Cosmopolitan Crossings: 
The Architecture of Begum Samru

MRINALINI RAJAGOPALAN

University of Pittsburgh

The Begam usually gives a grand fete, which lasts three days, during Christmas, and to which nearly all leading the society of Meerut, Delhi and the surrounding stations are invited. I have by me one of her circulars: “Her highness, the Begam Sumroo requests the honour of _____’s company at Sirdhana on Christmas Eve at the celebration of High mass and during the two following days, to nautch and a display of fireworks.”

Thomas Bacon was a first lieutenant in the British East India Company, stationed in the military cantonment of Meerut (North India), when he wrote these words. Bacon, likely an Anglican, looked forward to the Christmas festivities hosted by a woman who had converted from Islam to Catholicism. A solemn Mass led by the Irish Reverend John Murray in the Catholic church built by the begum—a title given to a high-ranking woman in Mughal India—would have been followed by decadent banquets and fireworks at the begum’s grand mansion. Other forms of entertainment would have included the nautch—dance performances by Indian women, usually courtesans—for the pleasure of both male and female audiences. Such was the festive ambience in the court of Begum Samru, a woman who had once been a humble nautch girl herself but who, by the time of Bacon’s writing, was the sovereign ruler of the prosperous and powerful territory of Sardhana in North India.

Wealthy ruler, ally to the British and the Mughals, leader of a mercenary army, and benefactor to several Christian institutions, Begum Samru was also a prolific builder. One of her many opulent mansions is represented in a painting made ca. 1820 by the Delhi artist Muhammad ‘Azam (Figure 1). The Household of Begum Samru, which blends elements of Indian art (such as the flattened perspective of Mughal miniatures) with European norms of representation (naturalistic portraiture), belongs to the genre of Company paintings. Such works were created mainly for officers of the East India Companies (Dutch, French, and British) and for Indian elites allied with the rising European powers in the subcontinent.

While the painting is similar in style to others of the Company genre, its subject is remarkable for the time, as the begum is depicted at the center of an entourage of Indian and European officers. The artist’s positioning of Begum Samru in the center of the painting, holding the hookah, signals her authority in this domain. Even more remarkable is the environment that the begum and her all-male retinue occupy. While a large Indian carpet defines the foreground, neoclassical pilasters, pediments, and wide double-paned doors frame the background. The first of many large European-style houses that Begum Samru built and lived in during her life, her mansion in Delhi employed bold European forms such as neoclassical façades, carriage porches, and formal salons, alongside more traditional elements of the Indian Muslim household, such as the zenana (women’s quarters) and the hammam (bathhouse).

In this essay, I argue that the begum’s architectural projects were not merely symbols of her elevated station and rank; rather, they were key instruments through which she consolidated and maintained her political power in nineteenth-century India. More specifically, I analyze the begum’s architecture as a form of strategic cosmopolitanism—a kind of sociopolitical cunning that allowed her to recast the dichotomies between masculine and feminine spaces, domestic and political realms, and European and Indian decor while...
combining local religiosity with global networks of piety. Although Begum Samrū was not the only Indian ruler to deploy cosmopolitan aesthetics to gain favor with European powers, her role as an Indian woman who was both a ruler and a builder merits closer examination. I focus on the begum’s three most ambitious architectural commissions: her mansion in Delhi (built ca. 1815); her last mansion (built 1833–34), located in her territory of Sardhana (60 kilometers northeast of Delhi); and a Catholic church (built 1822–28), also in Sardhana.

This study draws on contemporary debates about cosmopolitanism, a concept that originated with the Stoics, who defined a cosmopolitan as a citizen of the world. The idea found renewed purchase in eighteenth-century Europe, when Immanuel Kant argued for the particular capacity of Enlightenment man to participate in publics outside his own orbit and owe allegiance to humanity as a whole rather than simply to his own community. For Kant, cosmopolitanism was a prerequisite of “perpetual peace” in the world. In these early European articulations, cosmopolitan subjectivity was imagined almost exclusively through a literate male subject whose border-crossing ability and cultural fluency were predetermined by racial and social rank. In addition, like the public sphere of the post-Enlightenment world, the cosmopolitan milieu was imagined as the arena outside the affective realms of the domestic, the private, and the interior.

Recently, scholars have identified a variety of subaltern subjects—migrants, women, children, refugees, and global laborers—as modern cosmopolitans. They have also argued that rather than being the sole purview of enfranchised male elites, cosmopolitanism might be understood as a conditional process of exchange, such as the inevitable frisson between hosts and guests, the convivial communications that maintain neighborliness or a fragile truce between conflicted nations, or the ethical tensions embedded in cultural trespass and political negotiation. Cosmopolitanism as such is not so much an embodied identity as it is a persistent and deliberate communicative strategy between actors as they negotiate difference. Anthropologist Paul Rabinow has gone so far as to suggest that all persons are cosmopolitans, having forever to confront “the inescapabilities and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates,” standing always at a crossroads, living “in-between.” However, it bears
noting that not all persons are equally able to express, create, or deploy their cosmopolitanism for their own benefit. In other words, any analysis of cosmopolitanism must be mindful of the power available to the cosmopolitan subject under study.

