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## Behind The Veil: An Analytical study of political Domination of Mughal women

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### **Abstract:**

In fifteen and sixteen centuries Indian women were usually banished from public or political activity due to the patriarchal structure of Indian society. But it was evident through non-government arenas that women managed the state affairs like male sovereigns. This paper explores the construction of bourgeois ideology as an alternate voice with in patriarchy, the inscription of subaltern female body as a metonymic text of conspiracy and treachery. The narratives suggested the complicity between public and private subaltern conduct and inclination – the only difference in the case of harem or Zannaha, being a great degree of oppression and feminine self –censure. The gradual discarding of the veil (in the case of Razia Sultana and Nur Jahan in Middle Ages it was equivalents to a great achievement in harem of Eastern society). Although a little part, a pinch of salt in flour but this political interest of Mughal women indicates the start of destroying the patriarchy imposed distinction of public and private upon which western proto feminism constructed itself.

### **Keywords:**

Fifteen and sixteen centuries, Indian women, political activity, Mughal Women

Mughal rule in India had blessed with many brilliant and important aspects that still are shining in the history. They left great personalities that strengthen the history of Hindustan as compare to the histories of other nations. In these great personalities there is a class who indirectly or sometime directly influenced the Mughal politics. This class is related to the Mughal Harem. The ladies of Royalty enjoyed an exalted position in the Mughal court and politics. They were considered so influential that many persons succeeded in approaching the Emperor through them.

### Central Asian Tradition

In order to understand the prominent role of women at the Mughal court it has to be borne in mind that women in the central Asian region from which the 'House of Timur' originated enjoyed considerably more freedom and were more active than those in the central Islamic regions. Alanquwa the mythical female ancestor of Chingiz Khan played an important role in the prehistory of the Mughals. The chief wife of Timur, founding father of the Mughal dynasty was also a highly independent lady. In more recent history there was Babur's maternal grandmother Isan Daulat Begum, the wife of Yunus Khan Mughal who after the death of Babur's father managed everything for her grandson. (1) In the words of Babur

When it comes to tactics and strategy, there were few women like my grandmother Isan Daulat Begum. She was intelligent and a good organizer mostly arrangements were made according to her stipulations.(2)

Furthermore Babur's mother Qultug Nigar Begum was the very energetic lady, the chief wife of Umar Shaykh Mirza and she accompanied her son Babur on many of his campaigns.

Razia Sultanaa As A Source Of Inspiration



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Razia worked as a source of inspiration for Mughal ladies to take active part in politics. In India the Turks who had fully assimilated political traditions of the Persians accepted the right of female to sovereignty already raised a lady Razia Sultana to the throne. The example of Razia Sultana encouraged the ladies of Mughal royalty to take active part in politics. The family of Babur which inherited the traditions of Chingiz khan and Timur allowed their female sufficient political right and enabled them to share the political rights. (3)

## Political Domination Of Mughal Ladies

The company of women for Mughal men was a normal part of almost all their activities. Women took part actively at court functions, in wars and some of the prominent ladies participated in business dealings with domestic and foreign petitioners behind the veil. The chronicles contain a wealth of documentations on women in the imperial household who were often as powerful as their husbands acting as patrons of architecture, art and science, playing a role in government, having the right to issue edicts, intervenes in the political matters. The safety and protection of the Zananah however did not stop Mughal women from direct and indirect involvement in public affairs. Mughal women showed great dignity in the exercise of power. Akbar had appointed his sister Bakhtunnisa as governor of Kabul. She successfully administrated the area for three years. There were other ladies who were very dominant in the political affairs in the Great Mughals even outside the harem. As Rani Durgavati the Chandel princess of Gondwana governed her country with great courage and capacity. Her country was better administrated and more prosperous than that of Akbar the Great.(4)

Mughal women participated in the political culture of their times by different ways and means as follows:

### **1. Matrimonial alliance:**

In Mughals, many marriages were based on political motives. They strengthen their position in different regions through these marriages. Mughal women worked behind the scenes in marriage negotiations, guided emperors and princes in directions that would be most beneficial as political alliances and welcoming new wives into the complex culture of the women's apartments. Mubarika a lady of Pashtun clan of Yusufzay to whom Babur married which improved his standing in the eyes of the Afghan highlanders. Similarly Babur married her sister to Shabani Khan and after getting the rule of Hindustan he called her sister back by getting divorced from Shabani Khan. So women played a great role in these political marriages. As Nurjahan married the daughter of her brother Mumtaz Mahal to Shahjahan to strengthen her position and later married her daughter Ladli Begum to the other son of Jahangir.(5)

### **2. Diplomatic missions:**

These ladies corresponded by letters and by couriers with the noble wives of rulers of other countries and kingdoms and strengthen the contacts that were beneficial to the empire. The ladies actively corresponded to the nobles and other officials. In the list of the ladies who actively corresponded in Mughal period were Hamida Bano Begum, Nurjahan, Mumtaz Mahal and Jaahan Ara .

