



## Professions of Women during the Mughal period: Contrasting Aspects

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**Keywords: European Travellers, Mughal Period, Profession, Socio-Cultural, Women**

Women occupy a critical place in every stratum and society. They are the homemakers and the basic source of growth and development of the new generations. The European travellers have described women in thorough detail with respect to their socio-cultural aspect and their position and status in the society. The study of the social division of labour between sexes focuses on the women's social status. Scanty information regarding women's profession lay scattered in the travelogues during Empire. Also the information on women's work and profession is difficult to be found for the entire pre-colonial period as there are only incidental references in the Indo-Persian and the literature for the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries. The information given by the contemporary writers does not give a complete picture of the women in the Mughal period. Thus, the objective of this paper is to study the European travelogues to complement the contemporary sources as well as to juxtapose.

There were several aspects of women during the Mughal period. The women during the Mughal India can be broadly categorized into: the royal women and the commoners. The Royal women enjoyed the privilege of education and up-to some extent, were masters of their own will and expanded their horizons over several activities. On the contrary were the common women who were generally the home makers and were restricted to domestic activities and in certain stratum were victims of deeply rooted social evils. The focus of this paper is to highlight the prevalent professions during the aforementioned period and throw light on the contrast among them.

The management of house and household chores were confined to women in all class and society. The skill, expertise, talent and experience that were required in the management of the household were not recognized by the male dominated society, and were conceived as natural and therefore inferior in attribute of femininity. Whatever division of work is allotted for woman is considered to be compatible with her natural or biological function and thus, domestic chores are assigned to her.

The maintenance of the household required doing certain kinds of works and hard labour. In case of the majority of ordinary women, the work around household consists of a variety of subsistence activities such as rearing children, carrying water, collecting fuel, cooking food, serving meals, food transportation, tending cattle, spinning cloth for house use, etc.

Wealthy households included extra household female members such as mistresses, wet-nurses, slaves or servants and concubines. The presence of servants or maids among richer families would obviously tend to lighten the work of the women. They would have to do less manual work. In these families, there were a number of lower class recruits to take over the drudgery of housework and childcare. The female servants formed an important section of the household. The servants, both male and female received their wages in cash in addition to some food and clothing. Higher caste families hired women of lower orders to fetch water from well and for other related services. These women were known as *panibharin* and were usually allowed food and clothing than paid by a certain sum for each pot of water but many a times earned *annas* per month. Many unfortunate widows gave themselves up as domestic servants among richer family in return for food and shelter.

Besides this the fetching of water from the village well was another customary chore of Indian women. Fryer observes in 1676 A.D. says, "*Indian wives dress their husband's victual, fetch water and grind their corn with a hand-mill, when they sing, chat and are merry.*"<sup>i</sup>

Slave women did much of the household tasks. Lekhapaddhati cites women slaves doing household works as grinding, cutting, smearing the floor, sweeping the floor, fetching water, milking cattle, agricultural work, etc.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, the tasks performed by the female slaves were diverse and multiform.

The condition of female slave was not much changed in the centuries. According to Linschoten, "*male and female slaves were kept by the Portuguese to earn money. Male slaves were sent in the market to do labour and female slaves did needle work (embroidery) at home. Some slaves were sent to fetch water and sell it in the streets. Female slaves made all sort of confections and preserved fruits. Young girls were sent to the markets to do different jobs and the money brought by them was taken by their masters.*"<sup>iii</sup> Pietro Della Valle observes in 1623 A.D. in Surat says, "*The ordinary slaves lived with nothing, their clothing is only white linen. Which though fine was bought very cheap; and their diet for the most part is nothing but rice, so that everybody, even of mean fortune, keep a great family and is splendidly attended this is easy enough, considering the very small charge*"<sup>iv</sup>. Ovington in 1698 A.D. also give the similar kind of information from Gujarat, According to him, "*due to the easy availability and cheap maintenance, ordinary people maintain female slaves, or concubines.*"<sup>v</sup>

The establishment of the profession of concubinage had been a well-established feature of royal household whether it was the Hindu Kingdom of the South or the Mughal Empire in the North. To enforce discipline among the numerous concubines, matrons were placed over them.<sup>vi</sup> The eunuchs were placed as sentries over them and were allowed entry in the harem as male attendants of the harem. But in case of misbehaviour with any of the concubines, the concubines could sometimes deal strictly with them.<sup>vii</sup> Nevertheless, the welfare and entertainment of concubines was also taken care of, along with that of Begums. In the festive gatherings, for the entertainment of wives and concubines, the musicians and dancers performed and female servants were attached in service to them.<sup>viii</sup> The luxuries and spending by wives and concubines had been commented upon a great deal by the European travellers.<sup>ix</sup>

