

## UNRAVELLING POWER DYNAMICS IN THE MUGHAL *ZENANA*: AN ENTRY INTO AKBAR'S COMPLICATED HAREM

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### **Abstract**

The predominant depiction of a Mughal domestic household encompasses a large number of women crowding a harem. State's power and grandeur was determined by the presence of women in Emperor's harem. Polygamy, among other factors, ensured the expansionist policy. The only adult male who had unrestricted access to the harem was the king, although his mother's dominance there was widely acknowledged and revered. Earlier, the concept of Harem was present in a rudimentary form, however, it developed as a sacred abode under the reign of Akbar. The major factor being the Mughal - Rajput matrimonial alliances which gave birth to a vibrant and diverse Mughal Seraglio which had both Persian and Hindu element into it. Hence, the Mughal State cannot be seen purely as a political entity but as an active participator in cultural processes in which the authority of the male would be enforced by the state and state language is articulated by the household and the family. Depending on the kind of patronage they desired and the degree of influence and authority they wielded, women in the Mughal Empire were both invisible and visible. These women's lives were undoubtedly regulated by the Emperor, but that did not stop them from making their mark go unnoticed in the Mughal Empire's glorious history.

**Keywords:** Women, Harem, *Zenana*, Mughal, Rajput, Polygamy, State, Household, Matrimonial alliance

### **INTRODUCTION**

The term 'Harem' was derived from the Arabic term harem (literally, something sacred or forbidden); or Persian harem (sanctuary). It stood for seraglio, the private area of the palace or home allocated for the Muslim women's households. Additionally, it was referred to as Zenanah, Harem-Sara, Harem-Gah, Mahal-Sara, and Raniwas. Later, it was called *zenani-dyodhi* in the Rajput states. The chief officer of the Harem was accordingly called *Nazir*; *Nazir-i-Mahal*; *Nazir-i-Maskuyah* (In charge of women's quarters) and most popularly, *Kwajah-sara*. Harem specifically referred to a forbidden place i.e. enclosed quarters meant for the residence of the female members of the family, which were forbidden to other men. However, in this context the term 'women' denoted all the female relatives- aunts, sisters, mothers, daughters, concubines, wives and female servants of the Emperor or the master of the household. The harem served the basic purpose of providing safe and structured residence to the female

relatives of the king. Standard procedure for observance of *purdah* and seclusion were enforced as the highest order of security was adopted to ensure safety and well-being of the Harem inmates. It won't be wrong to say that *Zenana* was an all-women's world with a unique power structure.

The famous proverb that a woman entered the harem by *doli* (bridal palanquin) and left it by *arthior janaza* (funeral bier) was literally true. Mughal *Zenana* was an independent institution and to dismiss it as a pleasure sanctuary would be an injustice. The seraglio was a complex place owing to the presence of variety of females coming from complex places owing to their different backgrounds. This must have created problems and posed unique challenges. However, Polygamy was a well-accepted medieval practice. Also, the productive role of a woman was undeniably supreme in medieval times as it was essential to secure the continuity of Royal blood. Motherhood, elevated a woman's position but there were cases of childless women gaining great power owing to their many talents. Example Ruqaiyya Sultan Begum and Nur Jahan could not bear children to their husbands. Nevertheless, they gained tremendous ascendancy over their husbands.

The term "Begum" was only used by the royal ladies. On the other hand, the titles "Agacha" or "Agha" denoted a slightly lower status and origin. Apart from kin members, the Mughal household afforded a large number of non-kin members as well. One of them being the 'Concubines'. Although they were rated one tier below the wives, they were not just there for indulging in frivolous pleasures. Concubines even gave birth to several royal offspring. The incorporation of Slave-girls into the household was so well-structured in medieval India that many documents are found reflecting their sale and purchase on a frequent basis. Though Emperor Akbar had abolished slavery except for the State, nevertheless it continued. The *Lekhapaddhati* documents reflect Shah Jahan's interest in the slave trade.

