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## From Medieval to Contemporary Times: The Harmonious Legacy of Malerkotla and Begum Munawwar-ul-Nisa

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### ABSTRACT

Malerkotla, a diminutive yet historically notable princely state in Punjab, India, is distinguished by its legacy of interfaith harmony. This research paper explores the heritage of Malerkotla. It examines the role of the last Begum Munawwar-ul-Nisa of Malerkotla in promoting peace and tolerance, especially during the tumultuous period of India's partition in 1947 AD, and her legacy as a royal woman in contemporary India. This study analyses the Begum's role in preserving communal harmony and sustaining Malerkotla's distinctive heritage of inter-religious unity through oral histories, documentary evidence, and on-site observations. Her endeavours present a persuasive case study of female leadership within a princely state and exemplify the resilience of intercultural connections during crises.

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### **Introduction**

Despite the extensive scholarship on the partition of India and princely states, the role of Malerkotla's last Begum in promoting interfaith harmony remains underexplored. Existing studies primarily focus on the Nawabs or broader communal dynamics, neglecting the Begum's significant contributions. Furthermore, partition historiography often lacks a gendered perspective, overlooking female leadership in fostering peace. Oral histories, interviews with the Begum and local people, and archival

records related to the Begum are rarely synthesised, leaving gaps in understanding of her influence on Malerkotla's unique peaceful stance during partition. Comparative analyses of Malerkotla with other princely states are also limited, necessitating focused research on this exceptional case of harmony.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Archival documents and primary and secondary historical texts were reviewed to track the origins of Malerkotla's brotherhood and communal harmony, focusing on important events such as Nawab Sher Mohammed Khan's protest of the execution of Guru Gobind Singh's sons and the begum leadership during Partition.
2. In-depth interviews were conducted with local elders, royal family descendants, and community members. Oral testimonies from Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu residents provided insights into the Begum's initiatives and the broader socio-cultural dynamics of Malerkotla.
3. Field visits to Malerkotla included observations of its cultural landmarks, such as the 'Mubarak Manzil' palace, local gurdwaras, and Sufi shrines, which symbolise the interfaith ethos.

## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MALERKOTLA'S COMMUNAL HARMONY

Malerkotla, a Muslim-majority state, was established in 1454 A.D. by Sheikh Sadruddin-i-Jahan from Afghanistan and was ruled by his Sherwani descendants. The State of Malerkotla was established in 1600 A.D. The name Begum Munawar-ul-Nisa held a particular resonance in the region, as she was



no ordinary royal but rather a princess who was the rightful heir to the legacy of Nawab Sher Mohammad Khan of Malerkotla. Begum Munawwar ul Nisa was the third wife of Muhammad Iftikhar Ali Khan Bahadur, a descendant of Nawab Sher Muhammad Khan. She was also known popularly as 'Begum Sahiba' and lived alone in the twilight of her life in the dilapidated palace called 'Mubarak Manzil'.

The roots of communal harmony date back to 1705, when Sahibzada Zorawar Singh and Sahibzada Fateh Singh, nine and 7-year-old sons of 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, were ordered to be



bricked alive by the governor of Sirhind, Wazir Khan. His close relative, Sher Mohammed Khan, Nawab of Malerkotla, who was present in the court, lodged a vehement protest against this inhuman act and said it was against the tenets of the Quran and Islam.<sup>1</sup>

Dr Mohammad Idris, a professor of the history department of Punjabi University, said, “Nawab Sher Mohammad Khan has a significant contribution to Sikh and Punjab history as he had written ‘Murasala’, a communiqué to the then Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. This was considered a courageous and rebellious step as Malerkotla was a small princely state in the Mughal Empire. Malerkotla was a state of just 32 villages. “He had written in the letter that the execution of ‘Chhote Sahibzadas’ was against the principles of Islam. While citing the Quran, he had stated that Islam did not permit the execution of innocent children,” said Dr Idris.

