

STATUS OF WOMEN DURING SULTANATE ERA – 1206-1526 AD

*Mrs. Bindu,
Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of History, H.K.M. Sitapur,
Uttar Pradesh*

INTRODUCTION

The available information regarding the position of the women and their influence in Indian society is scanty. But very often, something incidentally mentioned about them provides us with some data about their position and status in the social and cultural life of the period.

During age there was no seclusion of women or even a reference to child marriage. During these period women enjoyed equal status with men. They had full access to public life. They were highly educated, some have written Vedic mantras like Apala, Shakshi, Mudra. After marriage a women had a position of considerable importance, she exercised great influence in the house hold matter. No religious ceremony was completed without her presence. Marriage took place only when they attained puberty. As a daughter and wife and mother, they were highly esteemed in the society.

There had been a definite deterioration in the status of women in the centuries after Vedic Age.

With the advent of the Islam new faces emerged on the Indian horizon. Strict veiling of the women was the common practice among the Muslims in their native land. Naturally in a foreign country like India greater stress was laid upon it. During this period the status of the women received a considerable set back. The spirit of the Age is reflected in the words of Aamir Khusro in 'Hast Bahist' and Matla-ul-Anwar containing his counsel to his daughter. We find him commencing his address thus "Would to God that you should have been in the will of non existence or you could have been a male child or were born in the eighth month (so as to die)".

Although our historians have written about women of their times but they have not done justice with. Fortunately, we have some distinguished historians who have made some efforts in this direction. Following are the works of these historians:-

- 1) Taj-ul-Maser by Hasan Nizami
- 2) Tabakat-I-Nasiri Minhaj-us-Siraj
- 3) Hasht Bishist, Malta-ul-Anwar Aamir Khusuran
- 4) Tarik-I-Firoz Shahi Zia-Ud-Basni
- 5) Tarik-I-Firoz Shahi Shams Seraj Afif
- 6) Kitab-ul-Rehla Travels of Iban Batuta
- 7) Tarik-I-Mubarak Shahi Yahiyah-Bin-Serhindi

Some of the latest historians and their work are:-

- 1) Tabakat-I-Akbari by Nizam-Ud-Din-Ahmad
- 2) Muntakhab-ul-Tawarikh by Abdul Qadir Badauni
- 3) Ain-I-Akbari by Abul Fazal
- 4) Tarikh-I-Farishta

These are the same Hindi sources which are useful for the study of the contemporary social history such as:-

- 1) Prithvi Raj Raso by Chand Basdai
- 2) Kirtilata by Vidyapati Thakur
- 3) Padmavat by Mallik Mohammed Jaisi, etc.

The available sources reveal that different views were held about women. Some averred that women were inferior by nature and were not fit to be entrusted with any responsible work. Even a Lady of talented ability was made to understand her

limitations. She was to accept a status of dependence on man because of her physical disabilities. Perhaps Jaisi reflects the impression of the people when he says, "You are women and deficient in the sense that man is fool who takes advice of women folk at home." We find corroboration of his view of this view in manusmriti, "Day and night women must be kept under dependence by the males of their families..... Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her son protects her in her old age, women never fit for independence."

RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Rights of women are key level of the civilization. Muslim women received far more liberal treatment in matters of inheritance than their Hindu counterparts. This can be illustrated by the mode of the division of property after the father's death, a daughter is receiving half of that of her brother. However under the Muslims the disabilities arising from the male tutelage of unmarried or married women remained in the force. The author of the Adab-UI-Hasab suggests that a wife was not to be trusted in the matters of consequences, and if it was unavoidable to consult her best course was to act contrary to her advice. The Muslims showed no disregard for the social conventionalities. She was regarded mentally weak and deficient of wisdom.

The theory of perpetual tutelage affected their personal status they were to remain chaste not only in their conduct but also in their thought. 'A woman can't dispose of her husband's property.' She was never to be called to court for giving evidence except in matters relating to the women.

