

Cultural Contribution of Royal Mughal Ladies (1526-1707 A.D.)

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Abstract:-

The Status of women in a country and civilization and culture represents fairly the social spirit of the age. The Women of the Mughal rule have not been paid enough attention they deserved. In the present paper a humble attempt has been made to depict the cultural contribution – Chiefly of Royal and elite class women of Mughal Period. In a society where women live in strict seclusion, public references are avoided as far as possible. The various aspects of the life of the Royal Mughal ladies are described here. Although confined within the four walls of the palace / harem their lives were not at all dull and dreary – as is supposed. On the basis of information obtained from the various sources, it may be concluded that this work is a significant contribution to the social history of medieval India. Many of the Royal Mughal Ladies were quite educated like ... Hamida Banu Begum, Maham Anga, Salima Sultan Begum, Noorjahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Zeb-Un-Nisa etc. They spent much of their personal allowances in imparting active support to the spread of education, establishing educational institutions patronising men of learning, maintaining their own libraries and collecting rare and valuable books. They also contributed much in the realms of various arts and architecture. Many of them took an active interest and even spent a lot of their private allowances in constructing beautiful monuments, sarais, tombs, mosques, market places, step-wells and exotic gardens, many of which survive even today, for themselves and also for their husbands or fathers. Their beautiful gardens were laid amidst beautiful location of Kashmir, Kabul, Lahore, Agra and Delhi. These elite class women also took keen interest in other forms of art and culture like music, painting, cooking, designing and art of decoration. Some extremely talented ones like Empress Nurjahan even went for textile, dress and Jewellery designing. They also knew the art of perfumery. These ladies often entertained themselves by musical and dance performances inside the harem. The lavish life style of the Royal Mughal Ladies includes the wearing of gorgeous dresses and exquisite ornaments. Their dresses were made of the finest silks, brocades, satins or malmals and the cloth was brought from far and wide. They decorated themselves with ornaments from head to toe. A lot of cosmetics (tradition of “Solah Shringar”) were also used by these women to enhance their beauty. Their aesthetic sense and creativity is revealed to a great degree in their contribution in the realms of various art and culture. But all their cultural activities were restricted behind the veil “Purdah”. Despite of prevailing social evils like polygamy, purdah, seclusion, discouragement of women’s education and low standard of women, then, this cultural contribution of Royal Mughal ladies in various fields is really praiseworthy.

Keywords: - Royal, Mughal, Ladies, Culture, Contribution

1. Introduction:-

In historical and literary writings, distinctive aspects related to the position and status of women in Mughal India have been underscored, particularly against the background of the peculiar political culture. Often, there have been sweeping generalizations about women’s situation in Mughal era leading to the projection of a specific picture that is embedded in people’s psyche. The explanation for this construction partly lies in the historical documentation, which either tends to romanticize the women’s position, or condemns their low status and is generally portrayed in a victim image. A stereotypical image of a powerless, suppressed, constricted womanhood has been the pattern of the writings. It has been seldom highlighted that women had made substantive contribution in numerous domains of public and cultural life of during the period under review. The manuscript would focus on the contribution of women in cultural domains. The social milieu of the region was particularly regressive for upper class women, who could barely move

on the streets without “Purdah” Royal Mughal Ladies have been known to engage in altruistic and philanthropic activities. The women of the Royal and elite families have been known for their deep sensitivity towards conservation of water bodies, educational buildings, libraries. These charitable initiatives of women for the common folk would also be highlighted in this manuscript. Women’s contribution to art and literature has been immense. The 16th and 17th centuries were witnessed by a flurry of cultural activities in India. The clan of the fabulously talented Mughal dynasty catalyzed much of this. There were also substantial achievements in many realms outside the royal patronage. Though there were two different religious identities i.e. Hindus and Muslims, but both these communities influenced each – other and there was great cultural interaction between them. But the royal and elite cultural effervescence was primarily a royal spectacle. ¹ The Mughals came from a lush and juicy cultural background like central Asia and they valued intellectual, literary, artistic and philanthropic activities and achievements. Mughal monarchs imparted enough liberty to their ladies in spite of purdah or seclusion to patronise the cultural activities. Their liberal resources helped them to patronise scholars, distribute charity, construct edifices, buildings and lay out beautiful gardens. This study is purely the study of cultural history of Royal class women.

2. Objectives of the study:-

- i. The objective of this paper is to unravel a new and innovative image of the Royal Mughal ladies in the Mughal era as active agents of cultural History.
- ii. The exercise is also an effort to provide a platform to practising women historians to deliberate on issues related to women.

