



Position and Status of Women in Mughal Period

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Abstract

It is an established fact that women in the Middle Ages played a number of different social roles. During the Middle Ages, a period of European history lasting from around the fifth century to the fifteenth century, women held the position as wife, mother, peasant, artisan, and nun, as well as some important leadership roles such as queen regnant. The concept of 'women' underwent a number of ways during the Middle Ages. Various forces were responsible for bringing a sea change in women's position during the Medieval period of history. Women came as a strong force in all spheres of life during this period as is evident through their significant roles played during this Age.

Paper

During the medieval period Indian society was divided into two broad divisions based on religion. In English documents and records of the period the Hindus are referred to as 'Gentoos' (Gentiles) and the Muslims as 'Moors'. The two communities differed with respect to social manners and etiquette; even their forms of salutation festivals. The social rites and ceremonies of the two communities, on occasions of birth and marriage, for instance, were different. Although these differences occasionally provoked tension and even hostility, a system of peaceful coexistence developed and even fraternizing on social occasions and in fairs was not uncommon.

MUSLIM SOCIETY

As a result of continuous immigration from the Muslim countries of central and West Asia the Muslim population retained the mixed character

which it had acquired during the previous centuries. In the north-western region the central Asians and Persians, who entered India during the reigns of Babur and his successors, Lived side by side with the Muslim immigrants of the pre-Mughal period. In coastal regions the immigrants were primarily traders, hailing originally from Arabia and the Persian Gulf. As a result of their regular or irregular unions with the local Hindus or converts a number of Muslim communities of mixed origin had come into existence, e.g., the Navayats of western India, the Mappillas or Moplabar, and the Labbais of the Coromandel coast. There were also a considerable number of Muslims of Abyssinian origin, most of whose ancestors were originally imported as slaves. As large parts of Afghanistan formed an integral part of the Mughal Empire, Afghans living in India could hardly be placed in the category of immigrants. Muslims of foreign origin, formally united by Islam, had racial and religious differences which influenced politics and society. The Turanis (Central Asians) and the Afghans were Sunnis; the Persians (Iranians) were Shias. There was much rivalry for political prominence and social promotion among these Muslims of diverse origins. However, Muslims of foreign origin considered as a distinct group, constituted the principal element in the ruling class of the Mughal period. They claimed superiority to the Hindustani Muslims, i.e., Hindu converts and their descendants on the basis of birth, race and culture. The overwhelming majority of the Muslims



were descendants of Hindu converts; but there was a tendency on their part to claim foreign descent with a view to securing political and social advantages. They were generally looked down upon by by Turanians and Iranians; but they were received on equal terms in mosques during the Friday prayers and also on occasions of principal religious festivals. There was no bar to inter-marriage on racial on racial grounds. A Muslim of low birth could rise to a high rank in the nobility by dint of ability of through the favour of fortune. The Muslim society had far greater internal mobility than the Hindu society. Apart form of racial and religious differences, i.e., Shia-Sunni disputes, there were clear-cut social differences within the Muslim society. Three classes are mentioned in a sixteenth century Persian work: (a) the ruling class comprising the imperial family, the nobility and the army; (b) the intelligentsia, comprising theologians (ulema⁰, judges (qazis), men of learning and men of letters; the class catering to pleasures, comprising classification is obviously incomplete and unsatisfactory. For example, it does not make of the producing classes-the peasants and the artisans-who farmed the backbone of state and society, and the lower ranks of the official bureaucracy of the minor officials.

