



A Premise on Nur Jehan's Education

KEYWORDS

girl education in Mughal history

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ABSTRACT *Mihr-un-nisa who later became famous in Mughal History as NUR-JEHAN was an intelligent, talented, and educated woman. There is no reference in the contemporary historians of her education in particular, or education of girls in general. Infact, there were no schools for girls. In the absence of any historical record, we can just work on a premise, on the basis of the circumstantial evidence, that, in the Royal Harem as well as in a Noble's household, there were lady tutors for girls who taught them Persian alphabet and a little arithmetic apart from the inevitable Quran. During adolescence, it was largely the influence, exerted upon her, by the three forms of culture, which provided the means of education and prepared her for such a responsible public office. She learnt gradually, bit by bit and CULTURE was her teacher and the best means of her EDUCATION.*

Mihr-un-nisa who later became famous in Mughal History as NUR-JEHAN and ruled the country, in the name of her husband Jehangir (1605-27 A.D.), son of Akbar the Great, and the fourth Mughal Emperor for 11 years, from 1616 to 1627, was daughter of Mirza Ghiyath Beg¹ who was a son of Khwajah Muhammad Sharif, Vazir (Prime Minister) of Tatar Sultan, the Beglar Begi (Governor-Incharge) of Khurasan, a province in Iran. After his father's death in 1576, Mirza Ghiyath started for India as a fugitive. On the way, at Qandahar, his wife Asmat Begum gave birth to a daughter Mihr-Un-Nisa (The Sun of Women) in 1577. The Mirza was introduced to Akbar and was admitted into the imperial service.

The Mirza, a Shia'h by conviction, was a polished Iranian. Culture was his way of life and his household, and Mihr grew up to be an extremely beautiful, talented, and cultured girl. Though strict 'purdah' prevailed, the ladies of the Mirza's household regularly visited the Mughal harem (seraglio), where Prince Salim saw her, and was greatly enamoured of her. But Akbar was a realist. He was also not in favour of his son and heir marrying a Shia'h girl. To ward off the storm, she was married to 'Ali Quli Beg Istalju entitled 'Sher-Afgan' (or Sher-Afkun) (the lion slayer), also an Iranian. Sher-Afgan was sent to Burdwan, his jagir in Bengal.

Salim could not forget Mihr-un-Nisa. He acceded to the throne in 1605 under the name Nur'ud Din Jehangir and as soon as he was free from Khusrau's rebellion in 1607, he sent his personal friend Qutb'ud-Din Khan Kokaltash to Burdwan. Sher Afgan was killed and Mihr was sent to Agra. Jehangir married her in 1611. First, she was given the title 'Nur Mahal Begum' (the Light of the Palace Queen) and then, Nur-Jehan Begum' (the Light of the World Queen).² She began to exercise over dominating influence upon him and, gradually, she captured and concentrated real political power in her hands, and ruled in the name of Jehangir and became a legend in Mughal history.³ As the contemporary historians recorded, she managed, competently, the whole affairs of the realm, and honours of every description were at her disposal, and "nothing was wanting to make her an absolute monarch except the reading of the Khutba in her name."⁴

She sat in the Jharokha along with Jehangir and the nobles came to pay obeisance and received commands. Coins were struck in her name,⁵ e.g.

"By the order of Shah Jehangir gold was adorned, A hundred-fold By the name of Nur-Jehan, the Queen Begum."

The Royal seal on firmans (decrees) bore her signature; "By the order of the exalted Lady of the Sublime Couch, Nur Jehan Padshah Begum."⁶

Jehangir completely surrendered himself to her and he used to say that "Nur Jehan Begum has been selected and is wise enough to conduct the matters of state, and he wanted only a bottle of wine and a piece of meat to keep himself merry."⁷ Other historians give this quantity as "a ser of wine and half a ser meat," and "six cups of wine and half a ser of meat." The quantity, however, is immaterial. The fact stands out that he had surrendered the Kingdom to her and he just played the King under her command. Foreign travellers like Francisco Pelsaert confirmed this phenomenon.⁸

