



DIROSAT

Journal of Education, Social Sciences & Humanities

Journal website: <https://dirosat.com/>

ISSN : 2985-5497 (Online)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58355/dirosat.v4i1.201>

Vol. 4 No. 1 (2026)

pp. 111-123

Research Article

Dominance in Confinement: The Complex Roles of Female Slaves in Mughal Harem and Their Ascendancy

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Received : December 15, 2025
Accepted : February 13, 2026

Revised : January 09, 2026
Available online : March 01, 2026

How to Cite: Zaman, R. (2026). Dominance in Confinement: The Complex Roles of Female Slaves in Mughal Harem and Their Ascendancy. *DIROSAT: Journal of Education, Social Sciences & Humanities*, 4(1), 111–123. <https://doi.org/10.58355/dirosat.v4i1.201>

Abstract. The paper deals with the role and status of female slaves in the Mughal period in medieval India, particularly in the imperial *harem*. The research explores and highlights the dominating and dignified role of the concubines and other female slaves of foreign origin, in the imperial *harem* in contrast to those of local female slaves having less attractive physical attributes and were assigned household and domestic tasks. It also categorizes the female slaves according to their positions and duties assigned to them, which they were bound to perform. The paper highlights the nature, organization of *harem*, femininity, social and cultural role of female slaves. It also discusses the methods of enslavement, legalization of slave trade, traditions of imperial *harem* and the social status of female slaves who were the important and most significant part of the Mughal household. The present research includes primary as well as secondary sources to show the novel portrait of the female slaves during this particular period.

Keywords: Female Slaves, Mughal Period, Classification, Role, Mughal *Harem*.

INTRODUCTION

A slave is a person owned by another person and can be purchased, sold or exchanged like any other commodity, having no legal standing; the slave owner has the authority to punish and starve him. If a female slave produces children, they do not belong to her; instead, they belong to the master, who has the authority to sell them. Slavery and enslavement are both the state and condition of being a slave; therefore an enslaved individual is one who is forbidden to leave his or her service for another who sees that slave as property.¹

Slavery was an ancient established institution. It was traditional and prevailing institution in the pre-Islamic Arab world as well as in the Christian world. The laws about slavery in Judaism and Christianity revealed the truth about the existence of the institution of slavery even before the Christ. Slavery as an earlier established institution is addressed in various verses of the Holy Quran. Slavery is allowed in Islam, although there are specific stated standards for its regulation that are distinct from those set in other Semitic religions and non-Islamic cultures. Slavery existed in form of a well-established institution in ancient and mediaeval India. It was a common practice during the Delhi Sultanate period and the Mughal period, but it was mainly confined to the imperial *harem*. Women were captured in wars as war captives which were usually kept or sold as slaves. They were traded and purchased from all over the world and treated as private property, but they were having a different social position during Mughal period, as they were given a respectful and dignified position in the *harem* (Mughal household). There was an enormous demand for slaves throughout the Islamic East which invited rapid trade in slaves, and India was having its own share in it. There was a mixture of local and foreign female slaves in the Mughal household, which was often dominated by the favorite ones. There were different categories of female slaves according to their physical attributes, intelligence, performance and their capabilities, so they were ranked accordingly.

Women in Bondage: Historical Context of Gendered Slavery in Medieval India

In seventh and eighth centuries and during Ghaznavid's raids in medieval India, females were seized and carried as war slaves. Indian slaves (both male and female) and the Turkish slaves formed a powerful royal retinue in the Delhi Sultanate Period.² Indian women were made captives by the Mongols in their raids in thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.³ We also get an idea of slavery in Medieval India from twelfth century onward with the accounts of *Lakhapadhati* slave (in *The Lekhapacasika* or *The Lekhapaddhati*),⁴ from the Chulukyan Kingdom of Gujrat. We get historical

¹ Allain Jean and Hickey Robin, "Property and the Definition of Slavery," *International & Comparative Law Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 4(2012): 915-938.

