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Role of women in medieval period with special reference to Mughals

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Abstract

The Mughals the Mughals established the biggest empire of medieval India and their legitimacy was unparalleled in Indian history. Babur laid the foundations of the Empire in 1525-26 by conquering Delhi. The Mughals set long lasting precedents and institutions on Indian soil. Babur's grandson Akbar under whom the Empire grew geographically as well as culturally was the architect of this Empire. Since his regime several changes took place, some good some not so good. The role 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. Under Akbar the Empire acquired institutional grandeur and certain rigidity in its attitudes. There were several reasons for this which will be discussed later. 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.

Keywords: Mughal Empire pre-Akbar and Akbar onwards, medieval India

Introduction

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 2 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 dynamism of patriarchy also stems from the fact that women are as much central to its preservation as men. The ideology of patriarchy stemming from religious and social acceptance makes women a willing party in subverting the role of women members within a society.

The consciousness regarding the gender imbalance and subversion of women at large has been a recent one, a product of the modern period. In earlier times male superiority and their domination in all aspects of collective and family life was almost uncontested. In this respect the medieval period was no different. Politics or the authority to rule was considered an exclusively male domain. Men in premodern India considered it below their dignity to be ruled by women. Indian society contested this prejudice on rare occasions. Women were not completely ousted from political participation. Intelligent and accomplished women tried to influence political decision making from 'behind the veil'.

The medieval period in India was different from earlier times. The introduction of Islam changed the political structure of India in significant ways. It is difficult to state here as to in what way Islam changed women's political participation in Indian society, but one can certainly see an opening up in this respect. There is of course a contradiction here. On the one hand Islam imposed the veiling of women while on the other it allowed for women's participation in political activity seen in the case of Raziya Sultan and Nur Jahan, Maham Anaga, etc. we do not see such open participation or women wielding political influence prior to the introduction of Islam in India.

The Mughals the Mughals established the biggest empire of medieval India and their legitimacy was unparalleled in Indian history. Babur laid the foundations of the Empire in 1525-26 by conquering Delhi. The Mughals set long lasting precedents and institutions on Indian soil. Babur's grandson Akbar under whom the Empire grew geographically as well as culturally was the architect of this Empire. Since his regime several changes took place, some good some not so good. The role Women played in the politics of Mughal Empire was also unique in many ways.

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Babur's Period

During Babur's times women, especially elder women i.e., mothers, foster mothers and sisters played an important role in politics. In addition to offering advice on important political matters they were also the chief mediators for the king. This was a period when after being ousted from his ancestral kingdom of Farghana Babur's efforts to regain it was defeated time and again by his own kinsmen. His position was in a flux. Incessant warfare with claims and counter claims to sovereignty were the order of the day. While military prowess and resources were very much required during this time, negotiations also played a key part in many situations. All claimants to various kingdoms in Central Asia belonged to the shared genealogy of Chingizi-Timurid lineage (timurid, uzbek, etc.). There were also close family ties through marriages between these rival claimants. It was this situation which allowed women to interfere in political matters. Sometimes only women could undertake negotiations and not men. Gulbadan Begum mentions several such women who Babur considered important for his political survival.

Isan Dawlat Begum

Babur's grandmother was known for her strategy and tactics. She was in charge of administration and political affairs immediately after Babur's father's death. Babur was around 11 years old then. She spent all her energies in saving Babur's kingdom including dealing with conspiracies against him (Lal, 135; Mukherjee, 115-116). She even decided the officers for every post and any shuffling was done with her orders. She related stories of Chengiz Khan and Timur to Babur to boost his morale and as lessons in war strategies. Regarding her Babur says in his memoirs few among women will have been my grandmother's equal for judgement and counsel; she was very wise and farsighted and most affairs of mine were carried through under her advice (Mukherjee, 116).

His mother Qutluq Nigar Khanum too supported him in the same way. She was known for her courage, patience and endurance and had a personal army of around 1500 soldiers (Mukherjee, 116). She accompanied Babur to all wars and expeditions. Babur speaks of her bearing great hardships for his sake while he was a wandering king. She died in 1505 without seeing her son a successful king.

Maham Begum

She was Babur's favourite wife and became influential during Babur and Humayun's times. She belonged to the Shia sect and helped Babur in cementing political ties with Iran. She also travelled with Babur to Balkh and Badakshan

and shared his difficulties (Mukherjee, 118). She was given the title Padshah Begum by Babur.

