

Chand Bibi of the Deccan: Falconry, Feminine Power and Women's Mobility

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Deccan Muslim warrior queen, Chand Bibi (1550-1600), successfully defended Ahmadnagar Sultanate several times against the most powerful emperor of her time: the great Mughal, Akbar. Chand Bibi had great administrative and military prowess as she united the Deccan sultanates under her banner and negotiated with Mughal power. Representations of Chand Bibi in several paintings from the eighteenth century onwards testify to her power within the Hindustani imagination.

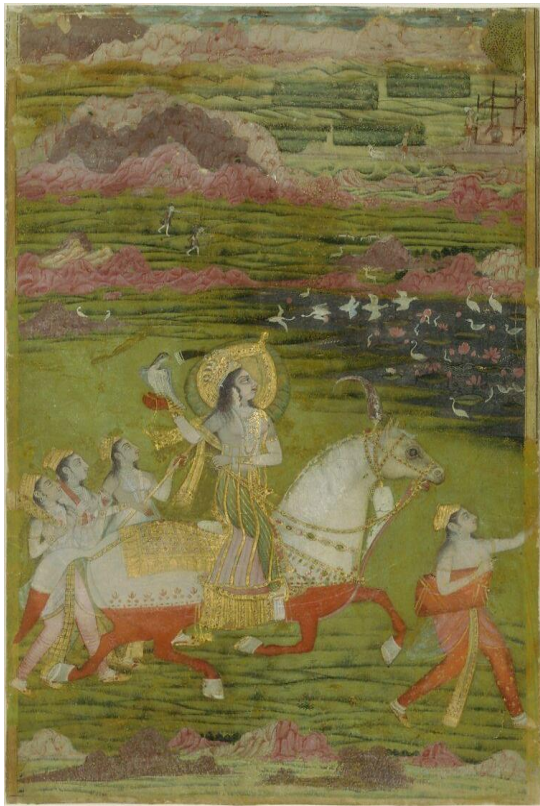


Fig. 1: “Chand Bibi Hawking with Attendants in a Landscape”, c. 1700. Islamic India. Opaque watercolours, gold and silver on card-weight paper; 10 x 6 1/4 in (25.4 x 15.9 cm). Image courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Louis E. and Theresa S. Seley Purchase Fund for Islamic Art, 1999 (1999.403).

Mobility, in fact, has long been associated with Chand Bibi, a queen who belonged simultaneously to the Islamic, Indic, Persianate and Deccani worlds. These influences are apparent in the visual imagination of Chand Bibi. Most paintings depict the queen hunting with a falcon, a bird meant to fly away and return. It is a central motif of the queen's iconography. Falconry was a typically male pastime, yet the invocation of the falcon associates Chand Bibi with ideals of female sovereignty.

Visual Representations of Chand Bibi



Fig. 2: “Chand Bibi on a Galloping Horse”, c. 18th century, Deccani India. Natural colour. Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi, Accession No. 59.94/25.

Chand Bibi as a falconress was a popular theme in a number of 18th-century works, seen in *ganjifa* playing cards, paintings from Mughal, Rajasthani and Deccani ateliers, Marathi lithographs, and covers of Urdu books. [1] One of the earliest paintings is from 1700, housed in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the Department of Islamic Art notes that “images from the

Deccan of a female figure hawking, such as this one, are identified as idealisations of the historical figure Chand Bibi” (Fig. 1).

Another 18th-century Deccan painting that features Chand Bibi as a huntress includes lines of Persian poetry (Fig. 2) The queen rides a dappled galloping horse, readying to release a hawk perched on her right hand to its prey. Other birds are seen soaring in the skies above. There are three female attendants in the foreground. The first (on the left) is carrying a spear in her right hand, while a recently acquired bird is held in her left hand; the second in the centre is holding two birds; and the third attendant (on the right) is carrying a bow and quiver full of arrows. The figures stand out against an olive-green background with overcast cloudy skies, implying the romantic season of *basant* (springtime).

