

Mughal Women and Games – A Study of Mughal Women and Their Public and Private Lives

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Abstract: *In the vibrant tapestry of Mughal society, women played a multifaceted role that extended far beyond conventional expectations. Mughal women were very much accustomed to so many outdoor and indoor activities. From the exhilarating realms of horse riding and racing to the luxurious royal parties, their lives were evidence of a diverse and dynamic existence. Their involvement in the cultural field was also fetterless. Before Akbar's reign, the Mughal Women's public and private lives were not well demarcated, though their active participation in the outdoor life was not invisible. Against this backdrop, this article aims to delve into the public life of Mughal women, focusing on their ability to participate in games and sports and their engagement in indoor activities in the same field. It will also try to examine the nature of the involvement of the Mughal women in games and sports - both indoor and outdoor, and comment on the importance of some prominent games and sports prevalent during the Mughal period.*

Keywords: Mughals, Chaupar, Harem, Peripatetic lifestyle, Turco-Mongol, Indoor games, Outdoor games

It is well-known that the Mughals – the dynasty that ruled for over 200 years in India – had set up a strong political establishment and administrative culture. Apart from their political manifestations, the Mughals had a great cultural tradition and taste not only in the field of art and architecture but also in the arena of games and sports. It is important to note that, as one of the elements of the cultural domain, practices of games were not defunct in pre-Mughal India. Nevertheless, during the Mughal period, sporting activities received special attention and zeal, which helped the sporting culture flourish and become more buoyant. This provides a different framework for studying games and sports in pre-colonial India, which goes beyond the hegemonic colonial paradigm of studying modern sports in colonial India.

Games and sports were an integral part of Mughal amusements. These were divided into two parts - outdoor games and indoor games.¹ Prominent Mughal rulers since Babur had shown their interest towards both. Having good skills in different types of games and sports, Mughal rulers added a festive mood to the sporting culture in the late medieval period. Besides the ruler, the active participation of Mughal women added an interesting dimension to it. Despite having various religious and social norms, Mughal women did not shy away from getting involved in sporting activities.

Participation in Outdoor Games:

Animal fighting, pigeon flying, hunting, polo, chaupar, *chandal mandal*, and playing cards were the most prominent indoor and outdoor games through which Mughal emperors entertained themselves in their free time.² It is true that in many cases, women were not active participants in these activities but were often present as spectators or audience.³ They were allowed to sit behind curtains while animal fighting was held.⁴ However, it would be inaccurate to assume that the knowledge and the involvement regarding games and sports were unknown to the Mughal ladies. Rather, it can be pointed out that the peripatetic background of the Mughals, which refers to their nomadic or wandering lifestyle, enhanced their familiarity with outdoor activities.⁵ For example, the Turco-Mongol nomadic cultural tradition preferred less enclosed lives for public participation concerning the political and social institutions. The Timurid women of Central Asian societies since the reign of Timur did have political influence and their roles were not strictly confined to the domestic spheres.⁶

As part of Mughal culture, outdoor games were also considered as an external activity. Hunting held a significant place in Mughal culture. Mughal women showed their immense interest in taking part in any hunting expedition. Many royal ladies used to go on various hunting expeditions accompanied by their ruler, Jahangir.⁷ Nurjahan Begum and Zeb-un-nisa were skilled in the use of arms. The granddaughter of



Figure 1 Nurjahan with a Rifle. By Abu'l Hasan, dated 1612-1613.