² Fouzia Farooq Ahmed, "The Delhi Sultanate: A Slave Society or A Society with Slaves?," *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2009): 1-24.

³ Shadab Bano, "India's Overland Slave-Trade in the Medieval Period," In *proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 58 (1997): 315.

⁴ It is a Sanskrit state document which includes models of written documents compiled and written between 8th and 15th centuries in Gujrat under the Chulukyan Dynasty. It was later composed

narratives about the actual nature of slavery at that period. There were four detailed accounts of acquisition of female slaves. Two of them were taken in wars, the third (from Rajputra caste) was left by her family due to famine and voluntarily become a slave. The last one was sold by her owner as she had lost her family. The *Simriti*⁵ laws were applied to them which were traditional Hindu laws, stating that, they were bound to perform physical service to their master (touching their private parts or scratching) etc. Sexual relations with the female slaves of lower castes were not allowed but when there were *Lekhapadhati* girls (of high caste in Gujrat) serving as slaves, then these relations were also possible.⁶

From Conquest to Commerce: Mechanism of Enslavement and Slave trade in Mughal Period

Mughal Empire had a large number of slaves before the abolition of slavery. There were records of the sale of female slaves. There were no restrictions or defined limits for Muslim rulers on the numbers of female slaves and concubines they could keep.⁷ The local female slaves were cheap in price. Sources are very few regarding their authentic worth, but there are references which show that Hindu as well as Sikh females transported by Pathan (The native of Afghanistan and former NWFP) invaders from Kashmir had been traded in the *Bazar of Ghulam* for 43 rupees.⁸

The female slaves of foreign origin were of high price. Their price sometime rose to 20,000 Rupiyas or more, as mentioned by Shahab-ud-Din-al-Umari.⁹ The price of a beautiful Abyssinian slave was sometimes higher than 250 Rupiyas. Overseas slaves had been bought from traders approaching from land elsewhere Sindh for 500 to 1000 Dinars. The value of a slave is constantly referenced in *Fatwa-i-Alamgiri*¹⁰ and *Hudaya* (book of guides) in the form of instances, and is usually 1000 dirhams. Traders from Turkey, Syria, Persia, and Transoxiana used to deliver their goods to Muslim rulers. Slaves from the outside, both sexes, were in high demand in the Indian subcontinent. Males were needed for heavy chores, while females were needed for concubinage, all while keeping an eye on the slaves of other harems.¹¹ According to

in Prakrit and translated in English with the name of *Models of Fifty Written Documents*. It is a detailed guideline written about the administrative patterns of Chulukyan rulers.

⁵ These are the sacred laws of Hinduism based on human memory and these were distinct from Vedas which are called Shruti (means what is heard). Both of these are product of divine revelation of Hinduism.

⁶ Shadab Bano, "Women Slaves in Medieval India," In *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 65 (2004): 314.

⁷ Shadab Bano, "Marriage and Concubinage in the Mughal Imperial Family," In *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 60 (1999): 353.

⁸ K.S. Lal, *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Aditya Parakashan, 1994), 101.

⁹ Bano, "Women Slaves in Medieval India," 316.

¹⁰ It is a document based on Shariah (Islamic Laws) and a guide book about the statecraft including ethics, military strategy, economy, justice and penalties. It was a kind of Law book or regulating body of the Mughal Empire in the period of the emperor Muhammad Aurangzeb Alamgir in India.

¹¹ K.S. Lal, *The Mughal Harem* (New Delhi: Aditya Parakashan, 1988), 102.

