

Labor Class of Women in Mughal India

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ABSTRACT

Karl Marx defined the labor class or proletariat as individuals who sell their labor power for wages. He asserted that labor class physically build bridges, craft furniture, grow food and nurse children. Women were always considered second grade citizens. They were seen as just adjuncts to men. The traditional view often praised the role of the women as wives and mothers. But as individuals they were assigned of a very low social position. They are not identified as labor class who could bear the hard ships of this labor class. The study of women as apart of economic life especially in medieval India is the topic yet to explore. This paper highlights the contribution of working women class in medieval India. The source material, in the political history of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had just passing references reflect social and economic life of women. Even though, some information is available in respect of the kinds of work that women did. A considerable amount of such literature has been addressed in Abul-Fazal's *Ain-i-Akbari* (1595).

Almost every traveler commented on the daily life of women in India. The reliability of this material is still questionable but these accounts considered an important source of medieval Indian history. The pictorial evidence offered by illustrations and miniatures of the Mughal School of fifteenth and sixteenth centuries portrayed the economic contribution of women.

KEY WORDS: Gujjar, Ghosi, Kujar, Khanchanis, Horckaenis, Hentsinis, Munsubdar, Diwan-I has, Darogha ,Urdu Begis,Zanana-I-Parsa,Parstaran-i-Hazur,Sad-us-sadur,Sadar-i-Inath,Bighas,Madad-i-Maash,Riyat.

Women's Professions

Domestic Works

Abul Fazal writes "Hindu women carry water from rivers, cisterns or wells, many of them carry several pots on their heads, one on the top of the other, while talking and gossiping with their companions and making their way over uneven ground. If the heart could maintain the balance of these vessels, in the same way, it would not be affected by suffering. Why should one be more lowly then these women in one's relationship to the Almighty?"(Abul Fazal,1989;425)

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India, being an agricultural unit always had a customary gender based division of labor. Literary sources as well as paintings provide us some passing evidences to reconstruct the share of labor that was traditionally associated with women. (Moosvi, 1994; 115).

Women mainly did the transplanting and weeding, helped in harvesting, brought fodder for their animals, though none of these was exclusively woman's job. A Mughal miniature of about 1610 A.D depicts a woman sowing seeds broadcast, walking behind the plough man. A nineteenth century line drawing from Kashmir clearly depicts a woman transplanting paddy along with a man. An evidence of woman carrying on actual cultivation comes from the middle Himalayas, it was reported in 1624 A.D. that the women cultivate the soil while men were weaver (Kosambi,1956;319)

Women worked along with their men in their fields traditionally a part of Indian rural society.(Kosambi,1956;321) The lower class women worked hard along with their men for livelihood. All the drudgery was done by them. The day to day activities including collecting fodder for cattle from far off places grinding rice, gathering cow dung and wood for fuel. Even for water she had to walk miles (Levis,1773;37).

In Anwar-i- Suhaili paintings depict women carrying food for their men folk working in the fields. Women were also grinding corn, fetching water and looking after cattle. (see fig,no 7.1(Zaidi,2004;37).

Women also had done some odd jobs with their men folk. After harvest they collect wastage from the fields for the purpose of fodder for their animals. Rice beating and husking of grains were exclusively women's job. They had equally shared in fed sugarcane and oil feeds into the ox-driven presses through worked by the men. Their daily job was to cook food and carry it to their men working in the fields (Moosvi,1994;116).



**Figure 7.1: A woman bring food for her husband in the field.
(Anwar-i-Suhaili 1597)**



Figure 7.2: Women rubbed the stones for constructions.



Figure 7.3: Women holding construction material.



Figure 7.4: Women working in the construction of Agra Fort. Geeti Sen. Paintings from AkbarNama.