The concubines were seen as threat to the stability of married life. In the description of noble's harem, in which were numerous slave girls (and potential concubines), the tension is evident. The helpless wives unable to check their husband treated the slave-girls with great severity. Pelsaert mentions that, "*if one of the pretty slave-girls takes his fancy, he calls her to him and enjoys her, his wife not daring to show any sign of displeasure, but dissembling though she will take it out of the slave-girl later on*"<sup>x</sup>. Mundy, similarly, has found a slave-girl, near Sikandra (Agra), only 10 years old, who had runaway upon the 'hard usage' of her mistress; the cause being, as the girl informed Mundy, that the mistress had conceived her husband's affection towards her.<sup>xi</sup>

There appears to be of jealousies on part of the masters to guard their women against other men. There are numerous references of destruction of harem so that they could not be taken by the victor. For instance De Laet reports of Qasim Khan, governor of Bengal. Leaving all his property but killing all his women when he had to flee from the royal forces.<sup>xii</sup>

The institution of concubinage became the social instrument for integrating captive women into household of their captors thus assuring their captors not only their loyal services but also those of their off-springs.

An important role was played by women as midwives and nurses of babies. Midwifery is typically a woman's work. These midwives and nurses invariably appear in Mughal paintings, depicting scenes of birth of Princes like the birth of Prince Salim. Fryer observed: "*At their labour they seldom call midwives, being petty quick that way, though there are not a few live well by that profession.*"<sup>xiii</sup>

Wet-nursing is another work that is obviously exclusive to women called *dhays* who nurse children. Lactating mothers would sell their milk to elites, and for the service so rendered they received and other favours by of compensation.<sup>xiv</sup> Almost all women of ruling and elite families required the services of the

wet nurse. In a polity where becoming a mother was important the availability of nurses was critical for survival of any infant. Besides, among ordinary families the need of a wet-nurse might arise if the mother was ailing with some problem and therefore could not feed the child. Further, the presence of *dhatri* could relieve the mother and hence geared up the production process.

On several occasions, a *dhatri* could use her position to acquire social and material benefits<sup>xv</sup> and a dignified position. If she becomes a *dhatri* of King's children, she would obviously develop a bond of love and care with children and have the opportunity to get her family members placed in good position and could exercise enough authority herself.<sup>xvi</sup>

The women during the sixteenth and seventeenth century were not only confined to the household work but opted many other professions as well. Women were involved in agriculture work also.<sup>xvii</sup> Women were not only confined to domestic farming, but they also worked as part time wage earner. After the harvest was collected from the field it created more work for women. The beating of rice and husking of other grains was exclusive a women's job. The grinding of the grain on the rotary hand-mill was also mainly done by women.<sup>xviii</sup> The peasant's housewife did not perform tasks subordinate to those of men but participated equally in the process of agricultural production. Norris reports that the women at Coromandel Coast did various agricultural works like cleaning, grinding the paddy and carrying the wood.<sup>xix</sup>

Women played a considerable role in the commercial activities during the Mughal period. Their involvement in the mercantile activities was not a new phenomenon in India because there are examples in history where we can clearly see women handling business and trade independently. Their involvement in trade and commerce came most often from ruling family and noble class women. Women in the imperial harem were actively engaged in commercial activities.

Maryam Zamani, Jahangir's own mother, owned ship called *Rahimi* through which she traded with the market of West Asia and Persian Gulf. The significance of *Rahimi* in the overseas commercial activities is reflected from the fact that when in 1611, it was captured by the Portuguese they demanded 30,000 *rials* for its release.<sup>xx</sup> She showed a remarkable interest in trade and commerce, particularly overseas trade. She was among the most well-known of the ship owners; "the Great Mogul's mother was a great adventurer, which caused the Great Mogul to drive the Portugals out of this place".<sup>xxi</sup> Her ship carried merchandise for the vendors of Holy city, Mecca, and trafficked in pilgrims going for *hajj*.<sup>xxii</sup>

Nur Jahan, a woman of imminent importance was also involved in overseas trade. Foreign trade was quite flourishing and lucrative in her time. She owned her own ships and was actively engaged in overseas trade and commerce. Some of her commercial enterprises brought her immense profit, especially in indigo and embroidered cloth trade.<sup>xxiii</sup> She was an extremely astute and practical merchant, showing no hesitation in cooperating with the Portuguese for commercial security and profits.

