Mughal Harems: An Intricate Affair

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Abstract

Etymologically, the word Harem is related to Arabic which means ‘sacred’ or ‘forbidden’ and is used for sacred precincts of Mecca. It evolved to refer to the domain of women in a polygynous family, as well as their separated rooms that were off-limits to males. Hence, harem being a forbidden area was always a source of mystery and intrigue. The Harem complex which included great structures, was a lively and expansive physical environment, which was surrounded by high walls, keeping purdah in mind in which women were organized according to their closeness to the emperor. It was made up of a succession of annexes that were supposed to be light and airy, with a central courtyard for communal celebrations. It was a sophisticated organization that mirrored the Mughal elite's polygamous and opulent lifestyle.

The research paper is based on self-administered online snowball sampling survey where 44 respondents were reached through referrals. Inspired by the results, where 96% respondents were keen to know more about these intricacies, this paper attempts to address the nuances of the highly ambiguous medieval tradition of Mughal Harem. It wasn’t just limited to emperor’s luxury but there was more to it, which opens more avenues for the researchers to explore.

Keywords: Mughal Harem, Opulent Lifestyle, Intricacies, Women’s status

Introduction

Harem is the magnificent location where the royal women resided. Harem comes from the Arabic term “harem”, which signifies ‘forbidden’ or ‘holy enclosure’. The image of Harem is often a sexualized one, as portrayed in the works of fiction and by most of the media houses, displaying them as not more than a pleasure place wherein young, beautiful women were locked from the outside world. Generally associated with the Islamic tradition, Harem was not alone a practice within the Islamic world. Quarters principally reserved for women were common among the elites of ancient Greek as well. The kings of Assyria, an ancient Mesopotamian civilization, is also known to have harems regulated by royal edicts and guarded by slave eunuchs. In the Islamic culture, this practice of gender seclusion was given an institutionalized form under the Abbasid Caliphate. It is believed by some scholars that the tradition of keeping harems was adopted from the Byzantine and Persian Empires. The term ‘harem’ or ‘mahal’ was thus used by indigenous writers to mean “a system in which a man's female relatives—wives, sisters, mothers, aunts, and daughters—share much of their time and living space, and further, which enables women to have frequent and easy access to other women in their community, vertically as well
as horizontally.” The term ‘harem’ was commonly used by European travelers, but the name mahal was also used. Their interpretations of these concepts, however, were vastly different. They used it in a way that was close to meaning "a system that allows guys to have sexual access to several females," and in this context, "the system often, but not always, evoked religious censure from Western men for encouraging sexual laxity and immorality.

Figure 1.2—(A) group of Women in a Garden, entertaining themselves with music and dancing.(B),Princess Nur Jahan and Attendants.

Mughal Harems: A Survey

A brief baseline survey was conducted online using Google form and by employing snowball sampling technique for the selection of participants. This baseline survey was conducted among the people of different age groups, to gain insights about the notions of contemporary people about harems. Table 1 represents the responses obtained from the online baseline survey. The result of obtained from the survey came as an eye opener. Amongst the responses received from 44 respondents around 85% had a very blurred notion which accounted to Harems only being a place of sexual affairs. The aim of this paper was to address as many nuances as possible regarding the lifestyle, composition and working of the Harems. The survey also displayed the interest of readers which further encourages more work on the Mughal Harems. Result from the survey concludes that most of the respondents know about the Mughal Harem, but with their own interpretations. 93.2% respondents were keen to know more about harem intricacies. Authors intend to unveil these intricacies by saying that it wasn’t just limited to emperor’s luxury but there was more meaning associated to it.

Table 1. Responses obtained from the online survey conducted to assess the knowledge of the respondents (n=44) about Mughal harem and their interests to gain further knowledge about the concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Value*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you read research papers/journals regarding the same? If yes, how many?</td>
<td>0-5, 5-10</td>
<td>95.5, 4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which age group do you belong to?</td>
<td>Below 18, 18-30, 30-40, 40-50 or above</td>
<td>4.5, 86.4, 9.1, 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you heard about Jahanara Begum?</td>
<td>63.8%</td>
<td>20.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you heard about Gulbadan Begum?</td>
<td>68.18%</td>
<td>22.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you heard of Mumtaz Mahal?</td>
<td>84.09%</td>
<td>2.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you heard of Nur Jahan?</td>
<td>79.54%</td>
<td>6.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you like to know more about Mughal Harem?</td>
<td>93.2%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Values are presented as percentage (%).**