Nicolo Manucci¹², the ruler of Balkh dispatched a delegation in 1661 and 1662, and the envoy brought many Tartar and Uzbek girls for commerce. Some of the girls were purchased by Aurangzeb. Those girls were chosen because they were warlike and adept with weapons, arrows, swords and thus could serve as well-organized *harem* protectors. Fair ladies from Eastern European countries were preferred for concubinage.¹³

There was a proper network of slave trade between the large empires of the world (Ottoman Empire, Safavid Empire, Holy Roman Empire, British Empire, Russian empire and Mughal Empire). There were slave markets for the sale and purchase of the slaves in the Delhi Sultanate period, where the sale and purchase of slaves was a common practice. The slaves were purchased at Delhi and then transported across the frontier to be sold in the marts of Khorasan, Ghazni and Bukhara.¹⁴ The important towns of Lahore, Multan, Kabul, Ghazni, Balkh and Bukhara were major slave markets during Sultanate Period and same practice was continued during Mughal Period.¹⁵ Beautiful girls from all over the world were brought here and they often carry high price. The *harems* of Babur and Humayun did not comprise of more than 200 members each.¹⁶ The empire also received female slaves as gift from foreign rulers. According to Gulbadan, Babur had two Circassian slaves, Gulnar *Aghacha* and Nargul *Aghacha*, gifted by Tahmasp (the king of Persia) to him. These were the recognized ladies of the *harem*.¹⁷ Akbar inherited a number of Slaves from Babur and Humayun. Some were rose to the position of officers.¹⁸ The *harem* of Akbar contained more than 5000 ladies, each of whom had separate quarters. They were attended by a staff of servants including female guards, eunuchs and porters. About ten to twelve servants were attached to every lady of importance¹⁹

The royal establishment of slaves was mostly filled by military expeditions resulting in the acquisition of slaves of defeated foes. Although Akbar had banned the enslavement of women and children of local rebels, yet on the conquest of Chittor (1567)²⁰, women, along with men were taken as war slaves. The female slaves (singers and dancers) were collected during the Deccan campaigns, perhaps the ordinance did not touch the *harem* of vanquished foe. The emperors however continued to possess a large retinue of imperial slaves both male and female, besides the normal demand for ordinary labor including domestic and menial works.²¹ After the slave laws

¹² He was a 17th century Venetian doctor, writer and traveler. He was the person who wrote a first-hand account of the Mughal Empire.

¹³ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 103.

¹⁴ Bano, "India's Overland Slave Trade in the Medieval Period," 316.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁶ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 20.

¹⁷ Zahir-Ud-Din Babur, *Babur-Nama*, Volume 2, trans. Annette Susannah, Beveridge (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1970), 712.

¹⁸ Shadab Bano, "Professor J.S. Grewal Prize Essay: Slave Acquisition in the Mughal Empire," *In proceedings of the Indian Congress*, vol. 62 (2001): 318.

¹⁹ Lal, *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India*, 75.

²⁰ It is one of largest forts in India. It was the capital of the Kingdom of Mewar during the reign of Mughal emperor Jahangir. It is located in the town of Chittorgarh which is a town of Mewar (south-central part of Rajasthan). It is called Chittorgarh Forte now.

²¹ Bano, "Professor J.S. Grewal Prize Essay," 318.

implemented by Akbar, no slave markets were mentioned by any traveler, yet the private transactions of sale and purchase were continued.²² Manucci argues that eunuchs were helpful in smuggling girls into the apartments of princes and kings and men into the women cells.²³ Many writers claims that Barter trade was in practice not only in the days of Jahangir but it was practiced throughout the Mughal Period.²⁴ The interesting feature of the slave trade was a close balancing of slave exports from India with horse imports from the countries to which it sent slaves. War horses were vital in an age when cavalry dominated the field. The Sultanate and Mughal cavalry was in high demand for good quality horses from Central Asia and Persia. For the Mughal Empire, at the end of the sixteenth century, the annual imports were calculated at around 25000 horses.²⁵