On the back of the painting are Persian couplets eulogizing the queen:

humāyūn fiṭrat wa ‘ālī muruwwat
jahān rā zīnat-o ham zeb o daulat

waḥīd-ě-dahr zātat-o maḳḥzan-e jūd
karāmī manzilat bā shān-o-shaukat

Her nature is of a royal / she is of an excellent elevated stature
She is the ornament of the world / its beauty and its wealth
You are unique in eternity (one of a kind) / You are the repository of generosity
You are of marvellous (high) stature / with grandeur and magnificence

The couplet praises the queen’s generosity and grandeur while invoking the imagery of birds. The first verse begins with *humayun*, a term meaning royal and connoting auspiciousness. Humayun is also the name of Chand Bibi’s mother, Khunza Humayun, so the poet could be referencing her as well. *Humayun* is also linked to *huma*, the mythical bird of pre-Islamic Iran, which became an important symbol in courtly and popular traditions of the Persianate-Islamic world, from the Ottomans to the Mughals. The *huma* is a magical bird that never touches the ground and is perceived to be a “happy omen”. *Huma* and *humayun* are interrelated, because the *huma* is an auspicious sign of sovereignty. It is believed that every head the *huma* flies above will wear a crown, for if its shadow falls on a person, they are fated to rule. This bird is a stock feature of

Persian poetry. [2]

In the last verse about Chand Bibi, the poet invokes *wahīd-ē-dahr*, which means one of a kind in eternity. It also refers obliquely to the phoenix-like bird. *Wahid* means to be alone, unique, single and singular, and *dahr* refers to time. Thus, *wahīd-ē-dahr* can also be translated as the “phoenix of the age”.

The *huma* bird contains two genders. It is a motif that also travels across time and space. Both aspects come together in Chand Bibi’s imagery, which reflect masculine and feminine ideals. While the motif of the queen as a falconess originated in the Deccan, it spread across Hindustan.

Several of these paintings depict other female figures around the queen, who are engaged in hunting and warfare. According to one account, “Chand Bibi’s entire *zenana* formed a government of their own in Ahmadnagar.” [3] The women of her court included:

astrologers (*munajjim*), narrators of the Hadith (*muhaddis*), jurists (*fuqaha*), memorizers of the Quran (*hafiz*), scribes (*munshi*), sculptors and painters (*musawwar*), physicians and philosophers (*hakeem*), impersonators and actors (*behroopay*), tailors and seamstresses (*khiyat*), goldsmiths (*zargar*), tune modulators (*aahan gar*), story-tellers (*qissa goh*), singers (*raag-goh*), dancers (*raqqas*), food-tasters (*chaashni geer*), accountants and clerical officers (*muttasaddi*), ministers (*vazir*), military payroll and paymasters (*bakhshi*), court-reciters as well as petitioners of official documents (*arz-begi*). [4]

The harem has been mythologized as a passive, immobile space, yet this list reveals a wide range of occupations held by women of the royal *zenana*. Besides courtesans, there also existed female courtiers “moving from court to court to gain patronage” with “their destinations dictated by news of generous rulers” which “disseminated through webs of transregional personal networks”. One such woman from Iraq invited Chand Bibi’s brother Murtaza to the royal camp, impressing him with her intellectual abilities.[5] The episode is one of many, characterizing the mobility of peoples, including women, across the Deccan and the broader Persianate world.

The list of Chand Bibi’s female entourage goes on:

while riding, Chand Bibi would be accompanied by seven hundred women, and amongst those women, were elephant drivers and mahouts (*feel-baan*), camel drivers (*shutur-baan*), caravan

drivers (*kaar-vaan*), wood-keepers (*daar-baan*), perimeter watchers (*chop-daar*), servers (*khidmat gaar*), retinue and water attendants (*jaleb-daar*), contract officers, revenue collectors (*ahdeh-daar*), armed spear-bearers (*nezah-bar daar*), water-handlers (*aab daar*), collectors (*jaamadaar*), and fire-making porters (*kaangaaar*). As for the remaining women: one hundred were accoutred in chain mail armor, one hundred were soldiers in decorated metal armor (*chiltah-posh zari*), one hundred were guards and huntresses with hunting equipment (*qaraaval vali*), and one hundred were archers (*teer-andaz*). About four hundred women in armor and men's clothes used to be present. [6]

