

CONTRIBUTIONS OF ROYAL MUGHAL WOMEN IN ECONOMIC FIELD

Dinesh Kumar¹ & Dinesh Mandot², Ph. D.

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Bhagwant University, Ajmer

²Supervisor and Professor, Department of History, Bhagwant University, Ajmer

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Abstract

Women occupy a critical place in every stratum and society. Royal Mughal ladies played a considerable role in the economic field during the Mughal period.

The Mughal age was marked by overall prosperity and growth in all the spheres of life. There was hectic economic activity in the country, which led to growth of trade and commerce. India commodities like textiles, spices, and exotic products like opium and dyes were in great demand in the countries of west Asia and North Africa. The items of import were gold, silver, ivory, pearls, precious gems, horses etc. Mughal women made a fairly large but little appreciated contribution to the development of trade and commerce in the country. Besides participating in economic activities, Mughal royal ladies saw to the construction of markets and caravan sarais. Therefore, encouraging and facilitating trade conditions in the country. The present article deals with contribution of the royal Mughal ladies in economic property of the Mughal empire which occupies a unique place in the annals of India.

Keywords: Royal, Mughal, Ladies, Economic, Trade, Commerce, Contribution



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Introduction

We already know that Mughal ladies were paid through jagirs allotted them whose revenues were entirely at their disposal. Other sources of their income were the various presents given to them by their royal master as well as other members of the Royal family from time to time. Few of them had other sources of income, which made Begums extremely rich. Their personal income had rendered them economically self-sufficient. Thus we see that the Mughals gave their women sufficient degree of economic freedom. With such a flourishing atmosphere of trade and commerce prevailing during the Mughal period, it is not

very unnatural that side by side with the Mughal emperors, the Mughal ladies, their close relatives and the nobles also took a lot of interest in this field and participated actively in the economic scenario of the Mughal Age. Though too many royal ladies of the Mughal did not actively participate in the economic field, yet there were distinguished ladies of that time like Jahangir's mother Maryam-uz-Zamani, Nur Jahan Begum and Shahjahan's daughter Princess Jahanara, who are known to have taken an active participation in the trade and commerce of that time. There were also some others who contributed indirectly to trade and commerce.

The royal Mughal ladies built places where there were a lot of buying and selling, built caravansarais for the travelers and merchants, and also owned ships which carried on sea-trade on their behalf. These ships usually operated between Surat and the ports on the Red Sea. They were of different types, like the pilgrim ships of 400 to 1500 tons, and the junks, built on Chinese model and roughly of 30 to 400 tons.

Even in an indirect manner the Mughal ladies contributed to the flourishing economy of the Mughal age. The needs and requirements of the Mughal harem gave an impetus to many industries, including both the imperial karkhanas and also those which flourished in other parts of the country. To fulfill certain requirements of their goods were also brought from foreign lands. Starting with textiles, it is already known to us that the harem ladies dressed in the costliest clothes made from the finest material whether of cotton, silk or wool. Apart from fine fabrics and beautiful dresses, the Mughal ladies were also interested in jewellery, items of decoration needed in their palaces, furniture items, looking glasses, laces, carpets, shoes and slippers, cutlery, vases, qualits, bedsheets, pilow-covers, shawls and many other things. Many of these were manufactured in the imperial karkhanas by skilled artisans, but some of them were brought from foreign countries. For example, exquisite carpets were made in Kashmir, Fathehpur and Jaunpur, but the most wonderful ones were brought from Iran and Central Asia. Since many goods came from other places including foreign lands, this certainly helped in trade and commerce to some extent, both internal and external.

Objectives

- The objective of this paper to unravel a new and innovative of the Royal Mughal ladies in the Mughal era as active part in economic field.
- To examine the impact of these economic undertakings undertaken by the royal ladies.

Methodology

The methodology of present paper is purely descriptive. Required information's are collected from different sources. As regards the sources, primary Persian sources and the

accounts of the foreign travellers have been utilised. Besides them essential Hindi Literature and some evidence has been collected from the paintings. A number of modern secondary and translated works, articles in various journals have also been consulted.

