

# The Evaluation of the Status of Women in Mughal India

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## Abstract

There are several misconceptions in modern society about the Mughal Empire, and even more so about the women in the empire. Modern society also often overlooks the role of women in Mughal society and politics, underestimating their power. So, the aim of this research article is to evaluate the status of women in the Mughal Empire. We will be doing so by looking at three main aspects: **Socioeconomic and political roles, Access to Education** and the **Influence of religion and culture**. We will be drawing conclusions from previous research, journal articles and a few primary sources such as biographies, memoirs, and artworks. Through this article, we can de-mystify and clear the fog of misinformation surrounding the lives of women in the Mughal period.

**Keywords:** Mughal India, Gender Studies, Women through History, Mughal Women, History

## Introduction:

Scholars and historians have been captivated by the Mughal Empire for centuries. The Empire itself, lasting from the 16th to 19th century CE, has not only left a powerful impact on Indian History but also modern India. The status of women in Mughal India is a topic of great interest and significance, as it offers valuable insights into the position and roles of Mughal women; Which helps us study further the impact it still has on our societies and perceptions.

The Mughals were an, an Islamic Empire. So, it is safe to assume that a large part of the resentment or dissent about including it as a part of Indian history stems directly from islamophobia. In recent years, the chapter explaining the Mughal Period has been pulled from history textbooks all over India (*Livemint*, 2023). The justification for this is that the empire dominates other aspects of Indian history. Furthermore, this move may also have a more sinister motive at play. We have recently seen a 'Saffronisation' of India, its history, education, policy etc. Saffronization—a process named after the colour saffron that adorns Hindu nationalist symbols—involves imagining India as a Hindu nation, both by reconstructing an imaginary past defined by Hindu unity and by refashioning political institutions to reflect majoritarian ideals (*Oxford Academic, International Affairs, 2023*). Additionally, the acceptance of the Mughals as a valid part of Indian history is a step forward in forging an even more diverse and new India and breaking away from the shackles of colonisation.

One of the key aspects of understanding the status of women in Mughal India is to examine their lineage, which influenced their society. The status of women in Mughal India is studied in this research paper, shedding light on their influence, power, and the level of respect they commanded. The Mughal Empire was founded by *Babur*, a descendant of both the Turki and Mongol empires. A significant role was played by *Babur's* mother, *Qutlugh Nigar Khanum*, in his life, influencing his character and demonstrating that

women in the Mughal lineage were not merely passive figures, but were capable of exerting their influence and shaping the course of history. Moreover, the royal family were extended by the power and agency of women in the Mughal Empire. In addition to the influence of women within the Mughal lineage, significant power was commanded by women in the empire in various spheres of society.

While the Mughal Empire is often associated with the grandeur of the harem, it was so much more than that. The Mughal Harem was a perfect representation of the intricate narratives, titles, power plays, and politics that transformed the Empire. The women perhaps even commanded the most control and power, as they were the ones raising the future of the empire. As we still observe in modern life, the bond between a mother and child is sacred and unbound by royal titles and duties. The women acted as pillars of stability, stained by the blood of childbirth and brutality, for the Empire.

Understanding the true status of women in Mughal India and separating from these Islamophobic ideas is what makes this topic imperative to understand the functioning of not only the Mughal Empire but also modern-day India.

### Literature Review:

Often women's existence and purpose have been distorted by centuries of patriarchy and prejudice in history. There are a multitude of research papers written on the aspects of women during the Mughal period. Scholars like *Angbin Yasmin*, *Ruby Lal*, and *Shadab Bano*, just to name a few, have written extensively, discussing literacy, property rights, reigns, harems etc.

Regarding the context of property inheritance during the Mughal era, the work '*Women and Property in Mughal India*' by *Shadab Bano* deciphers the correlation between women and property.

Theoretically, women were entitled to property and were seen as legitimate heirs to property (*Bano, 2007*) But in practice, not so much. Muslim women were awarded *mehr*, a form of dowry, by their husbands. The husbands were not permitted to keep the dowry of the wife to themselves and must return it at any point requested in the marriage, or upon the dissolution of it. These Muslim women also received *hiba*, or a gift given to a daughter by her parents on the occasion of her marriage. However, according to the *Sharia*, a woman may only inherit half of her male counterpart. This can be attributed to the patrilocal nature of the family structure, rather than patriarchy. Many non-Muslim women also enjoyed property rights and technically were equal inheritors, however, the customs and traditions vary throughout the sources (*Yasmin, 2014*).