The Mughal Harem's operation and structure are described in depth in K.S. Lal's<sup>1</sup> groundbreaking study of the Mughals' household. He discovered the Mughal harem to be an entire world that confirmed to King's prime wants and fanciful desires. The King served as a major focal point for each of the harem's events and rituals. Emperors used harems as places to enjoy themselves. His work offers a thorough understanding of how it functions. In his fascinating work, Harbans Mukhia<sup>2</sup> sought to identify the diverse cultural roles, manners, and court culture of the Mughals. He researched the foundations of the Mughal state's legitimacy, the development of court manners, and the imperial Mughal family's world. The Mughal harem was known for its elaborate mannerisms and etiquettes, which made it a place of decorum as well as pleasure and delight.

Ruby Lal's<sup>3</sup> work is another important one that demonstrates the political significance of harem. She contends that the inhabitants of domestic arenas affected the numerous political changes in Mughal India. She is able to comprehend the power wielded by harem members. The harem proven to be a dynamic setting for modifying, controlling, adjusting, and managing powerful positions for oneself and their offspring. The harem inmates frequently engaged in rivalries, competition, and hostility. Every queen, concubine, and prisoner had a personal staff of maidservants, who were obedient and trustworthy to their superiors. They developed plots and

<sup>1</sup>Lal, Kishori Saran. (1988). *The Mughal Harem*. Aditya Prakashan:Delhi.p.16

<sup>2</sup>Mukhia, H.(2005) *The Mughals of India*. Blackwell Publishing, :USA.

<sup>3</sup>Lal, Ruby.(2002).*Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*. Cambridge University Press:UK

disseminated information via these servants. In addition to hatching plots for dominance, harem inmates also attempted to obtain advantages. These women frequently announced their fictitious pregnancies in an effort to influence politics through procreation. Because the birth of a male child and heir is a major factor in determining any woman's position in a harem.

Farhat Hasan in his work "The State and Locality in Mughal India" argues that women enjoyed an impressive control over property.<sup>4</sup> They rented it, fought for it in courts of law as well. By seventeenth-eighteenth century, it was a well-established practice by women to inherit property. This is evident from the marriage contracts/*nikahnamahs*, where women got certain terms and conditions included in their marriage contracts. And by manipulating the ambiguities in the Sharia't women even prohibited men to take concubine as a part of marriage.

The absence of women in the imperial chronicles and the emergence of harem as a site for social and physical segregation of women doesn't mean the absence or elimination of women agency from the whole structure. As in later Mughal period, Imperial women continued to remain powerful social and political actors even after transformation of Mughal state into an Empire. Recent works have investigated a neglected area of inquiry, with biographical sketches detailing the political and business endeavors of elite Muslim women as well as the development and management of structures. In order to demonstrate their agency within a patriarchal framework, imperial women must emerge, become visible, and be held accountable, as Ruby Lal<sup>5</sup> emphasizes the close connections between the political and home spheres. However, under Akbar's rule, which established a new Mughal monarchy, the domesticity and authority of Mughal women were increasingly institutionalized and regulated in terms of imperial statecraft and ideology. However, as Ruby Lal points out, Mughal women were more than just harem dwellers; they were an essential component of the numerous, intricate processes that went into creating the Mughal imperial polity.

### **Akbar's Complicated Harem**

Beginning with Daulat Begum, Babur's maternal grandmother, who used diplomacy to achieve military and political victories in Central Asia and India, Timurid - Mughal women were active in court politics and imperial affairs. Even his mother and older sister Khanzada Begum served as close advisors to him while he was in power. In her renowned work "Humayunama," Gulbadan Begum, the sister of Emperor Humayun, provides the first personal and richly detailed glimpse of women's lives in the imperial harem. The facts of Humayun's history suggest that the purdah laws were not fully adhered to in the imperial harems of the first two Mughal Emperors, as opposed to those that were later imposed by Akbar and even later by social and religious norms.

