



Regal Mughal Women: The Veiled Traders

Suprity Guchhait¹, Daljit Kaur^{1*}

¹ Department of History, Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi, New Delhi-110002

*Associate professor, Department of History, Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi, New Delhi-110002.

Abstract

The Mughal women first stepped on the Indian soil back in 1501 when Emperor Babur left Samarkand along with a small band of *Timurid-Mughal* women to secure a home in Hindustan. Royal Mughal women were an important pillar to build and sustain the Mughal empire in India. Mughal women had an image of beautifully ornated ladies which have been portrayed in the paintings of their era. The status and role of women are often limited to one who stays behind the strong opaque walls of the harem and under the patriarchal protection of the ruler, limiting their contribution solely to the royal household. However, they lead many important spheres like economic patronage, charitable endowments, architecture, and especially trade which enable the Mughal Empire to sail smoothly. The sixteenth and the seventeenth century saw influx of trading activities with the increasing Indian Ocean trade. The Mughal emperors were fond of trade and commerce and participated actively in it. The emergence of trade by the royal ladies of the harem dates to Abkar's reign. Rulers like emperor Jahangir and Shah Jahan were great traders when they were princes. Mughal princesses also didn't stay back in the field. This paper traces and analyses the commercial activities led by the royal Mughal women focusing on Mariam-uz-Zamani, Nur Jahan, and Jahanara Begum. These Veiled traders with their contributions in architecture, poems, charity, writings, and commercial activities, especially trade, left their imprint despite being confined behind the secluded walls. Their lavish lifestyle led to the huge economic growth and developments in the Mughal empire.

Keywords: Royal Mughal women, Trade.

1. Introduction

During the early years of the Mughal period in India, the royal household was restless and thus, less rigid. Mughal harem consisted of the female relatives of the royal family and children along with their huge and elaborated servants and administering staffs. This extravagant *zanana*¹ was under the eye of the head of the harem who owned the huge title of *Padshah Begum of Hindustan*² In the Mughal court, female elders were

¹ E.P Findly, Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India, (1993) Pg-88.

² Ira Mukhoty, Daughters of the Sun by Ira Mukhoty(2018), pg.-7.

highly respected, and their advice were obtained on various matters. This can be seen clearly in the painting made by Mansur, a miniaturist in Akbar's court. The painting displays Khanzada begum, the beloved elder sister of Babur raising a commanding hand and a respectful and attentive Babur sitting in front of her. As the third Mughal emperor established himself on the Indian land, he changed the characteristics of the Mughal harem. He rephrased the meaning of harem by bringing changes which were new for the Mughal women. "The matriarchs of the first Mughal, would never be constrained tidily within the definition of the chaste and ordered harem, invisible to all and beyond reproach. That destiny would be reserved for the next generation of women"³ (Mukhoty 2018).

The new *Shahanshah*⁴ constrained the Mughal women in elaborated harem walls that also hid their names. The biographers of Shah Jahan mention ever since Akbar's reign had been ordained that the names of the seraglio should not be mentioned in public but by their titles. However, Akbar was generous with the women's allowance. As the Mughal empire solidified under Akbar's rule, the empire flourished and a large share of wealth accumulated went to the harem. This wealth and riches allowed the women of the following generation to invest in commercial activities and trade.

2. Participation of Royal Mughal Women in Trade

Mughal women were economically rich and were given the freedom to do trade and commerce on their own. The fondness of cotton, silk, wool fabrics, jewelry, items of decorations, furniture, laces, carpets, cutlery, vases, shawls, and many more items was traded. Mughal were involved in the inland trade as well as foreign trade. Various *karkhanas*⁵ and markets were established to meet the demands of the harem. Many intermediaries and merchants were employed to purchase best quality goods from the various parts of the empire for the women in the royal household. White *Ambartis*⁶ and many other fabrics were procured in the region of Bihar, large consignments of silk were traded from Bengal to Agra. Exported goods from foreign regions used to reach the port of Surat and from there the goods were taken to Agra by the two routes that link *Surat* and *Agra*. The best trade links were with Iran and Central Asia. The needs and demands of the Mughal women contributed to the flourishing economy. Silks were traded from China and Persia. The most loved fabric of the Mughal women was *Makhmal* which used to be traded from Europe. Mughal women's extravagant lifestyles and interest boasted both internal and external industries.

In the eighteenth-century major developments took place in the commerce, new credit institution and *Serais*⁷ were built for the protection of merchants and goods. This encouraged the merchants to invest and conduct trade on a large scale. Royal ladies actively participated in the commission of the construction of serais. *Serai Noor Mahal* was one of the most magnificent *serai* commissioned by Noor Jahan. Another well-known *Serai* is located in the garden of Bagh Aizzabad or Shalimar. This *serai* was commissioned by *Akbarbadi Begum*, the chief queen of Shah Jahan after the death of Mumtaz Mahal. This *serai* was a crucial

³ Ibid, Ira Mukhoty (2018), pg.-66.

