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Muslim Mughal Women's Contributions: Building a Legacy of Learning and Giving

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the significant contributions of Mughal royal women to the empire's social fabric, focusing on their roles in philanthropy, education, and cultural activities. Contrary to the traditional historiography, which frequently confines the roles of elite Muslim and non-Muslim women to political influence alone, this research, employing the Structuration theory, expands the perspective on their agency in medieval India by showcasing their active involvement in social, religious, and educational domains. This study also investigates their philanthropic activities—comprising the erection of madrassas and mosques, helping the needy—had a notable impact on reinforcing the religious strength of the Muslim subjects. Additionally, the study investigates how extravagant feasts and fairs, including Nauroz and Meena Bazaar, offered these women opportunities to showcase their wealth, engage in economic activities, and build social acquaintances within the nobility. Drawing on various historical sources this research illuminates how these women utilized both the assets and restrictions of the harem to nurture the societal progress. Through this nuanced examination, the article emphasizes the interplay of gender, power, and philanthropy, revealing the pivotal role of Muslim royal women in shaping the sociopolitical and cultural legacy of Mughal Empire.

Keywords:

Mughal Empire, Harem Women, Power, Society, Legacy.

Introduction

The increasing emphasis on gender studies worldwide serves as a vital impetus for this research, driven by the need to explore the often-overlooked facets of women's lives and contributions. In past, much of historiography has focused on male rulers, often sidelining the roles of women due to entrenched patriarchal biases. Within medieval Indian historiography, elite women have been somewhat represented, yet mainly portrayed through their political influence, often emphasizing their "cleverness" in guiding the decisions of their husbands or sons. This study aims to bridge this gap by offering a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective on their roles, highlighting their contributions beyond mere political influence.

The Mughals' vast resources enabled them to leave a profound mark on society, with royal Muslim women making notable contributions across social, educational, and religious spheres, establishing a distinctive legacy within the empire. The Mughal Harem, often perceived as a secluded place, was in fact, a dynamic institution where women engaged in activities that enriched the empire's social fabric. Philanthropic endeavors, such as the establishment of madrassas, mosques, and sarais, alongside their support of scholars and religious works, and the sponsoring of festivities such as Nauroz and Meena Bazaars boosted their prestige and power in the imperial court, as well as their social position both within and beyond its confines. The public and charitable endeavors of the women of the Mughal dynasty which often stretched beyond the harem walls reflect the agency and authority these women exercised, while still aligning with Islamic ideals of modesty. Far from passive figures, these royal ladies actively engaged in social and intellectual causes, demonstrating their pivotal role in medieval philanthropy. Examining their contributions reveals a nuanced understanding of how Mughal women's public initiatives were central to the socio-political and cultural legacy of the empire.

This study holds significance in its potential to redefine our understanding of the roles and influence of Mughal royal women, often seen as limited by the seclusion of the harem. Utilizing Structuration Theory, this study explores how these women maneuvered through societal limitations to make significant contributions to governance, culture, and social reform. By emphasizing their agency, it demonstrates that their roles were crucial not only in private spheres but also in influencing the political and cultural framework of the empire. Ultimately, this research broadens historical understandings of gender, agency, and power dynamics within Mughal society, contributing to the larger discussion on women's roles within patriarchal systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the roles and contributions played by harem women in Medieval India by examining a wide range of academic publications that illuminate the

socio-cultural context of the period. This review aims to challenge conventional narratives by highlighting the agency, influence and contributions of harem women throughout the time of Mughal reign in India. Through a thorough analysis of various scholarly works and historical accounts, the significant lives of the harem women who through their power and resources have played their role in navigating and shaping their society in respective times are explored.

Several works discuss the evolution of women's roles in medieval India, highlighting both continuity and change. For example, "Indian Feminism: Class, Gender and Identity in Medieval Ages" a publication of Rukhsana Iftikhar (2016) traces the journey of women in India from prehistoric times to the middle ages, focusing on various social groups in Indian society, including Muslim and Hindu women serving as an attempt to learn about and comprehend the centuries-old treatment of women. This work also emphasizes the contribution and accomplishments of women during the Medieval Period.

Similarly, Sudha Sharma's "The Status of Muslim Women in Medieval India" (2016) examines the evolving roles and statuses of Muslim women, shaped by their interaction with the Indian milieu. Sharma highlights the socio-economic challenges these women encountered, including early marriages and dowry practices, while also recognizing their economic agency through property rights and employment. This book offers valuable insights into the social, cultural, and economic aspects of Muslim women's lives during this period.

"Education in Muslim India" a publication of S.M. Jaffar (2009), examines the educational endeavors of Mughal women, highlighting their intellectual achievements and contributions to the establishment of educational institutions. This work emphasizes the progressive attitudes towards women's education during the Mughal era.

Soma Mukherjee's book "Royal Mughal Ladies and their Contributions" (2001) delves deeply into the lives and responsibilities of notable women in the Mughal Empire, offering an in-depth analysis of their contributions to the various facets of Mughal culture. The author provides in-depth research and analysis to show how these women used their influence to shape public policy, promote cross-cultural interactions, and acquisition of expensive art and architecture.

This work differs from the previous literature by employing a theoretical framework that enables a deeper examination of how harem women navigated societal restrictions, highlighting their ability to wield power both within the harem and in the broader social landscape. This approach expands the scope of gender studies in South Asian history, challenging conventional views of the harem as solely a place of seclusion and revealing it as a complex institution of influence and significance.

