

Contribution of Women to the Persian Language in Medieval India

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Abstract: Patriarchy, it seems today, has always been an integral part of the Indian society. A slight glance at the status of women in India today makes one think that women have always been considered inferior to men. History, however, says otherwise; women in India have historically had a greater role to play and have commanded far greater respect than they do today. It will therefore be justified to say that women are not gaining but rather re-gaining prominence in the Indian society, considering the fact that the idea of women having a prominent role to play in the society is not new to this vast country. The role of women in India has in fact been a 'loss and gain' business, with their influence fluctuating from time to time. This paper attempts to examine the contribution of women in the field of literature under the Islamic rule in India. During the Sultanate as well as the Mughal period, although the status of women was comparatively lower than their male counterparts, this period saw some significant literary contributions from women. This paper first analyses the status of women during the Islamic rule in India, and then outlines their significant literary contributions.

Keywords: Bhakti movement, Mughal period, Persian literature, women in India.

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Introduction

The status of women saw a great decline in the medieval period, slowly worsening their position in the society. During this period, female infanticide, child marriage, Purdah, Jauhar, and Sati were the main social evils contributing to the low status of women and hindering their overall development.

However, the Bhakti and Sufi Movements that occurred during the same period as the mughal rule played an important role in improving the condition of women again. According to Dev, Tiwari & Khan (2005) "This age also saw the emergence of writing by women saint poets, the most prominent among which are Lalleshwari and Habba Khatoon in Kashmiri, Mirabai in Hindi, Gujrati and Marathi, Avvayyar in Tamil, Mudduparani in Telgu and Akka Mahadevi in Kannada" (p.17). The life of Mira Bai who refused to commit sati after her husband's death is a historic example of women's independence and individuality. Kabir and Guru Nanak preached equality between men and women. Ramanand was the first Bhakti reformer who threw open the gates of hearty worship to women and made disciples from amongst them. Padmawati and Sursuri, who were pupils of Ramanand, had equal contribution to the Bhakti movement (Mehta, 2002, p.193).

Women under Islamic Rule

The improvement of women's status was also visible in the royal sultanate rule and later to a greater extent, under the Mughals. Women living in the royal courts were allowed to receive education and were even given a chance to prove themselves in different fields. They even took part in the administration of the country. The Sultanate period bears witness to this, where woman played a great role in administration and harem management. The most valuable source of medieval Indian history, *Tarikh-e-Firoz Shahi* by Zia-ud Din Barni deals with these ladies with great respect, namely, Shah Turkan (wife of Iltutmish), Malika Jahan (wife of Jalaluddin Khilji), Khudaband Jadeh (sister of Muhammad bin Tughlaq), Makhdume Jahan (mother of Muhammad bin Tughlaq), Shams Khatoon (wife of Bahlol Lodi), Bibi Amba (also wife of Bahlol Lodi), Bibi Mattu (wife of Islam Khan Lodi), Bibi Jamal (daughter of Moinuddin Chishti), Bibi Julekha (mother of Nizamuddin Auliya), Bibi Rasti (daughter of Muhammad bin Tughlaq), Bibi Fatima and others.

Among the women that made their mark in the Delhi Sultanate, the name Raziya Sultana stands out even today. Raziya Sultana was the only woman to sit on the throne of Delhi. Despite much opposition to her gender, she was able to ascend to the throne and rule the Delhi Sultanate for four years (1236-1240 CE) before being deposed and later murdered. Her four short years were very valuable as she gave a lot of patronage to poets and authors, and campaigned for equal rights for women. Her endeavors helped in the advancement of Persian language and literature in India. One can never know how much literature and art would have flourished had she been allowed to reign a little longer.

Persian or Farsi was the administrative language of the Sultanate dynasty. Sikandar Lodi was the first ruler who made Persian an official language in 1514. According to Sharma & Sharma (2004, p.61), "He himself was a great poet of Persian language and wrote 9,000 verses in Persian". However, a little contribution of women under the later Sultanate rulers can be seen.

The Persian language reached its highest stage of influence under the patronage of the Mughals. The Mughal period is believed to be one of the most interesting and astonishing periods of India's history. The Mughals contributed in numerous fields ranging from architecture, music, and literature to organization, administration and warfare among others. One comes to know a lot about the Indian society under the Mughal rule from some of the writings of the Mughal rulers themselves. Although owing to the strict Islamic laws and Purdah system women were at large barred from education and all forms of public life, there were many Muslim women, especially in the Mughal courts, that were able to leave their mark and command influence in various fields of public and administrative life.