An ordinary illiterate woman could not have, thus, run the Mughal Empire for eleven years, and all this shows that Nur Jehan, the legendary Queen consort of Jehangir, was an extra-ordinarily intelligent, talented, and educated woman. But there is no reference in the contemporary historians of her education in particular, or education of girls in general. The contemporary work 'Ain-i-Akbari (The Ordinances of Akbar) of Abul Fazl, court historian of Akbar who composed it in c.1600 A.D., has a chapter on the education of boys under the heading: 'Regulations Regarding Education',⁹ but there is absolutely NO mention of the education of girls during the Mughal Period.

Infact, there were no schools for girls, 'Purdah' custom was so strictly enforced and segregation of females was so complete among the Royal, Noble and Elite class, that girls were not sent to study along with boys, even at the primary level. How then was Nur Jehan so well educated that she could manage the affairs, not only of her large estate (Jagirs), but also of the Grand Mughal Empire for eleven years?

In the absence of any historical record, we can just work on a premise, on the basis of the circumstantial evidence, that, in the Royal Harem as well as in a Noble's household, there were lady tutors for girls who taught them Persian alphabet and a little arithmetic apart from the inevitable Quran. Later on, girls were taught Persian prose and poetry and calligraphy. Hand written copies of such classical works as Diwan-i-Hafiz were easily available. It must be borne in mind that Persian was not only the court language, but also the language of the upper class of the society and it was in daily usage.

During adolescence, it was largely the influence, exerted upon her, by the three forms of culture, which provided the

means of education and prepared her for such a responsible public office. The first was the influence of the culture of the TIME and the AGE in which she lived; the second was the influence of the SOCIETY and the ENVIRONMENT in which

also she lived; and the third was the influence of the FAMILY and the HOUSEHOLD, which, in fact shaped her entire personality. She learnt gradually, bit by bit and CULTURE was her teacher and the best means of her EDUCATION.

REFERENCE

1. For his biography, see Ma'athir'ul-Umara, Vol.II (H.Beveridge) (Calcutta 1952) (hereinafter abb.MU) Pp 1072-79. Also see 'Ain-i-Akbari, (Vol-1 (H.Blochmann) (abb.;Ain) Pp.571-76 | | 2. History of Mughal Architecture (R.Nath) Vol-III (New Delhi 1994) (abb.HMA-III) p.75. For her brief sketch, see HMA-III, 74-78. Jehangir has referred to her, over and over again, in his autobiography, viz. the Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri or Jehangir-Namah (Rogers & Beveridge) 2 vols in one (Delhi 1968) (abb.JN) I, 192 n, 266, 278, 319, 342, 348, 375, 380, 385, 397 & 401; II, 45, 74, 105, 187, 190, 192, 199, 205, 214, 216, 221-22, 228, 235, 237, 239n, 277 and 289. For details of her biography see Ma'athir'ul-Umara Vol-I (Beveridge and Bains Prasad) (Calcutta 1911-41) (abb.MU-I) PP59, 61, 129, 141, 150, 287, 232, 386, 418, 561, 573, 603, 604, 659 & 729; and Vol-II (Beveridge and Bains Prasad) (Calcutta 1952) (abb.MU-II) Pp.11, 17, 19, 240, 497, 656, 837, 1018, 1073, 1075, 1076 and 1077. | | 3. HMA – III, p.75. | | 4. Muhammad Hadi in Tatimma-i-Waq'at-i-Jehangiri vide HMA-III, 75. | | 5. MU, II, 1077 | | 6. Ibid, 1077 | | 7. Cf. HMA-III, p.76; Elliot & Dowson, History of India as told by its own Historians, Vol-VI p. 399. | | 8. Cf. The Remonstrant of Francisco Pelsaert (tr. from the Dutch by W.H.Moreland and P.Geyl) (Delhi 1972) p.50 | | 9. The 'Ain-i—Akbari, Vol-I (tr.H Blochmann) Book-II, 'Ain-25, pp.288-89. |