

***Women in Politics during the Time of the Mughal Empire:  
Navigating Power and Influence***

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***Abstract & Indexing***

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**Abstract**

This article provides a glimpse into the dynamic role of women in politics during the Mughal Empire, exploring how they navigated power and influence within the context of a predominantly patriarchal society. The Mughal era, spanning from the 16th to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in South Asia, witnessed the presence of influential women who played significant roles in the political landscape. This paper delves into the lives and contributions of Mughal queens, princesses, and other female figures, examining the strategies they employed to wield political power, establish diplomatic alliances, and influence decision-making processes. By analysing historical accounts, court chronicles, and contemporary writings, this study sheds light on the complexities and nuances of women's engagement in politics within the Mughal court. Understanding the agency of these women provides insights into the broader socio-political dynamics of the Mughal Empire and challenges conventional narratives surrounding gender roles in pre-modern South Asian history.

**Keywords**

*Mughal Empire, Socio-Political Dynamics, Women in Politics.*

**Published by:**



**HIRA INSTITUTE**  
*of Social Sciences Research & Development*



## Introduction

Throughout history, women have held a significant position in Islam, not merely as mothers, daughters, or wives, but as individuals with rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for empowerment. The Quran, the holy book of Islam, serves as the primary source of guidance for Muslims, and within its verses lie profound teachings regarding the status, rights, and empowerment of women. The Quran emphasizes the fundamental equality of men and women as creations of Allah.

"O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women."<sup>1</sup>

This verse underscores the shared origin and spiritual equality of all human beings, regardless of gender.

Moreover, the Quran affirms the intrinsic worth and dignity of women:

"And do not wish for that by which Allah has made some of you exceed others.

For men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned."<sup>2</sup>

This verse recognizes women's right to possess and dispose of wealth, highlighting their economic independence and financial autonomy.

In matters of education, Islam places a strong emphasis on knowledge and learning for both men and women. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) declared:

"Seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim."

This injunction encompasses all Muslims, irrespective of gender, thereby affirming women's right to pursue education and intellectual growth.

Furthermore, the Quran grants women various legal rights and protections.

"And due to the wives is similar to what is expected of them, according to what is reasonable. But the men have a degree over them [in responsibility and authority]."<sup>3</sup>

While some may interpret the phrase "degree over them" as implying superiority, Islamic scholars explain it as referring to the additional responsibilities and obligations placed on men, rather than superiority in essence.

Additionally, Islam recognizes women's right to inheritance, a revolutionary concept in pre-Islamic Arabian society where inheritance was typically reserved for men:

"For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much - an obligatory share."<sup>4</sup>

This provision ensures that women receive their fair share of inheritance, thereby safeguarding their economic interests and financial security.

Moreover, the Quran addresses the issue of marriage and family life, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect, kindness, and equity between spouses.

"And among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts."<sup>5</sup>

This verse underscores the concept of marital partnership and cooperation, where both husband and wife contribute to the well-being and harmony of the family unit.

## Women in Politics:

Women in politics according to Islam occupy a complex and multifaceted position that is often subject to diverse interpretations and cultural contexts. While some societies have

historically limited women's political participation, Islamic principles, as derived from the Quran and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), provide a foundation for women's engagement in political affairs. Here's a nuanced exploration of women in politics according to Islam:

- **Principles of Equality:** Islam fundamentally upholds the equality of all individuals before Allah, regardless of gender. The Quran explicitly states in Surah Al-Hujurat: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you." <sup>6</sup>

This verse underscores the spiritual equality of men and women, emphasizing righteousness as the criterion for nobility.

