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Hidden Power: The Politics of the Mughal Harem

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ABSTRACT

The Mughal harem, often shrouded in orientalist stereotypes and popular misconceptions, was far more than a secluded domestic space; it was a significant political and cultural institution. This paper explores the nuanced role of the harem in Mughal India, interrogating its spatial dynamics and the covert forms of power exercised within its confines. Drawing on court chronicles, memoirs, and contemporary historiography, the study examines how elite women—empresses, princesses, and concubines—navigated cloistered spaces to assert agency, influence imperial decisions, and shape dynastic politics. Far from being passive figures, women like Nur Jahan and Jahanara Begum emerge as pivotal actors in the Mughal polity, operating within a framework of invisible politics that challenged patriarchal boundaries without overtly transgressing them. By re-evaluating the architecture, daily routines, and interpersonal networks within the harem, this paper aims to reconceptualize the Mughal zenana as a site of subtle resistance, negotiation, and governance. The study contributes to broader discourses on gender, power, and space in premodern South Asia.

Since most of the available source material for reconstructing medieval India's history was written in the Indo-Persian tradition and was created in a court environment, the rulers' patronage is extensive because these histories mostly focus on courts and the actions of the monarchs. Information on the women and their activities is scarce. Women like Razia, Nurjehan, and Rudramma Devi are among the few women mentioned in the records; they carried out duties that were geared toward men, therefore their responsibilities cannot be broadly described. The personal lives of these and several other medieval women, as well as their contributions to the creation of new imperial organizations, practices, and structures, are unknown to us. Though they are extremely rare and primarily due to unusual historical circumstances rather than established methods, women were more visible and occupied this field than in other fields like diplomacy, hunting, or military battles. For instance, Razia's father, Iltutmish, chose to name his daughter Razia to succeed to the throne since he did not believe any of his boys were capable [1]. The nobility objected to a female sovereign because it was a novel measure in an unprecedented historical situation, and they were unsure of how the people would react to this new and revolutionary deed, despite the fact that there were several antecedents in Turkish and Iranian traditions [2]. Though women were not particularly present in the public sphere, there was very little differentiation between the home and the public sphere in any premodern civilization. The *Humayunama* of Gulbadan Begum serves as the primary foundation for our account of the Harem in Mughal India in this study.

The fact that "though women like men have been actors and agents in history, their experiences and actions are not recorded" has been brought to light by the feminist movement of the 1960s and the ensuing advances of women's studies. Women's involvement in agriculture, animal husbandry, family

rituals, and folk art are considered irrelevant and outside the purview of traditional historiography, which has always concentrated only on areas of human activity where men predominate, such as war, diplomacy, politics, or commerce. The history of men has been portrayed as being universally human. Male interests, concerns, and experiences are reflected in the structure, ideas, and priorities of these universal histories [3].

As a result, traditional history has either downplayed or overlooked women's constructive contributions. Women in the Vijaynagara period were entitled, and this includes a description of attire, jewelry, holidays, and hobbies. Even though this might be significant, it does not adequately represent the contribution of women. In any event, women's contributions to the past and to the development of its politics, religion, and society have not been sufficiently highlighted. By providing a gendered interpretation of international relations theory, Cynthia Enloe has demonstrated how women's roles as housewives, maids, prostitutes, and other similar occupations serve as the foundation for society, on which all other roles are reproduced and, consequently, serve as the foundation for international relations. Her findings may also apply to the institutions and roles of women. As a result, it is impossible to see one group of institutions in a vacuum.

The general tenet of patriarchal society is that women should be kept in the private home and males should labor in the public sector. Since the public sphere is deemed significant, women are either portrayed as domesticated or as more passive participants in the historical process, while assertive women are labeled witches, possessed, etc. In certain instances, such as Joan of Arc, who is only now being rehabilitated in history, the distinction between a fallen woman and a heroine is blurred. The dearth of thorough and meaningful documentation regarding them is indicative of this. Without a question, a



social science that fails to acknowledge the role of women can only provide a skewed view of society as a whole. The history of women is not "intellectually interesting" to many people. There is a general perception that it is not respected and that the field is not legitimate. Many believe that studying women must be the ultimate sign of academic anarchy. Because of persisting "Victorianism," scholars may believe that women are too eternal or unworldly to play a significant role in politics and economics [4].

