

Mughal Harem Ladies and their Administrative Rights

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Abstract

The role of Mughal royal ladies in politics was remarkable which was neglected by some prominent historians. Our male-centric history is written by historians who gave prominence to the male Mughal rulers although the Mughal women contributed to the Mughal Empire. Women were actively participated in harem and court politics. They have many legal rights and decision making powers. Their ideologies impacted rulers greatly and many of them were the 'king makers' who ruled the Mughal world behind the curtains.

Objectives: Through this article, I want to discuss some issues like 1) Role of harem women in the history of Mughals. 2) What were the special rights enjoyed by Mughal royal ladies. 3) Their active role in Mughal politics.

Keyword: Harem women, Farman, Hukm, Nishan, Parwana.

Introduction

In the Mughal India, royal women are found enjoying many legal rights and exceptional powers. They had right to issue many official documents such as *farman*, *hukm*, *nishan*, *parwanas*. According to Ira Mukhoty, most of the women of the Mughal harem were, in fact, not wives at all; they were mothers, like Hamida Banu and Harkha Bai, unmarried sisters, like Jahanara and Roshanara, divorced women, like Khanzada, single daughters, like Zeb-un-Nisa and Zeenat-un-Nisa, aunts like Gulbadan, distant relatives, like Salima Sultan, elderly dependents, etc. They were not sexually available women at all. And yet they had a role to play, a duty to perform and they were respected, and paid, for these crucial jobs.¹ A few women like Maryam Zamani, Nur Jahan, Mamtaz Mahal, Nadira Banu enjoyed exceptional powers in Mughal era.

The Mughal women issued Imperial orders following the same procedure as the actual segments of the Persian *farmans*-(1) The beginning opens with the invocation-the invocation of God. (2) The Intitulatio- the name and title of promulgator. (3) The Aranga- the obligations of the ruler to his subjects and the religious granted by the appropriate Islamic official at any level of government. It was a royal mandate or decree commandments. (4) The Narratio, which explains the circumstances or the previous history of the document's

promulgation. (5) The Dispositio-the intention of the ruler behind for drafting the decree which is the actual legal mandate. (6) Then follow the regulation for the recipient, concluded with an *adhartatio*, whose content specify the responsibilities for all those called upon to execute the disposition. (7) The final segment of the document made by the eschatocal, the declaration of the date and sometimes the declaration of the place of the issue.² It has been noticed that the first two lines of the Mughal *farmans* were always concise and that the royal seal and the *tughra* with their almost exact location on its top (the seal being on the right side of the *tughra*) are its inevitable features. Further, the set phraseology and the arrangement of text, the various endorsements on the reverse with the seals of ministers as also certain signs and symbols should make a *farman* quite distinct from a *nishan* or a *hukm*. Because a *nishan* or *hukm* too have their first two lines in an abbreviated form.³ Also *hukm* stands for the edict of Queen mother, or Queen consort. It was crown with *tughra* or *unwan*. Though the connotation of the term was uncertain because Maham Begum's edict as *farman*,⁴ while Nur Jahan refers to her edicts as a *nishan*. On the other hand, *nishan* denotes an order of a prince or princess or wife of a prince and used *tughra* or *unwan* of the sovereign.⁵

Role of some specific women

Nur Jahan, Hamida Banu Begum, Mariyam-uz-Zamani, Jahanara issued all of the administrative *farman*, *hukm*, *nishan*, *parwana*, because they held the highest rank in Imperial *harem*.⁶ Most of the time, *unwans* were employed in the *hukms* of Queen mothers, while *tughra* figure in the *hukms* of the royal consort as also in the *nishans* of the princesses. *Dogmaa* statement or an interpretation declared as authoritative with the expectation that it should be followed without any question. This type of *farmans* usually declaring under the authority of NurJahan.⁷

