

THE HAREM OF THE MUGHAL NOBLES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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In Muslim lands the quarters reserved for women are called *harem* or, a sanctuary; which is used for the holiest palaces in the world of Islam. The word signifies the respect shown to women and to the sanctity of domestic life. In the Mughal period the ladies apartment of the emperors was called *Mahal (harem)*. Abul Fazal named it a *Shabistan-i-iqbal* or *Shabistan-i-khas*. As regards the *harem* of the Mughal period, it existed in its more developed form, with all its elaborate code of rules. There were separate apartments for each of the ladies to live and made servants and eunuchs were appointed to attend to them whenever they needed their services. The palace remained safe and secure, a prohibit site where only those could enter who obtain permission. It contained many beautiful separate apartments, which were made spacious and splendid, according to the rank and income of the inmates.

The pleasures of the *harem* were not the authority of the Mughal emperors only; the nobles also had permission to keep their own *harem*. Which were generally designed on the royal patterns. The *harem* of nobles too was known as *Mahal*. The contemporary Persian chroniclers Manucci says that almost all the nobles, both Hindus and Muslims, had their own *harems*, which were same pattern of the Mughal *harem*; “All the nobles practically followed the same methods as the emperor for maintaining strict supervision over the inmate of their *harem*”.¹

The *Mahals* of a few great nobles were constructed a fine building, which building materials were used of stone and marbles like those of the king: but mansions of majority of nobles were of inferior construction and with materials like bricks, slaked lime and timber.² While many of the royal palaces in the forts of Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Delhi and Lahore are still extant, the houses of most nobles and mansabdars built with less durable materials, some having

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only mud walls and thatch roofs.³ Have disappeared, but their pen picture remains. Terry and Pelsaert write about the houses At Agra and Bernier those of Delhi. Their detailed accounts point to their personal knowledge through visits to the nobles houses to which some of them were regularly invited. This helps to have a clear idea of the way the nobles and ladies lived.

In these *harems*, wives and daughters of different races, caste and creeds were kept. These nobles had generally three or four wives, and some time even more⁴ besides concubines. Like the Queens and Princesses, each wife of a noble had separate quarters⁵ for herself and her 'maids or slaves; the senior most wife commanded the greatest respect. These wives worshipped their husband like God.⁶ The reason was that the whole management of the palace was in their hands and they could give and refuse anything the nobles visited a particular day, and on such occasion he was welcomed very cordially.

The nobles while going out were accompanied by the favorite wife only. The slaves arranged for all kinds of comforts for him. Noble's women lived in the *Mahal* surrounded by high walls, while inside the harem beautiful garden and tanks⁷ were constructed for their pleasure.

In Mughal period, all the nobles, with a few exceptions, had built fairly large mansions, having mirror like walls, with many halls, rooms, tanks, fountains and gardens, for their ladies. Mohammad Qasim Khan Badakhshi,⁸ a nobleman very loyal to Humayun, and promoted to Mihr Bahr (admiral) of India during the reign of Akbar, had constructed a delightful residence in the capital.

William Finch says, "The City of Agra" about the time of Jahangir, are one way seven mile in length and, three in breadth...the City lies in the manner of half a moon, bellying land ward on the banks of the Jamuna there are many goodly houses of the nobility, pleasantly overlooking the river.⁹ Pelsaert also says that "every one has tried to be close to the river bank, and consequently the water -front is occupied by the costly palaces of the entire famous lord, which make it appear very gay and magnificent".¹⁰

Jahangir writes that, about houses of the nobles, "Many persons have established buildings of three or four storeys".¹¹ One of the notable nobles of his times was Asaf Khan, and William Finch describes his palace thus: "on the east side of the castle, hard without the (Fort)

wall is the garden of Asaf Khan ...smell, neat, with walks (planted with cypress trees), diverse tanks and jounters.¹² Asaf Khan's palace was "exceedingly well built and costly".¹³ But the basic pattern of the *mahal* of the nobles was the same. One portion of the building formed the Diwan Khana or the man's quarters, where the nobleman received friends and suppliants while the greater portion was occupied by their ladies and was called zanan Khana".¹⁴

In Agra the Houses of Khan-i-Dauran, Nasrat Jang. Who had received various mark of favourn from Shahjahan¹⁵ was known to the people of the time. Islam Khan Rumi (1669 A.D) in the rank of 5,000 with 5,000 horses had a lofty mansion on the bank of the river Jamuna; this mansion was formerly in the possession of Rustam Khan Daccans¹⁶ During the reign of Aurangzeb, Mustafa Khan Kashi had built a splendid building in one of the words of Sultanganj in Aurangabad.¹⁷ Mir Jumla, when he died in 1063 A. D. left behind him a lofty building , tank and garden in Hyderabad.¹⁸

