Crossing Boundaries

The Life of Begum Samru

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ON January 27, 1839, a memorial Mass was held in Rome to commemorate the third death anniversary of Her Highness the Begum Le Sombre of Sardhana, India. The celebrant, the very Rev. D. Wiseman, Rector of the English College at Rome, was aware that the occasion represented a meeting of several cultures since here was an expatriate Britisher delivering an eulogy in Italy on a woman who had lived in India; he recognised, too, that such multiculturalism (to use a modern word) was appropriate in celebrating a person whose career had been shaped by a meeting of the East and West. So he chose as his text *Matthew* 8.2: "Many shall come from the East and the West and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven." What he was not able to indicate sufficiently in his sermon was that there were many other boundaries that Begum Le Sombre, or Begum Samru, to give her the name by which she is best known, crossed and transgressed in her career besides the more obvious one of the East and West. Begum Samru was a woman who performed roles that men may envy as warrior, general and ruler; a Muslim, she became a devout Catholic; an Indian, she was married in turn to a German and a Frenchman; born poor, she died an enormously wealthy woman; possessed of an extremely generous nature, she also became notorious for acts of horrifying cruelty; determined to defend her independence, she shifted alliances, now joining the Mughals, now the Sindhias, now the French, till finally she became friends with the British in India and helped them to consolidate their hold on north India.

The Rev. Wiseman ascribed the meeting of the East and the West in the life of Begum Samru to the universality of the Catholic church, the fact that the Church provides an umbrella under which people of all races can unite. I would argue that though the Church may have been responsible for the multiculturalism on the occasion of the Mass in Rome, it was not the Church but rather the conditions in mid to late eighteenth-century India and the character of the Begum herself which resulted in the multiculturalism of her remarkable life.

Begum Samru in old age

Begum Samru's Seal

At that time many powers representing diverse nations, races, cultures and world views were vying for control of an India which was so fragmented that it could hardly be called a nation. After the battles of Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1765) the British had become the dominant power in India, but they were far from occupying the whole country. The Mughal emperor Shah Alam still sat on the throne in Delhi. But his power had waned and rival contenders and power brokers battled against, or formed uneasy alliances with one another as they sought to carve out areas of control in the plains of north India. The Sindhias possessed a powerful artillery commanded by French generals with whose help they sought to dominate the petty chieftains of Rajputana and Malwa, who in turn squabbled among themselves endlessly and formed and broke alliances. The territory a little further to the north and the east was occupied by the Rohillas who had come as invaders from Afghanistan with Ahmad Shah Abdali and, after the third Battle of Panipat (1761), stayed back in India. Other parts of north India were in the control of the Jats of Bharatpur or the Sikhs of Punjab. Among the smaller principalities was the Begum's own at Sardhana, about fifty miles from Delhi (see map, which conveys the extent to which India was politically fragmented in the 1760s and far from being a nation).

In part it was her realisation that the survival of her kingdom depended upon her ability to cross boundaries, to abandon her role as a conventional Muslim woman and to establish contact with all types of people in the political game, that made her multicultural. However, in this respect she could hardly be called unique, for the same conditions that imposed a multicultural imperative on her operated also in the case of the other Indians or Europeans engaged in politics and in preserving or extending their domains, for instance Mahadji Rao Sindhia or the British general Lord Lake. What marked her as being so unusual was an openness and daring in her character which made her welcome the opportunity of crossing cultural boundaries.

While for some people an encounter with other races, religions or cultures is like water off a duck's back, so that they remain unchanged by it, some others are so overwhelmed that they lose their bearings and no longer know who or what they are. Yet others are like chameleons: they transform themselves so completely into the image of another culture that their original selves can hardly be found. Begum Samru was different from all these types. Forced early in life to fend for herself and make the most of whatever opportunities came her way, she developed a remarkable quality of being able to create a harmonious whole out of her disparate experiences. Consequently her multicultural experiences, instead of throwing her off balance or making her a *deracinee*, became a way for her to realise herself more fully. A review of her career can help us understand not just the cross-cultural encounters of eighteenth-century India, but the nature of such encounters in general.