Shah Jahan, Ansaish Banu Begum, was an efficient hunter and was known for her perfect shot.⁸ According to Kafi Khan, Jagat Gosain is said to have good hunting skills, with whom Nurjahan often competed.⁹ An incident was mentioned by Jahangir in his memoirs where Nur Jahan received a pair of diamond bracelets and was awarded 1000 ashrafis for hunting four tigers with six shots. Jahangir wrote in *Tuzuk* that after taking his permission, Nur Jahan Begum shot two tigers with one shot each and knocked over the two others with four shots. Also, he added that until that time, such shooting had never been seen. From the top of an elephant and inside of a howdah Nurjahan made six shots and not one missed. As a result, the four beasts found no opportunity to move or escape.¹⁰ Nurjahan's rival wife Jagat Gosain was also praised by Emperor Jahangir. An incident was described by Kafi Khan in *Muntakhab-ul-Lubab*, where both the ladies accompanied him on a hunting expedition and were confronted by a lion. Jagat Gosain saved them by swiftly shooting the lion while Nur Jahan was left perplexed and spell-bound. Seeing the dead lion and the rani with a gun in her hand, he applauded her bravery; however, he was displeased with terror-stricken Nur Jahan. By then, Nur Jahan started learning the use of arms and soon became an expert in handling them.¹¹ In 1616, during a campaign near Ajmer, Nur Jahan shot a rare bird called Qrisha, which weighed only about 200 grams.¹² A portrait of Nurjahan, painted by Abu'l Hasan, holding a matchlock hunting gun or toradar and a powder horn and bullet pouch in her sash, emphasizes the potentiality, strength, and independence of her. As a noble pursuit, in Mughal India, hunting was demonstrated as the sovereign power over the land which the ruler governed. Thus, Nurjahan, for her excellent hunting skills was acknowledged as the co-sovereign of Jahangir.¹³

It is noteworthy that the tendencies to gain this kind of physical ability and to be skilled in outdoor exercise did not start from the time of Nurjahan. As mentioned before, the Turco-Mongol Legacy and the peripatetic lifestyles of the Mughals could indeed contribute to their familiarity with various physical activities. The Turco-Mongol heritage, which included a mix of Central Asian and nomadic traditions, was very skill-enhancing, related to horsemanship, archery, hunting and other physical activities, which seemed to be a necessary precondition for survival in an open terrain. Timurid women had a comparatively independent lifestyle and a strong position in public life. A Castilian envoy, Clavijo, describes the scenario of Timur's court, wherein he confirms that in 1404, the time of his visit, the royal harem had not developed yet and women used to live in a series of unwallled gardens just outside of capital city of Samarkhand and they resided in pavilions of silk and embroidered curtains. So, women from the royal family were very well accustomed to living in places other than the royal quarters. The lord of Samarkhand used to set up separate chambers for feasting and for the company of his women in the garden areas.¹⁴ Those luxurious garden encampments were often arranged in which the Timurid ladies entertained their guests, participated in royal feasts, and

consumed alcohol in the presence of men. There was no rigidity in wearing a veil as Clavijo recounts royal women seemed to be veiled with the thinnest of gauzes that allowed the observer to see their features clearly. This description sheds light on the much more liberal atmosphere of that era in which the Timurid ladies had grown up and pursued their cultural practices freely. This also indicates a favourable environment for the ladies to do physical exercise and a more or less equal opportunity to take part in outdoor activities like men.¹⁵ Later, the Mughals carried forward this tradition.

The political turmoil during the early career of Babur showed the potentiality and ability of adjustment of the Timurid women in the public domain, even at the time of emergency. When the Central Asian semi-nomadic warlord Babur rode into Hindustan, he did not only bring his warriors with him but also his Haraman or household, which Ira Mukhoty prefers to address as *Zenana* rather than *Harem*. All the royal women of Babur's court, including elderly matrons to unmarried royal women, used to live in tents, spent most of their lives on horseback, and equally travelled a long way by riding their horses. Khanzada Begum, the sister of Babur, was considered one of the earliest women, who was capable of doing these kinds of outdoor activities. She travelled to Hindustan on horseback to meet Babur.¹⁶ On pleasure excursions and sightseeing or for battle, Humayun also always took his Haraman with him.¹⁷ Many royal women accompanied Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan in their hunting expeditions as well. Jahangir went on hunting excursions with his ladies and stayed in camp often for two to three months.¹⁸ Royal women participated in Qamargah hunting, in which a large number of wild animals were driven into an enclosure for killing. In 1611, at Somnagar, Jahangir led a hunting expedition accompanied by Mughal ladies and the hunted antelopes were divided between the Begums.¹⁹ This participation of royal women in outdoor expeditions explains their growing expertise in outdoor games. Gulbadan Begum mentioned the two royal women, Shad Begum, the paternal aunt's daughter of Humayun, and Mihr-angez, the grandchild of Sultan



