

# Women and Power in the Slave Dynasty: The Reign of Razia Sultan

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## Abstract

The reign of Razia Sultan (1236–1240 CE) represents a significant yet often contested episode in the political history of the Delhi Sultanate. As the only woman to rule the Sultanate in her own right during the period of the Mamluk Dynasty (Delhi), Razia's accession challenged deeply entrenched gender norms within a political system dominated by military elites and patriarchal traditions. This paper examines the relationship between gender and political authority through an analysis of Razia Sultan's rise to power, her methods of governance, and the circumstances that led to her downfall. It explores how Razia sought to legitimize her authority by adopting the political symbols and responsibilities traditionally associated with male rulers, including public leadership, military command, and administrative control. At the same time, the study investigates the resistance she encountered from the Turkish nobility, whose political dominance and social attitudes limited the sustainability of her rule. By situating Razia Sultan's reign within the broader context of aristocratic power struggles and gender expectations in medieval India, this research highlights both the possibilities and structural constraints of female sovereignty in the early Delhi Sultanate. The case of Razia Sultan thus provides valuable insight into the complex intersection of gender, authority, and political legitimacy in medieval South Asian history.

**Keywords:** Razia Sultan, Delhi Sultanate, Gender and Power, Mamluk Dynasty (Slave Dynasty), Medieval Indian Politics

## Introduction

The emergence of Razia Sultan as the ruler of the Delhi Sultanate in 1236 CE represents one of the most striking episodes in the political history of medieval India. In a political culture deeply shaped by patriarchal norms and military aristocracy, the accession of a woman to the throne was both extraordinary and controversial. Razia Sultan, the daughter of the powerful Sultan Iltutmish, remains the only woman to have ruled the Sultanate in her own right. Her brief but eventful reign (1236–1240 CE) not only challenged established gender hierarchies but also exposed the fragile balance of power between the monarchy and the influential Turkish nobility that dominated the early administration of the Sultanate under the Mamluk Dynasty (Delhi), commonly known as the Slave Dynasty.

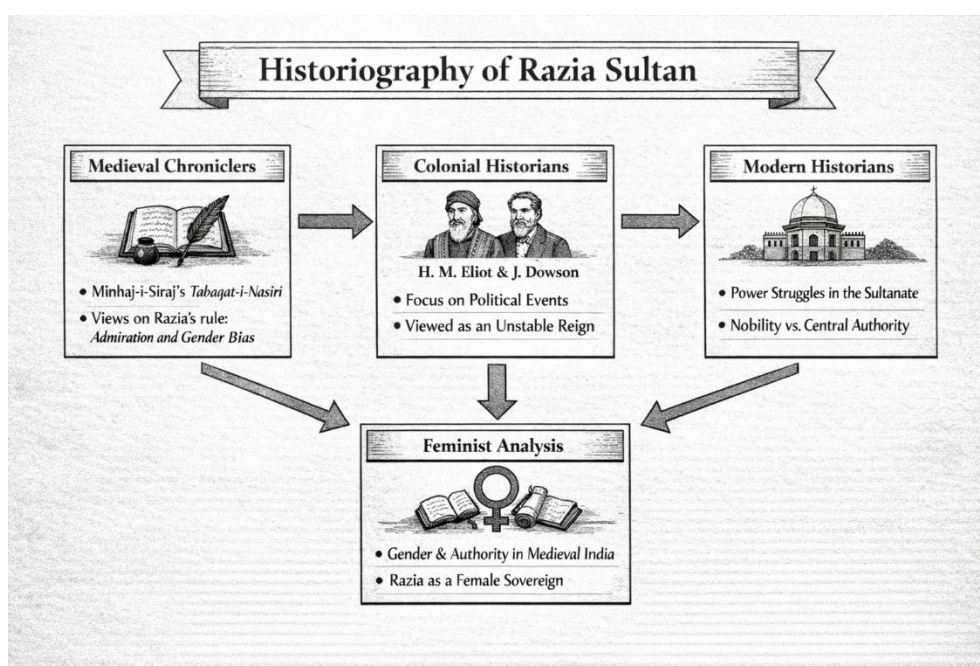
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The political environment in which Razia rose to power was shaped by the consolidation of the Delhi Sultanate during the early thirteenth century. Following the establishment of Muslim rule in northern India by rulers such as Qutb ud-Din Aibak, the Sultanate evolved into a centralized political system supported by a powerful class of Turkish slave-nobles. These elites, often referred to as the *Chahalgani* or “group of forty,” played a crucial role in state administration and military affairs. While this aristocratic structure strengthened the state, it also created tensions between the Sultan and the nobility, especially during moments of succession. Within such a rigid political framework, the idea of a female sovereign was widely regarded as incompatible with established traditions of governance and authority.

