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### (B) Description of Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Women's Studies
Paper Name	Women and History
Module Name/ Title, description	<b>Creation of The Mughal Harem</b> , Mughal Harem, Composition, Administration, & Security, Physical Structure, Court Politics, Economic Activities, Charity Work, Cultural Life, Conclusion.
Module ID	Paper-3, Module-10
Pre-requisites	The reader is expected to have knowledge of Mughal History, women in Medieval India.
Objectives	To acquaint the reader with the complications of women's role in the Mughal domestic and political structure. The article explains various facets of women's activities and their importance in the Mughal household depending on their political affiliations and position within the Empire. It has been attempted to show the structure of the Harem as a domestic as well as political establishment. Women here enjoyed greater political, economic and cultural freedom than hitherto understood.
Keywords	Women, Harem, Mughal, Emperor, Mother, wife.

## Mughal Harem

The Mughal Empire was established in India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was one of the biggest, most organized and centralized Empires of its time. It was a huge establishment which embodied several institutions within it. Similar to Mansabdari and Jagirdari the *Harem* was also one of the most important institutions. In fact, it was the most secure place in the Mughal establishment. The term *Harem* or *Haram* is derived from Arabic *Harem* which means sacred or forbidden. In Turkish the same is called as *Seraglio* and in Persian the word *Zenana* is used. In Mughal sources a *Harem* is also referred to as *Harem sarah*, *Haremghah*, *Zenana* and *Raniwas*. The Rajputs called it as *Zenana dyodhi* [Nath]. Abu-l Fazl uses *Sabistan-i-Iqbal* which was the official terminology for *Harem* [Lal,180]. The main inhabitants here were the women members of the Emperor's family. It included his various wives, mothers, step mothers, foster mothers, sisters, daughters and cousins. Several second line of relatives also resided here. The Mughals were known to provide shelter to needy relatives. Thus, royal and noble women from different countries sought refuge with the Mughals. They too were provided quarters here. In addition young princes were also lodged in the *Harem* quarters until they attained maturity. They were under the supervision of their mothers and grandmothers. No outside men were allowed inside.

The composition of *Harem* has been a subject of some debate amongst the scholars. The contemporary sources refer to a large number of women within the Mughal *Harem*. The main source of information for us is the accounts of European travelers who were much engrossed by fantasy and rumours. Their account of the *Harem* thus contains exaggerations. This is also because these foreign travelers had no access to the *Harem* establishment. Some sporadic information is available in the biographies of Jahangir and Babur. The only source to contain detailed information about the *Harem* is Gulbadan Begum's Humayun Namah. However the text only covers Babur, Humayun and early part of Akbar's reign. Nonetheless scholars like Ruby Lal and Karuna Sharma have used this text to the maximum advantage so far as the Mughal women studies goes.

## Composition

The composition of the Mughal *Harem* was heterogeneous with women from various nationalities and ethnicities residing there. Besides the respected members of the family, it also had concubines, dancing girls, singing girls, servants, slave girls, women officials and guards [ Mukherjee, 16]. The Eunuchs who were guards also had access to the *Harem* as did the women fortune tellers. They were the main past time of the royal ladies.

As already mentioned the *Harem* was a specially guarded and secure place. An array of officers and guards were appointed to look after its security. Only women were allowed inside the *Harem* premises. There were three circles of security. The innermost circle consisted of female guards. Mostly *Habshis*, *urdbegis* and *tartar* women were employed in this capacity. They were considered as good soldiers. They used Bows-Arrows and short daggers. They were further divided into groups guarding different sections of the *Harem*. A particular group was responsible for the security of the Emperor's chambers. The second layer consisted of trustworthy Eunuchs. They were called as *Khwaja sarah*. The head of this group was given a title *Aitmad or Aitbar Khan*. The third layer consisted of Rajput soldiers in the employment of high nobles. They were posted at a considerable distance from the *Harem*. On the four directions of the *Harem* important nobles and *ahadis* were kept ready to assist the security at *Harem* [Mukherjee, 38-39].

The size of the *Harem* was modest during the reigns of Babur and Humayun. The peripatetic nature of the kingdom in those days limited the size of the *Harem*. Similar to all other Mughal institutions, Akbar's accession to throne also led to major changes in the structure of the *Harem* as well. The settled nature of Mughal kingdom and the expansion of its geographical boundaries contributed as well. Habitation within the *Harem*, its security and rituals became an elaborate affair. According to Abul Fazl there were 5000 women in Akbar's *Harem*. Not all of them were his wives. Jehangir, on the other hand, had 300 wives and around 1000 women resided in his *Harem* [Mukherjee, 15].

