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## Gender, Class, and Literacy: A Historical Study of Women's Education under the Mughals

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**ABSTRACT:** In this communication, the education system of women during Mughal reign is presented. Throughout the Mughal era, women's status was tiered. In the Mughal era, women's education was regarded as less significant than that of males by both Muslims and Hindus. Studying Literature and Education was only available to women from royal class and noble class. Getting education for middle class and lower class women was very stringent due to Purdah System, Early marriage, social taboos and many more reasons. Many Mughal Princess such as Gulbadan Begum, Mumtaz Mahal, Noor Jahan, Jahan Ara, Roshan Ara, Sati al-Nisa Khanam and many more were taught literature and language. Many of them were well versed in poetry. During the Mughal era, women also made significant contributions to education through the establishment of institutions, in addition to their literary works. Some princess and women belonged to noble families had constructed mosque and attached Madrasas to it for imparting education.

**Keywords:** Women, Education, Mughal Empire, Social, Culture, Political, Religion, Islam

### Introduction

Throughout history, powerful female leaders have impressed the world with their knowledge and creativity. However, the role of women, especially in education, during the Mughal Empire (1526 AD to 1707 AD, extending to 1857 AD) has not been thoroughly studied. To gain a deeper understanding of the social structure and evolving status of women during this era, it is essential to explore women's education.

Women's access to education in the Mughal Empire varied significantly based on their social class. The upper echelons of society, particularly the nobility and royal family, valued women's education, although it was often limited to domestic affairs. Women in these circles were typically well-versed in subjects like music, poetry, literature, and religious studies, reflecting the cultural sophistication of the Mughal courts [1,2]. The primary purpose of their education was to enhance their social standing and intellectual refinement within the court, rather than to empower them to assume more prominent roles in society. For instance, Gulbadan Begum, the daughter of Emperor Babur, was a notable educated woman who authored the "Humayun-nama," providing a rare feminine perspective on the Mughal dynasty [3]. Her writings not only offer valuable historical insights but also demonstrate the intellectual capabilities of Mughal women who, despite societal constraints, made significant contributions to the empire's literary heritage. Similarly, women like Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal and Jahan Ara Begum etc. who were educated and held influential positions at court, viewed education as a means to enhance their lives within the palace [4,5,6]. In contrast, the educational experiences of women from lower social classes were vastly different. Most women, particularly those in rural areas, had limited access to formal education. Their education focused primarily on religious teachings and practical skills necessary for managing household duties. Societal expectations dictated that women were primarily responsible for their roles as wives and mothers, with little emphasis on their personal development beyond these roles. This stark contrast in educational opportunities underscored the deep socioeconomic divisions within the Mughal Empire [7].

Islam, the religion of the Mughal emperors, also significantly influenced beliefs about women's education. While education was valued for all, cultural norms such as purdah, which required the segregation of

women, often restricted their participation in formal education and public life [8]. Despite these obstacles, some women managed to pursue education, particularly in religious studies, which were deemed essential for their moral and spiritual growth.

The outlook on women's education during the Mughal era is complex. Although women of the upper classes had access to broader education, their learning was often confined to domestic matters due to the social norms of the royal court. Most women, especially from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, were limited to home-based education, focusing mainly on practical and religious knowledge [9]. This intricate relationship between women's education, societal structure, and gender norms in the Mughal Empire highlights both the opportunities and limitations faced by women in that era.

This study aims to explore the multifaceted nature of women's education during the Mughal period, examining the disparities among social classes, the influence of religious beliefs, and the contributions of influential women within the Mughal court.

### **Women Education in Pre-Mughal Period**

*Vedic Era (1500BC-1000BC):* All of the evidence that is now accessible indicates that, in the pre-vedic era, women had equal access to education and religious opportunities, along with a good degree of independence. Boys and girls may attend school in the pre-Vedic era. Veda and fine arts are studied by girls. There was no observation of the Purdah system throughout the Vedic era. In addition to enjoying total independence inside the family, they are also permitted to choose their partners. In household life, women were viewed as superior. Husbands used to confer with their wives on financial matters, and women assist him in agriculture. Rig Vedic hymns were composed by several women throughout the Vedic era. Three of them were pioneers: Gargi, Lopamudra, and Maitreye [10,11,12].

*Post Vedic Era (1000BC-600BC):* The right of women to an education was eliminated at this time. Women were also prohibited from taking part in Sabha and Samiti. Vaivasvata Manu, an ancient Hindu figure in history, is credited with establishing laws in his code (200 A.D.). He believed that a woman should submit to her husband. She is deferential to her husband, boys, and father at every stage of her life. Under the Manu (200 A.D.) law, women were kept within their houses and were not allowed to perform Vedic mantras. They also lost their entitlement to an education [12,13].

