

Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World

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Author: Ruby Lal

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Reviewer: Karuna Sharma

The issues and themes concerning the state and its rulers have until quite recently dominated the historiography of Mughal India. While some scholars argue for the centralized character of the Mughal state, others have pointed out its contested and negotiated nature. More recent scholars have come up with studies that underline the fluidity of the state. Ruby Lal's *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* is one of the two major works on the contestations and negotiations inherent in the functioning of the Mughal state ([1](#)). This supposedly unconventional subject, the domestic world of the Mughals, is predisposed to question the politics of history writing (which had hitherto been centred on politics and trade), and this book marks a first attempt to understand gender relations at the Mughal court.

Lal revisits the Mughals, and their domestic world in particular, provides a detailed genealogy of the rulers, and takes to task colonial caricatures. The author refers to early travellers' emperor-centric accounts, which referred to women only marginally. For them, the harem was worth exploring and examining but they ended up giving, at times, misleading—even fantastic—accounts of it. The efforts to understand the oriental culture and society during the colonial period resulted in a concoction of information from, what Lal calls, 'fluid and self-contradictory travellers' accounts'. This had an impact on the understanding of the domestic world of the Mughals as the numerous incidents that the early writers had keenly observed were interpreted as symbolic of perversion. Intrepidly, Lal's book provides an alternative to the sensuous, voyeuristic Mughal harem marquee, reproducing instead the vibrant and contested nature of the harem/domestic of the Mughals. Such a portrayal of the royal domestic space, akin to the research of Leslie Peirce in the context of the Ottoman harem ([2](#)), challenges the common notion that gender segregation indicates limited and restricted involvement on the part of royal women. Instead, Lal demonstrates that the decisions of the Mughal emperor, and thereby the policy of the Mughal state, were formed by the politics and complexities of the royal household.

This study of the royal household falls into that genre of feminist writing that envisages the household as an institution in which gender relations are structured, enforced, and, possibly, contested. Underlining the fluidity of the domestic arrangements of the Mughals, this book builds upon the role that the royal Mughal household, especially the females, had in the making of the Mughal state structure. This approach problematizes and broadens the polarized character of the public-private model, and the book takes us

through the various meanings attached to the concept of the 'public-private domain', especially in the non-western world. By taking up issues such as the intersection of the political interests of women and men, the book emphasizes the superfluity of such distinctions, and contends for the dynamism and contestation of the Mughal harem.

Domesticity and Power, which covers the period from the sixteenth century to the early-seventeenth century, is divided into six chapters, besides an introduction and a conclusion, that underscore the differences in the domestic world of the peripatetic period of Babur and Humayun from that of Akbar's centralized administration. The book focuses on a re-reading of contemporary historical literature in the light of the new set of questions it poses. The oft-repeated inadequacy of the sources in matters related to women and domestic life has been challenged, and information culled from Gulbadan begum's *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah* has been critically analysed. Gulbadan's account of Babur and Humayun's reigns was part of a programme commissioned by Akbar, and was to become the official source for the chronicling of his rule. Through *Ahval*, which gives an account of the nascent Mughal monarchy, *Domesticity and Power* shows how the harem metamorphosed over a period of time into a bounded space which could be understood as a family. The record of routine events (like the king's visits to the royal women, preparation of marriages, and distribution of gifts) in the *Ahval*, is, for Lal, a repertoire of the processes involved in the making of 'hierarchical relationships, building alliances and reinforcing kinship solidarities'. Lal examines how royal life evolved through a period of struggle, how the Mughal monarchy was made, and the role royal women played in Mughal politico-cultural thought. Making good use of Persian terminology, Lal shows how the domestic/harem, and the relations between different communities within it, evolved over time: from kin and intimate relationships to an awe-inspiring monarchy whose women/harem was to be much more secluded. This is a necessary step to reaching an understanding of the political power, and consequent social relations, of the Mughal world.

The book describes the reign of three successive Mughal rulers. The first is Babur, whose reign was fraught with incessant conflict among his cousins which necessitated direct deliberations with his fellow men. Lal finds in this a homo-social domestic environment, in which emotions played an important role. The second ruler is Humayun. Even though the court was still peripatetic during his reign, and although he faced outside rivals, he developed a tighter royal entourage in which hierarchies were more clearly defined than before, and where there was greater formality—to the extent that 'elaborate rituals of comportment' were being written down. Babur had invoked his ancestral connections to legitimize his rule. Humayun also invoked his exalted pedigree, but he preferred to enforce his power by demanding a strict adherence to the code of conduct. This led in turn to the 'beginning of settlement of his court, its increased organization, of peoples, of relationships, of roles'. There were certain stringent regulations which governed the conduct of close associates (pp. 96–99), and Lal attempts to show the debates and tensions in the lives of the people at court which mirrored the intersection of private and public-political affairs.

Turning the pages over, we come across women-specific information. One finds themes such as marriage, motherhood, and wifehood, through which Lal locates the harem in the peripatetic world of the Mughals. Babur never discussed the harem as an institutionalized entity (which was, of course, only a later development); and among other things the harem meant, simply, 'women'. By Humayun's time, the word was being used more frequently, but it still referred to the imperial women, the haraman-i padshah. As for their contribution, the royal women had a due place in the construction of the monarchy. They were not only the carriers of the new dynasty, but they also socialized new members. This created the opportunity for women's agency in the production and circulation of power. The intersection of the interests of men and women undermines any conception of a separate and independent domestic sphere. Amidst the multifaceted and intimate community which encompassed the domestic world the Mughals, Lal's account relives various episodes and stories to reveal the hierarchical and emotional relationships within the harem, which were respected by the kings, and how women played a crucial role, such as in brokering peace, as one may find many entanglements in the making of monarchy. Thus Lal considers the deliberations over marriages, Humayun-Hamideh Banu's, and bases upon them a narrative of the making of Mughal political norms, traditions, protocols, and the agency women enjoyed (concerning their own marriage). Thus instead of being

a segregated domain, the domestic/harem of the Mughals was open to negotiations and challenges from within.