Despite these prevailing norms, Iltutmish reportedly recognized Razia’s administrative capability and political intelligence and nominated her as his successor. Contemporary chroniclers suggest that she had already demonstrated competence in managing state affairs during her father’s absences. Nevertheless, after Iltutmish’s death in 1236 CE, the Turkish nobles rejected his decision and instead placed his son Ruknuddin Firuz on the throne. His ineffective leadership, however, soon led to administrative disorder and widespread dissatisfaction. This instability ultimately created the conditions that enabled Razia to gain support and ascend the throne, marking a rare moment in medieval Islamic and South Asian political history where merit briefly superseded rigid gender expectations.



Once in power, Razia Sultan attempted to assert her authority in ways that directly challenged established gender norms. She adopted the title and responsibilities of a sovereign ruler rather than governing from behind the veil, appearing unveiled in public court, leading military expeditions, and participating actively in administrative decisions. Such actions were not merely symbolic; they represented deliberate strategies to legitimize her authority within a political culture that equated sovereignty with masculine ideals of leadership and military capability. However, these same strategies also intensified resistance among the Turkish

nobility, who perceived her policies and her efforts to limit their influence as threats to their political dominance.

### **Historical Background**

The political circumstances that shaped the rise of Razia Sultan cannot be understood without examining the formation and consolidation of the Delhi Sultanate during the early thirteenth century. The Sultanate emerged as a powerful political entity in northern India following the decline of earlier regional powers and the expansion of Turkic military rule. The foundations of this state were laid by Qutb ud-Din Aibak, a former slave and general of Muhammad of Ghor, who established independent rule in Delhi in 1206. His reign marked the beginning of the Mamluk Dynasty (Delhi), also known as the Slave Dynasty, which ruled from 1206 to 1290. This dynasty was characterized by the dominance of military elites who had risen from the institution of military slavery, a system in which capable individuals could attain high administrative and political positions through loyalty and service.

Although Aibak laid the foundation of the Sultanate, it was under the rule of Iltutmish that the Delhi Sultanate truly consolidated its power and administrative structure. Ascending the throne in 1211, Iltutmish strengthened the central authority of the monarchy and expanded the territorial boundaries of the Sultanate. He successfully suppressed regional rebellions, secured recognition from the Abbasid Caliphate, and introduced administrative measures that stabilized governance. One of the most significant features of his rule was the organization of a powerful group of Turkish nobles known as the *Chahalgani*, or the “group of forty.” These nobles were trusted military commanders and administrators who played a crucial role in governing the empire. While this group initially helped maintain political stability, their growing influence eventually created a powerful aristocratic class capable of influencing succession and royal authority.

Succession within the Delhi Sultanate often proved unstable because political legitimacy depended not only on dynastic inheritance but also on the support of powerful nobles and military commanders. Unlike hereditary monarchies with clearly established traditions of succession, the early Sultanate frequently witnessed disputes over the throne. Such instability became evident toward the end of Iltutmish’s reign. Recognizing the weaknesses of his sons and the administrative abilities of his daughter, Iltutmish reportedly nominated Razia as his successor. His decision was highly unusual, as political authority in the Sultanate was almost exclusively associated with male leadership, particularly in military affairs. Nevertheless, Iltutmish’s choice reflected a pragmatic recognition of Razia’s capability rather than adherence to conventional gender expectations.

