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The Two Shades Of Mughal *Harem*: Chastity And Debauchery

Layma Parveen

Research Scholar

CAS, Deptt. Of History

AMU, Aligarh.

Mughal *Harem* has always been an interesting topic to work on for research scholars and historians. But the general problem in highlighting the real image of *harem* is that scholars lack in solid evidence. As per strict rule, except the emperor, no one was allowed to enter into *harem*. Generally, it happens that information about the lives of Mughal ladies in their palaces is very scanty and it is available in different works which portray a blurred picture of their lives. Persian chroniclers or official court historians have given a slight touch to the activities of women. It might have two reasons (i) they were not allowed to write about the women of the royal palace and (ii) they, themselves, never dared to write about them or they never get any clue to write about them. Therefore, Mughal ladies are being discussed as a part of narratives rather than discussed as a whole. Though, biographies mentions Mughal ladies but detailed accounts are not given.

As K.S. Lal states in *The Mughal Harem* that, “No nobleman, historian or scholar not even an *allama* like Abul Fazl, could enter the *harem*, meet with queens and princesses, discuss their problems and wrote about them. Most of the Persian chroniclers were official historians; per force the central figure of their narrative was the emperor. The harem was for His Majesty’s personal pleasure and his women remained far too removed from the

chroniclers' official notice. Therefore, their references to the seraglio¹ of the royalty and nobility are based on their observations from a distance and not on intimate personal knowledge.”²

Thus, the information is taken from all the sources including, the primary sources, secondary sources, travelers' accounts, paintings and modern works as well.

The study of this paper would trace the collective information of the activities of the Mughal *harem*, especially the right and wrong doings of the *harem* inmates. The paper would also cover the unjust play of social status, assumed by the ladies of *harem*, and the role of debauchery as well. The main aim of this paper is to highlight the different shades of Mughal *Harem* which depict that how secure was the administration of *harem*. The ladies of Mughal *harem* contributed in each field whether they are wives, daughters, sisters, servants or concubines.

Many women were there in *harem* of the Mughals which belonged to different races, provinces and communities.³

Soma Mukherjee writes in her book “*Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contribution*” that, “The harems of Babur and Humayun were modest in size. But from Akbar's time onwards the Mughal *harem* became an elaborate affair having a large number of women. Akbar's *harem* has approximately 5000 women. The harems of Jehangir, Shahjahan and puritan Aurangzeb were also large”.⁴ Prof. R. Nath says, “It is not hidden that Mughals were Sunni Muslims and at least theoretically, they believed in the orthodox religion of Islam. The *shariat* allowed a faithful to have a maximum of four wives by *nikah*”.⁵ He also states that “whatever is licentiousness today was a mark of social status during the medieval ages.”⁶ In this regard, Mirza Aziz Koka's famous proverb describes that a “man should marry four wives: a Persian to have somebody to talk and to make love; a Khurasani to do the house-work; a Hindu to caress the husband and nurse the children; and a woman of Mawra-un-Nahr to have someone to whip as a warning for the other three. It shows how the medieval people fancied having four wives from different regions”.⁷

If we talk of the inmates of *harem*, we have wives of king, concubines; girls who dance and sing; girls who work as slaves and servants and there are sisters, daughters, aunts, grandmothers, stepmothers, foster moms, and other female royal relatives. Until they reach the appropriate age, even the male youngsters reside within the *harem*. Then, there are several women officials and guards who are chosen by the king for taking care of the different

¹ “The women's apartment of an eastern king, in the common parlance of western historians, is known as seraglio or harem”, Mohd. Azhar Ansari, “The Harem Of the Great Mughals”, *Islamic Culture*, Vol. XXXIV no.1, January, 1960.p.1.

