
UNIT 17 WOMEN AND GENDER*

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to:

- introduce students to the current historiography on questions of Gender in this period;
- discuss constitutive aspects of masculinity and feminine spaces in this period;
- examine the role and participation of women in political, social, cultural, legal and economic processes and
- understand social processes from a gendered perspective.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

The question of gender has traditionally been approached through an exploration of the status of women in a society. In this approach there is an assumption that women were distant from the domain of political power and were only participants in social and economic systems. However, new work on the medieval and early modern period demonstrates that gendered identities and gender roles were central to the framing and articulation of political authority as well as economic and social organisation. In this unit, we will look at gender and gender roles through an examination of the political, cultural and social institutions and processes. We will see the articulations of masculinity and femininity in political and other public spheres. These questions are most easily traced through an exploration of courtly material. This is largely because of the richness of textual and visual material from this sphere. Alongside the courtly culture and its visual archives, we will refer to the discussions made available to us through the limited work on questions of legal disputes, inheritance, property ownership etc. We will examine the revenue and administrative records available in the princely courts of Rajasthan to develop an understanding of the gender relations in rural society.

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17.2 THE KING'S BODY AND IDEALS OF MANHOOD

Courtly texts — chronicles, biographical and autobiographical literature, poetry, prose, illustrations and paintings etc. — form the most extensive archive from the early modern period. The central figure in these accounts is the person of the king. Courtly literature like Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama* (composed in late sixteenth century) or Lahori's *Padshahnama* (an account of Shahjahan's reign, composed in his court) offer very clear and distinct articulations of the nature of kingship.

Existing scholarship on the Mughal Empire has focused on the nature and composition of the ruling elite, institutions of governance, religious ideology of the Emperors, structures of revenue collection, economy of the empire, networks of power sharing, role of normative texts etc. The discussion on the gendered aspect of kingship and courtly culture by Rosalind O'Hanlon, Ruby Lal and Monica Juneja marks an important intervention in this scholarship. Through a critical reading of courtly literature, they draw out the ideals of manhood articulated through the person and body of the king.

Rosalind O'Hanlon looks specifically at Abul Fazl's representation of Akbar as the ideal king, who embodied the harmony of the Empire. Juneja points out that in visual representations of the Emperor, like in the scene of a hunt, even amidst movement and chaos, the king's body remained above the tumult, reflecting poise and dignity. The king was presented as the ideal of courage, martial honour, leader on the battlefield and on the hunt. He was a devoted father and son, careful master of his household and was a benevolent patriarch of the Empire. In the figure of the king, the physical, personal and political realm converged to reflect the harmony in the Empire.

The models of masculinities developed in Akbar's court created an accepted set of values and modes of conduct. It included regulations for the ruling elite in the domains of marriage, sexual and bodily regulation. These included institutes for maintaining bodily purity, regulation of sexual relations and of prostitution. For example, marriage before puberty was actively discouraged. Homosexual relationships were discouraged and disparaged. Heterosexual relationships were reified. It drew upon the discussions in legal and ethical treatises, in *akhlaq* literature. It was in conversation with other norms of masculinity, service and traditions of valour from regional courts. Idealised manhood presented a 'new set of norms of elite male virtue...', (O'Hanlon: 1999) which served as an alternative to religious ideology and community identities. Traditions of masculinity, where the king represented the embodiment of ideal man, became a part of the service culture in the Mughal court. It created a distinctive elite identity, which drew from the person of the emperor.

17.3 WOMEN IN THE MUGHAL COURT

In traditional scholarship, the harem is seen as the physical and notional space where women were sequestered. The act of segregation pointed to the authority and power of men. The harem was a private space — the domain of the household and the family, distinct and distant from the public life of the court. However, the practice of segregation has led scholars to make women invisible in the politics and socio-economic processes of the Mughal Empire. Only a few women figures, like Gulbadan Begum, the sister of Humayun who wrote *Ahval i Humayun*, Nurjahan, and Jahanara Begum, stand out in an otherwise male dominated narrative of history. However, they are seen as exceptions.

Recent scholarship on the history of women has challenged these assumptions about the participation of women in the early modern polity and society. It has argued that the idea of the court as a public space and the harem as a private space is a false binary. On the contrary, members of the Mughal harem were active participants in the everyday exercise of power in the court and were visible in the daily life of the Empire.

