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## **Women's bodies as War Zones: A study into operation of power, honour and violence through women's bodies in Mughal Society**

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#### **Abstract**

*Violence, bodily and psychological, played an important part in the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo in Mughal Empire which functioned at different levels. This paper would look at the conditions of women in Mughal India, and explore the perception of their bodies being the bearers of the honour of family, clan, race and community. It would also focus on the operation of violence, which was an effective tool in upholding the oppressive ideals of the society. Two biographical dictionaries of Mughal Nobles: Zakhiratul Khwanin<sup>1</sup> and Maasirul Umara<sup>2</sup>, covering the period from mid-16<sup>th</sup> century to late Mughal era, would be studied as sources of information regarding the Mughal society.*

*Women's bodies were means of bargain and legitimization of the political power. Use of the institutions of marriage, abduction and rape was an important aspect of the operation of power dynamics in Mughal times. Women's bodies were also symbols of honour and morality of community structures with which they were associated. Protection of the chastity and integrity of the womenfolk, figures as a major reason behind violence. Ironically this violence was at times even directed towards the women. Massacres of harem and murders of women are reported to have taken place in order to prevent the womenfolk from falling into the hands of the enemy. Sati (a widow burning herself on her husband's funeral pyre) and Jauhar (Self-immolation, mostly by women, when facing defeat at the hands of an enemy), also become an important part of the functioning of honour through a woman's body.*

*The paper would look at all these aspects of medieval Mughal society with examples drawn from the two sources on Mughal social milieu.*

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<sup>1</sup> Shaikh Farid Bhakkari, *Zakhirat-ul-Khwanin*, ed. Moinul Haque, Karachi, 3 Volumes, 1970 (trans. Ziauddin Desai in two parts as The Dhakhirat-ul-Khwanin of Shaikh Farid Bhakkari (Vol I), Delhi, 1993 and Nobility Under the Great Mughals, Delhi, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Nawwâb Şamşam-Ud-Daula Shâh Nawâz Khân, *The Maathir-Ul-Umarâ : Biographies Of The Muhammadan And Hindu Officers Of The Timurid Sovereigns Of India From 1500 To About 1780 A.D.*, (trans. H. Beveridge, B.C.S. (Retd.) Revised, Annotated Compiled By Baini Prashad, D.Sc, F.R.A.S.B.), New Delhi, 1941.

Patriarchy functioned at various levels in Mughal Period of Indian History. Rosalind O'Hanlon (2007, pp. 889-923) argues that the male, in medieval ideology, was fashioned as the protector and caretaker of not only his own self but of the household and the kingdom (O'Hanlon, 2007, p. 896). This conditioning along with functional patriarchy must have out rightly relegated women to a lower social status. Violence, bodily and psychological, hence would have been an important part of the maintenance of this status quo. This paper would look at the conditions of women in Mughal India, and explore the perception of their bodies being the bearers of the honour of family, clan, race and community. It would also focus on the operation of violence, which was an effective tool in upholding the patriarchal ideals. Two biographical dictionaries of Mughal Nobles: *Zakhiratul Khwanin* (Bhakkari, 1970) and *Maasirul Umara* (Khan, 1941), would be studied as sources of information regarding the Mughal society. Treatment of women's bodies in these texts, covering the time period from Akbar to late Mughal era, would be the main area of enquiry.

Women's bodies were not only spaces of sexual domination but they were also means of bargain and legitimization of the political power, which was the main force shaping the medieval imagination. Use of the institutions of marriage, abduction and rape was an important aspect of the operation of power dynamics in Mughal times. Similar to this, women's bodies were also symbols of honour and morality of community structures, of various sorts, with whom they were identified. Protection of the chastity and integrity of the womenfolk, figures as a major reason behind organizing violence. Ironically this violence was at times even directed towards women. Massacres of harem and murders of women are reported to have taken place in order to prevent the womenfolk from falling into the hands of the enemy and getting dishonoured. *Sati* (a widow burning herself on her husband's funeral pyre) and *Jauhar* (Self-immolation, mostly by women, when facing defeat at the hands of an enemy), two institutions, though not exclusively limited to women but largely related to them also become important parts of this functioning of honour through the body of a woman.

