

The position of women in the Mughal Period

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ABSTRACT:

India is a male dominated society. Religion, social norms, legal structures, cultural values and mores of the region have, through historical times, encouraged and fostered patriarchy in numerous ways. However, patriarchy has never been a monolithic or a static institution. It is one of the most dynamic systems across the world, flexible yet persistent. It however does not alter its basic principle of accepted supremacy of men over women. The ideology of patriarchy is spread in the fields of religious, society and property from time to time. The position of Indian women was continuously declining since the Vedic period, but before the arrival of the Mughals there was no arrangement of living in seclusion for women in Indian society. Unlike in the ancient Indian period the position and status of women in the Mughal period was not quite high.

KEYWORDS: Status, Profession, Socio-Cultural, politics

INTRODUCTION:

Women in Medieval India wielded a considerable influence in society and played a significant role in the development of social, cultural and philosophical values and held a respectable position in society. A change in the status of women came as a sequel to the advent of Mughals in India. There had been a special emphasis on the importance of the social, economic, political and cultural life of women in general, as well as that on royal women of the Mughal period.

OBJECTIVES:

Through this study I am trying to highlight about the various aspects of life of women during the Mughal reign. An attempt has been made to show the status of women in society, the respectable position and facilities enjoyed by women, various practices and customs that prevailed in society like Purdah, sati, jauhar, child marriage etc, the life of women in harem, the impact of Islam on their life.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY:

The study has been undertaken mainly on the basis of secondary sources. Almost all the primary chronicles relevant to the topic has been used. Assistance for this article has been taken from several secondary sources which are cited at the end of the article as reference.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Women in ancient India wielded considerably influence in society and played a great role in the development of society. But the position of

women in the society considerably changed with coming of Mughals. The social laws and customs which evolved in the change setup of things stamped many a times the women in stigma of mental deficiency and created in them a profound sense of inferiority complex.

There was a special emphasis on the importance on the social, economic, political and cultural life of women in general, as well as that on royal women of the Mughal period. In villages where a woman part of rural economy, there was no scope for cultural growth. On the other hand unfortunately to be too much occupied with domestic and farm work they had no leisure time. Now some customs, laws and manners which prevailed in society at that time are highlighted.

Purdah System:

With the commencement of Islam in India the veil system came into existence among Indian women. Strict veiling of women was the common practice in their native land. Naturally in a foreign country like India, greater stress was laid upon it. By the time of the Mughals the veil system became rigid. De Laet writes that '*purdah*' was observed mainly by the Muslim ladies and it was not so rigid with the Hindu ladies. But it was also adopted by the Hindu women as a protective measure to save their honour at the hands of the foreign invaders. The tendency to imitate the ruling class was another factor which operated in favour of introducing '*purdah*' among the Hindu families. In the high class families living in a solitary place for females became necessary. Eunuchs were appointed as a mediator between male and female. Even a doctor could not see the face of female patient of royal family. The outing of women of high class family was occasional and in a curtained palanquin. It appears that seclusion was welcomed as a sign of respect and nobility. The

position of women in the Muslim society was so miserable that Amir Khan the Governor of Kabul divorced his wife, because her Burkha (veil) had fallen while she was saving herself from an elephant.

The veil system among the Rajputs was not rigid. The Rajput females equipped themselves with the art of warfare and art of fighting. They were accustomed to hunting. The veil system found rare in the Muslim families of South India. The females of ordinary Hindu families could come out of their houses without veil. They covered their head with scarf (dupatta). Hindu women assisted their husbands in day-to-day work inside and outside the house. Not such conceive *Purdah* system was observed among the Hindu middle classes and certainly not among the Hindu masses. The system was absent among the people of lower classes such as artisans, peasants and manual labourers, for the nature of their work prevented from remaining indoors behind the veil or *Purdah*.

Zanana System:

It is only followed by the Muslim communities, under this system large number of woman used to live in Mughal fort known by special name *Harem*. It is an Arabic word which means 'hidden place' or 'holy place'. In Persian language *zanana* word is used for *harem*. During sultan period the term *harem* signified the totality of female inmates, who were secluded from the view of public. Under *zanana* system woman in harem included wives of kings, mother and other women member of the family. Along with them relative of king, eunuchs, slaves used to live in harem. In Mughal period beginning of harem culture was traced from Babur's time and latter during Akbar's rule it gained prominence. During Jahangir *zanana* system reached at zenith and from Aurangzeb time it's decline started. Harem were part of every forts maintained by Mughals. There is

no source to tell us about the exact number of women's in the harem. According to Abul Fazl there were around 5000 women in harem of Akbar. Generally women were not allowed to go out of Harem's without king's permission.