Despite this nomination, the Turkish nobles were unwilling to accept a female ruler after Iltutmish’s death in 1236. Instead, they elevated his son Ruknuddin Firuz to the throne. Ruknuddin’s short reign soon revealed his lack of political competence. Real authority was largely exercised by his mother, Shah Turkan, whose harsh policies and factional politics alienated many sections of the court and the public. Administrative neglect and internal conflicts weakened the stability of the Sultanate during this period.

The political dissatisfaction created by Ruknuddin's rule eventually opened the way for Razia's emergence as a viable alternative. Supported by sections of the nobility and the populace of Delhi, she was able to claim the throne later in 1236. Her accession marked a remarkable break from established norms of governance within the Slave Dynasty.

### **Rise of Razia Sultan**

The accession of Razia Sultan to the throne of the Delhi Sultanate in 1236 CE was the result of a complex interaction of political crisis, popular support, and her own administrative competence. Unlike many rulers who inherited authority through uncontested dynastic succession, Razia's rise occurred within a contested political environment dominated by powerful Turkish nobles and military elites. Her accession therefore represented not merely a dynastic transition but also a significant challenge to the traditional assumptions about gender and sovereignty that prevailed within the ruling structure of the Mamluk Dynasty (Delhi).

The immediate circumstances that enabled Razia's rise were closely connected to the failure of the reign of Ruknuddin Firuz. After the death of Sultan Iltutmish in 1236, the Turkish nobles ignored his earlier nomination of Razia and instead placed Ruknuddin on the throne. His rule, however, quickly proved ineffective. Rather than actively participating in governance, Ruknuddin devoted much of his attention to personal pleasures and delegated authority to his mother, Shah Turkan. Her political actions, particularly the harsh treatment of rival members of the royal family and administrative officials, generated widespread resentment among both the nobility and the general population of Delhi. This discontent soon created an atmosphere of instability and opposition within the capital.

It was during this period of political turmoil that Razia demonstrated both political awareness and strategic leadership. Historical accounts suggest that she appealed directly to the people of Delhi, exposing the misrule of Ruknuddin and his mother while emphasizing her own legitimacy as the chosen successor of Iltutmish. By addressing the public and presenting herself as a capable and just alternative ruler, she successfully mobilized support against the existing regime. The resulting rebellion led to the removal of Ruknuddin from power and the elevation of Razia to the throne later in the same year.

Once she assumed authority, Razia adopted the title of "Sultan" rather than the more gendered term "Sultana," which was commonly used to refer to the wife or consort of a ruler. This choice was politically significant, as it signalled her determination to be recognized as a sovereign ruler rather than a symbolic female figurehead. Razia also made deliberate efforts to perform the public roles traditionally associated with kingship. She appeared unveiled in the royal court, wore attire similar to that of male rulers, and personally presided over administrative and judicial matters. These actions were not simply personal choices but calculated political strategies intended to reinforce her legitimacy in a system where authority was closely linked to visible demonstrations of power and leadership.

However, Razia's rise also intensified tensions within the ruling elite. The Turkish nobles who had initially accepted her accession largely did so out of political necessity rather than genuine support for female rule. Many of them remained uncomfortable with the idea of a woman

exercising direct political authority and feared that her attempts to strengthen royal power would reduce their influence in the administration. Consequently, while Razia's accession represented a remarkable achievement in overcoming the barriers of gender and aristocratic resistance, it also marked the beginning of a period of political confrontation between the Sultan and sections of the powerful nobility.

### **Razia Sultan's Exercise of Power**

After ascending the throne in 1236 CE, Razia Sultan faced the formidable task of consolidating authority within the politically complex structure of the Delhi Sultanate. Her reign unfolded in a context where royal authority depended not only on dynastic legitimacy but also on the cooperation of powerful Turkish nobles who dominated the administrative and military hierarchy of the Mamluk Dynasty (Delhi). Recognizing these challenges, Razia pursued a series of administrative, political, and symbolic measures intended to strengthen central authority and establish her legitimacy as a sovereign ruler.