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Composed in 1651, *Zakhiratul Khwanin* of Shaikh Farid Bhakkari, is an important source to understand social trends and tensions of the Mughal times. The author of this work was the pioneer in the field of writing biographies of even the lesser *mansabdars* associated with the Mughal court. He was a Mughal bureaucrat himself and retired sometime after 1649<sup>3</sup> (Rezavi, 1986). Following Shaikh Farid, Nawwab Samsam-ud-Daula Shah Nawaz Khan and his son Abdul Hayy composed *Maasirul Umara*. Shahnawaz Khan held important posts under *Nizamshahi* rulers of Hyderabad and played conspicuous role in the struggles between English and French. His work contains biographies of nobles from

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<sup>3</sup> For a Biographical sketch of Shaikh Farid, see Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, 'An Early Historian of the Mughal Nobility-Shaikh Farid Bhakkari', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 47<sup>th</sup> Session, Kashmir University, Srinagar, 1986, pp. 317-326

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A.D. 1556-1780. These two works written by people strategically placed in the bureaucracy of the time reflect an interesting image of the medieval social attitudes towards women and the perceptions about their body in the society.

Both these works are replete with examples of women being married off and 'presented' as means of attaining political power for the men associated with them. Shaikh Farid informs us of the increase in the position and nearness to the emperor of Zain Khan Koka, an important *amir* of 5000 rank under Akbar, after his daughter, Khasmahal was married to Jahangir (Bhakkari, 1970, p.124). In the biographical account of Nur Jahan, in *Zakhiratul Khawanin*, she has been given the credit for the elevation of the entire house of Itimadud Daula, her father, due to her marriage to Jahangir (Bhakkari, 1970, pp.49-50). Such benefits of marrying the royalty, however, didn't function in just one direction. Emperors sought marriages with women of powerful communities as well, in order to establish themselves better and legitimize their authority in an alien land. Emperor Humayun, Shahnawaz Khan tells us, after being enthroned the second time as the King of Hindustan, took steps to marry daughters of *zamindars*, who wielded large amount of power at local level. Thus women here appear mere bodies, exchanged as tools of political gains. Humayun married the eldest daughter of Jamal Khan, cousin of an influential *zamindar* of Mewat, Husain Khan, when Jamal waited upon him (Khan, 1941, p.50).

Institution of marriage, as reflected in these biographies of nobles apart from being a political tool also appears as a constant process of inflicting mental trauma on the womenfolk. *Zakhiratul Khawanin* reports one such example where Mihtar Khan khasssakhail, a *mansabdar* of 3000 rank under Akbar, married his daughter, and asked for forgiveness from the bridegroom because as compared to the position and pomp of the groom, Mihtar Khan's daughter wasn't worthy of being his bed companion, and she would make up for it by being of service to the groom (Bhakkari, 1970, p.223).

Power in medieval societies also operated via the institutions of abduction and kidnap. Abductions of women were done to serve some political ends as, Farid Bhakkari, informs us was the case in abduction of wife of the rebel Gheloji Bhonsle Martha of Deccan. Mahabat Khan, during rule of Shah Jahan, held captive his wife and the Khan is reported to have sent a message to Gheloji Bhonsle saying, "Money is sacrificed for one's wife (who is his honour). If you offer a tribute of 100,000 hons, I shall allow your wife to leave in honour". Shaikh Farid goes on to say that after the receipt of the tribute from the Maratha Chief, his wife was sent back to him with all honour (Bhakkari, 1970, pp. 132-133). The examples of abduction of brides and women of other religious communities are even more abundant in the two sources of our enquiry. To mention a few, *Zakhiratul Khwanin* in the biographical account dealing with Mriza Lahori, son of Muhammad Qilich Khan, governor of Lahore during Jahangir's reign, informs us about his acts of abduction of infidel brides 'by force and violence'. And when a complain would be lodged with his father, who considered himself the *mujtahid* of his time, the father was reported to have replied, "This is just as if you have forged a bond of kinship with us" (Bhakkari, 1970, p. 286). *Maasirul Umara*, Volume-IV, Issue-I