As we have seen earlier, the concept of harem was present in a rudimentary form during the reign of his two predecessors. However, it developed as a sacred abode only during the time of Akbar.<sup>6</sup> The first emperor to codify it and establish it as an institution was Akbar. The harem was known as a *mahal*, and the *Nazir e Mahal*, or "in-charge of women quarters," was typically a khwaja sara or a eunuch. The harem guards would all be female or eunuch. It is noteworthy that women's political engagement at the Mughal court was based more on personal merit than

<sup>4</sup>Hasan, F. (2004). *State and Locality in Mughal India. Power Relations in Western India, c, 1572-1730*. Cambridge University Press:UK

<sup>5</sup>Lal, Ruby. (2002). *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*. Cambridge University Press:UK. p.19

<sup>6</sup>Fazal, Abul. (1993). *The Akbar Nama*. (H. Beveridge translated). Delhi. p.421

on family ties. Maham Anga, one of Akbar's wet nurses, is a prime example of this kind of merit-based power in imperial history. Maham Anga influenced Akbar's life in a variety of ways. She dedicated her entire life to Akbar's wellbeing while taking a strong interest in politics. According to Vincent Smith<sup>7</sup> Maham Anga took on authority for herself, gave her own family favors, and established herself as a kingmaker. She formed a puppet (*petticoat*) government in which Akbar was the main figure. It is hardly surprising that Maham Anga's legacy vision may have ultimately been focused on her and her family, similar to Nur Jahan's. Maham Anga, like Nur Jahan, was excluded from the genealogy that would have supported her claim to authority and prestige.

Akbar's harem was called *Shabistan-i-iqbal* (Harem of fortune) and his women were known by different names like *Pardeh gayan* (veiled ladies) and *Iffat-i-Qubab* (cupola of chastity). The important question that however rises is in finding the reason behind the sanctity and inviolability that came to be associated with the Harem during Akbar's time.<sup>8</sup> Apart from the divine status conferred upon him, it becomes important to look into Rajput influence upon Akbar, owing to his matrimonial alliance with *Kachwaha* princess of Amber. This caused a massive ideological shift in his attitude. The Rajput obsession with chastity and equating female honor with family's prestige cannot be ignored.

It's worth mentioning therefore that Akbar started the practice of marrying Hindu Rajput women and this led to introduction of Rajput culture and tradition in the Mughal Seraglio, this gave birth to a hybrid culture that had both Persian and Hindu elements in it. However, it's important to remember that this influx of Hindu women in the Mughal house was unilateral and no Mughal lady is recorded to have entered any Rajput Royal house.

Akbar's attitude towards sexuality was somewhat puritanical. Though he maintained a large fleet of women in his harem, he was against any kind of sexual excesses. Abul Fazl<sup>9</sup> hails Akbar's remarkable sexual control and justifies the large number of his marriages to his desire to have able progeny than any kind of over-indulgence. Though his attitude was somewhat paradoxical, as on one hand he held progressive views on women and their role in family and society while on the other hand his fetish for their reproductive role as the center point of a successful marriage seem to ignore the physical and emotional strain of repeated labor pain and child birth. Nevertheless, Akbar was ahead of his times in varied aspects. He introduced reformatory measures like prohibiting pre-puberty marriages, consent of both the parties i.e. bride and groom along with their respective parents was made binding, marriage between near relations was forbidden, polygamy was generally disapproved owing to both health reasons and financial constraints.<sup>10</sup>

Akbari mores of morality were very pristine and immaculate. Any kind of deviation from the general standard was unacceptable to him. As Badauni notes, the prostitutes were asked to relinquish their quarters in the main city and settle in a place called *Shaitanpura*<sup>11</sup> as a measure of correcting unregulated sexual practices. His righteous behavior and omission of any name as his favorite wife, hints at his controlled virility and ideal sexual/ethical behavior. This was a departure from the time of Babur when male-female love was celebrated and could readily