Bernier's observations about the houses of the nobles of Delhi are similar to those of pelsaert at Agra. In these Countries houses is considered beautiful if it be capacious, and if the situation be airy and exposed on all side to the wind, especially to the northern breezes. A good house has its courtyard, gardens, trees, basin of water.¹⁹

Besides these grand residences of nobles, in Delhi, the mansions of Khan-i-Dauran, Azam Khan, Muzaffar Khan and in Agra the haveli of Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khana. According to Tavernier, "in the houses of the nobles the women's apartment in the centre and it is generally necessary to traverse two or three large courts and a garden or two before reaching there."²⁰ Pelseart also notes that there were gardens and tank inside the house. In the hot weather, the tanks were filled daily with fresh water. "In this climate water and plants are refreshment and recreation, water is drowning (by oxen) or sometime rose by a wheel."²¹ Bernier says that there was handsome under-ground apartments cooled with large fans. These became ideal for repose from noon till the evening. There were no good dwellings without a terrace was a palace for the family to sleep at night.²²

Nobles' houses were not cluttered with too many items of furniture like tables, stools benches, cupboard, etc.²³ The side walls of the rooms were provided with niches in a Varity of shapes, there were exquisite paintings on walls. The ceilings too were gilt and painted.²⁴ The

whole floor was covered with a cotton mattress, four inches in thickness, over which a fine white cloth was spread in the summer and a silk carpet in the winter.

The ladies in the *harems* of the nobles made extensive use of gold and silver, even for their utensils and table service.²⁵ In the words of Pelsaert, “The *Mahals* are adorned internally, with ‘superfluous pomp’ and ornamental dainties, betraying inflated pride.²⁶ Even their bedsteads were “lavishly ornamented with gold and silver”.²⁷ The *harem* of the noble was small when compared with that of the king. The ladies of the nobility led a luxurious life. Their residences were the picture of magnificence. The wife of Jafar Khan was one of the most magnificent and liberal ladies.²⁸ Noble women live together in the enclosure surround by high walls. Each wife has a separate apartment for herself and her slaves, of home there may be 10 or 20 or 100, according to her fortune. Each has a regular monthly allowance for her expenses (furniture, clothes and jewels) are provided by the husband according to the extent of his affection. Their food comes from one kitchen, but each wife takes it in her own apartment, for they hate each other secretly, though they seldom or never allow it to be seen, because of their desire to retain the favor of their husband.²⁹ The practice of keeping concubines was very common both among the royalty and the nobility. These concubines did their best to attract their masters.³⁰

Noble’s *harems* like their emperor, even though the size of their harems was smaller, yet they followed the emperor to the security and safety of the inhabitants of their respective *harems*. For the safety they appointed appropriate number of handmaids or slaves,³¹ according to their status. The Mughal emperor employed people of different races in their harems, so did the nobleman too like Turks, Kashmiri, Bengali, Habshi (Negroes) etc.

During the period of Jahangir these eunuchs and Bengali slave³² girls served the nobles and their wives. The other women servants employed there also strictly guarded the occupants. They were given severe punishment in case of violation of rules in regard to safety and security connected with their *harems*. In noblemen’s *harems* many old women and beardless eunuchs were appointed as spies, who kept watch at the doors to prevent unlawful intruders.³³

Manucci observed that in Delhi many nobles “are very pleased to have their dwellings far from the royal palaces”.³⁴ The reason was the mutual fear and suspicion due to the

prevailing atmosphere at the court and intrigues in the royal harem. Beside these people enjoyed the pleasure of idleness and Women Company, and many of them avoided attracting the king's attention by living too close to him. Manucci goes so far as to assert that the nobles trained pigeons to obtain intelligence about the movements of the king, what, when and where the king was at a particular time, and had it not been for official and court duties, the nobles would never have bothered to leave their houses at all,³⁵ in order to enjoy uninterrupted intimacy of their female beauties.

Manucci further writes that these *harems* of the nobles were also great centers of mirth and gaiety, where numerous dancing damsels of uncommon grace and voice got full opportunities to exhibit their talents.³⁶ Manucci's account bring out the degrading impact of *harem* life on the rulers and the nobility, in fact, practically sunk in the vices of the Age, and wasted the major portion of its huge wealth over luxury and debauchery.

In short, the noblemen followed the pattern of the imperial *harem*. The interiors of their *harems* were guarded by lady sentinels where as the exterior was in hands of well equipped male guards. Thus the nobles' ladies in side the *harem* lived in splendor and luxury, enjoying all worldly pleasures in their own quarters.

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