



Zoom into MUGHAL HAREM as an active imperial institution: Unsettling the Family narratives and gender dynamics of Medieval India

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Abstract: The Mughal history is a plurally located and constantly evolving Field in South Asian history. But it was only about men in the early Historiography of medieval and Early Modern periods. Even Modern historians also neglected agency of women except for very rare exceptions, even though Women were actively dominated in the Muslim kingdom and their access was very wide due to the nexus. So, our venture divides this reconstruction, by covering the role of royal ladies throwing sheds on harem and delineating the conventional image of harem.

Keywords: Harem, Mughals, Royal ladies, household, Family History, Gender

1. Introducing theme

Between the mid sixteen and early nineteenth century, Mughals ruled as far as Bengal in East and Kabul in the west, as high as Kashmir in the north, and Kaveri basin in the south. ¹This Indo-Muslim empire was the exemplar of the vibrant, culturally plural, multi-ethnic polity. But the inherently structural analysis of the Mughal state limits all understandings related to women and their spaces.

To reestablishing the it was the same time, where Women in society were at the centre of familial nexus and facilitated connection between lineages and kingdoms, and served bridges connecting disparate lineages and affirming the alliances of powerful kingdoms. It means political relations can't be exists without women.

But mostly they were restricted to the within the boundaries of house. To unravel it, we need to pepped into the households and relationships, and of course need to grapple with the historical variability of gender, beyond binary conceptualizations of gender.

So, the paper will revisiting existing historical trends on Harem, by examining new insights into the archival documents of Mughals and their biographies i.e. Humayun-namah, and will connect the Mughal Harem to

¹ Evolution of geography of Mughals can be understood through wide range of text, i.e. Habib, Irfan. An Atlas of the Mughal Empire, 1982. Gommans, Joss The silent frontier of South Asia 1100-1800, 1998.

wider South Asian histories of the family and seek to extend studies that have shown capacious histories of relatedness. Further this paper will suggest that a proper study of Mughal Harem as autonomous institution can result in huge canvas of influential women dominating throughout the Mughal Empire.

Harem : meaning and attributes

The term Harem is derived from the Arabic word h-r-m , which originally meant a sanctuary. It is a place where the committing of sin is considered haram- that means forbidden, so conceptually at least it was a place where restraint was the norm rather than excesses in sexual among other, filial relationship.²

Conventionally, Harem has been described as an ordered community with its own decorum and gentility. It was seen as comprising a number of women living in it, solely with the purpose of providing pleasure to one man, namely the Emperor, whose sexual appetite was insatiable.

In other word harem aroused images of an immense fortified playground for fulfilling a man 's sexual fantasies, with hundreds of women at his disposal. But in actual it was not the case. It was just, the late nineteenth century colonial project only that led into such picture and continued into later historical debates as well.

What we find in harem, it was internally organized. Of course within the harem there were hierarchies. The royal harem was supervised within by a regular hakim or governess. She belongs to a noble family, whose office was considered to be one of great trust and responsibility. Mahaldar, a highest female servant who controlled harem , was responsible for the welfare of the inmates of the Harem. She was also responsible for inner and outer field as well. Being the superintendent of the Harem, she was honoured, respected, featured, loved , admired and was relied upon by not only the chief queen or the ladies of the Harem but also by the emperor. Syed Najmul Rizvi, traced that , “on different festive occasions such as lunars and solar, birthday of the emperor, Nauroz, marriage of princes and princesses and other occasions, she was given rewards, gifts and titles.” The Mahaldar of the harem was assisted by Daroghas (supervisors) who supervised the work of sections, Mushrif, the Tahwildar (cash keeper), and the other petty officials. It is the fact that all such post inside were given to women.

Historiographical shifts : Sexual pleasure to activate institution

Then first question arises how this Harem get the attribute of sexual pleasure thing. Now it is established fact among scholarship that in the history of expansion of the British Empire, Europeans have often tried to suppress the voices of Asians, thus attempting to assert a British oriental's Cultural hegemony in public discourse in both colony and metropolis. In Orientals influence, historical writing treated harem as erotic site of pleasure. Following this aim, many British created contrasting images of British verses Asian Women, in efforts to justify British and Christian superiority over Muslim, Hindu and other South Asian Cultures.

In the explanation of decline of Mughal Empire, again traditional portrait harem as backward or blame it, i.e. William Irwin. They also portraits Emperors wasted time in Harem. Important thing to be notes here is,

² Mukhia, Harbans. The Mughals of India, New Delhi: Rupa,2005.