METHODOLOGY

For studying the ability of the Mughal ladies to act independently and exert their influence within the confines of the harem, the *Structuration Theory* of British sociologist Anthony Giddens is applied. This structuration theory provides a framework for examining the link between individuals and society. It implies that social structures are both the medium and the outcome of human activity. Giddens believed that humans act as knowledgeable agents within the social order to actively change their social reality. He redefines the role of structure by recognizing that it can both constrain and enable human action.¹ The research recognizes the duality of structure in Giddens' theory by acknowledging both the constraints imposed by the harem system and the agency of elite Indian women within that system. This duality suggests that while social structures may limit individual actions, individuals also have the capacity to maintain, challenge, or transform those structures through their agency. This idea aligns with this research, as the royal ladies residing in the secluded world of the harem actively participated in the social and cultural spheres of society, leaving a lasting impact. Despite their confinement, they utilized their wealth to influence their surroundings through donations, organizing fairs, and other significant actions that reinforced their position and influence. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make choices that influence their lives and the social structures around them. Giddens argues that agency and structure are interconnected. While structure refers to the patterns of social organization that shape individuals' actions and experiences, agency refers to individuals' ability to actively engage with and potentially transform these structures through their actions. Despite the constraints imposed by the harem system, my research will underscore the agency of elite Indian women by highlighting their significant contributions.

THE PHILANTHROPIC LEGACY OF MUGHAL ROYAL WOMEN

While Islamic teachings accentuate the spiritual rewards of charity, this tradition was also deeply rooted in the practices of medieval societies. Just as Islam views charity as a path to divine closeness and eternal reward, medieval kings and queens demonstrated their generosity through charitable acts, often as a public display of their piety and compassion. Whether motivated by religion or royal duty, charity served a common purpose—helping the needy while enhancing the moral and social stature of the benefactor.

¹Mukunda Lamsal. "The Structuration Approach of Anthony Giddens." *Himalayan Journal of Sociology & Anthropology* 5 (2012),p. 111-122

In medieval times, charity stemmed from either pity or generosity. Charity was a common tradition, with Kings and Queens actively engaging in charitable works and giving alms to the needy. Distributing alms to the poor was even a part of the coronation festivities.¹ The recovery of a royal family member from illness or an escape from calamity was celebrated with a jashn and the distribution of alms.² When emperors gave gifts to men of high status, it was viewed as a gift to someone of lower status. When they gave money to the poor, it was considered charity.³ All subjects, irrespective of religion and creed, benefited from the King's generosity. Several royal ladies, known for their kindness, generosity, and benevolence, dedicated a significant portion of their personal allowances to charitable causes. They assisted the poor, particularly needy women, gave generous donations on special events, built caravanserais and inns, and established educational centers and mosques for public usage.⁴ Starting from Babur to Aurangzeb, different ladies attached to the kings somehow, made generous endowments and charities for the destitute. As in case of Mahim Begum (wife of Babur) who made several donations after the death of her husband in 1530. Gulbadan Begum mentions that Mahim Begum made a daily allowance of food: an ox, two sheep, and five goats in the morning, and five goats at afternoon prayer-time. She provided this from her own estate during the two and a half years she remained alive.⁵ Bega Begum (wife of Hamayun) returned to the imperial dominions after visiting Mecca and Medina, where she generously distributed benefactions and charities, and was spiritually fulfilled.⁶ After performing the Hajj, she was given the title of Haji Begum. Throughout her widowhood, she dedicated her time to almsgiving, supporting five hundred poor people through her charity.⁷ She also built an Arab Sarai near the tomb of her husband Humayun. The Sarai could accommodate at least 300 Arab travelers and traders.⁸ Gulbadan was renowned for her generous charitable contributions, consistently dedicating herself to pleasing God by supporting the poor and

¹ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions*, (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House , 2001),p.107.

² Muhammad Azhar Ansari, *Social Life of the Mughal Emperors (1526-1727)*, (Allahabad and Delhi: Shanti Prakashan , 1974),p-186.

³ *Ibid.*,p-182.

⁴ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions*, (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House , 2001),p.43.

⁵ Gulbadan Begam, *Humayun Nama*, Trans. Annette S. Beveridge, (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902),p.111.

⁶ Abul Fazal, *The Akbar Nama*, Trans. H. Blochmann, Vol-II, (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1907),p.484.

⁷ Rekha Mishra, *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967),p.109.

⁸ S. K. Banerji, *Humayun Badshah*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1938),p.232.

needy.¹ Gulbadan Begum herself made large donations, when she returned from the holy pilgrimage in 1585 A.D.²

Nur Jahan has been credited as the chosen one by her husband Jahangir. Her nature was generous and sociable and thus earned widespread admiration from everyone. She was generous and fair to all who sought her help, providing refuge for those in need. Muhammad Hadi described her as a refuge for all sufferers and helpless women. Whenever she heard of oppression, she actively supported the oppressed.³ She ensured that every orphaned girl received a wedding portion, and over 16 years, she bore the marriage and dowry expenses for 500 girls from her own purse.⁴ She gathered a large number of maids in palace and facilitated their marriages to Ahadis (gentlemen troopers) of the court. According to accounts, she would donate three thousand rupees in alms on designated bath days.⁵ Instances of her minor acts of charity were nearly countless.⁶

Arjumand Bano Begum also known as Mumtaz Mahal (wife of Emperor Shah Jahan) was also very famous for her kindness and generosity towards the subject. Jadunath Sarkar while mentioning her, writes that a crowd of female beggars, poor widows, orphans, maidens from impoverished families, and daughters of poor scholars, theologians, and pious men sought the royal charity. Their petitions were presented to the Empress by her chief servant, Sati-un-Nissa, known as the female Nazir. Her Majesty reported these cases to the Emperor, who granted land to some, pensions and donations to others, and provided garments, jewels, and money as dowries for maidens too poor to marry. Every day, large sums were spent in the harem for this charitable work.⁷ The incident also shows the influence of the Queen on the Emperor. It is reported that during Aurangzeb's rule, one of his wives and mother of Muhammad Muazzam and Badr-un-Nisa, Nawab Bai, constructed a sarai in Fardapur and established Baijipura as part of Aurangabad conurbation.⁸ The eldest daughter of Shah Jahan, Jahan Ara, who ascended to become the premier lady of the realm in her youth (after the death of Mumtaz Mahal), was prominently portrayed in court chronicles for her piety and sanctity. She was given titles that emphasized her spiritual significance, such as 'gateway to heaven.' Her public display of piety was viewed as enhancing the spiritual and benevolent image of royal

¹ Gulbadan Begam, *Humayun Nama*, Trans. Annette S. Beveridge, (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902),p.76-77.