It was not unusual that Chand Bibi's retinue included armed women. *Urdubegis* were regularly retained within Indo-Muslim military forces to escort the *zenana* and guard male rulers as well. They "were partially" or "not at all veiled".[7] Moreover, in some contexts, the royal harem itself was quite mobile. For instance, early Mughal emperors were constantly on the move, which made the harem a part of a "peripatetic world". As historian Ruby Lal points out,

everyday activities were constructed in ways that make it difficult to tie them exclusively to any strict, well-defined domain such as the *haram*, the family, or private life...the limits of the domestic life in the context of Babur and Humayun's peripatetic lives are more in flux, more fluid and indefinable than in the later more settled times of Akbar or Jahangir. [8]

The *zenanas* of the Deccan Sultanates were far more mobile than in the Mughal north. As local, non-imperial frontier states, the Deccan Sultanates were surrounded by the Mughal, Portuguese and Vijayanagara empires, against whom they fought and with whom they aligned at various times. The Deccan Sultanates also fought frequently between themselves, constantly shifting between capitals, forts and carrying out battles upon the rugged terrain. Female seclusion was never total or complete. Succession disputes and factional court politics enabled women in the Deccan to make a bid for sovereign power. Chand Bibi's power is exemplary, rather than exceptional.

Several powerful Muslim women in the Deccan held state power and fought militarily. In Bijapur, women of the Adil Shahi dynasty such as Dilshad Agha and Bibiji Khanum "dressed as men, clad in armour, with boys and arrows in their hands" while protecting the boy king Ismail from rivals in 1510. [9] The Portuguese described one Adil Shahi woman, "about 65 years of age, little of stature...and much valued for her prudence, wit, and courage, for in a man's habit...on horseback with bow and arrow she followed the army like an Amazon, and gained reputation." [10] In a 17th-

century letter from Burhanpur, noblewomen Fatima Shah and Zuhra Shah, requested funds, property and military assistance. They were inside a fortress which was under a military siege. The women were securing property not only for themselves, but for “the people inside the citadel under [their] care.” [11]

The subject of Chand Bibi’s female entourage inspired a number of paintings, such as one from Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu dated to the 19th century (Fig. 3). The painting features several women in the foreground. Equipped with weapons, some are riding while others are hunting. Meanwhile, the male retinue is relegated to the background and remains only partially visible on the horizon. At the centre, Chand Bibi charges ahead upon her horse with her falcon.



Fig. 3: “Chand Bibi, with two court ladies”, c. 1800, Tanjore. Company painting. Archer, Mildred. ‘Company Paintings: Indian Paintings of the British Period’ V&A, 1992, p. 54.

The imagery of Chand Bibi with a falcon persisted well into the 20th century, such as the cover of a 1965 play by Vazir Hasan about Chand Bibi. The image is in the style of the modern painter, Abdur Rahman Chughtai (1894-1975), who was influenced by Mughal miniature painting and developed a uniquely Islamic nouveau art style that was popularized in literary Urdu magazines from the 1930s through the 1960s.



Fig. 4: Artist unknown. Cover. Hasan, Vazir. *Chand Bibi Sultan*. Hyderabad: Deccan Urdu Academy, 1965.

By the mid-20th century, Chand Bibi and other medieval and early modern Muslim queens were invoked in reform debates about *purdah* in middle-class Muslim society, such as in 1949, in an Urdu news daily based out of Hyderabad. In response to an article titled “Purdah Mauzun Nahin” (“Purdah is not Mandatory”), a woman taking up the pro-*purdah* stance wrote to the editor claiming that “Chand Sultana was able to accomplish whatever she did, while remaining in *purdah*.”[12] Here, Chand Bibi was celebrated as an ideal model of women’s skills and achievements, while also invoked to justify the social practice of Muslim women’s covering.