² K.S.Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988, p.1

³ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contribution*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2011. p.15

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ R.Nath, *Private life of the Mughals of India (1526- 1803)*, New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2013. p.24

⁶ Ibid.p.25

⁷ K.S.Lal, *Mughal Harem*. p.21

requirements of the *harem*. There are eunuchs posted as guards and female fortune tellers.⁸ The women were kept, in addition to the legally wedded wives, exclusively for sexual enjoyment.⁹

Now, as far as size of Mughal *harem* is concerned from the times of Babur to the time of Aurangzeb, we get to know that *harem* of Babur and Humayun were reserved in size. By all computation, it did not comprise more than two hundred members each¹⁰. But during Akbar's time onwards, *harem* as a body was developed and well established and it was under rule of him that it worked scientifically and autonomously like any other unit of the rule¹¹.

Jehangir is known at the age of just twenty-seven, to have more than twenty-two wives.¹² The *harem's* unruliness ended with Jehangir. After being sized appropriately, it was brought inside regulated areas by Shahjahan who didn't diminish its splendor or glamour; neither did he interfere with its tangled organization.¹³ And Aurangzeb tried to make the *harem* organization simpler, though the organization had developed to a wider extent, and it was almost impossible to undo it.¹⁴

Harem's domestic activities and the lifestyle of its inmates can never be ignored. Many historians or scholars have worked on it but due to lack of evidence it couldn't have become possible to portray the actual lives of *harem* inmates. Therefore, the private lives of Mughal women remained under a veil.

Although Mughals were very perfect in showing respect for their ladies whether it is for their aunts or other elderly ladies. We get to know from Gulbadan Bano Begum's biography of Emperor Humayun that from Babur himself, the tradition of showing etiquette continued. She writes that when her father (Babur) was in Agra, he would visit to see his aunts from father's side on Fridays. When it was very hot one day, and her Highness (Akam)¹⁵ said, "The wind is very hot, indeed; how would it be if you did not go this one Friday? The begums would not be vexed." His Majesty said, "Maham! It is astonishing that you should say such things! The daughters of Abu Said Sultan Mirza, who have been deprived of father and brothers! If I do not cheer them how will it be done?"¹⁶ Further, she also writes that Babur ordered Khwaja Qasim, an architect, to built palace for the ladies of their own choice.¹⁷

Humayun also continued the tradition of paying respect to ladies of his harem. For this also, Gulbadan Bano is witness herself. She says, "When Humayun fell ill, he was growing weaker and weaker. Every time he came to his senses, his pearl-dropping tongue asked for us and said: 'Sisters, you are welcome! Come and let us embrace

⁸ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contribution*. p.16

⁹ Shadab Bano, *Marriage and Concubinage in the Mughal Imperial Family*, Proceedings of IHC, vol.60.1999, p.353.

¹⁰ K.S.Lal, *The Mughal Harem*.pp.17,18.

¹¹ R.Nath, *Private Life of The Mughals of India*.p.26

¹² Ibid.p.29

¹³ Ibid.p.36

¹⁴ Ibid.pp.37-38

¹⁵ Gulbadan Begam, *Humayun Nama*, Tr. A.S. Beveridge, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1983.p.89

¹⁶ Gulbadan Begam, *Humayun Nama*, Tr. A.S. Beveridge, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1983.p.97

¹⁷ Ibid.p.98

one another. I have not embraced you.’ It might be three times that he raised his head and that his jewel-dropping tongue let fall these uplifting words.”¹⁸ Further she writes that after his coronation on Friday, Dec.29th, 1530 (Jumada, I. 9th, 937 H.), he visited his mothers, sisters and his own people and asked about their health also. He also ordered them to continue their services as they used to do.¹⁹

When Akbar acquired the throne, he carried forward the tradition of his predecessors with utmost regard that respect should be given to the ladies of the harem. He treated Miriam Makani with huge respect and would move out of the capital to welcome her.²⁰

Jahangir was also very much aware of paying respect to the women of harem. He had a special regard for his mother and would frequently move out of his citadel to receive her. It was not that he only respected his mother, but he would be expecting the same from his son also. After the giving in of Rai Karan when Khurram was honored, Jahangir asked him to wait on his mothers.²¹