**Harem and its intricacies: Architecture**

Mughal architecture is an Indo-Islamic architectural style that evolved during the reign of the Mughals in Northern and Central India. It's a stunningly symmetrical and ornate blend of Persian, Turkish, and Indian architecture. The Mughals' opulent lifestyle may still be observed in their forts and palaces today. The emperor created well-furnished, finely designed, and gorgeous palatial rooms for the ladies of the royal harem. The Harem was a fort complex separated into Mahals or Shabistan-i-Iqbal and Shabistan-i-Khas sections. Not all inmates were given a Mahal, as seen by the remains of these structures. The rank of an inmate in the social order must have influenced her housing status as well. A Mahal was often used to house a royal lady's retinue, which included servants, slaves, and singing and dancing girls. The Harem's precincts also housed the Harem's servants and slaves. Chowk was the name of the neighborhood where they resided. The concubines, like Ayitvar and Shanivar, resided in different apartments that were known by the weekdays when the emperor paid them a visit. The Harem buildings, like other Mughal structures, were opulent. Some were constructed of marble and embellished with gold engravings and gems. Persian rugs covered the floor, and the living room was lavishly decorated with mirrors, chandeliers, and lighting. The harem complex was surrounded by high walls, keeping purdah in mind, and included some of the greatest structures. It was made up of a succession of annexes that were supposed to be light and airy, with a central courtyard for communal celebrations. Fountains, ponds, gardens, and orchards would be available to the ladies, many of whom would spend their whole lives in the complex. All compartments were linked together. The harem had just one entrance door, which was well guarded. Within its precincts were bazaars, laundries, kitchens, schools, and baths.

**Harems from the pages of Memoirs of Gulbadan Banu Begum:**  
*(Ahval-i-Humayun Badshah, Humayan Nama)*

To individuals who have never been exposed to such a lifestyle, the picture of the harem is typically sexualized. It is stated that studying the complicated system of the harem is necessary to comprehend the Mughals' thinking. A tiny portion of the harem's job was to fulfill the royal sexual hunger. The harem was more than simply a place for ladies to stay. There were babies born there, and children grew up there. According to
Ruby Lal, Hollywood films, works of fiction, and scholarly works all portray the harem as a place where young, attractive women are imprisoned for a man's pleasure. (Lal.Ruby,2005.) In the article "Historicizing the Harem: The Challenge of a Princess's Memoir," Lal points out that if we look at the perspective or description of a woman who lived in a harem, such as Gulbadan Begum (Daughter of Babur, the first Mughal Emperor of India), the image would be quite different.

**Figure 3. Gulbadan Banu Begum, Emperor Babur’s daughter**

_Ahval-i- Humayun Badshah_, memoirs of Gulbadan Banu Begum, daughter of Babur, the first Mughal Emperor of India, paint a completely different picture. She records from the perspective of a woman who herself lived in those secluded adobes, her own domestic life along with the complexities of relationships between the women inside and their involvement with the world outside. The Mughal Harem were elaborate and pompously styled living quarters of the women in accordance with their relationship to the emperor. These included mothers, aunts, daughters, wives, sisters, nurses, dancing and singing girls, female warriors etc. Male children also lived in the harem until they reached puberty. Gulbadan depicts many forms of interactions that a man might have with the ladies in his harem in _Humayun-nama_. She, like her mother, her older aunts, and other ladies of status, was a member of the royal harem when she was five years old. As can be seen, the harem's women’s age ranged from very young to very old. Their harem rank was determined by their relationship with the emperor and their age. The emperor's mother had the greatest status in Gulbadan's depiction of how the tents were put up in Agra, followed by his aunts and sisters (Lal.K.S, 1988). Gulbadan goes on to talk about her brother Humayun's trips to the royal family's women's tents in Agra later in her narrative. He would start by visiting the tents of his eldest relatives, and as he went from tent to tent, his sisters and other ladies of status would join him. These trips appeared to be more social meetings with family members than anything more. Her memoir of harem life is considerably more of a family affair than the romanticized one typically shown to outsiders. Gulbadan lost her foster mother, the emperor's mother and the lady who cared for her during her early life, when she was 10 years old. "I felt lonely and powerless […] His Majesty visited multiple times to console me, and showed me sympathy and love," Gulbadan said of her grieving period (Gulbadan, 5). The Mughal Harem, is described as a place of misery and loneliness, rather than pleasure and joy (Lal.K.S,1988) . It also depicts Emperor Humayun's bond with his sister. "You all should know that I have been to the quarters of the
elder relations [female]," Humayun adds in another case. It is a need that I make them pleased" (Gulbadan, 8). Rather than seeking pleasure with attractive young ladies, Humayun visits his old female relatives in the harem to delight them. These two sorts of visits are diametrically opposed to the notion that males visit the harem primarily for sexual enjoyment.