The founder of the Mughal Empire Babur's *farmans* seems to have notable characteristics, which were totally differ from other Muslim rule in India. This change was also noticed in the orders of powerful Mughal women. Like the invocations in the *farman Huwal Ghani* used by Babur, Humayun and early period of Akbar, which was replaced by *Huwal Akbar* and *Allahu Akbar*. Maryam Zamani and Nur Jahan continued the last one. On the other hand, Dara Shukoh's consort Nadira Begum employed *Huwal Qadir* and *Bismillah ar rahman ar Rahim* as invocation, while Jahan Ara used *Allahu Akbar* and *Bismillah ar rahman ar Rahim*.⁸ Hamida Banu Begum's *unwan* was *Hukm-i-Hamida Banu Begum*, Maritam Zamani was *Hukm-i-Mariyam Zamani*. Similarly Nur Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal's *tughra* was *Hukm-i-uliyai aliya Mahdi uliya* with their respective names. Nadira Banu Begum's *unwan* was *Nishan-i-Nadira Bano Begum*. Next to Jahan Ara styled her *tughra* as *Nishan-i-uliyai aliya Mahdi uliya Jahan Ara bint i Hazrat Shah Jahan Badshsh Ghazi Sahib Qirani Sani*.⁹ Under the Mughals, all the documents were in Persian, because it was their official language, and mainly in *Shikasta* script.¹⁰

Under the Mughals, the imperial seal was entrusted to the in charge of the queens. Father Monserrate said, during the reign of Akbar, Khvaja Jahan was the in charge of the *muhr-i-muqaddas-i-kalan* (the great royal seal), and the small signet ring (*uzuk*) was deployed to one of the Emperor's queen.¹¹ During the reign of Shah Jahan, the seal was entrusted to Queen Mumtaz Mahal. After the death of Mumtaz Mahal, the seal was given to Begum Saheb means Jahanara.¹² In some exceptional cases, the seal was maintained by reliable noble, like a favour to Mumtaz Mahal, the responsibility was given to her father who held the position of prime minister at that time.¹³ Abul Fazl observed that a separate seal was used in all the matters connected with the female apartments.¹⁴

The *hukm* and *nishans* issued by the Imperial ladies decorated with a beautiful seal, which had peculiar stamp and shape. It contains a legend which includes the name and titles of the owner along with the appellations of her father, husband or son along with the year of engraving the seal as evident. Haminda Banu Begum's shape of the seal was flower with the eight petals and the legend inscribed was Hamida Banu *bint-i-Ali Akbar*. Next Maryam Zamani styled her seal as pitcher and decorated the legend Wali Nimat Begum *walidah-i-Jahangir Badshsh*. Nur Jahan's seal had two style- one followed the legend *Ze mehr i shah i Jahangir shud chun mah furuzan nigin i muhri Nur Jahn Badshsh Begum i dauran*, second followed the legend *Allahu Akbar Ze nuri mehr i Jahangir Badshsh i Jahanban* (rose with six petals). Again Mumtaz Mahal and Nadira Banu Begum followed the round simple shape of the seal with a legend *Ze lutfi Haq Mumta Mahal dar alam ba zill i khuda Shah i Jahan shud hamdam*, Nadira Banu Begum *hamdam i shahi baland iqbal*. Jahan Ara inscribed the legend *Uliya i aliya Jahan Ara bint i Shah Jahan*. But on the other hand, a type of order like stipulated salary of the begams did not received royal seal.¹⁵

Another type of Mughal document highlighted concerning women for granting them land grants and legal rights. According to *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Jahangir ordered and appointed Haji Koka (superintendent of the *harem* as *Sadr-anas*)¹⁶ to bring such needy women as were worthy to be presented with land and money.¹⁷ In 15th July, 1611, a *farman* issued that Musammat Alam Khatun was granted 65 *bigha* of land (Jagadishpur in *suba* Bihar) as *madad-i-ma 'ash*. Even widows were given land as seen in the *farman* of Jahangir (dated 21st July, 1621), said Musammat Daulat Bakht (widow of Sheikh Haji), nimat (widow of Hasan Jao), Alam Khatun (widow of Ibrahim) had collectively given 150 *bigha* of land. Also Emperor ordered not to disturb the grant in any way.¹⁸