Likewise, the last two Mughal emperors i.e. Shahjahan and Aurangzeb also paid the same respect for their ladies. Shahjahan is very well known for his affection towards his queen Mumtaz Mahal. In fact, it is said that he was so overpowered by grief of her death that his hair turned grey rapidly and he was unable to bring himself to show at the window of the Hall of Audience, or to focus any affair of state.²² And, during the reign of Aurangzeb, Jahanara Begum was the one who enjoyed his respect and affection despite of the reality that Dara Shukoh favored her, and Aurangzeb was sincere and genuine to her was always ready to follow her instructions.²³

It is true that Mughal emperors were very protective and affectionate towards their ladies and so were their nobles too. Their nobles also showed the same level of respect for the women. They would get down from their horses at a distance and bow down before the ladies.²⁴

In fact, for the security of *harem*, the administration of this institution was very active and advanced. There were strict rules for their safeguard. The organization of the *harem* of the Mughal emperors was maintained on the same outline as the central administration of emperor’s household. Two types of *harem* staff were there, firstly women and eunuchs and secondly, male officials and servants who worked under the supervision of Mir saman. Three tiers were additionally established for female employees: high, moderate, and low. Their appointment was

¹⁸ Gulbadan. *Humayun Nama*.p.104

¹⁹ Ibid.p.110

²⁰ Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, Tr. H. Beveridge,.vol.III. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1939.p.88

²¹ Nur-ud-Din Muhammad Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Tr. Alexander Rogers, Ed. Henry Beveridge. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1989.p.277

²²Jadunath Sarkar, *Studies in Mughal India*. Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar & Sons Ltd. 1933.pp.27-28

²³ Rekha Misra, *Women in Mughal India(1526- 1748)*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Oriental Publishers and Booksellers, 1967. p.74

²⁴ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*. Tr. William Irvine.vol.2. London: John Murray, 1907.p.354

very vigilant. The inside portion of *harem* was safeguarded by courageous, adept, and engaged women and the outside portion by trustworthy Rajputs.²⁵

K. S. Lal stated that, “The internal administration of the harem was placed under the charge of intelligent and active women called *Daroghas*. Many other officials all-women like *Mahaldars*, *Mushrifs*, *Tahwildars* and *Begis* are also mentioned in Persian chroniclers. The female officers of the harem were divided into three main sections: the high (*Mahin Banu*), the middle (*Paristaran-i-Hudur*) and the low. The *Mahaldar* was the chief lady officer and kept an eye on all important matters. *Tehwildar* was the lady accounts officer and cashier to whom officials, including *daroghas* had to apply for their salaries. *Mushrifs* were superintendents and *Begis* were women guards stationed at the gate of the female apartments. The duties of the female palace officials sometimes inter-changed, telescoped and overlapped.”²⁶

Outside the Mughal Harem, there were eunuchs who were stationed. In Mughal India they were assigned to guard duties in the seraglio and went by the name *Khwaja Sara*. The *nazirs* were the elder eunuchs. There were several more eunuchs beneath each of them. Their structure was hierarchical.²⁷

The security of women was so strict in Mughal India that even during journeys also, arrangements of supervision and security of *harem* were equally good. No one was allowed to enter the *harem*. At dusk, lamps were left burning, and the harem's doors remained closed. Each female guard was there to report to the Nazir of all the happenings inside the harem.²⁸

The other important feature of the Mughal harem was the culture of *purdah*. During the Mughal period in India, we find *purdah* being obligatory on women quite common. Even a progressive monarch like Akbar issued an order stating that any young lady spotted wandering the town's bazaars and streets without a veil. She would be taken to the prostitutes' quarters and forced to become one of them²⁹. *Purdah* in its strict meaning was popular among Mughal females, according to both modern native chronicles and Western visitors to India during this period.³⁰ Whenever the ladies of the royalty would move outside their palaces they would put on veils, usually in white color, which hide their faces. Royal women would rarely travel on foot. Most of the time they travelled in covered palanquins with a team of servants and eunuchs adjoining them on all sides. Male palanquin bearers were replaced by females at the entrance of the residence to carry the palanquins inside. The aristocratic ladies would travel in covered *howdahs* on backs of elephants, *chaudoles* and occasionally in carriages that are completely covered to uphold *purdah*. A *mahout* would cover the elephant's face with a rag to prevent the princess from his sight as she entered the covered howdah and when an aristocratic lady rode an elephant, it was made sure to place

²⁵ Azhar Ansari, 'Social conditions at the court of Akbar and its influence on society', *Islamic Culture*, vol.XXXIII No.1, January, 1959.