Begum's Early Life

Many details of Begum Samru's early life are conjectural. She was born in a small village called Kotana in the present district of Meerut sometime between 1750 and 1753 and named Farzana at birth, though as a grown woman she hardly ever used this name. Her father, an impoverished Arab (whether nobleman, trader or soldier is uncertain) either died or abandoned his wife when Farzana was just a child, whereupon mother and daughter migrated to Delhi where the mother would seem to have become a prostitute, and apprenticed the daughter as a dancing girl.

Farzana had just entered her teens when she came to the notice of a European mercenary in his mid-forties by the name of Walter Reinhardt. Reinhardt's origins are shrouded in mystery. A German, he came to India in the service of the French, then briefly served the British, whom he deserted in favor of Gregory Khan, the Armenian general of Mir Kasim, the Nawab of Bengal. At Mir Kasim's orders he slaughtered 62 Englishmen at Patna in cold blood in 1763. After the battle of Buxar, when the British defeated Mir Kasim, Reinhardt fled to north India in order to escape British revenge.

By now Reinhardt had acquired a common-law wife, a Muslim named Bahaar, by whom he had a son. He had also come to be known as Le Sombre or Samru. It is unclear how he obtained this sobriquet. Some biographers suggest that when he entered British employ in Calcutta he took on the name Summers which his French comrades changed to Le Sombre and Indians to Samru. A more commonly favored explanation is that he was nicknamed Le Sombre on account of his swarthy complexion and the fact that he rarely smiled, and this got corrupted to Samru.

Around 1767 Le Sombre or Samru met Farzana and she became his consort though his first wife was still living. It was not at all unusual for Europeans in eighteenth-century

India to have two or more common-law wives or concubines called *Bibis*. The custom was accepted by both Indians and Europeans, and *bibis* enjoyed not only social acceptability but also many legal rights. On becoming his *bibi* Farzana gave herself the title of Begum and came to be known as Begum Le Sombre or Begum Samru.

For the next several years Begum Samru led a somewhat nomadic existence. Le Sombre had collected together a small ragtag army consisting of rowdy European mercenaries and ill-trained and ill-equipped Indian soldiers, and he, his young bride and his army lived in the saddle as they went from place to place offering their services to the highest bidder. The instinct for self-preservation was strong in him. When his troops were engaged in action he would form them into a tight defensive square from where they would shoot in all directions without engaging the enemy. When the battle was over, he would offer his services to whichever side had prevailed.

For a while he served Jawahar Singh, the Jat ruler of Bharatpur. Then, when Jat fortunes waned, he switched allegiance to the Mughal emperor, who in 1774 granted him the principality of Sardhana, a village about 50 miles from Delhi and 10 from Meerut. The following year Le Sombre and his troops were posted to Agra, and he and Begum Samru were finally able to enjoy their first semi-permanent home after marriage. In conditions of relative peace and security Le Sombre established a *menage a trois*, for his first wife Bahaar made her home with him and Begum Samru. Bahaar apparently suffered from a mental disorder which made her withdrawn and unable to take care of herself. She never seems to have objected to her husbands getting a second consort, and Begum Samru, in turn, provided for her and ensured her well-being till her death.

Because the elder wife was incapable of managing affairs, the running of the household became Begum Samru's responsibility. She exhibited a decided preference for a life which was a combination of the European and Indian. The house was furnished in European style and the Begum dined at table with her husband (which few Indian women did) unless Indian guests were present. Wine was served at meals. But the food tended to be Indian and everyone dressed in Indian style and preferred to speak in Urdu rather than any European language. This was just as well for the Begum who never acquired more than a smattering of English and French. But she became adept at keeping strict accounts, learned a great deal about politics, managing men, and planning military campaigns from the conversation of her guests, and became a good judge of character. From her husband the most important lesson she learned was that of self-preservation, of knowing where one's best interests lay, and doing everything to further them.