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goes on to add to this account the wickedness of Mirza Lahori and his imprisonment. It also tells us how he was eventually released and received a daily allowance (Khan, 1941, p.435). What happened to the abducted woman isn't reported in both sources. This form of double marginalization of the Hindu women during Mughal time is also reflected in the biographical account of Murshid Quli Khan, *faujdar* of Mathura under Jahangir, where Farid Bhakkari informs us of his act of forcefully appropriating a Hindu woman from Govardhannagar, an area where Muslims had no entry. The author of *Zakhiratul Khwanin* draws analogy between Murshid Quli Khan and a wolf and informs us how nobody came up to speak for the woman and eventually she was left at the mercy of the abductor (Bhakkari, 1970, p.398). This account reflects not only the fact that crime against women could take place with ease but also that there was no accountability for these crimes. Further, the ways in which these crimes are reported in the sources suggest that they were normalised in the general perception.

Nature of most of the crimes against women involved sexual undertones. In both the texts there are a number of references to female companions (*sahelis*) being a part of the harem of the Mughal Nobles.<sup>4</sup> (Bhakkari, 1970, p. 205; Khan, 1941, p. 250) Inhuman treatment with and lack of concern regarding these un-free women is also reported (Bhakkari, 1970, p.101). But women were not just objects of fulfilment of sexual needs but of fetishes and obsessions of nobles as well. Farid Bhakkari tells us about Nawwab Mirza Ghazi Beg Tarkhan, who had agents to fetch 11-12 year old virgin girls for him every night for consummation (Bhakkari, 1970, p.30). It is also reported that these women were left uncared for after the night. Such inhuman behaviour, however, was not limited to the slaves or *sahelis* but wives of nobles also figure as mere objects possessed by them. This fact is reflected in reading of both the sources. Shaikh Farid informs us about Ismail quli Khan, who before going to the court used to put a seal on waistband of his 1200 wives (Bhakkari, 1970, p. 213). *Maasirul Umara* speaks of Khan Azam Koka, foster brother of Akbar, who is reported to have said, "A man who is well off needs four wives- an Iraqi (West Persian) for companionship, a Khurasani for housekeeping, An Indian for sexual intercourse, and a Transoxiana one for whipping so that the other may take warning." (Khan, 1941, p. 331)

Irfan Habib argues that gender exploitation worked in conjunction with class oppression in medieval times. (Habib, 2000, p.3) Shahnawaz Khan relates an interesting example which reasserts this point. In 34<sup>th</sup> regnal year when Akbar was returning from Kabul, at a halting at Safed Sang, it was brought to his notice that a base fellow had dishonoured a peasant's daughter. This fellow was capitally punished, however the noble Muhammad Sharif, who had influence and intimacy with the royalty and who had also played a part in the incident was merely censured and punished (Khan, 1941, pp. 625-629).

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<sup>4</sup> Farid Bhakkari, in *Zakhiratul Khawanin*, writes about one Jahangirshahi noble Mukhlis Khan, who had collected many beautiful female attendants for himself, this information of *Zakhiratul Khawanin* is complimented by the account in *Maasirul Umara* of the same Mukhlis Khan, Shah Nawaz Khan writes that before he died the noble had granted freedom to 500 of these concubines.