Man acted as the custodians of the honour and chastity of women. Dr Asraf rightly pointed out, "with the growth of general sensuality, an unhealthy attitude developed on all sides. People began to put a much exaggerated value on the chastity of women, exactly in the same measures they encouraged its absence in the men." The spirit of the age with regard to the chastity of the women is reflected in Amir Khusro's Maltla-UI-Anwar: "A girl on whom reflection were cast regarding her chastity

could never expect to find any respectable person to marry her even though the accusations were proved to be absolutely groundless.." A pious and chaste lady was called Rabia of the time. Such a lady even belonging to lower grade of society was respected. Status of the women may enable us to form an idea of culture and civilization of the country. Islam has brought a considerable amelioration in the condition of women, has removed the prejudices against the birth of female, and the Quran has declared that women have as many rights as duties. A woman in Islam is not mere a play thing for men. Both in India and elsewhere, in many respects, such as inheritance, contract of marriage, dowry, divorce and right of children etc, instead of inferiority and abject subjection, there was a good deal of social equality between men and women.

The long poetical discourse of Amir Khusro in the Hasht Bahist and Matla-UI-Anwar containing his councils to his daughter, Mastura contains much that was not merely idealistic but political. He could not remain unaffected by his environment, by this Indian lineage from the mother's side and therefore we find him counseling his daughter in the following words, "Though you are still very young and without understanding, one day you would become an elderly woman when you attain wedlock and wealth, I would wish you first, purity, chastity and then good fortune." He counseled her to be constant and devoted worshipper of God, to be a seeker of good name, to be abstinent and virtuous to remain indoors, and to keep her face bright within the four curtains (walls). "Live your life in such a way that by your behavior and conduct you may be able to your kindred and relations. It is better that for the sake of good name, fame, purity and chastity you should lay your leg with the chain of your skirt (and do not go out)." Here our author uses many smiley and metaphors to strengthen his advice about observing pardah and dialects on the harm of mixing with the strangers.

PARDAH SYSTEM

The term Pardah means something to screen off; popularly it applies to veil when applied to women,

the term signifies her seclusion in the separate building or in a segregated apartment or part of the building otherwise called the Harem.” Regarding the origin of pardah Dr B P Majumdar’s remarks deserve to be noted; “The use of veil was customary with the ladies in the north India. Edilpur copper plate of Kasavasena tells us that as Kasavasena passed through the city, the ladies saw him behaving him in coquettish way casting amorous glances. They gazed at him from the top of the sky-scraping houses. Slightly earlier than our period we find the ladies of the Harem of Mahabhava Gupta-I Somainejaya observing Pardah in Orissa. The kathasaril Sagar also tells us that when Udayana entered Kaushambi with Vasavadatta and Padmavati some ladies peeped out at them from the window some with their long lashed eyes closely applied to the lattice of the windows.”

But Pt. Gauri Shankar Ojha advocates the theory of absence of pardah system before the coming of the Muslims. He says, “At the time under the review there was no PARDAH SYSTEM, AND THE WOMEN OF THE royal households attended the court.” It is stated in Banbhata’s Kadambari that Vilaswati used to interview the Priest, the astrologers, and Brahmans and heard the Mahabharat in the temple of Mihirkula. Rajshri herself met Huien Tsang. The dramas of that time reveal no trace of Pardah. According to Abu Zaid, the Arab traveler, “Most of the Princes of India, when they hold court allowed their women to be seen by men who attend it, whether they are native or foreigners. No veil conceals them from the eyes of the visitors.”

In fact there was partial exclusion of women in ancient India and women observed certain veil but the present form of the Pardah dates back to Muslim rule. Many factors have made possible the development of the present form of Pardah, the most important being the status of the women in Hindu society. We know that exclusion of the women from the male society was the general in Hindu India and the home was their sphere. Muslim brought much exaggerated ideas of class and social exclusion and of aristocratic and royal behaviors, which took root in a congenial soil to all there was

added a practical reason – the growing sense of insecurity which attended the inroads of invaders, especially the Mughals, which lasted for more than two centuries.

As the Muslims became prominent in the northern India, the system of paradh grew there rapidly. The system of pardah was not well established where the influence of Muslim was less. Even to this day no such system exist from Rajputana to Deccan, or nominally.