One of the defining aspects of Razia's governance was her effort to reduce the excessive influence of the Turkish aristocracy in state administration. The political system of the early Delhi Sultanate had allowed elite military commanders considerable autonomy in provincial governance, which often weakened the authority of the central ruler. Razia attempted to counter this tendency by appointing officials based on loyalty and competence rather than solely on aristocratic lineage. By diversifying the administrative elite and promoting individuals outside the dominant Turkish nobility, she aimed to create a more balanced political structure that would reinforce the power of the monarchy.

Among the most discussed appointments of her reign was that of Jamal-ud-Din Yaqut, an Abyssinian officer who was elevated to an important position within the royal court. His rise symbolized Razia's willingness to challenge the established dominance of the Turkish nobles. However, this decision also intensified opposition among the aristocracy, who viewed the promotion of non-Turkish officials as a threat to their privileged status. Consequently, what may have been intended as an administrative reform soon became a focal point for political rivalry and resentment within the court.

In addition to administrative reforms, Razia sought to legitimize her authority through active participation in the public and military functions of kingship. She presided over court proceedings, addressed petitions, and supervised the functioning of the state bureaucracy. More significantly, Razia personally led military campaigns against rebellious governors and provincial leaders who challenged the authority of the central government. By taking on these responsibilities, she demonstrated that her rule was not merely symbolic but firmly rooted in the practical duties expected of a Sultan.

Equally important were the symbolic strategies through which Razia projected royal authority. She adopted the title "Sultan," deliberately avoiding the title "Sultana," which traditionally referred to a ruler's wife rather than a sovereign. Razia also appeared unveiled in public audiences and wore attire similar to that of male rulers, including a tunic and headgear associated with royal authority. These actions were designed to align her image with the

conventional expectations of kingship, which in medieval political culture were closely associated with masculine ideals of leadership, courage, and justice.

Despite these efforts, Razia's policies gradually deepened tensions with sections of the Turkish nobility. Many aristocrats perceived her attempts to strengthen central authority and promote new officials as direct challenges to their power. Their resistance was fuelled not only by political concerns but also by social attitudes that questioned the legitimacy of female rule. As a result, the very strategies Razia used to establish her authority ultimately contributed to the emergence of organized opposition within the ruling elite.

### **Gender and Authority**

The reign of Razia Sultan provides an important perspective for examining the relationship between gender and political authority in the early Delhi Sultanate. Medieval political structures in both Islamic and South Asian contexts were overwhelmingly patriarchal, with leadership closely associated with masculine ideals of military strength, public authority, and control over administrative institutions. Within this framework, the presence of a female ruler was highly unusual and often regarded with scepticism by the political elite. Razia's rule therefore not only represented a dynastic development but also challenged deeply entrenched assumptions about the nature of sovereignty and gender roles in medieval society.

In the political culture of the Mamluk Dynasty (Delhi), authority was strongly tied to the military aristocracy, particularly the Turkish slave-nobles who formed the core of the Sultanate's ruling class. These elites believed that effective governance required martial capability and direct participation in warfare—qualities that were traditionally associated with male rulers. As a result, Razia's accession was viewed by many nobles as incompatible with the established traditions of kingship. Their resistance was not solely political but also rooted in prevailing social attitudes that questioned the legitimacy of female authority in public life.

Despite these constraints, Razia Sultan consciously attempted to redefine the boundaries of female leadership. Rather than ruling from behind the palace walls or acting through male intermediaries, she adopted the visible and active role expected of a Sultan. She held open courts, addressed administrative matters personally, and appeared before her subjects without the veil that traditionally symbolized female seclusion. By presenting herself publicly as a ruler rather than a secluded royal woman, Razia sought to reshape perceptions of authority and demonstrate that effective governance was not inherently limited by gender.

