



## Tracing the Narrative(s) of Cultural Heritage: A study on Razia Sultan's Abandoned Tomb

**Mr. Vivek Raipuria**

Independent Researcher

Email: [vivekraipuria786@gmail.com](mailto:vivekraipuria786@gmail.com)

---

### Abstract

This paper examines the contested resting place of Razia Sultan, the first female Muslim ruler of Delhi (1236-1240), focusing on the site in Bulbuli Khana, Old Delhi, amidst competing claims in Kaithal and Tonk. Razia Sultan's ascension was historically significant not only due to her gender but also her non-traditional lineage, subverting prevailing power structures. Her reign was marked by progressive policies, including gender-neutral attire and the establishment of secular educational institutions, yet faced strong opposition from Turkish nobles and the religious establishment, culminating in her defeat and death in 1240. The research explores the physical characteristics of the Bulbuli Khana site, detailing the graves, prayer area, and surrounding urban environment. Through a qualitative approach, including observations and conversations with the mosque's Maulana and a regular worshipper, the study highlights the site's local maintenance, limited visitor capacity, and the prevailing local belief in its authenticity despite historical ambiguities. The abstract concludes by reflecting on the emotional disconnect surrounding neglected historical monuments like Razia Sultan's tomb, advocating for renewed societal engagement with these integral components of shared heritage, regardless of historical uncertainties or the absence of modern recreational appeal.

**Key Words:** Cultural Heritage, Razia Sultan's Tomb, Bulbuli Khana.

---

### Introduction

Before examining the tomb of Razia Sultan, it is pertinent to establish an understanding of her significance, as this research has revealed a potential lack of universal familiarity with her historical figure. Razia Sultan holds the distinction of being the first female Muslim ruler,



governing Delhi as its Sultan from 1236 to 1240. This ascension marked an unprecedented assumption of power for a Muslim woman. She was the fifth Mamluk Sultan and one of the few female rulers in the extensive history of Islamic civilizations globally.

Historical accounts suggest that Razia rejected the title "Sultana," which she perceived as denoting "wife or mistress of the Sultan," and instead asserted the title "Sultan," underscoring her position as the sovereign head of state. Razia's accession to the throne is of profound historical importance, not solely due to her gender, but also because she did not originate from the traditional nobility. Her lineage traced back to Turkish Seljuk slaves, and their rule constituted the Slave Dynasty. Consequently, her reign represented a significant subversion of prevailing power structures on multiple levels. Following the death of Qutb-ud-Din, Iltutmish garnered support from the Turkish nobility of the time and became the first Sultan of the Slave Dynasty. In his later years, Iltutmish designated his daughter Razia as his successor, a decision that defied historical precedent, driven by his assessment of her superior efficiency and suitability for governance compared to her brothers. Shams-ud-Din Iltutmish passed away on April 30, 1236. Despite his prior appointment of Razia as his heir, the existing Muslim nobility vehemently opposed the notion of a female Sultan. Consequently, political pressure groups ensured the elevation of her brother, Rukn ud Din Firoz, to the Sultanate. However, his tenure as ruler proved markedly unsuccessful, culminating in the assassination of both Ruknuddin and his mother, Shah Turkan, within six months, in November, as a result of a court conspiracy.

Razia ascended to power on November 10, 1236, assuming the throne with the formal title of Jalal-ud-din Razia. As a ruler, she departed from traditional Muslim female attire, including the veil, and adopted gender-neutral clothing akin to that worn by male rulers before her. This abandonment of the veil was met with disapproval from orthodox Muslims and the religious establishment. Demonstrating her authority, Razia commissioned the minting of coins bearing the inscription "Sultana Razia, daughter of Shamsuddin Altumish." Her governance also exhibited secular characteristics, as evidenced by her establishment of numerous educational institutions and public libraries. Alongside Quranic instruction, she emphasized a broad spectrum of contemporary education. These institutions also



incorporated the study of traditional scientific and literary works from diverse cultures beyond the Islamic tradition.

