

WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

- Unfortunately, women have **not received their due space in historical writings.**
- An important reason for their relatively lesser presence in primary documents lies in the fact that **most of these were penned by men.**
- The status of women **in social, economic and political domains was secondary to males** and at most times, females were oppressed and subdued.
- This suppression traced its origin from the emphasis on the **physical distinction** of women from men.
- **Free movement of women in public spaces was restricted** and they were required to observe a ***purdah/ghoonghat*** (veil) in public.
- It also led to the **emergence of dedicated and protected spaces for women in the elite households.**
- Women, specifically at the elite homes, had to also **adjust in polygyny** wherein men had multiple female partners.
- In addition, self-immolation in the form of ***sati*** and ***jauhar***, **female infanticide, discrimination in legal discourses on marriage, property rights**, etc. all contributed to the subordinated status of women during the period.
- Apart from the wives, the polygynous households of the times included a man's **numerous concubines** who were recognized sexual partners but did not have the legal sanction of marriage.
- **Concubines were usually initiated from secondary or inferior communities** and women ascribed with this position were devoid of several rights including **disenfranchisement of their sons to contest for the throne.**
- The ruling and most wealthy households also included **female members such as wet nurses and slaves.**
- Ibn Battuta, that **female slavery was a prevalent institution** under the Sultans in India.
- **Slave girls were procured in wars, as gifts and through purchases.**
- Once a girl was brought under the fold of slavery, she was severed of her family ties and **became the exclusive property of the owner.**
- **Female slaves were of two kinds**, those employed for domestic and menial work and
- Others, who were brought for the company of their masters **under various forms of concubinage.**
- **The latter** by virtue of their intimacy with the ruler **held a relatively higher and sometimes even a dominating position** in the household.
- **The former, lacking education and skill**, were employed in rough domestic work and also worked as spies for their monarch.
- Their duties included **grinding, cutting, mopping the floor, sweeping the floor, fetching water, milking cattle, agricultural work**, etc.
- Women employed as **female entertainers** were another category that formed the elite households of the period.
- The Sultans of Delhi, with few exceptions, were great lovers of music.

- According to Ibn Battuta, during the period of Alauddin Khalji (1296-1316), **musicians and singers were settled in Tarababad** (city of joy) located on the side of Hauz-i Khas (the lake built by Sultan Alauddin Khalji) in Delhi.
- Often young slaves were trained by professionals **in the arts of dance and singing in the elite homes.**
- The entertainers **performed in private and public– in rituals and festivities,** and the **presence of dancing and singing girls became a symbolic marker of the glory of royal courts** during this period.
- There was, however, **an evident anxiety attached to a woman** performing musical arts.
- Amir Khusrau, that **singing and dancing was good and amusing in the early stage of a woman's life** but warned women not to patronize it for it could bring ill fame to them.
- The large clique of females attached to a monarch including **his mother, sisters and daughters were collectively referred by the term *harem*** in the ruling Muslim household.
- The term '***harem***' is of Arabic origin, meaning sanctuary and during the Sultanate period, the term signified the totality of the female inmates.
- The word ***janana*** – derived from ***jananis* (females)** – was a Hindu counterpart, referred for the group of women at the indigenous aristocratic households, such as that of **Rajputs.**
- **Shah Turkan**, the Turkish wife of Shamsud- din Iltutmish (r.1211-36) is one such example who was bought as a slave but **rose to the status of Iltutmish's chief queen.**
- **Slave manumission** was also a prevalent practice in the Muslim households wherein slaves were set free as an act of charity.
- Prominent among these was the prevalence of self-immolation by women through ***sati* and *jauhar*.**
- **Ibn Battuta fainted** (অসুস্থ হই পৰে) on the site where a woman was undertaking *sati* is one indication of the same.
- There was however **no compulsion upon the widows to perform *sati* as widow remarriage was largely prevalent** and accepted except by the upper-class Hindus.
- **Muhammad bin Tughlaq (1325-51)** insisted that widows should take the consent of the royal authority before undertaking *sati*.
- Before the reign of Balban (r.1266-87), **the widows of men who held *iqtas* (territorial land assignments) in the state could retain them after the death of their husbands.**
- The practice was stopped by **Balban who replaced it with a fixed allowance for the upkeep of the widows.**
- **Amir Khusru, Isami, stressed** that the place of women was the home and instead of wearing the crown they should take interest in spinning and weaving.
- Firuz Shah Tughlaq (1351-1388) even went on to **prohibit women from visiting holy shrines.**