Apart from power and violence that was associated with the assertion of that power, women's bodies were also battle grounds of honour and pride. From works of Chaitanya to Amir Khusrau there has always been attributed an ethical responsibility of morality on women. ( Sen, 1922, p.4) The body of a woman and its chastity were symbols of greatness of the community they were associated with. *Jauhar* and *Sati* appear tools of propagation of these ideals of patriarchal society. The protection of family which included mostly the ladies of the harem was the first thing that caught one's imagination in cases of adversity. In the biographical account of Khan Jahan Lodi, Shaikh Farid mentions family and treasure in one vein as the objects to be protected on the starting of hostilities after his rebellion during Shah Jahan's reign (Bhakkari, 1970, pp. 103-105). The manifestation of these ideals appears to turn violent too. In *Maasirul Umara*, in the account of a noble of Akbar's time, Asaf Khan Khwaja, mention is made of invasion of Gondwana by him. The country was ruled by Rani Durgavati. In the battle that followed this invasion the Rani was wounded and she requested her confidant to put an end to her life with a dagger since she had been conquered in battle and she didn't want to 'be conquered in name and fame' (Khan, 1941, p.38). Thus losing a battle wasn't that great a matter of dishonour for a community but a woman falling alive in the hands of enemy was. While discussing self-sacrifice of women in the name of honour mention cannot be missed of the famous Rupmati, who was the love interest of the ruler of Malwa, Baz Bahadur. In 1560-61 Malwa was conquered by royal Mughal forces and Baz Bahadur before leaving for the battle 'had left some trustworthy men with his women and dancing girls in order that if news of his death should arrive they should put them to death as is the custom of India'. When the defending army was defeated and the news reached Rupmati, Shahnawaz Khan writes, 'fidelity grew ardent and she quaffed the cup of poison and *manfully* died for love of Baz Bahadur'. (Khan, 1941, p. 395)

But not all sacrifices in the name of honour were voluntary. There are also examples of the sacrifice being shoved down women's throats. Shaikh Farid Bhakkari informs about Aqil Khan Kambu Karori who was stationed at Kara Manikpur and fell out of favour due to irregularities in wealth and was imprisoned. He, in order to prevent his womenfolk from being captured by the agents of the court under Kifayat Khan, got his entire harem massacred by his son-in-law. (Bhakkari, 1970, pp. 136-137)

In perpetuation of acts violence against women, the practice of *sati* becomes an important instrument. Viewed in the beginning as an act of bravery on part of women even by Emperor Akbar (Habib, 1992-93, pp.300-310), this practice was prevalent in major sections of the society. *Sati* has been reported in both the sources extensively. To give a few examples, there is mention in *Zakhiratul Khwanin* of Raja Man Singh Shaikhawat with whose dead body sixty persons, male and female, performed *sati*. (Bhakkari, 1970, p.111) *Sati* was performed with the turban of Raja Ram Das Kachhwaha, where fifteen women and twenty male servants sacrificed themselves to the fire (Bhakkari, 1993, p.177). In *Maasirul Umara*, there is report of an unusual case of sacrifice where a mother kills herself soon after

the death of her son. This was the mother of Mir Jalaluddin Masaud, who was son of an important Akbarshahi noble Mir Gesu of Khurasan. The author of the compendium draws a comparison between the common practice of wives burning themselves on their husband's pyre and the unusual nature of this act of sacrifice. Interestingly, Shahnawaz Khan goes on to explain the circumstances of the sacrifice of women. He writes: "But, in fact, the conditions in the two cases (Jalal's mother and the Hindu widows sacrificing themselves) are not the same. For it often happens that the widows sacrifice themselves on account of the custom without being moved by love" (Khan, 1941, p.576). The nature of the so called sacrifice becomes evident by this observation of the author of *Maasirul Umara*. Further the manner in which this information is presented suggests that the society not only attempted to control bodies of the women but also their minds and the emotions. And if any deviation from the ideal set of behaviour, both psychological and bodily, was observed in any woman she was looked down upon.

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A critical reading of the two sources, *Zakhiratul Khwanin* and *Maasirul Umara*, also highlights the perception of gender in popular imagination. The ideas of 'Manliness' and 'Womanliness' in Mughal times have been mentioned a number of times in these texts. We also find attributions of certain derogatory traits to women by the authors. Also reflected, in the events reported, is the hypocritical nature of social attitude towards women.