However, her ascension to the Sultanate was not accepted by the Turkish nobles, who viewed a female ruler as an affront to male warriors and the nobility. During her reign, rumours circulated regarding her close relationship with one of her Abyssinian slaves, Jamaluddin Yaqut. Her adversaries exploited this association to undermine her reputation by propagating allegations of a romantic affair. Yaqut was killed in the conflict between Razia and Altunia, leading to Razia's imprisonment in Leila Mubarak in Bathinda. Ultimately, Malik Ikhtiyar-ud-din Altunia, Razia's childhood friend, reconciled with her, and they were subsequently married.

### **Controversy**

Determined to reclaim her kingdom from her brother with the support of her husband, Razia engaged in conflict but was defeated and subsequently fled Delhi. It is believed that she was ambushed, looted, and killed by accomplices of her brother in October 1240. Following her death, the location of Razia's grave or mausoleum has become a subject of considerable debate and legend. Consequently, individuals seeking to pay homage to her final resting place are confronted with the challenge of ascertaining its precise location. Numerous individuals and historians posit that Razia's grave is situated on Manas Road in Kaithal, Haryana. Others contend that it is located in Tonk, Rajasthan, while some assert that Razia Sultan's grave is in Bulbuli Khana, Old Delhi.

Dr. Syed Sadiq Ali, a lecturer in Urdu at the Government PG College, Tonk, discovered two neglected graves during a UGC-sponsored field project focused on historical monuments in the region. One of these, situated on a platform approximately eight feet above ground level, has been known locally as "Razia ki Mazar" (Razia's Tomb) for generations. Local tradition holds that the larger of the two graves belongs to Razia, while the smaller one is that of her confidant and alleged lover, Yaqut. Dr. Ali noted that, according to the original Persian text of the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, there was an interval of one lunar month and one day between the date of her defeat (24 Rabi ul Awwal, the third month of the Hijri calendar = October 13,



1240 AD) and her death (25 Rabi ul Akhir, the 25th of the fourth month = November 13). Dr. Ali disputed this chronology, suggesting that Razia fled the battle of Kaithal to Tonk, where she resided in disguise. However, the troops of her brother, Behram Shah, tracked her down, and she was killed in the ensuing battle on November 13. Given her popularity among the inhabitants of Delhi, Shah purportedly ordered her burial in Tonk rather than returning her body to the capital. The 14th-century scholar and traveller Ibn-e-Batuta also recorded that Razia fled after her defeat, stating that she was killed by avaricious peasants and buried on the banks of a tributary of the Yamuna River, according to Dr. Ali. Furthermore, architectural evidence in Tonk lends support to this claim. The tombstone features octagonal carvings and a mihrab characteristic of the Sultanate period's Turkish architectural style. The stones on the 20x20 feet platform are arranged such that the gaps between them spell out "Sultan ul Hind Razia" in Arabic calligraphy. Dr. Ali detailed these findings in an interview with "India Today."

In contrast, the site in Kaithal presents as a ruin amidst fenced fields, with fragile bricks easily crumbling upon touch. Notably absent is any signage from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). A well is situated near the ruins, its depth unknown. The area surrounding the ruins is overgrown with vegetation, and local accounts suggest the presence of snakes and scorpions. This description is based on the researcher's assessment of available images of the site. However, the primary focus of this paper will be Razia's grave or mausoleum located in Bulbuli Khana, Delhi, setting aside the claims regarding Tonk and Kaithal.



Razia's resting place in Bulbuli Khana, Source: The Hindu



## Structure

Upon approaching the purported tomb of Razia Sultan, situated beyond the Quran Mahal shop, the unassuming nature of the structure initially belied its significance as the final resting place of Delhi's first and only female ruler. Confirmation of this monument's association with Razia Sultan was only ascertained upon observing inscriptions in English ("RAZIA SULTAN'S TOMB") and Hindi ("Sultan Razia ka Maqbara") on adjacent stones. Regrettably, the inscriptions were partially illegible due to weathering, wear, and bird droppings. However, the inscription indicating that the compound was formerly known as Rani Shazia ki Dargah was discernible. A blue painted iron board erected by the ASI bore the white painted inscription: "This monument has been declared of national importance under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act 1958 (24 of 1958)."