For the purposes of this essay, I define cosmopolitanism as the practices that allow any individual to inhabit multiple worlds—be they culturally, racially, aesthetically, or socially antagonistic—while dwelling in one place. These practices of inhabitation are ineluctably linked to and limited by power. While it may be said that First Lieutenant Thomas Bacon of the British East India Company, Begum Samru, and the Reverend Murray, the Irish bishop in the begum’s church—and, indeed, many of the Indian servants who worked in the begum’s court—were all cosmopolitan subjects, their cosmopolitanisms were also calibrated by the degrees and types of power available to them. It is in this vein of cosmopolitanism as exchange, negotiation, and trespass mediated through power that I position the architectural works of Begum Samru. I argue that the begum organized and employed her architecture to demonstrate her ethics as well as the aesthetics of cosmopolitanism—that is, her willingness to engage with difference. In other words, the begum’s architecture was a form of strategic cosmopolitanism.

The Begum

Who was Begum Samru (b. ca. 1750–d. 1836), and how did she come to acquire so much social capital and high political rank in early nineteenth-century India? A woman “distinguished by abilities of no common order and a daring seldom possessed by her sex” was how her contemporary Sir Thomas Metcalfe, British Resident at the Mughal court, described her.9 As with so many other powerful women of earlier eras, few reliable records survive regarding the begum’s birth or early childhood. Most popular histories present her as elite by birth but forced into poverty when her family fell on hard times.10 The begum probably entered a house of courtesans to become a nautch girl in Delhi when she was eleven or twelve years of age. Most popular histories present her as elite by birth but forced into poverty when her family fell on hard times.

The begum probably entered a house of courtesans to become a nautch girl in Delhi when she was eleven or twelve years of age. Most popular histories present her as elite by birth but forced into poverty when her family fell on hard times.

It was in this context of political flux—where each day brought a new reckoning of dominant powers—that the begum’s cosmopolitanism was a vital strategy of diplomacy, negotiation, and political manipulation. Historians have discussed the utility of cultural cosmopolitanisms during this...
scholars have also explored women within prescribed social norms: Buddhist nuns built Buddhist sponsored architectural products to reinforce their positions and social status, and artistic practice. The bulk of this research, recipient or mere consumers of art and architecture, insteadship has rightly resisted the portrayal of women as passive negotiators.

Face-to-face dialogue at a time when “empires were still in negotiation.”12 Similarly, in her history of sexual and familial arrangements between European men and Indian women in early colonial India, Durba Ghosh brings attention to the quotidian, corporeal, and domestic negotiations of empire. Writing specifically of Begum Samru, Ghosh notes her savvy appropriation of “multiple cultural images in order to fashion herself as a Mughal noblewoman, a pious Christian, and a woman of substantial wealth and political power.”13 Ghosh shows that the begum’s political success was fundamentally based on such border crossings and on her confident inhabitations of multiple and often seemingly incongruous milieus. The many acts of sharing and hospitality that defined eighteenth- and nineteenth-century northern India should not, however, be mistaken for sanguine cultural relations or placid political dynamics. Indeed, such cosmopolitan engagements were fraught with political, ethnic, and religious tensions that threatened to, and often did, erupt in violent conflict. The strategic cosmopolitanism of Begum Samru’s architecture should thus be understood as a self-conscious and risky intervention in a volatile context.

Recent scholarship on female patronage in South Asian, Islamic, and East Asian architecture has revealed the agency of women builders and the valuable contributions they made to these regions. Much of this scholarship has focused on the patronage of architecture by royal or elite women who sought to gain political power and social capital through their buildings. For example, the history of elite women building monasteries, churches, and mosques as means of displaying piety and thereby consolidating their roles within patriarchal societies is well documented.14 Another body of scholarship has focused on women as patrons of luxury objects and supporters of new and often experimental art forms.15 Several scholars have also explored women’s strategic appropriation of the domestic realm or the family space as an arena from which to exercise political power and control.16 This scholarship has rightly resisted the portrayal of women as passive recipients or mere consumers of art and architecture, instead presenting them as active creators of cultural spaces, sociospatial etiquette, and artistic practice. The bulk of this research, however, perpetuates the belief that female patrons commissioned architectural products to reinforce their positions within prescribed social norms: Buddhist nuns built Buddhist monasteries to consolidate their role as stewards of their own religious traditions, female pharaohs appropriated existing models of patriarchal authority to secure their own political positions in ancient Egypt.17 Through their patronage these women reinforced the essentialist feminine categories of “mother,” “pious woman,” and “domestic role model” and strategically co-opted each of these in order to stake political claims and gain legal rights.

The architecture of Begum Samru stands in contrast to these examples in that the begum was an outlier to many of the categories available to women at the time. She was never an especially pious woman (originally Muslim, she converted to Catholicism in 1781 but continued to be a friend and donor to the Anglican Church while also celebrating Hindu and Muslim festivals with ardor), nor was she a morally chaste widow (she married once after Reinhardt’s death and was later rumored to have had lovers and close male confidants). She was not a devoted mother (she had no biological children but adopted Reinhardt’s great-grandson toward the end of her life), nor was she a wily whore (although she did little to hide either her past as a dancing girl or her later romantic interests, her rise to power had little to do with her sexual cunning). Instead, it appears that through her architectural projects, Begum Samru was able to inhabit multiple, seemingly incompatible, realms of power and publicity. This was not an architecture of “passing”—that is, one based on the rote recitation of prevailing models of masculine power—but was it an architecture of radical subversion. Instead, Begum Samru’s architecture was the locus of clever and deliberate engagements with cultural, gendered, and racial differences.