The status of ladies in the *harem* was determined by the place which they had in the emperor's life. The most important position was usually enjoyed by the emperor's mother, who was given the greatest respect and honour in the *harem*. Apart from their mothers, the emperors had paid due respect and had affection for their aunts and other senior ladies of *harem*. Because of the emperor's personal affection and attention given to their mothers and sisters, there arose a jealousy among the other ladies of the *harem*. In the Mughal *harem* there were three distinct classes of women- legal wives, free inferior wives and the concubines. The legal wives were raised to the position of respect and dignity and could claim greater attention from their husbands which the lower wives were not in a position to do. Besides the wives of emperor along with other relations, the large part of *harem* consisted of slaves, whether concubines, or maids or mistress and eunuchs. The concubines were usually female slaves kept without legal marriage. They were solely or mainly for sexual enjoyment. Besides all these women, there were quite few wet nurses or foster mothers in the *harem* who looked after and even breast fed the royal child.

Child Marriage:

The birth of female child was not regarded the event of pleasure. The birth of a female child was considered to be a necessary burden to the family. The women who bore only female children were treated as accursed. The custom, in those days, did not allow girls to remain in their

parents' home for more than six to eight years after birth. The rigidity of the custom together with the celebration of the marriage at a very early age left no room whatsoever for either bride or bridegroom to have time to think of a partner of their own choice. On account of early marriage, there were many widows in other society. Generally, women in Mughal period were not allowed to remarry. The Rajputs usually married their daughters at a very early age i.e., between 8 to 10 years. Demand of dowry was general feature of society. In some tribes and regions groom had to pay the price of bride. Sometimes young boys married to aged ladies. During Akbar's reign this practice was so common that Akbar was forced to issue an order to declare such type of marriages illegal in which bride was more than twelve years older than the grooms. The females of high class Rajputs families enjoyed comparatively more rights. The girls of high class Hindu families could select their grooms of their own choice. Sometimes some romantic girls prescribed some conditions for marriage.

Position of Widows:

Divorce and remarriage were common among the Muslim women but in Hindu society divorce and remarriage were not practiced. Among Hindus in some low castes widow remarriage was in practiced. Though Mughals tried to impose restriction on Sati Pratha but could not stop this evil practice. The position of a widow was miserable in the Hindu society. They were not allowed to use ornaments. Even betrothed girls had to commit sati on the funeral pyres of their would- be- husbands. Those widows who would not burn themselves with their husbands were treated harshly by society.

Polygamy:

In Mughal India polygamy was prevalent both among the Hindus and the Muslims, especially belonging to the richer sections of the society. Prestige of a man increased if he had a number of wives but the status of a woman was affected adversely. She had to go through the struggle with the co-wives for securing her husband's favour. Polygamy was the birth right of high class Muslims. In respect of marriage, Muslim law permits a man to have four wives at a time to certain conditions. In spite of the decision of the ulema in the *Ibadat khana* in Akbar's time, that a man might marry any number of wives by *mutah* but only four by *nikah*. Akbar had issued definite orders that a man of ordinary means should not possess more than one wife unless the first proved to be barren. Polygamy was the privilege of the rich. But in royal Hindu families some princes had more than one wife.

Prostitute/Public Women:

Prostitution was considered another social evil by that time. These public women were mainly employed as dancers and singers on special occasions such as marriage, feast festival and like that. These public women were generally inhabitants in a particular area or building called *kuthi*. Some of them were highly accomplished in various arts and skills like dance, music, poetry, sorcery and spying.

They usually provided enjoyable leisure and entertainment to the inmates of the harems by means of their captivating dances and songs and all these were maintained by the emperors and the nobles. No one permitted to take these dancing girls to his own house without the emperor's permission.

Custom of Sati:

Among the Hindus, the death of husband was the greatest tragedy in the life of a woman. After the death of their husbands they had to burn themselves on the funeral pyre of her husband. A number of travellers mention its prevalence in different regions of the country. Ibn Battuta mentions with horror the scene of a woman burning herself in the funeral pyre of her husband with great beating of drums. According to him, permission from the sultan had to be taken for the performance of *sati*. Some of the Delhi Sultanas did try to discourage the custom of *sati* which prevailed among a large section of the Hindu population, particularly the upper classes and the Rajputs.

It was a custom in Goa that if a woman did not perform *sati*, she was sent to temple to earn money with their bodies, for the said temple. They became public prostitute and earned money for the keep and construction of the temple. If the girl was pregnant at the time her husband's death she would suffer to be burnt until her delivery. If the man dies on journey, his wife burn themselves with his garments whatever they belong to. Though *sati* was only voluntary in the south and not enjoined upon widows, it is difficult to account for its wide population in the Vijaynagar Empire, whose rulers do not seem to have put up any restriction on its observance.