### **3. Appointments on official posts:**

Women at court had an important role in the appointments and promotion of relatives and friends to positions of political and financial responsibilities. The most noted example of this



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involvement in the shaping of court hierarchy was Nurjahan whose family benefited tremendously from her position as Jahangir's wife.(6)

#### **4. Court politics:**

The most important way women shaped Mughal politics was by actual involvement in political affairs at court. They were acting as mediators and peacemakers. The most famous example of such intercession by women in the role of peacemakers occurred at the end of Akbar's reign when the intense efforts of Gulbadan Begum, Maryam Makani and Salima Sultana Begum proved successful in bringing about a reconciliation between Akbar and Salim.(7)

Criteria Of Sovereignty In Political Affairs. According to Fatima Mernissi ,

“There are two indisputable criteria of sovereignty in Islam. The name of the head of state is proclaimed in the Khutba at the Friday service in the mosque and it is inscribed on the coins”(8)

Although Mughal men allowed their women to participate in political matters but they did not share the privilege of Khutba with any lady even a person like Jahangir who was fully influenced by Nurjahan and she was equally possessed the power but even her name was not allowed to be read in the Friday Khutba. The royal ladies had many other privileges only without Khutba such as: Minting the coins, Royal seal, Official correspondence and Titles. (9)

#### **Prominent Female Political Figures of Mughal Era**

Maham Begum was the Shia wife of Babur. She was married to Babur in 1506 A.D. She accompanied her husband to Badakhshan and Transoxiana and stood by him through thick and thin. She enjoyed exalted position in the time of Babur and was the only queen who was allowed to sit by the side of the king on the throne at Delhi. For two and a half years after the death of her husband she continued taking an active interest in the contemporary politics. She held a very high place in the harems of Babur, Humayun and Akbar.(10)

Bibi Mubarika was another wife of Babur. Babur married her in 1519 A.D in Afghanistan. It was a political marriage and a clear cut example of matrimonial alliance of Mughals. She helped Babur in solving some of his political problems. She was the daughter of Malik Sulaman Shah belonged to the Yusufzai Tribe of the Afghans. This tribe was the most troublesome of all the tribes of the Afghans. She helped Babur considerably in lessening the tension between the Afghans and him by conciliating the Yusufzais and their chief Malik Shah Mansur. She strengthened Babur's hold in Afghanistan.(11)

In the reign of Humayun the first lady who occupied an important position in the Harem was Khanzada Begum, the eldest sister of Babur. After the death of Maham Begum she was raised to the status of the principal lady of the palace and was given the title of “Padshah Begum”. Humayun had great faith in her and always consulted her in solving the complicated problems of the family. In 1541 A.D when Humayun was moving towards Thatta he learnt that Hindal had occupied Qandhar at the instance of Qadracha Khan (governor of Qandhar and Kamran had marched against him to recover Qandhar). He was greatly disturbed at the news of this fraternal discord and requested his aunt Khanzada Begum to go to Qandhar, intervene in this matter and try to bring reconciliation between the two brothers. Khanzada Begum went there but could not succeed in her mission. In 1545 A.D when Humayun returned from Iran and laid siege to the fort of Qandhar. Kamran found himself in difficulty. He sent Khanzada Begum to Askari who was in charge of the fort with a secret instruction to hold out the fort till the arrival of



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Kamran. But Askari could not resist the forces of Humayun. The fall of the effort became obvious. As such according to the instruction of Kamran, Askari sent Khanzada Begum to negotiate peace with Humayun. As the issue had not yet been finally settled when she fell seriously ill and died in September 1545 A.D. As principal lady of the harem, Khanzada Begum took fairly keen interest in the political affairs. (12)

Gulbadan was the daughter of Zahir ud din Babur. She was born in 1522 A.D. In the period of Humayun when he had to face a great challenge from Sher Shah Suri he called an advisory meeting to crush the revolt of Sher Shah Suri. In this meeting Gulbadan Begum participated actively. Due to her continuous efforts she was able to remove the clashes between Humayun and Hindal. She was of the view that only by the collective efforts of the four brothers the danger of Sher Shah Suri could be ended. She wrote first official document of Mughal history on the request of her nephew Akbar.