Birds in the Islamic Cosmological Imagination

The significance of the falcon and its associations with Chand Bibi and female power deserves further attention. Falcons and other birds have long captured the imagination of Sufi mystics and poets. The falcon soars into the heavens, free, returning to the outstretched hand of its master when summoned, as described in the poetry of Jalaluddin Rumi. [13] The poet frequently invoked the

falcon or the hawk as the symbol of a high-born soul. Birds often accompanied emperors on hunts, which also provided an important context for visualizing sovereignty. In her study of the hunting ground (*shikargah*) which became a popular feature in 18th-century paintings, Shaha Parpia has argued that for the Mughals, it served as “a sophisticatedly designed landscape that reflected the prevailing political, social, and cultural worldviews, a site capable of exhibiting kingship...and engendering spirituality and knowledge”. [14]

Birds, real or imagined, were frequently invoked as images in paintings and in poetry, of not only the Mughals, but the Deccan Sultans, as inheritors of Islamic traditions of storytelling and spirituality. In fact, the Deccan Sultanates had long been steeped in Persianate and Islamic cultural traditions, given the migration of Persian emigres to the Deccan. Both wild birds as well as those raised by sovereigns, harkened to the exemplary and legendary rule of King Solomon, or the Prophet-King Suleiman. Suleiman is well-known in the Islamic ecumene, for his power to communicate with animals and with the nebulous creatures known as the *jinn*.

An incident narrated in Chapter 27 of the *Quran*, titled “Sura al Naml (The Ants)”, provides explicit links between sovereignty, queenship and birds. The verses refer to the correspondence exchanged between King Suleiman and Bilqis (otherwise known as the Queen of Sheba) via the *hud hud* or hoopoe bird. [15] Feminist scholars have offered an interpretation of these verses, seeing in Bilqis a model of female sovereignty. They claim that more than Suleiman, it is she who embodies the virtues of *rahma* (mercy) and justice.[16] They also argue that the verses demonstrate Bilqis’s humility, respect and leadership skills as superior to those of Suleiman, who is faulted for his arrogance, anger and rashness.

Early interpreters of these verses had already drawn similar conclusions. In his commentary on this incident in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Ibn ‘Arabī notes that the queen’s handling of the letter from Solomon demonstrates her superiority and worthiness to rule. Such attributes, along with her willingness to embrace true faith (Islam) when challenged (unlike other figures such as the Pharaoh), can also be interpreted as constituting a Quranic model for beneficent and wise female leadership and governance. [17] According to Amina Wadud, this story of Bilqis “celebrates both her political and religious practices”. She adds that “while there are many negative male leadership figures, no such women exist” and that “Bilqis is depicted extremely well in the Qur’an. Other than the prophets, she is the only ruler who is given favourable consideration. The Qur’an refers to her characteristics

of wisdom and independence as a leader.” [18]

By the 14th century, the Persian poet Fariduddin Attar, inspired by the Quranic story, composed *Mantiqut-Tayr* or *The Conference of the Birds*. It is one of the preeminent Sufi texts, as an allegory for the Sufi path to righteousness and towards the guided path towards union with God, as presented in the responses by different and distinct birds. *Mantiqut-Tayr* presents multiple birds as allegories, for people on a spiritual quest. It includes the falcon who is exemplified for its reasoning, while criticized for its arrogance. The falcon was a pliable symbol.

The figure of Bilqis occurs in Persianate paintings from the period of Chand Bibi’s own lifetime. In one 1590 Qazvin style painting from the Safavid empire, Bilqis is shown reclining next to a flowing stream, writing a letter that the *hud-hud* bird will deliver to Solomon on her behalf. [19] Depicted alone, she looks at bird, while herself dressed in a miraculous robe that contains depictions of a hoopoe and other birds and animals, alluding to her own potential mastery of these species.