The Mansion in Delhi

A map of the walled city of Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi) as it stood in the nineteenth century shows the prominent position and vast scale of the Red Fort—the seat of the Mughal Empire (Figure 2). Other prominent elements of the walled city include the Chandni Chowk, or Moonlit Street, the main commercial thoroughfare that ran east to west from the Lahore Gate of the Red Fort to the Fatehpuri Mosque at the other end of the city; the main mosque of the city, the Jama Masjid, where the Mughal emperor offered Friday prayers (southwest of the Red Fort); and the British EIC Resident’s house and gardens (north of the Red Fort). Located on the Chandni Chowk and equidistant from the British Resident’s quarters and the Red Fort were the mansion and gardens of Begum Samru. The Mughal emperor Akbar Shah II had granted this large estate to the begum in 1806 in recognition of her service. By 1815 the begum had completed the mansion and its adjoining gardens so that early nineteenth-century maps identified the property as bagh Begum Samru, or the estate of Begum Samru. The begum’s estate was remarkable.
not only for its immense size (comparable to the British Resident’s quarters) but also for its proximity to the two major power centers of those controlling Delhi at this time—the EIC and the Mughals. Begum Samru’s sturdy alliances with these two entities, who maintained a cordial but fragile relationship, were inscribed into the contested political geography of Delhi. The begum was able not only to situate herself within close proximity to them but also to project her own power on the Chandni Chowk—the most public thoroughfare in Delhi—through an impressive structure that signaled openness and engagement.18

The main façade of Begum Samru’s mansion faced the Chandni Chowk and was defined by a seven-bay portico framed with Corinthian columns and a curved double staircase leading up from the carriage porch. The north portico to the back of the house was similar, but with twin columns that shared single square bases and Corinthian capitals. The entire house was raised up on a plinth that served as storage for military ammunition while also keeping the house cool in the summer and dry during the rains. This base also helped to increase the visibility of the mansion from the Chandni Chowk and lent a monumental scale to the structure (Figures 3 and 4). By the time this mansion was built the begum had stopped observing purdah (the custom of women veiling when they appeared in the company of men); it was thus of utmost importance that her private residence portray her willingness as well as her ability to participate in a male public sphere. This was communicated primarily by the main (south-facing) façade of the mansion, which several painters depicted as a lively front to the begum’s dwelling and her dealings. For example, in the 1820s an unknown painter created a carnivalesque scene wherein a motley crowd of Europeans and Indians parade down the Chandni Chowk and push through the gates toward the begum’s mansion (Figure 5). The vibrant cast of musicians, sweet vendors, visitors on horseback, and sentries gathered in the mansion’s forecourt dissolves the boundaries between the private and public realms of house and street. Indian guests arriving on elegantly caparisoned elephants meet the carriage of a mysterious visitor escorted by European horse riders. The energetic sociability of the scene reaches its visual climax at the topmost terrace of the mansion, where the begum stands: a lone woman flanked by European and Indian

---

Figure 2 Map of the walled city of Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi), ca. 1850, showing spatial relationships among the Red Fort, the British Residency, and the estate of Begum Samru (created by Dylan Stein, 2017).
men. Her gaze is directed downward to those gathered in her forecourt and beyond on the Chandni Chowk. She participates in this cosmopolitan melee while also establishing herself at a vantage point that lifts her above it. Her mansion appears as an urban pavilion—in its location, layout, and design—that allows her to view and derive pleasure from the spectacle that unfolds below her.

The south façade of the begum’s mansion is also the setting for Muhammad ‘Azam’s painting (mentioned at the outset) showing her entire court gathered there (see Figure 1). The decision to depict the begum and her courtiers in the front portico of the house, such that they are facing the Chandni Chowk, is another indication of how the begum utilized the façade of her mansion as a means to participate in the political sphere of Delhi. This depiction of the begum’s quarters and her court can be compared to a similar Company painting of the begum’s friend and ally David Ochterlony in Delhi (Figure 6). Ochterlony was the first British Resident at Delhi (first tenure, 1803–6; second tenure, 1818–20), and in this image he is dressed in Indian clothes as he watches a nautch, enjoying his hookah while surrounded by his Indian entourage. As with the portrait of Begum Samrū, European traditions of building and decor are evident in the large windows and doors of Ochterlony’s mansion. Despite his dress and other appropriations of Indian culture, Ochterlony’s house accommodates numerous portraits of his English forebears, several of whom seem to look askance at him for having “gone native.”

The painting commissioned by the begum of her household deliberately appropriates many of the tropes of masculine power seen in Company paintings. Like Ochterlony, the begum is shown holding the snake of the hookah—a clear sign of her authority in this setting. While Ochterlony’s importance in his own home is conveyed by the exaggerated scale of his body vis-à-vis the other people in the painting, the begum’s rank is represented by her centrality and the fact that the others (all men) radiate outward from her. The begum’s court as represented here includes her adopted heir, Dyce
Figure 5  Begum Samru’s mansion, Delhi, ca. 1815, south façade, painting ca. 1820 (© The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, AKM484).