Razia's leadership style also reflected a deliberate effort to align herself with the political norms of kingship. She adopted the title "Sultan," emphasizing her position as the sovereign authority of the state. Her participation in military campaigns and her presence in public ceremonies reinforced this image of royal power. These actions were crucial in a political system where the legitimacy of a ruler depended on visible demonstrations of leadership and the ability to command both administrative and military institutions.

The tension between Razia's authority and prevailing gender norms illustrates the broader limitations faced by women in positions of political power during the medieval period. While her competence allowed her to briefly overcome these barriers, the structural realities of

aristocratic politics and patriarchal attitudes ultimately constrained the sustainability of her rule. Nevertheless, Razia Sultan's reign remains historically significant because it demonstrated that female leadership was possible even within highly restrictive social and political systems.

### **Fall of Razia Sultan**

The decline and eventual fall of Razia Sultan illustrate the fragile nature of political authority within the early Delhi Sultanate. Although Razia had demonstrated administrative capability and determination in governance, her position remained vulnerable due to persistent opposition from powerful sections of the Turkish nobility. The same aristocratic elite that had initially tolerated her accession soon began to challenge her authority as her policies increasingly threatened their political influence.

One of the major factors contributing to the growing conflict between Razia and the nobility was her effort to restructure the administrative hierarchy. By promoting officials based on merit rather than aristocratic background, Razia attempted to reduce the dominance of the Turkish slave-nobles who had traditionally controlled key positions in the government. The elevation of Jamal-ud-Din Yaqut, an Abyssinian officer, to a prominent role within the royal court became a central point of controversy. Many Turkish nobles interpreted this appointment as a direct challenge to their authority and privileges. Rumours and accusations regarding Razia's relationship with Yaqut were circulated within the court, further intensifying hostility toward the Sultan and undermining her political position.

The tensions between Razia and the Turkish nobility soon escalated into open rebellion. Provincial governors and influential nobles began organizing resistance against her rule, taking advantage of the widespread dissatisfaction among the aristocratic elite. Among the most significant figures involved in this opposition was Malik Ikhtiyar-ud-din Altunia, the governor of Bhatinda. Initially one of the officials within the Sultanate's administrative system, Altunia eventually rebelled against Razia's authority, marking a turning point in the political crisis of her reign.

In response to this rebellion, Razia personally led a military expedition to suppress Altunia's revolt, demonstrating once again her willingness to fulfil the traditional responsibilities of a ruler. However, the campaign did not proceed in her favour. During the conflict, Yaqut was killed, and Razia herself was captured by Altunia's forces. This event significantly weakened her authority and allowed the Turkish nobles in Delhi to seize the opportunity to replace her with another ruler from the royal family.

While Razia remained in captivity, the nobles installed her half-brother Muiz ud din Bahram on the throne of Delhi. This decision reflected the determination of the aristocratic elite to restore a political order more favourable to their interests. In an unexpected turn of events, Razia later formed an alliance with Altunia, reportedly through marriage, and attempted to regain the throne by organizing a military campaign against Bahram Shah. Despite this effort, Razia and Altunia were unable to gather sufficient support to challenge the established authority in Delhi.

In 1240 CE, Razia's attempt to reclaim power ultimately ended in defeat. While retreating after a failed campaign, she and Altunia were reportedly killed near Kaithal. Her death marked the conclusion of one of the most remarkable and unconventional reigns in the history of the Delhi Sultanate.

The fall of Razia Sultan highlights the complex interplay of political rivalry, aristocratic resistance, and entrenched social attitudes that shaped the politics of the early Sultanate. Although her reign lasted only four years, the challenges she faced reveal the structural limitations of royal authority in a system heavily influenced by powerful nobles. At the same time, her downfall underscores the difficulties encountered by a ruler who attempted to challenge both political and gender norms within a deeply hierarchical medieval society.

