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**A Study on the Socio Political Condition of Women in the Mughal Harem
During Post Mughal Period 1707 to 1857 AD**

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ABSTRACT

The term Harem has been derived from the Arabic word Harem meaning "sacred" or "forbidden". By it we refer to that closed and cloistered part of the Imperial palace or residence which was reserved for the residence of the women of a Muslim household. This place was variously called as the zenana, haremsara, mahalsara and raniwas. Later the term Zenani Dyodhi came to be associated with it in the Rajput principalities¹ Going by this definition it becomes clear that at least in concept this was meant to be a place of restraint where committing any kind of inequity was forbidden. However the popular image of the harem remains to be of a place where all kinds of sexual excesses were permissible with a vast number of women gathered around one man, providing all kinds of pleasure to him.² The concept of the harem was primarily meant to provide structured living conditions to Emperor's women while maintaining the strictest Pardah while also acting as a repose for him where he could relax and retire from his taxing routine and strenuous imperial duties.³ Since the powers of governance and administration were concentrated in one man (the sovereign) and he was the pivot around which the entire empire revolved it was deemed necessary to provide him with every pleasure possible on earth. It won't be wrong to say that the King was seen as the center of the universe and all the people around him were like the stars. Hence no pleasure on earth was supposed to be left wanting in order to please the monarch, in whose ultimate happiness lay that of all the people surrounding him whether at the court or in his harem. In fact the concept of harem was not peculiar to Mughals of India alone. As it was a common feature in all the Islamic societies of the world. Besides in India there was prevalence of this tradition in Persia under the Safavids and in the Ottoman Turkish Empire with minor differences.⁴

One striking similarity between all these cultures was the emergence of strong female personalities. For instance on one hand we have Persian Princess Pari Khan Khanum who played a vital role in the succession battle. On the other there was the strong queen Hurrem in Ottoman Empire. While comparing the Mughal harem with its Central Asian counterparts we find some points of difference also. Like the kind of freedom and influence that women held in the Safavid Iran remains unparalleled elsewhere. In fact it is quite interesting to note that unlike Hindustan, unmarried daughters of the imperial family held a great political clout in Persia.⁵ This kind of prominence is not found in India and at least from the time of Akbar imperial women become almost invisible. We do have instances of strong women like Nurjahan, Jahanara, Roshanara and Zeb-unNisa but they are more of an exception than a general rule. While concubines formed a politically dominant part of the Ottoman Empire it was not so in other Islamic societies like the Indian Mughals and Persian Safavids. Among Safavids Pari Khan Khanum and Shahzada Khanum daughter and sister of Persian King Shah Tahmasp respectively held considerable power and authority in their times.⁶ It is interesting to note that during the seventeenth century all the princes and princess were blinded in Iran to decapacitate them from claiming power. Hence we see that in theory even the women could be possible heirs to the throne. This was a unique Safavid practice and does not find a parallel among other Islamic societies of the world⁷ As far as Mughals of India are concerned they did love their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters but political power was a man's preserve. Even the most powerful Mughal woman of all times Nurjahan could only get to become the de facto ruler of her people.

KEY WORDS

Mughal Harem, Post-Mughal Period (1707–1857 AD), Gender, Royal Women, Property Rights, Socio-Political Condition.

INTRODUCTION

The Mughal harem, commonly referred to as the *zenana*, was far more than a secluded domestic space for the emperor's wives and female relatives. It functioned as an important social, cultural, economic, and political institution within the Mughal Empire. During the zenith of Mughal rule, royal women exercised considerable influence through diplomacy, patronage, charitable activities, and participation in matters of succession and governance. Influential women such as Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum and Zeb-un-Nissa demonstrated that the harem was a center of political power rather than merely a symbol of female seclusion.