- **Consultation and Participation:** Islamic governance emphasizes the principle of consultation (shura) as a means of decision-making. Surah Ash-Shura highlights the importance of consultation among the members of society in matters of governance. Women, as integral members of the community, have the right to participate in this consultative process and contribute their perspectives to political discourse. <sup>7</sup>
- **Historical Precedents:** Islamic history offers examples of women actively involved in politics and governance. For instance, during the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), women played significant roles in advising him, participating in social reforms, and even engaging in diplomacy with other tribes and nations. The Prophet's wife, Umm Salamah, is renowned for her political acumen and wisdom.
- **Rights to Representation:** Islam grants women the right to representation and advocacy in political matters. Women have the right to voice their concerns, advocate for their interests, and participate in decision-making processes within the framework of Islamic principles. This includes standing for elected office, serving in advisory roles, and engaging in political activism to address social issues affecting women and society at large.
- **Adherence to Islamic Values:** While women's participation in politics is encouraged in Islam, it must align with Islamic values and ethical principles. This entails upholding modesty, dignity, and integrity in all aspects of political engagement. Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of maintaining ethical conduct and avoiding actions that contradict Islamic values, irrespective of gender.

Women in politics according to Islam are encouraged to actively participate in governance, consultation, and decision-making processes while upholding the principles of equality, justice, and ethical conduct. By embracing Islamic values and principles, societies can create inclusive political environments that harness the talents, perspectives, and contributions of women for the betterment of society as a whole.

The Quran provides a comprehensive framework for the empowerment and uplift of women within the fold of Islam. It emphasizes their equality, dignity, rights, and responsibilities, thereby laying the groundwork for a society where women can thrive and fulfill their potential. By adhering to the teachings of the Quran and upholding its principles of justice, equity, and compassion, Muslims can foster an environment where women are valued, respected, and empowered participants in all aspects of life.

### **Mughal Empire & the Muslim Women**

The Mughal Empire, spanning from the early 16th to the mid-19th century, was characterized by grandeur, cultural richness, and political prowess. While the Mughal era is

often associated with influential male rulers, the role of women in politics during this period was more nuanced and significant than commonly acknowledged. As follows explores the multifaceted involvement of women in politics within the Mughal Empire, examining their influence, roles, and the socio-political dynamics that shaped their participation.

### **1. Royal Matriarchs**

In the Mughal Empire, women of the royal household held substantial influence. The royal harem, a complex institution, housed not only the emperor's wives but also his mother, sisters, and daughters. These women, often referred to as "Mughal Matriarchs," played crucial roles in shaping courtly politics and advising rulers on matters of state.

### **2. Power and Influence in the Mughal Empire**

The Mughal Empire, renowned for its opulence and political splendour, was not solely shaped by its male rulers. Behind the scenes, Mughal Matriarchs, the women of the royal household, played pivotal roles in shaping the empire's destiny. This article explores the multifaceted influence of Mughal Matriarchs within the context of the Mughal Empire, shedding light on their political acumen, roles, and the impact they had on courtly affairs.

#### **2.1. The Royal Harem**

The heart of Mughal Matriarchs' influence was the royal harem, a complex institution that housed not only the emperor's wives but also his mother, sisters, and daughters. Contrary to Western stereotypes of passive seclusion, the harem was a dynamic political space where women wielded significant power.<sup>8</sup>

#### **2.2. The Padshah Begum**

At the pinnacle of the harem's hierarchy was the emperor's mother, commonly known as the "Padshah Begum." Her role was more than ceremonial; she held considerable sway over courtly politics. The Padshah Begum's advice was often sought on matters of state, and her decisions carried weight in the imperial court.<sup>9</sup>

#### **2.3. Senior Wives and Court Politics**

Senior wives, including the chief consort or "Padshah Begum," were not passive figures. They actively participated in court politics, negotiating alliances, managing patronage, and safeguarding the interests of their children. The courtly dynamics often involved strategic alliances and power struggles among these influential women.<sup>10</sup>

#### **2.4. Navigating Dynastic Politics**

Mughal Matriarchs played a crucial role in shaping the destiny of the dynasty through their influence on the emperor and their involvement in matters of succession. The birth of heirs and the strategic marriages of princesses were integral components of dynastic politics, and Matriarchs were central to these processes.<sup>11</sup>

