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Dr. Bharti Mohan
Associate Professor,
Department of History, Aditi
Mahavidyalaya, Delhi
University, Delhi, India

Influential women in early Mughal India

Dr. Bharti Mohan

Abstract

India is a patriarchal society. Throughout history, religion, social norms, legal systems and cultural traditions have both aided and abetted patriarchy in various ways. However, since the ancient times, women have played a vital role in every field. Women were active participants in public and administrative fields in historical India. There are many examples of well-governed Hindu kingdoms led by female regents. Queens had a lot of clout in the government. The paper will aim to study, discuss and appreciate some of these powerful women of the early Mughal period. We will elucidate about the most influential women in the period from Babur to Akbar.

Keywords: Aisan dault begum, qutlug nigar khanam, maham begum, hamida banu begum, mahchuchak begum, maham anaga

Introduction

The Mughal period was one of the glorious period of Indian history. The Mughals founded medieval India's largest empire, and their authority was unrivalled in Indian history. India's political system was significantly altered by the advent of Islam. The period of Muslim rule in India is generally divided into two parts—the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526) and the Mughal period (1526-1707).

The Mamluk dynasty was India's first Islamic-based monarchy. In the male-dominated political environment of the Delhi Sultanate, the Mamluk dynasty was the only dynasty to have raised a woman to the throne. Razia Sultan was the first female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate. Razia's fall is a perfect reflection of women's status at that time. Historians do not have records of any other female ruler apart from Razia during the Delhi Sultanate, which also shows that people were not very encouraging and supportive to have a queen administer the kingdom. It is fair to say that the Sultanate era was a difficult time for women, but situation was different in the Mughal period.

Mughal rule ushered in a modern and distinct era of Indian culture. With their political and intellectual prowess, Babur to Aurangzeb changed the face of India. Women's status in India changed dramatically with the arrival of the Muslims in India. In many respects, the role of women in Mughal politics was exceptional. Harem played an important impact in governing the politics of that time.

The word "Harem" comes from the Arabic word "Haruma", which means forbidden or illegal, but also safe and secure. Harem was the part of the kingdom which was reserved for the women. So, all the women of the palace used to live in the Harem. Entry of the males, except the king, was forbidden in the Harem. As a result, influential woman in the emperor's harem had a great impact on him.

Prior to Akbar, both Babur and Humayun spent much of their time wandering (unsettled life) from place to place and fighting for political and personal survival. Because of this, the political situation in their time was much more open, where women played critical roles and were directly involved into politics. But how much do we know about the women who helped to build this great dynasty?

We will familiarise you with some of the most powerful women of the early Mughal Period.

Aisan dault begum

We'll begin with Aisan Dault Begum, the first influential woman during the Mughal era. She was the maternal grandmother of Babur, the first Mughal emperor. She was always there to save him from the difficulties of life as he faced daily struggles and conspiracies.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Bharti Mohan
Associate Professor,
Department of History, Aditi
Mahavidyalaya, Delhi
University, Delhi, India

Even as a teen, he struggled with insecurities. After the death of Umar Shaikh Mirza (Babur's father) in 1494, an eleven-year-old boy was left alone and in hostile circumstances, where his own family was conspiring against him. Soma Mukherjee in her book, "Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions", quotes Babur's words:

"Few among women will have been my grandmother's equal for judgment and counsel; she was very wise and farsighted and most affairs of mine were carried through under her advice."

It was Aisan Daulat Begum's vision that paved a way for Babur's achievements. She was instrumental in establishing Babur as an emperor and helped to stabilise Babur's stumbling and precarious political career. She became his leading advisor and political guide in the crucial moments when he was struggling to recapture Farghana and conquer Samarkand.

Ahsan Daulat Begum was a cornerstone of Babur's early political accomplishments. She was a competent administrator, who presided over Babur's entire administration for several years. She possessed a remarkable aptitude and judgement for solving complex problems. Babur could have never matched her administrative prowess.

Qutlug nigar khanam

Qutlug Nigar Khanam, Babur's mother was another leading lady who actively participated in Mughal politics and administration. She remained steadfastly by her son's side during the battle until her death in 1505. She was often by his side during his expeditions, exiles, and wanderings. She was able to see her son as the master of Kabul before she died. Babur had a rough time starting in 1500, as he was not the king of any dynasty. He went without food and water on many occasions, but his mother always supported him. Qutlugh Nigar Khanum was present with Babur during a long and difficult time of his life. Babur's political fortunes were so volatile and unpredictable at this point that he and his mother had to endure a decade of misery, stress, pessimism, and physical and mental pain. Qutlugh Nigar Khanam's devotion to his son is an example of maternal love and selfless sacrifice. In his memoir, Babur laments how he and his mother received no sympathy or assistance during the crisis, and writes with sorrow that the relatives who had previously helped him in various ways had abandoned him and his mother.

Maham begum

Humayun's mother, Maham Begum or Mahim Begum, was the chief queen of Babur. Maham Begum and Babur were the ideal couple; they solved all of their problems together and were united in all their endeavours. She was given the imperial title of "Padshah Begum", which denoted her status as the Mughal court's first lady. She was allowed to seat herself on the throne by the side of her husband. She was a brilliant scholar who could quickly solve difficult political issues. Maham Begum's adoption of Prince Hindal, the son of Dildar Begum, Babur's other wife, was another critical act of foresight. She must have taken this step in order to win Hindal's loyalty to Humayun. Maham's nature was unpredictable, but because she was Babur's favourite, he listened to everything she said, which was why he loved Humayun more than his other sons. It is apparent from this fact why Humayun was the obvious choice of Babur to be

the successor of the throne. On many occasions, Maham Begum was effective in minimising the differences between the father and the son.