² Rekha Mishra, *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967),p.109.

³ Beni Prasad, *History of Jahangir*, (Allahabad: The Indian Press, 1930),p.184.

⁴ Sir H.M. Elliot & Professor John Dowson, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, Vol-VI (London, 1875),p.399.

⁵ Nawwab Samsam-Ud-Daula Shah Nawaz Khan And Abdul Hayy, *Maathir Ul Umara*, Trans. H. Beveridge, Vol-II (Calcutta : The Asiatic Society, 1952),p.1078.

⁶ Beni Prasad, *History of Jahangir*, (Allahabad: The Indian Press, 1930),p.184

⁷ Jadunath Sarkar, *Studies in Mughal India*, (Calcutta : Kuntaline Press , 1919),p.11-12

⁸ Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb*, Vol-I (Calcutta : M.C. Sarkar & Sons, 1912),p.63

women.¹ The documents reveal the princess's acts of public piety, including Jahanara's organization of charity, payment of pilgrims' fares on her ship, establishment of langar (free kitchen), and provision of daily allowances for physicians and medicines.² Jahanara constructed the city's largest bathhouse along with a caravanserai, regarded as the "the most impressive structure in the city after her father's newly constructed Jami Masjid," located west of Chandni Chowk.³ Most notably, unlike the typically anonymous women builders of the Ottoman and Safavid courts, the Mughal princess Jahanara in the eighteenth century had intentions that extended beyond the mere glorification of the dynasty to include personal recognition as well.⁴ According to Shadab Bano, the documents highlight Jahanara's acts of public piety, such as princess organizing charity, covering the fares of pilgrims in her ship, running a langar (free kitchen), and providing daily allowances for hakim and medicines for hospitals.⁵ During her inaugural voyage on November 29th 1643 A.D., The Sahebi, Jahanara's ship used both for revenue and to serve Hajj pilgrims, was designated to transporting hajjis to Mecca and Medina. Princess also directed that 50 Koni of rice must be sent on ship every year to be distributed among the needy and poor of the Mecca.⁶ Pilgrims were not charged fare, but they were cautioned against transporting merchandise for other merchants under their names. Upon Shah Jahan's recovery from an illness, Jahanara and harem women made a donation of 50,000 rupees among the poor. After his death, she gave two thousand gold coins to be given to the destitute.⁷

Eldest daughter of Emperor Aurangzeb, Princess Zeb-un-Nisa supported and provided financial aid or other resources to scholars and intellectuals,⁸ thereby encouraging and promoting learning and intellectual activities. Aurangzeb's daughter Zinat-un-Nisa Begum was also exceptionally generous and charitable. She was known for her charitable nature, providing livelihoods to many⁹ and constructing numerous

¹ Shadab Bano, Piety And Pricess Jahanara's Role In The Public Domain, (Indian History Congress, Vol. 74, 2013: 246-250),p. 247.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. & Lisa Balabanlilar, The Begims of the Mystic Feast: Turco-Mongol Tradition in the Mughal Harem. (The Journal of Asian Studies , Volume 69, No. 1, 2010: 123-147),p.141.

⁴ Ibid.,p.141.

⁵ Shadab Bano, Piety And Pricess Jahanara's Role In The Public Domain, (Indian History Congress, Vol. 74, 2013: 246-250),p. 247.

⁶ Shireen Moosvi, Mughal Shipping at Surat in the First Half of Seventeenth Century, (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Vol. 51, 1990: 308-320),p.312.

⁷ Rekha Mishra, Women in Mughal India 1526-1748 (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967),p.110.

⁸ Soma Mukherjee, Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions, (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House , 2001),p.44.

⁹ Saqi Mustad Khan, Maasir-I-Alamgiri, Trans. Jadunath Sarkar, (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society , 1947),p.323.

caravanserais for travelers' benefit. Rekha Mishra quotes from Norris Embassy to Aurangzeb (1699-1702), this princess (Zinat-un-Nisa) constructed fourteen caravanserais along the roads as a charitable act to support poor travelers and merchants.¹ Another daughter of Aurangzeb, Badar-un-Nisa Begum is said to have devoted her life to performing pious deeds.²

This benevolent attitude persisted among ladies even in later periods. Lal Kunwar (consort of Jahandar Shah, who was the grandson of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb), was known for her kindness, regularly distributing food and cash to the impoverished and needy.³

The persistent tradition of charitable practices from Babur to Aurangzeb highlights a steadfast royal dedication to public welfare. Prominent figures such as Mahim Begum, Bega Begum, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahan Ara, and Zinat-un-Nisa Begum are notable for their significant charitable contributions, ranging from daily food distributions to the construction of caravanserais for travelers. These acts were not merely expressions of kindness but also strategic efforts to reinforce the moral authority and spiritual leadership of the ruling elite. The charitable endeavors of royal women, often undertaken independently or in conjunction with their husbands' efforts, emphasize their influence and active participation in the socio-political sphere. This deeply ingrained tradition of royal charity within Mughal governance illustrates the intersection of personal piety, public duty, and the consolidation of power through acts of generosity, offering a nuanced understanding of medieval philanthropy in the Mughal Empire. Routine charity and the practice of gifting were significant means of displaying regal power and patronage, as repeatedly referenced in court chronicles. This continuity of charitable practices not only underscores the strategic importance of these acts in reinforcing royal authority but also elevates the image of imperial women, highlighting their public role in piety and its value in statecraft.⁴ Their efforts significantly enhanced the social infrastructure of their regions, showcasing a comprehensive approach to charity aimed at improving the lives of the less fortunate throughout the Mughal Empire. Privacy and

¹ Rekha Mishra, *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967),p.110.