The lane, approximately seven in width, leading to the mausoleum, which occupied an area of about 100 yards, was enclosed by four- and five-story buildings. These adjacent residences exhibited a variety of features: some with air conditioning units in their windows, others with laundry drying, some with exposed electrical wiring, some with vacant or closed windows, some with iron window grills, and the outer walls of many were painted in blue and white. Observing the immediate surroundings while still in the lane, a black bicycle was parked nearby, and pigeons hovered in the vicinity. Subsequently, a decision was made to enter the tomb. After removing footwear, the researcher passed through a door with iron bars, entering the tomb of Razia Sultan. At the time of entry, three individuals were present: a worshipper, a child (the son of the mosque's Maulana situated within the tomb complex), who was sweeping, and the researcher.

The tomb itself was open to the sky. Upon entering, the researcher's attention was immediately drawn to three graves situated on the right side. Two larger graves, constructed of aged stones, were positioned adjacently, while a smaller grave, likely belonging to a child, was also present. Several prayer caps and empty earthen bowls were placed on the larger graves, possibly used for providing water to birds. The researcher lacked the means to accurately measure the dimensions of the graves and deemed it inappropriate to attempt estimation using hand measurements.



Having not yet engaged in conversation with anyone present, the researcher observed the surroundings. Immediately upon entering the gate, a designated area for wuzu (ablution) was located on the right. This area comprised three black plastic water tanks, beneath which were two long, slab-like stones facing each other. Seven taps, connected to the black tanks, were situated in front of these stones. Significant moss growth was evident in the wuzu area. A white electric board was positioned adjacent to the wuzu area, and directly in front of it was a small white stool, presumably used by the Maulana's son after sweeping.

Subsequently, the researcher examined the area designated for namaz (prayer). This space featured neatly arranged carpets and mats, some spread out and others stacked. A brown painted cooler was also present, with several plastic namaz caps placed on top, and a fan was affixed to the wall. A plastic water filter was located just to the right of the cooler. Small speakers were positioned in the corners where walls met. Numerous framed Urdu inscriptions and calendars (both Urdu and English) adorned the walls. In the central part of the mosque, where a dark blue carpet was laid, a stool was placed. Next to the stool was a table on which several Urdu books were kept. A framed picture of the Kaaba in Mecca hung above this table, leading to the assumption that this was the usual seating place of the Maulana. To the left of this area was a board displaying multiple clocks, each showing a different time, and the inscription “Shahi Masjid Razia Sultana”. Further to the left was another board listing the prayer times for each Namaaz. To its left, near the door, two fire extinguishers were placed. Having extensively explored the premises, the researcher noted the absence of any prior interaction with the individuals present. Shortly thereafter, the Maulana of the mosque arrived, and the worshipper who had been offering Namaaz concluded their prayer.

The subsequent section details the conversation between the Researcher and a Namaazi (Muhib) who had come to pray, and the Maulana of the mosque (Maulana Tauheed). While the conversation may appear somewhat informal, this linguistic approach was intentionally adopted to foster a comfortable environment conducive to candid responses from the interviewees.



## Conversation

Researcher: Sir, could you please state your name for the record?

Muhib: My name is Muhib.

Researcher: Do you regularly come here to offer namaz?

Muhib: Yes, my grandfather's residence is in this vicinity.

Researcher: So, you currently reside at your grandfather's house?

Muhib: No, I lived here during my childhood. I now reside with my wife and children on Lodhi Road, but I remain a resident of this locality. I was born here, and my grandfather's house is adjacent to this site. I continue to visit my uncle and friends here.

Researcher: This location must attract a significant number of worshippers for namaz?

Tauheed: As you can observe, the prayer space is limited, accommodating a maximum of thirty to forty individuals. This is the current capacity.

Researcher: Could you please inform me about the maintenance and care of this site?

Muhib: A mosque committee oversees the site. Personnel from the ASI also visit, and the Imam Sahib primarily manages the daily upkeep.

Researcher: Sir, what are the parameters of your responsibilities here?

Tauheed: My duties involve leading the five daily Namaaz prayers, instructing on prayer practices, and ensuring the cleanliness of the premises in my capacity as the Imam.

Researcher: Sir, do tourists frequent this location?

