

“Status of Women in India During Mughal Period: A Brief Study in Historical Perspective”

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Abstract:

In this article, an attempt has been made to historical analysis the right and status of women during Mughal Period in India. The sources have been mainly accumulated from various important websites, research articles, journals, books, government documents etc. The paper is mainly descriptive in nature. The status of women during the Medieval Period was in a deprived state. The key cause of this was, there was prevalence of male dominance. The women lack in various aspect of day to day live. They were not allowed to express their ideas and views. Women were dedicated towards the implementation of household responsibilities. In addition, they were overwhelmed by the practices of polygamy, sati, child marriage, and female infanticide. Improvements came about in their conditions with the advent of Islam and they were given rights.

KEY WORDS: Child marriage, Female Infanticide, Islam, Mughal Period, Polygamy, Right, Status, Sati, Women,

Introduction:

Women in ancient India wielded considerable influence in society and played a significant role in the development of social, cultural and philosophical values and trends; and held a respectable position in the society. Ever since the days of the famous Indian law-giver Manu, Hindu Law has assigned to women a dependent, but by no means, a dishonorable status in society. As a girl, she was under the tutelage of her parents, as an adult, of her husband, and as a widow, of her sons.' In religious matters women enjoyed status equal to that of men. They must be honored by their family member's desire welfare. Women in India in the pre-Muslim period, although dependent upon and protected by men enjoyed in theory as well as to a considerable extent in practice, an honorable status in society.

Indian History: A Brief Chronological Overview

Chronologically, Indian history can be classified into three periods- Ancient India, Medieval India and Modern India. Ancient India can be studied under other heads like Paleolithic (2 million BC – 10,000 BC), Mesolithic (10,000 BC-8,000 BC), Neolithic (8,000 BC – 4,000 BC) and Chalcolithic Period (4,000 BC – 1,500 BC) based on the types of stone/metal tools people used. Within this period, it also includes the Iron Age (BC 1500-BC 200) and Mauryan Empire (321 – 185 BC). In Medieval India the Tripartite struggle – Pratiharas, Palas, and Rashtrakutas (AD: 800-1200), Delhi Sultanate (1206 AD -1526 AD) and Mughals (AD 1526-AD 1857). Last period is the Modern India (AD 1857 +)

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A brief Profile of the Mughal Period:

The Mughal Empire was founded in 1526. Babar confronted and defeated Lodhi in 1526 at the first battle of Panipat, and so came to establish the Mughal Empire in India. The Mughals originated in Central Asia, and were descended from the Mongol ruler Jenghiz Khan and Timur (Tamburlaine), the great conqueror of Asia. They were immensely proud of their pedigree, and it was the memory of Timur's raids on India in the fourteenth century that spurred Babur on to invade. By the late 17th century, most of the Indian subcontinent had been reunited under the Mughal Empire, which became the largest economy and manufacturing power in the world, producing about a quarter of global GDP, before fragmenting and being conquered over the next century. The Mughal rule over India is called an Empire because it stretched over a large area. When it was biggest it ruled most of the Indian subcontinent, then known as Hindustan, and parts of what is now India, Afghanistan and modern Pakistan and Bangladesh, between 1526 and 1707.

Classes in the Mughal Society:

- Society in Mughal times was organized on a feudal basis and the head of the social system was Emperor.
- He enjoyed an unparalleled status. He was the ultimate authority in everything.
- Next in rank were the nobility along the zamindars.
- The Mughal nobles monopolized most of the jobs in the country.
- Socially and economically the Mughal nobility formed a privileged class. There were men of every type and nationality among the Mughal nobles.
- Clan or family links were the most important considerations for recruitment and admission to the aristocratic class of the society.
- Zamindars or the chieftains also constituted the nobility. They had their own armed forces and generally lived in forts or garhis which was both a place of refuge and a status symbol.
- There was a large class of merchants and traders. They had their own rights based on tradition and protection of life and property. They maintained a high standard of living.

Right and Status of Women during Mughal Period:

The position of women in the Indian society changed considerably with the coming of Mughals. The social laws and customs which evolved in the changed set-up of things stamped many a times the women with the stigma of mental deficiency and created in them a profound sense of inferiority complex.