² Saqi Mustad Khan, *Maasir-I-Alamgiri*, Trans. Jadunath Sarkar, (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society , 1947),p.323.

³ Rekha Mishra, *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967),p.110. Also see, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions* in which Soma Mukherjee has also documented the construction of mosques by royal ladies, alongside connected projects as part of their charitable works. These constructions were often accompanied by additional facilities like rest houses and lodging for the needy, reflecting the royal women's commitment to both religious piety and public welfare,p-43.

⁴ Gregory C. Kozlowski, *Private Lives And Public Piety: Women And The Practice Of Islam In Mughal India. (Women In The Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, And Piety, 1998: 469-488),p.476.*

seclusion did not confine Mughal women solely to charitable and pious activities. Instead, piety was essential for women in positions of power and likely a reflection of the influence they truly held.

THE EDUCATIONAL LEGACY OF MUGHAL WOMEN

Education is regarded as a radiant light that reveals and nurtures the inner qualities and talents of individuals. It plays a vital role in the socio-economic development of people. The importance of reading and writing is highlighted in the first verses of the Holy Quran, emphasizing them as essential means of acquiring and disseminating knowledge. There is evidence indicating that female education was also valued in Muhammadan India.¹ The Mughals were cultured and had a strong inclination towards acquiring knowledge. Throughout the Mughal Dynasty, every emperor prioritized the education of both the princes and princesses, ensuring that the ladies of the imperial seraglio received the proper arrangements of the education. The Muslim aristocracy and royalty ensured that their daughters received an excellent education and training. During the era, there are examples of princesses receiving a liberal education, suggesting that they did not live and die ignorant. An important activity among royal ladies was their active engagement in literary pursuits.² However, opportunities were mainly limited to princesses and women of high-ranking families.³ Mughal Emperors often employed experienced learned⁴ women, to educate the royal women. Sometimes the roles of school mistress and governess were combined into one person, who was referred to as '*atun mama*'.⁵ Gulbadan Begum also includes *atun mama* in her list of guests at the mystical feast.⁶ The employment of female tutors reflects the practice of home education, a

¹ Narendra Nath Law, Promotion Of Learning In India Dur Muhammadan Rule (By Muhammadans), (London: Longmans, Green And Co., 1916),p.200.

Jadunath Sarkar in his book Studies in Mughal India claims that: "In Persia and Arabia, young girls attended the same primary schools as boys under the Mullah's instruction. However, in Mughal India, it appears that mixed-gender classes, even for very young children, were not conducted, and girls from poor families remained completely illiterate",p.302

² Rekha Mishra, Women in Mughal India 1526-1748 (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967),p.87.

³ Angbin Yasmin, Literacy And Literature — Study Of Attainments Of Women In Mughal, (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Vol. 73, 2012: 391-399),p.392. Also in Kalpana Dasgupta, How Learned Were the Mughals: Reflections on Muslim Libraries in India, (The Journal of Library History (1974-1987), Vol. 10, No. 3, 1975: 241-254),p.248.

⁴ Jadunath Sarkar, Studies in Mughal India, (Calcutta : Kuntaline Press , 1919),p.301.

⁵ Angbin Yasmin, Literacy And Literature — Study Of Attainments Of Women In Mughal, (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Vol. 73, 2012: 391-399),p.391. Also can be seen in Lisa Balabanlilar, The Begims of the Mystic Feast: Turco-Mongol Tradition in the Mughal Harem. (The Journal of Asian Studies , Volume 69, No. 1, 2010: 123-147),p.142.

⁶ Gulbadan Begam, Humayun Nama, Trans. Annette S. Beveridge, (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902),p.121.

privilege reserved for the upper class of society. Father Monserrate noted that Akbar had a strong interest in female education.¹ These tutors were not ordinary individuals but experts in their respective fields, imparting the best of their knowledge to princes and princesses. The syllabus frequently comprised of study of Persian, Arabic, Theology, and History.² But these subjects also encompassed theology and ethics, history and politics, accounting and arithmetic, mensuration and agriculture, engineering and astronomy, domestic science and medicine, logic and philosophy, as well as physical and mechanical sciences.³ Akbar changed the curriculum of the madrasah. The curriculum included geometry, economics, grammar, law, physics, and geography in addition to the previously listed subjects.⁴ During his reign, the royal household's ladies received regular training,⁵ as evidenced by the establishment of certain chambers serving as school in his palace at Fatehpur Sikri.⁶

The Mughals were cultured individuals who had a strong affinity for acquiring knowledge. They established numerous madrasas, maktabas, and centers of higher education, in addition to founding libraries. The activities through which Timurid and Mughal women became visible and acted as representatives included promoting and financing sacred and secular buildings that conveyed specific meanings, shaping their identity, authority, and personal ambitions.⁷ The princesses were well-educated and cultured⁸ and they played a significant role in promoting learning, particularly during an era when the concept of educating women was largely neglected. These women went

¹ Monserrate, Commentary Of Father Monserrate, S.J. On his Journey to the Court of Akbar, Trans. J. S Hoyland), (London: Oxford University Press , 1922),p.202. "He devotes significant care and attention to the education of the princesses, who are strictly secluded from the sight of men. They are taught to read and write and receive training in other areas from matrons."

