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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	Role of women in medieval politics of delhi sultanate, mughals and deccan.
Module ID	Module-7.
Pre-requisites	The reader is expected to have some knowledge about Medieval Indian politics, Women in medieval India.
Objectives	To explain the importance and space of women in medieval politics. Also to explain the change that came in Indian politics with the advent of Islam. To clear the misconception that medieval India did not allow women to participate in political activity because of Purdah. The women did participate in political activity despite purdah.
Keywords	Political participation, Purdah, Islam, Mughal, Deccan, Sultanate, warrior women.

Role of Women in Medieval politics – Delhi Sultanate, Mughals and the Deccan

India is a male dominated society. Religion, social norms, legal structures, cultural values and mores of the region have, through historical times, encouraged and fostered patriarchy in numerous ways. However, Patriarchy has never been a

monolithic or a static institution. It is one of the most dynamic systems across the world, flexible yet persistent. It however does not alter its basic principle of accepted supremacy of men over women. The dynamism of patriarchy also stems from the fact that women are as much central to its preservation as men. The ideology of patriarchy stemming from religious and social acceptance makes women a willing party in subverting the role of women members within a society.

The consciousness regarding the gender imbalance and subversion of women at large has been a recent one, a product of the modern period. In earlier times male superiority and their domination in all aspects of collective and family life was almost uncontested. In this respect the medieval period was no different. Politics or the authority to rule was considered an exclusively male domain. Men in pre-modern India considered it below their dignity to be ruled by women. Indian society contested this prejudice on rare occasions. Women were not completely ousted from political participation. Intelligent and accomplished women tried to influence political decision making from '**behind the veil**'. The medieval period in India was different from earlier times. The introduction of Islam changed the political structure of India in significant ways. It is difficult to state here as to in what way Islam changed women's political participation in Indian society, but one can certainly see an opening up in this respect. There is of course a contradiction here. On the one hand Islam imposed the veiling of women while on the other it allowed for women's participation in political activity seen in the case of Raziya Sultan and Nur Jahan, Maham Anaga, etc. we do not see such open participation or women wielding political influence prior to the introduction of Islam in India.

Delhi Sultanate

The Mamluk dynasty under what is known as the Delhi Sultanate was different from the previous ruling powers of India in several respects. It was the first kingdom to be established in India on Islamic principles, though not *Sharia* driven. It was also a dynasty ruled by freed slave warriors of previous rulers. Thus the

ideas of hierarchy on which Indian polities stood so far were shaken to some extent. More importantly, it was also the only dynasty to have raised a woman ruler to the throne, in a male dominated political atmosphere. The appointment of Raziya as Iltutmush's heir and then as ruler was fiercely contested and her reign was cut short as much due to factional politics as due to the fact that she was a woman. Let us now take a detailed look at the case of Raziya Sultan as the first woman king of Delhi.

Raziya Sultan

The foundation of the Mamluk dynasty was laid by Qutb-ud-Aibak but strengthened by Iltutmush. He ruled from 1210-1230. Iltutmush had three sons and one daughter. The eldest son was Nasir-ud-din Mahmud who Iltutmush had nominated as his heir but who died suddenly while he was governing Bengal. His other sons were incapable of shouldering the responsibility of ruling the kingdom and Iltutmush knew this. He thus began considering his daughter Raziya for the role of a king. She was naturally capable and well educated. To test her abilities Iltutmush gave her the charge of administering Delhi when he went on his Gwalior campaign. Raziya discharged her duties efficiently and received laurels from her father. Immediately, Iltutmush declared her his heir and coins with the names of Iltutmush and Raziya were struck to commemorate this event (**Habib & Nizami, 230-231**). However, despite the public proclamation of her succession by the king himself, her accession to the throne was not easy. Immediately after Iltutmush's death, one of his sons Ruknuddin Firuz was raised to the throne by the powerful section of the provincial officers. There is some controversy regarding the late king's last wish with regard to the succession issue. Barani, believes that Ruknuddin and not Raziya was made the heir by Iltutmush on his death bed which was duly followed by his officers most of who were slaves brought and raised by Iltutmush himself (**Habib & Nizami, 232**). However, while reading Barani we must not forget the biases inherent in his account and his dislike for women in politics in general and Raziya as a ruler in particular.