Under Mughals a healthier tradition came to prevail among the Indian aristocracy. The ladies of the royal harem of the Emperor Humayun used to mix freely with their male friends and visitors. They sometimes went out in male garments, played polo, and applied themselves to music. They were also well versed in the use of pellet bow and other practical arts. There is very little information about women in lower walks of life, but probably they approximated to the standards of women higher than themselves in status. There had been definite deterioration in the position of women in the centuries that followed the Vedic Age. In the ancient period, the existence of purdah though not very common, cannot be completely denied. The practice of strict veiling of women was the common practice among the Muhammadans in their native lands.

With the advent of Turks in India it was also adopted by the Hindu women as a protective measure to save their honour at the hands of the foreign invaders. The system of purdah was prevalent under the Mughals, as under the Delhi Sultans.

Dowry and Divorce:

The chief reason for considering the birth of girls an unwelcomed event was the custom of dowry. It was impossible to marry the girls to suitable bridegrooms without handsome dowry given to the bridegroom's parents. On account of this practice many poor and lower middle-class families were ruined. The system of dowry also affected the Muslim society and this practice became prevalent

among the high-class Muslims. Abul Fazl writes, “Akbar disapproved of high dowries, although he (Akbar) believed that fixing up of high dowries was preventive against rash divorces”. He also informs us that, “dowry was not mentioned in the case of Brahmans, and divorce was not customary. The Muslim law and customs allowed divorce conditionally, but among the Hindus it was not allowed. Among the Hindus the marriage was a sacrament and its bond was unbreakable. The right to divorce gave the Muslim woman a better position than her Hindu counterpart, and a divorced woman was allowed to remarry.

Polygamy:

In Mughal India polygamy was prevalent both among the Hindus and the Muslim, especially belonging to the richer sections of the society. The prestige of a man increased if he had a number of wives in his harem but the status of woman was affected adversely. She had to struggle with the co-wives for securing her husband’s favours in polygamous marriage. She was often looked upon as a thing of enjoyment in such marriages.

In respect of marriage, Muslim law permits a man to have four wives at a time subject to certain conditions. Although Akbar was in favour of monogamy, he himself violated his dictum by marrying as many as 300 wives without divorcing anyone. Usually in a polygamous Muslim household the first wife, that is the wife by the first marriage, was the most honored one (Haram-i Muhtaram) and she had a control over the management of the household affairs and took charge of other wives of her husband, though the younger ones were sure to become the cynosure of the eyes of their master. The Muslim community of Hindustan suffered more from the evils of polygamy.

Prostitute:

Prostitute was also considered to be a necessary social evil. Women were many a time employed as dancers and singers on special occasions e.g., feast festivals, marriages and the like. Among them some of them were highly accomplished ladies, adept in various arts and skills such as music, poetry, sorcery and spying. They also provide enjoyable leisure to the inmates of the harems, maintained by the emperors and the nobles, by means of their captivating dances and songs. These public women might have been largely responsible for the growing moral laxity in the society.

Sati:

Among the Hindus the death of husband was the greatest tragedy, in the life of a woman. Widow-remarriage was not permitted among the Hindus except among some lower classes in the Mughal period. It was a custom among the Hindus that after the death of their husbands’ women burnt themselves, whether from love, or to save the honour of their fathers, or from being ashamed before their sons-in law. Those widows who do not burn themselves with their husbands were treated harshly by the society; their head be shaven as they were not allowed to wear their hair long or to put on ornaments. Society looked down upon the widows who did not perform sati. Widowhood was considered a punishment of the sins of previous life. A pregnant woman was not suffered to be burnt till after her deliver. If man dies on a journey, his wives burnt themselves with his garments or whatever else may belong to him. Sati was mostly performed by the ladies of Brahmin, Kshatriya and Bania community. The practice of sati even prevailed before the advent of the Mughals and was more or less compulsory in nature. In this connection some of the Mughal emperors, particularly Akbar tried to ban and if not at least check this practice, that no widow was burnt with her husband against her wish. In spite of all these efforts, it cannot be suppressed altogether. This custom appears to have continued even during the later times among the Hindu society.

Jauhar:

Just like Sati, Jauhar was also performed by the Rajput ladies particularly of Rajputana. On the occasion of the capture of whole village and town by the enemies the modesty of women was often outraged. Many widows gladly ascended the funeral pyres of their husbands, for escaping such situation. This custom was more or less confined for the Rajputs.