However in this process these historians recognised harem, although it was negative way. But in result of this Harem became politically important in scholarly works. Although, these writing offers a view of political culture of Mughal India by including women as well, that is without doubt an immensely significant contribution to the field.

But if one look at historical trends since the 1950s, the historians of Mughal India have concentrated heavily on political- administrative institutions of Mughal rule on the one hand, and questions of agrarian conditions, economic change and class struggle, on other hand. Social history related to family and household has till now, not received similar attention.

Since, the traditional historical trends, understand Harem as a place of pleasure and decident place. So, major image emerged of harem as a fixed , sensual, lustful domain of sin and pleasure devoted to the comfort of men.

That image is borrowed from English traveler and writer who were not allowed into harem. So, it was just the market and popular opinion from selective people only whom they interacted. For example, as Manucci had observed that “all Mughals are very fond of women, who are their principal relaxation and almost their only pleasure.”³

Following this, we can say that traditional writings denied women role as important political player. So in dominate historiography the articulation of harem as a political space is something, that was missing. Although in colonial historical trends there were few instances dedicated to cultural history, where they address ornaments, dress, love stories, fantasies etc. surrounded around the harem. As a separate study, K.S. Lal⁴ following the English portraits of women, argued existence of harem is serving to men. Closer to the similar statement, John Richards has described the harem as “a respite, a retreat for the nobleman and his closest male relatives- a retreat of grace, beauty, and order designed to refresh the males of the household.”⁵

The major scholarship shift occurred with work of Ruby Lal.⁶ She challenges the conventional stereotyped representation of the Harem, by conceptualizes the domestic life and activity of a world that was not fixed, unchanging or unhistorical and analysis the nature and meaning of the family, household, marriage and the role of women in courtly life in the sixteenth century, particularly during the reign of Babur and Humayun, the peripatetic Emperors, however arguing for considerable changes that occurred in the domestic world of Akbar, as the Mughal power consolidated .

Ruby Lal analysis the nature of the family, household and role of women in Mughal Harem expand the arena of Mughal family which includes mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents, auncles, aunts, queens, kings, children, servants, maids and other people.⁷

Interestingly, in family servants and maids were also dominate voices that they get documentation in Emperors autobiography, i.e. Abd-ul- Karim, Abd-ul-Vahhab shaghval, Abu-al-Hashim.⁸

³ William, Irvine, (trans.) Storia do Mogor by Niccolao Manucci,vol.1, London,1907

⁴ Lal,K.S. The Mughal Harem, New Delhi: Aaditya Prakashan,1998.

⁵ Richards, John. The Mughal Empire, The New Cambridge History of India,bol.1.5,1993, p.62.

⁶ Lal,Ruby . “The Domestic world of peripatetic Kings: Babur and Humayun, c.1494-1556” , The Medieval History Journal, Vol.4, no. 1, January-June 2001, pp.43-82. Lal, Ruby. Domesticity and power in the Early Mughal World, Cambridge: Cambridge University press,2005.

⁷ Ibid.2001, p.47.

Ruby Lal further studies the dynamics of the non – public structures, like how the member of the royal family, their servants, maids and others interacted with one another, the tensions in these familial relationships and the role of politics within the so called private world.

One more aspect is the household of a ruler, which was an important centre of politics, where women played a crucial role in the institution and maintenance of the political alliances. Women’s active contributions in different spheres indicate that the private domain (harem) can’t be segregated from public court. The private was never exclusively residential. Many activities took place in the public-private sphere, several of which were of immense political significance.

Marking the difference and transition she further elaborate that throughout the reign of Babur and his son, Humayun, there have been no distinction between the public and private, in the sense of physical separation of court and harem. Ruby Lal argued that “even if women eventually became *pardeh-giyan* and we’re confined to the seclusion of the Harem, they did not lose their status or identity but remained crucial in the establishment and concretization of Imperial traditions and imperial grandeur, which were indispensable and acute in the creation of an illustrious monarchy.”⁹

During the reign of Akbar, there were rigid distinctions in physical spaces. Akbar as argued by Rosalind, appeared in Fazal’s history, not only as father- ruler of the kingdom, but also as an active and vigilant householder. She draws our attention to the essential gender dimension in the investigation of imperial politics and identity, by examining Akbar’s self projection as a universal monarch and careful construction of Imperial masculinity.¹⁰

Similar remarkable contribution marked by great Medieval scholar Harbans Mukhia.