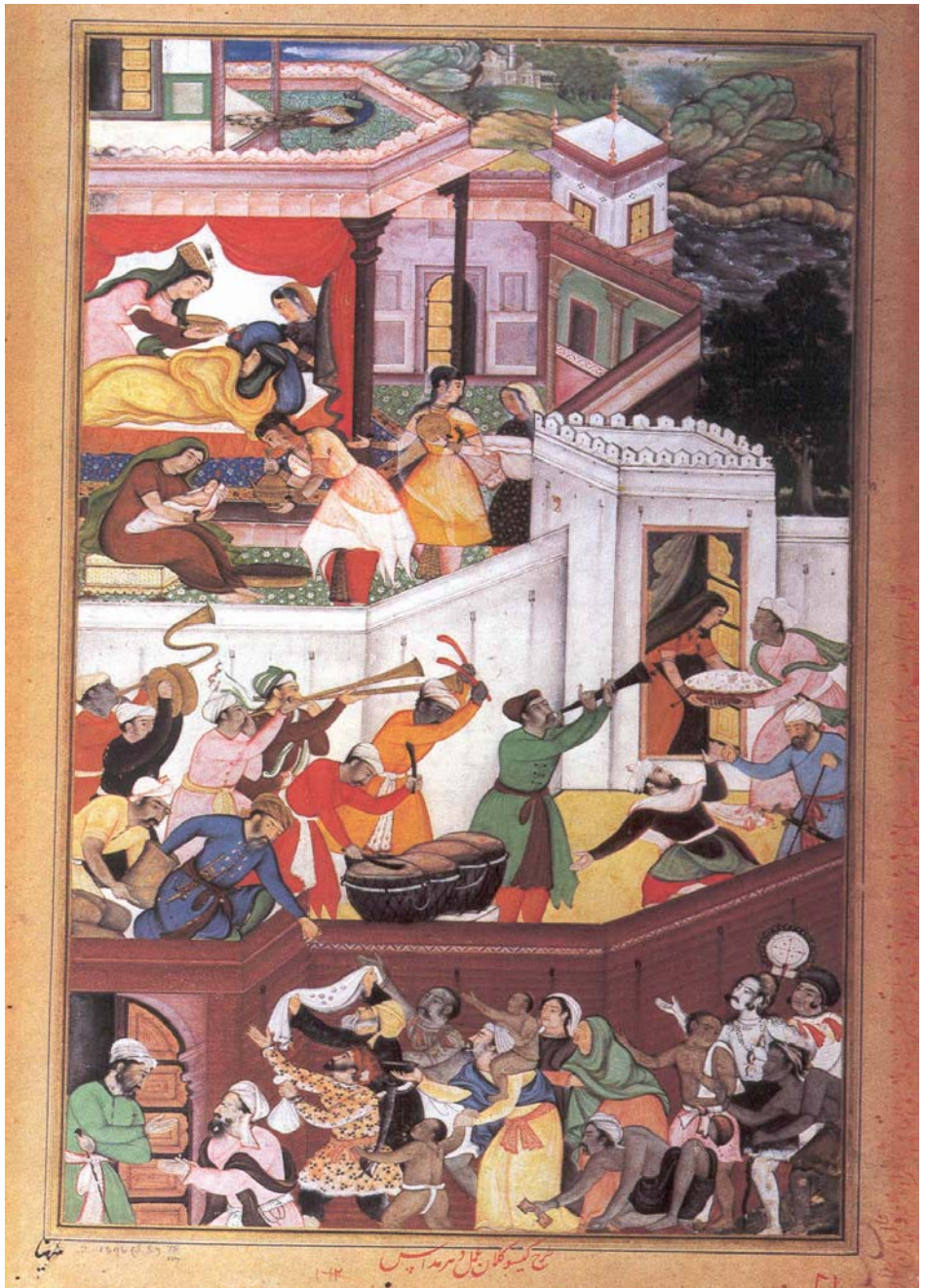


Figure 7.5: Birth of Akbar. Wet nurse Clear in the picture. Geeti Sen. Paintings from Akbar Nama.



Figure 7.6: Women work as mid-wives Geeti, Sen, Paintings from Akbar Nama.

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John Fryer comments upon the chores performed by the women in household “Indian wives dress their husbands’ victuals, fetch water and grind their corn with the hand mill when, they sing, chat or marry.(Fryer,199) Women collected twigs and leaves for fuel, fed the cattle, prepared yogurt and butter. Milking was done by males and females both(Moosvi,1994;117).

In India spinning was regarded exclusively women’s job. Women performed it not only for their consumption but also for the market. Women also helped in washing, bleaching and dying(Fryer,201).

Women were even involved in physical work especially in the construction of buildings. They engaged in breaking stones, pounding bricks into rubble, preparing cement, staining and mixing lime, carrying the mortar up to the masons. (See Fig. 7.2 – 7.4). Women also worked as mid-wives. (See Fig. 7.5-7.6) (Sen, 1994; 201).

Indian women were also engaged in commerce especially in small industries along with their husbands. “Gujjar” and “Ghosi” women hawked milked products in villages and “Kunjar” women sold green vegetables and fruits. The pitcher’s wife parched and sold grain, the potter’s wife kneaded clay and the lace-maker’s and Iron smelter’s wives similarly helped their husband in the respective fields.(Moosvi,1994;118)

Indian women were also involved in the business of Inn keeping. Manucci records a tradition that Sher Shah (1540-1545) assigned the duty of looking after the travellers to married slaves and their wives (Manucci, 1908; 116).