3. Methodology:-

The methodology of present paper is purely descriptive. Required information’s are collected from different sources. As regards the sources, primary Persian sources and the accounts of the foreign travellers have been utilised. Besides them essential Hindi Literature and some evidence has been collected from the paintings. A number of modern secondary and translated works, articles in various journals have also been consulted.

4. Literary Attainments and accomplishments:-

Royal Mughal Ladies utilized their time and resources on the literary pursuits of that age. The ladies of Mughal Royalty were quite educated.

- 4.1 **Aim of Female Education:-** During the period under review, the aim was to develop the faculties of the students and to equip them with all that was essential for their moral and material development.² By education, a girl was expected to prove a devoted wife, an excellent future mother, expertise in household work and above all punctuality in religious duties, the latter being the highway to lead them to the final goal, after death.³

The ceremony of starting education was called Bismillah Khani or Maktab Ceremony.⁴ It was observed only when a boy or a girl attained the age of 4 years 4 months and 4 days.⁵ During the Mughal period girls like boys received their early education in a Maktab,⁶ which was a permanent institution of primary as well as elementary education. As regards the curriculum, it can be safely said that normally it was very simple. It comprised reading, writing, elementary arithmetic and moral sayings, i.e. ethics. In the primary stage the Holy Kuran was the chief text book, the whole of which they had to read without knowing its purport. For this, they were first taught the Arabic alphabets, certain portions, essential for the daily prayers, were memorised by the students.⁷ During the Mughal age, higher education of Muslim Women was mostly confined to the upper classes of society. The Emperors, nobility and higher classes were keenly interested in imparting higher education to their ladies. They adorned their ladies with the jewel of “Ilm” (Knowledge). These women had ample opportunities and leisure for intellectual and literary pursuits. For the education of their girls, well to do classes appointed learned ladies or old men of tried merits ⁸, in their own houses, while highly paid educated matrons and superintendents ⁹ were appointed in the Royal Harem. As for their choice in the selection of subjects and books, the Muslim ladies were very fond of poetry, as per the fashion of the day, the spirit of which came from their Persian lady teachers, ¹⁰ who often dictated poems to them. The well – known books of Shaikh Said Shirazi’s, Gulistan and Bostan, ¹¹ written in the form of poetry got much popularity among the female students of that time. The ladies of the Harem took great delight in reading these outstanding books, in their leisure hours. Persian works, as these were not mere books of poetry, but were treated as a treasured sea, full of knowledge and lessons. Besides the Holy Kuran and the study of Hadis, the fair sex were taught Persian an Arabic literature, Elementary Arithmetic, Theology, History, Astronomy and Mathematics. ¹² Some of them also gained proficiency in the art of calligraphy ¹³. Law was also a subject of interest for them. Many Muslim ladies had deep knowledge of medicine and treatment. ¹⁴ The art of administration was regarded very important for the ladies of the Royal Household ¹⁵ and therefore, it was taught to them particularly.

During the under review period, on having finished the Holy Quran, a day was celebrated with great pomp and enthusiasm. This ceremony was called “Khatam Quran”.¹⁶ The beginning and completion of education were important events in a girl’s life¹⁷. The question of female education in the upper classes is concerned, it was not restricted and they could afford it according to their status. The spirit of female education developed out of religion and flourished in politics and fashion¹⁸.

4.2 Mughal Emperor’s Contribution to the realm of Female Education:-

Muslim girls never received their higher education in khangah and madrasa due to strict purdah system, but it does not mean the girl’s education ended in Maktab only and their was no further arrangements for their higher education. The great Mughal Emperors were very much interested and inclined to imparting polished manners and good education to their daughters. They usually made necessary and essential arrangements for residential education for their girls. However, there is evidence to show that many private houses served as important agencies of higher education to impart instructions to the girls privately.¹⁹

The contribution in the realm of learning and education, made by the great Mughals, are indeed worthy of special consideration. Under their great supervision and care their daughters and other distinguished ladies of the harem, received education that immortalised their names, For instance, Babur’s daughter Gulbadan Begum, was credited the authorship of Humayun Nama. In it, we find the names of other educated and learned ladies. Gulbarg, Bega Begum, Dildar Begum and Ayishaa Sultan Khanam were some educated ladies during the age of Babur and Humayun.²⁰

Akbar is famous for his keen interest in promoting education. He made excellent arrangements in this realm and appointed matrons. He gives very great care and attention to the education of the princes, who are kept rigorously secluded from the sight of men. They are taught to read and write and are trained in others ways, by matrons.²¹ In Mughal History, he is credited with founding a girl’s school, for the first time at Fatehpur Sikri.²² During his time the regular training was imparted to the ladies of Royal Household.