Ruknuddin succeeded his father with the help of the *amirs* and his mother. However, he was reckless and his mother too domineering for him to succeed on the throne. His ill treatment of his other brother along with that of some *amirs* led to the rise of rebellions across the kingdom. This was the time when Raziya who

enjoyed the support of army and the amirs of Delhi dethroned her brother and declared herself the ruler of Delhi. Ruknud din was put to death barely 7 months after his father's death (**Habib & Nizami, 236,**). According to Mohammad Habib and Khaliq Nizami there were some striking features to Raziya's accession:

1. People took initiative in deciding the ruler. Raziya had complete support of people of Delhi.
2. Her accession was a kind of a contract between the ruler and the people. If she didn't protect or perform they had a right to remove her.
3. The theologians of the time were proved useless and powerless since Raziya was raised to the throne despite their stated opposition to her (**Habib & Nizami, 237**).

Raziya's rule was marked by opposition from every corner. Though she enjoyed the support of the residents of Delhi, the main opposition came from the group of slave officers raised by her father known as *Turkan-i-Chihalgani*. This group was headed by Balban, an important and capable noble who later became the ruler of Delhi. Both Barni and Minhaj-us-Siraj refer to the *Chihalgani* nobles. According to Barni they were forty in number but he gives detailed reference of only 25 members and Balban figures predominantly in his account (**Habib & Nizami, 232**). Minhaj on the other hand refers to nobles far exceeding the said forty (**Habib & Nizami, 234**). The *Chihalgani* nobles were mostly posted in the provinces as **Iqtadars** and aspired for greater power in the post-Iltutmush period. However, under the strong rule of Raziya they had no scope to further their own power. In addition, Raziya began to assert herself as soon as she rose to power. On the one hand she abandoned the traditional *Purdah*, seclusion of women from the public eye. *Purdah*, by its very nature hampered her day to day activities like meeting people and administering her kingdom. Instead she began to wear a **qaba** (cloak) and **kulla** (hat) similar to the male kings of the Sultanate. This was the visible proclamation of Raziya's power which broke no opposition. On the other hand she began raising her own nobility by taking away power and responsibilities from the earlier *Chihalgani* nobles. This act was seen as a threat by the slave nobles and they started hatching conspiracies against her. Several provincial governors formed groups to overthrow her. She could efficiently curb these rebellions and undertook administrative reorganization. However, she failed to offer a share in power and resources to her father's nobles which ultimately led to her downfall. Despite

several alliances with some of these nobles, especially her marriage with the governor Altunia, Raziya was defeated. Both were killed in 1240 marking the end of the glorious career of the only woman king of Delhi Sultanate.

According to Minaj *She was endowed with all the admirable attributes and qualifications necessary for Kings. But her sex was her greatest disqualification.*

However, modern scholars do not agree with this assessment. According to Mohammad Habib and Khaliq Nizami, Raziya's failure lay in the fact that she failed to forge an alliance with the **Chihalgani** who were the most powerful segment of the nobility. Satish Chandra too blames the **Chihalgani** and not her gender for her failure (**Chandra, 50**). The **Chihalgani** was responsible for the turmoil even in post Raziya times which came to an end under the iron hand of Balban. So far as Raziya is concerned her reign was marked by sound political judgement, grit and courage. She dealt with many rebellions and made necessary alliances but mostly to break the **Chahilgani** nobles and not to share power with them. One of her achievements was that she refused to get drawn into the Mongol conflict which saved her kingdom from loot. She knew her limitations.

