in British India.

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