Despite this, Wazir Khan ordered the Sahibzadas to be subjected to torture and bricked into a part of the wall while they were still unconscious. As a form of protest, the Nawab of Malerkotla removed himself from the courtroom. As soon as Guru Gobind Singh became aware of this compassionate and humanitarian attitude, he blessed the Nawab and the people of Malerkotla, wishing for the city to be a place where peace and happiness might prevail. As a result of this act, the state of Malerkotla did not experience any violent incidents throughout the partition process. It continued to be a solitary haven of composure. Malerkotla has been able to transcend tensions and overcome the strains of violent events such as the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 or the riots in Gujarat in 2002. This has occurred throughout successive moments of communal conflict in India. Those occurrences that have the potential to precipitate violence and social strife often serve as the motivation and the pretence for such disputes.

The oldest Hindu site in town is the Dera of Baba Atma Ram, a Bairagi sadhu from the Neem Margi sampraday (group). A robust local tradition asserts that Atma Ram and a Muslim saint, Shah Fazl, placed the foundation stone of Kotla in the mid-seventeenth century at the behest of the Nawab. This gesture provides a literal foundation for Malerkotla's pluralism and open society.<sup>2</sup>

There are numerous Hindu organisations in Malerkotla. It is clear from state records that the Hindu Mahasabha was active in Malerkotla in the 20s and 30s but is no longer active." Hindu extremist groups have long been discouraged in Malerkotla. For example, the last Nawab declared the RSS an "unlawful body after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, a former member of the RSS."<sup>3</sup>



*Figure 1- Mubarak Manzil*

### **MALERKOTLA- A HERITAGE FOR COMMUNAL HARMONY**

The narrative of Malerkotla's establishment closely resembles the myriad Sufi stories throughout North India. According to local belief, in about 1450 CE, an Afghan adventurer named Bahlol Lodi (1451-1517 CE) embarked on a military campaign to seize Delhi from the Sayyid dynasty, who had governed the city since the conclusion of Tughlaq rule. En route, he and his troops were engulfed by a formidable sandstorm. In the ensuing darkness, Bahlol Lodi observed the faint glow of a lamp in a shack, persistently illuminated despite the fierce wind. He sought shelter in the hut, where he encountered an elderly Sufi saint, Sheikh Sadruddin-i-Jahan. The Sheikh blessed Lodi, proclaiming his impending victory, which subsequently materialised. Bahlol Lodi vanquished the Sayyids and founded the Lodi dynasty, which governed Delhi until the arrival of the emperor Babur in 1526. In 1454, Bahlol Lodi bestowed the jagir of 'Maler' to Sheikh Sadruddin-i-Jahan and his heirs, who governed it until India's independence in 1947. During 1657, Nawab Bayazid Khan reportedly preserved the life of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, who subsequently conferred the authority to construct a fort or 'Kotla' at that location. This is the origin of the town's name, 'Maler-Kotla'. Just next to the palace stands Fatehgarh Sahib Gurdwara, on land donated by the Nawabs. It is a reminder of the royal family's unique connection with the Sikh Gurus. Named 'Ha Da Nara' ('Voice of Justice') Gurdwara, it commemorates Nawab Sher Mohammad Khan's decision to walk out in protest against Wazir Khan's decision to sentence Guru Gobind Singh's young sons to death in 1705, an incident famous in Sikh history as Ha Da Nara.<sup>4</sup>



*Figure 2 Gurudwara Fatehgarh Sahib, Sirhind*

The boys were barely seven and nine, and Mohammad Khan had stood up for them, taking on Wazir Khan in public and then putting himself in the line of fire by walking out of the royal court in protest. Though the boys couldn't be saved, Guru Gobind Singh was so grateful that he gave the Nawab a kirpan (a small, symbolic sword worn as an article of faith by Sikhs). Since then, Malerkotla has been immortalised in Sikh history. The main gate at the Fatehgarh Sahib gurdwara, built to mark where the Guru's sons lost their lives, is named after Sher Mohammad Khan, who built on the land he gave to Sikhs.