Figure 2 : Picture of Playing Polo by the Mughal Ladies.
Laurence Binyon , *The Court Painters of the Grand Moguls*, London: Oxford University Press, 1921, p. 19, plate- VII

Hussain Mirza, who were experts in playing polo and were very capable in shooting bows and arrows.²⁰ Gulbadan identifies these women as honoured guests at the royal mystic feasts.²¹

Being an outdoor game and a form of entertainment, polo had received royal patronage. Nurjahan was an expert polo player, and she used to play polo with the other women in the garden.²² Contemporary paintings, too reveal that Mughal ladies played chaugan or polo. However, due to the strictness of veiling customs, the number of female polo players was reduced later.²³ Horse riding was immensely enjoyed by the Mughal ladies. However, boxing, wrestling, horse racing, as well as magic and acrobatics, were considered an integral part of outdoor games to watch, which Mughal women were allowed to watch from behind the curtains.²⁴

Another exciting amusement of the ladies was the display of fireworks. At night, the women used to have large torches, and by using these, they beguiled themselves. It was a popular gaming activity among the Mughal women on which they spent more than one hundred and fifty thousand rupees. The torches were made with wax or oil.²⁵ In some paintings indicating its popularity, Mughal women are seen letting off fireworks.²⁶

Participation in Indoor games:

Chess, *chauper*, *chandal-mandal*, *pachisi* (dice and board game) and cards were popular among the Mughal ladies as indoor games. Zebunnisa Begam was very fond of *chauper* (dice and board games).²⁷ There was an incident about her rumored lover, Akil Khan, the governor of Lahore during 1662, who saw Zebunnisa playing *Chausar* (Dice and board game) with some of her girlfriends when he desperately wanted to catch a glimpse of her.²⁸ Chess (another mood of board game) was another important game that received royal patronage as it was played for wisdom and higher intellect. The queens of Emperor Jahangir and Shahjahan accompanied their husbands in this play. With a wide variety of figures, sandalwood silver and gold, chess was played among the Mughal ladies with high interest and esteem.²⁹ Aram Jan Begum, the wife of Emperor Jahangir, was famed as an expert chess player.³⁰ As a form of pleasure, to them, gambling



Figure 3 : A Lady Playing with Fireworks. Mughal, 1750-75AD. Source: O.P.Sharma, *Indian Miniature Paintings*, Brussels: Bibliotheque Royale Albert Ier, 1974

seemed to be an integral part of these indoor games.³¹

Chandal-Mandal was a newly modified form of the dice game or *Chauper*, which was invented by Emperor Akbar. With 16 players it could be played in 12 different ways, in which many royal ladies participated in one group or more at the same time. *Ganjifa* or playing cards were also popular in the Mughal seraglio.³² The pack consisted of 12 suits of 12 cards each, making a total of 144 with different kinds of kings and followers.³³ *Nard* and *Pachisi* were two more variants of the dice game that existed in Mughal India. *Nard* or Backgammon was introduced into Hindustan by the Muslims whereas *Pachisi* is considered to be an ancient Hindu game that became very popular since the time of Akbar.³⁴ *Pachisi* boards are marked out in marble squares in a quadrangle shape in the Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri. During Akbar's reign, slave Girls were used as game pieces. Many Mughal paintings depict scenes of the participation of royal ladies in the game of *Pachisi*.³⁵