So, though they technically were seen as equal inheritors/owners and were free to sell or mortgage their land, the scenarios in which they received property were rare. E.g.- If the family did not have a son etc. (*Bano, 2014*)

Widowed Hindu women also sometimes received their late husband's property, though this claim has been contested (*Bano, 2007*). All the points raised here, however, have been made in context with immovable or permanent property.

It was far more common for women to own movable property, like jewellery, due to the patrilocal nature of both cultures and religions. Women property owners also faced many hurdles, which made it increasingly difficult to own immovable assets such as land: women often faced harassment by officials, women were not always available to look after their share of the property, and thus it was often overtaken by the male inheritors (*Bano, 2007*). Many slaves, who were business managers, also often overruled the female heir's right to inheritance (*Bano, 2007*). All these discussions are about the status of middle-class women.

Noble women owned many assets, and property such as land was just one of them. Many nobles also often made many donations or did charity. For instance, the Mughal state acknowledged poverty and made donations called *madad-i-maash* to the poor and middle class alike, as their fall to dire straits would be a social embarrassment (Bano, 2013).

The work of *Shadab Bano* named *Piety and Princess Jahanara's Role in the Public Domain* explores the relationship between power and women in the Mughal era.

Contradictory to popular beliefs, noble women exercised quite a fair bit of power in the Mughal era, especially during *Akbar's* reign. *Rafiuddin Ibrahim Shirazi* speaks of *Akbar's Brahmin* wife's influence over him abolishing slavery and the slave trade (Bano, 2013). One of the most influential female figures in the late Mughal empire, *Nur Jahan*, exercised much control over the court and was the first Mughal Female Ruler (Bano, 2013). *Nur Jahan* set a great example which *Shah Jahan* later tried to follow with his wife and daughters. *Princess Jahanara* was later given the title of premier lady. She managed the harem as well as the domestic rituals like the weddings of her brothers which held obvious political significance (Bano, 2013).

When the practice of 'veiling' gained prevalence, to display the piety of women, *Jahanara* and *Mumtaz Mahal* were given many titles (Bano, 2013). The public piety of royal women was seen as a characteristic of the benevolent nature of the regime. *Jahanara* later expressed her reluctance to marry as a symbol of her austerity. Piety expected of them made them respected figures. Emperors used the public piety of women as a means to appeal to the general public. Personal piety was established in gifts, charities etc (Bano, 2013).

Obscured from public view, women devised other ways to prevail in the socio-political realm. *Princess Jahanara* built many monuments, universities, gardens, and mosques. She was declared the greatest female builder in *Shahajanabad*. Women generally did not work but those of women of lower classes and poor economic backgrounds often assisted their husbands in their jobs (Yasmin, 2014). *Gulbadan Begum*, the daughter of *Babur*, sister of *Humayun* and aunt of *Akbar*, was a great literary scholar who witnessed the inception of the Mughal empire to *Akbar's* reign. She documented many key moments in the history of the empire in her memoirs and the *Humayun-nama* at the request of her nephew *Akbar*. She brings the new and refreshing perspective of a woman, in history documented almost entirely by men. *Gulbadan Begum* was a trailblazer for the generations of women after her. She was the first woman to embark on a women-only *hajj* (Mukhoty, 2020). In her memoirs, she speaks of the anxieties and pressures of being a woman. Young girls would have been tutored in musical knowledge, literature, etiquette, arts etc. This knowledge was an indispensable asset for many noble women, which perhaps held more gravity than vanity itself. As such, noble women were highly educated and often renowned scholars, intellectuals and poets. Many noble women also had a fascination with books and maintained extensive libraries, often giving literary grants to other scholars and establishing universities and other such institutions. Muslim women also learnt the *Quran* and were educated in the way of the Prophet, this tradition has continued even to the present day. *Gulbadan Begum* recalls the 'Mystic Feast' in her *Humayun-nama* later, which was essentially a great event that honoured the last remnants of the Turki-Mongol culture and heritage. Furthermore, it was a celebration of dynastic succession. She also mentions a great friendship between some *Begums* at the feast. This, however, would have been a rare case, as the harem created a distinct stratification amongst the women, who all competed for the favour of the emperor. The person next in command to the emperor would have been the emperor's mother, who was also usually the premier lady, or head of the harem.

Contradictory to modern notions, the Mughal harem was not only an institution for love or lust. Rather, it was more political and included the family of the emperor as well. It has been assumed that the Mughal harem was no place for the 'old and ailing' (Lal, 2004). However, this claim has been contested as elderly women also resided in the harem. There were also defined laws for marriage and concubinage. There were approximately 5000 women in Akbar's harem although this did include the whole entourage (Lal, 2004). Concubinage was not permitted in Islam for a married man, but emperors would be immune to such regulations. There were roughly three tiers of women: Wives, Partners and Concubines (Bano, 1999). The religious men of the time were also not permitted to interact with women (Bano, 2008).