<sup>7</sup>Smith, V. A. (1966). *Akbar the great Mogul, 1542-1605*. Dalcassian Publishing Company.p.67

<sup>8</sup>Lal, Ruby.(2002).*Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*.Cambridge,UK.Cambridge University Press.p.178

<sup>9</sup>Fazal, Abul.(1993). *The AkbarNama*. (H.Beveridge translated).Delhi.p.287

<sup>10</sup> Nath, Ram. (1994).*Private life of the Mughals in India (1526-1803 A.D.)*.Jaipur: Rupa Publications.p.152

<sup>11</sup>Badauni, Abdul Qadir.(1972). *Nijat-ul-Rashid*.S.M.Haqq ed.Lahore.p.311

find place in the Emperor's memoirs. Babur for that matter does not seem embarrassed for his liking for a *bazaar* boy either and went to the extent of composing love poems for him. In Akbar's time, love of opposite sexes was not discussed publicly. Homo sexuality was considered an unpardonable offence and disease to the society.

Akbar mastered a mammoth harem which was a departure from the time of his father and grandfather, who had dwarfed sized harems as compared to Akbar. Though there is no fixed number of wives that Akbar is credited with and different sources provide different numbers. While Abul Fazl puts the figure at five thousand; Father Mon serrate talks of three hundred wives and Henry Bloch Mann puts the number at sixty.<sup>12</sup> Divergent set of opinions are propounded by historians as the cause of these marriage alliances which led to bulging Mughal *zenana*. Political aspect of these marriages is the most plausible cited reason.

Akbar's tactful use of matrimonial alliances as a tool to strengthen and enhance his rule played a pivotal role in furthering the Mughal cause. Forging of matrimonial alliances was an attempt at winning over political allies. These marriages was a novel and bold initiative with a twin purpose of winning the Empire faithful allies like Rajputs and at the same time firmly establishing Akbar as a tolerant and eclectic ruler.<sup>13</sup> It was not an easy task to manage such a heterodox set of elements under one roof with ease. Thus, coupled with Emperor's obsession for the chastity of the female body there arose the need to give the already existing harem an institutionalized form.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Harem developed as a full-fledged separate department that was dependent on the State Exchequer like any other Royal office.

To understand the functioning of Harem as an institution under Akbar's reign it becomes imperative to do an in depth study of the architectural configuration of the Harem. A closer look at Akbari buildings like The Fatehpur Sikri Complex, Agra Fort, Forts of Allahabad and Ajmer makes it abundantly clear that the Harem complex was enclosed by high walls from all sides ensuring both privacy and security of its residents. It should be understood that the *Mahal* or seraglio formed only a part of the innumerable buildings that were housed inside the massive palace structure. A survey of the Agra fort tells us that it was planned like a city, housing structures like the *Diwan-i-Aam*, *Diwan-i-Khas*, imperial offices, guard dwellings among others, apartments of Royal ladies called *Mahal* lay in one part of the palace.<sup>15</sup>

Though the exact number of Akbar's marriages is uncertain still this much can be said with conviction that he maintained a large harem. It proved to be a political masterstroke that brought peace, prosperity and strength to his empire. His first Rajput marriage solemnized in 1562 with Kachwaha chief Raja Bharmal's daughter. Neither this was Emperor's first marriage nor his last but decidedly it marks a turning point in the history of Hindustan as it not only won him favors of brave and loyal Rajputs but also furthered the Akbari cause of giving a unifying character to the diversified people and cultures of this country. The intermingling of the two cultures gave way to a new cultural identity- The Indo-Islamic culture. Akbar's son and successor Jahangir, born of Kachwaha Princess Harka Bai had half Hindu and Half Muslim blood in his veins that corroborates the viewpoint.