There were a number of free born inherited female slaves in the *harem*. The actual practice of enslavement did not cease. During the reign of Jahangir, he gave clear order to his troops to ravage the domain of rebellious *zamindar* of Jaitpur and imprison his women. His wife and daughters were brought into *harem*. In the early period of his reign, there was a large scale enslavement of people. In the Rajputana campaigns (1608-1614), women and children were taken into captives. Same case was with Mathura region (1623). However the enslavement of local people was still considered wicked. There were numerous instances of enslavement throughout the seventeenth century. The Mughal noble also had some share in this acquisition. Most of the forcible enslavement was resulted mainly from the raids on the villages that evaded the payment of revenue. Manrique²⁶ tells us the strictness of revenue demand also forced the peasants to sell their women, children and cattle.²⁷ The sale by parents in times of scarcity and famine was also a recurring feature and an important source of slave recruitment throughout the Mughal period.²⁸ During the reign of Akbar, when the slave trade and sale of slaves were banned, Badayuni²⁹ reports that some parents were allowed to sell their children but Akbar allowed them to get them back, when had money in future. The supply of the Mughal court was assured through other sources as well. The import of slaves was a regular practice, as even there were slaves of foreign origin in nobility. *The Tahmasnama* (an autobiography of a slave officer mid-eighteenth century) suggests that the Mughal court and the nobles continued to receive slaves from distant Turkish lands and, by the Turani nobles (nobles of Turkish origin from Central Asia). There was also the presence of female slaves from Georgia,

²² Bano, "Professor J.S. Grewal Prize Essay," 317.

²³ Lal, *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India*, 88.

²⁴ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 99.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁶ He was a 17th century Portuguese Augustinian missionary and traveller in India. After sixteen years of his travel in the Eastern countries, he wrote and published his work named *Itinerary of the Oriental Missions of Father Manrique in Rome*

²⁷ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 320.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

²⁹ Abdul Qadir Badayuni was the 16th century writer and Grand Mufti of India. He was a historian and translator living in the Mughal Empire. He also translated the Hindu books, the Ramayana and Mahabharata. His famous work is *Tarikh-i-Bada'uni* also known as *Muntakhab-ut-Twarikh*.

Russian, Circassia, Turkey, Mingrelia, Ethiopia and Gurgistan.³⁰ According to law, the owner was not allowed to sell the husband and his wife separately, if they had children, even they could not be separated from the parents.³¹ During the period of Emperor Akbar, he did not allow himself to possess much slaves and set many of them free. However, some were employed in court at their own choice. The concept of making slave become abhorrent to his temperament. After the reign of Akbar, slavery was confined to the Mughal *harem* and it was declined in the society (with the exception of Mughal nobility).

Roles, Ranks and Realities: The Social Classification of Female Slaves under Mughal Rule

Female slaves during the Mughal period can be classified into following categories:

- a. Domestic slaves
- b. Administrative slaves
- c. Concubines (*Agha/Aghachas*)
- d. The Entertainers (Singers and Dancers)
- e. Umm-ul-Walad (Mother of the Child)

a. Domestic Slaves

There were a large number of female slaves who had to perform the domestic household chores inside the Mughal *harem*. They were mostly the local slaves, who were cheap in price. The ordinary women were unfit to be concubines. Ibn-e-Batuta³² tells that captives taken from infidels were cheap, as they were dirty and uncivilized. Still in the household of lower aristocracy, the ordinary slave girls were treated like concubines. For instance, a slave girl from village, later married to an Afghan soldier.³³ Some were the hereditary and transformed to the next emperors and some were born slaves (born by the slave parents). There were Muslim, Hindu and Sikh girls, captured through the raids and expeditions inside the India and were assigned domestic tasks.³⁴ During the period of Emperor Akbar, large number of domestic slave girls in Mughal *harem* were referred as *paristan* and also as *Sahelis* (women's friend). They were not called by the earlier title of *kanizak*, *kaniz* or *dah* in official literature of the court.³⁵

³⁰ Bano, "Professor J.S. Grewal Prize Essay," 321.

³¹ Rukhsana Iftikhar, "Labor Class of Women in Mughal India." *A Research Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2020): 243.