Sometimes the grant was passed to over to the heirs after his/her death under the ruler's order. Like a *nishan* of Prince Khurram (dated 23rd June 1624) addressed to the officials states that Shaikh Abdus Samad and Shaikh Muhammad were granted 400 *bigha* of land in Rampur and *suba* Bihar as *madad-i-ma 'ash*. After the death of Shaikh Abdus Samad, an order was issued that the said grant should be renewed and given the share of the deceased to Musammat Bibi Sharifa and Bibi Fatima, heirs of Abdus Samad. The grant being rent free and the grantees should not be asked to pay the land revenue or any other tax.¹⁹ Also few of

them refers to the chaste image of the women which reflected from the following: *Sanad i Sadaratul ulliyatul aliya* addressed to the agents of *karoris*, and *jagirdars* of *pargana* Batala, *suba* Lahore informs them that the wife of Shaikh Qutb, a chaste and pious lady has been granted 60 *bigha* of land by virtue of the *farman* as *madad-i-ma 'ash*.²⁰

This *farman* or *hukm* or *nishan* performed several functions (1) Disseminate the messages from the authority to his subjects and he/she controlled the broader empire without his presence. (2) expressed his/her own authority, privilege and their knowledge also. (3) Highlighted diplomatic features and the historical values of the edicts. Like Akbar introduced many types of Hindu customs into the court assemblies. Some Mughal women during that time interfered with it. Akbar's mother Hamida Banu granted permission to Vithal, a Brahmin of the *pargana* of Mahavan in *sarkar* of Agra, to graze his cow freely. Though it was a *hukm*, it has been written in *farman* style.²¹ Another *hukm* of Maryam Zamani, she instituted an enquiry for the misappropriation of the revenues and usurpation of the *jagir* of Mudabbir Beg in the *pargana* of Chaupala in the *sarkar* of Sambhal by Suraj Mal *zamindar* and instructed the officer-in-charge to summon the *riayat*. After investigating into the matter he should ensure that all the arrears were paid to Mudabbir Beg and also ensure that not a single *fulus* or *jital* was appropriated by Suraj Mal.²² Thus she expressed her influence and authority over the Mughal Empire.

Mutamad Khan described about Nur Jahan's *farman*, which visualized her administrative experience, concern towards the welfare of *ri 'aya*, enlarging trading activities etc. She also struck coins in her name.²³ There had a record²⁴ which highlighted *nishans* of Nurjahan to Raja Jai Singh-

- (1) *Nishan* issued in August, 1622 desiring Raja Jai Singh to send money of the lease of Amer per Mohd. Hashim.
- (2) *Nishan* issued in November, 1664 expressing pleasure on his (Raja's) disassociation with Muhabat Khan, desires him now to act according to the wishes of Khan-i-Jahan.
- (3) *Nishan* issued in November, 1625 desiring Raja to act according to the orders conveyed to him through Fidai Khan.
- (4) *Nishan* issued in December, 1625 sending a *Khilat* per Khwaja Roz Bihan.
- (5) *Nishan* issued in October, 1626 desiring the Raja to report everything to the royal court and not to act against the royal orders.

Conclusion

Also found as many as eight *hukm* and many administrative *farman* in her name. In her short live, Mumtaz Mahal issued one *hukms*, addressed to the *mutasaddis* of *pargana* Erandol, *sarkar* Khandesh and appointed Kanoji as *deshmukh* of the said *pargana* in place of Suryaji. who had taken over that office but as he died, a new *deshmukh* was instructed to adhere to the prescribed regulations of his Majesty to treat the *ri 'aya* and residents of the place in such a way that they may feel satisfied and grateful to him.²⁵ A list of *nishan* of Begam Sahiba

(Jahanara Begam) issued in July, 1640, September, 1651 to Raja Jai Singh assuring him (Raja's) of many royal favours.²⁶ This was one of the ways that the harem ladies carried their weight. Even their attendances were influential, that many persons succeeded in approaching the Emperor through them.

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