Participation of Mughal Ladies

However, too many Mughal ladies were not interested in the economic field. In fact, till Akbar's time we practically do not come across any royal lady who contributed in some way towards this field, except one of Humayun's wives named Haji Begam, who happened to build a sarai called Arban Sarai near Delhi in 1560 A.D., which had an accommodation of 300.¹ This same Haji Begum had built the Humayun's Tomb in Delhi. Haji Begum's motive behind building this sarai was certainly a charitable one owing to her charitable nature, but building of sarais during the Mughal times, as in times before and after, certainly helped as means to boost up trade and commerce by providing shelter and security to pilgrims and also traders and travellers, who went from one place to another. Because such safe provisions were made, traders could freely and fearlessly move with their goods to other places for selling and buying of goods.

Akbar's wife and Jahangir's mother Jodha Bai, who had the title of Maryam-uz-Zamani, was greatly interested in trade and commerce of her time and was the first royal Mughal lady who participated directly in it. She had her own ships and carried on brisk trade from the Surat port to various ports on the Red Sea. One of her ships was the famous Rahimi of Surat.² It carried about 1500 passengers and pilgrims to Mocha or Jedda port of Mecca. John Jourdain calls it Beheme.³ Sometimes the foreigners called it Reme.⁴

Many foreigners who were in India during Jahangir's time make mention of the ships of Queen Mother Maryam-uz-Zamani and the brisk trade that was carried on by them between India and Arabia, in their accounts. William Finch wrote that, "Emperor's mother, or others acting under her protection, carried on extensive trading operations, and at this time a vessel belonging to her was being laden for a voyage to Mocha." The position of the English ambassador Hawkins, seems to have suffered at the Mughal court as a result of the dealings that Finch had with the Queen Mother's agents who were sent to Bayana to buy indigo.⁵

¹ S.K. Benerji, *Humayun Badshah*, Calcutta, 1983, VOL.II, P. 317; Jagdish Narain Sarkar, *Mughal Economy*, Calcutta, 1987, p.115

² Jagdish Narain Sarkar, *Studies in Economic Life in Mughal India*, Delhi, 1975, p.274

³ Journal of John Jourdain, ed. William Foster, Cambridge, 1905, pp.186, 191 and 209

⁴ Nicholas Downton as quoted in J.N. Sarkar's *Studies in Economic Life in Mughal India*, p.275

⁵ William Finch in Foster ed. *Early Travels in India*, p.123

English wanted to capture them to make the Mughal Emperor (Jahangir) aware of the impatience of the English merchants and their grievances.⁶ In 1613 A.D. the Portuguese came into direct conflict with the Mughals for capturing one of Queen Mother's ships "which was to be laden for Mocha."⁷ This ship had valuable cargo and passengers and also had a Portuguese pass guaranteeing her against molestation. The Mughals were greatly angered by this high-handed behaviour of the Portuguese. When the Portuguese showed no signs of restoring the ship, Mukarrab Khan was sent to Surat "with orders to stop all traffic and to lay siege to the Portuguese town of Daman by way of reprisals. At the same time the Jesuit Church at Agra was closed, and the Fathers were deprived of the allowances they had hitherto received."⁸

One of Jahangir's Hindu wives Jagat Gosain who was the daughter of Raja Udai Singh of Jodhpur and who was the mother of Prince Khurram, later Shahjahan, did not contribute directly towards the economic field, but she is said to have founded a village called Sohagpura where ruins of her palace and tomb are still found. This village was a famous manufacturing centre for fine bangles of glass which were quite popular and considered auspicious by unmarried and married ladies.⁹

Other than Jahangir's mother and in a scale much larger than her, it was Jahangir's last wife, the illustrious Nur Jahan Begum who took a very active part in trade and commerce of her time. As in trade and commerce of her time. As in other fields like art, architecture, education, literature and even politics, Nur Jahan's participation in the economic field too was quite substantial and much more than any other Mughal lady of the royal household, except perhaps Princess Jahanara, the eldest daughter of Shahjahan.