First and foremost, the harem was the site of dynastic politics. In the Mughal texts, there are numerous instances of reproductive anxieties. The best known among these is the story of Akbar's barefooted pilgrimage to the shrine of Sheikh Muinuddin Chishti at Ajmer, to seek the blessings of Sheikh Salim Chishti for the boon of heirs to his kingdom. In this sphere of the household and family, even the sexual act was linked to the issue of the continuation of the dynasty.

Discussions on the composition of Mughal nobility focus on the assimilation of diverse groups in the ruling elite of the empire. Royal marriages are often cited as forms of alliance formation. Consequently, the harem was also a cosmopolitan space. But the women marrying into the royal family or entering the Mughal harem were not mere conduits of political alliances. These women were powerful figures, who negotiated the circuits of power both in their maternal homes as well as the Mughal court. They created new forms of social values, brought new languages and traditions to the Court. Members of the harem were actors in networks of power and influence.

Women in the harem were also participants in the wider economic processes of the Empire. They were owners of property and titles. They were legal actors in litigation over marriage contracts, divorce, inheritance, and property ownership.

Women of the imperial household were participants in commercial networks. The capture of Maryam uz Zamani's ship *Rahimi* by the Portuguese on its journey from Mecca highlighted their role as actors in the commercial life of the period. They were also patrons of industry and artisanal production. The harem was also the space of innovation in the material life of the Court.

Women of the harem made significant endowments to public welfare. They were patrons of monumental architecture like mosques, tombs, gardens, sarais, and waterbodies like stepwell or tanks. In 1650, when the city of Shahjahanabad was under construction, Jahanara commissioned the construction of the wide avenue that came to be known as Chandni Chowk, with the canal, *Nahr i Bihisht* running through it. To the north of this avenue, she laid out a garden, primarily for the women and children of the imperial household. She also added a sarai and a *hamam* (bathhouse) to it. Akbarabadi Mahal, a nursemaid in Shahjahan's family, built a mosque, a sarai, a *hamam* and a market known as Faiz Bazar. Fatehpuri Begum built a mosque at an important axis point in the city. The grand constructions by the women of the royal household testified to the extent of their wealth. It was also a testimony to their authority, that allowed them to shape and mark the landscape of the new imperial capital.

The harem itself was not an undifferentiated space. Networks of power and authority also played out in the politics within this space. It was governed by its own hierarchies. It had its own rules of conduct that regulated everyday life. It also had its own forms of sociability.

17.3.1 Nurjahan

Born as Mehrunnisa in an Irani immigrant family in the court of Akbar, Nurjahan married Emperor Jahangir in 1611. Widow of Ali Quli Beg Sher Afghan, she arrived at the

court following a tumultuous series of events in Bengal. Her royal marriage, an event of interpersonal attachment, and her ascendancy in courtly politics were presented as interlinked developments in the seventeenth century *tazkira* (biographical compendium), *Zakhirat ul Khwanin*. Certain parts of the Nur Jahan story are well known, and often romanticised. She sat in the *Jharokha*, coins were minted in her name, she was the holder of the *tughra* (the royal seal). She issued orders on a wide range of administrative matters like revenue collection, grant of villages etc. Nurjahan's family exercised immense authority in the court. Her father was given the title of Itimadud Daulah while her brother, Asaf Khan, was a close companion of the Emperor. Her niece, Mumtaz Mahal married the then heir apparent, Shahjahan, in 1612. In the politics of the Jahangiri court, Nurjahan and her family came to occupy one node of power, such that modern historians have even called them Nur Jahan's Junta.

Nurjahan is also remembered as an individual of many accomplishments. She crafted a distinct sociability and brought new aesthetics to the material culture in the Mughal court. She is credited with innovations of the *gulab itr* (rose essence) and *patcholiya* cloth. She was a patron of a number of building projects like sarais, gardens, mosques and mausoleums.

In the account of the Jahangiri reign, Nurjahan appears to be traversing both the masculine and feminine domains — as an administrator and patron of public buildings, and the author of specific norms and forms of sociability. This is reflected in the fact that upon the death of her father — Itimadud Daulah — she was the chief patron of his mausoleum and the inheritor of his worldly possessions, honours and titles.