³² Abu Abdullah Muhammad Bin ibn Batutah was a 14th century Arab-Berber scholar, explorer and traveler. He travelled in Afro-Asian countries and particularly in the Muslim World. He travelled more than about thirty years and no other traveller travelled more than him in pre-modern world. During his last days he dictated an account of his journeys, titled *A Gift to those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling*, commonly known as *The Rihla*.

³³ Bano, "Women Slaves in Medieval India," 315.

³⁴ Iftikhar, "Labour Class of Women in Mughal India," 241.

³⁵ Bano, "Women Slaves in Medieval India," 317.

b. Administrative Slaves

The internal administration of the Mughals was placed under the supervision of active and intelligent female slaves called *Daroghas* but Munucci calls them *matrons*.³⁶ There were many other officials who were called *Mahaldars*, *Tewildars*, *Mushrifs*, *Begis* and *Urdubegis*. They were further divided into three categories:

- The high (*Mahin Banu*)
- The Middle (*Paristaran-i-Hudur*)
- The Low (maids etc.)

First two were the categories of superior staff of the palace, but the rest belonged to the cadres of maids and slave girls. *Mahaldar* was the chief lady who kept an eye on all important matters. *Tehwildar* was the lady account officer. *Mushrifs* were the female superintendents.³⁷ *Begis* were the special female guards, appointed at the gate of the emperor.³⁸ They were also stationed at the gates of the female apartments. Their duties were some time changed, telescoped and overlapped.³⁹ They were purchased by the emperors through foreign diplomats. They were paid for their duties.

Francois Bernier⁴⁰ stated that the sister of Aurangzeb, Roshan-Ara Begum was travelled to Delhi in luxurious possession with 66 elephants. She was accompanied by a troop of female guards and slaves surrounded her elephant.⁴¹ The *urdubegis* were of the low category than concubines. All were paid for their duties, but their salaries varied greatly. They were enjoying food, clothes and many privileges from the Mughal imperial house along with different kind of precious gifts. Royal ladies very often awarded them with presents and money. Fatima Bibi was an *Urdubegi* of Mughal emperors. She continued to serve in Akbar's court. She was the nurse of Humayun. She was an ambassador to *harem* for marriage negotiations. She was allotted separate cells. These female servants were very respectable.⁴² Bernier further writes that Mughal princes were given to the care of slave women (*Urdubegis*) and eunuch, slaves from Russia, Circassia, Gurgistan (Georgia) and Ethopia.⁴³ Extra precautions were taken in the imperial kitchen while preparing and serving meals. The head of these officials was assisted by the Prime Minister himself. Similarly strict security was maintained around the king's bedroom.⁴⁴

There were also the Abyssinian women, appointed as female officers. The fortune of the black Africans was not that much good, but a few rose to high positions. Fifteen Abyssinian slaves (men and women both) were brought into Mughal *harem* as gifts. Sixteen Habshi women were inducted as *harem* guard in Malwa (Gujrat) and

³⁶ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 51.

³⁷ Ibid., 52.

³⁸ Iftikhar, "Labour Class of Women in Mughal India," 241.

³⁹ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 52.

⁴⁰ Francois Bernier was French Physician who visited India between 1656 and 1668. He wrote about Mughals of India.

⁴¹ Iftikhar, "Labour Class of Women in Mughal India," 241.

⁴² Ibid., 242.

⁴³ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 88.

⁴⁴ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 54.

same was the case of other Muslim kingdoms.⁴⁵ Abu-al-Fazl writes, that the Mughal household was run by the sober and active ladies, the most trustworthy were appointed about the apartment of his majesty.⁴⁶ In short *matrons* and *Daroghas* were maintained discipline, imparted education to small maiden, kept an eye on the activities of the *harem* ladies, performed the duties of secretaries and bureaucrats and reported the king about any untoward happening.⁴⁷

c. Concubines (*Agha & Aghachas*)