Map showing political fragmentation in the 1760's

Chief of Sardhana

Perhaps it was for these qualities that when Le Sombre died in Agra in May 1778, his troops accepted Begum Samru as their leader. In turn, she pledged allegiance to the Mughal emperor who thereupon ratified her command of her husband's troops and

transferred possession of the principality of Sardhana to her. In July 1778 she entered Sardhana as its chief.

For the next few years she busied herself in administrative tasks, in raising revenue, and in keeping her lands secure from the depradations of neighboring chieftains. Begum Samru was not the sovereign of Sardhana. Rather, Sardhana was her *jagir* or fiefdom. But she enjoyed considerable autonomy. She acknowledged the sway of the emperor in Delhi whose levees she had therefore periodically to attend and to whose aid she was duty-bound to come when need arose. For the rest, so long as nothing that she did went counter to the interests of the emperor, she was in absolute command. She could impose and collect taxes, try cases and impose punishment. She could negotiate with and even engage in hostilities against other powers. Begum Samru did so frequently. Sardhana was surrounded by Rohillas, Sikhs and others who coveted the agriculturally rich territory that the Begum possessed and who therefore continually raided her borders, and she, too, carried skirmishes into their territory. Over a period of time she developed a reputation as a brave warrior and fine military strategist.

A number of Europeans heard about her and joined her retinue. Two such who entered her service around this time and remained for the rest of their lives were the Frenchmen Francois (?) Bernier and Jean Remy Saleur; the latter would eventually become her commander in chief. A third, Mme. Le Fevre, the widow of a French soldier of fortune, became part of her household; later, her daughter was to marry the Begum's stepson.

While living in Agra with Le Sombre, the Begum had got to know the Jesuits who had maintained a mission there since Akbar's time. Le Sombre had made contributions to the upkeep of their church, the head of the mission visited the Samrus frequently, and the Begum had expressed curiosity about Christianity and on one occasion asked for a Bible. These contacts continued after Begum Samru moved to Sardhana, and in 1781 she was received into the Roman Catholic church.

By the end of the 1780s Begum Samru had become a respected and powerful player in north Indian affairs. Her troops were commanded by European officers who drilled the soldiers well, so that her army, though not as disciplined, well led, well equipped or large as those of the British to the east or the Sindhia's further south, came to be regarded as being superior to those of her nearest rivals. Begum Samru's reputation for skilled leadership, personal courage, wealth, and administrative acumen spread widely. She also enjoyed the admiration of Mahadji Rao Sindhia, one of India's most able men in the eighteenth century. When his power was at its height in the 1780s his domination from the Deccan to the Ganges was complete and his arms kept the Mughal throne propped up. He could not have managed these achievements had he been in a habit of misjudging people. And his judgement of Begum Samru was wholly favourable. He was willing to leave the defence of the *doab*, or the territory between the rivers Jamuna and Ganges, to her.

She ordered her chair to be set down on their graves and calmly smoked a* hookah *while they suffocated.

Nor did she fail him. In 1787, while his forces were away in the south and she was deputising on his behalf on a military mission, a rebel named Ghulam Qadir marched to Delhi with a view to capturing the emperor. She rushed to Shah Alam's side and was able to save him. For her pains the emperor invested her with the title of *Zeb-un-Nissa*, the "ornament of her sex". The following year she again came to his rescue when he was ambushed by another renegade Najaf Quli Khan. Again it looked as if the emperor would be taken, but then the Begum was carried into the midst of the fray in a palanquin and her small contingent succeeded in repulsing the enemy. This engagement earned her a second title of "dearly beloved daughter".

Cruel Justice

Around 1790 (though the exact date is uncertain) an incident occurred which, while it may have helped to consolidate her power by putting terror into anyone who might have been inclined to challenge her authority, also brought her obloquy. Two of her slave girls in Agra set fire to a residence and a nearby storehouse causing considerable loss to the Begum's property. Begum Samru's justice was stunningly cruel. She had the girls flayed and then buried alive and had her bed placed on their graves so that nobody could dig them out surreptitiously. Another story has it that she ordered her chair to be set down on their graves and calmly smoked a *hookah* while they suffocated.