The social structure of the *Harem* was hierarchical in nature. The important members of the *Harem* were the mothers and the wives of the Emperor. The

Emperor himself resided inside the *Harem* from time to time. Every inmate tried to gain his attention. Pleasing the Emperor was the gateway to power and prestige within the *Harem*. Generally, his mother was the first lady of the Empire [Mukherjee,18; Sharma, 7]. She was also consulted by the Emperor on important issues including forming political policies. Nur Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal were the exceptions. The Mughal Emperors respected their mothers greatly. Babur as well as Akbar waited upon their mothers especially when they came home after travelling for long distance. It was she who first visited the emperor after his coronation. This was also the case on occasions of celebrations like festivals and birthdays.

In addition, foster mothers and wet nurses were given a similar position as the Emperor's mother. This was in keeping with the central Asian tradition where foster mothers were considered as equal to a mother. It is said that Akbar was closer to *Maham Anaga*, one of the four women who breast fed infant Akbar, than his own mother. For a short while Maham Anaga also acted in the capacity of Akbar's chief advisor after Bairam Khan's exit from Mughal politics.

Next in importance were the chief or principal wives of the Emperor. The Emperor had several wives from different ethnic and religious background. In order to strengthen their political position the Mughals entered into several strategic matrimonial alliances with different polities. The importance of a particular wife depended upon the relative importance of her natal kingdom in the Mughal political structure. In addition, the proximity to the Emperor and a share in his affection also decided the status of the wife in question. Nur Jahan and Mumtaz *mahal* were two such queens who were highly influential not only within the *Harem* but in the politics as well. The princesses from the defeated clans and smaller kingdoms generally formed the section of lesser wives and accorded lesser position compared to the chief queens. They are referred to as *Mahals and Bais* [Mukherjee,19]. Nonetheless there was scope for them to rise above in the hierarchy of the *Harem* especially if they gave birth to a male child.

Next to the wives were the concubines known as *Kaniz, Sarkar and Paristar*. Though officially they were inferior to the other inmates of the *Harem*, they enjoyed many privileges by the virtue of the affection they were able to earn from the Emperor. Some of Babur's concubines became recognized ladies of his *Harem*

while one of Humayun's concubines occupied the position of Akbar's wet nurse. Several of them gave birth to royal children like Bibi Salima and Bibi Daulat shad who gave birth to Akbar's daughters while princes Murad and Daniyal were both born of his concubines. Similarly, Shahryar and Jahandar, two of Jehangir's sons were born to concubines. Shahjahan was served in his last days by his two favourite concubines, Akbarabadi *Mahal* and Fatehpuri *Mahal*. Aurangzeb was very fond of one udaipuri *mahal*. Thus, it can be said that though the political status of the natal kingdoms played an important part in determining the status of women in the hierarchy of the *Harem* there were other ways through which lesser women could gain Emperor's affection and thus augment their own position.

These were the main inhabitants of the *Harem*. Other than these categories there were dancing and singing girls. These women were meant to entertain the inmates. Several Begums had personal dancing and singing girls who were given as gifts [Mukherjee,25]. Possessing them was a status symbol.

### ***Harem Administration and Security***

Besides the royal inmates and the security personnel a large number of administrative staff also lived or moved about within the *Harem* complex. The Emperors ensured that the *Harems* were administered efficiently and the necessities of the inmates were taken care off. The staff too consisted of only women. They were divided into three categories; high, middle and lower strata. Internal administration was under the charge of women official called as *Daroga*. She was directly appointed by the Emperor. Such women were well qualified, intelligent, capable and belonged invariably to high noble families. The importance of this post can be gauged by the fact that Nur Jahan's mother Asmat Banu Begum occupied this post for some time. Even Jahangir praised her efficiency. The prime duty of this official was to keep the *Harem* in order. She had several officers under her charge known as *Mahaldars*. They acted as supervisors, but their main duty was to keep an eye on the inmates. They reported directly to the Emperor. They were also the link between the Emperor and the various report writers like *Waqia-nawis* (public news writer) and *khufiya nawis* (secret news writer). The *Mahaldars* also directed the above writers according to the wishes of the Emperor. There were separate supervisors for the dancing and singing girls. More mundane staff like *Tahawildars* and *Ashrafs* also existed. *Tahwildars* were in charge of the *Harem*

accounts. All inhabitants including the royal women had to apply to them for money and other necessities which were met with in accordance with their salaries and maintenance. *Ashrafs* were the store keepers [Mukherjee,38-39; Sharma, 7].