However, she remained a fractious figure. In the last years of Jahangir's reign, Nurjahan was involved in conflicts on the question of succession. In Shahjahani texts she is presented as a competent but unscrupulous figure who took over the Emperor's authority. The notice of Nurjahan's death in Lahori's *Padshahnama* notes "...She died at the age of 72 years. Her tomb, took four years and six lakh rupees to construct and was located in the four-garden scheme [*chahar chaman*]." It adds that after her marriage to Emperor Jahangir, she captured the government. Shivangini Tandon follows the journey of Nurjahan in historical memory, by tracing the notices in two *tazkira* texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She argues that the memory of Nurjahan shifts over this period. While the seventeenth century text presents her as a powerful public figure, the eighteenth century text presents her as usurping the power of the king, who was laid down by overindulgence. These shifts in the story of Nurjahan were part of the changing memory of Emperor Jahangir himself.

17.3.2 Jahanara

Jahanara Begum (1614 – 1681) succeeded to the role of head of the imperial harem in 1631 upon the death of her mother Mumtaz Mahal. Given the title of Sahiba Begum, she took on the role of the consort of the Emperor, the keeper of the imperial seal and the manager of the harem. She is often cited as a companion of the Emperor or as the partisan of her brother Dara Shukoh. However, in her own right she was a powerful figure in the Shahjahani court and articulated both her political authority and her personal esteem through a series of writings and architectural commissions. Jahanara's articulations were both 'textual and lithic' [Afshan Bokhari, in Malhotra & Lambert-Hurley, 2015] and presented her individual subjectivities as well as an imperial ideology. She wrote *Munis al Arvah* (1640), an anthology of Sufi saints and *Risala i Sahibiyah* (1641),

an autobiographical sufi treatise, which traced her own journey as a *murid* (disciple) (successor) and a *khalifa* to Mullah Shah Badakshi of the Qadiriya order.

She commissioned a number of gardens, the *khanqah* and mosque complex for Mullah Shah Badakshi in Srinagar. She is eulogised in the Persian inscriptions on the panels of the Shahjahani mosque at Agra. She was buried in an enclosure, at the Nizamuddin Dargah in Delhi.

In both in her writings and her architectural commissions, Jahanara emerges as an authoritative figure — an image she seemed to be crafting herself. Her devotion to Mullah Shah Badakshi placed her within a network with the heir apparent Dara Shukoh. Her elevation to the position of *Khalifa* builds equivalence with him — for he was to be the successor to the throne of the Empire — except in her case it was in the spiritual and material domain of a Sufi *silsilah*.

Architecture has been an important domain of patronage by women and a way by which they have marked their presence in the political and urban spaces. Lahori’s *Padshahnama* contains this description of the garden built by Jahanara in Kashmir:

“...Sahibabad, known as Achhbal, which is a portion, from Behat, held by Begum Sahib [Jahanara]. In the visit to Kashmir, in his 7th regnal year, Shahjahan had ordered that in place of the hauz in the middle, constructed by Jahangir, a banglah should be built, and the tank and streams should be built elsewhere. To give shape to this, orders were given to officials and titles were given. In this season, the results of the efforts were seen and were liked. Two days were spent at this place.”

An older garden was given to Jahanara. Through the construction of streams, tanks, and pavilions, she refashioned it in line with Shahjahani aesthetics. The garden was given her name, called Sahibabad. Similarly, the garden she built in Chandani Chowk was also named Sahibabad after her. These gardens also contained special spaces for women. Usually, gatherings in gardens are associated with men and members of the imperial court. These specifically feminine spaces in gardens suggests the development of different forms of sociability.

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) Write a note on the ideals of Manhood during early Modern times in India.

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- 2) Discuss the role and position of women on Mughal Court.

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17.4 QUESTIONS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

In his memoirs, Jahangir writes:

“At this stage Prince Shuja‘, the beloved son (liver-corner) of my son Shah-Jahan, who was being brought up in the chaste lap of Nur-Jahan Begam, and towards whom I have so much affection that he is dearer to me than life, was attacked by a specially infantile disease which they call “*ummu-s-sibyan*,” and for a long time his senses left him. Although experienced people devised many remedies, they were unprofitable, and his insensibility (*bi-hushi*) took away my senses (*hush*). As visible remedies were hopeless, by way of humility and submission I rubbed the head of supplication on the Court of the gracious Ruler who cherishes his slaves, and begged for the child’s recovery. In this state it occurred to me that as I had made a vow to my God that after I had passed my fiftieth year, this suppliant would give up hunting with bullet and gun, and would injure no creature with his own hand, if for the sake of his safety I were to give up shooting from the present date, it were possible that his life would become the means of preserving the lives of many animals, and God Almighty might give him to me.”