The incident shocked the British. Several years later Sir Walter Scott was

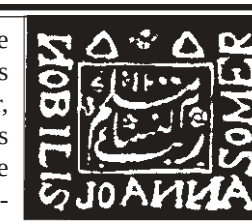
to recall the fate of the "Circassian slaves" in *The Surgeon's Daughter* (1827), as was Col. William Henry Sleeman, and throughout the nineteenth century British historians (see bibliography) highlighted it. There can be no question that the Begum's punishment was cruel and inhumane by any standard. However, it must be remembered that under Muslim rulers in India punishments were not codified and judges were at liberty to create punishments that they thought best fitted the crimes. Akbar, who was hardly a cruel man, had criminals' heads crushed under the feet of elephants. Sometimes prisoners were skewered. In the year following Begum Samru's defence of the emperor Shah Alam against Najaf Quli Khan, Ghulam Qadir had once again invaded Delhi, and this time, with Mahadji Rao Sindhia still away in the south and Begum Samru otherwise engaged, he had succeeded in capturing the emperor. Thereupon he had proceeded to gouge out the emperor's eyes. When Sindhia heard about this he rushed back to Delhi, restored the blinded emperor to the throne, and devised a series of shocking punishments for Ghulam Qadir. On successive days he had the victim's limbs hacked off, nose chopped, ears lopped, and eyes gouged before he was finally allowed to die. Though Begum Samru acted cruelly towards her slave girls, she had ample precedent in recent history.

If Britishers were appalled by Begum Samru's cruelty, it did not stand in the way of happy relations between her and British officialdom. At this stage the British presence in north India was not significant. Begum Samru had hardly any contacts with them. If she thought about them at all, she must have done so in a vaguely favourable sort of way. Therefore she was probably acting out of charitable motives when around this time she ransomed a Britisher called Col. Stuart who had been captured by the Sikhs in Punjab. The British were gratified by this action. The Governor General in Calcutta, Sir John Shore, met in Council and it was decided to reimburse the Begum the ransom money.

Personal Life

Her closest contacts with the British at this time were those that she had with George Thomas. Born in Tipperary in 1756, Thomas had landed in Madras in 1782 in the service of the East India Company but deserted shortly thereafter. In 1788 his wanderings brought him to Sardhana where his dashing good looks and courage soon made him popular. The Begum arranged his marriage to a Frenchwoman in her retinue and entrusted him with several military missions against neighboring principalities. However, around 1793 there was a falling out between him and the Begum and he left her service. Some historians suggest that, jealous of Thomas's popularity, his enemies poisoned her ears against him. However, it seems more likely that the cause of the quarrel was Levassault or, as the name is perhaps more properly written, Le Vasseau.

Shah Alam II



Le Vasseau served in the French army in India under Dupleix and later in the Sindhia's forces before entering the Begum's service towards the end of the 1780s. Haughty and distant, he was not popular with her other European officers and did not get on well with Thomas. Partly the antipathy had to do with their nationalities: the British had bested the French in their struggle for the Indian subcontinent and French and British officers often found themselves on opposite sides in political and military encounters. But partly it was also personal, for Le Vasseau was constitutionally very different from the dashing and cavalier Thomas.

In 1791 Begum Samru married Le Vasseau. Realising that it would not be politic to make her marriage public, Begum Samru did not change her name though she added "Nobilis" after it in acknowledgment of her husband's connections to French nobility (see picture of her seal). She continued to behave towards him in public as she had always done. But Le Vasseau was not able to keep the formal distance from her that protocol demanded; and since her troops did not know that he was now her husband, they took offence at the liberties he permitted himself in her company. Another factor which worsened relations between Le Vasseau and the other officers had to with a custom that Begum Samru had followed since the days of her first husband. She entertained them at dinner each night in her palace. This had been Le Sombre's way of keeping a fractious,

sometimes disgruntled lot of soldiers under control, and now it was hers. Her new husband put an end to this custom on account of the bad manners of these daily guests and his belief that dinner should be a family affair. This caused them to turn further against him and the Begum and a mutiny broke out led by her stepson, Reinhardt's issue by his first wife.