According to Mrs. Beveridge the translator of Humayunnama:

“When Jahangir revolted against Akbar at that time Gulbadan Begum and Hamida Banu Begum performed the role of the conciliator and on the request of both ladies Akbar forgave Jahangir”(13)

Mah Chuchak Begum was step mother of Mughal king Akbar. Her son Mirza Mohammad Hakim was appointed the governor of Kabul by Humayun in 1556 A.D. He was placed under the guardianship of Munim Khan. But Mah Chuchak Begum was an ambitious lady and exercised her influence to a great extent in the political affairs of Kabul. In 1560 A.D after the fall of Bairam Khan when Munim Khan was called back to the court, this situation was fully exploited by Mah Chuchak who gradually started a firmer grip over Kabul. She managed to force out Ghani Khan and persuaded him to leave for India. Kabul was now under direct control of Mah Chuchak Begum who appointed Fazil Beg to look after the administration. After the murder of Fazil Beg she appointed Shah Wali Atka as the general manager of Kabul but he started arrogating too much power for himself and Begum managed to put him to death. In 1563 A.D when the news of the expulsion of Ghani Khan and confused state of affairs at Kabul reached the court, Emperor Akbar decided to send Munim Khan to establish peace and order in the province. Munim Khan himself was interested in going to Kabul in order to take revenge of his son. But the resistance offered by Afghans could not break down. Munim Khan was ultimately defeated and compelled to retreat.

Shah Abdul Mali a turbulent noble from the family of great Sayyids of Tirmiz having escaped from the prison from Lahore arrived at Kabul in search of protection and refuge and approached to Begum. The Begum consulted her confidential advisers and finally she welcomed him, treated him with generosity and married her daughter Fakhrun nisa Begum to him with a view to strengthen the position of her family. But Shah Abdul Mali did not like the influence of Mah Chuchak begum and started asserting his position. In order to establish his complete supremacy over the politics of Kabul he conspired against Begum and finally put her to death in 1564 A.D. After the death of her husband Mah Chuchak Begum took active interest in the politics of Kabul and tried to dominate the scene for the next eight years. In order to strengthen the position of her son Mirza Hakim she even lost her life.(14)

Maham Aanga was chief nurse of Akbar. She played very active role during the early years of Akbar. She was the wife of Nadim Kuka and mother of Baqi and Adam Kuka. She



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remained very influential on the personality of Akbar. Akbar had great respect for her. She loved Akbar so much that she happily agreed to expose her life at Kabul for him in 1547 A.D. when Kamran was fighting against Humayun, threatened to expose Akbar to the fire of a cannon.

Maham Aanga's influence remained from 1560-1564 A.D. Maham was a very ambitious lady and used Akbar as an instrument to carry on her plans. (15)

After the death of Humayun in 1556 A.D. Bairam Khan became the regent of Akbar. Gradually Akbar began to dislike the idea of regency. He was tired of Bairam Khan and was anxious to assert his own personality. In this situation Akbar found a favorable response from Maham Aanga. Her relatives occupied important offices of Akbar's government. At that time Shahab-ud-din was the governor of Delhi and Baqi Khan of Aligarh (kul). In 1560 A.D. when Akbar went on a hunting expedition from Agra then Maham Aanga communicated this close secret to Shahab ud din. They explained to the emperor that as long as Bairam Khan would remain alive he would not be able to exercise his authority. This exasperated the mind of Akbar. Receiving encouragement from Maham Aanga incensed at the conduct of Bairam Khan Akbar arrested some of his messengers which resulted in creating a gulf between Akbar and Bairam Khan. Bairam Khan finally left for Mecca in 1561 A.D. after the fall of Bairam Khan Akbar's attention was drawn towards Malwa. Malwa was ruled by Baz Bahadur at that time. Akbar sent Adham Khan son of Maham Aanga towards Malwa to occupy this area and Baz Bahadur was defeated in 1561 A.D. Adham Khan took all property, treasure and even Seraglio including singing and dancing girls in his possession. Adham Khan made a mistake at that time. Instead of sending booty to the emperor he sent only a few elephants. Akbar was very much annoyed at the misconduct of Adham Khan. Akbar left Agra to surprise Adham Khan. Maham Aanga sent two swift couriers to warn her son but Akbar reached before them. Adham Khan was stunned at the Emperor's arrival. Maham Aanga intervened at that time in the issue. She arranged the articles and Adham Khan presented them before Akbar. Adham Khan persisted in his wickedness. He deliberately kept two beauties of Baz Bahadur's Harem. Akbar knew it he gave orders to search them out. Maham Aanga perceived that if these two women were discovered by his majesty the veil over Adham Khan's act would be raised. Therefore she put these two ladies to death. (16)