The harem is also frequently depicted as a location where women are shut away from the outside world and have no interest in or interaction with it. Lal, on the other hand, points out that the women of Akbar's harem were not completely segregated. In fact, Gulbadan led them on the hajj at one time (Lal, K.S 1988). While that did not happen again, the point is that these royal ladies were able to execute their religious duties in the world. Gulbadan's story demonstrates that women were aware of and actively participated in the political developments taking place in their environment. Mirza Kamran, a traitor, contacted her and asked her to compose a letter to his brother, begging him to join Kamran's battle against the monarch (Gulbadan, 11). Despite her isolation in the harem, Gulbadan was fully aware of the political struggle and goings-on of the developing kingdom. According to Gulbadan, the royal harem's women were frequently involved in parties, meetings with their male relatives, and other forms of interaction with the outside world. Using an insider's perspective, such as Gulbadan Begum's, may provide a far more realistic image of the harem and its inhabitants to an outsider. The Humayun-nama, written by Gulbadan, shows us the differences in women's status, the important decisions made in the harem, the complex relationships a man may have with different members of the harem, and the fact that harem women did have contact with and were involved in the world outside their quarters. It was also during the reign of Akbar, in November 1575, that a large number of Mughal women, a group of young and old, including a now elderly Gulbadan Begum (who organized and led the expedition) and her granddaughter, among various wives, aunts, and nieces of the emperor, made their famous pilgrimage to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (Balabanlilar, 2009)

The women of Mughal Harem had a wide range of hobbies. Elite women of the royal family participated and appeared to be high-level merchants and became wealthy in the international shipping trade; were recognized scholars and patrons of the arts; built luxurious palaces for their own but also markets, caravanserai, and magnificent gardens that changed the landscapes of the capital cities of the empire. Several of them dabbled in foreign and domestic commercial pursuits. Jehangir's mother was the owner of a huge fleet of ships that sailed to Mecca. Jeddah was a harbor that served as a crossroads for trade between Africa, Arabia, and Europe. Rahimi is the name of the biggest ship in this fleet. It ferried passengers and cargo between West Asia and the Persian Gulf. Nur Jahan was a savvy entrepreneur as well. She backed European East India Companies as a patron. She invested in both Portuguese and English goods at the same time. She used to pay cartezes to the Portuguese on a regular basis.
In addition, these women's income was supplemented by domestic trade and the Jagirs they were awarded. In general, the Harem provided upkeep to all royal and dependent women. Jagirs were given to some powerful and prominent ladies for both upkeep and gifts. Nur Jahan was given extensive Jagirs in Gujarat, including Toda near Ajmer, Bharuch, and Surat. Jahanara, too, had large Jagirs that brought in a lot of money. Jahanara, who was called by her father Sabihat al-Zaman (the Mistress of her Age) or Padshah Begim (Lady King), and more generally Begim Sahib (Great Lady), controlled vast personal financial resources, part of which she had accumulated through her own trade relationship with Dutch merchants, but most of which, total cash and Nur-I-Jahan, wife of Jahangir goods valued at more than 10 million rupees, had been left to her by her mother, Mumtaz Mahal, who had also been heavily involved in international trade (Kozlowski 2003,). Jahanara earned three million rupees every year from her Jagirs, according to Manucci. They engaged Nazirs or Gumasthas to manage their Jagir's business. They also got annual maintenance and gifts worth millions of rupees in addition to the Jagirs. Mumtaz mahal received 16 lakh rupees and 2 lakh asharifs from Shahjahan in 1628. As an annual stipend, Jahanara received ten lakh rupees and one lakh asharifs. This was in addition to the monetary presents they were given during festivals and festivities. These women did not squander their earnings from diverse sources. In reality, money was used for noble reasons such as the construction of public utility structures and the patronage of artisans. Mughal royal women were interested in charity endeavors. They oversaw the construction of several mosques and Idghahs. Bega Begum, Humayun’s first wife, erected his tomb. She also ordered the building of a serai. In 1561, Maham Anga constructed Khair-ul-Majlis, a Masjid-Cum-Madrasa in Agra.