Deals with the British

Le Vasseau and the Begum decided to flee Sardhana. Late in 1795 Le Vasseau requested the British Resident at nearby Anoopshahar for safe conduct to British territory either in Bihar or Bengal where he and his wife could spend the rest of their days. He declared that the Begum had grown tired of administering her territory and fighting wars for eighteen years and now wished to hand over Sardhana to the British. The Begum, too, addressed a letter to the Governor General in Calcutta saying that she had always supported the British and would like to spend the rest of her days under their protection. Though only in her mid forties, she referred to herself as a tired old woman who did not have many days left to live.

The Governor General agreed to provide protection to her and Le Vasseau in return for control of Sardhana. Finally, in May 1796 the couple set out in secret. But the protracted nature of their negotiations with the British had caused the plans of their flight to become known to the mutineers. Begum Samru and Le Vasseau were just three miles out of Sardhana when the mutineers swept down on them. Le Vasseau committed suicide. The Begum's attempt at taking her own life failed (intentionally, say some biographers) and she was led back in captivity and thrown into prison.

However, her instinct for self-preservation was strong. She was able to smuggle a secret message to George Thomas for help. In turn, he, regarding his recent falling out with her as being of little consequence when her life was threatened, proceeded to Sardhana and entered the town with fifty cavalrymen, leaving equally small infantry to follow. Now the incident took an operatic turn. The Begum's captors, realising that the Sardhana army far outnumbered Thomas's cavalrymen, were about to launch an attack on them when Thomas's infantry was spotted on the horizon. No one knew how many men there were, and the quick-witted Irishman spread the rumor that the whole of the Sindhia force was marching in his support. This was enough to break the mutineers' morale. They surrendered without a shot being fired, and Begum Samru was reinstated.

Anti-British Activities

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, the Begum began to realise that her position as an independent ruler of a small principality was daily becoming more precarious. To maintain her independence she needed allies. But her patron Mahadji Rao Sindhia had died in 1794. The Mughal emperor's writ no longer ran beyond Delhi. George Thomas was hounded from fort to fort by General Perron, one of Sindhia's French commanders, till he finally surrendered to the British in 1801; he died the following year while being taken to Calcutta. Most importantly, the British under the new Governor General Lord Wellesley were now beginning a concerted effort to dominate north India and if she did not come to terms with them she could well lose everything. So she entered secret and protracted negotiations with the British and let Wellesley know that she was willing to hand over Sardhana to the British and put herself under their protection. Wellesley replied that he would avail himself of the offer when an opportunity presented itself.

She had seen too much treachery and double crossing in her life to take the British at their word.

By the middle of 1803 the British and Sindhia were getting ready for a final showdown at Assaye in the Deccan. The Begum had sent five battalions to aid Sindhia. She now offered Wellesley to withdraw them from Sindhia's side and have them go over secretly to his. Wellesley vetoed the proposal because he thought that such a move would only expose her to the wrath of Sindhia. But as soon as the British defeated Sindhia in September 1803, thereby clearing the way for the conquest of north and central India, his concern for Begum Samru's welfare evaporated. Lord Lake, the British commander stationed in Delhi, peremptorily summoned her in tones very different from the cordiality with which Wellesley's predecessor Sir John Shore had treated her. "Immediately on receiving this letter," he wrote to her on 29 October 1803, "you will come alone to my presence." Begum Samru had no option but to comply.