Unlike her mother-in-law Jodha Bai, Nur Jahan Begum's commercial activities were not confined to sea-trade alone. She is famed to have built market places and sarais, had ships of her own that carried on brisk sea-trade and even coins were struck in her name. No other Muslim women enjoyed this privilege of having coins struck in their name. Nur Jahan's coins were made of gold and bore the twelve signs of the zodiac, one sign on each coin. It is not clearly known how much of an economic transaction was carried on by these coins.¹⁰ It is not

⁶ Jagdish Narain Sarkar, *Studies in Economic Life in Mughal India*, p.274

⁷ Finch in Foster ed. *Early Travels in India*, p.129

⁸ Nicholas Withington in Foster ed. *Early Travels in India*, pp. 191-92

⁹ Kabir Kausar and Inamul Kabir, *Biographical Dictionary of Prominent Muslim Ladies*, New Delhi, 1982, p.151

¹⁰ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and their contribution*, New Delhi, 2001, pp.239-40

clearly known how much of an economic transaction was carried on by these coins. Manucci calls them “current money”¹¹ whereas Pelsaert said that they were not so.¹²

Nur Jahan Begum built sarais too, the most famous of her sarais being the Nur Mahal Sarai in Jalandhar. This sarai was built around 1620 A.D. and Nur Jahan bore the entire expenses of its construction.¹³ This sarai is situated 16 miles west of Phalor. This sarai was a very famous one and could accommodate a large number of people. Jahangir speaks of this sarai in his memories.¹⁴ Nur Jahan Begum built another sarai, again by the name of Nur Mahal Sarai near Agra. Peter Mundy mentioned this sarai in his accounts and said that it could accommodate two to three thousand people and 500 horses.¹⁵

We have already discussed Nur Jahan Begum’s interests, talents and contributions in the fields of dress, textiles, carpet and jewellery designing. All her new innovations in these fields must have encouraged craftsmen a lot, especially the craftsmen engaged in such types of works. During her times and because of her encouragement in Agra there seems to have existed a whole market called the Kinari Bazar where the craftsmen were engaged in the manufacture of the famous kinkhab textile. The dress making, carpet making and jewellery making industries also got a boost under her encouragement and innovations. More and more skilled craftsmen also got employment in these industrial units.

Nur Jahan Begum carried on seatriade with foreign lands with a lot of enthusiastic vigour. She owned a number of ships. Her chief agent in her activities concerning foreign trade was her brother Asaf Khan. Her ships too operated between Surat and the Arabian coasts. Nur Jahan was a very intelligent woman. She realised that the rivalry and tensions that existed between the Mughals and the Portuguese would prevent her ships from taking her goods to foreign lands. So she tried to favour the English so that she could send her goods out on English ships.¹⁶

Nur Jahan Begum also took an active interest in internal trade through the river Jamuna in Agra, a number of articles manufactured in Agra were sent to other parts of the country and similarly many articles of trade and commerce entered Agra through this route. Pelsaert, while describing the city of Agra in his accounts, wrote that Nur Jahan Begum had offices there which “collect duties on all these goods before they can be shipped across the

¹¹ Manucci, *Storia do Magor*, tr. W.Irvine, Vol. I, p.157

¹² Pelsaert, p.29

¹³ E.B. Findly, *Noor Jahan, Empress of Mughal India*, New York, 1993, p.229

¹⁴ *Tuzuk-i-Jahangir* (tr.), Vo. II, PP. 192, 338

¹⁵ Peter Mundy, *Travels (in Asia)*, ed. R.C. Temple (Cambridge: 1907-36), Vol. III, pp. 78-79

¹⁶ D. Pant, *The Commercial Policy of Mughals*, Bombay, 1930, pp. 165-66

river: and also on innumerable kinds of grain, butter and other provisions, which are produced in the Eastern provinces, and imported thence.”¹⁷ De laet too in his description of Sikandra mentioned, “Hither are brought all kinds of merchandise from Purob, Bengala, Purbet and Bouten (Bhutan); these pay dues to the queen before they are taken across the river.”¹⁸