Babur established the Mughal dynasty, and Akbar created the idea of a secular nation state in India. The Mughals were also heavily influenced by the Safavids.¹ Akbar's regent, Bairam Khan was a Qizilbash from Iran, and a disciple of an Iranian sufi named Maulana Zayn-al-Din Kamankar. The Rsumcretic Esoterici (Din-i-Ilahi)² as a Quasi-state religion bore remarkable

1. The great ancestor of the Safavids and founder of the Safaviyya sufi order was Shaykh Safi-al-Din Ardabili.

2. Dīn-i Ilāhī was an elite eclectic religious movement formulated by the Mughal emperor Akbar in the late 16th century AD in his attempt to promote tolerance of all faiths and show that no single religion could claim total monopoly of the truth.

Safavid influence. In the Mughal period, many royal ladies had Safavid ancestry, Nur Jahan being the most prominent among them.

Overall, during this period, the society was patriarchal and did not give attention to female education; however, the Mughal emperors were wise rulers and knew about the importance of education, hence, great care was taken to educate the women of the royal households. Ought to be noted, was that the education of women vis-à-vis Persian literature was only limited to a few privileged women of the royal elite family and common women were debarred with such privileges.

Works of the time like Tuzuk-e-Babari of Babur, Akbarnama of Abul Fazal, Dastur-al-Amal of Shah Jahan, and Fatawa-i- Alamgiri of Aurangzeb show how developed the Persian language in India was. At that time, some Mughal ladies played a great role in the development of the Persian language in India, namely, Gulbadan Begum, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara, Zeb-un-Nisa, to name just a few.

Qutluq-Nigar Khanum and Aisan-Daulat, who were Emperor Babur's mother and grandmother respectively, were educated ladies, and provided intellectual environment for Babur. Gulrukh Begum another lady of Mughal, had composed a number of verses in Persian and Turki.

Muslim aristocratic women during the Mughal Dynasty that we know of were talented and capable royal women that achieved much during their lives. The greatest Mughal Emperor was Akbar (1545-1605), and it is during his time that our knowledge of women's contributions is manifested. As a Sufi Muslim, Akbar practiced religious toleration and he refused to accept the absolute primacy of Islam, but did model his court based on Persian ideas of Pomp and glitter, due to the Persian Sufism he adopted.

The first prominent women scholar under the Mughal rule in India was Gulbadan Begum. Gulbadan Begum (1523-1603), the daughter of Mughal Emperor Babur, was a woman of great learning. Although there are no specific records of her education, her knowledge is prominent in her work "Humayun-Namah ", which gives a detailed account of her brother Humayun's reign. The book written in Persian language, with lots of Turkish words and phrases, is considered the most important writing of the period. In her book, she describes the domestic affairs of the kingdom, the relations of Babur and

Humayun with their wives, daughters and other family members, etc. She gives brief information about Babur and Humayun, and also the royal ladies in their harems. The mountains, rivers, seasons, art and culture of India are also mentioned. According to Mukherjee (2001, p.168), "Nowadays, the original Humayun Namah is preserved in the British Museum".

Another important figure in this field was Nur Jahan (31 May 1577 -17 December 1645). Nur Jahan's verses, also called poetry of high order, are proof enough for her talent in Persian. According to Mukherjee (2001, p.174), "Nur Jahan, like Salima Sultan Begum, wrote under the pen name of Makhfi". She was interested in collecting books and had a personal library, and purchased a Persian book titled *Diwan-i-Kamran* with three gold coins. From the time of Nur Jahan, because of their influence in Mughal courts, women became more popular as subject matter of paintings (Mukherjee, 2006, p.48). According to Meri (2006, p.561), " Nur Jahan originally came from a Persian aristocratic family and patronized Persian style art and architecture". Perhaps, the influence of Persian style writing on Indian poetry also increased as a result of her patronization of the Persian culture in the Mughal court.

The contribution of Mumtaz Mahal also deserves a mention. Mumtaz Mahal - Lady of Taj Mahal (1 September 1593 -17 June 1631) - was a woman of literary taste and composed verses in Persian. She was Shah Jahan's wife and a cultured and educated lady.

