The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 3 | Issue 7 | July 2025
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online)
Website: www.theacademic.in

Women in the Sultanate and Mughal Periods: A Socio-Political Perspective

Utkalika Sahoo

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Bangabasi Evening College

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16880040

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 30-07-2025

Published: 10-08-2025

Keywords:

women - india-medieval era - education -health - sultanate period - mughal era.

ABSTRACT

There has been a lot of discussion in history about the condition of women in India during the Middle Ages. The condition of women in that era was not very good. They were subject to the veil system, and ordinary women were far from the light of education. Although women in the houses of emperors and aristocrats received the light of education. Many of them wrote books. Women like Nur Jahan have also been seen ruling behind the veil. Ordinary women then contributed a lot in agriculture and handicrafts in addition to household chores. Therefore, to understand the overall condition of women in the Middle Ages, we have to judge from the perspective of history.

Introduction:

The medieval period of Indian history was marked by significant events and transformations. The decline of Rajput rule paved the way for the advent of Muslim powers. The historical trajectory of medieval India largely revolves around the Sultanate and Mughal periods. During this era, the status of women began to deteriorate further. The two Battles of Tarain in 1191 and 1192 brought about a decisive change in the political landscape of India. In the second battle, Prithviraj Chauhan was defeated by Muhammad Ghori, who subsequently installed his loyal general, Qutb-ud-din Aibak, on the throne of Delhi. This period also witnessed a considerable decline in the social standing of women. Practices such as purdah (veiling), child marriage, sati (widow immolation), and the custom of jauhar became deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural fabric of medieval Indian society. The condition of women's education likewise became increasingly deplorable. It would be inaccurate to claim that women enjoyed a favorable position in society during this time. While women belonging to royal households—those of emperors and

sultans—were sometimes granted access to education, such privileges were largely denied to women from the general populace. Nevertheless, the annals of medieval Indian history do record the presence of formidable women rulers who defied the constraints of their time and engaged in statecraft. Notable among them are Rudramma, Durgavati, Razia Sultana, and Chand Bibi—figures who exemplified courage and administrative acumen in an otherwise patriarchal milieu.

Medieval India can be regarded as a transitional epoch—a *yugasandhikshana*—characterized by the emergence of Islamic cultural influences that brought a distinct sense of novelty to various domains such as language, literature, and art. Within the Hindu community, the varna system remained firmly entrenched, with the continued presence of the fourfold social order: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. During this period, the practice of *purdah* witnessed widespread expansion. It was often imposed upon women through coercive social customs and, at times, through state intervention. It is said that even Emperor Akbar issued a decree stating that if any woman were found in public spaces or city streets without observing *purdah*, she would be sent to a brothel and coerced into that profession. However, numerous historians have expressed divergent views on the origins and enforcement of *purdah*. As B.N. Sharma notes, "Pardah before the Muslim rule in India could have been partial. This system became well grounded in northern India by 1200 A.D with the advent of Muslim culture. The Hindus adapted pardah as a protective measure to save the honour of their women folk and to maintain the purity of their social order." [1]

That the practice persisted well into the 16th century is evidenced by the observations of the foreign traveler Barbosa, who encountered it during his visit to Bengal. Among Muslim elites, the *purdah* system was enforced with particular rigidity. "Among Muslim, if for any reason a lady of rank discarded pardah even for a temporary period the consequence for her were disastrous. For instance, Amir Khan the governor of Kabul renounced his wife when her pardah was broken when she jumped from the back of an elephant who had run amuck." [2] It is important to note, however, that this rigorous observance of *purdah* was largely confined to aristocratic and elite households. Among the lower and economically disadvantaged classes, such rigid restrictions were less prevalent, primarily due to the necessities of labor and subsistence. Nonetheless, the medieval period was not devoid of notable women figures within the Islamic world who transcended the constraints of their time—among them Razia Sultana, Gulbadan Begum, Jahanara Begum, Meher Angrez, and Islam Khatun—all of whom made significant contributions to governance, literary culture, or public life.