During the reign of Shahjahan, his eldest daughter Jahanara Begum was the only royal Mughal lady who took an active interest and participated wholeheartedly in the prosperous trade and commerce of that time. Jahanara’s mother and Shahjahan’s favourite wife Mumtaz Mahal, though an influential lady of the royal court and seraglio, did not take part in trade and commerce. After her name stands the name of a flourishing and prosperous area, Mumtazabad, which Shahjahan built to immortalise her name after her untimely death. This city of Mumtazabad was built in twelve years, 1631-1642 A.D. at a cost of 50 lakhs of rupees, and apart from many buildings, had many makets and inns.¹⁹ Private merchants too built inns and buildings here. But other than the name, Mumtaz Mahal did not contribute anything in it. In course of time the city of Mumtazabad merged with the older city of Agra, but the most famous of its buildings the mausoleum of Mumtaz Mahal known as the Taj Mahal, still stands there. A secondary wife of Shahjahan, Akbarabadi Mahal seems to have built a sarai.²⁰ But, it was only Jahanara Begum who participated actively and contributed largely towards economy in those days.

Princess Jahanara built the famous caravansarai known as the caravansarai of Begum Saheb or the Begum Sarai. It was built in Delhi and foreigners like Manucci, Bernier, Tavernier and Thevenot speak of it in their accounts. In it provision was made for adequate safety of the travellers and merchants, the gates being closed at night. This carvansarai was said to have been meant for the rich Persian, Usbek and other foreign merchants. The Begum Sarai was destroyed after the Sepoy Mutiny.²¹ No doubt this sarai with its special facilities encouraged merchants to carry on trade and commerce between different places through Delhi.

Princess Jahanara, like Nur Jahan Begum, built Caravansarais and market places, engaged in sea-trade and on the whole, took an active interest in trade and commerce. Again, like Nur Jahan Begum, the revenues of which came to her, apart from the annual allowances

¹⁷ Pelsaert, p. 4

¹⁸ De Laet, *The Empire of the Great Mogol*, tr. J.S. Hoyland (New Delhi, 1974 reprint), p. 41

¹⁹ K.S. Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, New Delhi, Aditya Parkashan, 1988, p. 85

²⁰ Maheshwar Dayal, *Rediscovering Delhi, The story of Shahjahanabad*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 281

²¹ Bernier, pp. 280-81

given to her by her doting father and the gifts that she received from other sources. Some of her jagirs were Panipat,²² Achchol, Bachchol, Safipur, Dohraha, and Farjahara.²³ The revenue of the flourishing Surat port was given to the Princess for her expenditure of betel which she provided for her entire household, and the revenue of the Sarkar of Dohraha was given to her for the maintenance of her gardens. The pargana of Panipat yielded an annual revenue of one crore dams.²⁴ Since Princess Jahanara had great influence in her father's administration, many people, even foreigners tried to please her through valuable gifts and presents in order to gain her favours. The Dutch sought her intervention to solve their problems. The English too tried to please her with gifts like broad cloth, embroidered cloth, mirrors, perfumed oil, cabinets, etc.²⁵ Tavernier speaks of presenting the Princess with gifts.²⁶

Jahanara Begum invested her wealth in conducting brisk foreign trade and also got back in return huge profits. She owned a large number of ships and established friendly commercial relations with the Dutch and the English. Their co-operation helped her to carry on extensive trade and make huge profits.²⁷ Manucci estimates her income to 30 lakh of rupees a year apart from the precious stones and jewels owned by her.²⁸ The most famous and largest of Jahanara Begum's ships was called Sahebi after Begum Saheb, the popular title of Jahanara Begum. It was constructed by the Begum at Surat, from where it operated. Usually the captain, crew and other officials of the ship such as the Darogha and Munshrif were appointed by Emperor himself. But Princess Jahanara once left the selection of the captain and the crew of her ship to her officials. But in the next year she made the appointment of the Darogha of her ship herself and Muhammed Rafi was given the post. The ship Sahebi was used by the Princess for profits as well as to assist Haj pilgrims.²⁹

On her first voyage on 29th November, 1643 A.D., The Sahebi was reserved for pilgrims to Mecca and Media, Jahanara Begum also gave orders that every year 50 koni for rice was to be sent by the ship for distribution among the destitutes and needy people of Mecca. No fare was charged from the pilgrims. But they were warned against carrying the goods of other merchants in their names. Merchants with cargo were also allowed to travel in

²² Inayat Khan, *Shahjahan Nama*, tr. And ed. Begley and Desai, Delhi, 1990, p. 447