*Buddhist Era (560 BC-200BC):* It was encouraged for women to pursue education throughout the Buddhist era. Philosophy and education spread quickly among well-educated and affluent women. A few women left India to become well-known educators abroad. Buddhist nuns wrote the well-known poem collection "Therigatha," which is the most ancient piece of writing by a woman ever discovered [14]. Therigatha poems show a variety of ladies. Of these ladies, eighteen were married and thirty-two were single. Among the single ladies, Subha, Anopama, and Sumedha came from wealthy backgrounds [15, 16].

*Gupta Period & Post Gupta Period (300 AD- 600AD):* Women were prohibited from obtaining religious or Vedic education at this time, but they were by no means illiterate. As an alternative, they achieved success in a variety of creative and cultural endeavours, exhibiting their expertise in disciplines like dance, music, painting, and guitar playing. The epics and Puranic texts were also open to women's engagement and learning, and this contributed significantly to their education and intellectual growth [17].

*Sultanate Period (1206 AD- 1526 AD):* Despite having a respected role within the family and taking part in religious rites, the status of Hindu women in society has declined. In the community, Muslim women too lacked respect. Polygamy was a real system in place. Muslim ladies adhered rigorously to the Purdah regime. They were strictly denied access to schooling as well. Only women from royal and noble families could get education such as Raziya Sultan, Mihr Aigez Begum, Islam Khatun, and others. Women from lower strata of the society had no ingress to any kind of education and literature. Muslim women in mediaeval India had no reason to fear comparison with modern Muslim women in other parts of the world, even though they did not reach the same level of liberty education as Muslim women in Baghdad. In both Hindu and Muslim societies, there was a widespread belief that women should have received their education at home from their older and knowledgeable relatives. Puran Mal's wife Ratnawali was gifted poetically. One of the greatest exemplars of Hinduism, Mira Bai, also penned Garkha Geet, Giet Govind's tika (or contemporary), Raj Govind, Mira ka Pad, and Narayan Mehua.

## Women Education during Mughal Period (1526 AD- 1707AD)

In Sultanate period, women were considered unworthy of education and literature. The Mughal era though improved a bit, but depicted similar nature of educational progress. Throughout the Mughal era, women's status was tiered. Only women belonging to the privileged class were allowed to pursue education. Women and girls from middle-class and lower-class families did not get much schooling. Only a small number of them attended the private schools that some older women ran. At times, the girl's father served as both her teacher and mentor [19,20]. With the exception of a handful who were gathered and occasionally instructed by the Mullas of the mosque or by pundits in Pathshala, girls from impoverished families were nearly completely left unread. The majority of the study subjects were home sciences, including cooking, needlework, and other household tasks.

During the Mughal Empire, a number of other reasons also hindered the proliferation of female education. Some of them were mentioned below;

*Purdah System:* The most significant of them all was seclusion, which included the Purdah system that kept women confined to their houses and restricted their freedom of movement. It made it impossible for the women to enroll in schools and pursue further education.

*Early Marriage:* Another reason that significantly impeded their education was the widespread marriage at an early age of girls from both Muslim and Hindu households. They had no choice but to stop their studies. In his Akbarnama, Abul Fazl makes reference to this custom of early marriage. According to what he wrote, Indians were ready to marry off their young children. The affluent members of the community were the ones who produced the kings and nobles in every walk of life. Thus, they did not entirely disregard their women's education. However, because they had to take care of their families and their children after being married, women had little time or chance to pursue their intellectual or literary interests.

*Social and Religious Taboo:* Women were not allowed to attend school in any of the villages throughout the Middle Ages because of social taboos and religious prohibitions. Yet, women continued to get some form of private education, particularly from monarchs, nobles, and wealthy individuals.

However, despite these challenges and resistances many women specially from elite and noble class excelled in many different fields of study such as, Language, Literature, Music, Archery, Swordplay etc. and become an epitome for females of middle and lower classes. Some of them are enlisted below;

*Gulbadan Begum (1523-1603):* She was daughter of Mughal Emperor Babur. She enjoyed reading and writing poetry, and she received her training in these areas from her stepmother, Maham Begum. She was fluent in Persian and Turkish [3]. Akbar's ambition led to the compilation of Humayun Nama, which serves as proof of her achievement [21, 22]. She paid close attention to intellectual pursuits in addition to her intense interest in home matters. A wealth of knowledge regarding the educational pursuits of affluent Muslim women may be found in Humayun Nama. She also provided a summary of Humayun's struggles and the happenings at the time [23].