Tauheed: Yes, tourists do visit, including foreigners. Bloggers and content creators also come here. It is a diverse group of visitors.

Researcher: Do foreign tourists express surprise upon seeing this site?



Tauheed: They are appreciative that it is a trust and that the remaining structure has been maintained to some extent, given its current state, which they perceive as its destiny.

Researcher: Mr. Muhib, are you satisfied with the current level of maintenance at this site?

Muhib: Yes, we are content. The site is well-maintained. As you can see, it is clean, and the brickwork is stable. Please observe for yourself.

Researcher: Indeed, I am observing. However, I note that if a comparable historical figure, the first and last such influential female Muslim ruler, existed elsewhere, particularly abroad, her tomb would likely be significantly larger and maintained with considerable grandeur.

Tauheed: Her demise was tragic. It is recounted that her identity as Razia Sultan was only confirmed later, as she was attired in a soldier's uniform at the time of her death. Consequently, the tomb was constructed to the extent and in the manner that circumstances allowed.

Researcher: Whose are the other graves present here? And which of the two larger graves is believed to be Razia Sultan's?

Muhib & Tauheed: Determining with certainty the individual occupant of each grave is not possible.

Interrupting the exchange, Maulana Tauhid's son indicated a specific grave, stating, "This one." This was the left-most of the two larger graves upon entering through the iron gate.

Tauhid: (Laughing) If the boy indicates it, then that must be it, according to local belief. It is generally said that this is Razia's grave. Regarding the second large grave, some speculate it belongs to her brother, others to her sister Shazia, and some suggest it is Yakut's. Allah knows best; definitive knowledge is lacking. The identity of the occupant of the third, smaller grave remains unknown; it may be a child's.



Muhib: Yes, it is said that during the establishment of Delhi by Ghyasuddin, eighteen to twenty villages were acquired for the city's settlement. Bulbulikhana was one such village, and its designation included the information that the tomb of Razia Sultana was located here.

Researcher: I see. Were you also a student of history?

Mohib: (Laughing) No, no, my academic background is in political science. However, when a historically significant site is in close proximity to one's residence, it is imperative to learn its history.

Researcher: Some accounts suggest that the actual grave is situated in Tonk or Kaithal. What are your perspectives on this?

Tauheed: No, the authentic grave is here. Given the historical presence of the government in Mehrauli, it is logical that her final resting place would be here. The Gayebana, the prayer recited in absentia after a funeral, and the act of symbolically giving soil, may have occurred in Kaithal or Tonk.

Mohib: All historians assert that it is located here, and the ASI board is also present at this location only.

Researcher: What are the opening hours of this site?

Tauheed: The site remains open; Fajr prayers are offered at 5:30 in the morning. There is no reason for it to be closed. Were it not for the mosque, it might close at 6:30 in the evening. Generally, the site is well-managed. A watchman from the ASI also visits, and occasionally officers come as well.

Researcher: Sir, as I mentioned, the site itself is very clean. However, the approach lanes were quite narrow, and in some areas, there was refuse and unpleasant odours.

Mohib: To provide a comparison, the old cities of Italy and France often have lanes as narrow or even narrower than these. The primary difference lies in their maintenance and



street lighting, which are superior to what we see here. You are aware of the general conditions in our country; what can be said? We advocate for the entire Delhi 6 area to be designated a heritage city, as it is a unique place globally.

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting on the visit to Razia Sultan's tomb in Delhi, a definitive emotional connection remains elusive. There is a sense of lament that her grave remains unroofed, yet a simultaneous appreciation for the preservation of what endures. The question of authenticity persists, as the exterior appearance does not definitively reveal the truth of its occupant. To address this uncertainty, Mrinalini Rajagopalan's book, recommended by my teacher, offered insight, particularly its introduction, which referenced the work of cultural theorist Sara Ahmed. Ahmed posits that affect operates as an emotional economy, where emotions transcend private feelings and circulate within and through numerous bodies, both human and non-human. Similarly, Gregory Siegworth and Melissa Gregg argue that affect is experienced and managed in an intermediate state, a realm of reactions, intensities, and emotional charges that pass between entities, be they human, non-human, objects, or essences. Beyond mere emotion or reason lies a motivation for emotional or intellectual response. The emotions, the Navras, once perhaps associated with Razia Sultan's tomb, appear to have dissipated.