This description in Jahangir’s memoirs appears as a moving expression of concern by a grandfather at the ill-health of a favoured grandchild. Mughal chronicles, which are carefully constructed texts articulating ideals of kingship, contain numerous such instances where emperors appear as devoted and concerned husbands, fathers and grandfathers. Gulbadan Begum narrated the apocryphal story of Babur’s trade of his own life for the health of Humayun. Akbar addressed Jahangir endearingly as Sheikhu Baba. Shahjahan was deeply disturbed when Jahanara suffered burns in an accident in the palace. Similarly, the romance of the emperors — Jahangir’s affection and esteem for Nurjahan or Shahjahan’s devotion to Mumtaz Mahal — these stories are stuff of popular legends.

These stories present us Emperors who were driven and affected by strong emotions, by romantic, paternal, and filial love. We can read into these a continuity with the idea of Emperors as patriarchs, who sought the well-being of their heterosexual family, household, and the Empire.

But these accounts also prompt questions about notions of family and intimacy in the Mughal court, and at a wider scale about the early modern period. We must ask, did new forms of interpersonal relations emerge in this period?

17.5 THE COURTESAN AND COURTLY ETIQUETTE

When examining the question of women visible beyond the elite precincts, it is possible to recover some histories from the stories of courtesans. Though the *tawaifs* and *devdasis* were classified alongside common prostitutes from 1858, an investigation into the evolution of the culture of courtesan culture reveals ‘complex histories of real communities of women’ (Schofeld 2012). An investigation into the history of performance cultures reveals the rich cultural world of the early modern period. At the same time, it places at the centre of this history a culture that was largely centred on women performers.

The use of the term courtesan, in popular imagination, includes the elements of performance, expertise in music and dance as well as sexual intimacy. However, as the

work of Schofeld, Sharma has shown, the female performers covered a wide range of social roles. Female performers, over the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries included different communities, with distinct roles and repertoires. Archives from the period point to a wide range of performers. Schofeld notes some of the terms used to describe them: *paturis*, *daruniparastars*, *lulis*, *kancanis*, *kamacins*, *mukkanis*, *dominis*, *dhadhinis*, *ramjanis*, *kalawantis*, *raqqas* etc. [Schofeld 2012, p. 152]. Each of these represented distinct kinds of performances, social roles and had access to very different kinds of spaces. Schofeld divides the performers in three categories: those who performed only within the harem, those who could perform both in male and female space, and those who performed only in male spaces.

By the eighteenth century, female performers emerged as holders of property, heads of their household and institutions. They were often the teachers and masters of specific musical and other performative traditions. They were important and influential figures in the public sphere.

Women performers, though liminal figures, were able to move across social boundaries and enter social spaces usually out of reach for the people of their class. What allowed for their power and presence in the courtly life? Schofeld further asks, can the courtesan be separated from music and the power it exercised in the Mughal emotional and social world? Music, gave a potentially subversive erotic power to those who embodied musical sound. These performers were of a lower social standing compared to their patrons, but were allowed entry into these elite spaces and hold power over them. They occupied an important place in the elite social functions such as coronations, royal weddings.

17.6 WOMEN AS LEGAL ACTORS

In 1622, Itimadud Daulah, a high ranking official in Jahangir's court and father to Nurjahan and Asaf Khan passed away. Upon his death, the bulk of his property and titles were bequeathed to Nurjahan. Jahangir writes in the Tuzuk:

“On the first of the Divine month of Isfandarmuz I gave the establishment and everything belonging to the government and Amirship of I'timadu-d-daula to Nur Jahan Begam, and ordered that her drums and orchestra should be sounded after those of the king.”

Nurjahan's inheritance of her father's titles and property was not a unique incident. In the early modern period, women were owners of property and legal actors. Through an examination of the legal documents from Surat and Cambay in the seventeenth century, Farhat Hasan looks at the relationship between kinship networks, property ownership and the domain of law. He argues that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there is considerable evidence that demonstrates the rights of women to inherit property. Women held legal claims upon their parental estates, irrespective of their marital status. At the same time, property was a collective resource, shared among members of the joint family and immediate kin. In the absence of living male heirs, women could sell, rent or mortgage property. In other situations, their right to property operated within the household and kinship system. The rights of women in the domain of property ownership were both curtailed by, and enabled by the kinship networks they were embedded in. Irfan Habib, through his study of the Vrindavan documents, says that there is no mention of women as sellers of agricultural land, “. It seems as if they were simply not accorded the status of peasant landholders anywhere.” However,

women appeared in these documents as holders of urban property. Documents from Kota region suggest that ladies from royal household were often assigned land, such as orchards. These orchards were often managed according to the wishes of the lady concerned and income from the orchards went to the assignee.

