



THE DIFFERENT FACETS OF WOMEN AT AKBAR'S COURT: AS OBSERVED BY FATHER MONSERRATE

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Abstract

There was an influx of European travellers from the early fifteenth century. The influx of European travellers increased with the establishment of the Mughal Empire, probably due to the expanding trade and trading networks through overseas as well as land routes. Although the European travellers were often critical of rulers and their respective states, labelling these accounts as biased would be a sweeping statement. These accounts reflected travellers' individual visions and perspectives and were subjective in their observations and writings. Therefore, it is important to understand these subjectivities while analysing the travel accounts.

The travellers documented what they essentially saw and observed. The European travellers while travelling within the Indian subcontinent engaged with texts, chronicles and accounts composed in the subcontinent, and used them as sources of information.

It is with the help of these source that this paper will understand the status and position of women at Akbar's court. Various spaces such as; The Harem, Palaces, along with the social practices such as Sati is studied as observed by Father Monserrate in order to understand the position of Women at Akbar's court.

INTRODUCTION:

The Mughal Empire (1526CE-1857CE) was one of the most distinguished and strong authority that ruled over the Indian Subcontinent. The empire was established by Babur in 1526C.E., in the first battle of Panipat by defeating the Lodhi dynasty. His son, Humayun ascended the throne after Babur's death in 1530 C.E., however, his rule was interrupted by Humayun's defeat at the hands of Sher Shah in 1540. Humayun reclaimed his power by invading India in 1555 C.E., by defeating the second Afghan empire. However, his death occurred in a year which paved his son, Akbar to ascend the throne. Akbar reigned for almost half a century from 1556 C.E. to 1605 C.E.

Akbar established Ibadat Khana or the House of Worship (1575-76 CE.) for conducting religious debates and discussions amongst theologians of different religions.¹ He indulged in intellectual pursuits which helped in *Din-i-ilahi*.²

In 1578 CE. it is believed that the discussions were further opened for theologians, intellectuals of various religions, and atheists. Three missions were sent at the emperor's request at his court, of which this paper intends to focus on one- *The Commentary of Father Monserrate, S.J. On his Journey to the Court of Akbar*.³

The discussions at Ibadat Khana led to major policy changes at Akbar's court, however, it falls beyond the scope of this paper. This paper intends to uncover the status and position of different women folks during Akbar's reign as observed by Father Monserrate during his mission at court.

THE STUDY OF SOURCE:

There was an influx of European travellers from the early fifteenth century. The influx of European travellers increased with the establishment of the Mughal Empire, probably due to the expanding trade and trading networks through overseas as well as land routes. Modern historiography and research often criticise these travellers' accounts for being biased and one-sided.⁴ Although the European travellers were often critical of rulers and their respective states, labelling these accounts as biased would be a sweeping statement. These accounts reflected travellers' individual visions and perspectives and were subjective in their observations and writings. Therefore, it is important to understand these subjectivities while analysing the travel accounts.

The travellers documented what they essentially saw and observed. The European travellers while travelling within the Indian subcontinent engaged with texts, chronicles and accounts composed in the subcontinent, and used them as sources of information. Sometimes, the travellers were patronised by the local rulers as well. The travellers even had access to contemporary state documents and archives. Thus, it would not be incorrect to point out that their respective accounts would certainly reflect a degree of historical and contextual reality.

One cannot ignore the historical and individual contexts in which these European travellers were located. In addition to the context of the country of their origin, travellers belonged to different occupations and were definitely influenced by their respective professional training. The travellers belonged to a variety of professions. They were missionaries, doctors, merchants, diplomats and adventurers. A lot of them also entered into various

¹ The discussions were held every Thursday evening which sometimes continued through the night. (Abu'l Fazl, 158)

² "the religion of God"- a system of religious belief proposed by Mughal Emperor Akbar in 1582 CE., by combining belief from Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Jainism mostly.

³ *The Commentary of Father Monserrate, S.J. On his Journey to the Court of Akbar*,³ translated from the original Latin by J.S. Hoyland and annotated by S.N. Mukherjee, OUP, 1922.

⁴ Eugenia Vanina, 'Roads of (Mis) Understanding: European Travellers in India (Fifteenth to Seventeenth Century)', *Indian Historical Review*, 40(2) 267-284, Sage, 2013.

services with many kings, particularly in the Deccan. Some of them also accepted the services of a Mughal nobleman or attached themselves to the nobleman's retinue. They served as soldiers, advisors and mercenaries and adapted local customs and traditions and wore Indian clothes and learned various languages. Therefore, it is very important for us to keep in mind their different backgrounds, vocations, length of stay, nationality, and religion while analysing their accounts in history. In addition to the understanding of state and polity in the travel narrative, during the period under study, this thesis will analyse the accounts of the travellers according to their professions, namely missionaries, ambassadors, merchants and so on.

There is no doubt that as sources of history, the accounts of the European travellers are invaluable and they help us in filling in certain major historical gaps, which otherwise would have been difficult.