Maham Aanga with her loyalty and wisdom considered the prime confidant of the emperor Akbar. She took Shahab ud din and Khwaja Jahan in her confidence and manipulated that appointment of Babadur Khan (Brother of Ali Quli Khan) to the office of Vakil. Though, he became vakil. In 1561 A.D. Akbar appointed Atka Khan as the Prime Minister, Maham Aanga who from her excellent service's abundant wisdom and exceeding devotion regarded herself as the substantive prime minister was displeased at that time. Munim Khan was also discontented at the growing influence of Maham Aanga. This influence started disappearing so Akbar recalled Adham Khan from Malwa and appointed Muhammad Khan Shirwani. Adham Khan was very much annoyed and decided to kill Akbar when on Akbar's call Adham Khan came to the court he had planned to kill the Akbar. When Adham Khan came the court Shams ud din Atqa Khan tried to stop him, he murdered Atqa Khan. Adham Khan further proceeded to kill Akbar who was in his harem at that time. Akbar did not spare him and ordered to throw him down from the terrace and Adham Khan died. Akbar himself visited Maham Aanga and gave her the news of Adham's death. After 40 days of her son's death Maham Aanga died of grief in 1564 A.D.



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It bears out that Akbar acted according to his own will. Akbar had emancipated himself from the tutelage of Bairam Khan and the strong influence of Maham Aanga who was very cunning, an intriguer and strong in the matter of political contact. In short the theory of petticoat government led by Maham Aanga does not appeal much. It appears that Akbar took advantage of Maham Aanga's position and talent the whole political scenario showed that Maham Aanga had the ability to manage the political matters.(17)

According to I.H. Qureshi

“Maham was a cunning, an intriguer and strong in political contacts: is baseless because these things are quite legal in the case of male”(18).

Bakhtunnisa was the half-sister of Akbar and was married to Khwaja Hasan of Badakshan. In 1581 A.D Muhammad Hakim the governor of Kabul had conspired against Akbar in 1580 A.D rebelled in Kabul. He invaded the Punjab and advanced to Lahore but was checked by Mansing who was then governor of the province. Akbar declared war on Muhammad Hakim and he took shelter into hills. The emperor himself went to Kabul. Muhammad Hakim was pardoned but was humiliated by the appointment of his sister Bakhtunnisa Begum to the governorship of Kabul. Akbar informed her that he had no concern with Muhammad Hakim and in the case of his misbehaving again he would not be shown any kindness. After the departure of the Emperor from Kabul though Muhammad Hakim resumed his old position yet all the official orders were issued in his sister's name by appointing Bakhtunnisa to the government of Kabul. Akbar succeeded in managing the situation. Bakhtunnisa Begum skillfully helped the Emperor in solving this problem.(19)

Hamida Bano Begum was the daughter of Sheikh Ali Akbar. She got married with Humayun at the age of 14. Her title was Maryam Makani, the Merry of both the worlds. When the circumstances of Hindustan did not remain suitable for Humayun he decided to migrate towards Iran. When Shah Tahmasp heard the news of the arrival of Humayun, he sent his brother to welcome him. There were many persons who tried to create hatred in the heart of Shah Tahmasp for Humayun on religious bases but by the great wisdom of Hamida Bano Begum they remained fail in their motives. Hamida Bano Begum got the favor of the Sultanaah (sister of Shah Tahmasp) and became her favourite, through Sultanaah, Hamida Bano Begum asked Shah Tahmasp to give some force to Humayun that he would be able to reattack the Hindustan. On the request of Sultanaah Shah Tahmarp gave a big Army to Humayun. Even after coming back to Hindustan Hamida Bano Begum remained very important and loving for Sultanaah. Even in the period of Akbar when there were some chances of breaking up good relations between Hindustan and Iran. Hamida Bano Begum remained very important and loving for Sultanaah. Even in the period of Akbar when there were some chances of breaking up good relations between Hindustan and Iran Hamida Bano Begum always stopped the Akbar to break up the relations. Due to the efforts of Hamida Bano Begum the relations between Iran and Hindustan always remained good.(20)

