



Position of Hindu women In Mughal India: A socio-cultural and political overview

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Abstract

The period of great Mughals occupied a significant position in entire social life of Medieval India. Society of this sub-continent has been followed by numerous amelioration and devolution of women's status in course of time. The Mughal period was not divergent regarding such circumstances. In comparison with royal ladies and princess, the life of ordinary women was far more distinctive. This paper attempted to focus on the status of Hindu women's during Mughal period. Contemporary popular historical sources, like court chronicles, account of foreign traveller, and regional evidences, profoundly collaborated to explore the subject. Their position could be discernible in context of marriage system, divorce, sati, widowhood, dowry and inter-relation with Harem.

Keywords: period, widowhood, Mughal, cultural, marriage

Introduction: Different offshoots of Hindu Marriage

Akbar's great court historian Abul Fazal Allami asserted child marriage in both Hindu and Muslim society as a popular custom, in which girls had to be married before nine and ten years old^[1]. European traveler Manucci pointed out that most of the Hindu families seems to have organize their child's marriage even before the beginning of verbal capacity. He also enumerates that commonly the daughters of Brahmins performed marriage within four and five years but in several cases the marriage could be adjourn up to ten years². Pelsaert excerpts "the Hindus joined their children at the age of only 4 and 5 years"^[3].

Indian society was much rigid towards the norms of arranged marriage into precise caste and 'Gotra'. As narrated by Abul Fazal a pure marriage was happened between close relatives or in own caste and clan⁴. In accordance with the consideration of parents or nearest relatives a genre of arranged marriage said to have performed. Surprisingly, a broad sphere of liberty enjoyed by the girls of upper-class Rajput Hindu families to choose their husbands. As paradigm, the princess of Rangpur invited her lover to manumit her from the ensuing union with Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. The daughter of Rao Surthan, Tara Bai promised to marry the youth who would regain her father's Todah from Pathans. Finally, Jamal Raja of Ajmer, the brother of Pritviraj fulfilled her wish and according to oath she married him^[5].

Remarkable accounts of Marriage custom

Foreign travelers have expounded several interesting masterpieces of marriage ceremony. Pelsaert alluded a detailed description of an ordinary marriage program at Agra, "marriage negotiation were initiated by the grooms family and when settled the bridegroom sent a ring to the bride ..." with his observation Pelsaert says "in return she sends some betel leaves with a handkerchief, though the unfortunate bridegroom is not allowed to meet the lady, still less to see if his future is white or black straight or crooked, pretty or ugly.... On the marriage day the bridegroom arrives at bride's house with great pomp and show, the

women follow in palanquin and carts, covered with finest cloth that can be provided ..." ^[6]. Among the orthodox Hindus marriage was consummated on the 4th day after marriage. Regarding Hindu women as told by Jahangir in his autobiography "it is a maximum of Hindus that no good deed can be performed by a man in social status without the presence of the wife whom they have styled the half of the man"^[7]. That's why as long as an intimate relation continued, the Hindu women treated by their Husband in honorable subordination.

Monogamy and polygamy

The practice of Polygamy was associated mostly with the upper-class Hindus and Muslims in Mughal India⁸. As told by Abul Fazal Allami "only king is permitted more than one wife, His Majesty (Akbar) declared that 'one woman is sufficient for one man'^[9]. But in contrary, Hindus were monogamous except the princes and persons^[10]. As alluded by Della valle "Hindus takes but one wife and never divorce her till death, except for the cause of adultery". In some distinctive cases if a wife proved to be sterile, then they had the liberty to marry another one with the consent of Brahmanas^[11]. In this respect Hindu society shows a progressive approach towards their women, wherein Muslims remain in inertia.

Practice of widowhood

The genre of widowhood was widely prevalent in Hindu families it was a far ancient custom in Indian society where a widow was not permitted to remarry after her husband's death. Even a woman could not remarry if she desired to do so^[12]. However, Dr. Altekar remarked "this prohibition was complete in the higher section of the society, while those women who belonging to the lower stratum continued to remarry^[13]. Those women who disagreed not burn with their husband were compelled to shave their heads and had remove jewelry and ate vegetarian foods^[14]. Barnier mentioned "to avoid such evil fate a widow had to lead a low life, sometime as a prostitute, she associated with a creature so degraded who is accounted utterly notorious,

because of the dishonor”^[15]. But it is very hard to argue that how much the lower strata of Hindu society were related with such conventions.