<sup>12</sup> Lal, Kishori Saran. (1988). The Mughal Harem. Aditya Prakashan:Delhi.p.26

<sup>13</sup> Srivastava. Ashirwadi Lal.(1952).The Mughal Empire (1526-1803 A.D.) Agra, U.P: Shiva Lal Agarwala and Co. p. 149

<sup>14</sup>Nath, Ram. (1994).Private life of the Mughals in India (1526-1803 A.D.)Jaipur: Rupa Publications.p.26

<sup>15</sup>Fazal, Abul.(1993). The AkbarNama. (H.Beveridge translated).Delhi.p.46

While analyzing the marriages of Akbar, it becomes pertinent to note that the status of his various wives was also not the same but differed significantly. While in the first line stood wives who were related to either to the sovereign through blood or those who were of exalted lineage or high pedigree. The second line was occupied by those ladies who were female relatives of either defeated native rulers or those men who out of their personal choice/ambition wanted to become Emperor's relatives.<sup>16</sup>

Akbar like his predecessors had many concubines. In fact, concubinage was a common practice among the Mughal royalty and nobility.<sup>17</sup> However, these concubines who were variously called *Kaniz*, *Sarar*, and *Paristars* sometimes endeared themselves to the master more than the legal wives owing to their charm and vivacity. Fidelity was always expected out of wives, these concubines were freer in their conduct. However, we have instances of faithful concubines also who chose to live with the memory of their deceased master instead of switching to a new paramour. From the beginning of the Mughal dynasty till its very end these ladies continued to hold a prominent place in the Mughal realm.

Last in the line of female associates of Emperor who were somewhat sexually attached to him were *Kanchanis* (dancers/entertainers) and *Bandis* (servants). Among these entertainers artists like *bahrupiyas* (mimics), *Jadugars* (magicians) and *Nats* (acrobats) existed.<sup>18</sup> On the last level of Harem establishment stood *bandis* (maid-servants) variously called *paristar* and *khawas*. However, their chief duty remained to serve the master and mistress along with other inmates of the harem. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that they provided pleasure and enjoyment to the master. With names as attractive as *Nargis* (Tulip), *Kesar* (Saffron), *Gul-Nar* (Pomegranate Bud), *Gulrang* (flower-colored), *Mrig Nain* (Gazelle eyed), *Khishmish* (Raisin) and *Moti* (Pearl), these women were meant to entertain the inmates. Several *Begums* had personal dancing and singing girls who were given as gifts. Possessing them was a status symbol.

Bearing in mind that women of the Mughal Empire were to a high degree secluded it might be difficult to perceive how these women were active participants in various activities. There is also sparse documentation dedicated to the lives of women in the harem that represents them as powerful women and not just exotic subservient women of the emperor.

Women's responsibilities in long-term economic and strategic political planning as well as the daily operations of state government in kingdoms before the Mughal Empire as Karuna Sharma<sup>19</sup> argues were largely neglected because court historians were thought to believe that history was exclusively a domain of men and no place for women. Under the Mughal Empire there is a deviation from their predecessors in how they understand their women's roles in the empire. This can be observed not only in the assorted patronage these elite women commissioned but also in the duties some of the elite Mughal women of the harem were appointed by men.

One such noteworthy duty that was assigned to an elite woman of the Mughal harem was the duty assigned to Gulbadan Begum, Babur's daughter. Gulbadan Begum as Lal<sup>20</sup> states, "She spent her childhood under her father's rule in Kabul and Hindustan; her girlhood and young wifehood shared the fall and exile of Humayun; and her maturity and failing years slipped past

<sup>16</sup>Nath, Ram. (1994). *Private life of the Mughals in India (1526-1803 A.D.)*. Jaipur: Rupa Publications. p.41

<sup>17</sup>Fazal, Abul. (1993). *The Akbar Nama*. (H. Beveridge translated). Delhi. p.372

<sup>18</sup>Thevenot. (1949). *Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri*. S.N. Sen. (ed.) New Delhi. p.71

<sup>19</sup>Sharma, K. (2009). *A Visit to the Mughal Harem: Lives of Royal Women*. South Asia. p.155

<sup>20</sup>Lal, Ruby. (2002). *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press

under the protection of Akbar.” Gulbadan was given the mandate to compile an official history of the founding years of the Mughal Empire at its early stages and during the reign of her nephew Akbar.

