

# THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL CENTRAL ASIAN SOCIETY AS DEPICTED IN PERSIAN SOURCES

Dr. Zubaida Jan

Lecturer,

Department of Persian,

University of Kashmir

In the long, long history of humanity and its developments, in the propagation of the human race and in the social economy of the world, woman has been as important factor as men, yet she was always looked down upon as an inferior creature until an orphan in the desert of Arabia issued the Divine injunction - "Respect the wombs (women)."<sup>1</sup>

The Islamic laws gave the women in Central Asia a social status much superior to the status of the women in Rome, or other countries of old where women continued to be condemned to the perpetual tutelage of the priests, husband and guardians - a gender created to please and obey. The woman in these countries was completely dependent like a purchased slave and was treated as a property. The state of affairs was prevalent in the very recent past in almost all the countries where Islam had not reached yet. Kidwai in 1978 remarked, "the fair sex of England, only about thirty years ago had no personal property independent of her husband, and she could not make a will nor a contract. Woman acquired and inherited

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<sup>1</sup> Women under Different Social and Religious Laws, Sheikh M. H. Kidwai, Delhi, 1978, p.3.

for the sold profit of her lord and master (the husband); and so clearly was she defined, not as a person, but as a thing. "Islam gave rights of inheritance to her as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a sister and in some cases even when more distantly related."<sup>2</sup>

During Mongol period the duty of the women was to drive carts, get the dwelling on and off them, milk the cows, make butter and fruit and to dress and sew kin's, which they would do with a thread made up of tendons.<sup>3</sup> The woman also sew the boots, the socks and clothings, both the sexes looked after the sheep and the goats, sometimes the men and other times the women milking them.<sup>4</sup>

However, during Timurid period the affects of Islamic culture and the Persian sedentary civilization like other spheres of life also changed the social assignments and position of woman from Mongol to Islamic pattern. In Islamic law the wife has a right to food, clothing, lodging and servants and to money for those expenses which are usual among persons of her rank. The wife is, however, to obey her husband to avoid everything that is unpleasant to him. If the husband fails to fulfil her legitimate rights she can complaint to Qazi or Judge and he would allow her to borrow money on account of her husband or could even order the sale of her husbands property in order to provide her with the money that was necessary. She was obliged to preserve her beauty so far as she could and to try to please her husband; and for this purpose she was allowed by-law to use various cosmetics. The marriage could be dissolved if either of the party abandoned the Musalman Faith or if the husband was absent for a certain time without news being heard of him; as well as if madness or similar disease be

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>3</sup> History of Mongols, Bertold and Spuler, p. 96.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

discovered, or if it is discovered that the marriage was not properly solemnized. The husband was obliged to divorce his wife by her own consent if she had sufficient reasons for that and could go to Qazi to compel her husband to divorce her. Certain contemptuous expressions if used by her husband to his wife gave her the rights of divorce and allow her to prevent him from having access to her, unless he, bought this right by 'Kaffarat' and the recital of certain prayers.

Moreover, if the wife was a person of ability she could through her husband be able to obtain influence over many people and to meddle with affairs of various kinds; and if he be placed in high position, she could even have great influence over the politics of the country. For example Berthold has rightly concluded from various primary sources that during Shah Rukh's period "Shah Rukh was sovereign only in name. In reality the empire was governed by his principal wife Gauhar-Shad mother of Ulugh Beg."<sup>5</sup>

However, such changes from nomadic set-up to sedentary civilization were not in any way absolute rather many aspects of Monogolian life continued to dominate and position of the Timurid queens and other ladies at the court was more in keeping with Mongol traditions than with the requirements of Islam. Clavijo<sup>6</sup> and Ibn-I-Arab Shah<sup>7</sup> while describing the accounts of the banquets of 1404 A.D. mention the queens and princesses without any veil. The influence of these ladies in the affairs of the State during different Timurid kings has already been described under the heading of "The Royal Household", however one more thing worth mentioning here is that some of these ladies were highly cultured and probably educated also. They

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<sup>5</sup> Barthold, *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*, Vol. II, P. 84

<sup>6</sup> Clavijo quoted by Barthold in *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*, Vol. II, P. 31

<sup>7</sup> Ibn-I-Arab Shah, Urdu translation by Fazul Haque, P. 163

opened schools, built mosques and took active part in other welfare affairs of the state.<sup>8</sup>

The position of the common women was much different than the ladies of upper class. They could not afford to sit idle without their houses so moved about freely of course without a veil, helping their men in almost all the fields of outdoor life. Ibn-I-Arab Shah writes, that the women would even take part in active warfare and fighting "there were women of such valour in Timur's army that they would show much more bravery than men in the battle fields. Their vigour and valour astonished the men of Arab and Ajam known for their bravery. They were so expert in fighting with spears, swords and bows that they completely inhibited the army of their opponents.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the facts about the active participation and bravery of these women in war, it seems certain that many of them in accordance with the Mongol tradition accompanied their men in the war through most of the medieval courses are silent about it. But Ibn-I-Arab Shah writes, "If the wives of the Chiefs and soldiers of the Timur's army were pregnant and had to give birth to child while on march, they would dismount from their horses, go aside a little away from the main road, give birth and wrapping the child in a cloth mounted their horses and overtook their people."<sup>10</sup> The women of the sedentary population also worked side by side to men in fields and other outdoor activities, But it is clear that the women were however no longer treated as a mere property rather had their rights, their status and assigned duties. Their condition was in fact revolutionized under the influence of Islamic laws which freed them from most of the shameful cruelties of Mongol tradition.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, P. 163.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 256.