The custom of pardah doesn’t mean complete seclusion of women in the earlier days. Ramayana also records that the appearance of women in the open was not objectionable at the time of the marriage, festivity, sacrifice or public clamity.” Dr AS Altekar supports this view when he says neither in the ancient religious book nor in the old Sanskrit dramas we find any traces of the pardah system. Even Yuan Chuang has given an intimate picture of the Hindu society of the 7th Century AD but he no were refers to the pardah system. Similarly Rajtarang of Kalharn which depicts the life and the society of people of Kashmir from 700AD to 1150AD gives no mentioned of pardah system, subsequently to it many Sanskrit dramas don’t testify to the pardah system at all.

At the same time we have numerous references depicting pardah system during our period. The custom of ghoonghat among Hindus and lower caste Muslims is described by Malik Muhammed Jaisi, Vidyapatti and others who write about the life of the common people. The other more developed form of pardah with its elaborate code of rule came into existence almost from the beginning of the Turkish rule in India. Fakhr-Ud-Din Mubarak Shah narrates the amusing story of the Hindu slave girl of Bahram Shah, the Ghaznawid ruler of Lahore at the beginning of the Turkish rule in India. She fell ill and had to be treated by the physician who instead of examining her in person and feeling her pulse But monarch got upset and only after many convincing argument that he agreed. During the reign of Firoz Shah Tughlaq, attempts were made to enforce pardah on subjects of the Kingdom. He forbid the Muslim women visit mausoleums out side the city of Delhi, as according

to him Muslim Law (Shariyat) forbid such outdoor movements. By this time the custom had spread and a respectable Lady therefore went about in closed litters (doli) and accompanied by the male attendant. Poorer and non aristocratic women probably went about wrapped up in long garments covering their heads, what is now known as burqa. The Hindu nobility was not slow in adopting the ways of the Muslim rulers.

The common women folk didn't lead a secluded life. Many of them had to help their husbands in the cultivation, in addition to management of the household affairs and bringing up of children. They could not afford to remain indoors and their innate modesty wouldn't allow them to gaze at aliens and strangers.

EDUCATION

Though the ladies of the medieval India didn't attain to that degree of liberty education as Muslim ladies of Baghdad yet with such luminaries as Raziya Sultan, Gulbadan Begum, Mihr Aigez Begum, Islam Khatun etc, Muslim women in India had no reason to fear comparison with contemporary Muslim women in the other part of the world.

The intellectual culture of women varied according to class. In villages where the women were part of the rural economy, there was no room for cultural growth in the ordinary sense. The poorer class of peasant had unfortunately to be too much occupied with domestic and farm work and with children to find leisure for intellectual occupation or even recreation. Their mental culture thus didn't proceed beyond a very backward stage.

A study of contemporary literature, religion or otherwise tells us much about the inner life and thoughts of the people, and also of the state of learning, acquired by women, who flourished in religious circles and courts of the Kings. We don't get any evidence of the presence of separate institution for education of girls. We don't exactly know elementary and higher education was imparted to the fair sex. Perhaps Muslims didn't built any separate educational centers for their girls. Iban Batutas reference of Muktabs for girls in Hinawa, in

the south west coastal region of India and the women memorisers of Quran may be exceptional.

Women must have been educated at home by their elderly and learned relations. Ratnawali the wife of Puran Mal possessed great poetic gifts. Mira bai one of the best representatives of the Hindu culture wrote Narayan Mehua, Giet Govind's tika or contemporary, Raj Govind, Mira ka Pad and Garkha Geet. Gulbadan Begum wrote Humayunama.

It is reported by Haji Dabir that one of the reasons why Muhammad Tughlaq, attacked the Qarajil hills (Kumaun) was the desire of possess the women of those parts who were famous for their accomplishments.

MARRIAGE

The position and influence of women can be fairly well discerned from the nature of the problem of marriage. There was in no period limit for the age of marriage. Both Hindu and Muslims favored an early age for boy and girls. Confirming their children in marriage and supervising the attendant customs and ceremonies was the privilege of the parents, especially the father. The marriage of their children involved many delicate and complicated problems, for instance those of the family status, ancestral rites, tradition, and the social honour of the parties. The parents usually carried out their responsibilities most scrupulously in every detail, marriage was more a family question than a personal concern of the marrying couple.