Figure 6  Sir David Ochterlony in Indian dress, smoking a hookah and watching a nautch at his house in Delhi, painting ca. 1820 (© British Library Board, Add.Or.2).
Sombre (great-grandson of Walter Reinhardt through his first Indian wife), to her right; George Dyce (father of Dyce Sombre and husband to Reinhardt’s granddaughter Julia Anna) to her left; Jan Sahib (son of George Thomas, an Irish mercenary soldier, a close ally and rumored lover of the begum) to the right of Dyce Sombre; Lalah Gokul Chand (her munshi, or secretary) sitting at her feet taking notes; and her Italian engineer/architect Antonio Reghellini sitting in the foreground to the right in a red coat and blue trousers. In addition to the treasurers, accountants, ministers, and military personnel, the painting depicts several foreign delegates to the begum’s court (the four men seated at a diagonal to the left of center).20

Despite its formal similarities to the Ochterlony painting, the begum’s painting conveys a different message. Rather than depicting her mansion as a space of leisure or entertainment, the painting shows the begum’s home as a place of political and military action (guards, officers, ministers, and advisers arrange themselves respectfully around her) and global connections (as evidenced by her foreign visitors); it also references the begum’s role in communicating with powers outside her immediate domestic realm (her secretary taking notes).21

Unlike Ochterlony’s direct appropriation of male Indian dress, the begum’s sartorial choices straddle genders and both European and Indian couture. She wears a turban under her head scarf and loose trousers of the sort worn by men, while also wearing a more feminine shawl and kameez, or tunic; like her foreign visitors, the begum wears shoes and sits on a chair.22

The mixing of colonial and indigenous motifs seen in the Ochterlony and Samru’s homes was a persistent trope of European expansion in the global South. In the realm of architecture, such cross-pollination has been most thoroughly examined by Anthony King in his history of the bungalow, which proliferated globally as the bungalow. King traces the evolution of the bungalow as a tectonic representation of colonial hybridity—in terms of materials, form, and architectural vocabulary—as well as a site for the social reproduction of empire through the reinforcement of served and servant spaces and racial segregation within the colonial home.23 Jyoti Sharma has referred to the begum’s house as a kotbi, a type of large residence often built by Indian merchants who profited from European trade, later adopted by minor nobility such as the begum. Kotbis borrowed freely from both European and Indian architectural styles, and they became very popular with the newly wealthy and emergent political class in nineteenth-century Delhi.24 Other scholars have called attention to the persistent mixing of races in Indian domestic spaces. In an article on colonial Calcutta, Swati Chattopadhyay argues that despite their aspirations to dwell in spaces that were free of “natives,” colonial officers and their wives were dependent on the labor, counsel, and company of their colonized subjects.25 In these studies, the primary agent of domestic space is always the European colonizer—he or she is the primary inhabitant as well as the organizer of its social and spatial qualities. The architecture of the begum, however, reveals a more tenuous and fluid relationship and a nuanced segregation between European and Indian, master and servant, masculine and feminine. Indeed, the public façade of the begum’s mansion on the Chandni Chowk, the begum’s deliberate staging of herself as a political and diplomatic authority within her residence, and her androgynous clothing choices allowed the begum to subvert established practices of domesticity. Even when she was not physically present in Delhi, the open façade of Begum Samru’s mansion advertised her willingness to cross borders between European and Indian, male and female, ruler and ruled. In other words, the begum’s mansion in Delhi was a form of strategic cosmopolitanism not only because it allowed her to operate within a larger world outside her own local or regional belonging but also because it helped her to frame entirely new terms of engagement with both local and foreign agents.

The Mansion in Sardhana

A few years before she died, the begum commissioned another mansion in her independent territory of Sardhana. This mansion took two years to complete (1833–34) and was much grander than the begum’s quarters in Delhi (Figures 7 and 8).26 In contrast to Delhi, where proximity to the Mughal emperor and the British Resident was key, in Sardhana the begum was the reigning sovereign until her death, and so her mansion served as the administrative center of her territory. It is, therefore, curious that she did not build the new house until near the end of her life. Instead, she spent the major part of her rule in Meerut (the nearby British cantonment town) and in another house likely acquired from the Marathas in Sardhana.27 Unlike the mansion in Delhi, which served as an active space of political negotiations, the begum’s last architectural commission—her mansion in Sardhana—was meant to ensure her political legacy long after her death. In short, this house would serve in posterity as testament to her cosmopolitanism.

As noted previously, in 1803 the begum struck a deal with the British EIC: she would allow the Company exclusive use of her mercenary army in return for sovereignty over her territory of Sardhana. As part of the deal, which was unusual for the time and for a territory as prosperous as Sardhana, the begum agreed that following her death, her territory would become the property of the EIC. Toward the end of her life the begum appealed to her British allies to pass on at least part of her landholdings to her heir, Dyce Sombre, but these appeals were rejected. The only concession the EIC made was to allow the begum to bequeath personal property to her descendants and to the charitable and religious institutions
that she had established. Dyce Sombre had already proved himself unpredictable, lethargic, and politically clumsy. Although the begum could not predict the choices that her adopted son would make after her death, his decadent lifestyle of drinking and promiscuous sexuality, accompanied by bouts of venereal disease, could not have inspired much confidence in a woman whose own adult life had been spent in the strenuous and calculated acquisition of military and political power. The commissioning of such a large house toward the end of her life, ostensibly for the use of Dyce Sombre, was, in fact, an architectural strategy by which the begum would perpetuate her own legacy beyond her death.