Lake informed the Begum that Wellesley had now decided to accept her offer of Sardhana. In return, the British would recompense her with money and settle her on land on the western bank of the Jamuna under their protection. The Begum wrote to Wellesley accepting these terms. But when he wrote back that while she was

to hand over Sardhana immediately, her compensation and resettlement would have to await some future unspecified date, she balked. She had seen too much treachery and double crossing in her life to take the British at their word. She therefore started engaging discreetly in anti-British activities. She fomented disturbances against their authority in the area of the *doab*, the agricultural land between the Ganges and Jamuna rivers, and sent emissaries to Ranjit Singh of Punjab and Holkar of Indore, the only two native powers of any consequence left in north India now and who were both proving recalcitrant to the British. It is this anti-British phase of her career that has caused some nationalist Indian historians like Mahendra Narain Sharma to see Begum Samru as an early freedom fighter. However, the reverse seems to be the case. Far from wanting the British out, she did what she could to welcome them. Her turning against them temporarily was more the result of a feeling of betrayal than born of a vision of an India free of the British.

At this point the question may be posed: Why was she so pro-British? After all, till the end of the eighteenth century she had few personal contacts with them, and most of her close associates like Le Sombre, Le Vasseau, Sindhia and even George Thomas had good reason to shun the British. The answer is partly that being well-versed in military affairs, she admired the discipline and fighting quality of their soldiers and the skill of their generals. Partly also it was her instinct for self-protection that drew her to them. Treachery, palace revolutions and sudden death were the norm in the court of the late Mughals. By contrast, from a distance British India must have appeared to be a haven of peace where the rule of law prevailed. A third reason is glimpsed in a letter she wrote to her friend David Ochterlony, the British Resident of Delhi, in February 1804. It appears that as a result of marrying two Europeans in succession and her daily intercourse with several others who were in her service, she had come to see herself as being at least as European as Indian, and a sense of racial affinity drew her to the British. As she put it: "At the period that the English gentlemen have acquired possession of Hindustan I rejoiced that from a consideration of my being of the same race as theirs I should...be exalted in rank."

The British, however, did not see Begum Samru as one of theirs. It would have made little difference to their plans even if they had. Wellesley was adamant that the Begum carry out her promises of handing over Sardhana. He was about to send an agent to take possession when fate intervened. He was called back to England and Lord Cornwallis was sent out to India as Governor General for a second time.

St. Mary's Cathedral Church – Sardhana

Cornwallis was much more amenable to Begum Samru's entreaties. Lake, too, intervened in her behalf. He realised that a disaffected Begum Samru, while no threat to British interests in north India, would make for a troublesome foe who would constantly cause pinpricks and minor irritations. Ochterlony threw in his weight behind the Begum as well, with the result that in 1805 the British offered her a treaty whereby in return for placing herself under British protection, she was to be left "in the unmolested possession of [her] Jaghire [i.e. principality], with all the rights and privileges [she] had enjoyed hitherto." She was given the right to dispose

of her moveable property as she pleased, but Sardhana itself and her other immoveable assets were to pass into British control after her death since she had no children.

Finally secure, wealthy and honoured, Begum Samru spent the last three decades of her life in assisting the spread of Roman Catholicism, setting up or supporting many charities, and undertaking ambitious building projects. She continued to maintain a large army, though she no longer had need of it, at a cost of about Rs 6 lakh, or more than two thirds of her annual revenue. To support this expense she taxed her cultivators heavily and also levied stiff customs duties on goods that passed through her territory either by land or river. There were also taxes on hides, silks, and a number of other commodities. Consequently no capital formation became possible among her people, and though there were no shortages, existence remained pretty marginal for most citizens.

Economic Policies

Begum Samru's economic policies call for some comment here. Shortly after her death in 1836, T.C. Plowden, a British administrator and estates officer who was charged with making an inventory of her possessions, reported that though the economic condition of her territory seemed to be golden on the surface, everything was rotten within. He ascribed this condition to years of rack renting and to the fact that in the last three years of her rule she had handed over the reins of administration to her adopted son David Dyce Sombre who, instead of taxing farmers on the basis of what they actually produced each year, arbitrarily fixed an amount which they were obliged to pay whether or not their production matched this figure, with the consequence that the peasantry was further impoverished.