²⁶ K.S.Lal. *The Mughal Harem*. pp.51-52.

²⁷ Ibid.p.56

²⁸ Manucci. *Storia.....*vol.2. p.350,352.

²⁹ Soma Mukherjee,p.46

³⁰ Soma Mukherjee,p.46

him into a tent close to the royal entrance. Adequate precautions were taken to keep women hidden from the sight of the people.³¹ And beyond the palace walls as well as inside the Mughal women lived in strict privacy. The duty staff had to see that no one could enter the women's apartments. Even the wives of nobles or Begums whenever wished to visit the *harem*, they had to inform first to the servants of the *harem*. Then, they forwarded their requests to the officers of the palace after that, only eligible people were allowed to enter the *harem*. Few women of the rank were permitted to stay for month.³² The men having the privilege to enter the *harem* were fathers and brothers of the aristocratic ladies, but they were allowed to meet the women only in the company of her husband.³³ The culture and tradition of *harem* of nobles followed the same way as the royal *harem*.

The details about the colossal system of check and security of Mughal harem highlights the status of women in Mughal India. It seems like women were very precious to them and they were the first and foremost treasure to hide from the world. But this is not the whole truth about the Mughal *harem* as sources from foreign travelers reveal the dark shade of *harem* also. As we know that the Mughal emperors were very fond of having large *harems* and they have females from each part of the country. The truth is that the *pardah* system for the women at the time was used to identify them as denoting a reputable, noble, or royal aristocratic family. The family's custom of seclusion may have further emphasized the high social status. Therefore, the *harem* became the crucial mark of social status and the real symbol of king's.³⁴ The contemporary Persian chroniclers like Abul Fazl, Qazwini, Lahori, Inayat Khan, Khafi Khan and others calls the ladies of aristocrats, daughters and wives who are pure and upright.³⁵ It is significant that they prefix the name of royal ladies with words like pure and chaste. Women were kept secluded for maintaining the piousness of the *harem*. These emperors had wives and concubines, who were supposed to be totally faithful and devoted to them. Hundreds of more women, including concubines, mothers, sisters, daughters, and other female relatives of the emperor, resided in the harem in addition to the hundreds of wives. The laws of *harem* directed the lives of these women too and even they were supposed to lead chaste lives. However, each one of these ladies could be used to the emperor's satisfaction if that was what was desired.³⁶ Therefore, it can be said that evil for women was evil, but it was not same in case of men. It was very common to have concubines in the Mughal *Harem* among both royalty and nobles.³⁷ Apart from concubines and queens, there were secondary wives also. Typically, the daughters or cousins of Indian rulers who married Mughal princes were viewed as secondary or inferior wives since the marriages were arranged through diplomatic channels or because the girl's family had lost battles or fights against the Mughals.³⁸ These secondary

³¹ Soma Mukherjee. p.46.

³² Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*. Tr. H. Blochmann, M. A. and Colonel H. S. Jarrett, Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873- 1907.vol.1,p.45, Manucci, vol.2.p.350-351.

³³ Soma Mukherjee.p.46, Edward Terry, *Early travels in India*,Ed. William Foster, London: Humphery Milford, Oxford University Press, 1921. p.283.

³⁴ Soma Mukherjee.p.48.

³⁵ Ibid.p.49

³⁶ Ibid.p.50.

³⁷ John Ovington, *A Voyage to Surat in the Year 1689*. Ed. H.G. Ranelingson. London: Oxford University Press, 1929.p.234.