The Sardhana mansion carried over many of the formal features found at the house in Delhi. A double-height portico spanned most of its main façade. Like the residence in Delhi, the one in Sardhana was raised on a plinth that served as storage space and as a climatic buffer. Unlike the Delhi mansion, the Sardhana house featured a bowed façade, which exaggerated the building's scale and monumentality (Figure 9). The mannerist staircase, with its bell-shaped curve, led to the central salon, which was flanked by three smaller salons—one to the west and two to the east. A dining hall was on axis with the central salon and led to the south veranda. The other rooms were most likely used as multipurpose spaces, for entertaining during the day and sleeping at night. The begum's large household included Dyce Sombre, his many concubines, his two sisters, and their European husbands, all of whom lived permanently with the begum. Members of her "extended family," such as Jan Sahib, stayed with her for long periods, and a steady retinue of European officers were accommodated when they passed through her territory. A small spiral staircase led to modest-sized bedrooms on the second
The begum's bedroom was on the second floor. A hammam was built into the mansion—a curiosity for the time, when hammams were usually separated from main dwellings. There was also a plumbing system that brought hot and cold water to the baths. The lavish nature of the hammam, with its marble inlays, domed ceilings, built-in mirrors, and painted plaster walls, indicates that it was likely meant as part of the begum's hospitality toward European guests (Figure 11). The guests were shown the hammam during visits, perhaps, or even invited to use it. Either way, it seems likely that, as with the other spaces in the mansion, the bathhouse was created with an eye toward impressing the powerful Europeans who passed through the begum's territory.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the begum's mansion in Sardhana was its collection of approximately twenty-five paintings, several of European officials and some of the begum and Dyce Sombre. These hung in the central hall and two eastern salons. A visitor disembarking from a carriage outside the mansion in 1835 would take the shallow steps to the double-height veranda and enter the semicircular central salon, or “bow” room. Here he would first see a large portrait (8 feet 3 inches by 6 feet 3 inches) of the begum seated on a throne and holding a hookah. To the right were two other paintings of the begum—one showing her with Dyce Sombre as a child and another of her presenting a chalice to the bishop of Sardhana. Interspersed with these imposing pictures were numerous other portraits of the begum's closest associates and members of her court. These included portraits of David Ochterlony, whom the begum considered a brother and named as godfather to Dyce Sombre; Jan Sahib, the half-Irish, half-Indian son of George Thomas; the Armenian Aga Wamus, father-in-law of Jan Sahib; and Antonio Reghellini, the engineer from Vicenza credited with the design of the Sardhana mansion and church. The central salon clearly positioned Begum Samru as the doyenne and matriarch of the territory while also presenting her as part of a pantheon of global actors. As in Muhammad 'Azam's painting of her mansion in Delhi, at the entrance to the mansion in Sardhana the begum appeared as a lone woman in a cast of powerful male characters.

Moving into the eastern salon, the visitor would find a markedly political and masculine ambience. Here the two largest portraits were of David Ochterlony and Dyce Sombre. These were surrounded by smaller pictures of generals in the service of the French and British EIC and of various Indian rulers. Paintings of the two Catholic clergymen who served the church at Sardhana—the Reverend Julius Caesar Scotti from Italy and Father John Murray from Ireland—were also included here. Nested between these was a small painting of Begum Samru receiving Lord Combermere's army during the siege of Bharatpur in 1826, an important victory for the British EIC. The west salon displayed a similar mix of military personnel, although these seem to have been less important figures, such as Colonel Lawton, Quartermaster Rogers, General Fraser of the British EIC, and Colonel Boileau of the French forces, who fought on behalf of the Indian Maratha rulers.

Together, these paintings allowed the begum to stage her domestic space as a political tableau, one where she shared or exceeded the rank and station of her most celebrated European male counterparts. Indeed, when the house was inaugurated on 23 December 1833, the begum appeared on its roof and was greeted with a 101-gun salute. Through such presentations she inserted herself into the masculine sphere of political and military conquest.

That these salons were the primary spaces for the begum to politick with her male counterparts is borne out by the observations of Lady Nugent, wife of General George Nugent, commander in chief of India from 1811 to 1814, who met with her in 1813. On the first evening of their visit at an English officer's residence in Meerut, the begum was astonished to see the ladies retire en masse to the drawing room after dinner, leaving the men to discuss political and military matters in private. The next evening at the begum's own residence in Meerut, Lady Nugent observed that the “begum usually sits with the gentlemen, and lets the ladies retire without her, after dinner; but when I gave her the option, out of civility, she came to the drawing room. I was told this was intended as a great compliment.”

The begum's desire to build the mansion at Sardhana as a monument to herself is evidenced by the fact that, despite its...
opulence and grandeur, the house did not serve her own needs or comfort. In his diary, Dyce Sombre remarked that once the mansion was built, the begum preferred to host visitors and administer her duties from tents pitched in the back gardens, where she would also sleep. Her rare use of her bedroom in the house was remarkable enough for Sombre to write in his diary: “H.H. [Her Highness] for the first time slept in her new sleeping room; had nautch and fireworks in the night; I went to sleep knowing that H.H. would stop in the house, but she called for her tonjon and went to the tents about 12 o’clock, so no one was aware of her going, & no one went to hand her.”

On other occasions Sombre noted that, despite the rains and damp weather, the begum would not move indoors or spend more than a couple of hours there. It is safe to assume that the begum saw the house less as a functional residence than as a stage from which to project her political, charitable, and administrative duties.

Recent feminist scholarship has overturned the simple dichotomy of the public, male, urban, political sphere versus the domestic, female, interior, affective or apolitical one. Scholars now see the domestic as deeply political space, at times the very locus of social and cultural critique, if not change. The fact that Begum Samru’s mansions also served as sites for her court and salon leaves little doubt that her domestic realm was deeply political. Beyond that, “home” for the begum was not only the site in which cosmopolitan agency was exercised, it was also the mechanism through which such agency was consolidated and perpetuated. Indeed, the begum’s self-fashioning can be seen as an example of cosmo-feminism, as theorized by Sheldon Pollock and others,
who argue that the intimate domestic sphere is an essential site of cosmopolitan production. Pollock and his colleagues write that “domesticity itself is a vital interlocutor and not just an interloper in law, politics, and public ethics.”