Harbans try to explore the overarching norms in the Mughal family, the modes of subversion, the tensions in the interpersonal relations and the relatively smooth functioning of the vast space inhabited by women of very diverse backgrounds, statuses and temperaments, at the centre of which stood a very small number of select men, the Emperor in particular.¹¹

Reflection on Royal ladies : Contributions and connection

After delineating conventional image, we need to show how royal women actively dominated the difference spheres. For that we need to explain harem as active institution, with special focus on – How the royal ladies interactive in complex and unpredictable ways and shaped politics and what were forms and consequences of the same. Similarly their contribution to socio- economies and religious world is also traced in this section. We further established that participation in political sphere has entangled relationship with the court, as a mutual symbolic relationship.

It is the established fact that, the Royal women in medieval society were at the centre of familial nexus and facilitated connection between different Lineages and kingdom. In the turko- Mongol traditions of kingship,

⁸ Beveridge, Babarnama, pp.40,718-721.

⁹ Ruby Lal. Domesticity and power in the Early Mughal World, Cambridge: Cambridge University press,2005, pp.21-22.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mukhia, Harbans. The Mughals of India, New Delhi: Rupa,2005.

women seen as crucial political actors. It is important to note here as well, that in Timurid women co-shared sovereignty.

One another example is, Abul Fazal tells us that being respectful Emperor's mother, who's pre-eminence in the harem was universally acknowledged and respected. Paying obeisance to one's mother was a Chingiz tradition.

English traveller Thomas Coryat writes about Akbar's devotion to his mother, "When his mother was carried once in a palankeen betwixt Lahor and Agra, he, travelling with her, took the palankeen upon his own shoulders, commanding his greatest nobles to do the like, and so carried her over the river from one side to the other."

Another instance can be traced when Akbar shaved off his head and moustaches in mourning for death twice only- when his favourite foster mother Jiji Anaga died and then again when Mariam Makani herself passed away.

Political Significance and Royal Ladies

It is generally stated that Islamic Injunction does not allow any Muslim lady to participate in public life. But Royal Women of Mughals were not passive objects of transactions; rather they actively manipulated and controlled information alliance networks based and secret service systems during Conquests as well, by extending outwards, from the family or household and negotiations

Further they also engaged in the distribution and management of the power within the dynastic family, as well their roles as public exemplars of the dynasty's legitimacy, munificent, and piety, tell us a active agency of Mughal Harem.

One can notice the features of Empires of Medieval, where matrimonial alliance were the instrument for expansion of Empire ranging from Timurid to ottoman and Mughals as well. So the women coming into harem have network of powerful relations. So they were therefore powerful enough to exercise political power and simultaneously coming from elite society, they were very versed in literature and other things.

Following above we need to more specific to understand Harem as political space, for that we need look state in active, where state depends on network of alliance – that were managed and reproduced through harem. Some of these alliance were formal in nature, but few were informal as well, which also crucial for consolidation for empire.

Let we consider the example of Gift exchange, which was managed by harem. Here one has to note that economy of gift exchange was also important, that associated with construction and reproduction of network. Levi-Strauss described woman as supreme gift.¹²

Another layer is active role played by Senior mother. Thirdly authority can be seen from favorite wife of Emperor throughout the Mughals.

Fourth, We can trace political significance from edicts of harem as well, those were issued by a queen or a princess. Some edicts of Jahan Ara can be mentioned here to evident our argument. Her edicts to Najabat

¹² Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Elementary Structure of Kingship*, Boston, 1969, p.69.

Khan (2nd October,1632), Mirza Raja Jai Singh (30th October 1651), Raja Budh Prakash (31st October 1670, February 1672 & 25th July 1674) and Faizullah Khan (21st January 1673) shows that she had freedom in the royal harem which inculcated in her greater sense of dignity and honour with the result that she exercised considerable authority.¹³

One fact can be noted that, Tavernier in 1640 gave present to Jahan Ara with Emperor as well. She also received gift from ambassador of Rum (Turkey) Zulfiqar Khan as well. These both evidence are sufficient that how important women were in court politics as well.

Nur Jahan built tomb of her father in Agra and a sarai in Jalandhar as well. Jahan Ara provided many notable buildings like the Jama masjid in Agra, one mosque in Kashmir for her spiritual guide, Mulla Shah Badakhshi. Besides these she laid out some new gardens and renovated some gardens, which were situated in Delhi, Agra, Kabul, Kashmir, Ambala and Surat. Being a first lady of the realm , she received Panipat and Surat estates in gifts from her father.¹⁴

Another arena is education of royal ladies. Now it's fully established fact that, during the Mughals, Education of women showed a steady progress under the patronage and guidance of the Emperors and other well to do person. This can be proved from numerous instances of well educated and accomplished and highly cultural ladies, those possessed good taste and interest in literature activities, i.e. Gulbadan Begam's Humayun-Namah. Few Other can be mentioned as well for example Salima Sultana, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahan Ara and Zeb-un-Nisha.