In contrast to his predecessors, Akbar's presence and charisma were not dependent on an exalted ancestry, as he was divinely ordained; God granted him kingship. The leader of religion and realm, Akbar needed to exhibit an extraordinary magnificence and distinctiveness. He tried to consolidate his power first by disciplining his own body, including his sexual behaviour, so that one finds hetero-social and masculine sexual ethical compartments; secondly, by carefully constructing, and separating, spaces for different activities and rituals; and, thirdly, through a network of marriages which was a necessary adjunct of imperial power and control. If he were to be an awe-inspiring monarch, his harem had to be quite unique too. It now became an institutionalized body, which, according to Lal, had its genesis in the formation of royalty itself. At this time, the word harem began to be used to refer not only to the women themselves, but also to the spaces they occupied and their service-class. It is now, too, that one begins to find a neatly compartmentalized space. Various invocations, analysed in the book, convey the sense that Akbar and his dwellings were in close proximity to the Prophet and the holy sites associated with him. Under such circumstances, the places associated with Akbar, largely his harem, drew respect and, thereby, seclusion. The construction of a new capital at Fatehpur Sikri, that spatially organized the various people and structures within it, was one of the ways to create quarters manifesting the power of the monarchy. In this scheme, the women came to occupy demarcated spaces (p. 165). Further, the invisibility of women was achieved, Lal argues, through the complete obliteration of the names of the mothers of the future heirs. The mothers were crucial to the empire, but unnamed in the annals. By making the private apartments more sacred and, therefore, invisible to those outside the immediate family, the monarchy created for itself an aura of being beyond the reach of its subjects. In this scheme the domestic world is more subjugated, as Akbar's persona encompassed both spiritual and temporal powers. Lal in various ways tries to show how in reality the domestic world of Akbar betrayed such a characterization. Instead she discusses diverse ways by which women gained a central role at various junctures, such as intercessions or the provision of counsel. Thus even though the Mughal order was much more formalized and the domestic more secluded, Lal brings out the women's role in the contestation of those sovereign ideals—a contestation that was part of Mughal political traditions. Besides the intimate community, Lal is aware of the importance of Akbar's foster community, thus there is also a detailed description of this community. As this promoted relationships with individuals who were not kinsmen, it took to a higher level the politics of marriage making; such a promotion of foster-relations did have an impact on the socio-political relations of the actors concerned.

One episode that has triggered the author's anxiety is the decision of Gulbadan begum to lead the hajj party in 1578. The author has mapped onto this venture the desires and agency of the imperial women; something which helps to accentuate the fact that these women remained visible, despite the fact that they now resided in secluded places. Hajj was undeniably more than a spiritual journey on the part of the women. It fostered an Islamic image of the empire, which was one reason why it had been fully supported by the settled and consolidated government of Akbar. It was an exceptional enterprise of, and for, the royal women, who had a more or less secluded life, and it consequently slams the door on the notion of a domestic world of the Mughals (p. 213).

The conclusion sums up the findings of each chapter, including the introduction, providing a picture of the development of domestic life that follows the growth and formation of the Mughal Empire. An attempt has also been made to compare Mughal women with Ottoman and Safavid women (p. 216). All three empires inherited Central Asian political traditions, but adopted different techniques to consolidate of their rule. Each experimented with different domestic arrangements, social hierarchies, rituals, and symbols. These experiments involved the creation of the harem. The rule of hasekis (the sultan's favourite concubine) or the walide sultan in the Ottoman Empire, or the naturalness of royal women's political authority in Safavid Iran have no parallels among the Mughals (p. 223). In the Mughal context, it was only the uncommonly determined and talented women who gained political importance. It was this experimentation and negotiation that give the Mughal harem a unique character. That is why the author is tormented by the omission of the names of the mothers of the Mughal heirs from contemporary chronicles; equally, Nur

Jahan's marriage to Jahangir does not get a mention in his autobiography. These absences are ascribed to the patriarchal nature of the sources (p. 225). The 'final thoughts' call for a rethinking of the ways in which Islamic societies were formed and configured at a particular historical juncture.

Through this lively description of women's role in the making of the empire, its traditions, and grandeur, the Mughal social and domestic world becomes a part of the historical discourse. The book also embodies some provocative thoughts. The hajj episode, for example, emphasizes, among others things, the agency and autonomy of the women who undertook the journey. More than simply claiming women's agency in this enterprise, however, one could also notice its recognizable importance to the political economy of the day, where the 'actors in women' were performing their delineated roles. In such a big venture as the hajj, an admixture of trading and political enterprises cannot be ruled out. As the succeeding centuries would show, the ships bound to Mecca were loaded with merchandise for the vendors of that city. Thus, it may be that the hajj venture of Gulbadan was part of this exchange nexus. Although not within the thematic purview of this book, a peep into the local harem, that is the Rajput antahpura, would have added to the understanding of the evolution of the Mughal harem and the members constituting it. Could it be that the obliteration of a mother's name was the result of indigenous traditions, in which the requirements of respect hampered the so-called public pronouncement of the names of women! Written lucidly, the book opens up a new paradigm which will stimulate further researches into a neglected domain where gender relations can be tapped.

Notes

1. The other being F. Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge, 2004). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. L. P. Peirce, *Imperial Harem-Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 1993). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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