³⁸ Soma Mukherjee, p.24.

wives were known as Bais and Mahals.³⁹ It is true that all the Mughal emperors from the time of Babur had many concubines in their *harem*. Babur's two well-known concubines were Circassian slaves Gulnar and Nargul Aghacha, who were given to him by Shah Tamasp. Bhaval Anga, a concubine of Humayun, served as one of Akbar's wet nurses. Several of Akbar's concubines went on to become his children's moms. His daughter Shahzada Khanum, who was born to Bibi Salima, and Aram Banu Begam and Shukr-un-Nisa Begam, who were all born to Bibi Daulat Shad, were all descended from concubines. Murad and Daniyal, two of the three sons, were also born to concubines.⁴⁰

Jahandar and Shaharyar, two of Jehangir's sons, were born in 1605 A.D. to concubines. Shahjahan had two notable concubines: Akbarabadi Mahal, often called Aizunissa, and Fatehpuri Mahal. Throughout his days in prison, they provided excellent care for his children. Aurangzeb also had concubines i.e. Udipuri Mahal.⁴¹ The demand for concubines of the *harems* was quite large. As the nature of demand emphasized the physical attributes of the slaves and the cultural attainments. The *harems* of the defeated rulers became a source from where concubines could be collected.

Babur and Humayun were typical examples of a culture centered around polygamy. They had their concubines, spouses, and slave females, but they did not practise licentiousness as a pastime.⁴² As a matter of fact, sometimes the demand of having a son or beauty became the sole factor of having concubines and slaves. Gulbadan tells us that “Maham Begum had a great longing and desire to see the son of Humayun. Wherever there was a good-looking and nice girl, she used to bring her into her service. Maywa-jan, a daughter of Khadang, the chamberlain was in my employ. One day (after) the death of His Majesty *Firdaus-Makani* my lady said: Humayun, Majwa-jan is not bad. Why do you not take her into your service? So at her word, Humayun married and took her that very night.”⁴³

Mughals were constantly bringing in women from all over the world, both foreign and Indian women, to populate their harems. From all throughout the nation, Indian ladies were brought. Rajputanis were preferred for political reasons. Kashmiri women for their amiable disposition.⁴⁴

The harem life of Mughals was so colossal that their nobles also followed the same pattern and completed the picture of luxurious life of the Mughal elite. This was the urban scene throughout Mughal India from Kabul to Agra and from Agra to all the major cities of India. The level of their (nobles) richness was no less than princes. Pelsaert tells us, “Their *mahals* are adorned internally with lascivious sensuality, wanton and reckless festivity,

³⁹Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb*.vol.1. Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar, 1912.p.61.

⁴⁰ K.S.Lal.p.30

⁴¹ Soma Mukherjee.pp.24-25

⁴² K.S.Lal.p.160.

⁴³ Gulbadan Begam.p.112.

⁴⁴ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire (1656-1668)*, Ed. V.A. Smith. Westminster: Archibald Constable and Company.p. 439

superfluous pomp, inflated pride and ornamental daintiness,”⁴⁵ And as far their number of wives is concerned, “as a rule they had three or four wives, the daughters of worthy men, but their senior wife commands most respect.”⁴⁶ The wives of nobles saw their husbands as a god rather than a man, whom they fear, honor and worship.⁴⁷

In terms of pleasure and favor, nobles got a prestigious position in their harem. Pelsaert wrote, “Each night he visits a particular wife, or *mahal*, and receives a very warm welcome from her and from the slaves, who dressed especially for the occasion, seem to fly, rather than run, about their duties. If it is hot weather, they undress the husband as soon as he comes in, and rub his body with pounded sandalwood and rosewater, or some other scented and cooling oil. Fans are kept going steadily in the room, or in the open air, where they usually sit. Some of the slaves chafe the master’s hands and feet, some sit and sing or play music and dance or provide other recreation, the wife sitting near him all the time.”⁴⁸ He has very strong right to enjoy the desire of his likings or whatever he want, like, “the husband sits like a golden cock among the gilded hens until midnight, or until passion, or drink, sends him bed. Then 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 signs of displeasure, but dissembling, though she will take it out of the slave girl later on.”⁴⁹ And in case of *purdah* also, their wives followed the same pattern as the royal ladies. According to Pelsaert, “Two or three eunuchs, or more, who are merely purchased Bengali slaves, but are usually faithful to their master, are appointed for each wife, to ensure that she is seen by no man except her husband; and if a eunuch fails in this duty, he, with everyone else to blame for stranger’s presence, is in danger of losing his life.”⁵⁰