For three interconnected reasons, historians who specialize in women's history feel compelled to advance their knowledge of the "underlying conceptual framework" of their discipline. First, a poor regard for earlier research in the topic was directly linked to doubts about its validity within the historical studies discipline. The first is the distinct nature of the group that the field aims to investigate, and the third is the history of theories that have been developed to try to understand women's historical experiences [5].

The low regard and stereotypical perception of women are reflected in the unwillingness to accept work in women's history for its own purpose. In addition to attempting to achieve equilibrium, women's history may also be pursued for its own purpose. Asking a Dalit, Black, or Jew to defend their interest in their history is not appropriate.

Throughout history, women have always been a different category from males, and their actions also demonstrate this. Similar to how class, ethnicity, and sex have been used to establish distinct identities for men and women, sexual divisions have been one of the most fundamental social divisions, enabling one group to view its interests differently from another. We cannot discover the facts of women's lives during any particular period by studying the history of males and presuming that this would likewise encompass the history of women. Like every other group, class, or race, gender has always played a significant role in history. Therefore, the feminist perspective of women as a unique sociological group that is subject to both overt and covert restraints through social, political, and legal constraints must be used to analyze the evolution of women's history [2].

Since women have been excluded from history, it is vital to restore them and record their roles and contributions, a process that could require years of arduous labor. This is insufficient, though, as it only skims the surface of limited materials that were mostly written in a patriarchal setting. Therefore, creating newer approaches to highlight these invisible players is the difficulty. The goal is to better comprehend the past and the development of the institutions, social relations, and ideology that resulted in women's subordination, rather than merely addressing women's history within the confines of the current context. This viewpoint has produced a great deal of useful theoretical discoveries as well as well-fitting empirical research.

Women's history begins with the premise that, despite their differences, women are a social group rather than a biological group. This is historically significant. The fact that the behavior expected of men and women varies greatly from society to society contradicts biological theories. Gender roles also differ significantly between time periods within the same society. Individual women's opportunities and limits are mostly determined by social influences.

New paradigms have arisen in the last few decades as a result of the work of feminist sociologists, anthropologists, and people's historians. We now have a more comprehensive

understanding of women, their status, and their relationships with the rest of society because to the way that women's studies approaches the study of women in various historical situations. The statement "Women have a history and women are in history" was first made by Gerda Lerner. When considering gender, these words have had a significant impact. Historians and other social scientists viewed feminine identities as created rather than natural and necessary. There have been three broad perspectives on women's history in the west. The first of them was additive history, which is history that has been written after the sources have been reexamined to determine the role and contributions of women. The second method, gendered history, rethinks historiography by using feminist viewpoints to make gender disparities a crucial component of social relations analysis. A third method, contributing history, acknowledges how patriarchy hinders women's actions while valuing female agency [6].

Few works have sought to examine women in the historical context of ancient and medieval India, and the majority of works pertaining to women's studies in the historical background are rooted in European contexts, which is a major problem. With its male-biased aristocratic sources, the medieval era presents a greater challenge. We must acknowledge that no one methodological or conceptual framework can adequately capture the complexity of all women's historical experiences if we are to construct a new history that is worthy of its name [7]. We must reexamine the literature, chronicles, archival material, and other sources in order to create a new women's history. We must also read between the lines and consider every possible angle, asking, "What about the women?"

Born in Afghanistan in 1523, Gulbadan Begum was the daughter of Babur and Hamida Begum. She was the future Emperor Humayun's sister. Gulbadan Begum witnessed the early upheavals of Babur's rule and the uneasy circumstances when all administration was conducted in front of the tents because she accompanied Babur throughout his conquests in India as a kid. Even during the unrest of Humayun's rule, she and her spouse, Khizr Khvajesh Khan, had traveled extensively. From the early struggle of Babar to the formation of the monarchy, to the upheavals of Humayun's reign and the splendor of Akbar's, Gulbadan Begum was a close observer of the development of the Mughal monarchy. She was therefore the most qualified individual to document all of this, and she complied with Akbar's request to write the official chronicle of Babar's reign by penning the *Humayunnama*. The Colonial scholar Annette Beveridge has translated this text. The ideology of the nineteenth century, which unquestionably believed in the objectivity of science and its capacity to depict reality, influenced her schooling. She believed that Western institutions, customs, and belief systems were logical, whereas non-Western ones were outdated. In keeping with her beliefs, she openly opposed the Abert Bill of 1883, which aimed to give Indian civil servants criminal authority over European subjects in country stations [8]. As a result, the text interjects her Victorian frameworks of knowing. Furthermore, the stereotype of the Turkish harem with the royal seraglio served as the primary source of generalization at the time because the historical background in Europe was predicated on the Oriental portrayal of the east. Nevertheless, we encounter a welcome dissenting comment written by Lady Morley Wortley Montagu, who traveled to Turkey with her husband in 1716 as an English envoy and who had personally visited the harem,