Shahjahan appointed Sati-un-Nisa Begum for the literary training of Jahanara Begum. She picked up the knowledge of Persian and Arabic from her²³. It was she who, later on, became the governess of princesses Roshanara and Jahanara.

Aurangzeb was deeply interested in the education of ladies of the imperial Harem. He himself supervised his daughter’s education and academic progress. He taught his princess, all the essential rules and other relevant doctrines of Islam. Under his strict guidance, all the ladies of the harem were engaged in the worship of God, reading and transcribing the Holy Quran, together with the performance of virtuous deeds.²⁴ He appointed Hafiza Mariyum and Mulla Said Ashraf Mazindarani as her teacher, a highly educated lady and a great Persian poet respectively.²⁵

The curriculum for the education of ladies included study of Persian, Arabic, Theology, History etc.²⁶. Gulbadan Begum, Bega Begum, Hamida Bano Begum, Mumtaz Mahal, Sati-un-Nisa, Jahanara Begum, Roshanara, Zeb-Un-Nissa, Zinat-Un-Nissa were some learned Royal ladies of that time. Great Mughal emperors always hired some experienced old person especially for the education of their women, she was entitled Atun Mama (Lady Teacher)²⁷.

Despite the fact that the Royal Mughal ladies remained behind strict “Purdah”, on the whole, their contribution towards education has been great.

5. Educational Institutions:-

Royal Mughal Women also promoted the cause of learning by establishing educational institutions. Salima Sultan Begum, Gulbadan Banu Begum, Nur Jahan, Jahanara and Zeb Un-Nisa had their own libraries.²⁸ Some ladies of royalty founded madrasas (colleges) and imparted stipends (Wajifa) to the needy and deserving persons for encouraging education.

Bega Begum, Wife of Humayun, founded a college near the tomb of her husband.²⁹ Maham Anga (Foster Mother of Akbar) was keenly interested in the promotion of learning, patronised education with heart and soul and spent her money and energy on it.³⁰ She founded a madrasa at Delhi with a mosque attached to it and gave it the name, Khair-Ul – Manzil³¹.

Jahanara Begum founded a madrasa attached to the Jama Masjid at Agra.³² She was also a patron of learning and encouraged a number of scholars and fixed allowances and stipends for them.³³

Dai Lado, wet nurse of Jahangir, was a great patron of learning. She founded a school at Lahore which was presided over by a learned scholar, named Maulvee Asmatullah.³⁴ After her death the school, with the mosque attached to it, continued to be a centre of learning and existed till the down-fall of Mughal sovereignty.³⁵

The patronage given by these ladies to diffuse the education was not confined to the capital alone. In some provinces of the empire, some ladies took keen and deep interest in the promotion of education. Bibi Razi, The wife of Mahmud Shah of Jaunpur, built a college and allotted stipends for students and professors.³⁶

So the Royal Mughal ladies were quite educated and they had done a lot for promotion of learning especially in that era in which the concept of female education was quite ignored.

6. Dresses:-

Royal women adopted and accepted many amorous tricks to increase their charm and beauty through various varieties and designs of dresses.

6.1) Cost:- Elite Women wore elegant and expensive dresses, some foreign travellers have imparted incredible amount of the cost of their dresses. Bernier observes: "The article of dress which lasts only few hours, may cost ten to twelve crown and even more when beautifully embroidered with needlework."³⁷ Manucci mentions that "each garment cost forty to fifty rupees and sometimes more"

6.2) Dress Material:- Miniatures of the period under review reveal the extraordinary beauty and richness of dress materials used by Emperors, Nobles and their ladies. The material used in the dresses were usually silk, cotton, muslin (Malma), Sarband (fine cotton stuff used for the head dress of ladies), dodami, makhmal-i-zarbaft (brocaded velvet), tas (a kind of brocade generally used for brides dress) satin, jamawar, bafta (dyed calico), atlas, kamkhwab (a silk dress article made of gold threads), doria (stripped cotton cloth), Katan- i-firangi, deba, chikan work etc.

Most favourite woollen materials and fabrics were made of "pashm" the wool of a certain mountain goat. In order to make their dresses more beautiful they used laces on it. Nurjahan introduced such a lace called kinari. The Mughal princesses had a special liking for clothes with garniture of jewelled balls. The merchants were ordered to send it only to Mughal seraglio or to nobles and courtiers of the Mughal court.³⁹ Mughal ladies had a great fancy for perfuming their dresses with different scents of that time.