Entrusted with managing the affairs of Sardhana after the Begum's death, Plowden reduced taxes marginally. British historians reported with some jubilation that the move produced salutory effects: thus H.G. Keene said that by the 1850s the population of her territories, which had shown a decline between 1820 and 1830, had risen once again. The implication was that the Begum was not a good ruler and used the profits of her state for herself, while with the coming of the British had also come economic reform.

No multiculturalism is possible without some sort of crossing of boundaries, some cultural poaching or transgression.

There can be no doubt that Begum Samru's economic policies were not aimed at the good of the people. However, it is also true that British officials had an axe to grind in denigrating her. They exaggerated the conditions prevailing under her and awarded themselves credit where none was due. Plowden's report contrasts oddly with that of Fr. W. Keegan, a seminarian resident at Sardhana at the time of the Begum's death and therefore whose monograph called *Sardhana and its Begum,* written in the 1840s, may be granted some credence. The picture he paints of Sardhana is very different. He says that during periods of drought farmers were aided with loans, agriculture was productive, and the administration was lenient with tax defaulters. Similarly the credit which was bestowed on Plowden and later British administrators for reducing taxes marginally needs to be placed in the perspective of other facts enumerated by E.T. Atkinson, most notably that because these administrators followed the advice of the Begum's prime minister Rai Singh, who was a Taga by caste, they ended up undertaxing the Tagas and overtaxing the agriculturally more progressive Jats who were the Tagas' main rivals, and consequently harmed rather than helped agriculture by depressing Jat industriousness.

The truth would seem to be that if Begum Samru's economic policies were aimed more at self-enrichment than at improving the condition of her subjects, they were no different from those followed by other rulers in India at the time, whether Mughal, Hindu, or British. No one really had the interest of the Indian peasantry at heart. If she transgressed against the welfare of her subjects, so did everyone else, not least her British detractors.

Sardhana Cathedral

Where Begum Samru differed from many of her contemporary Indian rulers was in the use she made of her wealth. She spent liberally in the name of religion. Besides Rs 1.5 lakh which she donated to the See of Rome and Rs 50,000 to Canterbury, she endowed several Catholic seminaries, schools and colleges in Sardhana, Agra and Meerut and contributed to Protestant charities as well. Her most ambitious project was building a cathedral at Sardhana for which she employed Italian architect Antonio Reghlini. Some of the workmen were brought from Agra, descendants of the builders of the Taj Mahal, others imported from Italy. The marble was quarried in Jaipur, the church clock brought from Switzer-

land, the gold communion chalice ordered from France. The building had two Gothic spires, three domes and a colonnade or *verandah* in the Indian style. The cathedral was completed in 1822; and when in 1834 Begum Samru sent five lithographs and a large painting of it done by an unknown Indian artist to Pope Gregory XVI, she could justly claim that they were views of the largest and finest church built in India to date.

Begum Samru died in January 1836 in an odour of great respectability if not sanctity, leaving behind more than 700,000 pounds.

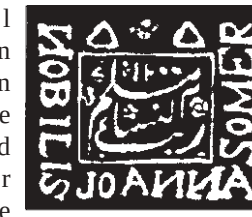
In conclusion, I would like to return to the theme with which I started and, in light of Begum Samru's career, further explore her achievement as a multiculturist. This much may be granted straight away: no multiculturalism is possible without some sort of crossing of boundaries, some cultural poaching or transgression. Such crossings, even transgressions, came naturally to a woman whose mother was a prostitute and who was herself brought up as a dancing girl, and therefore whose early years were spent beyond the pale, living across the boundaries of what was socially acceptable.

These crossings were also necessary for survival. Indeed, the reason Begum Samru survived so well was because what she needed to do to survive was also what she enjoyed doing. It was not just that the imperatives of history demanded that she mix with Indian, French, German and English men and women, or with Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian. She seems to have done so with zest. It is almost as if she somehow sensed that these cultural contacts would enrich her life and enable her to realise herself more completely. If to be multicultural means to be able to function comfortably with people of varied backgrounds, beliefs, races, cultures and politics different from one's own, and to grow from this experience, then there is no doubt that Begum Samru was so.