Guru Gobind Singh died from a stab wound in Nanded in the Deccan region of central India. Not long before his death, he met a Hindu Bairagi, Madho Das, who attached himself to the Guru. Adopting the name Gurbaksh Singh, the former Bairagi became more widely known as Banda Singh Bahadur when he gave up the path of renunciation and took up arms for the Guru. Following Guru Gobind Singh's death, Banda Bahadur (1710-12) and a large army of Sikhs briefly conquered sizeable areas of Punjab, but he did not approach Malerkotla. Whereas other Muslim principalities, such as Sirhind, the scene of the martyrdom of the Guru's sons was razed to the ground, Malerkotla was spared. Although any number of reasons could explain this, Iftikhar Ali Khan, the last Nawab of Malerkotla, declares in his history of the kingdom (as do many residents) that Banda did not attack the otherwise somewhat vulnerable state out of respect for Nawab Sher Mohammad Khan's defence of the two sahibzadas.<sup>5</sup> Another key event that happened in 1872 was the Namdhari movement. Namdhari records indicate that the assault on Malerkotla stemmed from their resistance to British occupation, the



slaughter of cows by both the British and Muslims, and the veneration of saints. Contemporary Namdhari literature neglects the Muslim contribution to later events, instead focusing on British imperialism and rigid discriminatory laws as the catalysts for their aggression. Mainstream Sikh historians argue that the organisation sought firearms and that Malerkotla was vulnerable and an accessible target at that time. The British, not unexpectedly, portray the Namdharis as radicals requiring subjugation. The 1904 British Gazetteer states, "The zealots known as Kukas assaulted Kotla, resulting in the deaths of several residents and the looting of homes." Nawab Iftikhar Ali Khan's History, composed in the late 1940s, tells a radically different account. The head of the movement, Baba Ram Singh, is characterised as a "sensible man" who resisted the attack because Malerkotla had received blessings from the Guru.<sup>6</sup>

Sikh separatist politics and the repressive Indian governmental response led to a long period of terrorism in Punjab during the 1980s and early 1990s. The violence and tension significantly impacted Sangrur District (where Malerkotla is located), but Malerkotla itself was left mainly unscathed.

### **THE ROLE OF THE BEGUM THROUGHOUT THE PARTITION OF INDIA**

The 1947 partition of India signified one of the most brutal and harrowing epochs in the subcontinent's history, resulting in millions of displacements and innumerable fatalities due to the subsequent communal violence. Malerkotla's tranquil position was an aberration in an area of religious conflict. Some residents attribute the peace at Partition to the brave leadership of the Nawab and the vigilance of the kingdom's army. Others claim that due to the blessing of Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikhs spared Malerkotla. Still, others believe that Haider Shaikh and the many other saints buried in Malerkotla were collectively responsible for preserving the kingdom. These explanations contribute to Malerkotla's collective identity as a place of *bhaichara* and a zone of peace.

As a Minister of Law and Order, Sardar Balwant Singh faced a very tedious situation during the Partition days. In the words of Sardar Sahib himself:

At the time of the partition of India, about one lakh Muslims from other areas of Punjab took shelter in the Malerkotla State. Not to speak of riots, even a single killing did not take place in the whole State. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs lived like brothers, having harmonious relations among themselves with the grace of the Almighty and the Blessings of Guru Gobind Singh Ji. All the Muslims converged at Malerkotla and were safely sent to Pakistan with the



assistance rendered by Sardar Patel, the then Home Minister of India. On our request, he sent one battalion of the Army to help our army send them to the Pakistan border.<sup>7</sup>

Historian Gurinder Singh Mann points out that Malerkotla's peace during partition was an "exceptional testament to leadership rooted in shared historical respect" and that Begum's outreach to the community "reflected both her strength as a leader and the legacy of interfaith unity cherished by her family." Singh highlights that, as a Muslim woman in a Muslim-majority state, the Begum's proactive efforts were particularly courageous during a time when emotions and violence ran high in much of Punjab. Residents recall her appeals for calm, invoking the legacy of Nawab Sher Mohammed Khan's respect for Sikh values as a reminder of the shared history and humanity between the communities.<sup>8</sup>

An interview by Balwant Singh, a historian in Punjab, highlighted the Begum's interfaith efforts. As he stated, no Muslim, Hindu or Sikh got harmed during the partition. He says Sikhs gather annually and revere Sher Muhammad Khan for his bravery. Every day in the morning, refugees used to arrive. The wounded were given medical facilities. The Begum made it her mission to mediate between the Sikh and Muslim communities. Village landowners provided shelter to Muslim refugees.<sup>9</sup>

An interview with a local old age Muslim man said -we would have fled to Pakistan if there was any reason to do so. The government of India returned all the property to Punjabi Muslims that had been seized. In the mayhem of partition, the Government of India advertised that all the Muslims who wished to remain in India would get their property back. All my property was returned to me. What do I want from Pakistan? This is my land.<sup>10</sup>

### **THE BEGUM'S ENDURING LEGACY AND THE SPIRIT OF UNITY IN MODERN-DAY MALERKOTLA**

The Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee has declared February 4 as the day for honouring the last descendant of Nawab Sher Mohammed Khan for the role the family played in raising their voice against the atrocity committed by the Mughals on the sons of Guru Gobind Singh.