“Concubinage is the state of cohabitation of a man and a woman without the full sanctions of legal marriage. The word is derived from the Latin *con* (with) and *cubare* (to lie)”.⁴⁸ Concubines were the female slaves kept for cohabitation (sexual relationship) without legal marriage. Concubinage was a strong institution all over the world and in Islamic societies as well.⁴⁹ The grandeur of the Mughal Kings was depending on the worthiest collection of females, gathered from whatever source. Moreover, during the Mughal period, these concubines were highly prized slaves. The price of concubines sometimes rose to 20,000 Rupiyas and more as mentioned by Shahab-ud-din-al-Umari.⁵⁰ There were animosities and jealousies among the concubines to win the favor of the Mughal Emperors. During Mughal Period, there was a strict system of *pardah*. Women were kept in secluded quarters guarded by eunuchs. These concubines were carried into the palace of king’s mother in a *dola*, covered with silk curtains, by the eunuchs of the palace.⁵¹ In the *harem* of the Kings, concubines formed an upper category of slaves.⁵²

Manucci writes that all Muslim rulers were very much attracted towards women who were the source of their relaxation and also their only pleasure. The nobles and Amirs were following the same practice. They were fully involved in merry making and salacious life. Woman was the main object through whom they fulfilled their sexual desires.⁵³ The emperor set the traditions in such matters and everyone who got a position at court followed that example so far as his means allowed. Ten to twelve servants were in the service of every lady of importance.⁵⁴ The concubines were somewhat differently treated in the Mughal Period in India. They did not only appear as upper class of slaves but enjoyed much dignity and respect within the imperial household. Babur clubbed together in his discussion, the wives and concubines of the

⁴⁵ Lal, *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India*, 57.

⁴⁶ Abul Fazl, Allami, *The Ain-i-Akbari*, vol. 1, trans. Blochmann (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1939), 46-47.

⁴⁷ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 55.

⁴⁸ H. R. Hahlo, “The Law of Concubinage.” *S. African LJ* 89 (1972): 321.

⁴⁹ Bano, “Women Slaves in Medieval India,” 315.

⁵⁰ He was a 14th century Arab historian and also known as Ibn Fadlallah-al-Umari. His famous work are *At-Tarif bi-al-mustalah ash-sharif* (on Mamluk administration) and *Masalik al-absar fi mamalil al-amsar* (an encyclopedic collection).

⁵¹ Bano, “Women Slaves in Medieval India,” 316.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 315.

⁵³ Iftikhar, “Labour Class of Women in Mughal India,” 241.

⁵⁴ Lal, *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India*, 75.

Mughal ruler and princes in Central Asia, and those whom he numerated as special one.

Gulbadan (daughter of Emperor Babur) mentioned the names of Gulnar *Aghacha* and Nar gul *Aghacha* (Circassian Slaves) in *Humayun-Nama*. The title *Aghacha* was for those favorites who rose to the position of begums, while the favorite ones were called *Aghas*. Concubines alongside the begums were present in mystic feasts in new palace. The favorite ones (*Aghas*), also could rise to the position of begum depending on if she becomes the ruler's favorite or by virtue of motherhood.⁵⁵ Zahir-ud-Din Babur (Founder of the Mughal Empire in India) freely described wives and concubines and their children in the Mughal family. He also mentioned the instances of children of concubines been taken care of and also adopted by begums, as Maham Begum, Babur's wife adopted the son of Dildar (concubine), though forcibly⁵⁶. This indicates that the *harem* of the Mughals was operated more or less like a family household.