Maham Begum's political reputation and power grew even more after Babur's death. She played a key role in elevating Humayun as an Emperor. She was by Humayun's side in both the bad times, when he was not ruler of any kingdom, and during his good times, when he reclaimed control of India.

On the occasion of Humayun's accession to the throne, Maham Begum prepared a lavish feast. She presented 7,000 people with special honour robes. The celebrations lasted a few days. This magnificent feast had to have a political and diplomatic purpose. Maham begum had a major impact on Mughal politics during the time of Babur and Humayun.

Hamida banu begum

Hamida Banu Begum was born into a Persian Shia family and was married Emperor Humayun. She was the mother of Emperor Akbar, the most prominent Mughal emperor. Her son, Akbar, gave her the moniker "Maryam Makani", which means "Epitome of Innocence." She was a great help for the political career of her husband, when he was struggling to regain the lost empire of Hindustan. Hamida Banu Begum was instrumental in bringing Humayun and the Persian king Tahmasp together. Humayun was able to reclaim control of Hindustan, thanks to this alliance.

Hamida Banu Begum, during the reign of her son Akbar, took active part in the conspiracy to oust Bairam Khan. Hamida Banu Begum had great prestige in the court of Akbar. In 1601, Prince Salim, fed up with his father's long reign, raised the revolt banner in Allahabad. The situation was perilous, and the emperor was furious. Hamida and Gulbadan Begum pleaded in front of Akbar to forgive Salim for his pertness. Hamida was the bond between Akbar and Salim. She was a pivotal figure in the politics of three generations (Humayun, Akbar and Salim).

Mahchuchak begum

MahChuchak Begum was the last recorded wife of Humayun. She gave birth to a son named Muhammad Hakim in 1551 A.D. She gained confidence and started to play a larger role in the state's political affairs after becoming a possible queen-mother. In 1554, Humayun named Muhammad Hakim, her three-year-old son, as the nominal governor of Kabul under the command of Munim Khan. MahChuchak Begum was a ruthless politician who sought to expand her political clout in Kabul's administration. By 1561, the tensions between MahChuchak and Munim Khan had devolved into open hostility. Emperor Akbar summoned Munim Khan to the court after Bairam Khan's fall. Munim Khan appointed his son Ghani Khan as Kabul's regent. The nomination bothered MahChuchak. Ghani Khan, in reality, was not as effective as his father, which enabled MahChuchak to take advantage of the situation. By exiling Ghani Khan from Kabul, she was able to seize power. MahChuchak took control of the entire government. Akbar dispatched Munim Khan with men to set things right. She came out to stop Munim Khan from entering Kabul, and the two armies clashed in Jalalabad. Munim Khan was defeated and fled to Agra for his life. Mah Chuchak became more involved and aggressive following the death of Humayun.

Maham anaga

History would be incomplete without Maham Anaga's name (chief nurse of Akbar) in the early years of Akbar's reign. Her own son, Adham Khan, was almost considered a member of the imperial family as Akbar's foster brother. Maham Anaga was the commander of the Harem and household. She wielded considerable power over Akbar and used it to further her goals. After Bairam Khan (guardian, chief mentor, advisor, and teacher) was deposed, Maham Anaga became more aggressive and ambitious. One of her main goals in life was to help Adam Khan, her son. During the period 1560-62, Akbar was not yet entirely his own master and Maham was acting as the de-facto Prime Minister. He devised an ambitious plan to conquer Northern India and establish himself as the true emperor of the land at this period. In 1561, according to the emperor's official chronicle, *Ain-i-Akbari*, Adham was dispatched to seize Malwa, now MP, which was ruled by an Afghan named Baz Bahadur. Adham not only defeated Baz, but also assassinated the ministers and their kin, as well as seizing Baz's harem. Rani Roopmati, one of Baz's queens and a well-known beauty, took poison to save herself. Adham, undeterred and unconcerned, gathered all the war spoils and sent only three elephants to Akbar; however, news of Adham's atrocities reached Akbar through these elephants. Angry, Akbar set out for Malwa on his own, outrunning a contingent of ministers sent by Maham to alert her son, and returned with the dethroned king. To break free from Maham Anaga's power, Akbar named Shamsud-Din-Atga as the Prime Minister. Maham Anaga and her associates were very unhappy with this nomination. The emperor was clearly using his discretion. Maham Anaga's clout was dwindling. Maham Anaga and Adham Khan felt their control was slipping from their hands, which was the result of Adham Khan's crime. On May 16, 1652, Adam Khan entered the palace with a few of his followers and stabbed Shamsuddin Atga, who was busy with his official duties, to death. To ensure Adam Khan's death, Akbar ordered his attendants to tie him and throw him headlong from the terrace not once, but twice. Maham famously said to Akbar when he told her the news, "You have done well". Maham Anaga died of heartbreak on the 40th day after Adham's death. The tomb was built by Akbar, which housed the bodies of both Maham and his son.

Conclusion

Across various regions and times in Mughal India, we can see that male rulers dominated. Women, on the other hand, did not abstain from politics, and instead made a mark in a variety of ways. The most popular and valued form of political participation for women was serving in the advisory capacity. In the Mughal period, women could only play an indirect role in politics during the Mughal period, but their voices were important and powerful. The chief queen was not only responsible for the next successor of the throne, but also played an important role in supporting the king in his political decisions. In this way, we may conclude that during the Mughal's long reign, the role of the ladies of the Mughal harem cannot be overlooked.

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