The Mughals

The Mughals established the biggest empire of medieval India and their legitimacy was unparalleled in Indian history. Babur laid the foundations of the Empire in 1525-26 by conquering Delhi. The Mughals set long lasting precedents and institutions on Indian soil. Babur's grandson Akbar under whom the Empire grew geographically as well as culturally was the architect of this Empire. Since his regime several changes took place, some good some not so good. The role Women played in the politics of Mughal Empire was also unique in many ways. With regard to this issue we can divide the Mughal era into parts, pre-Akbar and Akbar onwards. Under Akbar the Empire acquired institutional grandeur and certain rigidity in its attitudes. There were several reasons for this which will be discussed later. Prior to Akbar however, the political situation was much more fluid and therefore open, given the fact that both Babur and Humayun spent much of their time wandering (unsettled life) from place to place and in almost continuous warfare for political and personal survival. This fluidity allowed the women of their times to play important and direct political roles, i.e., of mediating and administering, etc.

Babur's Period

During Babur's times women, especially elder women i.e., mothers, foster mothers and sisters played an important role in politics. In addition to offering advice on important political matters they were also the chief mediators for the king. This was a period when after being ousted from his ancestral kingdom of Farghana Babur's efforts to regain it was defeated time and again by his own kinsmen. His position was in a flux. Incessant warfare with claims and counter claims to sovereignty were the order of the day. While military prowess and resources were very much required during this time, negotiations also played a key part in many situations. All claimants to various kingdoms in Central Asia belonged to the shared genealogy of Chingizi-Timurid lineage (timurid, uzbek, etc). There were also close family ties through marriages between these rival claimants. It was this situation which allowed women to interfere in political matters. Sometimes only women could undertake negotiations and not men.

Gulbadan Begum mentions several such women who Babur considered important for his political survival.

Isan Dawlat Begum: Babur's grandmother was known for her *strategy and tactics*. She was in charge of administration and political affairs immediately after Babur's father's death. Babur was around 11 years old then. She spent all her energies in saving Babur's kingdom including dealing with conspiracies against him (Lal, 135; Mukherjee, 115-116). She even decided the officers for every post and any shuffling was done with her orders. She related stories of Chengiz Khan and Timur to Babur to boost his morale and as lessons in war strategies. Regarding her Babur says in his memoirs *few among women will have been my grandmother's equal for judgement and counsel; she was very wise and farsighted and most affairs of mine were carried through under her advice* (Mukherjee, 116).

His mother **Qutluq Nigar Khanum** too supported him in the same way. She was known for her courage, patience and endurance and had a personal army of around 1500 soldiers (Mukherjee, 116). She accompanied Babur to all wars and expeditions. Babur speaks of her bearing great hardships for his sake while he was a wandering king. She died in 1505 without seeing her son a successful king.

Maham Begum: She was Babur's favourite wife and became influential during Babur and Humayun's times. She belonged to the Shia sect and helped Babur in cementing political ties with Iran. She also travelled with Babur to Balkh and Badakshan and shared his difficulties (**Mukherjee, 118**). She was given the title *Padshah Begum* by Babur.

Khanzadeh Begum, eldest sister of Babur saved him in 1501 by marrying his more powerful rival Shiabani Khan when Babur could not defend himself. Babur was besieged in Samarkand without any help and could only save himself after agreeing to let Shiabani Khan have his sister in return for his own life (**Mukherjee, 117**). This act of Khanzadeh Begum in Mughal sources was considered as a sacrifice and when she returned to her brother 10 years later in 1511 she was not only received well but also accorded a special position in the Mughal domestic world (**Lal, 224**). Under Humayun she was given a coveted title *Padshah Begum* and was the chief lady of the Harem. She continued to provide political advice to the Emperor and acted as a peace maker and negotiator. One of the important episodes of her intervention was when Mirza Hindal insisted on the *Khutba* being read in his name instead of Humayun's name. The *Khutba* in the medieval state was the symbol of sovereignty. A *Khutba* could be read only in the Emperor's name. Hindal's insistence was an act of rebellion. Humayun sent Khanzadeh Begum to negotiate with Hindal regarding the sovereignty of Humayun and explain to him the threat from Uzbeks and the need for Babur's sons to be united. She played an important part in settling the issue. On several other occasions also she attempted to establish peace and cordiality between Humayun and his warring brothers, Hindal, Kamran and Askari until she died in 1545 (**Mukherjee, 121**).