The begum’s mansions were a savvy appropriation of public and private traditions, political and personal affect, and masculine and feminine realms of power. Cosmopolitanism was not simply a condition of cross-cultural conversation but also a vital strategy of it.

The Church at Sardhana

In 1781, three years after Reinhardt’s death, the begum converted to Catholicism. In 1822 she began the construction of a large church in Sardhana; helping her with this was the Italian officer Antonio Regghellini, who had trained as an engineer in Vicenza (Figure 12). No doubt the church was meant to be a grand statement of the begum’s piety, but more than any of her other projects, it signaled the participation in global networks of power offered to her by her Catholic faith. Through the building of her church she was able to communicate with the pope and request that he send a bishop to dedicate the structure and serve its congregation. As she approached the end of her life and realized her legacy might not survive her, the begum invested heavily in Christian endowments, such as the large church at Sardhana.

Popular local legend has it that Regghellini fashioned the church at Sardhana as a replica of Saint Peter’s in Rome, even though there is little evident resemblance between the two buildings. Instead, the prototype for the church at Sardhana was in all likelihood the Roman Catholic church at Agra, commonly known as Akbar’s Church (Figure 13). The Mughal emperor Akbar had laid the foundation of that church in 1599 as a tribute to the Jesuit missionaries in his court. The church suffered looting and destruction during the reign of Shah Jahan (1635–36) and, later, during...
the siege of Agra by the Persian Ahmad Shah Abdali (1758). In 1769, Reinhardt, then commander of Agra Fort in the employ of the Jat rulers of the region, rebuilt and expanded the church. It is likely that the begum was baptized as a Catholic in 1781 in Akbar’s Church.

The church at Sardhana, although much larger and grander than Akbar’s Church, replicates some of its most visible elements, including the neoclassical portico, the central dome, and the minor chapels off the main nave. It is also likely that the Agra church carried steeples, similar to the one at Sardhana, that were taken down when the church was refurbished in 1838. While Reinhardt cannot be credited with building as prolifically as the begum, she was clearly emulating his patronage of religious institutions as a means of establishing her own patrimony. Like her large estate and mansion in Delhi, the church at Sardhana was a signifier of the begum’s far-flung alliances with power centers such as the Vatican, which responded to her request by dispatching a papal legate to meet with her.

Like the begum’s residences, the church at Sardhana shows a mix of architectural styles (Figures 14–16). The domes of the church stand next to oversized steeples that evoke Islamic minarets more than Christian bell towers. Inside, the central dome is supported by squinches, while the plaster detailing recalls the delicacy of *muqarnas* from western Islamic architecture. The central altar of the church features pietra dura ornamentation, a style of ornamentation commonly found in Mughal architecture, most famously at the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort, two Mughal structures with which the begum was likely familiar, given her extended stays in Agra and Delhi. In terms of style, then, the structure was unabashed in its cosmopolitan mingling of Indian and Islamic architectural elements with a modified European-type cross-plan church (Figures 17 and 18).
The church was equally cosmopolitan in terms of the religious officials who served there. The first bishop to serve the church, the Reverend Julius Caesar Scotti, was from Italy, and the second was Father Murray of Ireland.

As a rare Catholic institution within a predominantly Islamic and Hindu country, the church enabled the begum to establish a European network outside the EIC. This was an advantage considering that she was a military and political ally of
the Anglican British yet still desired access to the European continent. The year before she died, the begum sent a small portrait of herself on ivory to King Louis Philippe of France. He acknowledged its receipt by sending her a portrait of himself; unfortunately, the king’s portrait arrived after her death and was confiscated by British customs agents, but this episode provides evidence of the begum’s global ambitions.37

The begum attended Mass in her church every Sunday, and she held a great feast there following the midnight Mass on Christmas. She also distributed monetary gifts to her subjects during the Islamic festival of Eid and celebrated the Hindu festivals of Diwali and Holi—practices that vexed her resident bishop such that he urged her to beg forgiveness for her religious transgressions. There is no evidence that the begum did so. To the contrary, she continued to be ecumenical in her charities and endowments, as when in 1834 she made a generous donation of 150,000 rupees to the pope and a smaller donation of 50,000 rupees to the archbishop of Canterbury.38 The same year she also provided the endowment for an Anglican church to be built in Meerut’s British cantonment, for the use of EIC troops who were stationed there.39

The image of the cosmopolitan has necessarily privileged mobility. It assumes an itinerant or traveling figure, usually a literate European male who has the prerogative as well as the means to cross physical borders and converse across cultural ones.40 Yet the begum, while undoubtedly more privileged than most, subverted this notion of peregrination as a crucial condition of cosmopolitanism. Instead, she managed to make global alliances and create visibility and a sphere of influence for herself outside her local domain by using architecture as an instrument of cosmopolitan communication. Through her church, she was able to mobilize the local (Sardhana) in order to connect with a cosmopolitan global (the Catholic Church and continental Europe). Begum Samru’s cosmopolitanism thus aligns with a definition of the term offered by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, who describes Buddhist monks of the early modern world as “habitants of a vast universe.”41 Even though the monks were entirely stationary, their daily practices (eating, sleeping, begging for alms, dressing, walking) linked them to a world much greater than what they had seen or would ever see. Still, the begum’s case seems a little different. On the one hand, her grand Catholic church, with its Italian and Irish clergymen, was a symbol of her piety. On the other, she continued to assert her patronage in decidedly non-Catholic ways by celebrating Hindu and Muslim festivals and funding an Anglican church. The architecture of her Catholic church echoed her Mughal roots and her ecumenical embrace of religious, aesthetic, and cultural difference. Her singular and rooted location in Sardhana did not stop her from belonging in multiple, overlapping, and often antagonistic worlds.