The period from 1707 to 1857 AD, beginning with the death of Emperor Aurangzeb and ending with the Revolt of 1857 and the fall of the Mughal dynasty, witnessed profound political, social, and economic transformations. The gradual decline of centralized Mughal authority, the rise of regional powers, and increasing intervention by the British East India Company significantly altered the status and influence of the imperial household. As the empire weakened, the political authority of women in the Mughal harem also underwent substantial changes. While some royal women continued to influence court politics, succession disputes, and diplomatic negotiations, many experienced diminishing economic resources, reduced political authority, and increased dependence on external powers.

This study examines the socio-political condition of women in the Mughal harem during the post-Mughal period, focusing on their roles in governance, family politics, education, cultural patronage, property rights, and charitable activities. It also explores how changing political circumstances affected their status, opportunities, and limitations. By analyzing Persian chronicles, European travel accounts, official correspondence, memoirs, and modern historical scholarship, the study seeks to challenge the traditional perception of the harem as merely a secluded domestic institution and instead highlights it as a dynamic arena of political negotiation and social influence.

Furthermore, the research investigates the relationship between gender, power, and imperial decline, demonstrating how royal women adapted to changing political realities while preserving elements of Mughal courtly culture. Through this perspective, the article contributes to a broader understanding of women's agency in early modern Indian history and offers fresh insights into the transformation of the Mughal imperial household between 1707 and 1857 AD.

The Ancient Indian Antecedent of Harem: The Antahpura

- **Intellectual Context of the Mauryan Period:** The practice of Purdah which meant the confinement of women behind veil or harem quarters was not a part of ordinary women's life in ancient India. However the kings maintained harems called Antahpur with restrictions upon their women's movement and upper class women would often cover their faces. With the advent of Muslims in India Purdah became a permanent part of Indian culture⁸ in not just the imperial but all the aristocratic families of North India. In the opinion of Dow, in India the practice of women's seclusion was more strictly observed, "where continence is a more arduous virtue than in the bleak regions of the north."⁹ In the ancient Vedic literature women were granted greater freedom of movement, thought and expression. However by the time of Kautilya, seclusion of at least king's women had become established. He tells us in his Arthashastra about the elaborate arrangements which were made regarding women's security in the Antahpur and the restrictions imposed upon their free movement. However it was not as strictly enforced as in later day Muslim societies.
- **Beginning of the Mughal Harem:** In Islam haram has been designated as the sanctum sanctorum, the innermost private chambers which included the private residential quarters as well as the haraman (haram ladies). Like many other Mughal institutions Haram too took a decisive shape during Akbar's time but it was present in the time of Babur also however in a more fluid state. First of all it is very important to note that Babur could be the ruler of Hindustan for just four years and in that short period he was fighting wars thus he could not provide a settled base to Mughal rule in India, an unfinished feat later accomplished by his illustrious grandson Akbar. Thus it becomes all the more important to study the nature of Mughal household during Babur's time. As Ruby Lal points out in Domesticity and power in the early Mughal world that during wars ahl va 'ayal (wives, children, servants, other women and goods) moved with the King's retinue¹⁰ thus devoiding it of any stability. In Baburnama haram does not exist as a distinct entity but is rather used to denote all women. In fact we do not find mention of settled women's quarters during Babur's time, all that we know of female dwellings are tent structures.
- **The Mughal Harem as a Socio-Political Institution:** The Mughal harem, or *zenana*, has often been portrayed as a secluded domestic space inhabited by the emperor's wives, daughters, concubines, and female attendants. However, historical evidence demonstrates that it was a complex institution with significant political, economic, and cultural functions. The harem maintained its own administrative structure, financial resources, security personnel, and networks of communication. Senior royal women supervised large households and exercised considerable influence over court affairs. During the post-Mughal period (1707–1857 AD), although the political authority of the Mughal Empire gradually declined, the harem continued to serve as an important center of social organization and political negotiation.
- **Changing Political Environment After 1707:** The death of Aurangzeb in 1707 marked a turning point in Mughal history. The empire witnessed repeated succession disputes, weakening central authority, the emergence of powerful regional states, and the increasing intervention of the British East India Company. These developments directly affected the imperial household. As emperors became politically weaker, influential nobles and regional rulers assumed greater control over governance. Consequently, the political influence of women within the harem became more restricted. Nevertheless, royal women continued to participate in succession politics, mediation between rival factions, and diplomatic correspondence whenever circumstances permitted.
- **Political Role of Royal Women:** Despite the decline of imperial power, several Mughal women remained politically active. Senior queens, princesses, and influential Begums advised emperors, mediated conflicts among nobles, and occasionally influenced appointments to important offices. Their political authority was generally exercised indirectly through trusted officials, family members, and court networks rather than through formal administrative positions. Women of the imperial family often protected the interests of their sons or close relatives during succession disputes. Their interventions demonstrate that the Mughal harem remained an important political institution even during the empire's decline.

