



The Royal Ladies in Mughal Harem

Swati Sharma (Researcher)

Dept. of History

Natthimal Ramsahaymal Edward Coronation College,
Khurja, Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

From the 16th to the 18th centuries India was synonymous with the Empire of the Great Mughal. The Mughal Royal classes rolled in wealth and enjoyed luxurious lives. They not only built big mansions, reared up herds of elephants, horses and cattle, kept armies of domestic servants and slaves but also maintained huge harems for their ladies. The Mughals were among the most powerful and influential emperors. They were fine artisans and their architecture is famous and renowned throughout the world. Not only the Emperors but also the royal ladies of the Mughal era were very remarkable. They were very beautiful, educated and very much talented as well as they had great power and played an important role in the politics of their time. Although these remarkable ladies lived in strict control of the emperor and were not allowed to go outside the four walls of the harem without following the purdah system yet they were able to achieve so much that their contribution towards social, cultural, literary and economic fields is praiseworthy even today.

Key words: 1. Heritage, 2. Grandeur, 3. Concubines, 4. Eunuchs, 5. Adorned, 6. Annexes, 7. Aristocratic, 8. Diagnosis, 9. Retinue, 10. Seraglio

Introduction

The splendid place where the royal ladies lived is known as Harem. The word Harem is taken from the Arabic language which means prohibited or the sacred enclosure. The Royal Mughal women spent their entire lives inside the Harem. It was that part of the royal palace where all the female relatives of the emperor lived. Along with them lived their maid servants, attendants, singers, dancers and concubines. The harem had developed into a complex but highly organized domestic institution during the Mughal period. Françoise Bernier, a European traveler, who stayed at the Mughal capital during the reign of Shahjahan, describes the harem administration in his travel account, *Travels in the Mughal Empire* (1656-68).

In the harem a strict hierarchy was observed in which seniority was given the highest importance. Their status and the position of respect were decided by the place they had in the emperor's life. The living quarters, facilities, and wealth were allotted according to the status of the royal ladies. The more

important position a lady occupied, the more privileges she enjoyed. The richness and beauty of the palaces and their standard of living depended according to their influence upon the emperor.¹

Architecture of the Harem

Mughal architecture is the Indo-Islamic architectural style that was developed in the Northern and Central India during the reign of Mughals. It is a remarkably symmetrical and decorative mixture of Persian, Turkish and Indian architecture.

The splendid lifestyle of the Mughals can be seen even today from their forts and palaces. The ladies of the royal harem lived in well furnished, elegantly decorated, beautiful grand quarters provided for them by their emperor. These quarters were usually made of fine marbles, engraved with gold and gems. The floor was covered with rich embroidered carpets which were thick and soft.

The harem complex was enclosed within high walls, keeping tradition of purdah in mind and consisted of some of the best buildings. The series of annexes was



designed in such a way that they were airy and comfortable with a central courtyard for joint celebration of festivals. There were fountains, ponds, gardens and orchards for the women, who spent their whole lives there. All the apartments were connected with one another. There was only one highly guarded entrance gate to the harem.

When we visit a Mughal fort today we see only hammams for bathing. Each annexes her own toilet system. These were in form of a row of toilets on one side of the annexes with underground tunnels for the female toilet cleaners and sweepers. Each queen and important concubine had her own set of apartment and competed to entertain the king.

There was an underground system of well ventilated rooms and passages, which opened into the apartments and was used for keeping an eye and controlling the harem. There were the *Tekhhanas* or basements also which were used during summers².

Inhabitants of the Harem

In the harems a large number of women of different races, provinces and communities lived. There were no ordinary women, they were royal women. That is why they lived a luxurious life. Manucci stated that there were "Within the place two thousand women of different races."³ Apart from Muslim women, there were Hindu women including Rajput Ladies and even Christian women in the harem of the Mughal emperors. When one thinks of the women who lived inside the harem only the picture of the king's wives, concubines, dancing and singing girls and slave and servant girls comes to one's mind. But they were not only the women belonging to these categories. Of course, these women did live in the harem but other than these there were many others who also lived inside the harem. There were the mothers, step-mothers, foster-mothers, aunts, grand-mothers, sisters, daughters and other female relatives of the king. Even the male children lived inside the harem till they grew up. Then there were the ladies-in-waiting, slave and

servant girls and a number of women, officials and guards who were appointed by the emperor for taking care of the various needs of the harem. There were eunuch guards also guarding the surrounding areas of the harem quarters. Female fortune tellers also lived inside the harem. Some women and eunuchs acted as spies and they kept the emperor informed about the activities of the harem women. Women usually came into the harem through marriage, birth, purchase, appointment or as gifts.⁴