²³ Lahori, *Badshah Nama*, Vol. I, Pt. II, p. 51, Vol. II, Pt. II, pp. 426,582

²⁴ Manucci, *Storia....*, Vol. I, pp. 67,216

²⁵ English Factory Record (1651-1654), pp. 11-12, 50 (1646-1650) pp. 219-20, 304

²⁶ Tavernier, *Travels in India*, tr. And ed. V. Ball, London, 1873, Vol. I, pp. 219-20

²⁷ *English Factory Records*, 1642-1645, p. 148; 1646-1650, pp. 219-20; 1651-1654 pp. 11-12, 50

²⁸ Manucci, *Storia....*, Vol. I, p. 216

²⁹ Shireen Moosvi, *Mughal Shipping at Surat in the First Half of 17 Century*, *Proceedings of the Indian Historical Congress, 51st Session*, Calcutta, 1990, pp. 309, 312-13

it, though the naul (freight) collected from them was given away in alms. The cargo of the Princess carried on this vessel was worth 10 to 15 thousands of rupees. The goods usually went to Jeddah. The treasurer of the ship was in charge of keeping in his custody the amount received from freight and also the money got from the sale of the Princess's cargo. The captain of the ship was under instructions to bring as many horses as he was able to procure at Jeddah. The Sahebi, is known to have operated till 1663 A.D. Another ship by the name of Gunjavar, which originally belonged to Shahjahan was given by him to Princess Jahanara in December 1629 A.D., along with the instruments, valuables, drugs and material. It also operated from Surat.³⁰

Jahanara Begum is credited with the work of building two famous market places, one at Lahore and the other at Delhi. These market places became the most important commercial centers of those cities where merchants even from foreign lands came with their goods. In Lahore, Jahanara Begum planned and supervised the building of the Chowk Sarai Bazaar.³¹ The famous Chandni Chowk built around 1650 A.D. in Delhi was also a contribution of Princess Jahanara. It is situated opposite to the Lahore Gate of the Red Fort Delhi. There was a pool in the centre of the Chandni Chowk.³² At each end of the Chandni Chowk there was a beautiful ornamented gate. During the time of the Mughals, Chandni Chowk was a famous and flourishing trade centre where traders came from all parts of Hindustan and also from abroad. Each shop specialised in a particular commodity. There were jewellery shops selling exquisite ornaments and rare gems and pearls. There were fruit shops selling choicest fruits from Afghanistan and Kashgar. Some shops sold fine wine some sold ornamented hookahs and decoration materials. There were shops selling even different kinds of birds and pet animals. Many of the articles sold here were rare and very costly. The rich people and nobles often visited the Chandni Chowk for shopping.³³ The Chandni Chowk even today continues to be one of the busiest commercial centers of the Capital, of Delhi.

During the times of Emperor Aurangzeb there seems to have been no royal lady who actively participated in commercial activities. Aurangzeb's second daughter, the charitable Zinat-un-Nisa Begum built fourteen Caravansarais for poor travellers and merchants.³⁴ Then there was Aurangzeb's wife Nawab Bai who is said to have built a sarai at Fardapur. Other

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 311-13

³¹ *Amal-i-Saleh*, Vol.III, p. 47

³² Maheshwar Dayal, *Rediscovering Delhi, The Story of Shahjahanabad*, p. 15

³³ Ibid., pp. 15-16

³⁴ Rekha Mishra, *Women in Mughal India*, p. 110

than these two ladies it is difficult to say whether any other royal Mughal lady contributed in any way towards the economic field.³⁵

Conclusion

This short article of the commercial interests, activities and contribution of Mughal Ladies from the times of Babar to Aurangzeb reveal that even in the intricate field of economy, the royal ladies of the age, if at all they came forward and participated, they did it actively and with a lot of interest. They invested large amounts in trade and commerce and got back many times more as returns in the form of profits. Also, their building market places and sarais and having their own ships carrying on external trade, certainly helped in the existing process of trade and commerce. May be, very few ladies came forward to take part in commercial activities, even then, the few that came forward left their deep mark in this field.

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³⁵ Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and their contribution*, p. 245

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