In the 1949 Shri Shankar Prasad case, the court stated, "In so far as the victory of the British is a historical fact, monuments can serve as a reminder of our own weaknesses in the past and can serve as a good historical lesson to those who visit them." This underscores that every monument inherently presents a multitude of emotions, contingent upon the visitor's intent to understand them. Foucault argues that modern bureaucracy transformed documents into monuments, and in colonial India, monuments were transformed into documents. Given the perceived unreliability of Indian history, often relegated to biography or folklore, colonial experts privileged historical architectural objects as the primary stable sources from which to extract data about India's past. To some extent, this approach persists today, with attempts to comprehend monuments through documents and photographs. While photographs offer a form of understanding, firsthand observation is preferable. Contrary to any assertion of the absence of visual records, Zahid Chaudhary has traced the affective content of colonial



photography in India, arguing that early European photographs of colonial subjects functioned beyond mere documentation, capturing sensory desires such as morality, shame, and sexual curiosity on the photographic surface. Numerous monuments in Delhi and across India, such as Razia Sultan's tomb, are being overlooked or treated as silent historical artifacts. It is imperative to understand the reasons behind this neglect. Activists such as Ann Pamela Cunningham in the US, renowned for preserving George Washington's residence at Mount Vernon, were pioneers in this regard, recognizing the destructive impact of rapid urbanization and industrialization in the 19th century on the historic fabric of cities. Romila Thapar has traced a similar historiography for the Somnath temple in western India, spanning from medieval to modern times, highlighting the enduring symbolic and political contestations surrounding this particular monument. The declining status of historical monuments is not solely the responsibility of government or institutions, but a collective societal concern. It is the researcher's conviction that elevating the standards of neglected monuments and historical objects necessitates a reconnection with them on an emotional level, regardless of the nature of those emotions. Whether love or aversion, such engagement, devoid of harm, is crucial, as all extended pluralism ultimately leads towards "Ekam Sad Vipra Bahudha Vadanti" (Truth is one, sages describe it variously). The current condition of Razia Sultan's tomb, and countless other forgotten monuments, prompts the question: Is it due to the absence of recreational spaces like gardens, the lack of ornate architectural style conducive to photography, the absence of associated religious controversy, or the lack of captivating myths or ghost stories? The precise location of Razia Sultan's final resting place, whether in Bulbuli Khana, Kaithal, or Tonk, remains a matter of historical debate. While this uncertainty persists, it should not be considered inconsequential. Indeed, such historical ambiguities should not serve as a justification for a diminishing public interest in historical monuments. Rather, it is imperative to recognize the inherent significance of these structures as integral components of our shared heritage. Cultivating an understanding of their importance in present and future generations is essential to ensure their respect and preservation.



## References

- Minhaj-i-Siraj, Abu-'Umar-i-'Usman (1873). The Tabakat-i-Nasiri. Translated by Major H. G. Raverty. London: Asiatic Society of Bengal
- K. A. Nizami (1992). "The Early Turkish Sultans of Delhi".
- Chandra, Satish, "History Of Medieval India"
- Rajagopalan, Mrinalini, "Building Histories: The Archival and Affective Lives of Five Monuments in Modern Delhi"
- Chaudhary, R. Zahid, "Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-century India"
- Thapar, Romila "Somanatha, The Many Voices of History"
- Nayak, Arora Meena "Razia: A Dust Storm in Delhi"

## Web Sources

- Smith, R. (2018, February 5). Mystery of grave. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/society/history-and-culture/mystery-of-a-grave/article22657037.ece/amp/>
- Haeri, S. (2020). Razia Sultan of India: "Queen of the World Bilqis-i Jihan." In Cambridge University Press eBooks (pp. 106–138) <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316389300.005>
- Mishra, S. (2012, May 6). Raziya Sultan was actually buried in Tonk, claims Professor Syed Sadique Ali. India Today. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/raziya-sultan-was-buried-in-tonk-professor-syed-sadique-ali-101293-2012-05-05>