Atif tells us that the worries of the parents increased when their daughter reaches the stage of puberty. Many of them had no money for the marriage of their daughters. Sometimes on account of bounty of Sultan like Feroz Shah thousand of girls were married. As a result of this indigent Muslims and widows came from all sides and got the names their daughters registered in the Diwan-I-Khairat and got large possession for the marriage of their daughters³⁵. It is quite evident that the marriage was a great social problem which involved the economy means of the parents. There are references to the collection of garments, bedsheets and other articles from the houses of nobility for the dowry of

the daughters of poor parents. The dowry formed an important item of marriage expenditure. Even poor family could not hope to escape from it. As far the marriage negotiation we can infer from contemporary works that the bride and the bridegroom of the Indian Muslims had no voice in the selection of a match. In respectable families the opinion of the girls to be married and their negotiation was regarded as something as indecent. In negotiating marriage great consideration was given to the lineage of the family. The Afghans usually married within in their own tribe. They also took into consideration the purity of blood, and didn't allow their daughters marriage with royal princes. . But the customs of family exclusions was not uniformly followed. We learn of Syeds marrying their daughters in families other than Syeds

Though the love was not the normal consideration or basis of marriage, instances were found when parents yielded to their children choice. Jaisi's Padmavat is a beautiful story of love marriage.

DIVORCE

The practice of the marriage prevailed in the Muslims with whom marriage was a social contract rather than sacrament of divine origin as among the Hindus. If a man repeated the word divorce thrice, the divorce became complete and there was no way of getting back the divorced wife except through long process. Her marriage with somebody else and communication with somebody else might be followed by a second divorce and then only she could be married with the first husband. In a particular case cited by Sheikh Jamali, Qadar Khan Governor of multan in an excited state of mind, divorce his wife. The Qazi advice him to allow divorced wife to be married with Suhrawardy saint to facilitate her restoration to him, but the latter refused to divorce his new wife' Widow remarriage was prevalent, but among the upper class Hindus, widow remarriage was not allowed. They were not allowed to participate in social functions such as marriage, as their appearance was considered inauspicious.

POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Many women enjoyed a position in the society because of political, aristocratic and religious connections, attitude and outlook. They were accomplished and those in religious circle were well known for their saintly virtues.

Contemporary writings show that women sometimes exercised a potent influence on the administration of the state. Some of them were adept in court intrigues like Shah Turkan mother of Ruka-Ud-Din-Feroz. After the death of Sultan Iltumish she got her son Feroz crowned as King. For all practical purposes she ruled on behalf of her son. Razia formed a conspiracy against his rule. She exploited the discontent against the rule of arrogant rule of Queen Dowagarh. The conspiracy succeeded in dethroning of Rukh-Ud-Din. Razia was acclaimed as the rightful Sultan and successor to the throne. Razia was the 1st and last crowned Muslim Queen who occupied throne in India. But the ladies of the 'Harem' played sometimes most conspicuous part in the drama of succession to the throne. Khedawand Zeula, daughter of Tuglaq Shahand sister of Sultan Muhammad, opposed the candidature of Sultan Firoz for the throne in favour of her son Davar Mallik.

The wives of officials also wielded control over the working of day-to-day administration. During the rein of Sultan Kaikubad, the wife of Mallik Nizam-Ud-Din who was the daughter of Fakhrudin, the kotwal of Delhi, assumed full control of the Sultan's Harem. Sultan was completely under her control and refuses to listen any complaints against Nizam-Ud-Din.

The Afghan women were famous for courage. Some of the ladies had many accomplishments. In travel, hunting and military expedition's ladies accompanied the Kings and Nobles, and some of them rode on horses, garbed in many dress. Gulbadan Begum, sister of Humayun and author of Humayunama, refers to Mehr AngenBegum, daughter of Hussain Mirza, as an expert Archer, a Polo player and musician.