A very distinctive writing style differentiates and sets apart the Humayun Nama by Gulbadan from the Akbarnama. In contrast to the court chroniclers of the period, who tended to stick to the generic panegyric genre, Lal<sup>21</sup> contends that a historiographical work like Gulbadan's Humayun Nama offers the reader a women's viewpoint of Mughal history and a modest look into the lives of Babur, her father, and Humayun.

Unfortunately sources such as Gulbadan's and “visual materials, architectural remains, the anecdotal and poetic accounts of women and servants- have been marginalized by modern historiography<sup>22</sup>” This is an example of how elite Mughal women have been kept invisible, Mughal sources have been assigned authenticity, accuracy, and objectivity dependent upon the gender of its creator.

Nevertheless, it can't be denied that Timurid women were intelligent, daring, determined and proud. The women of Mughal Harem had varied interests. It seems that they were high level merchants too. Several of them dabbled with mercantile activities, both international and domestic. Jahangir's mother owned a large fleet of ships plying en route to Mecca. Jeddah was a port which functioned as an exchange market between Africa, Arabia and Europe. The largest of this fleet named Rahimi. It plied between West Asia and Persian Gulf. Nur Jahan was a shrewd entrepreneur as well. Her patronage went to European East India Companies. She made investments in Portuguese and English goods at the same time. She regularly paid cartezes to Portuguese. Her friendship with the English is well known. In 1627, she granted an order exempting the English Company from paying transit duties. The English Ambassador, Thomas Roe, refers to her as his solicitor and is full of admiration for her. Jahanara was another royal lady who invested heavily in overseas trade. She had ships named *Sahebi* and *Ganjwar* through which she traded with the ports of West Asia and Persian Gulf.

In addition engagements in domestic trade and the Jagirs granted to these women contributed towards their income. Generally all royal and dependent women in the Harem were given maintenance. Certain influential and important women were granted Jagirs for maintenance as well as gifts. The income obtained from various sources was not wasted by these women. Infact, it was put to use for noble causes like building public utility constructions and patronizing artisans. Mughal royal women involved themselves in philanthropic activities. Many Mosques and *Idgahs* were built at their direction. Humayun's tomb was built by his first wife Bega Begum. She also commissioned construction of a Serai. Maham Anaga built a Masjid-cum-Madrassa, Khair-ul-Majlis in Agra in 1561. Gardens too were laid down at their instructions.

Many *Karkhanas* were also patronized by these women. Here, the artisans produced different kinds of textiles, carpets, perfumes, Jewelry and other articles of luxury meant for royal consumption. Many such enterprises were supported by particular women. For instance, Nur Jahan supervised production and designing of royal textiles according to her taste. She is also credited with the invention of rose *ittar* or perfume.

<sup>21</sup>Lal, Ruby.(2002).Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World.Cambridge,UK.Cambridge University Press.p.55

<sup>22</sup>Lal, Ruby.(2002).Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World.Cambridge,UK.Cambridge University Press.p.55

Contrary to the popular image of purdah clad secluded women, Mughal women participated in court politics at a high level. Mothers and sisters played a decisive role in determining the political status of their sons and brothers especially during the wars of succession. This trait was more visible during the earlier phase i.e. Babur and Humayun's reign where many negotiations were required in order to help the Mughal Empire to survive. It was the women then who played an important role. As the enemies happened to be within the clan and part of the family the role of women was enhanced. Their negotiations were generally effective.