*Salima Sultana Begum (1539-1613):* Prior to Akbar, Salima Sultana was Bairam Khan's wife. She was Humayun's niece, the granddaughter of Babur, and the daughter of Mirza Noor-Ud-din Muhammad. She had a great deal of influence in state politics, and Akbar frequently sought her counsel on a variety of political issues. She was an enthusiastic student of Persian literature and language [24]

*Nur Jahan (1577-1645):* In the Jahangir period, Noor Jahan was the most powerful woman. She was Jahangir's wife. She was the woman of letters and words. She was skilled at giving impromptu responses and had a passion for poetry. She received training in both swordplay and archery. She was regarded as the de facto ruler of Jahangir's era. Being a brave woman, Nur Jahan possessed the ability to comprehend political issues and actively engage in administrative affairs. Several nobility became envious of Nur Jahan's dominance. [24,25]

*Mumtaz Mahal (1593-1631):* Mumtaz Mahal was the daughter of Wazir of Emperor Jahangir, Asaf Khan. Poet by trade, she was considered one of the smart women of the day. Mumtaz Mahal used to exercise some political pressure in the early years of the Shahjahan reign. The Royal Seal was bestowed to her. Upon completion of the state documents, they were delivered to the imperial harem, where she had the honor of sealing them with the imperial seal. She was able to get insight into current events as a result, some of which she actively participated in. [24,26] *Jahan Ara (1614-1681):* Jahan Ara was the daughter of Shah Jahan, who made all educational arrangements for her. Historiologists claim that. She was among the most learnt woman throughout the Mughal era. Jahanara enjoyed biographies and history.

At age 26, she authored her well-known Persian novel *Moonas ul Arwah*, which is about the life of Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti Ajmiri [27]. Jahan Ara was a proficient calligrapher as well. Her calligraphic pieces may still be found in Muslim Aligarh University's Azad Library in India. She was trained by Sati al-Nisa Khanam. Jahan Ara supported the creation of Madarsa as well. She built the Agra Masjid, which had Madarsa adjacent to it. Additionally, stores were built to finance this Madarsa [28].

*Roshan Ara (1617-1671)*: Elder daughter of Shah Jahan was another sterling example of charity and piety was Roshan Ara. Her sister, Jahan Ara, was younger. Her position as Aurangzeb Alamgir's girls' teacher was later confirmed. That demonstrates her skill. She was also trained by Sati al-Nisa Khanam [29].

*Sati al-Nisa Khanam (1580-1647)*: She was wife of Naseer Ashair and the sister of Persian poet Talib Aamli. She instructed Jahan Ara in Persian language and literature, the Quran, and Qiraat. *Sati al-Nisa Khanam* was a member of a distinguished literary family from Iran. She tutored the two Shah Jahan daughters who were previously stated. She was a qualified educator. In addition, she had an intense curiosity in humanitarian work. She was Quran's Hafiz. In addition, she had knowledge about medications [30].

*Zeb-un Nisa (1638-1702)*: Zebun Nisa was Aurangzeb Alamgir's eldest daughter. Alamgir assigned her many tutors. It was Hafiz e Quran who picked up this trait of respect from Hafiza Maryam Zamani. Afterwards, Mulla Saeed Ashraf taught her Hadith and Fiqh. Legendary Aalim Mulla Ahmed Jeevan taught her the Quran and Fiqh. She was fluent in Arabic and Persian. She was also a skilled calligrapher. She was well-versed in both history and Mathematics. She was also a poet. *Deewan e Makhfi* is her collection of poems [29,30].

*Zeenat-un Nisa (1643-1721)*: Second daughter of Alamgir was named Zeenat-un Nisa. She learnt the Quran and Hadith really well. She was also a talented poet. [29]

In the Mughal times the women not only contributed by their literary work but also helped in promoting education by the foundation of colleges. Madrasa Khairul Manzil was founded in Delhi by Maham Begum, the spouse of Ameer Nadeem Koka [28]. She was also Akbar's wet nurse. Next to his Madrasa was built a Masjid. This opulent marble structure was built. The Madrasa known by the title Madrasa -e-Begum and Madrasa Maham was referenced by renowned historians Abdul Qadir Badayuni and Abul Fazal. Maham Begum provided qualified instructors for this establishment.

A college was also founded by Bega Begum (Hajji Begum), wife of Humayun, in close proximity to her husband's tomb, furthering her advocacy for education. Akbar provided separate chambers in the Fatehpur palace for the education of the ladies of the court [31].

Apart from Muslim women, there were a number of other intelligent women from the royal families and aristocratic classes, such as Durgavati, Chand Bibi, Madhavi, Chandravati (daughter of Mansa mangal poet Bansidas) etc. The Hindu women had a strong interest in gathering literature for their own libraries as well. Hindu widows placed a strong emphasis on promoting education.

It may be inferred that women's position was elevated and that women's education was not willfully disregarded in India during the Mughal era.

### Conclusions

During the Mughal Empire, women's education reflected the larger social and cultural structures of the day. Even while women from noble backgrounds had access to a rather wide education, social norms that prioritized domestic tasks continued to limit their knowledge. Due to the significant exclusion of women from lower social strata from formal education, the period's profound socioeconomic differences were brought to light. Islamic teachings were clearly influential, but their application to women's education was frequently constrained by local norms. Despite these obstacles, a number of women in the Mughal court made important contributions to the empire's literary and artistic legacy. This research highlights the intricate relationships that existed throughout the Mughal era between gender, class, and education, highlighting both the opportunities and constraints faced by the women.

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