² Kalpana Dasgupta, How Learned Were the Mughals: Reflections on Muslim Libraries in India, (The Journal of Library History (1974-1987), Vol. 10, No. 3, 1975: 241-254),p.248. While Jadunath Sarkar in Studies in Mughal India writes The ladies prioritized studying the humanities over theology and preferred Persian to Arabic. However, every one of them who advanced in her studies was required to memorize the Quran,p.301.

³ Faraz Anjum, Education and Learning in Mughal India: A Critical Study of Colonial Perceptions, (Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan, olume No. 55, Issue No. 1, 2018: 83-94),p.89.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Narendra Nath Law, Promotion Of Learning In India Dur Muhammadan Rule (By Muhammadans), (London: Longmans, Green And Co., 1916),p.202.

⁶ Rukhsana Iftikhar, Cultural Contribution of Mughal Ladies, (A Research Journal of South Asian Studies Vol. 25, No. 2, 2010: 323-339),p.324. & S.M. Jaffar, Education In Muslim India, (Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delli, 2009),p.109.

⁷ Afshan Bokhari, Gendered Landscapes:Jahan Ara Begum's (1614-1681) Patronage, Piety and Self-Representation in 17th C Mughal India, (2009),p.194.

⁸ Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, The Administration of the Mughul Empire, (Patna: N.V. Publications Lohanipur, 1966),p.63.

beyond mere patronage and wrote works of great literary, historical, and cultural significance. The harem ladies strived to emulate their lifestyle and mindset. Many harem women had a passion for gathering books and conserved their personal libraries within the royal palaces.¹ They were enthusiastic patrons of learning, establishing schools and colleges to promote education. Additionally, they generously awarded land and fiscal endowments to scholars, poets, and intellectuals who sought their support in large numbers.² Their engagement in social reforms and charitable activities provided necessary services and promoted social welfare, directly improving the lives of many individuals, including those beyond the elite circles.

Mughal women also advanced the cause of learning by establishing educational institutions. They founded Madrasas (schools) and provided stipends to needy and deserving individuals to promote learning. Bega Begum, the wife of Humayun, established a college near her husband's tomb.³ The Humayun Nama, a literary work of Gulbadan's prolific pen, mentions that she had accumulated a large number of important volumes in her own library.⁴ She thus laid the foundation for female writers. Jahanara and Zeb-un-Nisa begum later followed in the footsteps of Gulbadan Begum and produced their own writings either in forms of books or pamphlets.

Maham Anaga, the wet-nurse of Emperor Akbar, was a highly educated woman of her time. Not only did she have a deep love for learning, but she was also a notable advocate for education. She believed in serving the society by educating its people. To fulfill this mission, she invested a significant portion of her fortune in establishing a college⁵ in Delhi in 1561 A.C., complete with a mosque. She ensured the institution was well-equipped and staffed with capable professors.⁶ This college is an honorable progeny of selfless dedication and the pinnacle accomplishment of a female educationist. However, it also reflects a sense of lament and irony. According to S.M. Jaffar, the "dilapidated madrasah" and the "moribund cloisters" are quiet testaments to Maham Anaga's extraordinary accomplishment and the subsequent inability to protect such a priceless cultural and educational legacy.⁷ It subtly criticizes the lack of efforts made to

¹ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions*, (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House , 2001),p.188.

² Ibid.

³ S. K. Banerji, *Humayun Badshah*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1938),p.317.

⁴ Gulbadan Begam, *Humayun Nama*, Trans. Annette S. Beveridge, (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902),p.76. & S.M. Jaffar, *Education In Muslim India*, (Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delli, 2009),p.193. Also in Lisa Balabanlilar, *The Begims of the Mystic Feast: Turco-Mongol Tradition in the Mughal Harem*. (*The Journal of Asian Studies* , Volume 69, No. 1, 2010: 123-147),p.142.

⁵ S.M. Jaffar, *Education In Muslim India*, (Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delli, 2009),p.134. Also see Narendra Nath Law, *Promotion Of Learning In India Dur Muhammadan Rule* (By Muhammadans), (London: Longmans, Green And Co., 1916),p.202.

⁶ Ibid.,p.134-135.

⁷ Ibid.,p.135.

preserve and commemorate the achievements made by historical women to the field of education.

Noor Jahan established vocational facilities for women, making her a standout example. Women interested in fine arts, such as sewing, knitting, and cooking, might participate in these centers.¹ These institutions in capital towns such as Delhi, Agra, and Lahore offered free services to underprivileged women.²

One of the wives of Shahjahan named Azzun Nissa Begum (commonly known as Akbarabadi Bibi) was also among the learned ladies of the time. It is believed that in 1667 A.D., she funded the construction of a madrasah near the Faiz Bazaar in Delhi to promote education. Jahanara established a Madrasah in Agra, which was connected to the Jami Masjid.³ Zeb-un-Nisa Begum deeply valued learning and skill, dedicating herself to collecting, copying, and reading books. She also focused on improving the lives of scholars and talented individuals. Consequently, she amassed a library⁴ unrivaled in its time, that houses numerous volumes on a variety of subjects,⁵ attracting numerous theologians, scholars, poets, scribes, and calligraphers who benefited from her generosity, despite her seclusion in the grand harem.⁶ She also established a translation department where numerous classical books were translated.⁷ The establishment of a translation department underscores the Mughal ladies' role in advancing translation studies.

Hence it is interesting to note that the education received by Mughal women, especially those from the royal family, was tailored to their status. They had access to private tutors and specialized instruction within the confines of the harem, with education taking place in the royal palaces. Their extensive education was designed to provide them with the knowledge necessary for their positions in society and the courts. But they also made an effort to spread knowledge beyond of their own confines, as shown by the creation of madrassas for the general public. The key difference lies in the fact that while they received home-based education, and promoted institutional education. Hence, it is

¹ Rukhsana Iftikhar, *Indian Feminism Class, Gender & Identity in Medieval Ages*, (Chennai : Notion Press, 2016).