When a Rajput chief and his soldiers become sure of their defeat, they either killed their women and children or locked inside a fortress or an underground enclosure and set that on fire and thereafter they went to battlefield and gallantly died fighting. This custom of Jauhar was mainly intended to safeguard the honour of the womenfolk at the cost of their life. This custom of Jauhar was frequently resorted by the Rajput women as the last weapon to save the honour of their family.

Property Right:

During Mughal period women received a share in movable as well as immovable property by the law of inheritance, payment of mehr and gifts. In respect of the partition of the ancestral property or the property of the father among his children, the Muslim women received a good treatment as compared with the Hindus. Islamic law of inheritance women recognizes the right of daughter, but an equal share as male members. Daughter's share was being half that of son. On the other hand, in Hindu religion girls do not inherit father's property except if unmarried daughters inherit father's property except if unmarried daughter inherit who gets a fourth share of a son which was to be spent on her marriage and her dowry. Afterwards she had no more income from the house of her father. This could become a convenient reason for denying women's right on her father's property. The royal ladies apart from their regular allowances owned vast jagirs bestowed upon them by the emperor. They also received special gifts in cash and kind on special occasions. Gulbadan Begum informs us that after Babur's victory against Ibrahim Lodi at Panipat, he told Khwaja Kilan Beg to take valuable presents and curiosities of Hind to his "elder relations, sisters and each person of the harem".

Education:

In an absolutely male dominated medieval society, female education was not given much importance. During the Mughal period women's education, both among Hindus and Muslim was considered less important than the male education. Very inadequate provisions were made for its development. Mass education was generally unknown. In Middle Ages many people were puritanical in their outlook. They considered women's education unnecessary if not positively injurious to the society. Their idea was to prepare the young girls for household work. Still there were persons who looked after the intellectual welfare of the fair sex. However, there were several factors also that hindered the growth of female education on a mass scale during Mughal period. The most important among them was seclusion including purdah system which restricted the freedom of movement and confined women to their homes. It prevented the women from attending educational institutions and thus acquiring higher education.

Female Slave:

In Mughal India the institution of female slavery did not change from the earlier period. Apart from the slave girls of India, female slaves were also imported from China and Turkistan. Enslavement was mainly through armed action in supposedly rebel or enemy areas and through sales of children by parents. Slavery was an institution of 'boundation' slave women have no right over property, without the consent of master they have no right to move or to be free. Female slaves were of two kinds, one held dear and kept for pleasure and enjoyment, and the other virtually serving as a maid-servant doing rough domestic works like the drawing of water and grinding the com. A special class of slaves was employed for the care of the female inmates of the harem. They were usually brought in childhood and castrated. In the master liked a maid for his pleasure, he had just to call her or even marry her. Gulbadan Begum writes, "Whenever there was a good looking and nice girl, she (Maham) used to bring her into his (Humayun) service". Mewajan was a domestic in Gulbadan's retinue, and Maham Begum said, 'Humayun Mewajan is not bad. Who do you not take her into your service. So, at her word, Humayun married her and took her that very night'. Apart from this woman were engaged in breaking stones, pounding bricks into rubble, preparing bitumen cement, staining and mixing lime and carrying the mortar up to the masons.

Conclusion:

Women in Medieval India wielded a considerable influence in society and played a significant role in the development of social, cultural and philosophical values and trends and held a respectable position in society. A change in the status of women came as a sequel to the advent of the Mughals in India. There had been a growing emphasis on the social, economic, political and cultural life of women in general, as well as that on royal women of the Mughal period. In Mughal India the women's participation in politics and their position depended on their personal ability rather than their blood relations, like Maham Anaga, who played an important role and exercised an unbounded influence in the harem and over Akbar himself. The contribution and the interference of the women of ruling class in contemporary politics reflects the position of women. The senior Mughal women are recorded ubiquitously as having played a central part in the affairs of peace- making. In some cases, they were even handed over the charge of the government. Apart from the Muslim women and the ladies of the Mughal harem, the Hindu women also played a significant role in the history of politics of Mughal India. Sometimes women ruled the kingdom of exercising the real authority and even possessed a large and well-equipped army under them. All this portrays that sometimes women in Mughal India attained high power and status.

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