### **Significance of Razia Sultan's Reign**

The reign of Razia Sultan holds a distinctive place in the history of the Delhi Sultanate because it represents one of the earliest and most notable examples of female political authority in medieval India. Although her rule lasted only four years (1236–1240 CE), it had lasting historical importance in shaping discussions about governance, gender, and political legitimacy within the context of the Mamluk Dynasty (Delhi). Razia's reign demonstrated both the potential for capable leadership beyond traditional gender boundaries and the structural limitations imposed by entrenched aristocratic and patriarchal systems.

One of the most significant aspects of Razia Sultan's rule was the way in which it challenged prevailing assumptions about female leadership. In the political culture of the medieval Sultanate, sovereignty was closely associated with masculine ideals such as military strength, administrative authority, and public visibility. By actively participating in governance, leading military campaigns, and appearing before her subjects as a sovereign ruler, Razia directly confronted these conventions. Her adoption of the title "Sultan" rather than "Sultana" symbolized her determination to be recognized not as a royal consort but as the legitimate ruler of the state.

Razia's reign also highlights the complex dynamics of power within the Delhi Sultanate. Her efforts to strengthen central authority and reduce the dominance of the Turkish nobility reflected broader tensions between the monarchy and the aristocratic elite. These tensions were not unique to her rule but were characteristic of the early period of the Sultanate, when the authority of the Sultan often depended on maintaining a delicate balance with powerful military commanders and provincial governors. Razia's attempt to challenge this balance illustrates the difficulties faced by rulers who sought to centralize power in a politically fragmented system.

Another important dimension of Razia's significance lies in the symbolic impact of her leadership. Although her reign was relatively short, it left a lasting impression in both historical narratives and cultural memory. Her story has been remembered as an example of courage, determination, and political intelligence in a society, where women rarely occupied positions of sovereign authority. For later historians and scholars, Razia Sultan became a figure through whom broader questions about gender roles, political agency, and historical representation could be explored.

In modern historical scholarship, Razia's reign is often interpreted as an early example of the struggle between institutional structures and individual leadership. While her personal abilities enabled her to rise above traditional restrictions, the political framework of the Sultanate—dominated by powerful nobles and entrenched social norms—limited the long-term sustainability of her rule. This tension between individual capability and structural constraints forms a key theme in understanding her historical legacy.

### **Conclusion**

The reign of Razia Sultan remains one of the most remarkable episodes in the political history of the Delhi Sultanate. Her accession to the throne in 1236 CE represented a rare and significant challenge to the patriarchal structures that defined medieval political authority. In a society where leadership was closely associated with masculine ideals and dominated by powerful military elites, Razia's rise to power demonstrated that political capability could momentarily transcend traditional gender boundaries. However, her reign also revealed the limitations imposed by entrenched aristocratic interests and social expectations.

Razia's leadership reflected both determination and strategic awareness. By adopting the title of Sultan, appearing in public court, and personally participating in administrative and military affairs, she sought to establish herself as a legitimate sovereign rather than a symbolic female ruler. Her policies aimed to strengthen central authority and reduce the overwhelming influence of the Turkish nobility that had long shaped the politics of the Mamluk Dynasty (Delhi). These efforts illustrate her ambition to transform the nature of governance within the Sultanate and assert the supremacy of the monarchy.

Despite these achievements, Razia's reign was constantly challenged by political opposition. The powerful nobles who had initially accepted her accession remained reluctant to acknowledge a female ruler, and their resistance intensified when her administrative decisions threatened their privileges. The conflict between Razia and the aristocratic elite eventually led to rebellion, political instability, and her eventual removal from power. Her downfall therefore reflects not merely the personal struggles of a ruler but the broader structural tensions within the political system of the early Sultanate.

From a historical perspective, Razia Sultan's reign offers valuable insight into the interaction between gender, authority, and political legitimacy in medieval India. Her experience demonstrates that while individual ability and determination could open the door to leadership, the sustainability of power depended heavily on the support of entrenched political institutions and social norms. The resistance she faced highlights how deeply patriarchal attitudes and aristocratic interests shaped the limits of political authority during this period.

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