² Ibid.

³ Narendra Nath Law, *Promotion Of Learning In India Dur Muhammadan Rule* (By Muhammadans), (London: Longmans, Green And Co., 1916),p.203. Also in Yusuf Husain, *Glimpses of Medieval Indian Cultur*, (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1957),p.86 & Rukhsana Iftikhar, *Cultural Contribution of Mughal Ladies*, (A Research Journal of South Asian Studies Vol. 25, No. 2, 2010: 323-339),p.32

⁴ Kalpana Dasgupta, *How Learned Were the Mughals: Reflections on Muslim Libraries in India*, (The Journal of Library History (1974-1987), Vol. 10, No. 3, 1975: 241-254),p.250.

⁵ S.M. Jaffar, *Education In Muslim India*, (Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delli, 2009),p.197.

⁶ Saqi Mustad Khan, *Maasir-I-Alamgiri*, Trans. Jadunath Sarkar, (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society , 1947),p.322.

⁷ Kalpana Dasgupta, *How Learned Were the Mughals: Reflections on Muslim Libraries in India*, (The Journal of Library History (1974-1987), Vol. 10, No. 3, 1975: 241-254),p.250.

justified to conclude that the Muslim women during the Muhammadan rule were not as ignorant as is commonly believed. They were knowledgeable and served as beacons of light and hope to others.

Religion was never put aside during the Mughal rule. Ladies of the royal family dedicated themselves to religious activities.¹ Gulbadan Begum described the pilgrimage procedures in detail.² Humayun Nama also lists the names of women who joined the religious journey to Mecca including Gulbadan Begum, Salima Sultan Begum, the wife of Askari (Humayun's step brother), Sultanam, also the daughters of Kamran (another step brother of Humayun) named Haji and Gulizar Begums were also on the board.³ Abul Fazl also mentions Haji Begum as the pilgrim.⁴ He mentions the donations made by her after her return from the holy pilgrimage.

Sati-un-Nisa was not only a Hafiza (someone who memorized the Quran), but also a wonderful reciter of the sacred book. Jahanara was also a religious lady who was a follower of Mullah Shah Badkshani⁵ from Qadriya Sufi order. Jahanara Begum's religious works include *Risala Sahebiya* and *Munis-ul-Arwah*. In *Risala Sahebiya*, she states that God has instilled in her a strong desire to seek the correct path.⁶ The *Risala Sahebiya* describes the princess' self-realization on the mystical path of Sufism, guided by her Sufi master, Mullah Shah Badkshani. In the *Risala Sahebiya*, Jahanara claims that her piety led to the light of the Timurid lamp. The princess was a fervent devotee of the Qadiriya order. Her brother, Dara Shukoh, encouraged her to join the Qadiriya order. She made Mulla Shah Badkshani as her spiritual guru and preceptor.⁷

Under the guidance of Emperor Aurangzeb, the females in his harem (daughters) learned doctrines and concepts and practiced worship. God, reading and transcribing the Quran, acquiring virtues, and preparing for the afterlife.⁸ Zeb-un-Nisa begum learnt Quran by heart and it was upon her order that Mullah Safi ud din Arbdili first took the residence in Kashmir and then translated the Quran into Persian and composed the

¹ Rukhsana Iftikhar, *Indian Feminism Class, Gender & Identity in Medieval Ages*, (Chennai : Notion Press, 2016).

² Gulbadan Begum, *Humayun Nama*, Trans. Annette S. Beveridge, (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902),p.73.

³ *Ibid.*,p.69-70.

⁴ Abul Fazal, *The Akbar Nama*, Trans. H. Blochmann, Vol-II, (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1907),p.484.

⁵ Mulla Shah Badkshani was Hazrat Mian Mir's follower and took over as head of Qadiriya Silsala following his death. Both Dara Shukoh and Jahanara Begum were his followers.

⁶ Prof. Muhammad Aslam, (trans.) *Risala Sehabiya*, (*Journal of Research Society* Vol XVI No.4, 1980: 69–106).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Saqi Mustad Khan, *Maasir-I-Alamgiri*, Trans. Jadunath Sarkar, (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society , 1947),p.318.

commentary “Zeb-ut-Tafasir.”¹ Other writings and publications have been written in her honored name as well.² Zinat-un-Nisa Begum was raised to be knowledgeable about doctrines and faith rules.³ Aurangzeb made Badr-un-Nisa memorize the Quran also and read literature on the faith. She spent her life performing holy acts.⁴

Thus, Mughal royal women’s religious and scholastic pursuits were an important part of the spiritual and cultural fabric of their time. Their contributions not only expanded religious discourse, but also demonstrated the importance of women in the Mughal Empire’s intellectual and spiritual life.

MUGHAL WOMEN AND THEIR EXTRAVAGANT FEASTS

The routine of life for the ladies of the harem was frequently broken by hosting and receiving of guests. The wives of nobles would visit the ladies of the Emperor’s household, and the Emperor’s ladies would, in turn, visit them.⁵ Islam views hospitality as a virtue, and the Mughal royal household found great resonance in this practice, as dining and hosting visitors became a way of demonstrating not only wealth but also piety. A few of the women took pleasure in organizing banquets and feasts. Several citations in contemporary documents suggest that these events were a source of great enjoyment for them. These feasts were not limited to any particular type of event; any significant occasion for the chief ladies could lead to a grand feast, such as weddings, coronation ceremonies of princes, celebrations after recovery from illness, and gatherings. The ladies also joined in the celebrations and feasts on special events like the birth of a prince or princess, birthdays, circumcisions, and marriages.⁶ The Emperor’s mother’s residence was regularly a site of the lunar and solar weighing ceremonies.⁷ The enjoyment of arranging feasts can be viewed both on a personal and social scale. These majestic feasts served as a means for these ladies to showcase their wealth and influence. Their keen interest in the arrangements and details was not only a display of their skills but also a demonstration of their regal power and affluence. The ladies not only arranged the feasts but also enjoyed paying visits to others’ gatherings. Hindu officials and their wives were occasionally hosted at the residences of the royal women.⁸

¹ Ibid.,p.322.