### **Physical structure of the *Harem***

The Mughal women lived amidst great beauty and luxury. The *Harem* was a fort complex divided into quarters called as *Mahals* or *shabistan-i-Iqbal* and *Shabistan-i-Khas*. It is evident from the remains of these buildings that not all inmates were provided with a *Mahal*. The position an inmate had in the social hierarchy must have decided her residential status too. Generally a *Mahal* consisted of space for a royal lady's retinue like servants, slaves, singing and dancing girls. The servants and slaves too lived within the precincts of the *Harem*. The place where they lived was called as *chowk*. The concubines similarly lived in separate quarters known by the week days when the Emperor visited them like *Ayitvar* and *Shanivar* (Sunday and Saturday) [Mukherjee,28-29].

The *Harem* buildings were grand like other Mughal buildings. Some were made of marble with gold engravings and gem studded. Persian carpets covered the floor and beautiful decoration of mirrors, chandeliers and lamps adorned the living quarters. Gardens and water falls were the hall mark of the Mughal *Harem* complex.

### ***Harem* and Court politics**

Contrary to the popular image of *purdah* clad secluded women, Mughal women participated in court politics at a high level. Mothers and sisters played a decisive role in determining the political status of their sons and brothers especially during the wars of succession. This trait was more visible during the earlier phase i.e., Babur and Humayun's reign where many negotiations were required in order to help the Mughal Empire to survive. It was the women then who played an important role. As the enemies happened to be within the clan and part of the family the role of women was enhanced. Their negotiations were generally effective.

Certain women like Maham Anaga and Nur Jahan were far more powerful than others. It was their capability and intelligence which allowed them to exploit a

particular political situation to their advantage. Early in Akbar's reign, in order to rid himself of Bairam Khan's powerful tutelage Akbar sought Maham Anaga's help. With the help of her clique consisting of her son and son-in-law she was able to remove Bairam Khan from the position of power and herself occupied that position for a short while. Similarly, Nur Jahan too became powerful with the aid of her family consisting of her father and brother. They were high nobles and held important posts in Jahangir's reign. They together formed what is referred to by some scholars as *Nur Jahan Junta*. She sought to extend her influence to the next generation by marrying her daughter Ladli Begum (an offspring from Nur Jahan's first marriage) to Shahryar, one of Jahangir's sons. Her position was compromised because of Shahjahan's marriage to Mumtaz Mahal, Nur Jahan's niece because of which her brother no more supported her pretensions to power. Nur Jahan was perhaps the most powerful women in the history of Mughal Empire. During Jahangir's reign she enjoyed paraphernalia equal to her husband. She took part in political decision making, struck and circulated coins in her own name and granted public audience [Sharma, 8-9]. The above were the privileges of kingship which the Mughals guarded closely. Through this we can gauge the amount of influence she had on Jahangir.

Another area where the royal women were effective was negotiating on behalf of rebels seeking Emperor's pardon. In 1582 Akbar's mother interceded on behalf of two erring officers who were then pardoned. Nur Jahan similarly obtained pardon for one erring Mansabdar. Jahanara was instrumental in the Court providing stipends and allowances to several individuals. Certain royal queens also enjoyed administrative powers. In case of Nur jahan, Mumtaz Mahal and Jahanara, they had the privilege of issuing royal orders like *Hukms* and *Parwanas*. Several documents bearing their seals have been found. These orders were next only to *Farmans* issued by the Emperor. In addition, the royal seals were kept in the custody of the chief queen. This made the queen a very powerful person in the Empire. Many senior women like Akbar's mother and Jahangir's mother heard petitioners and brought their grievances to the Emperor's notice [Sharma,9-10].

### ***Harem and Economic activities***

The women of Mughal *Harem* had varied interests. It seems that they were high level merchants too. Several of them dabbled with mercantile activities, both

international and domestic. Jehangir's mother owned a large fleet of ships plying enroute to Mecca. Jeddah was a port which functioned as an exchange market between Africa, Arabia and Europe. The largest of this fleet named *Rahimi*. It plied between West Asia and Persian Gulf. Nur Jahan too was a clever businesswoman. She was a patron for European East India Companies. She simultaneously invested in the merchandise of Portuguese and English. She regularly paid cartazes to Portuguese. Her friendship with the English is well known. In 1627 she granted an order exempting the English Company from paying transit duties. The English Ambassador, Thomas Roe, refers to her as his solicitor and is full of admiration for her. Jahanara was another royal lady who invested heavily in overseas trade. She had ships named *Sahebi* and *Ganjwar* through which she traded with the ports of West Asia and Persian Gulf [Sharma, 10-12].