While we can see the normative legal systems as instituting unequal status of women, there is also evidence to show that women asserted their rights, though limited, to safeguard their positions. Hasan gives the example of *mahr* (dower) contracts and the stipulations inserted in them. *Mahr* were contracts signed at the time of marriage, which assigned men to the position of head of the household. They also contained conditions for annulment of marriage. In the documents from seventeenth century Cambay, both Hindu and Muslim women were seen inserting conditions in the marriage contracts. Hasan gives the example of four conditions commonly found in the *Mahr* documents:

- ‘1. The man was not to take a second wife.
2. He would not beat his wife with sticks so severely as to leave bruises on her body.
3. He was not to leave his spouse for more than the stipulated period, varying from six to twelve months, without providing her with adequate maintenance during his absence.
4. He would not keep a slave girl as a concubine.’

The conditions were also put in place in marriages ‘among the economically weaker social groups’. In these contracts, the main concern was with maintenance. [Hasan, 2006]

These contracts were taken to the court of law, on the violation of the stipulations. Hasan argues that these instances demonstrated that through these legal actions, women were appropriating the *Sharia* — they were using the normative system as a site of resistance. At the same time, by entering the litigation process, women were shaping structures of authority at the local levels.

17.7 REVISITING STEREOTYPES: REMARRIAGE AND BRIDE PRICE

Moving beyond court chronicle, especially through vernacular archives, historians have explored gender relations in rural society. Rajasthan State Archives has a rich repository of village level documents, primarily maintained by the princely states. Most of these records are available from late seventeenth century but majority pertain to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Engaging with the administrative sources, written in the vernacular, available for Marwar region, Shahi Arora and Kailash Rani suggest that in the Marwar region widow remarriage was a highly contested issue. Debates around this question bring out issues in the political economy of the region, where the labour of women, especially reproductive labour, was important for the continuation of the production process. The premium placed on the life of women, in an patriarchal set up, appears a contradiction in terms. However, in this economy, human labour was the most important source of mobile energy. As a result, there was a premium on procreation. Women were valued as ‘energy resources’.

In addition to this, there was a widely prevalent practice of claiming bride price even during widow remarriage — even among the upper castes of the region. Archives show that, father and/or father-in-law, brother-in-law claimed right to remarry the widow.

Though the labour performed by women remains unrecognised in the modern household, it was duly recognised in the earlier periods, often leading to conflicting claims. We find numerous instances of women in rural society, asserting their individuality, and limited rights, with respect to the family or even the state. Further, the state responded by taking cognizance of their claims. Claims over property were recognised and safeguarded. In Rajasthan, we find examples, where women of lower caste/class status approached the state for redressal of their complaints against physical violation or betrayal in marriage or restriction to choose a life partner, especially among the widows.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Write a note on the Courtesan during early modern times in India.

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- 2) Write a note on the remarriage and bride price during early modern Rajasthan.

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17.8 LET US SUM UP

Our understanding of the early modern period must take into account the gendered nature of politics and other socio-economic processes. The articulation of the king’s authority was couched in terms of idealised manhood. The representations of the king as the patriarch of the Empire mirrored his role as the head of a heterosexual family and household. In this household, women were important nodes in the networks of power. We see women as imperial actors asserting their public presence, through their writings and most visibly, through their projects of monumental construction. Women were central to the fashioning of what we now study as Mughal culture. It included etiquettes of behaviour, forms of social interaction, aesthetic and material practices. The presence of women performers reveals other histories of political – cultural sphere, and assigns power to otherwise liminal figures.

Even outside the sphere of ruling elite, women appear as holders of property, and actors in the field of industrial production and commerce. Through the act of litigation women shaped normative systems of governance. They asserted their limited rights and sought safeguards for them. In the rural society, the labour of women, both reproductive and agrarian, was assigned significant value. This can be seen in the debates around widow remarriage, and the practice of bride price.

A gendered perspective of the early modern period creates a richer reading of the period and opens it up to new questions.

17.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 17.2.
- 2) See Section 17.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 17.5
- 2) See Section 17.7

Recommended Readings

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