WOMEN AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Raziya Sultan

- Raziya was the only daughter among the four children of Iltutmish.
- **Iltutmish nominated Razia as his successor** after the death of his most capable son, Prince Nasiruddin Mahmud.
- Iltutmish **selected Raziya as she was the eldest of his surviving children.**
- However, **after the death of Iltutmish, his another son named Ruknuddin Firoz, occupied the throne** which was made possible through the negotiations exerted by his mother **Shah Turkan.**
- **Within seven months Raziya secured her rightful claim and ascended the throne in November 1236 CE.**
- **Raziya Sultan was the first female Muslim ruler of South Asia.**
- Raziya's accession to the throne **was solely based on her merit and was a significant departure in the then political climate where the throne was considered a male monopoly.**
- **Many could not reconcile** with the idea of a woman ruler.
- For example, **Minhaj-I Siraj regrets** in his *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, that Raziya with all her eminent qualities fit for a sovereign was not born as a man a statement **supported by Isami as well.**
- the **provincial governors**, also, who constituted a very powerful section of the Turkish governing class, **objected her rule.**
- A significant constituent factor for Raziya's strength was the **support from the people of Delhi.**
- She held a court every week in which the earlier arrangement of **female guards and the screen was done away with.**
- Soon after her accession, **Raziya also gave up the *purdah* (veil).**
- She **adopted the male wardrobe.**
- **Her official name was Sultan Razat al-Dunya wal Din bint al-Sultan.**
- She continued the coin types of Iltutmish and **issued coins in silver, bullion and copper.**
- Raziya was an **accomplished poetess and she patronized men of letters.**
- **Madarasa-i Nasiriya of Delhi** became the centre of learning during her reign.
- **Appointment of non-Turks to important posts created animosity** amongst the Turkish nobles who began to conspire to overthrow her.
- The hostility of the nobles heightened when **Raziya elevated Jamaluddin Yakut**, an Abyssinian slave, to the office of *Amir-i Akhur* (commander of the cavalry), primarily to curb the power of Turkish nobility.
- This appointment **also stirred Persian chroniclers such as Isami** for whom the alleged intimacy between Razia and Yaqut was the causative factor for this administrative decision.
- The **contemporary historian Minhaj however does not say anything about this intimacy.**

- According to Minhaj, ‘**Raziya was the ablest of the successors of Iltutmish**’– a statement which can hardly be denied.

Naika Devi and Rudrama Devi

- **Naika Devi**, the mother of Mularaja II of Gujarat who performed an active political role as the regent of her minor son after the death of her husband.
- She demonstrated her admirable administrative ability by **defeating Muhammad Ghori** (1149-1206), the Ghurid ruler of Ghazna who had marched on a raiding expedition towards Gujarat, **by launching on him a surprise attack near Mount Abu in 1178 CE.**
- Similar abilities were demonstrated by **Rudrama Devi (1245-1289)**, famously known as the **warrior queen who hailed from the Kakatiya dynasty** in the Deccan Plateau of Southern India.
- She was appointed as a **co-regent to jointly rule alongside her father, King Ganapati** (1199-1262).
- **Ganapati had no sons** and he gave her daughter the male name of Rudradeva and formally declared her to be his male heir.
- Later on, Ganapati withdrew from public life and **passed full control of the kingdom to Rudrama.**
- Subsequently, **in 1269 Ganapati died and Rudrama was officially crowned as the ruler of Kakatiya kingdom.**
- **Marco Polo, a Venetian traveller,** visited during Rudrama’s reign and **described her as a lady of discretion who ruled with justice and equity.**