² Ibid.,p.323.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rekha Mishra, *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967),p.96.

⁶ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor Or Mogul India 1653-1708*, Trans. William Irvine, Vol-II, (Bengal, 1907),p.343.

⁷ Rekha Mishra, *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967),p.97.

⁸ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions*, (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House , 2001),p.82.

The description in Humayun Nama of the event of accession of Humayun explains the extravagance in such cases. The details of great feast at Humayun's accession in 1530 A.D., explains how Mahim Begum oversaw the feast's preparation herself. She made lavish and magnificent arrangements within the palaces.¹ The phrase "They lit up the bazaars. Before that time people used to illuminate the bazaars (only)" in Humayun Nama implies that they brought an exceptional amount of light, energy, or activity to the bazaars, making them much more vibrant and lively than before. The term "only" suggests that the previous illumination was less impressive or extensive compared to what they achieved.² She adorned the royal palace with golden embroidered pillows, cushions, and hangings. In a pavilion made of European brocade and Portuguese cloth, Mahim Begum personally prepared a tent, an enclosure (kanat), and a type of enclosure (sar-i-kanat). She used numerous jeweled and gold vessels, rose-water sprinklers, and candlesticks to create a magnificent and splendid feast with all her stored treasures.³ Similar extravagance has been shown and narrated on the eve of Hindal's marriage by Gulbadan Begum. In 1532-33 A.D, Khanzada Begum, the aunt of Emperor Humayun, proposed to him the idea of celebrating the marriage feast of his half-brother Hindal alongside a mystic feast. The Emperor agreed with the proposal and said, "Let what my Royal aunt wishes be done."⁴ Khanzada Begum first arranged the mystic feast, followed by the celebrations of Hindal's marriage feast. This feast was held in magnificent style, with pearl and gold hangings, and the use of silver and gold vessels. Rekha Mishra, in her book "Women In Mughal India," describes similar events involving Dildar Begum during the marriage of Humayun to Hamida Banu Begum, and Maham Anaga, the wet nurse of Akbar, who made similar arrangements for the wedding of her son, Adham Khan.⁵ Nur Jahan was not behind in this creativity as well. She created new methods to setting up feasts and entertaining visitors. Emperor Jahangir was quite pleased with her abilities to plan elaborate feasts. In his memoirs, Jahangir recounted multiple instances in which Nur Jahan Begum organized feasts. Nur Jahan had a feast in one of her homes, which was surrounded by huge tanks, on Shab-i-Barat.⁶ Jahangir also mentioned the amazing feast he and his other women had at the Nur Afshan Garden.⁷ This depiction not only illustrates the extravagance of Mughal celebrations but also reflects the cultural and

¹ Rekha Mishra, *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967),p.96.

² Gulbadan Begam, *Humayun Nama*, Trans. Annette S. Beveridge, (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902),p.113-114.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*,p.117-118.

⁵ Abul Fazal, *The Akbar Nama*, Trans. H. Beveridge, Vol-II, (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1907),204-205.

⁶ Jahangir, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Trans. Alexander Rogers Beveridge, Vol-II, (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1914),p.119.

⁷ *Ibid.*,p.241.

social dynamics of the period, where such displays of wealth and power were crucial in reinforcing royal authority and prestige. The narrative provides insights into the cultural and social practices of the Mughal court, as well as the roles and influences of royal women in shaping these traditions.

THE WOMEN IN MUGHAL FAIRS

Mughal Emperors showed great interest in providing their ladies with opportunities for entertainment and pleasure. One of the social activities for the ladies was their involvement in fairs held during New Year feasts (Nauroz).¹ Palaces, courtyards, gardens, private and public halls, and even marketplaces were adorned with elaborate decorations. Ordinary people also embellished their homes and dressed in fine attire. During this time, the common people were allowed to meet the emperor once a week without restrictions.² The magnificent decorations of palaces, courtyards, gardens, and marketplaces during celebrations such as Nauroz reflected the Mughal Empire's vast resources. The lavish adornments and fine dress worn by participants emphasized the richness of the Mughal court and its privileged females. Akbar introduced the Nauroz celebration, which continued until Aurangzeb abolished it due to his religious orthodoxy.³ Badauni, the bold historian of Akbar's reign (circa 1596), who strongly opposed the Emperor's religious policies, writes about these fairs as quoted by Bernier, "In order to further demean our religion, His Majesty ordered that the stalls of the fancy bazars, which are held on New Year's Day, should, for a certain period, be given over to the Begums and the women of the harem, as well as to other married ladies"⁴ which was a type of fair primarily held in the Mahal or royal palace. Along with the court ladies, the wives and daughters of the prominent nobles, chiefs, Rajas, also took part in these events. During such occasions, His Majesty spent considerable amounts of money. Additionally, important matters concerning the harem, marriage contracts, and engagements of young boys and girls were arranged during these gatherings.⁵ The fair's goal was to have fun rather than to shop, but it also served as an opportunity for it.

¹ Nauroz was a period of joy, festivity, and celebration. Planning for the festival began months in advance, see Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions*, (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House , 2001),p.101.

² Dr. Pran Nath Chopra, *Some Aspects Of Society & Culture During The Mughal Age 1526-1707*, (Agra : Shiva Lai Agarwala & Co. Ltd, Educational Publishers, 1955),p.81.

³ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions*, (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House , 2001),p.102.

⁴ Francois Bernier, *Travels In The Mogul Empire A.D 1656-1668*, Trans. Archibald Constable, (Oxford University Press, 1891),p.273.

⁵ *Ibid.*

During special events, especially the Nauroz celebrations in Mughal times, a unique fair called the Meena Bazaar was held, usually lasting for eight days.¹ The days of the fair were called Khus Roz,² which was a kind of fair that was mostly held in the Mahal or royal palace. The fair was primarily organized by noblewomen, including the wives of omrahs and mansabdars.³ Rajput ladies also participated in the event.⁴ The involvement of Rajput and other noble ladies underscored the integration and collaboration among diverse elite groups within the Mughal Empire. The lavish adornments and fine dress worn by participants emphasized the richness of the Mughal court and its privileged females. The events allowed for extensive social interaction among the aristocracy. This networking facilitated alliances, arranged marriages, and enhanced relationships between various aristocratic families, which might lead to political and social capital. In this way, these bazaars and festivals can be seen as the source of intermixing and diversification of the Mughal dynasty. What became known as the Meena bazaar was first introduced by Humayun.⁵ Akbar⁶, who adapted this tradition, celebrated such occasions as khushroz or joyful days.⁷ Meena Bazaar and similar fairs were held occasionally, without fixed schedule. They were organized as special events or celebrations rather than on a regular basis. Abul Fazl stated that it took place once a month.⁸ Merchants of the era eagerly attended, displaying goods from various countries. Members of His Majesty's harem, as well as women from other households, are invited to attend, and the buying and selling activities are widespread.⁹ The Mughals are thought to have adopted this tradition from Turkistan and Transoxiana, where these bazaars were held once or twice a week in every hamlet and involved both men and women in buying and selling process.¹⁰ However, the Meena Bazaar was an exclusive event for women, closed to the general public. It features exquisite stalls run by the royal ladies, other harem women, and the wives and daughters

¹ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions*, (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House , 2001),p.102.

² Ibid.

³ Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy In Europe And Asia 1608-1667*, Ed. Sir Richard Carnac Temple, Vol-II, (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1914),p.238. Also in Dr. Pran Nath Chopra, *Some Aspects Of Society & Culture During The Mughal Age 1526-1707*, (Agra : Shiva Lai Agarwala & Co. Ltd, Educational Publishers, 1955),p.88.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dr. Pran Nath Chopra, *Some Aspects Of Society & Culture During The Mughal Age 1526-1707*, (Agra : Shiva Lai Agarwala & Co. Ltd, Educational Publishers, 1955),p.88.

⁶ *The Travels of Peter Mundy In Europe And Asia 1608-1667*, Vol-II, states: There is also at this time a bazaar or market held within the Mahal, where his women are,"p.238.

⁷ Abul Fazl Allami, *Ain i Akbari*, Trans. H. Blochmann, Vol-I, (Calcutta , 1873),p.277.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.,p.276.

¹⁰ Dr. Pran Nath Chopra, *Some Aspects Of Society & Culture During The Mughal Age 1526-1707*, (Agra : Shiva Lai Agarwala & Co. Ltd, Educational Publishers, 1955),p.88.

of nobles, who acted as traders. They sold a range of goods including handicrafts, jewelry, cloth, brocades, fruits, and flowers.¹ Thus, meena bazaar serving as a platform for ladies to showcase their crafts and skill at the stalls. Rajput ladies also participated in these bazaars. These women would bring a variety of exquisite and fine objects, set up shops, and act as shopkeepers. The emperor, accompanied by the princes and princesses of the royal harem, would visit the bazaar to purchase items of their choice.² The shopkeepers were entertained with feasts and dances performed by the Kanchinies (professional dancers). As foreign travelers of the time also took note of the fair, which usually lasted for four or five days. This was the event especially arranged for the ladies as stated earlier. So a great chance for them to exhibit their grandeur with pomp and show. The fairs like Meena Bazaar during the Mughal era were multifaceted events that served as platforms for showcasing the wealth, power, and cultural sophistication of Mughal ladies. They provided economic benefits and social leverage while allowing women to engage in the public domain in ways that were significant within the context of their society. These ceremonies gave women a rare public platform to assert their visibility and agency within the patriarchal system of the Mughal court. They promoted social interaction and networking among the Mughal court's elite and noble families. The wives of noble and officials exchanged visits to establish friendships and alliances. These events highlighted the complex interplay of gender, power, and economy in the Mughal Empire, illustrating how elite women navigated and influenced their world. The Meena Bazaar, aligned with Islamic standards of modesty, offered a regulated, gender-segregated space where women could engage in economic activities with a degree of agency. This arrangement allowed these women to balance public participation with religious expectations of decorum, guided by Islamic teachings on trade, fair dealings, and the responsibility of managing wealth appropriately in their aristocratic roles.

CONCLUSION

By establishing themselves as custodians of religious and civic duties, royal women secured their positions within the political sphere, ensuring that their legacies became deeply interwoven with the foundations of Mughal governance. These royal women were not just confined to the limits of the harem, they made major contributions to the empire's social landscape through charitable, educational, religious, and social activities. It was not only an affirmation of the personal religiosity and beneficence of the rulers, but also the skillful manipulation of power instruments that secured the dominance of the elites. Their acts of kindness, educational advancement, religious devotion, and social connections demonstrated their importance and active participation in the Mughal

¹ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions*, (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House , 2001),p.102.

² Rekha Mishra, *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967),p.99.

Empire's governance. Their legacy shaped the Mughal identity for generations, highlighting the lasting impact of their contributions in strengthening the empire's social and cultural foundations.

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