#### **2.5. Cultural Patronage and Influence**

While political influence was wielded in the realm of courtly affairs, Mughal Matriarchs also left a lasting impact on the cultural landscape. Many of the architectural marvels, gardens, and cultural institutions were sponsored and managed by these influential women. Their patronage contributed significantly to the cultural vibrancy of the Mughal Empire.<sup>12</sup>

### **3.1. Legacy and Historical Recognition**

**Hamida Banu Begum:** The mother of Emperor Akbar, Hamida Banu Begum, is a notable example of a Mughal Matriarch. Hamida Banu Begum, also known as Haji Begum, was a prominent figure in Mughal history. She was the chief wife of the Mughal Emperor Humayun and the mother of Emperor Akbar the Great. Hamida Banu Begum played a significant role in the political affairs of the Mughal Empire, particularly during the reign of

her son, Akbar.

After the death of Humayun in 1556, Hamida Banu Begum took an active interest in the affairs of the empire and played a crucial role in ensuring stability during the early years of Akbar's reign. She was known for her intelligence, wisdom, and diplomatic skills, which earned her respect among the Mughal courtiers and nobles.

Hamida Banu Begum also exerted influence in the upbringing and education of Akbar, instilling in him values of tolerance, justice, and religious harmony. Her guidance played a significant role in shaping Akbar's inclusive policies, such as the abolition of discriminatory taxes based on religion and the promotion of a syncretic culture that embraced diverse religious and cultural traditions.

Despite her political influence, Hamida Banu Begum is also remembered for her piety and philanthropy. She commissioned several architectural projects, including the construction of gardens, mosques, and charitable institutions, leaving a lasting legacy of cultural and religious patronage.

Hamida Banu Begum was a pivotal figure in Mughal history, known for her political acumen, maternal influence on Emperor Akbar, and contributions to the cultural and architectural landscape of the Mughal Empire. Her legacy continues to be remembered and revered in the annals of Indian history.<sup>13</sup> Her wisdom and guidance were instrumental in shaping Akbar's policies, and her enduring influence continued even after her death, influencing the trajectory of the empire.

**Jodha Bai:** The Rajput princess and wife of Emperor Akbar, Jodha Bai, played a significant role in fostering religious harmony within the empire.

Jodha Bai, also known as Mariam-uz-Zamani, was the Rajput wife of the Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great. She was born as Heer Kunwari, the daughter of Raja Bharmal of Amer (present-day Jaipur). The marriage between Akbar and Jodha Bai was a significant political alliance, as it helped foster diplomatic relations between the Mughal Empire and the Rajput kingdoms. Jodha Bai played a crucial role in Akbar's court and was known for her intelligence, wisdom, and diplomatic skills. She actively participated in the cultural and religious life of the Mughal court, promoting harmony and tolerance among different religious communities.

Despite being from a Hindu Rajput background, Jodha Bai embraced Akbar's policy of religious syncretism and supported his efforts to create a unified and inclusive empire. She was respected by both Hindus and Muslims for her piety and devotion to charitable causes. Jodha Bai is also remembered for her architectural patronage. She commissioned the construction of several buildings, including the famous Mariam-uz-Zamani Palace in Fatehpur Sikri, which served as her residence during her time in the Mughal court.<sup>14</sup>

While historical accounts vary regarding the extent of Jodha Bai's influence in the Mughal court and her relationship with Akbar, she is widely regarded as a significant figure in Mughal history. Her marriage to Akbar symbolized the synthesis of Hindu and Muslim cultures and contributed to the cultural richness of the Mughal Empire.

Her influence extended to courtly affairs, contributing to the synthesis of cultures during the Mughal period.