This theme occurred in the paintings of the Deccan Sultanate courts as well. A late-17th-century work from Golkonda depicts the ascension of Suleiman, surrounded by female angels and yoginis, some who support the monarch’s throne as a *simurgh* (a mythical bird from Persian literature) flies above. [20] Another Deccan painting from 1780, depicting a meeting between Suleiman and Bilqis, features a vast coterie of jinns, birds and animals, ranging from large elephants to tiny beetles. [21] The sky above them is full of flying birds.

Birds and their association with female monarchical ideals within the Persianate Deccan contexts have been overlooked by historians. Chand Bibi’s iconographic association with the falcon has to do with women’ mobility and power from the sixteenth through eighteenth century. At various times, Chand Bibi’s rule was perceived to be justified by divine and auspicious writ.

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University Press in January 2022. Last year, she travelled to India on a Fulbright, undertaking research towards her second book about Chand Bibi and other female protagonists of the medieval and early modern Deccan tentatively titled, In Search of Chand Bibi: Warrior Queen of India.

Endnotes

[1] To date, I have encountered over two dozen such depictions of Chand Bibi.

[2] The *huma* occurs in the poetry of Sa’adi, as his *Bustan* opens with images of the bird and the ruler in reference to the Prophet’s friend, Abu Bakr. The *huma* is a bird of bliss or happiness, and the poet Hafiz Shirazi compares the shadow of a loved one with the shadow of the *huma*.

[3] M. Abdul Qadir, *Tarikh-e Ahmadnagar* (Bombay: Qutb Khana Taj Office, 1940), 250.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Emma J. Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 74.

[6] Qadir, *Tarikh-e Ahmadnagar*, 251.

[7] Gavin R.G. Hambly, “Armed Women Retainers in the Zenanas of Indo-Muslim Rulers: The Case of Bibi Fatima,” in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage and Piety* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1998), 429-468.

[8] Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 137.

[9] Firishta, Muḥammad Qāsim Hindūshāh Astarābādī Firishta, *History of the Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India till the year ad 1612*, trans. John Briggs, 4 vols. (Calcutta: Editions Indian, 1966), Vol 3: 23-24.

[10] Jorge Flores, *Unwanted Neighbours: The Mughals, the Portuguese, and their Frontier Zones* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 181.

[11] Farman., Gol Gumbaz Museum, Bijapur [Accession No. 125 (B-70)].

[12] Siasat, Hyderabad. November 10, 1949. Siasat Archives, Hyderabad, India.

[13] Playing on the double meaning of *baaz*, the Persian word for falcon also means “to come

back” (*baaz ayad*). Rumi sees the falcon as the noble soul that returns from its earthly exile to God (the falconer) when it hears the call of His drum. For more on this, see Paul Waldau and Kimberley Christine Patton, eds., *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 172.

[14] Shaha Parpia, “Reordering Nature: Power Politics in the Mughal Shikargah,” *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, 7, no. 1 (2018): 39-66.

[15] Sura 34 of the *Quran* takes her by the name of Sheba. Moreover, the invocation of the hoopoe as a bird of wisdom occurs in various Mediterranean cultures both before and after Islam. It has also been argued that the “Islamic world did not develop an independent tradition of literature and folklore related to hoopoes, but drew upon and continued pre-existing ancient and late antique traditions.” See Timothy Schum, “From Egypt to Mount Qāf: The Symbolism of the Hoopoe in Muslim Literature and Folklore,” *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 3, no. 1 (2018): 37-57.

[16] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40.

[17] Seyyed Hossain Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E.B. Lumbard, Mohammed Rustom, *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation and Commentary*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers). 2015. 27: 32-33. 933.

[18] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 89.

[19] Image from the British Museum: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1948-1211-0-8.

[20] Navin Kumar, “Deccani Paintings,” https://www.navinkumar.com/content/books/india1983/5_deccani.html.

[21] “The Queen of Sheba and King Solomon with Attendants,” Deccan, Central India, c. 1780, <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6335944>.

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