TRAVELLOGUE- FATHER MONSERRATE:

Father Monserrate (1580-82 CE) who was born in 1536 CE in Catalonia. He took the admission in the *society of Jesus* in 1558 CE. His *Commentary* is one of the earliest European accounts, in which he gives an objective account of the emperor's personality, court and administrative measures. His account has been an important source of material for understanding Mughal India, particularly, the reign of Akbar for many reasons. The first reason was that he served as a tutor to Akbar's second son, Prince Murad. Secondly, he was a Portuguese representative and was on a special mission, that is, conversion of Akbar to Christianity. Thirdly, he was a part of religious discussions, which was a regular feature in the court of Akbar. Last but not the least; he also accompanied Akbar in one of the military expeditions⁵. Hence, his account contains some valuable inputs as far as the present research is concerned.

Father Monserrate⁶ (1580-1582 C.E.) was a Portuguese Jesuit on his first mission to India in 1574 A.D. He accompanied Father Rodolfo Acquaviva and Father Francisco Enriquez on the mission headed to the court of the Emperor Akbar (1556-1605 C.E.). He was appointed for the mission by Francis Xavier in the Portuguese territory of Goa to Emperor Akbar's court in 1578 A.D. His account is one of the earliest European accounts, in which he gives an objective account of Akbar's personality, court and administrative measures.⁷

THE MISSION:

The first Jesuit mission to the court of Akbar left Goa on November 17, 1579. On February 28, 1580, Father Aquaviva and Enriquez arrived at Fatehpur Sikri. Father Monserrate having taken ill at Narwar, reached the

⁵ He accompanied Akbar on his military expedition to Kabul in 1581. He proceeded as far as Peshawar with the emperor.

⁶ Father Monserrate, *The Commentary of Father Monserrate S. J. on his Journey to the Court of Akbar*, J. S. Hoyland, Oxford University Press, London, 1922.

⁷ Ibid.,

Mughal capital a week later on March 4. They were warmly received at the royal court. Father Monserrate was shortly appointed tutor to the emperor's second son Murad. Another important aspect of Monserrate's account was that he also travelled with Akbar during his march against his half-brother, Mirza Muhammad Hakim, King of Kabul who had invaded Punjab in 1581.

THE HAREM:

The royal harems performed important political, social roles. Rulers at times also included wives to their harems as a means to cement political alliances. Since these women belonged to the influential and powerful families, harem became an important arena of political activities.

Harem is an Arabic word meaning prohibited, the sacred enclosure or something forbidden or kept safe. This was developed into a domestic institution under the Mughals and is elaborately described by Abul Fazal.⁸

The first instance of the "wives" mentioned in his account is during his first encounter with the King. The presents, in this case the atlas, having been given to the king, Akbar retires to the inner apartment (to the hall known as "Capur Talau") where he instructs to be displayed and exhibited in front of his wives.

Harem consisted of a large number of women and was a secluded part of royal household. It was meant for mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, entertainers, lady servants, concubines etc. The Mughal rulers showed respect for their mothers, which is evident in Monserrate's account. While Akbar decided to go to war with his half-brother Mirza Hakim, the emperor made the following arrangements for the government of the empire in his absence:

His mother⁹ remained at Fathepurum with his youngest son Danialus. Agiscocanus was made the viceroy of Gangaris, and Cutubdicanus¹⁰ of Gedrosia. The King's mother was to be superior to both of these, and was to have charge of the province of Indicum or Delinum. Ten thousand cavalry were left as a garrison in Gedrosia and twelve thousand with the King's mother.¹¹

With this it can very well be understood that Akbar placed his mother in high regards. With the fact that he places his entire city and administration at her hands in his absence shows how much trust he placed in her.

During Akbar's journey during the war, he usually carried his entire court along and established the elaborate Mughal camps. Father Monserrate states that,

The queens ride on female elephants, hidden from view in gaily decorated howdahs. They are guarded and escorted by five hundred old men of very dignified and venerable appearance. Great care is taken to drive

⁸ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, 3 vols., ed. & tr. H. Blochmann, Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1927.

_____, *The Akbar Nama*, 3 vols., tr. H. Beveridge, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1902.

⁹ Hamida Banu Begum, otherwise known in history as Mariam Makani.

¹⁰ Qutub-ud-din Khan. He was one of the Atgah Khail. After the conquest of Gujrat he was given the Sircar of Broach as Jagir. Subsequently he returned to court and was appointed ataliq to Prince Selim and received a dress of great distinction. In 1583, after the surrender of the fort of Baroda, he was killed by Mazaffar Shah III. He was one of the distinguished officers of Akbar and a commander of five thousand. He had two sons, Naurang Khan and Gujar Khan. Naurang served under Mirza Abdar Kahim in Gujrat (1584) and received Jagirs in Gujrat and Malwa. He was a commander of four thousand.

¹¹ Monserrate, *Commentary*, pp. 74-75.