Let we take example of Aurangzeb's daughter, Zeb-un-Nisha Begum. She had mastery over arabic, persian literature, simultaneously very proficient in mathematics, astronomy and other sciences as well.

Trade, Economy and Royal Ladies

The contributions to political apart, Mughal imperial women were equally involved in determining the different types of trade items to be used in the court. It was under Akbar and then Jahangir that royal women became actively engaged in domestic and international trade.

Jahangir's mother Maryam-uz-Zamani owned ships that operatd on international shipping lines which carried a variety of goods, largely cotton and indigo dyes. These trading ships often carried pilgrims to and from Mocha, 650 miles south of the holi city of Mecca. Women such as Maryam may have undertaken trading accessible due to the financial nonchalance of the the Emperors like Jahangir but also perhaps because of the enormous wealth that the royal women possessed and the liberal and syncretistic religious norms of the contemporary Mughal court.

Findly suggests that “ women such as Maryam were not minimally involved but immensely significant in organising commercial contacts, consolidating trading contracts and pioneering normative patterns in trade that contained to influence and be emulated even subsequently.¹⁵

¹³ Jaffery, Nausheen,Ara Begum, Delhi: IAD Oriental,2011, pp.69-70.

¹⁴ Ibid,89.

¹⁵ Findly, Ellison. “The Capture of Maryam-uz-Zamani's Ship: Mughal Women and European Traders”, Journal of the American Oriental Society,vol.108, no. 2,1998, pp.227-238..

Maryam owned substantial wealth, was one of only four members of the Court, the only Woman to have enjoyed the rank of 12000 sawar and who received a jewel annually on the occasion of New year festivities from every mansabdar according to potentiality of their jagir.

Like few other royal women she possessed the right to issue Farmans- a privilege usually that the emperor, and like Nur Jahan she expended her wealth and influence for the public utility, for instance constructing gardens, wells and mosques around the countryside.

Using money from gifts and revenue from lands, women like Nur Jahan traded in domestic items and also controlled mercantile routes by extracting taxes for the movement of varieties of commodities. Nur Jahan's activities are most documented. Findlay trace the data of trade contract between Nur Jahan and first English embassy which had "approached the Mughal Court to set up official trading contracts in indigo and cloth."¹⁶ Writer of Iqbal-nama-I Jahangiri reflecting on Nur Jahan writes- "Day by day her influence and dignity increased...No grant of lands was conferred upon any woman except under her seal. Sometimes she would sit in the balcony of her palace, while the nobles would present themselves, and listen to her dictates. Coin was struck in her name and on all farmans also receiving the imperial signature, the name of Nur jana – the Queen Begum, was jointly attached. "

The tradition of trading was later continue by Jahan Ara, the accomplished and favourite daughter of Shah Jahan. As D. Pant noticed "because of her position at court, Jahan Ara was able to trade voluminously on her own account,"¹⁷ running a large number of ships herself and entering into enormously successful trading relations with the Dutch and the English.

Conclusion

Though, the recent studies shows that Women have played a dynamic role in every field of life. These trends in Mughals historiography, that include not simply the treatment of the Harem, or the femininity but also studies of masculinity in relation both to the elite at large and the royal figure himself.¹⁸ In result of that the traditional belief about their static and inactiveness as a agency is rejected. Newly emerged Historiographical trends shows that we have suffice evidence of their contribution and active involvement to politics, society, religion, culture and economy as well.

In sum up the paper advocate harem to be studied as a political sphere, instead of erotic site only. There is need to outlined changing notions of harem and power politics assented by royal ladies, that will definitely open up new ways of thinking of political realm and at the same time ask to rethink about the spatial limits that historian have imposed on their imaginations while interpretation the past.

As Jf Richard rightly noted, "Muslim expansion into South Asia is one of the most important and prolonged instances of cultural encounter to be found in world history"¹⁹, which was under the patronage of talented

¹⁶ Ibid, 26-58.

¹⁷ Pant, D. The commercial policy of the Moguls,p.211.

¹⁸ Alam, Muzaffar and Subrahmanyam, Sanjay.(ed.) 2012, p.31.

¹⁹ Richards, J.F. The Islamic Frontier in the East: Expansion into South Asia, South Asia 4, 1974, p.91.

men and women of this dynasty diverse cultures were blended with incomparable refinement to produce one of the most artistically creative eras of the world history.

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