

Status of Women During Akbar's Reign



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I. INTRODUCTION

Women's 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. 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, a honourable status in society.

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.

The intellectual culture of women varied according to class. In villages where a woman was part of rural economy but there was no room for cultural growth in the ordinary sense.

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.

The system of purdah was prevalent under the Mughals, as under the Delhi Sultans. Both BamT and Afif have made references to this practice. Although Raziah discarded veil and female attire and appeared in public on horse and elephant, it does not explain the absence of veil with ladies. Generally women, especially of the aristocratic class, remained behind the purdah and if it was absolutely essential to come out of the purdah.

The system of purdah was absent among the people of lower classes such as artisans, peasants and manual labourers, for the nature of their work prevented from remaining indoors behind the veil or purdah. On the whole, whoever purdah might have considerably hampered the progress of women, both Hindu and Moslem. It had become one of the potent factors responsible for their subordination to men in the society.

The position of women in Indian society, with some exceptions, was not enviable. The girl was considered to be a necessary burden to the family. A birth of a female child was not a very welcome event which led to the practice of female infanticide.

Early marriage becomes almost a universal feature of the contemporary Indian social life. The accounts of the foreign travellers, the Persian chronicles and contemporary literary works abound the numerous instance of child marriage.

Emperor Akbar disliked the practice of early marriages prevalent in the society. Abul Fazl writes: He abhors marriages which take place between men and women before the age of puberty. They bring forth no fruit and his Majesty thinks them even hurtful, for afterwards, when such a couple ripens into manhood, they dislike having connexion and their home is desolate"¹.

Akbar had issued regulations regarding marriages. Girls before the age of fourteen and boys before sixteen were not to marry. He tried to check such practices as far as possible by charging the duty to the Kotwals in the cities. He made the consent of the bride and bridegroom, and marriage contracts. The chief reason for considering the birth of girls an unwelcomed event was the custom of dowry.

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".²

The Muslim law and customs allowed divorce conditionally. The right to divorce gave the Muslim woman a better position than her Hindu counterpart, and a divorced woman was allowed to remarry.

In the Mughal period women received a share in movable as well as immovable property by the law of inheritance, payment of mehr and gifts³. 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 recognizes the right of daughter, but an equal share as male members. Daughters share was being half that of son. The other source by which women enjoyed the possession of property was mehr, because in Muslim religion all marriage agreements mainly based on condition of mehr. Mehr in Islam designed as the right of women given by their husbands as bridal gifts in any form of movable and immovable property.

Some women also received grants of lands in form of madad-imdsh. Abul Fazl says Turani and Irani women held grants⁴. Some of the ladies held zamindaris (villages), milkiyat rights, and lands. They had the liberty of inheriting, selling and disposing of their properties. 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.

The status of ladies in the harem was determined by the place which they had in the Emperor's life. The more important position a lady occupied, the more privileges she enjoyed. Emperor's mother enjoyed the most respectable position in the harem. The Mughal ladies of rank, the queen and princesses, owned a lot of wealth and money through regular allowances, grants and valuable gifts raised their economic status.

During the Mughal period women's education, both among Hindus and Muslim was considered less important than the male education, but as the Mughal Emperors were cultured and educated, they knew the value of education of their children including their daughters, the princesses of the royal household. They were interested in encouraging women's education and also established girls school in their palaces.

In the childhood the girls were taught along with boys. There existed no separate schools or at home, separate from the boys, by some elderly ladies. Jafar Sharif in his Qanoon-i Islam gave an idea of the system of women's education in Muslim fridia and from that account we learn that there were many girl's schools in those days even for the middle class people. Education flourished considerably under the Mughals with their financial aid. There were maktabewhere Muslim girls received their primary education⁵. The author or Qanoon-i Islam informs us that when a girl or a boy goes to school, the teachers used to write an Idi (a verse of something relating to the Id') or a blessing for the child on a coloured or zaraifshanipresents who makes presents to the tutor.

There are some example of princesses being given a liberal education who have left behind them work of literary values or influence with long time effects and who also helped in promoting education by the foundation of colleges. Besides royalty and the nobility, even among the middle class girls were given primary education. The girls were restricted from acquiring higher education and attending educational institution due to purdah system and child marriage.

II. 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 India⁶. 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 MahamAnaga, 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 government⁷. 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.

III. REFERENCES

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