*away to a great distance all who are found in the line of the queens' march. The higher the rank and dignity of these old men, the more careful they are in fulfilling their functions. The ladies-in-waiting of the queens follow their mistresses on camels, under white sun-shades.*¹²

After the victorious return from the war, Akbar returns to his capital city Fatehpur, where he is “welcomed there by his mother with the greatest joy; and, as is the custom, public games were held in honour of his arrival.”¹³

PALACE FOR THE QUEENS:

Monserrate goes on to describe the royal palaces, where he states, “The splendour of his palaces approaches closely to that of the royal dwellings of Europe.” He further states that the second palace belongs to the emperor’s queens. He describes them to be decorated with “many pinnacles, supported on four columns, each of which forms a small covered portico.”¹⁴

Father Monserrate discusses the relationships the noble or the ruling class had with their female counterpart. He mentions that they were allowed incestuous unions with closely-related women, except only the mother and the sister.

“He also invented and introduced amongst the Musalmans two forms of marriage, first that with regular consorts, who may number four: and second that with those who are merely called wives, and who may be as numerous as a man's resources allow. Musalman kings employ this sanction and licence of the foulest immorality in order to ratify peace and to create friendly relationships with their vassal princes or neighbouring monarchs. For they marry the daughters and sisters of such rulers. Hence Zelaldinus has more than 300 wives, dwelling in separate suites of rooms in a very large palace. Yet when the priests were at the court he had only three sons¹⁵ and two¹⁶ daughters.”¹⁷

Another instance that shows that women family members were placed in high regard, while he also points out that the general crowd was left with a bare minimum. He mentions when Akbar’s aunt¹⁸ returned from Mekka, the King had the street pavements covered “with silken shawls, and conducted her himself to her palace in a gorgeous litter, scattering largess meanwhile to the crowds.”¹⁹

Another important court festival that was celebrated was the festival Nauroz (March 1582), Monserrate writes that it was Iranian festival lasting for six (sic nine) days on the occasion of New Year’s Day. It was celebrated in a lavish manner and expenditure, games and pageants were held. The King wore his crown, insignia of royalty and was enthroned on a high golden throne. He distributed gifts to many generals who accompanied him to the

¹² Ibid., p. 79.

¹³ Ibid., p.161.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp.199-200.

¹⁵ The three sons were Salim (Jahangir), Murad (Pahari) and Danyal ;

¹⁶ the emperor had three daughters: (i) Shahjada Khanum, (ii) Shahrunissa Begum, and (iii) Aram Banu Begum.

¹⁷ Monserrate, *Commentary*, p. 202.

¹⁸ Gul Badan Begum

¹⁹ Monserrate, *Commentary*, p. 205.

war and also gave instructions that all classes of citizens should observe holiday and express their joy by “leaping, singing or dancing.”²⁰ The celebration was so grand that, “Women were allowed to visit the palace and see its magnificent appointments.”²¹

The above statement shows how on general occasions, women of common stature did not usually enter the royal court.

PRACTICE OF SATI:

The status of women in ancient or medieval India is, however, incomplete without the study of the tradition of Sati practice. The infamous practice of Sati is elaborately mentioned in Monserrate’s account. He states that the wives of Brahmans are mostly “accustomed, in accordance with an ancient tradition of their religion, to burn themselves on the same pyres as their dead husbands.”²²

This entire episode was witnessed by Akbar, which suggests that the emperor supported this tradition. Here the woman were brought in an inebriated form, by means of certain drugs like “opium, bhang or duturo”. Monserrate further suggests that sometimes the women are half-drugged and hurried to the pyre with with “warnings, prayers and promises of eternal fame.”²³ At times the women tried to leap off to which they were held down with poles and hooks. Monserrate mentioned a particular incident where the missionaries tried to interfere, however, were shut down by the Brahmans shouting, “Away with you, black-clothed Franks.”²⁴

CONCLUSION:

Considering that Father Monserrate has closely studied the behaviour of Akbar, it helps us in understanding the instances and causes behind some of the activities of Akbar. It, therefore, helps us in understanding the nature of state, administration and the status of women particularly during the reign of Akbar. Monserrate was a missionary; hence, it is quite expected from his account to have instances related to religion and rightly so, we do find him mentioning the instances of how during discussions they (Christians) were far more superior than any other religions, especially to that of Islam. Therefore, keeping in mind how religious perception through the eyes of missionaries can be subjective to bias and prejudices, they can also lack objectivity at times. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the observations made by them.

Their observations cannot be taken on face value, as sometimes they misunderstood the things they saw. Nonetheless, we should not discredit them entirely, for they were professionals in their own field, and can also be said that they did not sugar-coat the occurrences they saw with their eyes, which was often the case with the native

²⁰ Ibid., p.175.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 175-176.

²² Ibid., p.61.

²³ Ibid., p. 62

²⁴ Ibid.

writers. These travellers wrote in a crude way, criticized harshly and appreciated the things they admired openly. Considering all these limitations, these travel accounts happen to be an important source of information about the specified time during the Mughal rule.

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