Khanzadeh Begum

Eldest sister of Babur saved him in 1501 by marrying his more powerful rival Shiabani Khan when Babur could not defend himself. Babur was besieged in Samarkand without any help and could only save himself after agreeing to let Shiabani Khan have his sister in return for his own life (Mukherjee, 117). This act of Khanzadeh Begum in Mughal sources was considered as a 'Sacrifice' and when she returned to her brother 10 years later in 1511 she was not only received well but also accorded a special position in the Mughal domestic world (Lal, 224). Under Humayun she was given a coveted title Padshah Begum and was the chief lady of the Harem. She continued to provide political advice to the Emperor and acted as a peace maker and negotiator. One of the important episodes of her intervention was when Mirza Hindal insisted on the Khutba being read in his name instead of Humayun's name. The Khutba in the medieval state was the symbol of sovereignty. A Khutba could be read only in the Emperor's name. Hindal's insistence was an act of rebellion. Humayun sent Khanzadeh Begum to negotiate with Hindal regarding the sovereignty of Humayun and explain to him the threat from Uzbeks and the need for Babur's sons to be united. She played an important part in settling the issue. On several other occasions also she attempted to establish peace and cordiality between Humayun and his warring brothers, Hindal, Kamran and Askari until she died in 1545 (Mukherjee, 121).

Hamideh Banu Begum

She was the favourite wife of Humayun who accepted the Emperor as her husband only after much insistence on his part (Lal, 235). It was she who Gulbadan Begum records as having said: I shall marry someone, but he will be a man whose collar my hand can touch and not one whose skirt it did not reach. She became the mother of Akbar therefore rose in status within the Harem. In addition, her political sagacity was such that she was given the charge of the Empire when Humayun was away (Lal, 235-236). She also played an important advisory role during Akbar's reign. She was given the title of Maryam Makani. She was also the first lady of the Empire during her lifetime till 1604. 8 These were some of the women who played important roles during Babur and Humayun's reign helping the early Mughal Emperors survive and hold on to the Empire.

Akbar Onwards

In the earlier section we have seen as to how women played a significant political role in maintaining the kingship of their male counterparts. Since the accession of Akbar this tradition was broken in significant ways. There were several reasons for this break, but mainly three reasons stand out.

1. Akbar's kingdom became a settled domain with specific geographical limits as distinct from Babur's shifting and Humayun's wandering kingdoms.
2. It also came to acquire a definite Indian character shedding much of its central Asian features. Rajputization of the Harem is one major factor in this respect.
3. The family ties too were no more intertwined with the central Asian clans. Only those families that migrated

with Babur and Humayun remained within the purview of Mughal domestic relations.

However, these developments did not diminish the importance accorded to the women members of the royal family. In fact, the Mughal Harem now came to be regarded more sacred than earlier and therefore more rigid. It came to be regarded as a matter of pride and a symbol of Mughal sovereignty and was thus lavishly designed and protected (Lal, 140 onwards). Such developments if not limited, at least changed the way women functioned politically in the Mughal set up. Women still continued to exert their influence on the Emperors but indirectly. Except perhaps for Nur Jahan no other Mughal women is mentioned as directly influential in Mughal official sources.

Nur Jahan

Amongst all Mughal women Nur Jahan was the most remembered and powerful queen. She is believed to have had absolute control over her husband Jahangir who was all but a puppet Emperor. Research has shown this version to be an incorrect one. Jahangir was indeed a powerful Emperor and undertook his 9 kingly duties with precision and dedication similar to his predecessors. However, Nur Jahan was an exceptional woman and her political role went beyond the mundane duties of managing the Harem and advising the King. She was part of what Beni Prasad calls as The Junta. It was a clique consisting of four most powerful and close members of the court and royal family *viz.*, I'tmad-ud-daula, the prime minister of Jahangir and Nur Jahan's father, her brother Asaf Khan, Nur Jahan herself and Khurram (the future Shah Jahan) Jahangir's most capable son. This particular combination made these four members highly influential and powerful in the court circles and except for Khurram the others were from the same family. It is held by Beni Prasad as well as Ellison Findlay that this clique made Nur Jahan very powerful in the Empire. However, the power of the Junta has been contested by Nurul Hasan who rejects the theory and holds that Jahangir was all powerful during his reign (Hasan, 342-35). Nur Jahan was an exceptionally accomplished woman. She was well educated, generous and intelligent in finances. She invested in overseas trade through her ships and dealt with Europeans, Portuguese as well as the Dutch. The English too sought her protection and support to obtain trade permissions in Jahangir's court. During Jahangir's reign she enjoyed paraphernalia equal to her husband. She took part in political decision making, struck and circulated coins in her own name and granted public audience on her own (Sharma, 8-9). She also had the privilege of issuing Parvanahs and Hukms generally reserved for royal princes.