Entertainers

Singing and dancing were considered the women’s profession in Mughal India. These groups were the essential part of Mughal court. According to Khondamir, all the inhabitants of the Kingdom were divided into three classes.

Ahl – Dulat (nobles)

Ahl – Sadat (religious persons)

Ahl – Murad (Entertainers)

Those who possessed beauty and elegance, those who were most lovely, also clever musicians and sweet singers composed the third class, and appellation of Ahl I Murad (people of pleasure) was conferred on them, because most people took great delight in the company of such young looking people of rosy cheeks and sweet voices (Khondamir,1887;120).

It was a part of emperor’s routine to enjoy the performances of singing and dancing girls. These singers and dancers were known by the common name Kanchanis. They were large in number and performed on the celebrated occasions. Even European travellers refer to their presence in the harem and outside repeatedly (Manucci,1908;69).

Dance was generally performed in the restricted assemblies of royalty and nobility but on birthdays, weddings and ceremonial occasions their performances were essential. Manucci gives us a list of more than fifty names, they were the professional singers and dancers of the Mughal Harem and Mughal court. Manucci further writes “each one has her special rank according to her standing. The queens, princesses and her ladies pass their time in their rooms, each with their own set of musicians. One of them was allowed to perform elsewhere except the person to whom they were attached. All these women are pretty, have a good style and much grace in their gait, are very free in their talk and exceedingly lascivious, their only occupation, outside the duties of their office, being lewdness. (Manucci, 1908; 335-336)

By the words, the duties of their office, Manucci probably means the custom and obligation of the dancing girls to attend the royal palace on certain days, to pay obeisance to the King, sing and dance before him. Some Europeans praise the dance of the dominos and Persian women. While their tunes are superior; they dance too, to the rhythms of the songs with a kind of swaying of the body which is not lascivious, but rather modest. Other classes were named as horckaenis and hentsinis, who have various styles of singing and dancing, but who are all a like accommodating people (Pelsaert, 1972; 83).

According to Bernier, Shahjahan was fond of fair sex and introduced at every Fares and festival into the seraglio singing and dancing girls were called Kanchains (the gilded, the blooming) and kept them there for that purpose for whole night. All Mughal emperors enjoyed the dance performances of these girls, some less some more, but all. They were not indeed the prostitutes in bazaars, but those of a more private and respectable class who attend the grand weddings of omrahs and Mansubdars, for the purpose of singing and dancing. Most of these kanchains are handsome and well dressed, and sing to perfection; and their limbs being extremely supple, they dance with wonderful agility and are always correct in regard to time (Bernier, 1986; 273-274).

Their grating movements almost whirled them into air and color and clapping with the songs to the beat of drum presented an ethereal vision. There are many Mughal miniatures depicting such dance performance (Brown, N.D.607) .

In the reign of Shahjahan these women visited palace to pay their respects “when they came to him on Wednesday to pay their reverence at the Diwan-i-Khas, according to an ancient custom, says Bernier he often detained them the whole night and amused himself with their antics and follies. A visitor to Shahjahan’s palace was once invited to dinner. After the banquet, dancing girls appeared with all the charms of lascivious and suggestive dress, immodest behavior and posturing, but the guest remained impassive ‘Aurangzeb’”, forbids the Kanchains to enter the Seraglio: but complying with long established usage does not object to their coming every Wednesday to Diwan-i-Khas, where they make their salam from the certain distance and then immediately retire while on the

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occasion of festivals, fairs these kanchains were allowed to come to the palace (Bernier,1986;274) .

Nicholas Doughinton who had visited India during (1608-15) remarks that they sang with such elevated and shrill voices, strained into the highest, yet sweet and tunable, rising and falling according to their art and skill, that I have been ravished in those silent seasons with the sweet ache or reflection thereof from a far distance, and keep walking hours together, listening to them, anticipating (in my desires) the new moon which they constantly thus celebrate. (Doughtinton, 1975;53-54)

A French physician Bernard (during the reign of Jahangir) fell deeply in love with a dancing girl. According to Bernier she was a young and beautiful damsel remarkable for the elegance of her dancing with honor countryman fell violently in love, but the mother resisted all (his) overtures and in peasant solicitation. Jahangir once offered Bernard present before all the Omrahs by way of remuneration for an extraordinary case which he had affected in the seraglio. In the midst of crowded assembly the girl was placed on Bernard's back, who withdrew triumphantly with his prize and took her to his house. In those days, Kanchains were the commodity of the emperor and he decided the fate of that creature. That's the way Bernard was rewarded by Jahangir in form of this girl (Bernier, 1986; 276).