Cosmopolitan Legacies

Shortly after the begum’s death in 1836, her adopted son and heir Dyce Sombre left India and traveled to Southeast Asia, where he reportedly met fellow travelers who had heard of the begum’s charity and generosity, especially to the Christian community. He later traveled to England, where he married Lady Mary Ann Jervis and briefly served as a member of Parliament. The Jervis family, however, soon labeled Dyce Sombre a “lunatic” and forced him to leave England for the Continent.42 While in Rome, he commissioned the Italian sculptor Adamo Tadolini to create a large monument of the begum for the church in Sardhana (Figure 19). The piece, which was brought to Sardhana in 1848, shows Begum Samru seated on a throne flanked by Dyce Sombre and her Indian treasurer to her right and her Indian chief minister and Bishop Julius Caesar Scotti to her left. Allegorical figures representing time, prosperity, death, and suffering surround the base of the monument. Of the three friezes at the base, the most prominent shows the begum handing a chalice to a bishop while Father Scotti (not yet bishop then),
Dyce Sombre, and Antonio Reghellini (holding the plans to the church) look on (Figure 20). The frieze on the left side of the base repeats the court scene depicted in Muhammad ‘Azam’s painting, only with fewer members. The panel on the right side of the base has been read as depicting the begum either processing toward a durbar (royal court) or marching to Bharatpur to show solidarity with Lord Combermere when he laid siege to the fort there (Figure 21). 43

Only one panel in the monument (the march to Bharatpur) does not include a likeness of Dyce Sombre. Because he was the patron and he commissioned this work during a time of great personal duress and uncertainty about his future, it is safe to say that Sombre wished to memorialize himself as much as the begum. Indeed, when he died only three years later, in 1851, his remains were brought back to Sardhana and interred at the base of the monument. What is startling, however, is that despite Sombre’s own cosmopolitan experiences of traveling throughout Southeast Asia and Europe, living in England, and having an elevated social station through his marriage to an Englishwoman and his rank as a member of the British Parliament, he chose to place his monument in the sleepy backwater of Sardhana. If the begum had entered a cosmopolitan world first through conjugal relations with a European man and later by making savvy political alliances with European powers, the same modalities of marriage and political maneuvering had ensured neither security nor power for Dyce Sombre. In the symbolic and corporeal return to Sardhana following his death, Sombre announced his own cosmopolitanism via the begum in a church that she had built. Here he was able to stand proudly alongside Indians and Europeans, a Catholic priest and an Italian architect, a woman ruler and her multiple subjects. Yet he stood in the shadow of Begum Samru, who created a vibrant cosmopolitan architecture for herself, for her heir, and for various others during her extraordinary life. In Tadolini’s monument, as she did in her mansions and church, Begum Samru continued to assert

Figure 20 Adamo Tadolini, Monument to the Begum, Begum Samru’s church, Sardhana, ca. 1847, detail of front panel showing the begum handing a chalice to a bishop while Father Julius Caesar Scotti, Dyce Sombre, and Antonio Reghellini (holding plans to the church) look on (author’s photo, 2016).

Figure 21 Adamo Tadolini, Monument to the Begum, Begum Samru’s church, Sardhana, ca. 1847, detail of right-side panel showing the begum processing toward a durbar (royal court) or marching to Bharatpur to show solidarity with Lord Combermere (author’s photo, 2016).
herself as belonging simultaneously and comfortably to many different worlds. In death as in life she inhabited an architecture that was both cosmopolitan and entirely of her own making.


Notes

1. The research for this essay was funded by the Mid-Career Fellowship offered by the Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art. The Humanities Center at the University of Pittsburgh provided a venue to workshop nascent ideas of cosmopolitanism. I am grateful to Karen Gerhart, Katheryn Linduff, Susan Andrade, Emanuela Grama, and Shundana Yusuf for reading early drafts and providing valuable comments. Many thanks to Dylan Stein, Anushri Garg, and Arunima Agarwal for producing the map and measured drawings for this essay.


7. See, for instance, Seyla Benhabib’s treatment of the “scarf affair” in France and revisions to German citizenship laws in the 1990s, in “Democratic Iterations: The Local, the National, and the Global,” in *Another Cosmopolitanism*. See also Nikos Papastergiadis’s exegesis on contemporary art, war, and hospitality in “The Global Orientation of Contemporary Art,” in *Cosmopolitanism and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 105–15.

8. The extended quote by Rabinow reads: “Let us define cosmopolitanism as an ethos of macro-interdependencies, with an acute consciousness (often forced upon people) of the inescapabilities and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates. Although we are all cosmopolitans, Homo sapiens has done rather poorly in interpreting this condition. We seem to have trouble with the balancing act, preferring to reify local identities or construct universal ones. We live in-between.” Paul Rabinow, “Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-modernity in Anthropology,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 258.