Despite the extensive papers and research endeavours, there are some gaps/discrepancies in our understanding of the life and status of women due to the nature of documentation and history itself. What we understand is from administrative documents or the memoirs of noble women, but does not inform of the cultural or religious practices and norms of these noble women. Furthermore, we have almost next to no documentation of the lives of middle-class or poorer people, much less women.

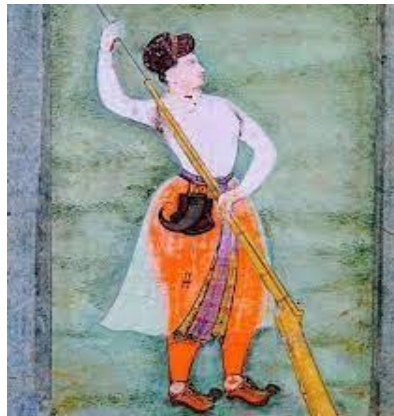
### **Objective 1:** Socioeconomic roles of women during this period.

Though women's lives aren't recorded in any formal written sources of history, we see records of their personal lives and lifestyles from art and culture. As such, Mughal miniatures from several manuscripts and other such artefacts serve as a rich source to study the same. However, these must be taken with a grain of salt. The artists making these paintings were men who viewed women's lives through a rose-tinted lens not understanding the nuances of womanhood. This also goes to say that only the women of nobility were usually recorded and marked in manuscripts. Additionally, only noble or wealthy women had the privilege of literacy or even resources and time, hence, only they were able to write memoirs and record their existence.



*'Wedding Celebrations of Humāyūn', By Junayd, 1396*

The above painting is a depiction of the day after Humanyun's wedding. The bride (*Hamida Banu Begum*) sits on the bed shying away from the scene while the women below scrutinise the blood-stained sheets of Humanyun and Hamida Begum's consummated marriage (Waseem, 2017). A woman's virginity has been and still is a social matter rather than a personal one. The blood-stained sheets are a symbol of the purity of the bride and a confirmation of the continuation of a great lineage. The portrayal of women in the context of a male is a recurring theme, broken by figures like *Nur Jahan*.

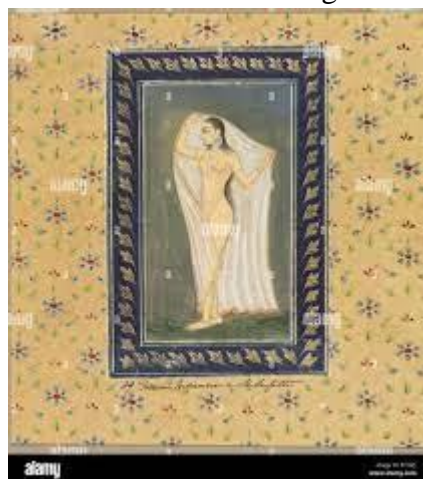


This portrait of *Nur Jahan*, the first female leader of the Mughal Empire, tells us of the instance when she shot four tigers atop an elephant. She was a skilled marksman and military strategist. (*Waseem, 2017*)

We can draw some parallels between this and the previous image. In the first, although the woman, *Hamida Banu Begum* is present, she is not the central figure of the painting. She is seen as coy and retracts from the scene, almost diminishing from the scene. The focus of the image is the blood-stained sheets, a testament to her virginity and the preservation of the empire through an heir. The woman is just a facilitator of the same. From this, we can infer how women were objectified and viewed as a means to an end (the end being a respected heir to carry on the great lineage). Respected, marriageable women turned into rare commodities. Beauty and charm were sought in a mistress; But for a wife, beauty was only secondary, honour and lineage came first.

Now, the second image is a portrait of *Nur Jahan* unhindered by other figures. She is portrayed in a strong stance, not diminishing herself but confidently posing with a rifle displaying her skills as a marksman. Such imagery was rare during the period as women were usually background figures, however, *Nur Jahan* was known to be a social deviant.

Another source from which we gain an insight into the everyday lives of royal women is architecture. The harems or the residence of the women have details which break the modern narrative of shy, meek women. We get to know from the paintings on the walls that they were regularly audienceed to elephant fights as a means of entertainment (Google Arts and Culture). Women, however, were still heavily sexualised as is evident from the artwork given below. Furthermore, this inference may not be completely accurate as the writing below the painting is in English suggesting the artist's prejudices instead of the time periods in viewing Mughal India through a Western lens and exoticising the women.