Several of her business ventures were based on the cooperation of private Portuguese merchants, and her ships would regularly pay *cartaz* dues to the Portuguese.<sup>xxiv</sup> Thomas Roe inform us about the interest of Nur Jahan's in trading activities, says, "on going to Jahangir, every way of new points of power, however, the queen Nur Jahan, asked to see ambassador's seal, keeping it overnight".<sup>xxv</sup> Roe further acknowledge that Nur Jahan played a crucial role in his negotiations with the imperial court, as also in determining the demand of foreign goods and luxury items in the imperial court.<sup>xxvi</sup> Thomas Roe called "Nur Jahan as his solicitor and brother as his broker."<sup>xxvii</sup>

It can be said that the majority of the women were not in a pleasant position owing to the social customs and male prejudices, however, the royal women were apparently in a privileged position which allowed them get well educated and also provided them an opportunity to establish their individual identities as literary figures and businesswomen. Common women played a specific role to complete the society; therefore no one can deny the role and contribution of women to build a society in present condition.

Although the European travellers were not from the same culture and society and could not completely understand the custom and traditions of the people, they left behind the large amount of information about

the social and cultural life of the society, especially the common people including women, which is very important to understand the contrasting position of the women during the Mughal period.

<sup>i</sup>Fryer, John, *A New Account Of East India and Persia Being Nine Years 1672-81*, ed. William Crooke, Hakluyt Society, London, 1909, New Delhi, 1992, Vol. II, p.454.

<sup>ii</sup>Prasad Pushpa, "Female Slavery in Thirteenth Century Gujarat Documents in the Lekhapaddhati" IHR, 1988-89, ed. Vivekanand Jha, Vol. XV, No. 1-2, p. 270.

<sup>iii</sup>Linschoten, *Purchas*, Vol. X, p.231.

<sup>iv</sup>Della Valle, Pietro, *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India, 1623-24*, ed. Edward Grey, Hakluyt Society, London, 892, New Delhi, rpt. 1991, Vol. I, p. 42.

<sup>v</sup>Ovington, p. 40.

<sup>vi</sup>Niccolao Manucci, *Storia, Storia Do Mogoror Mogul India*, trans. William Irvine, 4 Vols., Indian Text Series, London, 1907, Vol. II, p. 308.

<sup>vii</sup>Laet, Joannes De, *The Empire of the Great Mogol*, tr. J.S. Hoyland & S.N. Banerjee, New Delhi, 1928, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1974, p. 99.

<sup>viii</sup>Manucci, Vol. II, p. 308.

<sup>ix</sup> Hawkins, William, *Early Travels in India*, he says that, the expenses daily for his women is 30,000 rupees while Jourdain finds it difficult to compute and spending according to him was infinite.

<sup>x</sup>Francisco Pelsaert, *Remonstrantie, c. 1626, Jahangir's India*, translated into English by W.H. Moreland and P. Geyl, Cambridge, 1925, p. 65.

<sup>xi</sup>Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia*, edited by Sir Richard Carnac Temple, Vol. II, entitled 'Travels in Asia' Hakluyt Society, London, 1914, Vol. II, p. 88.

<sup>xii</sup>Laet, Joannes De, p. 194.

<sup>xiii</sup>Fryer, John, *A New Account Of East India and Persia Being Nine Years 1672-81*, ed. William Crooke, Hakluyt Society, London, 1909, New Delhi, 1992, Vol. I, p. 281.

<sup>xiv</sup>Begum Gulbadan, *Humayun Nama*, tr. Annette S. Beveridge, Delhi, 1996, p.95.

<sup>xv</sup>*The English Factories in India, (1618-1669)*, Thirteen Volumes, A Calendar of Documents in India Office & British Museum, ed. W. Foster, Oxford, 1906-27, (1655-1660), pp. 73-74.

<sup>xvi</sup>Fazl Abdul, *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol. I, p. 69.

<sup>xvii</sup>Moosvi, Shireen, *History of Civilization of Central Asia*, ed. Chahryar Adle and Irfan Habib, Unesco Publishing House, 2003, pp. 366-372.

<sup>xviii</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 105-14.

<sup>xix</sup>Norris, William, *The Norris Embassy to Aurangzeb (1699-1702)*, ed. Harihar Das, condensed and rearranged, S.C. Sarkar, Calcutta, 1959, p. 121.

<sup>xx</sup>*Letters Received by the East India Company from its Servants in the East, (1602-1617)*, Six Volumes: Vol. I, ed. F.C. Danvers; Vols. II-VI, ed. W. Foster, London, 1896-1902, Vol. I, pp. 186-88.

<sup>xxi</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 43.

<sup>xxii</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 163, 167, 178, 180-4.

<sup>xxiii</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 305.

<sup>xxiv</sup>*The English Factories in India, (1618-1669)*, Thirteen Volumes, A Calendar of Documents in India Office & British Museum, ed. W. Foster, Oxford, 1906-27, (1618-1621), p. xv.

<sup>xxv</sup>Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe, 1615-19, as Narrated in his Journal & Correspondence*, ed. W. Foster, London, 1926, pp. 401-404, 412.

<sup>xxvi</sup>Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*, p. 436.

<sup>xxvii</sup>*Letter Received*, Vol. VI, p. 150.