6.3) Manufacturing Places:⁴⁰ - Bengal and Gujarat led whole of India in the manufacture and export of textile goods. Malwa, Allahabad, Jaunpur, Banaras, Jalalabad, Awadh, Agra, Lahore, Sindh, Burhanpur, Bihar, Khandesh, Kashmir etc. were many thriving centres.

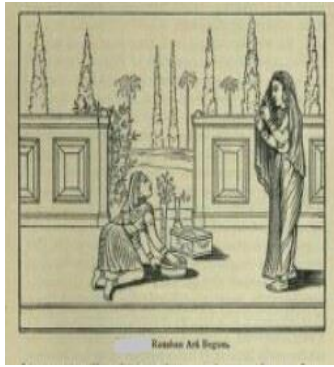
6.4) Different varieties of dresses:- During the period under review, the Royal Mughal ladies were very particular about new fashion and variety in dresses. Contemporary paintings are mere source which enable us to create a clear description of their costumes. The dress of the ladies of early Mughal period (Babur, Humayun) seems to be an echo of the fashion of Khurasan and central Asia. Wealthy muslim ladies wore loose and baggy and embroidered shalwars (drawers), Pajamas and breeches or tight trousers, fastened tightly round the waist.⁴¹

During the reign of Akbar, Royal ladies used to wear tight trousers (commonly known as chudidar Pajama in these days) as lower garment with a long upper garment like a modern maxi with a short round neck having plates on the waist.

Next was worn a shirt (upper garment), Peshwas,⁴² a variety of shirt, it was much plated and gathered in to a band at the waist as fully as it could be possibly set. It hung up to the knee or even below. It had a collar which opened in front. It was tied round the waist with the help of strings having gold fringe or tassels at the end. Mughal women liked to wear jubba, fastened on the neck and stitched with laces. It was a sleeveless dress. Jubba was so long that it needed help of female servants while the wearer walked.⁴³

During the winter season ladies of the Royalty and nobility wore a woollen qaba (a long open wadded coat) of fine Kashmiri Wool.⁴⁴

The age of Akbar adds a new chapter in the realm of Muslim Women's costume. A rich Muslim lady started to wear Angya⁴⁵ (a half or full sleeved jacket, fitting tightly over the breast and reaching just above the navel); Nima (a sort of Kurti) and Ghagra (a kind of petticoat gathered at the waist and extending up to the feet) were worn by Muslim ladies. It is clear from a painting that princess Roshanara was very fond of wearing saris.⁴⁶



The converted Muslim ladies never preferred dresses other than sari. Princess Zeb – Un- Nisa introduced Angiya Kurti.⁴⁷

Dupatta, a useful envelope and the most graceful part of the whole female costume was commonly worn by all Muslim ladies. Orhni, Dandiya, Magna were also varieties of dupatta. Abul Fazal writes the cost of dupatta varied from 6 to 8 Rupees.⁴⁸

6.5) Head Dress:-

As regards the head dress, the Mughal queens and Princesses wore Taj Kulah,⁴⁹



Taj Kulah

A special type of cap), Taqi (a high crested cap with 4 or 6 corners) was worn by unmarried girls while the married used a cap called qasabah.⁵⁰ A taqi with veil hanging called lachaq⁵¹ was reserved merely for Princesses and noble's daughters. Begums also liked to wear a cap (resembling a crown) known as showkali. It's interesting to mention that some of the Mughal princesses put on turban with the emperor's permission.⁵² Manucci refers to a fine Kashmiri shawl worn by the Royal ladies "so thin that they can be passed through a small fingering."⁵³ Muslim women used naqab or burqa whenever they moved out on foot or on horse back. Farsh khwab and shab Khwabi i.e. sleeping suit was not unknown among the ladies of the Royal harem and nobility.

Several varieties of brocades, lace and gowns were introduced by Nurjahan. She introduced a light weight dress dodami, Panch tola scarf, marriage dress Nur Mahali that cost only 25 Rupees.⁵⁴

6.6) Footwear:-

Ladies of royalty and nobility use shoes called paposh (pa = feet, posh = cover – Footwear) of various patterns embroidered with gold or silver or silk flowers. Some wore shoes decorated with pearls in the front part.⁵⁵

7) Architecture:-

Haji Begum (Bega Begum) built the tomb of her husband Humayun in Delhi under her supervision.