Between 1648 and 1650, Shah Jahan's eldest daughter, Jahanara, built a mansion in her father's palace compound overlooking the Yamuna River. To the west of the Chandni Chowk, Jahanara built the city's largest bathhouse and a caravanserai that was considered "the most imposing structure in the city after [her father's
I will build a serai, large and fine like no other in Hindustan. The emperor’s mother, Muhammad Hakim Mirza, governor of the Mughal province of Kabul, rebelled against Akbar in 1581, both the emperor himself and active” described the “I will build a serai, large and fine like no other in Hindustan. The wanderer who enters its courts will be restored in body and soul and my name will never be forgotten” (Blake 1998). At 17, she become Padshah Begum, an erudite author, her Risala-i-Sahibiya is a literary project. Her writings tell how she attempted to shape her life & persona ‘as per Anshan Bokhari (Sanaya, 2021).

These women made major contributions to the practice and patronisation of literature and artistic activities; they also patronized a lot of Karkhanas. The artists in Karkhanas created a wide range of fabrics, carpets, perfumes, jewelry, and other luxurious items for royal usage. Many of these businesses were backed by specific women. Nur Jahan is, oversaw the creation and design of royal fabrics to her specification. Credit of inventing itar, kind of perfume also goes to Nur Jahan. Although the veil (Purdah) was widely worn, it did not restrict women from partaking in outdoor activities. Victories, coronations, and significant days were all commemorated in the same way. Within the harems ground, fairs and bazaars were frequently held. The Harem was a bustling venue where parties were held on a regular basis, I’d-ul-Fitr, Shabb-I-baraat, Dussehra, Diwali, Holi, Raksha Bandhan, Nauroz and other festivals were observed with great zeal. Exceptionally talented women such as Maham Anaga, Nur Jahaan, Muntaz Mahal, and Jahan Ara might become deaf to rulers or at the very least have significant influence on the emperors. In the era of opulent royal family, Mumtaz was a companion, not just a wife, as confirmed by Mughal memoirs. Shah Jahan shared his plans and ambitions for her good advice (Sanaya ,2021)

The particular rights and roles of the elite women of Timurid Central Asia- their political rights and cultural participation, literary and artistic production, and the access to power offered to young, even childless, women and their participation in dynastic survival and success- have been described by many scholars as unique to the Timurid- Mongol elites(Szuppe.1994). Gulbadan Begum, writing of the Mystic Feast in her memoirs recorded the names of 36 of the 96 women who attended the accessional celebration; all were members of extended royal family (Balbaablilar,2010.) Two women, Shad Begum and Miharangaz begin were adorned by various accomplishments. Akbar (r. 1542-1605) marked a dramatic transition in the character of the Mughal court. As in the imperial offices, everything here is also in proper order. Abu’l Fazl carefully enumerated the "sufficiently liberal" stipends and salaries of women at the Mughal court, from servants to highborn elites, described the "peculiar, imperial stamp" with which the harem grants were marked, and mentioned the "sober and active" women who guarded the harem, the most trustworthy of which guarded the apartments of the emperor himself. So, public a role was taken by the women of Akbar’s court that when Akbar's half-brother, Muhammad Hakim Mirza, governor of the Mughal province of Kabul, rebelled against Akbar in 1581, both the emperor’s mother, Hamida Begum and, his half-sister Bakht al Nisa Begim were publicly appointed governors of Mughal territories.
Scholars have been debating about the Mughal Harem for a long time. Some have portrayed it as a location where the emperor could indulge in his sexual desires. Others regarded it as a lovely jail or a lonely place where women would be imprisoned indefinitely without any access to the outside world. Recent study has revealed that the Harem was more than a place for ladies to stay, they had easy access to the outside world and could communicate with them. Not only so, but these women were active participants in their era's political, economic, and cultural activities. Gulbadan in her memoirs *Humayun Nama* depicts the many forms of interactions that a man might have with the ladies in his harem. Memoirs also focuses on the differences in women status, decisive and influential at times. Exceptionally talented women like as Maham Anga, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, and Jahan Ara might become de facto rulers or at the very least have significant influence on the Emperors. Based on these Memoirs and the recent researches, one can conclude that in Mughal Harem, a man may have an intricate relationships with different members of the harem, and the fact that harem women did have contact with and were involved in the world outside their complexes.

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