People who live at the borders of many cultures for a length of time often find it a creative experience, in that they are able (or forced) to create a lifestyle for themselves which no one culture permits. To be multicultural is to inhabit a hybrid culture which is man-made and the product of conscious choices and actions rather than something that has evolved organically and naturally. In this sense there is something *artificial* about multiculturalism: the word is not to be understood pejoratively but as denoting an element of art in its fashioning.

The reason Begum Samru survived so well was because what she needed to do to survive was also what she enjoyed doing.

The culture of the Begum's court at Sardhana was of this kind. It was not fully Indian; it was Europeanised but not European and certainly not English. It was an artificial construct, the joint creation of the expatriate European who valued Indian culture and the transgressive Indian who appreciated things Western. In many instances Begum Samru preferred European people and things to their Indian counterparts. We have noticed how in her letter to David Ochterlony in 1804 she identified racially with the British rather than Indians. She enjoyed the company of Westerners and entertained Europeans lavishly for which purpose she even kept a band. When she sent the Pope a painting of her cathedral done by an Indian painter, she apologised for the poor quality of the perspective saying that it was, after all, not the work of a European. Yet she had no real command of any of the European languages nor did she try to learn any; her dress was always Indian as were her food habits and the observance of *purdah*. Had she gone to Europe she would probably have been a total cultural misfit.



The fact is that Sardhana became an experiment in living in which people from different parts of India and Europe came together with values and habits taken from both the Eastern and Western worlds. The Europeans in her service were restless men who had come to India seeking wealth, to be sure, but also a deeper fulfilment which they were unable to find in their own cultures but hoped to achieve through new roles in different cultures. They found a home in Sardhana because the Begum shared the same traits. They were all of them--not just the Begum but also Reinhardt, Le Vasseau, George Thomas, Saleur, Bernier and the others - crossers of boundaries, even transgressors against the norms of their cultures. In Sardhana they created some sort of a meritocracy where the fact of race, though never forgotten, seldom counted. Men of half a dozen European nationalities commanded her troops by turns; at her death her commander of cavalry was the Muslim Inayatullah Khan while the Prime Ministership, which was the chief administrative and revenue collecting office, was in the hands of the Hindu Rai Singh. Both of them were represented on the beautiful tomb that her stepson, David Dyce Sombre, com-

missioned Tadolini, an Italian sculptor and a disciple of Canova, to execute.

Begum Samru was multicultural, then, both in her ability to cross from culture to culture and also in her crossing cultures with one another in order to produce a hybrid, a new way of life which brought people of varied backgrounds and experiences together. But there is another sense in which we in the late twentieth century use this word. Multiculturalism today also means a celebration of diversity, a willingness to welcome the other as the other. In this sense she was no multiculturalist. She obviously enjoyed diversity and welcomed *others*, but she had no use for the other as the *other*. Hers was not the culture of democratic inclusiveness. It did not matter who you were when you came to Sardhana; once there, you had to blend. You had to accept the cultural values by which the others lived. There was no place for the waywardness of a George Thomas or the aloofness and breeding of a Le Vasseau. This is because, though Sardhana may have been a cultural experiment, in the final analysis it was not in this fact that its value to the Begum lay but rather in its being the base, however fractious, uncertain and at times even violent, of her economic and political power. She welcomed others not because they were different but essentially because they met her military or administrative needs.

From this point of view she would not satisfy our modern definitions of multiculturalism, nor would she have had any patience with them. She was willing to use and exploit people, as others wanted to use and exploit her. These were the realities of the power game in late eighteenth-century India. But it was precisely these realities that created the flowering of a remarkable hybrid culture in Sardhana for a few years, a culture that was neither Eastern nor Western but partook of both. Begum Samru deserves recognition as one of the pioneers of international living in the modern world. ❐

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