Mohammed Mehmood, the Begum's attendant, who takes care of the minutest requirements in her old age at this palace, recalling the moment when officials came here to honour Begum Nisa, says, "On February 4 afternoon, the SGPC secretary Simarjit Singh and the historic Gurudwara Fatehgarh Sahib Manager Bhagwant Singh and some other SGPC officials reached. The 'Mubarak Manzil' and met Begum Munawwar ul Nisa. They met and honoured her duly.

Offering that the supreme institution of the Sikhs and the entire Sikh community is indebted to her forefathers, she can reach out to them without any kind of hesitation or trouble.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 3 : Funeral of a begum performed by Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims.

Sikhs were instrumental in ensuring Begum Munawwar-ul-Nisa's last days were dignified, and respectful, and carried on Malerkotla's history of interfaith tolerance. Sikh people and organisations came to her to provide spiritual and emotional support, honouring her efforts to maintain interreligious harmony in a more divided society. Reflecting the great trust and mutual respect developed over decades, many Sikh households had strong relationships with her. In her contacts, especially at times of national crisis like the Partition, the Begum used the shared history of Malerkotla as a reminder of the links binding many groups.

Begum Nisa had then told *The Indian Express* over the phone, *Meri akhiri ichchha, aap keh sakte ho, yahi hai ke main iss mahal ko pehle ki tarah jagmagata chorr kar jayun.* (My last wish, you can say, is to see the palace return to its pristine glory before I die).<sup>12</sup>

Her final days were a reminder of the profound influence of her leadership, even in simplicity. The Begum's life and her enduring presence until the end inspire future generations to uphold justice, harmony, and coexistence. She was laid to rest near the last nawab's grave in Shahi Maqbara near Sirhindi gate. Her funeral was attended by Amargarh MLA Professor Jaswant Singh Gajjanmajra, Malerkotla MLA Jameel-ur-Rehman, ADGP (ITBP) Harpreet Sidhu and Malerkotla deputy commissioner Dr Pallavi Chaudhary. Among the mourners on Friday was a Sikh family from Ludhiana, who were close to the begum.



## CONCLUSION

The legacy of Malerkotla, as a symbol of interfaith harmony, exemplifies the ever-lasting principles of tolerance, compassion, and mutual respect. Begum Munawar-ul-Nisa, the final begum of Malerkotla, exemplifies the significant influence of female leadership during tumultuous periods, especially the Partition of India in 1947. Her endeavours to facilitate dialogue across communities, offer sanctuary to displaced persons, and maintain community harmony exemplify the need for inclusive leadership. The Begum drew upon the historical history of Nawab Sher Mohammed Khan's resolute opposition to injustice, aggressively using common cultural and spiritual traditions to unite and bridge gaps.

The account of Sikh-Muslim unity in Malerkotla transcends mere historical narrative; it serves as a significant lesson for contemporary society and the future. In a world marked by growing polarisation, the steadfastness of Malerkotla's communal harmony stands as a symbol of hope and an exemplar of coexistence. This unity surpasses simple tolerance, embodying profound mutual respect grounded in common principles of justice, compassion, and humanity. This also illustrates the efficacy of local leadership and grassroots initiatives in addressing the challenges of prejudice and division. Figures such as Nawab Sher Mohammad Khan and the Begum of Malerkotla exemplify the capacity of individuals and institutions to take moral stances that create enduring legacies.

In the contemporary landscape where communities contend with fragmentation, the insights gleaned from Malerkotla serve as a poignant reminder of the significance of historical consciousness, shared accountability, and the cultivation of empathy. The achievement of interfaith unity in Malerkotla compels us to transcend religious and cultural distinctions to pursue our shared humanity. This serves as an imperative to cultivate harmony, comprehension, and equity within our multifaceted communities, demonstrating that even in the face of conflict, cohesion is achievable and enduring.

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