Hamideh Banu Begum: She was the favourite wife of Humayun who accepted the Emperor as her husband only after much insistence on his part (**Lal, 235**). It was she who Gulbadan Begum records as having said: *I shall marry someone, but he will be a man whose collar my hand can touch and not one whose skirt it did not reach*. She became the mother of Akbar therefore rose in status within the Harem. In addition, her political sagacity was such that she was given the charge of the Empire when Humayun was away (**Lal, 235-236**). She also played an important advisory role during Akbar's reign. She was given the title of *Maryam-Makani*. She was also the first lady of the Empire during her lifetime till 1604.

These were some of the women who played important roles during Babur and Humayun's reign helping the early Mughal Emperors survive and hold on to the Empire.

Akbar Onwards

In the earlier section we have seen as to how women played a significant political role in maintaining the kingship of their male counterparts. Since the accession of Akbar this tradition was broken in significant ways. There were several reasons for this break, but mainly three reasons stand out.

1. Akbar's kingdom became a settled domain with specific geographical limits as distinct from Babur's shifting and Humayun's wandering kingdoms.
2. It also came to acquire a definite Indian character shedding much of its central Asian features. Rajputization of the Harem is one major factor in this respect.
3. The family ties too were no more intertwined with the central Asian clans. Only those families that migrated with Babur and Humayun remained within the purview of Mughal domestic relations.

However, these developments did not diminish the importance accorded to the women members of the royal family. In fact, the Mughal Harem now came to be regarded more sacred than earlier and therefore more rigid. It came to be regarded as a matter of pride and a symbol of Mughal sovereignty and was thus lavishly designed and protected (**Lal, 140 onwards**). Such developments if not limited, at least changed the way women functioned politically in the Mughal set up. Women still continued to exert their influence on the Emperors but indirectly. Except perhaps for Nur Jahan no other Mughal woman is mentioned as directly influential in Mughal official sources. It is significant that the names of Emperors' mothers too have been omitted in these accounts. Nonetheless, we can glean the political influence of some accomplished women from behind the curtains as a result of some painstaking work by modern scholars.

Nur Jahan: Amongst all Mughal women Nur Jahan was the most remembered and powerful queen. She is believed to have had absolute control over her husband Jahangir who was all but a puppet Emperor. Research has shown this version to be an incorrect one. Jahangir was indeed a powerful Emperor and undertook his

kingly duties with precision and dedication similar to his predecessors. However, Nur Jahan was an exceptional woman and her political role went beyond the mundane duties of managing the Harem and advising the King. She was part of what Beni Prasad calls as *The Junta*. It was a clique consisting of four most powerful and close members of the court and royal family viz., Itmad-ud-daula, the prime minister of Jahangir and Nur Jahan's father, her brother Asaf Khan, Nur Jahan herself and Khurram (the future ShahJahan) Jahangir's most capable son. This particular combination made these four members highly influential and powerful in the court circles and except for Khurram the others were from the same family. It is held by Beni Prasad as well as Ellison Findlay that this clique made NurJahan very powerful in the Empire. However, the power of the Junta has been contested by Nurul Hasan who rejects the theory and holds that Jahangir was all powerful during his reign (**Hasan, 342-35**).