### **Conclusion**

In the annals of history, the Mughal Empire stands as a testament to grandeur, power, and cultural richness. While the emperors often take centre stage in narratives of Mughal rule, behind the scenes, Mughal women wielded significant influence as political influencers,



shaping the course of dynastic affairs through diplomacy, leadership, and strategic alliances. From the early days of the Mughal Empire to its zenith under rulers like Akbar the Great, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, women played pivotal roles in navigating the complex webs of imperial politics, fostering diplomatic relations, and maintaining the stability of the realm. Here, we explore the unique contributions of Mughal women as political influencers:

### **1. Strategic Marriages and Diplomatic Alliances**

Mughal women often entered into strategic marriages with regional rulers, forging alliances that strengthened the empire's geopolitical position. One such example is the marriage of Jodha Bai, also known as Mariam-uz-Zamani, to Emperor Akbar. Jodha Bai's Rajput heritage and alliance with Akbar symbolized the synthesis of Hindu-Muslim cultures and helped foster diplomatic ties with the Rajput kingdoms, contributing to the stability of the empire.

### **2. Cultural Patronage and Soft Power**

Mughal women played key roles in promoting cultural exchange and patronizing the arts, literature, and architecture. Empresses like Nur Jahan, wife of Emperor Jahangir, and Mumtaz Mahal, wife of Emperor Shah Jahan, were renowned for their support of artisans, poets, and architects. Their patronage not only enriched the cultural landscape of the Mughal court but also served as a form of soft power, enhancing the empire's prestige and influence.

### **3. Behind-the-Scenes Counsel and Guidance**

While Mughal emperors wielded ultimate authority, they often relied on the counsel and guidance of their female relatives, wives, and concubines in matters of governance and diplomacy. Women like Hamida Banu Begum, mother of Emperor Akbar, and Gulbadan Begum, sister of Emperor Humayun, played instrumental roles in advising and supporting their royal kin, offering wisdom, insight, and strategic guidance in navigating the complexities of imperial rule.

### **4. Religious Tolerance and Social Harmony**

Mughal women, particularly empresses and queens, were instrumental in promoting religious tolerance and social harmony within the empire. Empresses such as Jahanara Begum, daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan, advocated for interfaith dialogue and supported the construction of mosques, temples, and gardens that reflected the diverse religious traditions of the Mughal realm. Their efforts fostered an atmosphere of inclusivity and mutual respect, contributing to the stability and cohesion of Mughal society.

### **Summary**

Mughal women served as powerful political influencers who shaped the destiny of empires through their diplomatic acumen, cultural patronage, and behind-the-scenes counsel. Their contributions, though often overshadowed by the deeds of their male counterparts, left an indelible mark on the history and legacy of the Mughal Empire, embodying the resilience, sophistication, and richness of Mughal courtly life. Despite their significant contributions, the roles of Mughal Matriarchs have often been overshadowed in historical narratives. Their influence, however, shaped the course of Mughal history, leaving an indelible mark on the empire's political, cultural, and social fabric. Mughal Matriarchs were not passive spectators but active participants in the political tapestry of the Mughal Empire. Their influence extended beyond the confines of the harem, shaping courtly politics, cultural patronage, and the destiny of the Mughal dynasty.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Qur'an 4:1

<sup>2</sup> Al-Qur'an 4:32

<sup>3</sup> Al-Qur'an 2:228

<sup>4</sup> Al-Qur'an 4:7

<sup>5</sup> Al-Qur'an 30:21

<sup>6</sup> Al-Qur'an 49:13

<sup>7</sup> Al-Qur'an 42:38

<sup>8</sup> Lal, Ruby. "Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, P:88

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<sup>12</sup> Eaton, Richard M. "The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760." Berkeley: University of California Press 1993, P: 201

<sup>13</sup> Sarkar, Jadunath. "A History of Aurangzib." Kolkata: M.C. Sarkar & Sons, 1912, P:219-222

<sup>14</sup> Hawley, John Stratton. "India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms." Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, P:723-729