- **Social Status and Daily Life:** Life inside the Mughal harem was highly hierarchical. At the top were the emperor's mother, chief queens, and princesses, followed by junior wives, concubines, attendants, servants, and female slaves. Social status depended upon birth, family connections, and proximity to the emperor. Although elite women enjoyed luxurious residences, education, and financial privileges, they also lived within the framework of court etiquette and purdah. Their movement outside the palace remained limited, yet they maintained contact with the outside world through female officials, eunuchs, merchants, religious scholars, and trusted courtiers.

Economic Position and Property Rights

Royal women possessed considerable economic resources through personal allowances, land grants (*jagirs*), gifts, and inherited wealth. These resources enabled them to maintain households, support charitable institutions, and finance religious and cultural projects. During the post-Mughal period, however, shrinking imperial revenues and political instability gradually reduced these financial privileges. The growing influence of the British East India Company further weakened the economic independence of the imperial household. Despite these challenges, many women continued to manage their estates and exercised control over personal property.

Cultural and Religious Patronage

Women of the Mughal harem played an important role in preserving the cultural traditions of the empire. They supported poets, scholars, musicians, painters, and craftsmen while also contributing to the construction and maintenance of mosques, gardens, tombs, and charitable institutions. Religious patronage enhanced their social prestige and strengthened their influence within society. Even during the decline of the Mughal Empire, these cultural activities helped preserve imperial traditions and reinforced the identity of the royal household.

Purdah and Women's Agency

The practice of purdah has often been interpreted as evidence of women's complete exclusion from public life. However, historical research suggests that seclusion did not entirely prevent women from exercising influence. Through correspondence, patronage, marriage alliances, financial management, and trusted intermediaries, women participated in political and social affairs. The harem therefore functioned not simply as a place of confinement but as a protected political space where women negotiated authority within the limits imposed by contemporary social norms.

Impact of British Expansion

The expansion of the British East India Company transformed the socio-political condition of the Mughal harem. As British authority increased, imperial revenues declined and the emperor's political status became largely symbolic. Members of the royal family experienced financial insecurity, while their political influence steadily diminished. The Revolt of 1857 and the subsequent exile of Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar marked the final collapse of the Mughal dynasty. The dissolution of the imperial court also ended the institutional significance of the Mughal harem, forcing many royal women into lives of economic hardship and social marginalization.

Historical Significance

The study of women in the post-Mughal harem challenges the conventional assumption that they were passive figures confined to domestic life. Instead, the available evidence reveals that royal women actively shaped political decisions, preserved cultural traditions, promoted education, and supported charitable activities. Although their authority declined alongside the weakening of the Mughal Empire, they continued to exercise agency through informal political networks and social institutions. Examining their experiences contributes to a more balanced understanding of gender, power, and state formation in early modern India.

CONCLUSION

The socio-political condition of women in the Mughal harem between 1707 and 1857 reflects both continuity and transformation. While the decline of the Mughal Empire reduced their political authority and economic independence, royal women remained influential participants in court politics, cultural patronage, education, and philanthropy. Their contributions demonstrate that the harem was not merely a secluded domestic institution but an important center of political negotiation, social organization, and cultural production. A gender-sensitive analysis

of the post-Mughal period therefore enriches our understanding of the changing nature of power, governance, and women's agency during one of the most significant transitional phases in Indian history.

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