taking care to engage and pay close attention to numerous nuances. Here, she portrays a number of affluent women who held enormous wealth, and more significantly, she also talks about the bath. She presents this as a distinct subculture that is entirely within the woman's sphere of influence. This is completely different from Beveridge, whose ideas are mirrored in the way that information about Europe is constructed.

Two distinct divisions may be distinguished in Gulbadan Begum's *Humayunama*. She begins by discussing her father Babur, his travels throughout Afghanistan and Hindustan, his conflicts and triumphs, his journey to India, and the early years of the Mughal era in India. She provides a wealth of knowledge of Babur's home life, including his marriages, children, relationships with his family, and relationships with various harem women. Her brother Humayun's life is the focus of the book's second section. She discusses how he succeeded to the throne, how he lost it to Sher Shah, and how Akbar was born at the time that Humayun and his wife Hamida Banu Begum were stripped of their country and forced to live as refugees. She provides us with a wealth of knowledge on the several festivals observed at court, Humayun's coronation and the celebrations that followed, and her stepbrother Mirza Hindal's wedding.

The Harem is only depicted in numerous texts as a remote, sexualized realm that controlled the king's and noblemen's sensual pleasures. The harem remained a symbol of the medieval era, and as the polity, administrative structures, and manufacturing methods changed, the real women in this culture became increasingly marginalized. Numerous works about medieval India reiterate this viewpoint. According to Professor Lal, the harem evokes an image of a secluded setting that enshrouds lovely shapes in enigmatic grandeur. The master bargained for beauty and affection, and the younger ladies were not exposed to the Mahal (palace) ceremonies where sex orgies predominated. Every significant lady, of course, openly vied for ascendancy in the harem and attempted to earn the master's undivided adoration. Although they weren't as severe, tensions were frequently present here. One could include these under the general phrase jealousy. The elderly and sick were not intended for the harem. It was intended to be a cheerful setting, a home for the young and attractive, a pleasure arbor, and a haven of happiness [9]. The same picture is even reproduced in the *New Cambridge History of India*, which claims that the harem should ideally be a place of relaxation and refuge for the nobleman and his close male family members—a place of elegance, beauty, and order intended to revitalize the men of the home [10]. It is also said of Jahangir that he was a man who overindulged in women and liquor. He reportedly has about 300 young, attractive ladies tethered to his bed, which is unthinkable in the present era and demonstrates his excessive harem involvement and sex addiction [11]. Tirmizi's book, which enumerates the decrees issued by the several queens from the Mughal harem, is a departure. Thus, we have a clear contradiction, as Ruby Lal meticulously illustrates by contrasting the *Humayunnama's* portrayal of the harem with that of authors like as KS Lal and even J F Richards to highlight significant disparities. [12].

A close examination of the sources, however, provides us with an alternative perspective on the harem that is typically disregarded. The different interactions in the harem, the establishment and upkeep of hierarchical relationships, and the harem as a place for forming alliances and strengthening kinship ties are all indicated by reading Gulbadan Begum's

memoirs. When Khavajeh Kilan, a close friend of Babur's, expressed a want to return to Kabul following the battle of Panipat, Babur granted him permission and urged him to bring priceless gifts for his family members and other Kabul residents. According to Gulbadan Begum, who reconstructs Babar's interactions with Khavajeh Kilan, Babur said he would compile a list and that he should use it to decide how to divide the gifts. Each Begum will have a tent with a screen set up in the audience hall garden, and the Begums are expected to prostrate themselves in gratitude for the total triumph that has been achieved. In addition to a plate full of gems, rubies, pearls, cornelian, diamonds, emeralds, turquoise, topaz, and two trays full of Asharfis, each Begum is to get a dancing girl that was taken from the court of Ibrahim Lodi, whom Babur had vanquished. He goes on to say, "Let the current jewels, asharfis, and Shahrukhis be distributed among my sisters, children, harems, and relatives, as well as to the begums, nurses, foster brethren, ladies, and everyone who prays." A closer examination of Gulbadan Begum's *Humayunama* really reveals the harem's hierarchies, which included both young and old people. The Harem's pan included sisters, kinsmen and their spouses, the head of the household, nurses, and youngsters.