SATI

A study of women of our period would be incomplete without the reference to the custom of Sati. The act of burning of Hindu wife under certain conditions after the death of her husband was called Sati. On the whole the custom was confined to the higher class Hindus and especially followed by the Rajputs. The women of the lower classes didn't even follow the piers of their husband's to cremation ground.

The heroic spirit shown by Hindu women who practice Sati was admired by the then Muslims as something noble. Amir Khusro describing the burning of the women on the funeral of her husband observes," though this is not allowed in Islam yet what a great achievement it is..... If this practice is made lawful amongst us, pious devotees might surrender their lives. Mallik Mohammed Jaisi had great praise for such types of women. He says "Sati who burns for the truth to her lord, if there is truth in her heart the fire will be cooled.

The act of Sati was performed both with the death body of the husband and without it if the corpse of the deceased husband was available, the wife was burned with it. This was called Sahamarna or dying in company with. In case of more wife than one, the privilege of being burned with the corpse of the husband was exercised by chief favorite wife and others were burnt in separate fires. In exceptional cases co-wife reconcile their life long differences and ill will and arranged to be burned together with their husband in the same fire.

Ibn Batuta gives a detailed account of it. The widow first took a bath and put on her best cloths and jewels. A procession was soon formed took conduct her to the place of cremation. The Brahmins and others relations joined the procession. The women took a coconut in her right hand and a mirror in her left and rood on a horse. The procession started with music and drums towards the shady grove. There was a pool of water in this grove. Near the pool was a huge fire, screen for public view the whole surrounding wearing an appearance of hell, God saves us from it approaching

the shady grove, the Sati first washed her self in this pool of water and then began making a gift of her fire cloths and Jewels one by one. At the end of it she borrowed a coarse unsewn cloth and put it over her body. Then with calm boldness she advanced to the enclosure, until now screened from her side. She joins her hand in salutation and prayers to the goddess of fire, Agni. She meditated for while then suddenly with her finale resolution she cast herself into the flames. Just at this movement, from another quarter, a clamorous noise was raised with trumpets, drum and other vessels obviously to distract the attention of the people from the horror of the scene. Others who were closely watching the movements of the 'Sati' immediately pushed away heavy logs of wood, over the body of the burning women to prevent her escaping or struggling. Ibn Batuta, our informant, fainted at the sight and was carried away from the scene. So his description doesn't give us further details. This account more or less a complete and faithful description of what happened in Sati.

Ibn Batuta tells us that the Sultans of Delhi had enacted a law, where by a license has to be produced before burning a Widow within the kingdom. Probably the law was designed to discourage the use of compulsion and social pressure to force a widow to burn herself, but in the absence of very strong reasons to the contrary, the license was issued as a matter of course. Beyond instituting a system of official permits, the state took no further steps.

Thus the position of the women deteriorated with the passage of the time from bad to worse. The Muslim rule to some extent was responsible for it. It was with advent of the Islam that 'purdah' system became very prominent. The position of the women on the whole was not very satisfactory.

REFERENCES

1. Abbas Khan P33
2. Ibid P74
3. M Mohammad Jaisi

4. Manusmriti, quoted in A Rashid (Society and culture in Medieval India)
5. Fakhre Madaber, P67 quoted in Ashraf P135
6. Barni P245
7. Jimutavahani's view discussed in HBI 610 quoted in B Majumdar, P135
8. Life and condition of the people of Hindustan – Dr K M Ashraf P135-136
9. Ibid P136
10. Siyar-UI-Arifin P140
11. Matla-UI-Anwar P192-198
12. Compare Min Elizabeth Copper, P102
13. Compare the opinion of Mr Mehta in an article on Pardah in the Reader, Allahabad, May 1908
14. The socio eco history of North India, P-141 – Dr BP Majumdar
15. Ed Vol. 1 P-11 quoted in Ashoka Srivastava (India as described by Arab travelers)
16. KM Asraf, P-171
17. History of Med. Civilization, P-77,78, Tr. M Habib. Indian culture and social life at the time of the Turkish Invasion PP-109, 110, Journal of the Aligarh Historical Research Institute, 1941.
18. The book of Durate Barbora, 11 P-35

Copyright © 2015 Mrs. Bindu. This is an open access refereed article distributed under the Creative Common Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.