It appears from the chroniclers that both the sides of Mughal *Harem* go simultaneously. It is true that if *purdah* was the culture of Mughal palaces, then it would not be wrong to say, debauchery was also a part of the same palace too. Although European travelers have exaggerated the scenario. Scholars like Meera Nanda analyzed the information given by foreign travelers and states, “the travelers round off the portrait of women with detailed descriptions of the imperial as well as nobles harem and the common prostitutes, clearly establishing that women were largely treated as an object of pleasure and denied her dignity as an individual.”⁵¹ It is true that few European travelers talked about the erotic pleasure patterns followed by the Mughals. Like Coryate mentions that the arrangement of fairs and markets was a way to get the sight of the beauties of the city.⁵² Likewise Manucci mentions that Shahjahan was only interested in search of pretty women to satisfy his desires.⁵³ In addition to that Alexander Hamilton cannot be ignored because he has scripted the popular love angle of Jahangir and Nur Jahan

⁴⁵ Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir’s India*, The Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert. Tr. W.H. Moreland and P. Geyl. Delhi: Idarah-i-Adabiyat-i- Delhi, 2009.p.64

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.p.65.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Meera Nanda, *European Travel Accounts during the Reigns of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb*, Nirmal Book Agency, Kurukshetra, 1994, p. 109.

⁵² Faraz Anjum, ‘Strangers’ Gaze: Mughal *Harem* and European Travellers of the Seventeenth Century’, *Pakistan Vision*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2013, p.75.

⁵³ Ibid.

in such kind of markets.⁵⁴ But these information that are given by the foreign travelers are totally and completely generated from the *bazaar* gossips. As K.S. Lal states that, “Travellers’ stay was short and during that sojourn they could not understand the country and generalized what they learnt about one Begum or one matron as true of the whole *harem*. They might be guilty of hasty generalizations, but not of willful scandal mongering. The essentials in the picture of Mughal harem-life, as presented by them collectively, are interesting, informative and by and large true.”⁵⁵ But scholars like Ruby Lal has labeled works like K.S. Lal’s “the caricatured version of the Mughal harem.”⁵⁶ The challenging study of Ruby Lal has defined the actual version of Mughal *harem*. The travelers’ accounts were quite based on the information gathered by the locals because it was almost impossible to peep into the women’s quarters especially for an outsider. The scarcity of authentic information or lack of research produced works like K.S.Lal that is completely based on English travelers’ accounts.

However, it may be concluded that the Mughal harem was a colossally organized institution where the ladies lived with much comfort and relaxation. This institution was very well furnished with each and every possible luxury of the world, including, carpets, curtains, furniture, food, jewelry, clothes, gardens and etc. Based on the overall analysis of study the life of a Mughal woman revolved round the emperor and her position in the harem was also determined by her position in the life of emperor.

But the two contrasting shades of Mughal harem have a different story to tell. On one hand, The Mughals had great respect and honor for their ladies that they were secured from each and every type of evil or enemy. They had guards in their harem. They had spies. They had full authority to move inside the harem and outside the harem, they had to observe *pardah* and they used to cover themselves from head to toe so that no one could see them. On the other hand there is another version of *harem* in the works of European travelers. These works portrayed the seraglio as a place for satisfying pleasure or desires only. They failed to portray the actual image of harem because of the limitations in approaching the ladies of aristocrats. Secondly, they viewed things from the European point of view. Hence, they produced scandals, exaggerations and misinterpretations only. These two shades of Mughal harem conclude that to the Mughals, the harem was a status of symbol and size of the Mughal harem increased from age to age.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ K.S. Lal, p.12.

⁵⁶ Ruby Lal, ‘Rethinking Mughal India: Challenge of a Princess’ Memoir’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38, No. 1, 2003, p. 63.

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