18. The begum was not the only woman who marked her presence through architecture on the Chandni Chowk. Indeed, Begum Sahiba Jahanara—princess and eldest daughter of the Mughal emperor Shahjahan, patron of the walled city of Shahjahanabad—had already established such a tradition of female patronage in the seventeenth century. Jahanara commissioned a large sara (rest house for travelers) on the Chandni Chowk, and some historians credit her as the patron of the entire street. The Chandni Chowk was the marketplace for luxury objects from around the world and the mansions of nobles. See Stephen P. Blake, “Contributors to the Urban Landscape: Women Builders in Safavid Isfahan and Mughal Shahjahanabad,” in *Women
in the Medieval Islamic World, ed. Gavin Hambly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). Catherine Asher, however, credits Jahanara only with the building of the sarai. See Catherine B. Asher, Architecture of Mughal India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Blake also identifies six congregational mosques commissioned by Mughal patronesses within or just outside the walled city of Shahjahanabad. He notes that it was not only noble or pious women who built prominent architecture in early modern Delhi, citing the example of Nur Bai, a famous courier and singer who had a large mansion in the walled city (its exact location is unknown) where she entertained large groups of men and women. Blake, “Contributors to the Urban Landscape.”

19. I am grateful to my colleague Gretchen Bender, who urged me to reconsider my original assumption that this painting depicts the interior of the begum's mansion.

20. Linda York Leach, Mughal and Other Paintings from the Chester Beatty Library, vol. 2 (London: Scorpion Cavendish, 1995), item 7.121. The identities of most of the men in this painting are known because their names are written on their cummerbunds or sleeves. Such documentary precision is also an indicator that the begum commissioned the painting as a gift for one of her political allies.

21. A few years before she died, the begum narrated her biography to Lalh Gokul Chand, and some scholars have read the posture of the munshi in this painting as being representative of that particular transmission. Considering that throughout her political career the begum corresponded often with her European and Indian allies, it seems imprudent to assume that this scene could only be related to the creation of her biography.


27. The begum's residence in Meerut is no longer extant. Her other mansion in Sardhana is now home to St. John's Seminary.

28. In 1894, the Reverend A. Saunders Dyer, chaplain at Meerut, reported that this painting was completed in Italy in 1839, when Dyce Sombre was in his wife and in-laws. As the Jervis family became increasingly embarrassed by the prevalence of the times, and the fraught relationship between him and his wife and in-laws. As the Jervis family became increasingly embarrassed by the Jervis family's decision to call Sombre a lunatic arose from a number of different factors, including his personal eccentricities, his inability to culturally assimilate into a European context because of his stubbornness and the prevalent racism of the times, and the fraught relationship between him and his wife and in-laws. As the Jervis family became increasingly embarrassed by Sombre's idiosyncratic behavior, they decided that a “lunacy” charge was the best way to affect a divorce while protecting their own assets (Mary Ann's honor and her estate) from him. A thorough account of this case can be found in Fisher, Inordinately Strange Life of Dyce Odberley Sombre.

29. File nos. 9–17, 1831, 25 Nov., National Archives of India (Foreign/Political).

30. This was especially true for the early modern world, where tourists, traders, emissaries, and missionaries were seen as the precosmopolitans of a globalization. For examples, see Catherine Asher and Cynthia Talbot, India before Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Denis Cosgrove, “Globalism and Tolerance in Early Modern Geography,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers 93, no. 4 (2003), 852–70; Pamela Fletcher, “The Grand Tour on Bond Street: Cosmopolitanism and the Commercial Art Gallery in Victorian London,” Visual Culture in Britain 12, no. 2 (2011), 139–53.

31. Yi-Fu Tuan, Cosmo and the Hearth: A Cosmopolite’s Viewpoint (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 160.

32. Today the Sardhana mansion houses St. Charles’ Inter College, a senior secondary school.

33. Blake, “Contributors to the Urban Landscape.”

34. I am grateful to my colleague Gretchen Bender, who urged me to reconsider my original assumption that this painting depicts the interior of the begum's mansion.

35. Maria Nugent, Lady Nugent's East India Journal: A Critical Edition, ed. Ashley Cohen (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 217. The incident described did not take place at the begum's mansion in Sardhana, which was built about twenty years later, but it does provide valuable insight into how the begum occupied her domestic spaces.

36. Today the Sardhana mansion houses St. Charles’ Inter College, a senior secondary school.

37. IOR/L/L 64 (441), Dyce Sombre, diary entry of 24 Jan. 1837, 339.

38. The St. Joseph's Church still stands today at Meerut, and its foundation stone credits the begum as its original patron.

39. IOR/L/L 64 (441), Dyce Sombre, diary entry of 23 Dec. 1833, 220.

40. When Sombre says that the begum would stop in the house, he means that she would stay in the house. A tonjon, also known as a palanquin, was a means of conveyance, consisting of an open sedan chair resting on poles, carried by two or more men.

41. IOR/L/L 64 (441). In his diary entry of 17 May 1834, Sombre says, “I H.H. sleeps out in the projecting verandah of the Western side, & I hope finding it cool; however, she must like it better than being shut up in room,” 242.

42. My own inclination is to read this panel as the begum's march to Bharatpur in 1826. The reigning monarch of Bharatpur was an infant whose uncle was about to stage a coup. Having vested interests in the territory of Bharatpur, the British EIC had requested that its Indian allies send military reinforcements but specifically stated that the Indian rulers themselves should not appear on the battlefield, perhaps to avoid the possibility of large-scale warfare. The begum, however, decided to accompany her troops and joined Lord Combermere at his camp in order to show her unwavering loyalty to the British. The begum spoke often of this event, had her munshi record it in her biography, and even had a painting of her meeting with Lord Combermere at Bharatpur commissioned for her mansion in Sardhana. It would not be surprising, therefore, if Dyce Sombre chose to represent this particular event in the begum's monument.