During the medieval period in India, both the Sultanate and the Mughal regimes constituted the dominant forms of governance. The extent to which women enjoyed social status and recognition within these structures remains a matter of critical inquiry. Under the Sultanate rule, women from both Hindu and Muslim communities experienced severely diminished social standing. Firuz Shah Tughlaq, for instance, prohibited women from entering *mazars* (shrines). Polygamy was prevalent during this era, allowing men to take multiple wives. Enslaved women were also kept in royal *harems*.[3] When a Rajput kingdom faced defeat, the wives and female attendants of the fallen rulers often committed *jauhar* (ritual self-immolation) to preserve their honor. This was because the women of the defeated Rajputs, like their property, were often treated as part of the spoils of war and taken away by the victors. Women from agrarian households commonly worked in the fields alongside men. During the Sultanate period, Razia, the daughter of Iltutmish, succeeded her father to the throne. This highly capable woman became the first Muslim female ruler to ascend the throne in India. Rejecting the *purdah* system, she dressed like a man and publicly performed her royal duties—defying the gender norms of her time.

During the medieval period, the practice of *sati* (widow immolation) was widespread, particularly between the 7th and 11th centuries CE in northern India. This custom was even observed within the royal families of Kashmir. During the Sultanate period, the condition of Muslim women was comparatively better than that of Hindu women, primarily because Islamic law entitled Muslim women to inherit parental property. However, the situation began to change during the 13th and 14th centuries, which witnessed a significant increase in the institution of slavery. Historian Irfan Habib writes, *"At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the price of a female slave in the markets of Delhi was higher than that of a milch buffalo. Sultan Firuz Tughlaq owned 180,000 slaves, among whom 12,000 were employed as artisans. His chief minister, Khan Jahan Maqbul, possessed more than 2,000 female slaves."* [4] This record offers a minor yet telling index of the status of women during the Sultanate period.

Evidence of women's representation also appears in artistic and cultural forms. For instance, in Tirupati, bronze sculptures from the reign of Vijayanagara Emperor Krishnadevaraya (1509–1529) depict him alongside his two queens. The cultural traditions of music and dance were very much alive at this time. Ziauddin Barani, in his *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, provides accounts of courtly life, mentioning that in the court of Delhi, under rulers like Jalaluddin Khalji, young women received formal training in Persian and Hindi music.[5] Women's roles, both in the ancient and medieval periods, were not insignificant. In ancient times, women often participated alongside their husbands in important decision-making processes and were recognized for their support and partnership. Women were sometimes accorded positions of political influence and symbolic authority. During the early medieval period, for instance, under the reign

of Harshavardhana, his widowed sister Rajyashri was accorded an honourable position beside her brother in court. Even during the Rajput era, elite Rajput women were known to participate in governance. Rajput kings and princes revered their mothers as divine figures, often beginning their day by bowing at their mothers' feet in a gesture of respect and devotion.

During the Mughal period, the practice of interfaith marriage began to emerge, particularly from the reign of Emperor Akbar onward. Traditionally, Hindus did not enter into matrimonial alliances with Muslims. However, among the Rajputs, marriages with Muslim—specifically Mughal—rulers became customary. These alliances were largely driven by political expediency, functioning as strategic instruments of diplomacy and consolidation of power.

From Akbar's reign, matrimonial alliances between Rajput princesses and Mughal princes became increasingly institutionalized. Royal daughters from states such as Jaisalmer, Bikaner, and Kota were married into the Mughal royal family to strengthen political bonds. In 1535 CE, Emperor Jahangir married Man Bai of Amber. In 1586, he wed the daughter of Rai Singh of Bikaner, and following his accession to the throne, he married the daughter of Jagat Singh. He also married the daughter of Rawal Bhun of Jaisalmer, bestowing upon her the title *Malika-i-Jahan* (Queen of the World). Later, Emperor Farrukhsiyar entered into a matrimonial alliance with Bai Indra Kunwar, a princess of Marwar. Polygamy was a widespread and socially sanctioned practice during the Mughal era. Royal princes often contracted multiple marriages. For instance, Maharana Pratap had eleven wives, Rai Singh of Bikaner had six, and Abhay Singh of Jodhpur had twelve. However, it cannot be definitively asserted that all wives within such polygamous arrangements enjoyed equal status or recognition within the royal household.