Tomb of Humayun

She also built an Arab sarai for the accommodation of Arab travellers and Merchants.⁵⁶ Salima Sultan begum seems to have built her tomb. Mariyam – uz- zamani (Jahangir's mother Manmati, Daughter of Raja Bihari Mal) built a baoli (step-well) in the Jasut Pargana, a grand construction, and cost about twenty thousand of rupees.⁵⁷ Near the Lahore fort, she constructed Begum shahi mosque.⁵⁸

The Tomb of Etimad – Ud – Daula at Agra, with pietra – dura inlay work, Jahangir at Shahadra (Lahore) and herself at Lahore were built under Nurjahan's great supervision. She financed to build a mosque at Shrinagar (Kashmir) which is called Nau Masjid, Shahi Masjid or Patthar Masjid.⁵⁹ Purnhunar Bano Begum (elder daughter of Shahjahan) buried in a mausoleum constructed in Delhi under her own directions.⁶⁰ Taj Mahal is influenced by the tomb of Humayun⁶¹ and Jahangir.

Jahanara Begum added a large and chaste hall to the sanctuary of Khawaja Mohinuddin Chisti, at Ajmer. She built the famous Jami Masjid at Agra (1648 A.D.)⁶². It was build out of her own allowances.⁶³ She established a madarsa in this mosque. In the Kashmir Valley, she had built Begum saheb mosque in an exquisite artistic style, at the cost of rupees 40,000, the entire funds being provided by herself. It was built for a certain learned man Mulla shah Badakhshani. She is said to have built a Rabat (Monastery) too. She planned and supervised the building of the Chowk Sarai Bazar in Lahore and also built the famous Chandni Chowk Bazar near the Red fort in Delhi, which is even to this day a hub of commercial activities in the capital. Her tomb in Delhi reveals her artistic sense.⁶⁴

Roshanara begum too designed her own tomb in Delhi. Zinat-un- Nisa, at the age of 37, undertook a project to construct a number of inns of the highway linking oudh with Bengal. Zinat – Ul – Masjid was buit at her expense in Delhi.⁶⁵ Tradition goes that she demanded the amount of her dowry from her father (Aurangzeb), and spent it in building this mosque. It is better known as Kuwari masjid or maiden's mosque⁶⁶ Dai Anga, wet nurse of Emperor Shahjahan, built Dai Anga Masjid presently situated near the Lahore Railway station, Punjab, Pakistan⁶⁷.

8) Gardens:-

Royal Mughal ladies were keen and deep interested in laying out beautiful gardens & pleasure – spots. A royal house and garden was built on the road from Agra to Bayana under the great supervision of Haji Begum, the wife of Humayun.⁶⁸ Thevenot mentions "upon the road from Agra to Bayana there is a royal house built by the queen mother (Step) of Eebar (Akbar) with gardens kept in very good order".⁶⁹

In Allahabad, Khusrau Bagh was built by one of the Jahangir's daughter in 1620 A.D.⁷⁰ It is listed as an Indian site of National Importance.



Khusrau Bagh

Emperor Jahangir mentions about other beautiful gardens in his memoirs, first of all “I walked around the Shaharara then in the garden that Bika Begum, grandmother of my father had made.”⁷¹ Jahangir’s mother Mariyam – uz-Zamani made a garden in Jasut pargana,⁷² which cost about 20,000 rupees. Empress Nurjahan, a great lover of gardens, inspired her husband in the building of some of the finest Mughal gardens, such as the famous Shalimar (Garden of Love), Verinag and Achabal Garden in Kashmir.⁷³

Aqa Aqayan, who was in the service of Jahangir, also built a garden in Delhi for herself.⁷⁴

Jahanara Begum loved beautiful gardens. She possessed three gardens in Kashmir: Bagh-i-Aishabad, Bag-i-Nur Afsha and Bag-i-safa.⁷⁵ After Mumtaz Mahal’s death, she inherited Bagh- i- Jahanara⁷⁶ where as Bagh-i-Shaharara was imparted to her by her Father Monarch Shahjahan. She laid out a garden in Delhi called Begum Ka Bagh.

Roshanara Begum also built a garden near the city of Delhi, which is known after her name.



Roshanara Bagh

Zeb-Un-Nisa Begum was not behind the other Royal Mughal ladies in her garden building, as Chau Burji (Lahore) proves.⁷⁸



Chau Burji

Bibi Akbarabadi made a garden in imitation of Kashmir and Lahore (Shalimar) garden, which took 4 years for completion and cost about 2 lakh rupees.⁷⁹

9). Paintings:-

Painting was one of the most favourite fine arts of the Royal Mughal ladies. There is only one available reference of female painter, that is the daughter of Pupil of Aqa Riza who made copies of Flemish etchings, named Nadira Bano. A portrait of Shah Tahmasp I, the Persian king with whom the Emperor Humayun took refuge, it is the only Mughal miniature signed by a Mughal lady painter, named Sahifa Banu (preserved in the Wantage Bequest in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London).⁸⁰