18th Century, *Source: Cleveland Museum Of Art.*

*Akbar* was a generally broad-minded ruler. He abolished sati or self-immolation practices, and the slave trade within the empire, tolerated all religions and was known to hold several philosophical discussions, women were also given more political freedom as compared to previous emperors (*Mukhoty, 2020*). He was seen as a liberal and progressive ruler who significantly contributed to improving women's condition under his empire. He believed in mutual consent in marriage and disapproved of marriage before puberty for both men and women (*Waseem, 2017*).

However, he must also have realised the political potential of these marital ties. And in a move heavily criticised by modern historians, he with-held the right to marry his sisters and daughters, to prevent the inoculation and bloodline of the empire and dynasty by new in-laws (*Waseem, 2017*) At the end of the day, he was an emperor, whose foremost duty would be preserving the empire, and one way to do this was through marital ties. Mughal women eligible for marriage were kept away from the eyes of any *na-mehrum* (Any man whom a woman could legally marry). All women of the palace resided in the *harem*, which as discussed earlier, had its system of social stratification (*Waseem, 2017*). Even before the reign of *Akbar*, or the Mughals for that matter, women had always been considered property and used as pawns in the political plays of rulers. This did not mean that women had no authority or autonomy, they created a space for themselves very tactfully using these power plays to their advantage. Like when *Nur Jahan* took control of the empire, due to *Jahangir's* incapacitating opium addiction and alcoholism. She used the position of premier lady to stabilise the empire even after *Jahangir's* death (*Tandon, 2015*).

Though we may have yet to get the impression initially, Mughal women played a substantial role in facilitating trade across the empire and the silk route. The lavish lifestyles of these royals led to great economic progress within the empire (*Guchhait, Kaur, 2023*). As pointed out earlier, *Akbar* established strict regulations for the women of the harem and disallowed anyone from referring to them by their given name (*Wasseem, 2017*). However, female elders had always been revered in the Mughal court and *Akbar* provided these matriarchs with large allowances. Of course, as the treasury of the empire grows, so will the wealth flowing into the harem. Thus, these royal women were not only pillars of the Mughal court and its socio-political nuances but also of the economy. Mughal women were free to independently engage in trade and commerce (*Guchhait, Kaur, 2023*). The head of the harem or premier lady, who would usually be the wife or mother of the emperor, was also a trendsetter of the time. Whatever the Queen donned would be followed by other noble women and ladies of the court.

Many royal women also owned ships, established trade centres and complexes, and commissioned art and buildings *Jahanara Begum* built most of the architecture of *Shahajanabad*. *Akbar's* wife, *Mariam-uz-Zamani*, was the first woman who actively participated in trade and owned a ship known as *Rahimi* (*Mukherjee, 2001*). Old Delhi's popular bazaar known for its food and culture, *Chandni Chowk*, was built by *Jahanara Begum* as a hub for the trade of silverwork and other such goods. It was originally made in a half-moon shape with a pool in the centre which reflected the moonlight. *Chandni Chowk* got its name from its layout, which translates directly to 'Moonlight Square' (*Roller, 2021*). The detail in designing the market is a testament to the genius of *Jahanara Begum*. Its existence is a poignant reminder of times long forgotten and how the narrative of history continues to play in our lives.

**Objective 2:** To analyse women's access to education and knowledge

Lost in the works of *Ab'ul-Fazl* and *Abdul Lahori* we often forget *Gulbadan Begum*, who wrote the *Humayun-nama*. Similarly, we observe a multitude of female scholars. One flaw, however, is that there

are little to no records of the literacy status of women of lower economic straits and middle-class women. From logs and administrative entries, it is estimated, that many middle-class men were literate as only they have been found in possession of books (*Yasmin, 2014*). Additionally, mostly only men went out to work. Women performed economic roles in the public sphere, this was especially visible in times of distress or calamity.

Noble boys and girls studied the same curriculum, as miniatures depict both learning to write from a teacher (*Yasmin, 2012*). However, we can also infer that this may only apply to elementary and primary teaching, as the roles played by men and women diversified greatly as they grew. Young Girls had matrons and superintendents, who were like governesses, teaching them the *Quran*, reading and writing through music verses (*Yasmin, 2012*).