Muhammad Tughlaq was, in all probability, the first medieval ruler who placed restriction on its observance. Though Akbar did not forbid the *sati* altogether, he had issued definite orders to the *kotwals* that they should not allow a woman to be burnt against her inclination. Aurangzeb was the only Mughal who issued definite orders (1664) forbidding *sati* in his realm altogether.

Jauhar:

Just like *sati*, *jauhr* was also performed by the ladies particularly Rajputana. When the enemies or outsiders attacked and captured the whole village and town the modesty women particularly wives of Rajput were outraged and gladly ascended on the funeral pyres of their husbands to escape from the clutch of attackers. This custom was mainly confined in the Rajputs.

When a Rajput chief and his soldiers became sure of their defeat, they either killed their women and children or locked inside a fortress or an underground encloser and set that on fire and thereafter they went to battlefield and gallantly died fighting. This custom of *jauhar* was mainly intended to safeguard the honour of womenfolk at the cost of their lives.

Property Rights:

Economically, a Muslim woman was entitled to a share in the inheritance with absolute right to dispose it off. Unlike, her Hindu sister, she retained the right even after marriage. *Mehr*, or entente nuptial settlement, was another safeguard for Muslim women whereas a Hindu woman had no right to the property of her husband's parents. A Hindu woman was only entitled to maintenance and residence expenses besides movable property like ornaments, jewellery, etc. Thus from the legal point of view, women were reduced to a position of dependency in every sphere of life. The woman in the south under the Cholas (8th to 13th), however, had the right to inherit property.

Role of Women in Politics:

The role of Women played in the politics of Mughal Empire was also unique in many ways. With regard to this issue we can divide the Mughal

era into parts, pre-Akbar and Akbar onwards. Prior to Akbar however, the political situation was much more fluid and therefore open, given the fact that both Babur and Humayun spent much of their time wandering (unsettled life) from place to place and in almost continuous warfare for political and personal survival. This fluidity allowed the women of their times to play important and direct political roles, i.e., of mediating and administering, etc

Role of Women in Trade:

Women played a considerable role in the commercial activities during the Mughal period. Their involvement in the mercantile activities was not a new phenomenon in India because there are examples in history where we can clearly see women handling business and trade independently. Their involvement in trade and commerce came most often from ruling family and noble class women. Women in the imperial harem were actively engaged in commercial activities.

Maryam Zamani, Jahangir's own mother, owned ship called *Rahimi* through which she traded with the market of West Asia and Persian Gulf. The significance of *Rahimi* in the overseas commercial activities is reflected from the fact that when in 1611, it was captured by the Portuguese they demanded 30,000 *rials* for its release. She showed a remarkable interest in trade and commerce, particularly overseas trade. She was among the most well-known of the ship owners; "the Great Mogul's mother was a great adventurer, which caused the Great Mogul to drive the Portugals out of this place". Her ship carried merchandise for the vendors of Holy city, Mecca, and trafficked in pilgrims going for *hajj*.

Nur Jahan, a woman of imminent importance was also involved in overseas trade. Foreign trade was quite flourishing and lucrative in her time. She owned her own ships and was actively engaged in overseas trade and commerce. Some of her commercial enterprises brought her immense profit, especially in indigo and embroidered cloth trade. She was an extremely astute and practical merchant, showing no hesitation in cooperating with the Portuguese for commercial security and profits. Several of her business ventures were based on the cooperation of private Portuguese merchants, and her ships would regularly pay cartaz dues to the Portuguese. Thomas Roe inform us about the interest of Nur Jahan's in trading activities, says, "on going to Jahangir, every way of new points of power, however, the queen Nur Jahan, asked to see ambassador's seal, keeping it overnight". Roe further acknowledge that Nur Jahan played a crucial role in his negotiations with the imperial court, as also in determining the demand of foreign goods and luxury items in the imperial court. Thomas Roe called "Nur Jahan as his solicitor and brother as his broker."

Impact of Islam on Women:

One of the direct impacts of Islam was *Purdah* which became an integral part of Muslim women since Islam came to India. The women in Muslim were not allowed to mix freely with the male youths or to move in the public displaying their beauty and ornaments etc. In Islam marriage is not only a religious rite but a secular contract. Women have given freedom to choice her life partner. According to Islamic Law (*Sharia*), Marriage can not be forced. A woman is to be consulted in the choice of her partner. Marriage contract specifies the dowry (*mehr*) the groom gives to the bride upon their marriage to value his wife. Men were allowed in polygamy whereas women were not allowed to engage in polygamy. Even Islam

allowed divorced women to remarry which in so other religion allows. Islam was the most liberal religion in allotting women their share in their father's or husbands property.