Empress Nurjahan shared actively her husband's (Jahangir) interest in painting.⁸¹ K.S. Lal convincingly stated that she herself painted some amount of excellence.⁸² She could ask the painter in Jahangir's studio to paint any image that appealed to her due to her great influence. A copy of Hafiz's Diwan, copied by Khawaja Abdus Samad Shirinqalam during Akbar's reign, illustrated with miniatures under Jahangir, bore the seal of Nurjahan, indicating that it was presented to her on some occasion by her husband.⁸³ The paintings of female images, whether of urban matrons, Roman goddesses or feasting courtesans must certainly have been drawn at Nurjahan's instance.⁸⁴ She had great interest in examining different pieces of painting. Unfortunately no painting of her brush is available now to show the general motives and the techniques followed by her.

Mumtaz Mahal appears to be adept in the art of painting.⁸⁵ A photo of a lady painter belonging to the Mughal age, placed in the Bharat Kala Bhawan, Benaras.⁸⁶ Dara Sikoh presented to his beloved wife Nadira Bano an album that proved her a lover of painting.⁸⁷ Rajput school of painting also bears the feminine images.

10) Decoration:-

Some royal mughal ladies were interested and involved in a beautiful art of decoration. After the victory of Chunar, when Humayun returned to Agra safely, Maham begum become so happy and imparted to great feast to share the joy, she beautifully decorated the palaces and bazars under her own guidance and supervision.⁸⁸ On the occasion of Akbar's circumcision, Bega Begum's garden was decorated. Sultans, Amirs and other Royal personalities decorated their gardens too. At this joyful event the Begums and Royal ladies exhibited their art by decorating their gardens "quite wonderful in a new fashion".⁸⁹

Nurjahan was too much interested in this art that even the death of her first husband Sher Afghan; she kept herself engaged in repairing and beautifying apartments.⁹⁰ She used to adorn the walls of the rooms with painted pictures and tapestries. Flowery curtains, made of sweet smelling flowers were hung on the doors, under her supervision, which were changed the next day. Farsh-i-chandani (a silver carpet) was spread over the carpet that lay on the floor, was her a new invention. Khafi Khan mentions that she had prepared a beautiful curtain for the main door of her room which was made of precious pearls, garnet and zamurrad.⁹¹ Animals used by Jahangir were also adorned and decorated beautifully on festive occasions. She is credited with making the housing with various pieces of khwanposh (Tray Cover), send by the nobles. Once, Jahangir became amazed to see such beautiful covers on his elephant's body.⁹² Jahan Begum (Hindal's widow) arranged a great feast in the garden on Jahangir's arrival at Daccan. Although it was autumn season yet she had managed to hang artificial flowers, fruits and leaves, prepared of different varieties of cloth, wood and wax on the trees. Jahangir became astonished to see her art and skill when he plucked one of the fruits.⁹³

Princess Zeb-un-Nisa used to decorate her apartments with artificial bunches of flowers.⁹⁴ As the activities of the Royal Mughal ladies were mostly confined to their harem, palaces and gardens, they tried to decorate them as beautifully as they possibly could.

11) Toilets and Ornaments:-

Royal mughal ladies spent most of their times in enhancing their physical charm and attractiveness. For this they have adopted various amorous contrivances. Abul Fazal describes 16 items of toilets which include – i) bathing, ii) anointing with oil, iii) hair braiding, iv) decking the crown of the head with Jewells, v) anointing with sandal weed unguent, vi) wearing of various kinds of dresses, vii) sectarian marks of caste, viii) Tinting with lamp black like collyrium, ix) earrings, x) nose rings of pearls and gold, xi) necklace, xii) garlands of pearls and flowers, xiii) staining the hands with Heena (Mehandi), xiv) wearing a belt hug with small bells, xv) decorating the feet with gold ornament, xvi) eating pan (betel) and finally, blandishments and artfulness.⁹⁵

By the women of Royal household were loved ornaments greatly. They were made of pearls, gold and silver varieties of ornaments were – Sheesphul, Mauli, Mang Tika, Chand, Bindi, Damni, Sar-Sari, Jhumar, Karnphul, Jhumka, Champakli, Laung, Nath, Bearas, Rekhan, Har, Hamel, Bazuband, Pahunchi, Gajra, Churi, Hathphul, Payal, Ramjhul, Bichhwah etc.⁹⁶

Use of scents and Perfumes:-

Royal Women were very fond of scents and perfumes, which were manufactured in Khushbu Khana. In Babur's and Akbar's reign perfumes of Kiura and Musk were very popular. Nurjahan's mother Asmat Begum invented an excellent Otto of roses called Itr-i-Jahangiri about which Emperor Jahangir himself mentions – "There is no other scent of equal excellence to it. It restores the withered soul."⁹⁷ According to Manucci, "They often receive from the King special presents in cash under the pretext that is to buy betel or perfumes or shoes."⁹⁸