⁴ Ibid, Ira Mukhoty (2018) pg.-63.

⁵ Tapan Raychaudhuri, Inland Trade in The Cambridge Economic History of India. (2008) Pg.-252.

⁶ Ibid, Tapan Raychaudhuri, (2008) pg.- 332.

⁷ Soma Mukherjee, Royal Mughal Ladies and their Contributions. (2001) Pg.- 240.

landmark because of the coronation of Emperor Aurangzeb in 1658. Shah Jahan's eldest daughter Jahanara Begum also built a *serai* called Begum Serai. Aurangzeb's daughter *Zinat-un-nisha Begum* built fourteen *serais* for the poor travelers and merchants. Nawab Bai, one of the wives of Aurangzeb also built a *serai* at Faradpur. In the circle of trade during the Mughal era, there are three royal women who specifically contributed to trade, Mariam-uz-Zamani, Nur Jahan and Jahanara Begum.

3. Mariam-uz-Zamani

Mariam- Uz- Zamani, the wife of Emperor Akbar and queen mother of Emperor Jahangir was the first Mughal Queen who actively participated in trade in her name and owned a ship called *Rahimi*.⁸ It is from the hustling town of Surat that Mariam-uz-Zamani's *Rahimi* used to sail in the sea and used to trade with the foreign land. As the queen's mother, she had a huge number of intermediaries and financial advisors who used to help her conduct and manage her trade dealings. *Rahimi* used to export cotton, indigo, silks, leather, metal, carpets, opium, and jewels. In return goods of particular interest of royal women like gold, silver, ivory, pearls, amber, perfumes, wines, brocade, cutlery, and glassware were imported from various places. *Rahimi* also used to carry passengers to Mecca for Hajj. It was an enormous ship that was also reputed in Europe which also led *Rahimi* to its bad fate.

Queen Mother was not very fond of Europeans especially the Portuguese. The reason behind such a view could be the growing ambition of the European Merchants and their insolence. One such event was when *William Hawkins*, an English merchant brought the whole harvest of Bayana by bidding higher than the queen mother's representative. Mariam-uz-Zamani was personally interested in the indigo plantation of Bayana and commissioned a stepwell with her own money to provide water to the plants. She wanted to have the whole harvest and send it Mocha near Mecca. Hawkins's representative bid higher and bought all the harvest. When the news reached Mariam-uz-Zamani, she was furious and felt humiliated. She complained to the emperor Jahangir. Due to this incident Hawkins had to leave Agra in 1611. Later in 1613, Portuguese did an outrageous task of capturing the queen Mother's ship *Rahimi* along with its goods and passengers and taking them to Goa. It was a humiliating matter for the whole Mughal Empire and emperor Jahangir was furious. He took steps against Portuguese; however, they miscalculated Jahangir didn't return the ship. When the Mughal court confirmed that the Portuguese wouldn't return the ship, he immediately stopped every commercial activity of the Portuguese. The seizing of the ship was an insult to the Mughal empire which led to the decline of Portuguese fortunes and led to their eviction from Indian land. Mariam -uz- Zamani whose actual name was lost behind heavy titles like *Wali Nimat Begum Mariam uz Zamani Sahiba* successfully created her name in history with her contribution to trade and her ship *Rahimi*.

4. Nur Jahan (Mehr-un-Nisa)

Nur Jahan whose real name was Mehr-un-Nisa was the last and most beloved consort of Emperor Jahangir who was the most powerful woman in the Mughal history of India. She actively participated in political matters, issued her own *Farmans*⁹ which used to carry her seal, and struck coins on her name which used to

⁸ Ibid, Soma Mukherjee, (2001) Pg.- 238.

⁹ E.P Findly, Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India, (1993) Pg-43.

bear twelve signs of the zodiac. She was an independent woman of her era. Nur Jahan was particularly interested in taking care of orphan girls and promoting many of them by funding their dowries in marriage. She took care of her trade, received petitions from nobles, and personally negotiated with European traders from the balcony of her palace.

The stories of the riches and wealth of Mughal empire reached the English shores, and they got interested to build trade links with them. One such English merchant and diplomat was *Thomas Roe*. He fought hard to gain exclusive trading rights in Mughal India which he finally obtained in a Farman in 1618 by Emperor Jahangir. Nur Jahan's keen interest in English trade and goods played an important role in Roe's success in building the first English factory in Surat. Thus, a new kind of trade emerged in the Mughal Empire which consists of English Ambitions.