Many elder women with position, power, and intelligence would assist in forming marriage alliances and were crucial in maintaining the Timurid Mughal name during the Middle Ages. These women had fulfilled their responsibilities as young women and had boys to continue the Mughal tradition. They accomplished this by enlisting the younger women in the monarchs' household. Gul Badan Begum tells the story of an extremely fascinating incident. All of the ladies of the court attended an entertainment that Humayun's stepmother, Hamida Begum, arranged when the conflict between Humayun and Kamran ended, with Humayun returning to Bikaner and Kamran proceeding to Kabul. Among them was Mirza Hindal's daughter, Hamida Banu Begum. Mirza Hindal was reportedly highly offended when Humayun inquired and stated that he wanted to marry Hamida Banu Begum. He reportedly told Humayun that he believed Humayun had gone to the entertainment to honor him rather than to find a spouse. Humayun was upset by this and departed the feast. In an attempt to mend the rift, Hamida Begum reportedly reprimanded Mirza Hindal for responding inappropriately to His Majesty, whom he should have regarded as his late father's representative. The following day, she hosted a nuptial feast, presented the young woman to His Majesty, bestowed her blessings, and they both traveled to Bhakkar. Gulbadan Begum also elaborates on the same episode, demonstrating how Hamida Begum first declined to wed Humayun. Hamida Begum was invited to her quarter at Humayun's persuasion. Hamida Banu responded that she didn't need to come again because she had already paid her respects to the monarch the day before if she had been asked to do so. In light of this, Hamida Begum appears to have counseled her that it would be preferable to wed a local king since she will eventually need to get married. In answer, Hamida Banu stated that she would marry someone someday, but only if their collar was touchable by her hand and not if their skirt did not reach Gulbadan [13]. The fact that Gulbadan was ready to include such a conversation in her writing is more significant than the ease (or literal accuracy) of this exchange between Hamida Begum and Hamideh Banu Begum. This suggests that she was aware of the customs and traditions of the era. Thus, one could interpret

Gulbadan's description of Hamida Banu Begum's hesitation as a commentary on the ongoing discussion and conflict about proper conduct in courtroom life. Hamida Banu Begum is said to have written to the emperor, "To see kings once is lawful [jayiz ast]; a second time it is forbidden [na-mahram ast]," in one of her correspondences. I won't be coming. Hamida Banu Begum's failure to pay him a second visit raises an underlying worry, which Humayun addresses by saying, "If she is not a consort [na-mahramand], we will make her a consort [mahram misazim]." (n33) After that, they get married [12]. Even though Humayun and Hamida Banu eventually got married, this occurrence demonstrates unequivocally that there were hierarchies in marriage and that dynasty and ancestry were taken into consideration. A lady enjoyed a particular position if she was able to have a son, and the son remained very significant. Maham Begum was eager for Humayun to have a son. Bega Begum and Maywa Jan were two women in the family way in the harem. Maham Begum prepared two sets of weapons and declared that the one who bears boys will receive them. It was found that Maywa Jan was a fraud after Bega Begum gave birth to a daughter and that she had no problems till the eleventh month [13]. Maham Begum, according to Beveridge, was a shrewd woman who established herself at her home in Gulbadan as a widow and a wife (353–354). She was a powerful woman, and as an elder, her counsel would have been taken very seriously. She must have been particularly worried about Babur and Humayun having sons.

As a result, we have sufficient knowledge about the home lives of Mughal noblewomen. The conflicts, small pleasures, and other aspects of a family are depicted in a way that has never been seen in any chronicle written by males during this time. In a climate where party politics and other factions are discussed by most of the sources, this is encouraging. Women, particularly those from the aristocratic classes, were integral to the imperial plan and were instrumental in the establishment of this monarchy. The categories created by the west were chosen and accurately replicated by secondary works, which historians of the current generation in India and elsewhere have internalized. This is one of the themes that emerges here that merits consideration. We can see that a new agenda for

women's history research can be established by stepping outside of this framework and utilizing sources from throughout the Muslim world. Second, it is unfounded to say that there aren't many sources on women in Mughal historiography. The harem was not a restricted space; rather, it provided women with a certain amount of autonomy and served as the foundation for the emergence of a subculture that is present in many Islamic societies, including Yemen, Zanzibar, and others.

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