

Begum Samru-only Catholic queen of India

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In news—The first week of October is said to mark the **200th anniversary of the completion of the Basilica of Our Lady of Graces**, one of India's minor basilicas situated in Sardhana in Uttar Pradesh.

The Basilica of Our Lady of Graces(church)-

- While she had **constructed a mansion in Chandini Chowk** and another in her independent territory, Begum Samru, **referred to by some as India's only Catholic Queen**, is best **known for building a Catholic church in Sardhana known today as the Basilica of Our Lady of Graces**.
- **It is one of the 23 minor basilicas of India, and the only one in the north**, after the church was bestowed the status by Pope John XXIII in 1961.
- The **architect was an Italian engineer Antonio Reghellini from the city of Vicenza**, and the Begum is said to have incurred a cost of Rs 4 lakh.
- **Completed in 1822, it is commonly believed that the church was built as a replica of St Peter's Basilica in Rome**, however some Historians claim that it was likely based on 'Akbar's Church' in Agra, which had been built as a tribute to the Jesuit missionaries in the emperor's court in 1599.
- **The structure consists of a blend of architectural styles, of Indian and Islamic features added to a European cross-plan church**.
- The **church's domes lie next to large steeples reminiscent of Islamic minarets**, while the central altar contains pietra dura or parchinkari designs that are found in the Taj Mahal and Red Fort.
- The **church helped Begum Samru establish relations with**

Europeans, beyond the networks she had established with the British in India later in her life.

A brief note on Begum Samru(1750's – 1836)-

- Begum Samru was a figure that defied any fixed identity.
- **She was a Muslim who converted to Catholicism, a nautch-girl (dancing girl) who became a warrior and an aristocrat,** and was described by her contemporaries as dressing more like a man than a woman, sporting a dark turban and ever-puffing away at a hookah.
- While **she had first supported the waning Mughal empire, from the 1790's the Begum began to provide service to the rising Marathas, before joining the British** to ensure that she could maintain her landholding rights if they emerged victorious.
- Some sources claim that Begum Samru, birth name Farzana, was born to a second wife of a poor nobleman in present day Meerut, while others claim she was of Kashmiri descent.
- **She spent her early years as a nautch (dancing girl) in a tawaif's (courtesan) kotha (household) in Delhi.**
- It was here **she met Walter Reinhardt, an Austrian mercenary** of uncertain origins and even more uncertain allegiances, who after reaching India in 1750 had served the British, French and Jats, i.e any force willing to employ him.
- While **some accounts suggest he was called Le Sombre due to his serious nature,** other sources claim he took on the name Sommers or Summers, which was Indianised into Samru.
- In **1767, the teenage-Farzana became the much older Reinhardt's close companion,** and remained so until his death, **assuming the role of his wife and became known as Begum Samru.**

Her rise to power-

- **After first fighting in armies against the Mughals, Reinhardt switched sides and began to serve them, for which the emperor Shah Alam II bestowed upon him the jagir (land tenureship) of Sardhana, in present day Meerut district.**
- **Begum Samru accompanied Reinhardt on his military campaigns** and began to play an essential role in managing Sardhana and its land revenue dealings.
- **As historian Durba Ghosh, the Begum had lived among Reinhardt's military force and formed strong relations with his officers.** Thus, **after his death in 1778, they looked to her as his successor,** rather than Reinhardt's son from a woman. She was able to be recognised as such by the Mughal emperor and was **granted all her 'husbands' lands,** thereby becoming not only a commander of a retinue of around 3,000 troops, but also a major landed magnate.
- **In the late 18th century, Delhi faced increasing threats from the rising Marathas, Jats, Sikhs and Rohilas, and the now waning Mughal Empire relied on the support of the Begum** who provided her armies for protection.
- **For her service, she was bestowed the title Zeb-un-nissa by emperor Shah Alam and honoured with a khilat (ceremonial robe).** The title and award brought her into the emperor's inner circle of trusted nobility and she was given a land grant near Delhi.

Her conversion-

- **Three years after Reinhardt's death, Begum Samru, the established ruler of Sardhana converted to Catholicism in 1781** and was christened Joanna.
- **While the reasons for her conversion are unclear, she continued to retain both her names, enabling her to associate with a larger community of Catholics,** as well as to remind her political foes of her military

prohess.

- **Her conversion, did not interfere with her status of a powerful landholder in northern India.**
- Despite her change in faith, the Begum did not forgo earlier practices and norms associated with other religions. **She maintained her Islamic appearance even after conversion**, much to the disappointment of the priest who had baptised her, while simultaneously spending lakhs of rupees on Christian institutions.
- **She held lavish Christmas feasts where she hired dancing girls and musicians for entertainment**, which her European guests recorded with intrigue.
- While Begum was a Christian, **she followed the north Indian practice of not eating with people from other castes and communities**, choosing to puff away at the hookah instead.
- Begum Samru **built one of the largest churches of the time in north India, where she attended Mass every Sunday.**
- At the same time, she dispensed money to her subjects during Eid and celebrated Diwali and Holi, practices that annoyed her resident bishop. Clearly the Begum had no problem cross-cutting between different cultures.