The contribution of women towards Persian literature reached its zenith with the works of Jahanara Begam and Zeb-un-Nisa. Jahanara Begam (2 April 1614 -16 September 1681) was the eldest daughter of Shah Jahan and had learnt Persian and Quran under Sati-un-Nisa¹. She was known as a genius in Persian poetry and wrote *Monisul Arwah*. In this book, she described the speeches of main Sufis and saints of India like Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti and Mulla Shah Badakhshi. Mirza Mohammad Ali Juhar, a famous Persian poet, has written a *Masnavi* praising Jahanara. According to Jain, (2003, p.257) "Jahanara awarded him five hundred rupees for his verses". She encouraged various scholars and fixed stipends for them. She wrote:

1. Sati-un-Nisa, herself learnt the Quran well and had proficiency in Persian. She hailed from a family of scholars and her brother Talib Amuli had earned the title of 'Poet Laureate' at Jahangir court.

"Beghair sabza na poshad kasa mazar mera

Keqabr posh ghariban hamin geyah bas ast"

It means let not any person cover my tomb with anything other than earth and grass, for they are best fitted for the graves of the poor (Jain, 2003, p.257).

Zeb-un-Nisa (15 February 1638-26 May 1702), was the eldest daughter of Aurangzeb, who he himself guided and tutored her to learn. Her tutors included Roshan Ara, Hafiza Mariyam¹, Miya Bai (Duncan, 1913, p.8), Shah Rustum Ghazi, Mulla Jiwan, and Mulla Sayyed Ashraf Mazandrani. Zeb-un-Nisa wrote poetry in Persian within the macaronic framework. Macaronic verse was common in medieval India, where the influence of the Muslim rulers led to poems being written alternatively in indigenous medieval Hindi verse, followed by one in the Persian language. In India, this style was named Rekhta. The Rekhta style is an excellent example of the admixture of two cultures and two civilizations, which transcends man made boundaries and expresses their emotions and feelings. In India, this poetic form was composed in one line of Persian and another line in any of the regional languages then prevalent, as shown below:

Zeb-un-Nisa jahan me, Dukhtar-e-Alamgir

Nain vilas vilas me, khas kari tahrir.

(Dinkar, 2004, p. 292).

According to Schimmel (1973, p.41), "Zeb-un-Nisa's lyrical diwan titled 'Divan-i-Mahfi' contained 421 gazals". This diwan was about her philosophy on Sufism, unity and peaceful society. According to Soma Mukherjee, she was a poetess and had a beautiful collection of her own verses, but unfortunately, her book of poetry drowned in tank, when it slipped from her servant Iradat Fahman. So that diwan was lost and her memory remains. She had another Persian collection that was a collection of letters named Zeb-ul-Manshaat. She used different Persian calligraphy styles in her letters, namely, Nastaliq, Naskh, and Shikaste (Qamaruddin, 2007, p. 168). She established a department of

1. Hafiza Mariam Bibi was the wife of Mirza Shukrullah of Kashmir, whose family came originally from Nishapur in Khorasan, province of Iran. (Sarkar, 1919, p. 79)

translation where classical books were translated. Mullah Safluddin Ardbeli translated a book titled Tafsir-i-kabir. According to Soma Mukherjee, Imam Fakhruddin Razi was a great scholar in Persian and Arabic, and translated the Quran in Persian and named it Zeb-ul-Tafasir (Jain, 2003, p. 260), but another writer by the name of Srivastava (2003, p.35) stated that "Zeb-ul-Nisa authored both Zib-ul-Tafsir and Zib-ul-Munshaat".

Conclusion

The conditions of women in both social-economical and political-religious spheres fluctuated, keeping pace with the different regimes; however, women showcased their excellence in various fields and proved that they are no longer unfit to access the areas acquired by men. Patriarchy never gave space for all round development of women. During the Mughal period, although women were not at par with men because of the patriarchal restrictions and suffered a lot of hardships and difficulties, still, this was the period that gave impetus to women to excel themselves in Persian literature.

The ladies of the Mughal royalty, as compared to their counterparts in the Sultanate regime, achieved a greater degree of education and occupied themselves in reading, writing and composing verses. Manucci writes that the curriculum for the education of ladies was not confined to Persian and Arabic, but also included subjects such as history and theology (Manucci, 1906, p.331). The Mughal Emperors and Mughal women played an important role in developing the Persian language and literature. If we scrutinize the aforementioned details, then one point must come to fore; as the Mughal rule consolidated itself and the culture formation gained momentum, it reflected in the increasing contribution of women in the field of literature and Persian language.

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