She was also a very active part of the conspiracy of Maham Aanga, Atka Khan, Mula Pir Muhammad and Mirza Aziz Kuka against the Khan Baba Bairam Khan. They all were against the extra ordinary influence of Bairam Khan. Due to the efforts of Hamida Bano Begum and her party they became successful to eliminate the influence of Bairam Khan and sent him to Mecca. After the departure of Bairam Khan ,Hamida Bano Begum and her party remained influential on



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the affairs of the state for a long time. When Akbar was leaving for the Deccan, prince Salim who had not been granted audience for sometime past due to his habit of excessive drinking was permitted to make Kornish by the pleadings of Maryam Makani who softened the heart of the Emperor. Once again Salim committed a serious crime. Tired of the long reign of his father which had already lasted for more than forty years and impatient to occupy the throne, he resolved to capture it by force. In 1601 A.D he unfurled the banner of revolt and assumed the royal title at Allahabad. The situation became critical. The emperor was very unhappy. No one dared to petition for the prince. In the end Maryum Makani and Gulbadan Begum his aunt begged for his forgiveness. The emperor granted their wishes. The prince was allowed to present himself before the emperor.(21)

Hamida Bano Begum was very much dominated in the court politics. She had the right to issue the farmans and she had done official correspondence for the settlement of different matters.

Salima Sultana was wife of Bairam Khan before Akbar. She was the daughter of Mirza Noor ud din Muhammad, grand daughter of Babur and niece of Humayun. She was very influential in the state politics and Akbar always took advice from her on many political affairs. Even in the case of prince Salim's revolt she remained very influential on the decisions of Akbar regarding Salim punishment. Umrah of Mughal court gave advice to Akbar that he should give a horrible punishment to Salim at that time she was the lady who forbade Akbar to do this. She said it would not in the favor of country. She confirmed him that she could make Salim agreed to come to Akbar to accept his mistakes. Akbar directed Salima Sultana Begum to convey the news of forgiveness to the prince. She went to him with an elephant named Fath Lashkar, a special horse, a robe of honor and thus through her efforts the prince was finally pardoned in 1603 A.D. During the very first year of the reign of Jahangir his stepmother Salima Sultana Begum accompanied by some other Begums of the harem played a very significant role in contemporary politics. In 1605 A.D Khusru the oldest son of Jahangir revolted against his father at the instigation of Mirza Aziz Koka better known as Khan Azam( the son of Shamshuddin Atka).

It is said that Khan Azam used to go to the court dressed in his shroud because he apprehended that he would be killed any day. But he had no control over his tongue. One night he had exchange of words with Amir ul Umra Sharif Khan the grand Wazir in a private meeting the Emperor took counsel of the prominent nobles in which both Amir ul Umrah and Mahabat Khan suggested that Khan Azam should be put to death immediately. But Khani-i-Jahan Lodhi opposed the idea. At this moment Salima Sultana Begum called out from behind the Purdah

“You'r Majesty; all the Begums are assembled in the Zanana for the purpose of interceding of Mirza Aziz Koka. It will be better if you come there otherwise they will come to you”(22)

Jahangir was thus constrained to go to the female apartment and on account of the pressure exercised by the Begums he finally pardoned him. On another occasion after the rebellion of Khusru was crushed in 1613 A.D his mother and sisters requested the Emperor repeatedly that as the prince was repenting for his past behavior he should be pardoned and permitted audience. At the intercession of Salima Sultana Begum Jahangir ultimately allowed audience to Khusru and permitted him to pay his respects to the Emperor every day.



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She was the Jaipuri Queen of Akbar the great. There is no marriage in the sub continent which proved more effective than the marriage of Akbar and Maryam uz Zamani. She was very much influential on political field. Her marriage with Akbar made Hindustan an influential class of Rajput community in the Mughal politics. It created a union between Hindu and Muslim community and it ended the disputes among the people of different religions. It was influence of Maryum uz Zamani that the marriage of prince Salim and others took place in Rajput families. She got very much strength of government after the death of Jahangir. She was supreme in all departments. She was from those ladies who had the right to issue the sanads or parvanah. In the field of official correspondent she was also very much dominated. Hindu Queens shared equal influence in politics like Muslim Queens. Particularly in the case of Maryam uz Zamani she had equal rights as in political matters, official correspondence, domination in Harem etc. after he death there was a great tomb built as there were tomb of prominent Muslim Queens like Nurjahan and Mumtaz Mahal.(23)

One of the most striking personalities of Mughal dynasty was Nurjahan Begum , daughter of Itimad-ud-daula. She was married to Jahangir in 1611 A.D the Emperor married her and gave her the title of Noor Mahal (Light of the palace) in 1611 A.D and Nurjahan (Light of the world) in 1616 A.D.(24)