Status and Position of Women in Harem

The emperors gave their ladies a more respectable position by enforcing the system of *purdah* and thus safeguard the honour of their ladies by regularizing the customary dower and property rights, the economic position of royal ladies was tried to be leveled by recommending the marriage of widows and raising their position. The Muslim rulers had contributed for the uplifting of women. Depending on the class, women in the Mughal harem led very different lives. They took part in the Mughal family society in multiple ways while performing different jobs. They were warriors and advisors in political matters, and some women could own land and do business. However there was a differentiation between the royal ladies and the other ladies in the harem.

Life inside the Harem

The lives of the harem ladies were governed by strict rules of *purdah*. These ladies usually did not have the liberty to move out of the harem as they liked. If at all they went out, their faces were well hidden behind veils. But inside the harem they could move around as they pleased. They were also provided with various kinds of luxuries and comforts. The daily life in the harem was full of gaiety and mirth. They wore beautiful and expensive clothes made from the finest material.⁵ and adorned themselves with jewellery from head to toe. They rarely went out but when they did, most of the time the ladies of rank travelled in style and comfort



in richly decorated *howdahs* on elephant backs and *palanquins*.⁶

The daily needs of the emperor and his harem inmates were fulfilled to a great extent by the imperial departments. Their food came from the imperial kitchen called the *Matbakh*. The *Akbar khana* provided drinking water and wine. During summers ice-cold water was supplied to the imperial household. The *Maywa khanah* provided fruits to the household. *Rikab khanah* or the bakery was in charge of supplying bread. The imperial karkhanas provided the royal ladies with beautiful dresses, jewellery, household articles and fancy articles.⁷

Education

The Mughal emperors were famous as patrons of learning and the arts but the royal women too played equally important roll. They were very well educated not only in the religious texts but arts, sciences and literature also. Monserrate writes that Akbar was very interested in women's education and gave good care and attention to the education of the princesses. They were taught to read and write and trained in other ways by the *matrons*. Many of the royal ladies namely Gulbadan Begam, Roshanara and Jahanara etc. were skilled writers and poets. There were libraries inside the harem for their use. Some aristocratic women received awards for their work⁸.

Means of Entertainment

Various arrangements were made for the entertainment of the ladies inside the harem. There were female superintendents of music and dance and a number of lady singers and dancers. The royal ladies mostly spent their time by adorning, decorating and beautifying themselves besides they played many indoor games. Once a month the royal women would participate in a *Kushroz* or Meena bazaar, which was a kind of fair where the ladies would put up stalls and the emperor would attend. Women would participate in garden parties and go out for outings and hunts with the emperor. Women accompanied the ruler on campaigns along with their retinue and stayed in tents.

Some of the royal ladies went a step ahead than the others and did great works like composing literature, building monuments and gardens, participating in trade and sometimes even taking part in contemporary politics.⁹

Visit of Physicians

Whenever a royal lady fell ill, she was shifted to the *Bimarkhana*. The *Bimarkhana* is the place where diagnosis and treatment was provided. Outsiders and strangers were never allowed to enter the harem as the royal seraglio of the Mughals was well guarded. The emperor was the only adult male who entered the harem freely. Other than the emperor the only men who could come in were physicians. Entry of physicians was allowed with some restrictions i.e. they came in heavily veiled and covered. Manucci writes, "It is the custom in the royal household, when a physician is called within the Mahal, for the eunuchs to cover his head with a cloth which hangs down to his waist. They then escort him to the patient's room and he is taken out in the same manner." The Hakeems and later the European physicians could diagnose by feeling the pulse. Another way of diagnoses according to English traveler John Marshall without seeing the patient's face or feeling her pulse was that a handkerchief was rubbed all over the body of the patient and put into a jar of water. By its smell the doctor judged the cause of illness and prescribed the medicine¹⁰.