THE MUGHAL HAREM AND THE POSITION OF WOMEN

- **Information on women is rather marginal from the early Mughal rule** yet through a thorough rereading of sources, **historians such as Ruby Lal** have brought forth important facets about women and gender from this period.
- During Babur and Humayun, *harem* was not an institution, as an institutionalized entity and as during Sultanate, it meant simply, **imperial women**, connoted by the term *haraman-i padshah*.
- In this early Mughal era, the **elderly women acquired an exalted position** for their experience and wisdom.
- **Humayun, in particular, frequently took advice from his senior female relatives** during his struggle for throne with his brothers.
- *Ahwal-i Humayun Badshah*, the memoirs of Gulbadan Banu Begum **provide the names of several women in this context.**
- Gulbadan’s account informs us that, senior women made **dynastic linkages through establishing marriages for the younger generation.**
- Akbar **paid great attention to the women of his household** and in his reign, *harem* became an institutionalized space, just as the royal court.

- This manifested in his construction of a **new capital at Fatehpur Sikri** with carefully assigned spatial divisions for different categories of people, **wherein women came to occupy designated and demarcated spaces.**
- The neatly compartmentalized spaces were guarded by *khwajasaras* (eunuchs) (बगुंसक) who being castrated males could not exploit women sexually but were able to carry out domestic works.
- **The word *harem* now referred not only to women but also came to denote the spaces they occupied.**
- The invisibility of women was further achieved through the **complete obliteration of the names of the mothers of future heirs in the Mughal annals.**
- The rise of the Mughals also affected gender equations and position of women in indigenous kingdoms.
- Elite households thus came to maintain a growing, hierarchical and varied *janana* which was securely segregated from the *mardana mahals* (halls reserved for males).
- *Jananas* were usually guarded by **eunuchs who were called *khojas*.**
- Although, segregation of women here was just one sided because women could view men and most political proceedings through a *jali* (screen) that guarded the female spaces.
- But, women of the royal households were to be protected from public view because their bodies were seen as sites of male and lineage (वंश) honour.
- Social evils such as **polygyny, *purdah*, *sati*, *jauhar*, dowry, female transactions and female infanticide** were prevalent and often rampant amongst the elites and the common and tribal masses.

WOMEN'S AGENCY (महिला) DURING THE LATER MUGHAL PERIOD

- In fact, in November 1575, during Akbar's reign, a large group of Mughal women undertook the famous ***hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca** and Medina which lasted for seven years, making the *hajj* four times.
- the emperor not only **gave permission for this religious voyage but also funded the travel** of all those who desired to go.
- The entourage of women **included young and old females, and was organized and led by the elderly Gulbadan.**
- In 1581, when Akbar's half-brother Muhammad Hakim Mirza, who was serving as a governor of Kabul, rebelled against him, **Akbar ceded the charge of Mughal territories to his mother and sister till he quelled the rebellion.**
- After the rife, Akbar's half-sister **Bakht al-Nisa Begum was appointed as the official governor of the critical province of Kabul.**
- Shah Jahan relied heavily upon his **eighteen-year-old daughter Jahanara to run the imperial house after the death of his wife.**
- **Jahanara was called Padshah Begum.**
- **She held finances** which she had accumulated through her own and her mother's trading activities with the foreign merchants.