Nurjahan was a courageous lady and was endowed with the capacity of understanding the political problems and of taking active interest in matters of administration. She served as a sound adviser to her husband. The emperor reposed great confidence in her. Naturally she exercised great influence over her husband. "Emperor Jahangir taken pride in her as she possesses the ability to defeat even the heavens through her wise and clever devices." (25)

The influence exercised by Nurjahan on the Emperor as well as the contemporary politics of the empire is a matter on which the opinions are divided. According to some historians Jahangir was very much under her influence and according to other group of historians Jahangir was independent. He shared authority with Nurjahan but he did not give her all the powers. According to Prof. Shuja ud din, Nurjahan and her family was not all in all. Jahangir was very much independent all the rules of foreign and domestic policy laid down by the name of Jahangir but there is an other side of the coin that Nurjahan and her family was overtaken all the machinery of government. It is said that she was a very ambitious lady and wanted to have power in her own hands. According to Ellison Banks Findly:

"She formed a Junta (clique) of her close relatives including her father Itimad-ud-daula, her mother Asmat Begum and her borther Asaf Khan"(26)

To strengthen the group in 1612 A.D Khurram the 2nd son of Jahangir was also included in it through his marriage with the daughter of Asaf Khan. It was through the help of this junta, Nurjahan exercised her influence by giving important places to her relatives. As mentioned in Iqbal-Nama-i-Jahangiri

"Day by day her influence and dignity increased no grant of lands was conferred upon any women except under her seal. Sometimes she would sit in the balcony of her palace, while the nobles would present themselves and listen to her dictates. Coin was struck in her name. On all farmans also receiving the imperial signature, the name of "Nur Jahan, the Queen Begam", was jointly attached. At last her authority reached such a pass that the King was such only in name"(27)



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According to Razia Gauhar in her thesis Harem influence on Mughal society and politics: “Nurjahan attained a position never before enjoyed by the wife of a prince in India” (28)

She sometimes sat in Jhoraka window and dictated orders to officers and received Nurjahan the important messenges. Coin were struck in her name.

The domination of Nurjahan roused the jealousy of other nobles. Later on Khurram had gained the title of Shahjahan and gradually coming into prominence in the political affairs of the Empire. There developed a tension between Shahjahan and Nurjahan which ultimately alienated the prince form this group.

Mahabat Khan had great jealousy of extra ordinary domination of Nurjahan on politics of the country. This jealousy of Mahabat Khan resulted into an open rebellion. He even went to the extent of taking the king captive in a surprise attack. When Nurjahan learnt about it her blood was up. Her husband and king had been taken prisoner. She called a council of nobles castigated Asif Khan and rebuked the others that: “All this has happened through your neglect and stupid arrangements” (29)

River Jahlum separated the captive king and Nur Jahan. Accompanied by many royal officers she plunged into the river to fight Mahabat Khan. Having failed in battle and in effecting the Emperor’s release she surrendered her to Mahabat Khan and joined her husband in captivity. Once again she started planning to rescue her husband.

“She cajoled the unwilling, she bribed the greedy, she strengthened the wavering she had out promises to all. (30)

Jahangir died in 1627 A.D with his death the power of Nurjahan ended. Despite her best efforts to enthrone her son in law Shahryar, Shajahan succeeded to the throne and it ended the political domination of Nurjahan- a long chapter of Mughal history.

Arjunmand Bano Begum later known as Mumtaz Mahal was the daughter of Asaf Khan, brother of Nurjahan and Wazir of the emperor Jahangir. During the early years of the reign of Shahjahan his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal exerted some pressure in political matters. Even before the accession of Shahjahan to the throne of Delhi she had followed him cheerfully in his wanderings and exile, patiently bearing the pains and rigors of life in the forests of Telingaha, Bengal, Mewar and Deccan. According to J.N. Chaudhary:

“In 1628 A.D when Shahjahan ascended the throne she occupied the premier position in the harem and the emperor usually consulted her about private as well as state affairs” (31)

She was entrusted with the Royal Seal. After the state documents had been finally drafted they were sent to the imperial harem and it was her privilege to imprint the seal on them. This enabled her to get an insight into the current affairs in some of which she took active interest. The seal of Mumtaz Mahal was containing an elegant Persian couplet:

“By the grace of God, Mumtaz Mahal became the companion in the world of Shahjahan in the shadow of God” (32)

In 1627-28 A.D when Shahjahan traveled from South to North in order to occupy the throne he heard reports about the doubtful attitude of Saif Khan the governor of Gujrat. He ordered him to be brought to the court. Saif Khan was brother in law of Mumtaz Mahal she was interested in his safety and therefore sent Parastar Khan to Ahmadabad to see that no calamity befell him. It was on her recommendation that the Emperor relieved the rigors of the



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imprisonment of Saif Khan and ordered that he should be subjected neither to mental nor physical torture.