Nur Jahan's main aim was to buy luxury items from the English for herself and the Mughal court. On the other hand, the English were solely interested in Indian cotton and dye. It is in this international trade that Nur Jahan was exceptionally successful and the quantum of wealth that Nur Jahan owns from this reached its hights. The trade with the English was only a small part of Nur Jahan's commercial activity. In addition to the trade with English, she had trade links with Dutch and Portuguese. She used to own and rent trade ships to these countries. Nur Jahan's brother *Asaf Khan* was her chief agent. Nur Jahan was also involved in design and the textile industry. She invented the *Farsh-e-Chandani*, a spreading sheet instead of carpets in a room. She also invented the *dodamni*, a light cloth, and the *pachtoliya*, a very light cloth to cover the heads¹⁰. Her interest in the field led to a whole new market called the *Kinari Bazar* where the famous *Kimkhab textile*¹¹ used to be manufactured. Besides these trades she used to collect duties at Sikandarabad on goods coming from Bhutan and Bengal. Nur Jahan also invested in the commerce of indigo and embroidered cloths.

Nur Jahan was particularly fond of architecture and show her wealth with the beautiful buildings she commissioned. She commissioned a beautiful *serai* outside Agra and named it *Serai Noor Mahal*. The wealth, power, and splendour of its patron can be seen through this *serai*. It was very huge and appointed with soldiers and servants for the safety and convenance of merchants and travellers. The *serai* was made of red sandstone and consist of huge gateways, many compartments, a bathhouse, and a mosque. Another beautiful piece of architecture commissioned by Nur Jahan was *Itamud-Daulah's Tomb*, her parents' tomb. It was made of white marble which was her favourite colour. This architecture inspired the next generation to build the Famous Taj Mahal. Her parent's tomb was the last architecture which was built by her. After the death of Emperor Jahangir, all her glory also died. Her coins were melted, and seals were taken.

5. Jahanara Begum Sahib: Padshah Begum

After the fall of Noor Jahan, the new *Padshah Begum* was Arjumand Banu Begum famously known as Mumtaz Mahal. She didn't get much time to manage the Mughal household or commercial activities due to fourteen pregnancies in her nineteen years of marriage and died in childbirth in 1613. However, she had her

¹⁰ Ibid, Ira Mukhoty, (2018), pg.-148.

¹¹ Ibid, Soma Mukherjee, (2001) Pg.- 241

eldest daughter Jahanara Begum to help in running the royal *zenana*, who became the wealthiest and most powerful princess of her era. Jahanara Begum was the favourite child of Shah Jahan and after the death of her mother, Shah Jahan made her *Padshah Begum* ignoring all his other wives. It was the first time that a princess was crowned *Padshah begum*. At a tender age all the responsibilities of running the royal *zenana* and the responsibilities of her younger siblings came crashing on her. Along with these responsibilities, she also received huge wealth which included - half of her mother's wealth, her annual income was now fixed at thirty lakh rupees, the entire revenue of the port of Surat, revenue from Panipat, and two ships of her own called *Sahibi*¹² and *Ganjawar*¹³. Jahanara Begum used all this wealth to arrange magnificent events and marriages of her brothers, trade, and architecture. Jahanara Begum continued the legacy of Mariam -Uz-Zamani and Nur Jahan. She continued the trade links with Dutch and English. She traded luxurious goods and jewelry for the Mughal household and harem. Shah Jahan himself was fond of clothes and jewelry. During this period, Mughal court was renowned for its wealthy and rich conduct. All these were somewhere maintained and looked after by Jahanara Begum herself. She also contributed to building the busiest commercial markets during the period. One was in Lahore called *Chowk Sarai bazar* and the other *Chandni Chowk* in Delhi¹⁴. Chandni chowk was a hub of trade and many merchants used to come from faraway places to conduct trade. It was a beautiful place with a pool in the center and beautifully ornated gateways surrounding it.

Jahanara begum was fond of Sufi culture. She expressed her views through her writings and architecture. When Shah Jahan built Shahjahanabad, much of the architecture were constructed by Jahanara. She also commissioned and designed her resting place in Nizamuddin Auliya's *Dargah*. It is open air white marble tomb with an inscription which she wrote herself:

*Let nothing cover my tomb save the green grass for
Grass suffices well as a covering for the grave of the lowly.*¹⁵

6. Conclusion

The Mughal royal women were indeed confined to the walls of *zenana* physically. However, they left their imprint in history with their architecture, poems, charity, writings, and trade. Even though, we don't find many women who actively participated in the commercial activities, each woman in the royal *zenana* contributed to the wealth and flourishing commerce of Mughal Empire. The extravagant lifestyle and demands of the Mughal harem led to huge economic boost and a flourishing economy with participation of huge number of common people. The royal women who actively participated in the trade were well known in their world and period and often envied and praised by various contemporary people. These women let a huge inflow of luxurious items which became the icon of the Lavish lifestyle of the Mughals.

¹² Ibid, Soma Mukherjee, (2001) Pg.- 243.

¹³ Ibid, Soma Mukherjee, (2001) Pg.- 244.

¹⁴ Ibid, Soma Mukherjee, (2001) Pg.- 244.

¹⁵ K.S Lal, The Mughal harem, Aditya Prakashan(1988).Pg- 98.

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