Sources of Income

The Royal Mughal ladies of the harem enjoyed a luxurious and lavish lifestyle full of awe and gaiety. The prominent harem ladies owned a lot of wealth and money which they spent as they wished. The Mughal ladies of rank received allowances and maintenance grants to meet their personal expenditure and necessities. As Manucci says, "These queens and princesses have pay or pensions according to their birth or the rank they held. In addition, they often received from the king special presents in cash, under



the pretext that it is to buy betel, or perfumes or shoes.”

Some important ladies of the Mughal household owned vast Jagirs bestowed upon them by the emperor apart from their regular allowances. Humayun paid a visit to his mother, sisters and other ladies of the seraglio and he gave them Jagirs and confirmed their mansabs soon after his accession. Jahangir also gave a lot of Jagirs to the royal ladies during his time.

Akbar used to give valuable gifts to his harem ladies on special occasions like that on Nauroz day. Jahangir too continued this tradition. Besides the gifts given by the emperor and royal princes, some very important ladies of the Mughal royal family received gifts from the foreign merchants and ambassadors who tried to please them in order to gain the emperor's favours.¹¹

Thus there were many sources of income of the women who resided in the harem.

Organization of the Harem Employees

The Mughal harem was an institution and had an administrative set up which was organized in similar basis like that of any other huge organization. The Mughal harem too needed rules and regulations for smooth functioning. Akbar was the first emperor to lay down rules for it and turn it into an institution.

The security of the harem was very tight. There were female guards responsible for the security of the harem inmates. Eunuchs were stationed just outside the harem enclosure as guards. The female officers of the harem were divided into three categories: the high (*Mahimbanu*), the middle (*Paristaran-i-hudur*) and the low. The internal harem administration was in charge of women officials called *Matrons* or *Daroghas*. These *Daroghas* were appointed by the emperor and it was a very honorable post. Another important post in the harem was that of the *Mahaldar*. They were selected from among the *Daroghas*. She was like a female major domo and even acted as a spy in the interest of the emperor. In the next grade of the harem staff came

the supervisors whose duty was to keep control over the maid servants and the dancing girls. Another category of harem officials was that of the *Tahwildars*, who was in-charge of the accounts of the harem. It was their duty to keep a check on the harem expenditure and to give away the salaries and allowances to the harem inmates.

The low category of harem staff consisted of the slaves and servant girls. They were usually known as *Bandis*, and also as *Khawas* or *Paristas*. Their duty was to serve the emperor, the princes and important harem ladies. Strict discipline was enforced on the harem staff, especially on the slaves and servants by the higher officials. All the employees in the harem had fixed salaries according to their position¹².

Safety and Security of the Harem

The royal seraglio of the Mughals was well guarded. Inside the harem only women were employed as security guards. They were very brave, active and faithful and armed with bows and arrows and short daggers. Usually *Habshi* and *Tartar* women and also *Urdubegis* were appointed in this post. The most trustworthy and efficient of them were in-charge of looking after the safety and security of the emperor's chamber. Over all these guards was a chief armed woman who supervised their activities. Beyond the limit of these female guards, eunuchs were appointed to guard *Zenana* from outside the harem enclosure. They were called *Khawaja Saras*. Manncci says that these eunuchs were responsible for preventing all illicit foods, beverages and drugs from entering the harem.

The senior eunuchs were known as *Nazirs*. On the gates of the Palace porters were posted. On all the four sides many nobles, *Ahadis* and other troops were also stationed. The gates of the Mahal were very well guarded. These gates closed at sunset and torches were kept burning throughout the night. Outsiders and strangers were never allowed to step inside the Mahal and if any such person was caught, the punishments were very severe¹³.



Conclusion

The royal Mughal ladies made a major contribution to the Indian cultural heritage with their unique vision in the field of fashion, literature as well as outburst of cultural activities. They lived under a lot of restrictions. The seraglio was well guarded and totally hidden from the eyes of outsiders and strangers, but the royal ladies of the Mughal harem had a lavish lifestyle. Although they rarely went out of the harem but whenever they did, the custom of *purdah* was strictly followed. The important harem ladies owned a lot of wealth and money which they spent as they wished.

Therefore the Mughal women played an important role in each and every aspect of life i.e. economic, social or cultural fields but also yielded great power and played a dominant role in contemporary politics.

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