Practice of Sati

“Sati” was an ancient unhuman custom of Hindu society, by which after the death of husband the women had to perform self-immolation with an object to reach in heaven. In Mughal period this practice was largely associated with Rajput classes but not even widely^[16]. Regarding, “Sati” Jahangir excerpts in his autobiography “it is the custom among the Hindus that after the death of their husband’s women burn themselves whether from love or to save honor of their father or from being ashamed before their son-in-law”. Sometime it had seen, if any Rajput women husband died in battle “their women immolate themselves with still great alacrity on receiving the turban sent to them as a sign on their hands they are cremated alluded by Mannuci. Although Sati was depending on self-wishes of widow, but their instance of forceful burning. As reported by Bernier a young woman of twelve years old had been constraint to sacrifice herself forcefully at Lahore. According to the tradition the authority had to receive consent from the widow before burning, but we have divergent opinion in this respect. Mannuci visualized that the widow had to reiterate her affirmation three time regarding her wish to go to paradise, then she was to mounted to the funeral pyre^[17]. He narrated “I have seen some of women were die with their husbands body in their Harem without making a sign or movement”^[18]. But Barnier delineated something differently, that looking at the cremation ground the mind of this alive woman became more dreadful, her pensiveness grew vehemently, she wiped out bitterly but there three or four Brahmans assisted by an old woman who bound her arm and forcefully brought her, she should have run away, but suddenly she burnt alive”^[19]. Scholars have adequately criticized this tradition but never remarked its reason as a part of their analysis. It is to be noted here, as Tavernier observed two basic circumstances regarding widow burning. First “by dying with their husband they will live again with them hereafter with more glory and comforts. and second, of the survived she could not remarry”. Bernier described another factor of cultural environment, ‘a vehement effect of early and deep-rooted superstition’ inherited by society from their forefather. Some tendencies are apparent from contemporary evidences that a girl was taught by her mother from childhood that real wife should mingle her ashes with her husband to reach into heaven. Henceforward, it can be argued with beyond dispute, a kind of socio-religious imposition handled such genre.

Jauhar

Indeed, just as like ‘Sati’ the custom of Jauhar had been performed by the Rajput ladies. Abul Fazal Allami described eye-witnessed account of Jauhar system when Rajputs of Chittoor on its fall^[20]. According to this Indian custom when there has been a certain defeat of men by enemies, their women to sustain the inherited Rajput prestige, said to have burnt themselves. Abul Fazal Allami states that it is a custom of Indian Rajputs, under such circumstances to collect wood, cotton, gross and such likes into one place and to bring the women and burn them willing and unwilling. This they called “Jauhar”^[21]. However, the case was not exclusively associated with

Rajputs, but even evident from other region, as instance, when the Hindu chieftains of Karnataka was surrounded by enemy in battle, realizing an extreme defeat, they slaughtered their women^[22]. So in that case, it has been apparent that despite being a human resource she had to suffer bitterly under entire social subordination, with grief and misery. If sometime she could effort to live by abstaining from existing customs that commonly mean to confront with her family and neighbor forever.

Practice of veiling among the Hindu women

As it commonly believed that the practice of veiling was borrowed by Muslims, and Hindus derived it from them. But the composition of Vidyapati and Malik Muhammad Jaisi enumerated about the veiling of Hindu and common Muslim women^[23]. Prof. K.M.Ashraf also remarked that the Hindu women used to perform veil which they called “Ghoongat”^[24]. Rather, Prof. S.M. Jaffar argued “seclusion of women could be traced back to all ancient communities and it was particularly so among the aristocracy during the palmy days of Hindu civilization”^[25]. Indeed, Purdah was associated with both Hindu and Muslim society of Mughal period^[26]. The condition was, however, divergent in context of its practices- among the Muslim women, abstaining from Burkha means to go in contrary of Islamic law for this sin they had to be punished, but in Hindu society it was not much rigid. Commonly aristocratic Hindu women of Northern India used to abide by this genre. As alluded by Bernier and Della Vale that majorities of the Hindu women were freely seen by everyone both at home and outside^[27]. Henceforward, it ascertained us regarding the absent of Purdah among common Hindu women.