Francisco Pelsaert (Dutch merchant) tells that noble could take any of the slave girls in concubinage, as he wished.⁵⁷ The term *saheli* was used for female slaves and servants in imperial household and in noble families in Mughal society. When Nur Jahan became the in charge of the *harem*, she got all of these *sahelis* married to her *ahadis* (troopers) and *chelas* (manumitted slaves).⁵⁸ Foreign concubines were in great demand in India, traders from Turkey, Syria, Persia and Transoxiana used to approach Mughal kings with their consignments.⁵⁹ The concubines were permissible but not legally married. Children were belonging to the master and therefore free. These were called *Kaniz*, *Sarar* and *paristar*. These were more important than legal wives. Shah Jahan build Fatehpuri Mosque in Delhi in commemoration of his love for concubine Fatehpuri Mahall.⁶⁰ Unlike his predecessors, Emperor Akbar followed the precedent of Sultans of Delhi in maintaining his *harem*. Initially, the size of his *harem* was comprised of more than 1600 women. Every campaign of Akbar ended with marriage, so the Rajput princesses brought a large retinue of maids and dancing girls.⁶¹ The concubines were titled and ranked according to their physical attributes and performance. They were awarded private apartments and ten to twelve slaves in their service. They were from Turkey, Georgia, Circassia, Gurgistan⁶², Persia, Russia and Central Asia. The Georgian slave girl of Dara Shikoh⁶³, who was mother of Kam

⁵⁵ Bano, "Women Slaves in Medieval India," 316.

⁵⁶ Zahir-Ud-Din Babur, *Babur-Nama*, vol. 1, trans.by, Annette Susannah (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1922), 712-713.

⁵⁷ Bano, "Women Slaves in Medieval India," 318.

⁵⁸ Iftikhar, "Labour Class of Women in Mughal India," 242.

⁵⁹ Lal, *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India*, 102.

⁶⁰ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 20.

⁶¹ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 25.

⁶² It is an old term used for Georgia.

⁶³ He was the eldest son of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan. He was designated with the title Padshahzada-i-Buzurg Martaba (Prince of high rank).

Bakhsh⁶⁴ had a deep influence over Aurangzeb. Hira Bibi was also the darling of Aurangzeb's youth.⁶⁵

d. The Entertainers (Singers and Dancers)

Apart from concubinage, singing and dancing were considered part of Mughal traditions in India. The concubines who were having beauty and elegance and those who were most lovely and pretty were used as entertainers (this includes the volunteer singers and dancers from south Asia and many were not concubines but professionals). The kings and Princes took great joy and delight in the company of such young and beautiful slaves, with rosy cheeks and sweet voices. Emperor's routine was to enjoy the singing and dancing of such slave girls. They were known as *kaniz*. They were in large number and they had to perform on the special occasions. Manucci endorses their presence in the *harem* and he provides the list of more than fifty *kanizs* who were the professional singers and dancers of the Mughal *harem* and court. According to him, every entertainer had her own rank according to her beauty and performance. All were pretty, had good style and much grace in their manners and they talked sweetly to everyone in the *harem*. Some European also enjoyed and praised the dances of some Persian women in royal palace on certain events. Their tune was superior, their dance with the flow of the songs with a kind of a shacking of the body, which was not lustful but rather modest. According to Bernier, Shah Jahan⁶⁶ used to keep them for that purpose for whole night.⁶⁷

Nicholas Doughinton, who had visited India during 1608 to 1615, remarked that these concubines were singing in sweet and shrill voices and they were moving their body according to their art and skills. A French physician Bernard (during the reign of Jahangir), fell deeply in love with a dancing girl, when Jahangir came to know the story, he awarded that *kaniz* to him as a reward.⁶⁸

e. Umm-ul-Walad (Mother of the Child)

The concubines who bore the children of the Emperor were titled as *Umm-ul-Walad*. They were ranked high and they were considered as legal wives (although not legally married). However, they were later married by the Mughal Emperors. The sale of *Umm-ul-Walad* was prohibited.⁶⁹ The children of master by slave girl were considered to be free. *Umm-ul-Walad* was free after the death of the emperor.⁷⁰ She was given separate apartment, stipends and respectable position of a *begum*.

⁶⁴ Muhammad Kam Bakhsh (1667-1709) was the youngest son of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.

⁶⁵ Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 31.