12. Food and Drink:-

All the ladies of the Royal harem got their daily meals from one Matbakh (Kitchen).⁹⁹ Muslim ladies not only displayed great luxury in food but some of them spent a heavy amount in the preparation of dainty dishes.¹⁰⁰ Cooking was generally concern of the professional cooks employed in the Royal harem. It was merely on some special occasion that royal ladies took some special interest in culinary art. Nurjahan organised a royal feast in Mandu in 1617 A.D.,¹⁰¹ where excellent food prepared from meat and fruit was served under her directions. "Nur Pulloo" invented by her, was a favourite dish of the Muslims.¹⁰² A finely carved jade and gem – studded fruit knife in the Salarjung museum in Hyderabad is said to have belonged to Nurjahan Begum.¹⁰³

Jahanara Begum mentions in Riasala-i-Shahebiya that she herself prepared Nan and Saag and sent it to the saint Hazrat Mian Meer.¹⁰⁴ Once Udaipuri Mahal prepared a ragout (stew) and invited Aurangzeb to her apartment.¹⁰⁵ Royal Muslim ladies were expert in dressing meat in various ways. So Abul Fazal writes, "Whenever long fasts are ended, the first dishes of meat come dressed from the apartments of Mariyam Makani, next from the other Begums, the princess and the other principal nobility for his Majesty".¹⁰⁶ Abraham Early gave the illustration of a Rajput lady enjoying Hukka.¹⁰⁷



A Rajput princess smoking a hookah. Tobacco was introduced into India by the Portuguese; smoking the hookah then became an elite refinement. Abraham Early, Mughal World, A tainted Paradise.

Huqah – bardar, an attendant was employed to keep it constantly going on.¹⁰⁸

Travenier writes especially ladies were in habit of chewing betel throughout the day.¹⁰⁹ Manucci says, the ladies drank at night when music, dancing and acting and other delightful pranks go on around. He imparts a doubtful account about Jahanara Begum's drinking nature. References are also made in contemporary Hindi Literature to liquor being used by women.¹¹⁰

13. Music:-

Music was considered the favourite activity of the Royal Mughal ladies. They could enjoy the songs and dances of professional singers.¹¹¹ In the Royal harem also there were a number of dancing and singing women for the diversion of queens and princesses, and ladies had the permission of emperor to enjoy seeing a dance and to hear singing.¹¹² These Muslim ladies entertained their lady friends and other members of the family on certain occasion, but they always avoided singing openly before others.¹¹³ Muslim ladies who had sweet voice, utilised it in reciting the verses of the Quran and the poems in memory of the heroes of the battle of Karbala (marsiya).¹¹⁴

Saru-Sahi and Shaham Agha, in 1549 A.D. in a moonlit night these two ladies entertained the Royal ladies of Humayun on the way of Laghman, singing, "softly-softly."¹¹⁵ Nurjahan sang and danced for the many queens and

princesses and delighted them with her art in her unmarried stage.¹¹⁶ Mumtaz Mahal had a sweet voice and sometimes she used to sing song in praise of her husband (Shahjaha).¹¹⁷ She also had interest in music.¹¹⁸ Zeb-un-Nisa was a gifted singer and a perfect musician. She also composed songs in Persian, Arabic and Urdu.¹¹⁹ Zain-Abadi (Hira-Bai), one of the Aurangzeb's wives, was a gifted singer of her time.¹²⁰ Hira-Bai was considered one of the famous musicians of Shahjahan's period. Saraus Bai, Prince Murad's Darling was the popular singer. Noor Bai another female singer of Aurangzeb's period sang the Rubai of Umer Khayam very melodiously and sweetly.¹²¹ Ratnavali, the wife of Puranmal, sang Hindi melodies sweetly.¹²² Man Singh's queen Mrignayani was expert in music.¹²³ Mira Bai was a well-known singer.¹²⁴ Nayak Bikhshi's (Court Singer of Akbar) daughter was an expert in music. Even Mian Tan Sen spent his time in Deccan for training under this eminent singer of that age.¹²⁵

Abul Fazal refers to a particular class of female singers known as the Sezdah Tali class. Dadi women were employed to sing sohla and Dhrupad on birthdays and marriage ceremonies. Besides Dadi, there were Hurkiyah women who played the tala and also sang.¹²⁶ There are a number of Mughal miniatures depicting the dancing performance and singing of women. Paintings of ladies holding various musical instruments like Drum, Tambourine, Duff, Sitar,¹²⁷ depicted the popularity of music under the period review B.P. Saksena mentions, "that Emperor Shahjahan had given sometime to music in hectic routine of his administrative life. He especially employed concubines for singing and dancing in the night parties"¹²⁸