In addition engagements in domestic trade and the Jagirs granted to these women contributed towards their income. Generally all royal and dependant women in the *Harem* were given maintenance. Certain influential and important women were granted Jagirs for maintenance as well as gifts. Nur Jahan was bestowed large Jagirs like Toda near Ajmer, Bharuch and Surat in Gujarat. Jahanara too had big Jagirs which yielded good income. According to Manucci Jahanara received three million rupees annually from her Jagirs. They employed Nazirs or Gumasthas to look after the affairs of their Jagir. Other than the Jagirs they also received annual maintenance and presents worth lakhs of rupees. In 1628 Shahjahan granted 16 lakh rupees and 2 lakh ashrafis to Mumtaz *mahal*. Jahanara received 10 lakh rupees and one lakh ashrafis as annual allowance. This was over and above the cash gifts they received on festivals and celebrations [Sharma, 12-13; Mukherjee, 30-31].

### **Charity works**

The income obtained from various sources was not wasted by these women. Infact, it was put to use for noble causes like building public utility constructions and patronizing artisans. Mughal royal women involved themselves in philanthropic activities. Many Mosques and *Idgahs* were built at their direction. Humayun's tomb was built by his first wife Bega Begum. She also commissioned construction of a *Serai*. Maham Anaga built a *Masjid-cum-Madrassa, Khair-ul-Majlis* in Agra in 1561. Gardens too were laid down at their instructions. Nur jahan supervised the

construction of three tombs; that of her father Itmad-ud-Daula at Agra, that of Jahangir at Shahdara and her own tomb at Lahore. She also got several gardens laid in Lahore and Agra. Jahanara is credited with the construction of two mosques in Kashmir and Agra. She also built many *serais* and markets. Bridges were built and wells were dug at the behest of the Mughal women. Roshan Ara Begum, Shahjahan's other daughter, Zeb-un-Nisa and Zinat-un-Nisa, Aurangzeb's daughters contributed in similar ways [Sharma,13-14; Anurag,1-3;Iftikhar,7]. Nur Jahan was exceptionally generous. She is credited with several charitable works. She regularly financed marriages of young women and supported orphans.

Many *Karkhanas* were also patronized by these women. Here, the artisans produced different kinds of textiles, carpets, perfumes, Jewellery and other articles of luxury meant for royal consumption. Many such enterprises were supported by particular women. For instance, Nur jahan supervised production and designing of royal textiles according to her taste. She is also credited with the invention of rose *ittar* or perfume.

### **Cultural Life**

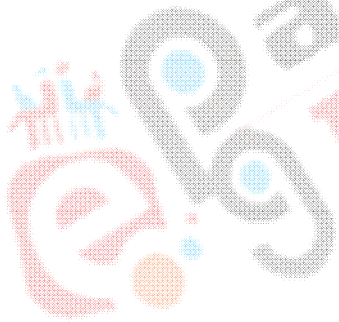
Contrary to popular belief the Mughal women did not lead a secluded life. Although *Purdah* (veil) was prevalent it did not prevent the women from participating in the activities of the outside world. These women contributed significantly towards practicing as well as patronizing literary and artistic activities. The *Harem* was a lively place which witnessed regular celebrations. Festivals like *Id-ul-Fitr*, *Shabb-i-barat*, *Dussehra*, *Diwali*, *Holi*, *Raksha Bandhan*, *Nauroz*, etc were celebrated with pomp. Victories, coronations and important days were also celebrated in similar manner. Fairs and bazaars were also held within the harem premises.

The Mughal women received religious and non-religious education. Several of them made important literary contributions. Gulbadan Begum wrote *Humayun Namah*, a first-hand account of Mughal *Harem* up to Akbar's time. His mother Hamida Banu Begam wrote some books and collected manuscripts. Jahanara who had Sufi inclinations wrote several *Risalas* (religious Pamphlets explaining tenets of a particular order) on mysticism and spirituality. Her *Risala-i-sahibiya* was well known. *Munis-ul-Arwah*, a biography of Muin-ud-din Chishti was popular in

contemporary times. Following her Zeb-un-Nisa also accepted Sufi way of life. She too wrote several *Risalas* with the pen name Makhfi [Mukherjee, 43].

## **Conclusion**

The Mughal *Harem* has been a subject of much debate amongst scholars. Some have painted it as a place where the Emperor could gratify his sexual pleasure. Some others saw it as a beautiful prison where women were imprisoned for ever. However, recent research has shown that women of Mughal harem were not ignorant of the outside world. They had easy access and connection with people outside. Not only that these women also participated enthusiastically in the political, economic and cultural activities of their times. At times they were decisive and influential in such roles. Exceptionally capable women like Maham Anaga, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal and Jahan Ara could become de facto rulers or at least influence the Emperors on important matters. Thus, the Mughal Harem was far more complex and dynamic than what was understood earlier.



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