Hindu Society

Hindu society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was characterised by conflicting trends of liberalism and catholicity on the one hand and exclusiveness and conservatism on the other. Some of the Vaishnava and Tantric teachers recognized, to some extent, the religious and social rights of women as also of the Sudras. Some non-Brahmin followers of Chaitanya become spiritual perceptors (gurus)

not only of the three lower castes but also of Brahmins. In Maharashtra Tukaram, a Sudra, and in the Brahmins. villey Sankardev and Madhavdev,

who were Kayasthas, had Brahmin disciples. But, the Brahmin authors of the Nibandhas tried to maintain the integrity of the ancient socio-religious system (Varnasrama dharma) by regulation the life and conduct of all classes of Hindus in the minutest details in conformity with traditional caste rules. Some writers of the Smriti nibandhas had royal patrons and their injunction cared political sanction. One of them, Keshava Pandit, was judge under the Maratha King Sambhaji. But there were eminent authors like Raghunandan and Ramnath of Bengal. Pitambar of Kamrup and Kamalakar Bhatta of Maharashtra whose authority was accepted by the Hindu society even though it was accepted by the Hindu society even though it was not backed by royal patronage. Their influence effectively counteracted the liberal trends. The raised their voice against the usurping of the privileges of the Brahmins by the lower castes.

POSITION OF WOMEN

Purdah System: With the advent of Islam, new forces appeared on the Indian horizon. Strict veiling of women was the common practice among the Muslim in their native land. Naturally in a foreign country like India, greater stress was laid upon it. The Hindus adopted Purdah as a protective measure. The tendency to imitate the ruling class was another factor which operated in favour of introducing Purdah among the Hindu families. Seclusion thus became a sign of respect and was strictly observed among the high-class families of both communities. Barbosa has referred to the strict observation of Purdah by the women of Bengal. Barring some



notable Muslim families, the south Indians did not adopt Purdah. In the Vijayanagar Empire, Purdah was confined only to the members of the royal household. No such coercive Purdah system was observed among the Hindu middle class was observed among the Hindu middle class and certainly not among the Hindu masses. Child Marriages: The custom, in those days, did not allow girls to remain in their parents' home for more than six to eight years after birth. The rigidity of the custom together with the celebration of the marriage at a very early age left no room whatsoever for either the bride or bridegroom to have time to think of a partner of their own choice. Dowry was demanded while in some caste and localities the bride-price was also known to be prevalent.

Monogamy: Monogamy seems to have been the rule among the lower level of society in both communities during the medieval period. In spite of the decision of ulema in the Ibadat Khana in Akbar's times, that a man might marry any number of wives by mutah but only four by nikah, Akbar had issued definite orders that a man of ordinary means should not possess more than one wife unless the first proved to be barren. Polygamy was the privilege of the rich.

Position of Widows: Divorce and remarriage, common among Muslims, were prohibited for Hindu women. Widow re-marriage, except amongst the lower caste people, had completely disappeared in Hindu society during the medieval age. The custom of sati was prevalent. Even betrothed girls had to commit sati was prevalent. Even betrothed girl had to commit sati on the funeral pyres of their would-be-husbands. Those widows who would not burn themselves with their husbands were treated harshly by society.

Custom of Sati: Some of the Delhi Sultans did try to discourage the custom of sati which prevailed among a large section of the Hindu population, particularly the upper classes and the Rajputs. Though sati was only voluntary in the south and not enjoined upon widows, it is difficult to account for its wide popularity in the Vijayanagar Empire, whose rules do not seem to have put up any restriction on its observance. Muhammad Tughluq was, in all probability, the first medieval ruler who place restrictions on its observance. Thourgh Akbar did not forbid the sati altogether, he had issued definite orders to the kotwals that they should not allow a woman to be burnt against her inclination. Aurangzeb was the only Mughal who issued definite orders (1664) for bidding sati in his realm altogether.

Economic Position: Economically, a Muslim woman was entitled to a share in the inheritance with absolute right to dispose it off. Unlike her Hindu sister, she retained the right even after marriage. Mehr, or entente nuptial settlement, was another safeguard for Muslim women whereas a Hindu woman had no right to the property of her husband's parents. A Hindu woman was only entitled to maintenance and residence expenses besides movable property like ornaments, jewellery, etc. Thus, from the legal point of view, women were reduced to a position of dependency in every sphere of life, The women in the south under the Cholas (8th to 13th century), however, had the right to inherit property.

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