NurJahan was an exceptionally accomplished woman. She was well educated, generous and intelligent in finances. She invested in overseas trade through her ships and dealt with Europeans, Portuguese as well as the Dutch. The English too sought her protection and support to obtain trade permissions in Jahangir's court. 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 on her own (**Sharma, 8-9**). She also had the privilege of issuing *Parvanahs* and *Hukms* generally reserved for royal princes. Her ability as a soldier and a cunning politician is brought to our notice during the incident of Mahabat Khan's rebellion which took place towards the end of Jahangir's reign. Mahabat Khan, a trusted and loyal noble of Jahangir rebelled against him in 1626. He had a personal grudge against Nur Jahan and detested her interference in state matters. This incident happened while Jahangir was camping on the banks of Jhelum. Mahabat Khan imprisoned the Emperor to settle scores against an insult meted out to him by Nur Jahan. While confining the Emperor he sought to induce Jahangir to come out of Nur Jahan's influence and restore him to his former glory. Through an ill fought battle Nur Jahan surrendered herself to Mahabat Khan so that she could be in close proximity to the Emperor. After her surrender, on her suggestion, Jahangir behaved as if he was convinced of Mahabat Khan's opinion of Nur Jahan and made him believe that Mahabat Khan would hence forward look after the Empire's affairs. Having lulled him into confidence Nur Jahan began

buying Mahabat Khan's soldiers one by one and gave secret instructions to her servants to raise an army to counter Mahabat Khan. Once her army was ready she took complete control and Mahabar Khan could only retreat. Though he was not punished severely for this act of travesty of loyalty and obedience by the Emperor he could never again regain his position in Jahangir's court. This episode however highlights the capabilities of Nur Jahan as a leader, a shrewd politician who could strike at the opportune moment and as an organizer who single handedly tackled a major rebellion (**Findlay, 260-274**). There were several other women of the Mughal family who were similarly influential though not as much as Nur Jahan.

Maham Anagha: She was the chief wet nurse of Akbar and one of the most influential figures in Akbar's early life. The Mughals had a tradition of engaging wet nurses who took care of the infant prince and they were in complete charge of their upbringing. Thus, these women had great amount of affection and loyalty towards the princes. They safeguarded the princes given into their care at personal peril as in case of Maham Anagha. Akbar had four such nurses. Maham was the main nurse. After Akbar could free himself from the clutches of Bahram Khan she became Akbar's chief advisor and administrator. She was also given the charge of the Mughal Harem. Her fall from grace came when her son Adham Khan betrayed Akbar. He was killed by Akbar and Maham too passed away soon after.

Mariyam-us-Zamani was mother to Jahangir and the chief queen of Akbar. She was well known for her commercial enterprises and support to Hajj pilgrimages through her ships. She also built mosques and other public utility buildings.

Mumtaz Mahal: The chief queen of Shah Jahan, she was also politically active. She was given the title **Mallika-i-Zaman** and was in charge of the Harem. The royal seal bearing the Emperor's name, the insignia of the Empire was kept in her custody. The Emperor's orders had to pass through her to get the seal affixed. Shahjahan consulted her on important state matters. She too had authority to issue *Paravanas* and *Hukums* (**Sharma, 9-10; Mukherjee, 147**).

Jahanara: She was the eldest daughter of Shahjahan and perhaps the last of the illustrious Mughal women. She too was capable and well educated. In addition to the usual talents of the royal family she was a poet as well as a Sufi. She had a soft corner for her elder brother Dara Shikoh, the heir apparent. She played a

significant part in the war of succession amongst the sons of Shah Jahan because of her influence with her father. After Mumtaz Mahal died in 1631, Jahanara took complete control of her father's personal affairs. She was also made the in-charge of the Harem. She too invested in overseas trade and enjoyed special privileges like earlier queens. Her importance was diminished to some extent after the accession of Aurangzeb but later she was accorded a special position in the domestic and court life because of her political capabilities.

Her other sister **Roshan Ara** also played a politically important role and was a supporter of Aurangzeb. She was a poet and head of the Harem under Aurangzeb. She died in 1671. Thus several women played an important role in the Mughal domestic and state matters. The fact that in case of the Mughals the domestic environment was part of the court made their intervention easy and effective.

Deccan

The Deccan peninsula had a history of women political participation predating the medieval period. The Shatavahanas witnessed women in politics in the early years of the ancient period. Gautamiputra Shatakarni's mother played a significant part in state politics. In addition to advisory roles she also directly gave land grants in charity to religious institutions on behalf of the state. Thus, the Deccan had a tradition of women in politics. During the medieval period we do find sporadic instances of women rising to power, sometimes directly to rule but mostly indirectly as important influential personalities. We shall see some of these powerful women below.