Ankhamichuli was another delightful activity popular among the Mughal ladies. Being an Indian form of the game Hide and Seek, Ankhamichuli was considered to be both an indoor and outdoor game, though it was mostly played inside their living quarters due to the strict rules of Purdah. Such a pavilion is seen in Fatehpur Sikri, where royal ladies used to play this game.³⁶

Apart from those indoor and outdoor games which dealt with a very competitive nature, we can find numerous activities coming from totally non-competitive, unstructured and merry-making purposes. Mughal women found enormous pleasure through *huqah-smoking*, *para-chewing*, bathing, and swimming in harem pools.³⁷ Kite flying and boating were too common among the royal ladies. Excursions on light boats with painted oars or large boats with rooms for the ladies in the middle were very much prevalent at that time.³⁸ Gulbadan Begum recounted an early Afghanistan trip of royal ladies during the reign of Humayun.³⁹ Both Jahangir and Nurjahan loved to spend time boating and fishing. Thomas Roe recounts an incident of a sudden private trip of the emperor Jahangir and his consort Nurjahan during an encampment in Ahmedabad.⁴⁰ Pigeon flying was another popular harem pastime.⁴¹ *Sukh and Sarika* were one of those popular species that were kept in beautiful cages and considered to be the best friends of the royal ladies. The ladies conversed with them intimately as if they were confident and taught them poems, verses, and novelties which they repeated to their delight and recreation.⁴² Such wise, we can presume the lucid demarcation between play and game, both prevailing in the Mughal harem with great attention to their leisure. The former is considered to be more spontaneous and purposeless, while the other deals with a competitive and organised nature.⁴³

Nevertheless, compared to the involvement and collaboration with games and sports of emperors and nobles, the evidence of women's participation is still limited. However, it will be wrong to assume the total restrictions of Mughal women. Apart from hunting, hawking, polo, chess and other outdoor and

indoor games, Mughal women were actively showing their physical fitness by doing acrobatic movements with their male partners on a public platform. Although it is easy to recognize that this was only indulged with the common people who took this as a profession. Women from royal families did not participate in it except as spectators. This kind of instance comprehends that the Mughal time delightfully welcomed those activities not only as a mere mood of recreation, but also as a way of livelihood for some people. It gradually became some one's profession too. Though very few, still the Mughal Indian society gave opportunities to ladies to act and show their virtues independently on a public platform where men showed the same.⁴⁴ This upholds a parallel view of the position of women in the Mughal society, which rolls out a liberal aspect of medieval India and helps to reconstruct the concept of medieval Indian socio-cultural condition with a modern view.



Figure 4 : Music, Dance and Acrobatics scenes, Mughal, Md. Shah's Period, 1730-40. National Museum, Delhi

A mu'allima⁴⁵ was often appointed to teach the princess ethical studies in the Quranic studies, ethical teaching, and basic arithmetic. However, some other common subjects were also required for the basic education for both royal boys and ladies. It seemed very interesting that Polo was one of them,⁴⁶ which not only highlighted the royal mind set of what their women should be but also

ensured equity between boys and girls within the royal care as much as possible

Conclusion

The term Mughal harem defines a sequestered place, which, as Ruby Lal argued in her book, was absent in a true sense before the reign of Akbar. It was conjured up differently during Babur and Humayun.⁴⁷ There was truly no separation between the private and public lives of the royal ladies.⁴⁸ Mughals had a strong sense of gratitude towards the matriarch of their clan, who were robust, physically inured to hardship, and willing to suffer their menfolk's privations alongside the men. Their indistinguishable public and private lives gave them the potential to deal with the situation whichever way they had. Thus, the context of Turco-Mongol legacy, their cultural tradition, and their peripatetic lifestyles create a milieu through which it seemed very innate to the Mughal women to pursue their desires in the field of outdoor and indoor sports as well and be capable of both, breaking so many social taboos and imprinting their distinctive reflection with ease on the culture of the Mughal Empire.

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