There were some women who were much more powerful than others, namely, Maham Anaga and Nur Jahan. They were able to take advantage of a certain political position because of their sharp ability and wise intellect. Early in Akbar's reign, in order to rid himself of Bairam Khan's powerful tutelage Akbar sought Maham Anaga's help. With the help of her clique consisting of her son and son-in-law she was able to remove Bairam Khan from the position of power and herself occupied that position for a short while. Similarly, Nur Jahan too became powerful with the aid of her family consisting of her father and brother. They were high nobles and held important posts in Jahangir's reign. They together formed what is referred to by some scholars as Nur Jahan Junta. She sought to extend her influence to the next generation by marrying her daughter Ladli Begum (an offspring from Nur Jahan's first marriage) to Shahryar, one of Jahangir's sons. Her position was compromised because of Shahjahan's marriage to Mumtaz Mahal, Nur Jahan's niece because of which her brother no more supported her pretensions to power. Nur Jahan was perhaps the most powerful woman in the history of Mughal Empire. During Jahangir's reign she enjoyed paraphernalia equal to her husband. She took part in political decision making, minted coins bearing her own name and gave it public accessibility. The above were the privileges of kingship which the Mughals guarded closely. Through this we can gauge the amount of influence she had on Jahangir.

Another area where the royal women were effective was negotiating on behalf of rebels seeking Emperor's pardon. In 1582 Akbar's mother interceded on behalf of two erring officers who were then pardoned. Nur Jahan similarly obtained pardon for one erring Mansabdar. Jahanara was instrumental in the Court providing stipends and allowances to several individuals. Certain royal queens also enjoyed administrative powers. In case of Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal and Jahanara, they had the privilege of issuing royal orders like Hukms and Parwanas. Several documents bearing their seals have been found. These orders were next only to Farman's issued by the Emperor. In addition, the royal seals were kept in the custody of the chief queen. This made the queen a very powerful person in the Empire. Many senior women like Akbar's mother and Jahangir's mother heard petitioners and brought their grievances to the Emperor's notice. Contrary to popular belief the Mughal women did not lead a secluded life. Although Purdah (veil) was prevalent it did not prevent the women from participating in the activities of the outside world. These women contributed significantly towards practicing as well as patronizing literary and artistic activities. The Harem was a lively place which witnessed regular celebrations. Festivals like Diwali, Dussehra, Holi, Nauroz, Id-ul-Fitr, Shabb-i-barat, Raksha Bandhan, etc were celebrated with pomp and show. Victories, coronations and important days were also celebrated in similar manner. Fairs and bazaars were also held within the harem premises.

The Mughal women received religious and non-religious education. Several of them made important literary contributions. Gulbadan Begum wrote Humayun Namath, a first-hand



account of Mughal Harem up to Akbar's time. His mother Hamada Bane Began wrote some books and collected manuscripts. Jahanara who had Sufi inclinations wrote several Risalas (religious Pamphlets explaining tenets of a particular order) on mysticism and spirituality. Her *Risala-i-sahibiya* was well-known. *Munis-ul-Arwah*, a biography of Muin-ud-din Chishti was popular in contemporary times.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Mughal harem has been a subject of much debate amongst scholars. Some have painted it as a place where the emperor could gratify his sexual pleasure. Some others saw it as a beautiful prison where women were imprisoned forever. However, recent research has shown that women of Mughal harem were not ignorant of the outside world. They had easy access and connection with people outside. Women participated enthusiastically in the political, economic and cultural activities of their times. At times, they were decisive and influential in such roles. Exceptionally capable women personalities like Nur Jahan, Maham Anga, Jahan Ara and Mumtaz Mahal could become de facto rulers or at least influence the Emperor on important matters. Thus, the Mughal harem was far more complex and dynamic as women not only served as mere passive objects but acted in all arenas ( political, social and economic) , carving a separate powerful niche for themselves both outside as well as within the confines of the harem.

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