According to Manucci, Mumtaz Mahal was also responsible for creating ill feeling towards and destroying the hold of the Portuguese of Hugli. She was quite hostile towards them because they had carried off two of her slave girls. It is said that she was determined to inflict severe punishment on them but her early death left her desire unfulfilled. Her determined hostility towards the Portuguese aggravated the wrath of Shahjahan against them. (33) Her career was short and she died in 1631 A.D.,

After the death of Mumtaz Mahal in 1631 A.D the honor of being the premier lady of Harem fell upon Jahan Ara Begum the eldest daughter of Shahjahan. She took active part in political matters. anyone, a stranger, a courtier or a governor who wish to obtain the favor from the Emperor found it necessary to win the support of Jahanara. As the first lady of the realm and as such among all the ladies of Mahal the Begum Saheb was the most respected.(34)

Jahan Ara Begum sometimes healed the discords in the imperial family which showed its political influence in 1644 Aurangzeb influenced by unwise council of some of the foolish advisors and by some of his acts annoyed the Shahjahan. In the reaction Shahjahan confiscated his Jagirs and ranks. Then it was on the appeal of Jahan Ara Begum that the emperor forgave Aurangzeb and restored to him the former rank and office. As the 1st lady of the realm, Jahan Ara enjoyed every powerful position. Jahan Ara had a great influence on official correspondence. Her farmans to the foreigners, governors of the Empire and rulers of other countries kept very much power and were very effecting in solving the problems.

Some chiefs and native rulers also approached to her seeking her help in solving their problems. On one occasion Raja Budh Prakash of Sirmur sent to her valuable presents and requested her to present his case to the emperor for deciding his dispute with the Raja of Garhwal. Realizing the enormous influence of Jahan Ara Begum the foreign traders personally went to pay her respect. When the Dutch embassy found it unsuccessful in getting permission to carry out their trade in India they made every effort to win the favor of principal members of the court and particularly of Jahan Ara whose influence on father was unbounded. When the war of succession started among her brothers for obtaining the throne of Delhi in 1658 A.D Jahan Ara Begum favoured Dara, helped him and prayed for her success. She tried her best to persuade her brothers to avoid any conflict. Jahan Ara wrote a letter to Aurangzeb in which she tried to convince him that

“The emperor was in actual control of the state affairs and that with the exception of that spent in prayers, he devotes the whole of his time to looking after the welfare of his subjects and to propagating religion”. She warned him of his temerity and said “It is against all canons of wisdom and foresight to fight the eldest prince. You should observe the path of loyalty and obedience and should stop at the place where you have arrived. To prevent the waste of Muslims lives on either side send your representations to court.”(35)

But the counsel turned on deaf ears. In May, 1658 A.D Aurangzeb crossed Chambal and reached near Samugarh. Dara failed to hold Chambal against Aurangzeb and Aurangzeb after crossing Chambal reached Bhadruru forty miles east of Dholpur. At this moment before the battle of Samugarh started on 23rd May 1658 A.D Jahanara Begum sent a letter to Aurangzeb



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again asking him to give up the evil designs and obey his father. She further used her political wisdom and suggested to Aurangzeb that the Punjab entrusted to Dara, Gujrat to Murad, Bengal to Shuja and rest of the empire with the position of near apparent and title of Iqbal Buland should go to you.(36)

As she was very genius in politics so when Aurangzeb came into power, she sent him presents and in return to get permission to stay with her father in prison in the Agra Fort. For gaining importance in the eye of Aurangzeb, she requested her father in his last days to pardon Aurangzeb for the wrong he had done to his father.(37)

Roshan Ara was the second daughter of Shahjahan. Roshan Ara Begum was not on very friendly terms with her sister Jahan Ara Begum. She tried to assist Aurangzeb in his plan of snatching the crown from the trembling hands of his father. She was in touch with the affairs in the seraglio and secretly conveyed to her brother regular developments. When she heard the news that Aurangzeb illness she had taken up arms in order to occupy the throne of Delhi she placed at his disposal all gold and silver available to her. Aurangzeb promised her the title of Shah Begum which he conferred on her in 1699 A.D in addition to cash reward of five lakhs of rupees. As mentioned by Bernier when Aurangzeb fell ill in May 1662 A.D she began to take active interest in the state affairs. Just Dara had done at the illness of Shahjahan she withheld the report of her brother's illness.(38)