⁶⁶ Shahab-ud-Din Muhammad Khurram (1592-1666) known as Shah Jahan was the fifth greatest emperor of Mughal Empire. He constructed famous *Taj Mahal*. Mughal Empire reached at the peak of its glory during the reign of Shah Jahan.

⁶⁷ Iftikhar, "Labour Class of Women in Mughal India," 238-39.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁶⁹ Lal, *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India*, 115.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

The Mughal State and the Regulation of Slavery: Laws, Customs and Control

In 1562, Akbar had issued an order prohibiting the imperial soldiers from enslaving women, children and kinsmen of the opposing soldiery. In 1563, he issued another order and banned the export of Indian slaves from the land routes of India. According to Arif Qandahari⁷¹, the order banned the enslavement of the local women and children. These orders were rigorously enforced at least at Agra. Immediate effect of these acts was the closure of slave market that had functioning for the traditional sale and purchase of slaves. During Mughal period, *Ulemas* (Islamic jurists), scholars and Jurists were dependent on the four schools of Muslims Jurisprudence and law books for deciding cases about slaves.⁷² Manumission was highly appreciated and recommended by the *Ulema* and scholars. As a result, in 1582, Akbar manumitted a large number of slaves who were later employed in court at their own choice.⁷³

Following this, Queen Nur Jahan of Emperor Jahangir also manumitted thousands of female slaves from the *harem*, when she took charge of it. The slave girls of age 12-40 were also married with *Chelas* (manumitted slave) and *Ahadis* (gentlemen trooper), and the women slaves from age 40 to 60 and 70 were made free to choose either to live outside the *harem* and find a husband for themselves or stay within the *harem*.⁷⁴ The female slaves who bore the children of emperors were ranked high and they were given the title of *Umm-ul-Walad* (mother of the child). According to the Islamic law (which was in practice), the child's lineage is attributed to the father but on the question which make the child a heir, there was no legitimacy, as Quran is silent on this point.⁷⁵ The *Umm-ul-Walad* was having the status of a legal wife although not legally wedded. The emperor could not sell her or give her away. The child was considered the legal child but he was not an heir of his property. After the death of the emperor, *Umm-ul-Walad* was considered as a free slave. These females were very respectable.

Abolition of slavery in Indian Sub-continent

Lord Ellenborough, who was the President of the Board of Control of East India Company and the Governor General (1842-1844), passed the act of 1843 and abolished the slavery from India. This act outlawed many economic transactions associated with Slavery.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

There are certain important features of the Mughal *harem* regarding its institution of slavery. Firstly, Slavery during the Mughal period was a common practice but it was mainly confined to the imperial household. There were different

⁷¹ Arif Qandahari is the compiler of *Tarikh-i-Akbari* known as *Muzaffar Nama*.

⁷² Lal, *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India*, 111.

⁷³ Bano, "Professor J.S. Grewal Prize Essay," 318.

⁷⁴ Bano, "Women Slaves in Medieval India," 317.

⁷⁵ Mathew S. Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain, *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 196.

⁷⁶ Robert Franklin Stuart Tate, "The Home Government of India, 1834-53," M.Phil. dissertation, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, United Kingdom, 1972. (Accessed on June 29, 2025).

categories of female slaves, some were local and some were of foreign origin. All of them were assigned duties according to their capabilities, which they were bound to perform. Secondly, the organization of imperial *harem* was strictly disciplined and highly maintained, placed under the supervision of active and intelligent female slaves of foreign origin. The law was respected by all. Mughal Emperor had a full authority over the imperial *harem*. The grandeur, beauty, uniqueness and discipline of the *harem* is admired and praised by all the foreign writers and travelers of that time. Thirdly, the particular feature of the Mughal *harem* was that most of the females were free in the *harem* as compared to the other empires, where there were majority of women were slaves and some were free. Lastly, all the female slaves of every rank were enjoying their respectful position, they were not treated inhumanly and they were having a respectable status in the Mughal imperial *harem*. There is not a single account and record of runaway slaves and neither of slave rebellions during the whole Mughal Period.

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