Hindu Women in Royal Politics

It has been well described about the participation of Mughal ladies in Darbari politics, sometime directly or indirectly. We have instances of several remarkable women figures such as Nurjahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara, Rausonara but little attention has been paid in replete prospect upon the Hindu women’s involvement in Royal politics. We have evidences of Rani Karmavati, wife of Rana Sanga^[28]. She has profound influence over her husband and convinced him to receive huge Jagir for her son Bikram and Udapiv^[29]. Babar alluded that through a conceal communication she sought Babar’s help in establishing her son’s claim for throne, but Babur reluctant such counsel^[30]. We have another incident, in 1535 when Bahadur Shah wanted to occupy Chittoor, following the weakness of Vikramjit, the local ruler. Realizing a forthcoming raid, Karmavati, wife of Vikramjit made an attempt to hindered Bahadur Shah, by assembling Rajput nobles. Ultimately, she was failed and later performed Jauhar^[31]. A great Hindu woman of this age known for her courage and daring personality was Durgavati, popularly known as Rani^[32]. She was a genuine daughter of Raja Salbahan of Ratha and married with Aman Das of Dalpat. After her husband’s death she became the regent of her son Bir Narain and ruled Garah Katanga with stern authority^[33]. It is said no chaos took place during her period of ascendancy. She had 23000 village at her possession^[34]. Durgadevi rejected Akbar’s imperial authority and fought bravely with her personal army against the Mughals. Being a courageous lady she although confronts with bitter defeat but never lost her honor and preferred death^[35].

Poetic composition of Hindu women

During Mughal period women's education was commonly ignored by both Hindu and Muslim society. But enormous evidences of poetic composition are available, precisely in the field of Sanskrit and Hindi literature which were done by the Hindu women. The Nirguna offshoot of Bhakti movement adequately gave birth a large number of poetess^[36]. The chief of this literature widely dealt with the panegyric of God and Guru. There was a broad division among the poetess regarding the variation of poetic manifestation -first was the poetess of Krishnait school, second was Ramait school and another was poetess of Reeti Kavya. A leading poetess of Krishnait school was Mitra Bai, she composed various literature in praise of Lord Krishna such as "Narsi ji ka Mahara", "Gita Govinda Ki Tika", "Rag Govinda" "Garva Geet" and "Meera Ke Pad"^[37]. Another poetess in the same was Bavri Saheb, composed both in Urdu and Hindi. She was a disciple of Bhayanand, due to her extreme aficionado for God, she was called "Bavri"(enigma/mad). There was other example of poetess in this school like Ganga Bai wrote "Ganga Bai ki Pad" also Son Kumari who wrote "Swarn Beli Ki Kavita"^[38]. The Ramait school, however, was not more popular as Krishnait School. The only poetess in this school was Madhur Ali, an inhabitant of Orchha, her two leading work were "Ramcharit" and "Ganesh Dev Leela". But it is a matter of regret, none of them are available^[39]. During 16th century in Bengal a poetess named Chandradevi, the daughter of Bamsidas, composed Ramayana also belonging to this school^[40]. Reeti Kavya emerged in Mughal period in Hindi language where it imparted Physical beauty of women as expression⁴¹. Praveen Rai Patur was a prominent poetess in this school, she worked at the court of Raja Indrajit, the king of music. The name of Rupmati and Teen Tarang also associated with this school.

Dress and Ornament

Indian women were practiced with diverse pattern of dresses. The Hindu women commonly wore Choli -simply like a small jacket worn round the chest and under it they wore Sari. Babur alluded Sari "as cloth one end of each goes around waist, the other is thrown over the head head"^[42]. They were mostly fond of red colour⁴³. Interestingly, till the age of 9 and 10 Hindu girls wear the same dress as boys. After crossing this particular age they wear a pieces of red or white cotton cloth that look like Petticoat sometime used Pajama(trouser)^[44]. According to mores, the Pajama was thrown over shoulder whenever they had to sparkling with any person, otherwise, at inside home they didn't used to cover up the upper portion, that's why upward said to have remain naked⁴⁵. The Rajput ladies used a more distinctive garments known as 'Lahanga' and 'Choli'. The 'Choli' was used to cover up the upper portion of body and Lahanga was long and loose skirt⁴⁶. A long scarf or 'Dupatta' was thrown over to cover the head as well as upper part of body.

Conclusion

Following these above aspects, it far more discernable that Hindu women although not engaged with much priority as today. But even not confronted with entire deterioration in context of socio-economic and political value. Except few subjects like -Sati, Jauhar, Widowhood, other genuine achievements must not be disregarded. In comparison with prior ages Hindu women laid profound influence upon

politics, culture, and literature. However, due to inadequate sources we are unable to focus more meticulously about the common Hindu women's life.

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