It is not unusual to find female Mughal scholars and intellectuals. This trend followed the Mughals from the *Mongols*. *Babur's* mother, *Qutlugh Nigar Khanum*, was a highly educated lady and a descendant of *Chengiz-Khan*. *Qutlugh Nigar Khanum* and her mother, *Aisan Daulat Begum*, both Persians, had a large impact on his intellect (*Yasmin, 2012*). *Gulbadan Begum* inherited her father's talents and was highly accomplished in Turki and Persian. She wrote the *Humayun-nama* skillfully and allowed the historians of today to piece together the lives of the women of the past. She describes a very particular niche of the time, the experiences of a woman. The power plays and the emotions, the poetic language just ties it all together. She converted her experiences into history and immortalised herself through it. She wrote the *Humayun-nama* in simple Persian, something fairly uncommon at the time. However, what continues to happen today is that her work is treated as ancillary to the other works of the time like the *Ain-i-Akbar* and the *Akbarnama* (*Kataria, 2022*). We also have the memoirs of *Gulbadan Begum*, where she writes of the dramatic lives of the women and the solace many *Begums* found in friendships and the ties within the bloodline (*Balabanlilar, 2010*).

### **Objective 3:** Evaluate the Influence of Religion and Cultural Practices on the status of women

A very unique aspect of the Mughal Empire was its lineage. The Mughals were descendants of the Timurids and Mongols, an identity they took great pride in. Now, both these empires were nomadic in culture, which means the women had relatively more autonomy and freedom in terms of public appearances, veiling, travel etc. So, the early days of the empire were fairly liberal.

Miniatures from the '*Baburnama*', an autobiography by *Babur* himself, showcase aristocratic men and women engaging freely (*Babur, late 16th century*). '*The Mystic Feast*' by *Gulbadan Begum*, *Babur's* daughter, talks about young men and women interacting and sitting with each other at the Mystic Feast held to commemorate their *Turki-Mongol* descent (*Bano, 2008*).

In the *Akbarnama*, a biography by *Abul Fazl*, we see *Khanzada Begum*, *Babur's* elder sister, observing an infant *Akbar* wrestling with *Ibrahim Mirza* (*Fazl, late 17th century*). From these instances, we can infer that male-female segregation was a later trend and that men and women not only interacted freely but that it was also acceptable to a certain degree because of the recreation of these instances in later works. *Gulbadan Begum*, in her memoirs, describes the court at Kabul as very liberal. The women were not veiled, embarked on hunts or *shikars*, went on picnics, rode horses etc. (*Bano, 2008*).

When segregation did come in, the name of any *na-mehrum* or marriageable man was not to be uttered within the harem, only old women were to interact with males and that too in a greatly limited manner. Additionally, the practice of veiling gained prevalence to enhance the 'piety' of a noble lady (*Bano, 2013*).

Segregation and veiling were popularised during *Akbar's* reign to control the marital ties within the dynasty but also served to further mystify and exoticise the harem to foreign travellers.

Furthermore, it is only in *Akbar's* reign that we find repeated references to eunuchs who acted as religious officers of sorts. These eunuchs also acted as guards and messengers for the harem, as they were not capable of impregnation. (*Bano, 2008*). Life in the Mughal harem was secluded and isolated from the public. *Purdah* laws were also very strict for noble women under *Akbar*.

### Conclusion:

One crucial aspect that shaped the status of Mughal women was their economic roles. Although societal norms confined women to specific roles, they actively participated in various socioeconomic activities. Women were engaged in agriculture, trade, and craftsmanship, contributing to the overall economic prosperity of the empire. Their contributions demonstrated their agency and played a pivotal role in shaping their status in society.

Access to education and knowledge played a significant role in determining the status of Mughal women. While formal education was limited and primarily available to the elite, women had access to informal education through interactions within their households. Educated mothers played a crucial role in cultivating knowledge within their families, fostering a culture of learning and refinement. The ability of women to share knowledge and influence the intellectual development of their children contributed significantly to their status within the Mughal society.

Religion and cultural practices exerted a profound influence on the status of Mughal women. Islam, the dominant religion during the Mughal era, provided women with legal safeguards, granting them property rights, inheritance, and the freedom to engage in financial transactions. While some cultural practices, such as the *purdah* system, emphasized seclusion, others highlighted the importance of women as patrons of art and literature. The Mughal courts witnessed influential female figures who held considerable social and political power, an illustration of the dynamic relationship between religion, culture, and the status of women.

The status of Mughal women was influenced by a multitude of factors that shaped their lives, roles, and contributions within society. By examining the socioeconomic roles, access to education and knowledge, and the influence of religion and cultural practices, it becomes evident that Mughal women played an essential and diverse role in the empire. They contributed to the socioeconomic fabric, actively participated in knowledge dissemination, and derived strength from the legal frameworks provided by religion. Recognising and highlighting the importance of these factors offers us a comprehensive understanding of the status and empowerment of Mughal women, which also influences our modern perception of history and the world.

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