- Trade, both overseas and domestic, was an important avenue of wealth pursued by several women of the imperial household in this period.
- Jahangir's mother Maryam-us Zamani, for example, owned a ship named Rahimi which in that period was the largest ship trading in the Red sea.
- Through their accumulated wealth, several women created lasting structures of their legacy on the political geography of the country.
- Jahanara, for example, used her wealth to modify the landscape (ভূদৃশ্য) of Shahjahanabad, her father's new capital city outside Delhi.
- The most important of her structures was the beautiful square known as Chandni Chowk and a garden outside the city walls, named as the Tis Hazari Bagh.
- Roshanara, also laid out a garden outside the walls of Shahjahanabad which was named after her – Roshanara Bagh and became her eventual resting place.
- The wives of Shahjahan were also involved in sponsoring buildings.
- For example, after the death of his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, Shah Jahan's chief consort was Akbarabadi Begum.
- This garden was known as Bagh Aizzabad (now known as Shalimar Bagh) wherein Akbarabadi Begum built a *sarai* (rest house) for the aid of the *caravans* and travellers.
- A landmark event that later took place in the garden was the coronation of Aurangzeb on 31st July 1658.
- Fatehpuri Begum, another wife of Shah Jahan, built the Fatehpuri Masjid which stands at the western end of the street leading from the Red Fort.
- The Sirhindi Masjid, just outside the wall of the city, to the west, was built by Sirhindi Begum, another wife of Shah Jahan.
- Aurangzeb's wife, Aurangabadi Begum is recorded to have sponsored a mosque near the Lahore gate of Delhi.
- Her sister Zinat-un Nissa, built in 1700, Zinatul Masjid in the south of the Red Fort.
- Women often gained economic power through imperial orders (*farmans*) and the grants of territorial assignments in the form of *jagirs* that provided them with economic security.
- It was also common for women to possess her own jewellery and cash, often acquired in marriage and through gift.
- Several documents from the period however reveal that women, both elite and in common houses, maintained active cognisance of their wealth and property and often voiced for such rights in legal and royal courts.
- The agency of Mughal women can further be located in their patronization to arts and religion.
- Jahanara, at the insistence of her brother Dara Shukoh, was indoctrinated into the Qadiriyyah sufi order and as part of this leaning, she composed *Risala-i Sahibiya*, an exploration of the Sufi ideas and the biography of Mu'in al-Din Chishti.
- She also used her wealth to patronize commentaries on Maulana Rumi's Masnavi.
- Aurangzeb's daughter, Zeb-un Nissa was a spiritual and well-educated woman, skilled in Arabic and Persian, and wrote both prose and poetry.

- She is believed to be the author of many poems composed under the pen-name (ছদ্মনামে) ‘Makhfi’.
- Like these remarkable women, other women of the royal family were also well educated and **female tutors called Atun Mama were employed to teach them** comportment and Persian, Arabic, theology, history and classical literatures.
- **Gulbadan** who wrote *Humayunnama* is said to have **possessed a huge library**.
- **In the Hindu aristocratic households, female education was centred on the basic knowledge of letters and religious scriptures, which was imparted by Brahmins.**
- the Mughal rulers **held special respect for their foster or milk mother** who were accorded the same rights and privileges as the monarchs’ birth mothers and **were often treated with greater respect than the stepmothers.**
- **Akbar** was profoundly attached to **Maham Anaga, his milk mother.**
- **When he was still a teenager, she was effectively his regent, ruling the nascent empire with her stern hand.**

Nur Jahan

- **Nur Jahan married the fourth Mughal emperor Jahangir as a thirty-six-year-old widow with a young daughter.**
- **Jahangir and she did not have children**, but he did not marry after her and preferred her companionship to all others at court.
- She displayed exceptional political acumen (দূরদর্শিতা) which quickly earned her the trust of her husband who even went on **to grant the right of sovereignty to her.**
- She had the privilege of issuing royal orders (*parwanahs (imperial order by minister of noble)* and *hukms (order by imperial prince or royal consort)* generally reserved for royal princes and also held the authority to **sign farmans with her seal.**
- **Coins were struck in her name and she held the right to direct public audience on her own.**
- She regularly **went on hunts with her husband** where she did not hinge from displaying her shooting skills.
- It was Nur Jahan’s **shooting skills combined with her political ability** that enabled her to rescue Jahangir when he was captured by the rebellious Mahabat Khan in 1626.
- **Nur Jahan invested in overseas trade through her ships and dealt with Europeans, Portuguese as well as the Dutch.**
- **The English merchants also sought her protection and support to obtain trade permissions in Jahangir’s court.**
- **She utilized her accumulated wealth to sponsor a series of private palaces for herself** in different parts of the empire, where she is also known **to have sponsored feasts and celebrations.**
- Contemporaries of the period expressed concern (উদ্বেগ) over her active political life and some even accused Jahangir of abdicating (ত্যাগ) all authority to her.
- Nur Jahan, nevertheless, actively exerted her command as a co-sovereign (সহ-সার্বভৌম).