Child marriage was a prevalent practice in medieval India, persisting through both the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Historical sources attest to its widespread acceptance across social and religious communities. For instance, Padmavati's father, Gandharva Sen, is said to have married off his daughter at the age of twelve. The literary work *Madhumalati* suggests that fathers who failed to marry off their daughters by the age of nine were looked down upon by society: *"Babāra tāder meyeke noy bacharer modhye biye dite nā parle samāj tāke bhālō chokhe dekhto nā."*[6] Amir Khusrau's writings indicate that when Khizr Khan married Deval Rani, she was only eight years old.[7] Even Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, was married at the age of fourteen. During the Mughal period, the incidence of child marriage appears to have increased significantly. Although Emperor Akbar himself disapproved of the practice, societal norms remained largely unchanged. Foreign travelers and merchants also provide valuable accounts of this social custom. As one source notes: "A number of foreign travellers and merchants tell

us that boys and girls were married in India several years earlier than the time of puberty. Fitch, a 16th-century English trader, has noted that boys and girls were married at Murshidabad in Bengal at the age of 10 and 6 respectively. Manucei tells us that during the 17th century girls were often married before they were able to speak but never after the age of ten."[9] These observations underscore the deeply entrenched nature of child marriage in the social fabric of medieval India, despite occasional royal opposition.

In medieval India, women's education did exist, though it was significantly hampered by the widespread practices of child marriage and *purdah*. Despite these constraints, female education was not entirely dismissed. Families often arranged marriages in such a way that girls could receive some form of instruction beforehand, particularly in elite households where private tutors were employed. Chand Bardai's *Prithviraj Raso* mentions that Princess Sanyukta was educated by a Brahmin woman, suggesting the presence of learned female instructors. Women from aristocratic backgrounds also displayed notable achievements in music and the arts—such as Mirabai, the saint-poet; Ratnavali, wife of Puran Mal; and Mrignayni, queen of Man Singh. However, the educational opportunities available to noblewomen were not reflective of the general female populace. Access to learning remained a privilege tied closely to social class and economic standing. As the scholar Ishami aptly noted that the woman's place is in the corner of the house. They spin yarn, sew, cook, and preserve food. This observation encapsulates the restricted domestic role assigned to women of common households, underscoring the sharp contrast between elite and ordinary women's access to education and cultural life.

Women of the Mughal royal family were literate; they studied the Quran and engaged in writing. For example, Gulbadan Begum authored the *Humayun-nama*. Similarly, poets like Zeb-un-Nissa and Jahanara Begum exemplify female literary accomplishment during this era. With the advent of Islam in the Indian subcontinent, changes began to unfold in economic, political, and cultural spheres of public life. However, these transformations did not significantly alter the status of women, especially Hindu women, whose conditions saw little improvement. Islamic scholars have often emphasized the relative freedoms granted to women under Islam compared to Hinduism, but such interpretations frequently reflect more emotional appeal than rigorous logic. The Quranic verse in Surah Al-Baqarah states, *"Your wives are as a tilth unto you; so, approach your tilth when or how ye will..."* (2:223),[10] which not only awakens ancient religious sensibilities but also endorses male authority over women's bodies. Similarly, Surah An-Nisa (4:34)[11] prescribes that husbands should admonish disobedient wives, refuse to share their beds, and even lightly discipline them, but if they become obedient, no further action should be taken. Unlike Hinduism, Islam did not sanction *sati* (widow immolation), and it recognized daughters' rights to inherit their father's property prior to such rights being established in Hindu law, where daughters were

traditionally excluded from inheritance. Nonetheless, the reality remains that neither religion, nor any other at the time, accorded women full dignity, rights, or freedoms commensurate with their humanity.

During the Mughal era, hedonistic men often confined their wives, concubines, and female slaves within the *harem*—a term that literally means "forbidden area." Access to the harem was strictly restricted, with only the emperor and a few trusted individuals permitted entry, excluding all other men. The concept of the harem had its roots in the Middle East and became an entrenched institution in Mughal India. Though life inside the harem was marked by opulence, luxury, and material pleasure, it was far from emotionally fulfilling for the women who lived there. As Abraham Eraly poignantly notes, "The harem was a smouldering world of private misery, of unspeakable loneliness and unsated love, the deprivation in fact of all the primary satisfactions of life—the pleasure of sex, the happiness of love and family and children—which no luxury in the world could compensate. The *begums* had everything and more. But they missed life."[12] The harem was intentionally isolated from the outside world. Its security was maintained by female guards and eunuchs. Abul Fazl, in his account, writes: "The Harem was guarded by 'sober and active women; the most trustworthy of them are placed about the apartments of his (the emperor's) Majesty. Outside the enclosure the eunuchs are placed; and at a proper distance, there is a guard of faithful Rajputs, beyond whom are the porters of the gates. Besides, on all four sides, there are guards of Nobles, Ahadis and other troops, according to the ranks."[13] According to Niccolao Manucci's descriptions, eunuchs ensured that no intoxicants like alcohol or opium entered the harem. However, despite such vigilance, smuggled alcohol occasionally found its way in. Empress Nur Jahan herself was known for crafting refined liquor blends.[14]

