

## Gender Relations in Eighteenth Century Northern India

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### Abstract

*The eighteenth century, a century which constitutes the core of the era of decline of Mughals, has provoked in recent decades a quality and volume of research that has come to establish it as a sub-specialization in the field of Indian History. Actually, the condition of women in any society is a major yardstick of its social values and social structure. Women often are at the receiving end of any social and political order. A society expresses its gender relation in many ways, one of them being crime against women. The type of crime, its frequency, pattern, attitude of state and society toward it, punishment and tolerance towards the culprit, and more importantly the victim, would help us situate women in the context of time and society. This eventually would have to be seen in the larger perspective of the society in general. A society manufactures a set of constructs-mental, social, cultural, ritual, legal – to control women and their sexuality. The entire discussion on women and crimes perpetrated against them and the liberal social and state attitude is crucial to the understanding of the social milieu prevalent during the medieval and early modern period in India. This writing shows that throughout history women suffered from some kind of patriarchal limitations and taboos.*

**Key Note:** Eighteenth Century, Mughals, Women, Gender, Society, taboo

The historical origins of contemporary liberal feminism go to 18<sup>th</sup> century –the Enlightenment period of Western Europe. It was Age of reason. The triumph of reason was the key conviction. Institution and ideas which could not stand the critical test of reason have to be repudiated and discarded even though they may have been existing for ages<sup>1</sup>. It was natural that one of the many subjects the thinkers of this era touched was the nature and role of women. The present paper attempts to provide a historical context to the study of position of women in contemporary society. In order to have a better understanding of the present social structure and position of women therein, it is imperative to know the operation of various historical<sup>2</sup>.

This article examines the strategies of the rulers to legitimize and negotiate sovereignty in the 18th century northern India. These rulers broadened the conventional definition of kingship and deployed caste and kinship structures strategically to consolidate power<sup>3</sup>. In case of Jaipur rulers delved intrusively into their subjects' lives at the level of everyday practice. The state's attempt to regulate social relations transformed local customs regarding marriage, spousal relations, domestic violence, sexual misdemeanors and caste transgressions. The caste councils worked

closely with the state to regulate behavior and impose fines, or to otherwise discipline people. Individuals faced fines, ostracism and imprisonment irrespective of their caste status. By utilizing the idioms of morality and controlling the sexuality of women, they were able to develop a gendered patriarchy that effectively controlled the contentious elements of their society. The study of pre-colonial Indian states has been heavily influenced by theories of Oriental despotism<sup>4</sup>. For a long time, historians were preoccupied with either proving or refuting this concept that Indian states were authoritarian, distant and active only on the level of revenue extraction. These analyses override the question of rulers' strategies of sovereignty by emphasizing the ultimate authority of tradition: caste and religion<sup>5</sup>.

The historiography of 18th century states has been particularly influenced by the notion of coercive and military-minded. The study of the political agency of rulers has been eclipsed by a focus on the agency of tradition and its ritualistic script<sup>6</sup>. These scholars ignore the initiatives of the Indian states to proclaim sovereign authority by propagation of morality, control of judicial process and better modes of governance. More recently, different legitimization mechanisms have been studied to suggest alternate structures of governance. The archival data available for expose the political strategy of this state, which was able to penetrate deep into the lives of its subjects and establish firm control through the ideology of law, benevolence. The discourse on penal practices and its accompanying decisions actually veiled a strategy that involved disciplining various communities through these practices<sup>7</sup>.

18th century states were able to control their subjects because the areas under their control were much smaller and could be managed cohesively. I concur with the conclusions drawn by Uma Chakravarti on the strategies of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Peshwa state. The administration of justice was pragmatic and did not follow the Dharmashastras but preferred customary norms prevalent in Rajasthan in the 18th century<sup>8</sup>. Most importantly, the political turmoil of the century had made it imperative for the states to create consensual societies that would enable them to remain in power. The administration of justice and attempt to codify certain norms and practices was an endeavor on the part of the ruling class and its bureaucracy to maintain a semblance of order and peace in violent and uncertain times. This article illustrates the interventionist nature of the Jaipur state by focusing on the crimes committed against women. The issues of polygamy, purdah (seclusion), female infanticide, child marriage and sati have been well-researched topics about Rajput societies. However, this article illuminates another dimension, not explored previously; how did societal norms protect women from violence, domestic abuse and sexual crimes. Did the state authorities or caste councils recognize crimes against women? If they did, what actions were taken against the perpetrators? The vast quantitative data on the nature and incidence of crimes against women in 18th century suggested by a viable defense of women's rights, specifically against sexual misdemeanors. The article is divided into three sections<sup>9</sup>.

The focuses on social institutions and gender relations, the state's views on

sanctity of marriage, the measures to curb expenditures on social functions, spousal relations and abortions deals with cases of domestic disputes and violence where the state intervened to punish culprits without considering caste distinctions and the third section elaborates on sexual misdemeanors and violent crimes against women, involving nearly all castes living in the state. An investigation usually followed the report, and the males responsible were disciplined, imprisoned or fined for their offences. By claiming to be protectors of dharma and upholders of the sanctity of caste norms and practices, Jaipur rulers made themselves responsible for interfering even in the domestic issues of their subjects. They did not follow any paradigm of morality, except of course, the customary caste laws of their kingdom. The official discourse clearly indicates that the government had authority to intervene in the familial domain with respect to relationships between husbands and wives, which some mint as penalties. Men and women were punished according to their crimes, irrespective of their caste status in northern India<sup>10</sup>.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

In the medieval India, the status of women was very much lowered. The scriptures prescribed rules for child marriages which increased the number of widows. The rules of conduct for the widows were even more rigid. The ancient Indian ideal of the equality of male and female was finished and women were considered to be slaves of men. In Buddhist and Muslim periods, the states of women were lowered even further. In the Muslim time the custom of veil, the child marriage, and the

custom marriage, and the custom of dying on the funeral pyre of the husband were prevalent. Indian society and social institution in a total perspective so that the unity in diversity of social stratification, social institution, social problem, etc. may be apparent to the reader. This requires a review of the fundamental philosophical basis of the Indian social life and an analysis of the fundamental characteristics of Indian culture.

This analysis highlights some features of governance of the 18th century northern India which assumed a paternalistic-cum-protectionist role by dealing with issues of marriage, domestic violence and sexual misdemeanors related to women. This discussion illustrates the interventionist nature of the Jaipur state that was articulated through infringement upon the private lives of the people. The caste infraction fines, more specifically in relation to crimes reported against women, accounted for nearly half of the miscellaneous income of the state. I contend that rulers protected women against violence as well as sexual crimes to maintain strict control over their subjects. Lack of evidence impedes historical research that would determine whether women had better protection in the 18th century than in the previous centuries. However, one thing is clearly established: those women had access to redress on issues arising out of familial dissensions or within their communities. Feminist scholars have to conduct in-depth investigations based on regional sources to create a cohesive picture about the pre-colonial states' policies regarding the protection of women. The strategies employed by the northern India did provide protection to women irrespective of caste status in domestic disputes involving violence and

sexual misconduct. During colonial times, these issues were hotly debated to criticize the Indian political regimes that never intervened to rescue the weaker sections of the populations, especially women. One of the most positive features of the 18th century society was that women were not held responsible or blamed for crimes against them and male perpetrators were punished in all cases of sexual misconduct. In fact, the past India can teach contemporary society how to deal with sexual crimes against women without placing the blame on women or holding them responsible for inciting the violence visited upon them, as often done today.

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