According to Manucci:

“She took the royal seal and wrote letters to many Rajas and generals on behalf of nine year old Sultana Azam”(39)

She did not allow anyone to see the Emperor and a rumor spread that he was dead. She persuaded the Hindu princes to support Azam. Prince Mazzam resented it and attempted to kill her design. When the emperor came to know the activities of his sister he was immensely displeased and she lost much of her brother's love and regard for her.

Aware of her importance Tavernier who was in India from 1641 to 1664A.D called her the ‘Ground Begun’ and once presented to her eunuch a watch with a painted case. Bernier too was aware of her constant influence to the court, in a letter written from Surat on 10th March 1668A.D. as a guideline for the establishment of French factories in the Mughal Empire he wrote:

“Roshan Ara Begum is so much in favor that it would perhaps be better to give her a few presents”(40)

The daughters of Emperor Aurangzeb Zeb un Nisa also took active interest in the political matters. In 1658 A.D when the war of succession was going on between the brothers of Aurangzeb his father in law Shah Nawaz Khan did not extend him any help. After the defeat of Dara, Aurangzeb got his father in law imprisoned. In the end it was on the insistence of Zebunnisa Begum that Shah Nawaz Khan her maternal grandfather was released. Similarly when prince Azam was punished (1701-5 A.D) for quarrelling with the superintendent of his harem he sent the petition of pardon through his sister Padshah Begum.(41)

It is found that Zebunnisa after appeared in the court with a veil on her face and assisted her father in his deliberations. In court she sat in Purdah and gave advices to Emperor Aurangzeb regarding the politics of court. It appears that she had also effective voice in matters of



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appointment. Once Aurangzeb wrote to her recommending some names for a post adding that if she did not approve of it, it should not be done.(42)

Zebunnisa was an ardent partisan of her younger brother Muhammad Akbar. She actively helped him during his rebellion in 1679 A.D in the year 1681 A.D the prince accompanied the emperor to Rajput wars in command of the advance division and through out the next year he had a full army corps under his command. Then he gave himself to evil adviser rebelled against his father and proclaimed himself emperor. He issued a manifesto deposing his father as a violator of Islamic law and been marched for a battle against him in 1681 A.D. During the course of the rebellion the princes held a secret correspondence with her. When the rebellion failed and Akbar's deserted camp was seized by the imperialists, Zebunnisa's letter to Akbar was discovered and she had to face the fury of her father's wrath. As mentioned in Maasir-i-Alamgiri:

“Her property and pension of four lakhs of rupees a year were confiscated and she was imprisoned at Samugarh for the rest of her life where she died in 1702 A.D.”(43)

Zinat un Nisa was also another daughter of Aurangzeb. He entrusted her with a very responsible task the care of Maratha captives, the widow of Shambhaji and her son Shahu. The Begum was born of the same mothers as prince Akbar and entertained a tender feeling for Maratha who had been friendly to Akbar.(44) She felt deep sympathy for Yesu Bai and her son. She protected them from her fathers wrath. In 1707 A.D when Shahu went to the Deccan from the river Narmada Zinat-un-Nisa helped him considerably to facilitate his journey. She might also have helped the release of Shahu and his mother. It is said that Balaji was in secret correspondence with her and it was with her assistance that she guarded the interest of Shahu. Zinat-un-Nisa sometimes acted as an intermediary also between the emperor and the princes with regard to political matters. In 1691 A.D the siege of Jinji started under the command of Asad Khan and his son Nusrat Jang. In 1693 A.D Kam Baksh the youngest son of Aurangzeb was arrested for his opposition to the two generals and also for his intrigues with the enemy. When he arrived at the court (in 1693 A.D.) it was through the mediation of Zinat-un-Nisa that he was granted interview with the emperor in the harem.(45)

It is a great achievement of the women that they became successful to leave their marks in the field of politics irrespective the restrictions of purdah and harem in Medieval India. They did not only participate in the political affairs but on many occasions seems to be dominant on their male sovereigns. These ladies advised them in the critical matters. They had the coins of their name; they got the right to sit besides the king and to issue the farmans on his behalf. This aspect is a great example of liberal attitude towards women in the confined structure of Mughal harem.



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