Chand Bibi

- **Chand Bibi was the princess of Ahmadnagar who was married to Ali Adil Shah I (1558-79) of Bijapur on the eve of the battle against Vijayanagar in 1565.**
- The marriage between the ruling members of the two states was a **political alliance**.
- Chand Bibi had grown up in a household where **her mother exerted considerable authority during the rule of her father**.
- **A sitar player and fluent in five languages, she often accompanied her husband on military campaigns and owing to her political acumen, he entrusted her advice in the matters of the state.**
- Ali's controversial assassination around 1580's brought for Chand Bibi a central role in the political affairs.
- **With no son and a young nephew placed on throne, she took care of the state by acting as a regent of the Bijapur Sultanate from 1580-90.**
- She played an important role in saving the kingdom from Mughal forces in the beginning of the 17th century.
- Her bravery was acknowledged even by **the rival Mughal forces who gave her the popular title of Chand Sultan.**

Umabai Dabhade

- 17th century Deccan witnessed rise of the Marathas.
- The Marathas had many warrior women who fought on behalf of their men folk.
- For example, **Jijabai and Ahilya Bai Holkar** played significant roles **as advisors, regents and warriors** safeguarding the interests of their state.
- Remarkable amongst such women was **Umabai Dabhade**, particularly because **she did not hail from the ruling family**.
- At a young age she was married to **Khanderao Dabhade**.
- After her husband's death, **her eldest son Trimbakrao took charge as the Senapati (military commander)** but soon he entered into a conflict with the **then Peshwa Bajirao I** concerning the rights over *chauth* tax.
- She rallied with the **Maratha queen Tarabai to fight for their dues against the Peshwa.**

Meerabai

- Meerabai, also known as Meera, of Rajasthan was the most prominent of the female mystics bhakti movement.
- Bhakti was a religious movement which promoted the belief that **salvation was attainable by everyone**.
- The period saw several female Bhakts like **Akka Mahadevi, Janabai and Bahinabai**, apart from Meera.
- They raised their voice **against patriarchal boundaries in various spheres including an equal space in religion**.
- Mirabai was extraordinarily radical in **her rejection of social norms and values, leaving their families behind**, in order to exalt their love for God.

- **Others** attempted to fit into more traditional roles in society **by pursuing spirituality while maintaining their responsibilities as wives and mothers.**
- **Bhakti and her poetry** became a device for her to challenge the masculine ideas.
- Meera not **only countered the Rajputs** with as much valour as they themselves were known for, but she also **remains an embodiment of female fearlessness for the public.**

Women in Medieval Bengal

- Although fragmentary, evidence from medieval Bengal indicates that women, especially **those hailing from upper class**, had several opportunities to assume leadership roles.
- These opportunities were most abundant among **the hill tribes to the north**, where a remarkably egalitarian system seems to have prevailed.
- Even before the 16th century, we have from this region the evidence of **Visvasadevi of Tirhut**, who successfully served as regent during her husband's lifetime.
- She is known to have compiled a **treatise on the worship of Ganga.**
- In the late 18th century, the lesser-known **Candraprabha** was another queen of the northeast **who demonstrated effective administration and was a patron of learning.**
- **Candraprabha was the wife of Tamradhvaja of Cachar** (now in Assam), who ruled her husband's kingdom when he was taken captive by a rival and later as a regent before her son took over as king.
- The queen **promoted the spread of Sanskrit language** and culture in her kingdom.
- The name of **Hati Vidyalkara of Sonai** is prominent among these who lived in the 18th century West Burdwan.
- She **had her own Sanskrit school.**