Rudrama Devi was the fourth independent queen of the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal. She ruled from 1262 to 1289. Her father Ganapati had no sons and his brothers died before him leaving him no choice but to appoint his daughter as ruler. He ruled jointly with Rudramadevi for some years before he died. Later she became the sole ruler. Many inscriptions mention her as Rudra and address her as Maharaja i.e., a male king. She also wore male attire similar to Raziya. This can be seen as an attempt to gain acceptance in a male dominated society. Rudrama devi was an able warrior who safeguarded her kingdom from the neighbouring pandyas of Tamil Nadu, Gangas of Orissa and Seunas of Devagiri. She died on a battlefield in 1289. She was succeeded by her daughter's son Prataparudra (**Singh, 553**).

Another interesting personality in medieval Deccan was **Chand Bibi**. She was the princess of Ahmednagar and married Ali Adil Shah I of Bijapur. She was adept in court politics and acted as a regent of the Bijapur Sultanate (1580-90) and of the Ahmednagar Sultanate (1596-99). She played an important part in saving Ahmednagar kingdom from the expanding Mughal forces in the beginning of the 17th century. She negotiated with Mughal Emperor Akbar and his son prince Daniyal. However, she could not outsmart factional politics and the ambitions of powerful nobles like Mian Manjhu and Abhang Khan leading to her death by public lynching on the charges of secret alliance with the enemy, the Mughals. She was a good stateswoman who thwarted many rebellions and a warrior whose presence inspired the army to fight the Mughals. She was also given a popular title Chand Sultan (223-224, Shyam).

17th century Deccan witnessed rise of the Marathas. The Marathas had many warrior women who fought on behalf of their men folk. Remarkable amongst them was **Uma Bai Dabhade**. She was a warrior and wife of Maratha Senapati Triambak Rao Dabhade in the early 18th century. She was a fierce warrior who advanced Maratha possessions in Gujarat. After her husband's death in 1731 in the battle between Peshwa and the Senapati she took leadership of his forces. Through her deputy Damaji Gaekwad she could re-conquer lands lost to the Mughals after Triambak Rao's death. She acted as the regent of her son Yashwant Rao who was made Senapati by Peshwa (Duff, 366-370,).

Medieval Deccan produced many other Maratha women like Jijabai, mother to Shivaji, Tara bai, Ahilya Bai Holkar and others who played political roles as advisors, regents and warriors safeguarding their husband's and son's interests.

Conclusion

We can see that medieval India predominantly had male rulers across different regions and periods. Women however did not stay away from politics as required by the society in those days but managed to leave their mark in various ways. Fulfilling an advisory role was the most common and respected form of political activity for women. There were also regents who could fight battles and

administered kingdoms but never ruled directly as kings or ruling queens. In the medieval Indian psyche political authority was vested only in men. Women were not tolerated. At least their struggle for survival was more intense than their male counter parts. Raziya is a case in point here. Rulers like Raziya and Rudrama Devi adopted male attitudes and attire in order to assert their right to rule. Rudrama Devi has been represented as a male ruler in the inscriptions being addressed as Rudra and Maharaja. So we can say that the society found it difficult to accept women rulers. They were more acceptable in indirect roles.

The Mughal family culture, its lineage and tradition slightly differed in this context. In the **Chagtai-Timurid** culture, women played a central role in both family and state. Chengiz Khan himself was greatly influenced by his mother and wife. Elements of this tradition trickled down into the Mughal culture. We have seen above the hardening of this tradition since Akbar's times. However, intelligent and capable women continued to influence the politics of their times. Nur Jahan was very popular. She enjoyed the same privileges and power as her husband Jahangir. Maham Anagha, Mariam Makani, Mumtaz Mahal and Jahanara were highly respected and consulted on state matters. Thus, we can say that in the medieval period women could only play an indirect role in politics but their voices were significant and effective.