Shahnawaz Khan compares the idea of manliness and womanliness, when he relates the incident of attack on Burhanpur by Tulsi Bhai, wife of one of Mahratta Sirdars, in 1713. He informs us that Mir Ahmad Khan, who was defending the fort, chose martyrdom above withdrawing from opposing a female foe (*zan harbiya*). Shahnawaz Khan then goes on to quote the verse: "What is the manliness that is less than womanliness?" (Khan, 1941, p.158) Thus the battlefields were also viewed in terms of gender identities and manliness appears something that should not be and cannot be lesser to womanliness. The rhetoric of manly and manliness returns in the writing of Shahnawaz Khan when he relates the incident where Rupmati 'manfully' took poison, proving her fidelity by protecting the honour of her lover Baz Bahadur of Malwa. (Khan, 1941, p.395)

Women are also reported to have disguised themselves as men in order to survive and wield power and authority. A few representative examples of this would be the incidents informed in *Zakhiratul Khwanin*, where women are reported to have taken part in battles but in men's garb. According to Farid Bhakkari when there was revolt of Mirzas during the reign of Akbar, Gulrukh Begum, wife of Ibrahim Husain Mirza, made 500 of her slave girls (*kaneez*) to don turbans and arms and set out towards Dakan (Bhakkari, 1970, p. 114). Further when Uzbeks had attacked Kabul and Khan Zaman Mirza was defending the city. In the battle a soldier was captured in 'fully clad amour (lit. iron) (*ghark ahan*) from head to foot', and the imperial forces wanted to kill him, however it was related by the soldier that he was in reality a woman and her womanhood became evident on removal of the armour and she was released. On questioning, this women warrior is reported to have informed that

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about a thousand women in men's garb were fighting in the army (Bhakkari, 1970, p.264). In Mughal India we however, don't find celebration or even acknowledgment of these cross dressed women warriors, as was the case in early modern Europe.<sup>5</sup> (Lynn, 2008, pp.164-215) Instead, despite the reports of these acts of bravery shown on part of women, they were still associated with the traits of cowardice and shame. Their bodies and their identities and its symbols were considered to be a humiliation to be associated with. To clarify this point example can be given of an incident reported by Shaikh Farid where during Jahangir's reign; some officials at Patna were made to put on ladies' veil as a means of punishment. This along with shaving off of their beards and parading them on donkeys was a part of humiliating them for them having failed in guarding the city (Bhakkari, 1970, pp.281-282).

Though her body was the most visible area of domination and power assertion by the patriarchal society on a woman, it wasn't the only area where such oppression took place. With the gender identity of a woman, associations were made of derogatory traits. Her mind was also a war zone, which was not that insulated from the body. The extreme of exploitation of body and mind of women surfaces in a biographical account of Hakim Masihur-Zaman, a *Jahangirshahi* noble in *Zakhiratul Khwanin*. He reportedly made his female servants work all quarters of the day and night. Farid Bhakkari enquired about the reason of this severity towards these women by Masihur Zaman, who replied, "As long as women have no work for them to do, they entertain vain ideas in their heads" (Bhakkari, 1970, pp. 341-342). This appears reflective of the general thought process of the time and not an exception, the author of *Zakhiratul Khwanin*, Farid Bhakkari himself calls women 'low in intellect' several times<sup>6</sup> (Bhakkari, 1970, pp. 103-105).

Thus we can observe from the reading of these two important sources on Mughal social history that women's bodies were a playing field. In this playing field, power-both physical and psychological- was asserted upon women. And women back then, were also mere objects, of bargain and exploitation, of gaining of political power or compensating for the lack of it. Thus it can be said that women's bodies were war zones even in medieval Indian times where violence was an important form of assertion of power and authority.

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<sup>5</sup> "Celebration of the cross dressing woman soldier in popular culture (of Europe) lasted for about two centuries, picking up in early or mid-seventeenth century and dying out in the first half of the nineteenth century". John A. Lynn II, *Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern Europe*, New York, USA, 2008, pp.164-215

<sup>6</sup> While giving the account of the escape of Khan Jahan Lodi's family Shaikh Farid calls women *aurat-i-naqis ul 'aql* (Women deficient in intellect. *Zakhirat-ul-Khwanin*, Vol. II, pp 103-105

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