Maham was the main nurse. After Akbar could free himself from the clutches of Bahram Khan she became Akbar's chief advisor and administrator. She was also given the charge of the Mughal Harem. Her fall from grace came when her son Adham Khan betrayed Akbar. He was killed by Akbar and Maham too passed away soon after.

Mariyam-us-Zamani was mother to Jahangir and the chief queen of Akbar. She was well known for her commercial enterprises and support to Hajj pilgrimages through her ships. She also built mosques and other public utility buildings. Mumtaz Mahal: The chief queen of Shah Jahan, she was also politically active. She was given the title Mallika-i-Zaman and was the in charge of the Harem. The

royal seal bearing the Emperor's name, the insignia of the Empire was kept in her custody. The Emperor's orders had to pass through her to get the seal affixed. Shahjahan consulted her on important state matters. She too had authority to issue Parvanahs and Hukms (Sharma, 9-10; Mukherjee, 147).

Jahanara

She was the eldest daughter of Shahjahan and perhaps the last of the illustrious Mughal women. She too was capable and well educated. In addition to the usual talents of the royal family she was a poet as well as a Sufi. She had a soft corner for her elder brother Dara Shikoh, the heir apparent. She played a 11 significant part in the war of succession amongst the sons of Shah Jahan because of her influence with her father. After Mumtaz Mahal died in 1631, Jahanara took complete control of her father's personal affairs. She was also made the in-charge of the Harem. She too invested in overseas trade and enjoyed special privileges like earlier queens. Her importance was diminished to some extent after the accession of Aurangzeb but later she was accorded a special position in the domestic and court life because of her political capabilities. Her other sister Roshan Ara also played a politically important role and was a supporter of Aurangzeb. She was a poet and head of the Harem under Aurangzeb. She died in 1671. Thus several women played an important role in the Mughal domestic and state matters. The fact that in case of the Mughals the domestic environment was part of the court made their intervention easy and effective.

Zeb-un-nisa

The daughters of Emperor Aurangzeb Zeb-un-Nisa also took an active interest in the political matters. In 1658 A.D when the war of succession was going on between the brothers of Aurangzeb his father in law Shah Nawaz Khan did not extend him any help. After the defeat of Dara, Aurangzeb got his father in law imprisoned. In the end, it was on the insistence of Zebunnisa Begum that Shah Nawaz Khan her maternal grandfather was released. Similarly, when prince Azam was punished (1701-5 A.D) for quarreling with the superintendent of his harem he sent the petition of pardon through his sister Padshah Begum. It is found that Zebunnisa after appeared in the court with a veil on her face and assisted her father in his deliberations. In court, she sat in Purdah and gave advice to Emperor Aurangzeb regarding the politics of court. It appears that she had also an effective voice in matters of appointment.

Gond Queen Durgavati Marvi

Gond Queen Durgavati Marvi ruled for a long time in South before losing her life in a fight with Mughal ruler Akbar's general Asaf Khan in 1564. She was born in the group of acclaimed Rajput Chandel ruler Raja Keerat Rai and her mother was the daughter of the celebrated Rajput King Maharana Sanga. From an extremely youthful age, she was knowledgeable in horse riding, sword battling and archery. Rani Durgavati ended up being a powerful and competent ruler. She moved her money to a more vital post area as this fortification in the Satpura slope ranges was situated among slopes and gorges which made it an imposing spot of the barrier. She expanded her domain and bound together politically Garha-Katanga additionally called Gondwana with strength and respect. She was a liberal benefactor of

learning and dealt with a vast and all around prepared armed force. While fighting bravely with the enemy, fearing that she would be captured by the Mughals and to save herself from ignominy and dishonor she is said to have taken her own life in 1564. She was a symbol of self-sacrifice and martyrdom.

Conclusion

The medieval period begins with the entry of Muslim invaders in India. The span of the period was about 500 years from the era of the Delhi sultanate to Mughal era. The status of women began to decline in the Muslim era. They were required to experience number of problems, which gave rise to impediments within the course of their effective growth and development. This period brought about changes in the lives of women to a major extent. The women were regarded as inferior as compared to their male counterparts. The various problems were experienced by women, which led to a decline in their status and these were, child marriage, purdah system, sati, jauhar and restriction on the education of the girls. The factors that highlight that improvements are made in the status of women are, acquisition of education, participation in employment opportunities, participation in decision making processes, participation in various activities, encouraging empowerment opportunities, curbing the societal problems, promoting public observation, encouraging up-gradation of communication skills, generating information in terms of managerial functions and practicing creative skills. Finally, it can be stated, the status of women declined in medieval India, but with the introduction of reforms by rulers and leaders, improvements were brought about in their status.

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