Every evening at sunset, all entrances to the harem—except the main gate—were sealed. The emperor's mother, sisters, and other female relatives also resided within the harem, attended by a large number of female staff. Historian Shireen Moosvi notes that female officials in the harem received monthly salaries ranging from 27 to 1610 rupees.[15] Elite women wore embroidered garments and distinctive *taj kulah* headgear. Nur Jahan's mother was skilled in the art of perfume-making. While women could not leave the harem freely, *zubadah* or travel permits were sometimes used for rare external visits. They applied *kohl* to their eyes and used *henna* to dye their hair. The only space offering a fleeting sense of liberation was the *Meena Bazaar*, a fair established during Humayun's reign, where emperors and nobles would mingle in search of beauty and companionship. Under Islamic law, a man was permitted to marry up to four women, whereas women had no such right to multiple spouses. In Bengal, women engaged in spinning fine muslin threads, showcasing remarkable artisanal skill. In Ayodhya,

women were known for their expertise in delicate embroidery work, contributing to the rich tapestry of domestic craftsmanship in medieval India.

In the medieval period, the practice of Sati—where a widow immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre—was prevalent, though not compulsory. The Mughals did not view this custom favourably. The French traveler François Bernier offers a harrowing account of a *Sati* ritual: *"The poor little creature appeared more dead than alive when she approached the dreadful pit: the agony of her mind cannot be described; she trembled and wept bitterly; but three or four of the Brahmins, assisted by an old woman who held her under the arm, forced the unwilling victim toward the fatal spot, seated her on the wood, tied her hands and feet, lest she should run away, and in that situation the innocent creature was burnt alive."*[16] The occurrence of Sati was more frequent in North India compared to the South, yet it was not legally or socially mandatory during the Mughal period. Despite the regressive social practices of the time, motherhood held a place of high reverence. The mother was seen as the most respected figure within the household. For instance, Rana Sangram Singh II of Mewar used to express his reverence to his mother before meals—a symbolic gesture reflecting maternal veneration.

However, women who were unable to bear sons were denied such respect, indicating a gender-biased view of female worth based on reproductive roles. While women in the Vedic age enjoyed relatively greater respect and autonomy, that status deteriorated significantly during the later Vedic and medieval periods. Under both the Sultanate and Mughal regimes, the condition of women worsened—particularly in terms of education and personal freedom. The widespread practice of purdah (seclusion behind veils or screens) confined women to the domestic sphere. Even their freedom of expression was severely limited. While royal and aristocratic women occasionally held positions of influence, the everyday woman—especially from non-elite backgrounds—had little to no access to economic or social upliftment. Her life was mostly confined to household chores, stripped of agency, education, or avenues for public engagement.

Reference

- Prof. Priyanka, *Status of Women in Medieval India*, SOVS. In, Vol. 3, 1st June 2021, p. 29.
- Ibid., p. 29.
- *Dawn*, 9th May 2024.
- "*Madhyajugīya Bhārate Mahilāder Abasthān*" (*The Status of Women in Medieval India*), 24th October 2019, https://www.groundxero.in

- Ibid.
- *Madhumalati* by Syed Mir Manjha, edited by Dr. Shiva Hapal Misra, Hindi Pracharak Pustakalaya, Varanasi, 1957, p. 118.
- *Dhola-Marura*, Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 2nd ed., Samvat 2011, Doha 91, p. 21. In: Yadav, Devi Lal, *Women's Position During Medieval Society*, Bharati Prakashan, Varanasi, 2015, p. 73.
- *Dewal Rani-Khizr Khan*, Aligarh, 1917, p. 93. In: Ibid., p. 73.
- *Kavikankan Chandi* by Mukundaram, Calcutta University Edition, 1952. In: Ibid., p. 73.
- Mallik, Samar Kumar & Mallik, Swastik, *Mughal Āmal* (*The Mughal Period*), West Bengal Publishers, Kolkata, 2016–17, p. 526.
- Ibid., p. 526.
- Eraly, Abraham, *The Mughal World*, p. 527.
- Ibid., p. 527.
- Ibid., p. 528.
- Ibid., p. 529.
- P.N. Chopra, "Social Condition in the Mughal Empire," in: R.C. Majumdar (ed.), *The Mughal Empire*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, p. 700; Mallik, Samar Kumar, op. cit., p. 547.