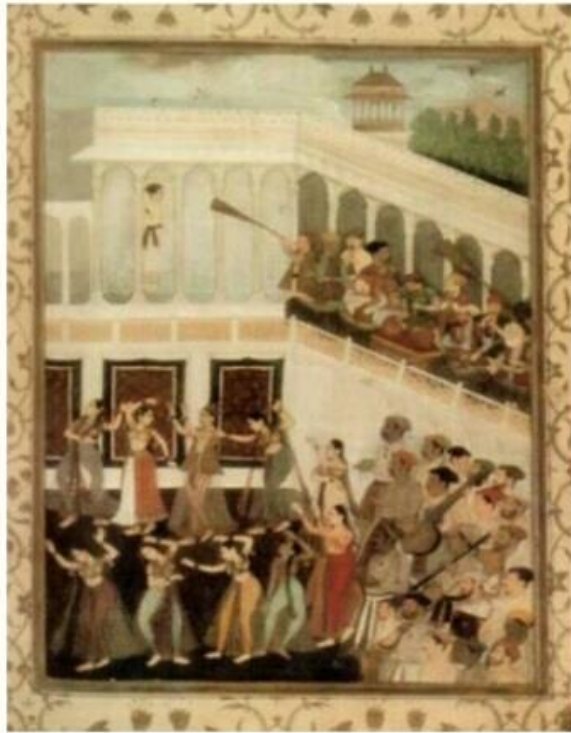


Royal Musicians Performance at a Marriage

Akbarnama, 1590 or earlier. Courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, IS.2-1896 f.8/117. The heralding ensemble (naubat or naqqara khana) on the right announces the presence of the Emperor. Three Indian women in the centre sing and play the drum (*dhol*) and cymbals (*tala*), while central Asian female musicians accompany dancers on tambourine (*da'ira*).

14. Dance:-

The art of dancing was not considered respectable among the royal and aristocratic Mughal ladies. Many Mughal paintings reveal the mughal women's love for dance performances.¹²⁹ Nurjahan was not in favour of cheap forms of entertainment in the harem. She encouraged classical music and dance.¹³⁰ A picture of Nurjahan holding a Nauraz Mahfil shows one woman dancing and others playing on musical instruments.¹³¹ Dance was confined to some professional groups alone. In the Royal Harem there were a number of professional dancing women for the diversion of Queens and Princesses. The Mughal emperors entertained themselves with dance performances at their court (Darbar) and Royal ladies watched these from behind the veils.¹³² Marriages, birthdays and different ceremonies of Royalty and nobility were the occasions of dance performances.¹³³



The Wedding of Shah Jahan on His 42nd Lunar Brithday.

Painted by Bholā. Padshah Nama, ca. 1635. the Royal Collection © 2000 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Holmes Binding 149, p. 140, f. 70b. The naubat/naqqara khana musicians paly from the balcony, while below dancers are accompanied by singing, dhrupad rabab, rudra vina, dhol, tambur, castanet and possibly other instruments.

There was a certain class of ladies which took dancing as profession. Akbar used to call them “Kanchinies”. Abul Fazal refers to a particular class of female dancer, the women while they sing play upon thirteen pairs of Talas at once, two on each wrist, two on each shoulders, one the breast and two on the fingers of each hand. They are mostly from Gujarat and Malwa.¹³⁴ He mentioned a special performance of dance named Akhara, which entertained the nobility and in which domestic servants are taught to sing and play. Cymbal, Pakhawaj, Upang, Rubab, Vina, Yantra etc. were the musical instruments. Peter Mundy writes, “there are also dancing wenches of whom they are diverse sorts as Lulleness (Lalni), Harcaness (Harakin), Kanchanees (Kanchain) and Doomness (Domnis) being of several castes and used various manners of music. Most commonly they are hired at solemn feasts where they play, sing and dance and there is rarely any meeting of friends without them.....¹³⁵. Bernier refers to them as dancing girls.....¹³⁶. According to Mohammad Saki, Emperor Aurangzeb prohibited singing and dancing at court, he allowed it in his palace for entertainment of the Queens and his daughters.¹³⁷ These singing and dancing women received handsome presents form the royal ladies. When they leave, their hands are filled with Kichari, a mixture of Gold and silver coins, with all kinds of precious stones and pearls, large and small.¹³⁸

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