Female Slave:

The female servants formed an important section of the household. The servants, both male and female received their wages in cash in addition to some food and clothing. Higher caste families hired women of lower orders to fetch water from well and for other related services. These women were known as *panibharin* and were usually allowed food and clothing than paid by a certain sum for each pot of water but many a times earned *annas* per month. Many unfortunate widows gave themselves up as domestic servants among richer family in return for food and shelter.

Besides this the fetching of water from the village well was another customary chore of Indian women. Fryer observes in 1676 A.D. says, *"Indian wives dress their husband's victual, fetch water and grind their corn with a hand-mill, when they sing, chat and are merry."*

Slave women did much of the household tasks. Lekhapaddhati cites women slaves doing household works as grinding, cutting, smearing the floor, sweeping the floor, fetching water, milking cattles, agricultural work, etc. Thus, the tasks performed by the female slaves were diverse and multiform.

An important role was played by women as midwives and nurses of babies. Midwifery is typically a woman's work. These midwives and nurses invariably appear in Mughal paintings, depicting scenes of birth of Princes like the birth of Prince Salim. Wet-nursing is another work that is

obviously exclusive to women called *dhays* who nurse children. Lactating mothers would sell their milk to elites, and for the service so rendered they received and other favours by way of compensation. Almost all women of ruling and elite families required the service of wet nurse. In a polity where becoming a mother was important the availability of nurses was critical for survival of any infant. Besides, among ordinary families the need of a wet-nurse might arise if the mother was ailing with some problem and therefore could not feed the child. Further, the presence of *dhatiri* could relieve the mother and hence geared up the production process.

On several occasions, a *dhatiri* could use her position to acquire social and material benefits and a dignified position. If she becomes a *dhatiri* of King's children, she would obviously develop a bond of love and care with children and have the opportunity to get her family members placed in good position and could exercise enough authority herself.

Life of Lower Class Women:

The women during the sixteenth and seventeenth century were not only confined to the household work but opted many other professions as well. Women were involved in agriculture work also. Women were not only confined to domestic farming, but they also worked as part time wage earner. After the harvest was collected from the field it created more work for women. The beating of rice and husking of other grains was exclusive a women's job. The grinding of the grain on the rotary hand-mill was also mainly done by women. The peasant's housewife did not perform tasks subordinate to those of men but participated equally in the process of agricultural production. Norris reports that the women at Coromondal Coast did various agricultural works like cleaning, grinding the paddy

and carrying the wood. There were several aspects of women during the Mughal period.

The women during the Mughal India can be broadly categorized into: the royal women and the commoners. The Royal women enjoyed the privilege of education and up-to some extent, were masters of their own will and expanded their horizons over several activities. On the contrary were the common women who were generally the home makers and were restricted to domestic activities and in certain stratum were victims of deeply rooted social evils. The focus of this paper is to highlight the prevalent professions during the aforementioned period and throw light on the contrast among them.

The management of house and household chores were confined to women in all class and society. The skill, expertise, talent and experience that were required in the management of the household were not recognized by the male dominated society, and were conceived as natural and therefore inferior in attribute of femininity. Whatever division of work is allotted for woman is considered to be compatible with her natural or biological function and thus, domestic chores are assigned to her.

The maintenance of the household required doing certain kinds of works and hard labour. In case of the majority of ordinary women, the work around household consists of a variety of subsistence activities such as rearing children, carrying water, collecting fuel, cooking food, serving meals, food transportation, tending cattle, spinning cloth for house use, etc.

Wealthy households included extra household female members such as mistresses, wet-nurses, slaves or servants and concubines. The presence of servants or maids among richer families would obviously tend to lighten the work of the women. They would have to do less manual work. In these families, there were a number of lower class recruits to take over the drudgery of housework and childcare.

CONCLUSION:

It can be said that the majority of the women were not in a pleasant position owing to the social customs and male prejudices, however, the royal women were apparently in a privileged position which allowed them get well educated and also provided them an opportunity to establish their individual identities as literary figures and businesswomen. Common women played a specific role to complete the society; therefore no one can deny the role and contribution of women to build a society in present condition. Although the European travellers were not from the same culture and society and could not completely understand the custom and traditions of the people, they left behind the large amount of information about the social and cultural life of the society, especially the common people including women, which is very important to understand the position of the women during the Mughal period.

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