Prostitution

The Mughal attitude towards prostitution varied from emperor to emperor. Akbar set up a private colony for prostitutes outside Fatehpur Sikri. Badaoni writes, the prostitutes of the realm (who had collected at the capital, and could scarcely be counted. so large was their number) had a separate quarter assigned to them, which was called shaitanpura or Devils-villa." Akbar appointed a Darogha (superintendent) and a clerk to register the names of such who went to the prostitutes, or took them to their houses. If any well known courtier wanted to have a virgin, he had to first apply to his majesty and get his permission. Infringement of these regulations invited (Badaoni, 1980; 311).

In the later times these conditions were relaxed and by the time of Shahjahan, the Omarah made it a fashion to pay visits to the houses of prostitutes. According to Peter Mundy, they were all "whore though not in so public a manner that there is hardly any meetings of friends, without them once the gathering was warmed up, they took up whom they take in mind either for night, or otherwise (Mundy, 1914; 218).

According to Manucci , "All Mohammdans are very fond of women, who are their principal relaxation and also their only pleasure. The nobles and Amirs were the chips of the Mughal block. They were fully involved in the activities of merry making and licentious life woman was the only object through whom they satisfied their sexual appetite (Manucci,1908;342).

Pelsaert gives us a detailed but delightful description of the sex play noble of man in his harem. Each night the Amir visits a particular woman and receives a very warm welcome from her and from the slaves, who dressed especially for the occasion seem to fly rather than run, about their duties --- fans are kept going steadily in the room, or in the open air, where they usually sit. Some of the slaves chafe the master's hands and feet, some sit and sing, or play music and dance, or provide other recreation, the husband sits like a golden cock among the gilded hens until midnight, or passion or drink send him to bed. Then one of the pretty slave girls takes his fancy, he calls her to him and enjoys her (Pelsaert,1972;64-65).

Mughal society was tolerant towards the alliance of men, and there was no restriction among Hindus and Muslims in maintaining concubines and harlots. There were large colonies of prostitutes in all major cities and towns and even along with the caravan's sarais for the comfort of the travelers. According to Tavernier, in Hyderabad there were 20,000 common women without license, they were not allowed to engage in their profession "entered in the Darogha's register they pay no tribute to the king, but a certain number of them are obliged to go every Friday with their governess and their music to present themselves in the square in front of the balcony if the king be there they dance before him" or otherwise withdraw. In the cool evening they stand at the doors of their houses which are for the most part small huts, and when the night comes they place at the doors a candle or a lighted lamp for a signal. There were also those shops where they sell Tari (toddy). It is a drink obtained from a tree and it is as sweet as our new wines. (Tavernier,1905;158)

According to Mauncci in Lahore there were six thousand houses of ill fame from which a weekly tax was collected by the Kotwal (Incharge of police station)(Manucci,1908;135) A question arises here; how much was population of Lahore at the time of Manucci in which a large number of houses of prostitutes existed? The travellers did not mention the total population of their respective areas.

Women servants

There were many kinds of women servants attached with the royal seraglio. Women servants were assigned various duties for which they received monthly salaries. Some of them worked as supervisors, wet nurses, servants and slaves. They worked even as the guard of emperor and some of them were daroghas in court or the other were maid servants. Special female guard of emperor was called Urdu begis. They were often brought by the rulers through foreign diplomats. During their services they were generously and regularly paid. Bernier writes, Aurangzeb's sister Raushanara Begum was escorted to Delhi in lavish procession with 66 elephants. Surrounding her elephants there was a troop of female guards,

Tatars and Kashmiris fantastically attired and riding handsome horses (Aisha lee,2004;332).

Other than guarding the inmates of Zanana and emperor, these urdubeigs had various duties. They would carry the woman's palanquin for short distance. They also accompanied the ladies when they left the Zanana. This included excursion to play Polo, strolls through the garden, hunting trips and pilgrimages (Bernier,1905;372).

The only Urdubegis of Mughal period known by her name Bibi Fatima. She began her career as Humayun's wet nurse and continued to serve in Akbar's court. She is mentioned in the Humayun nama by her official name Fatima Sultan Anka (wet nurse (Turkish Term)). She was the mother of Raushan Koka and Zohara. She went along on the military expedition to Afghanistan and successfully secured the safety of the emperor. In 1546, she helped to nurse Humayun, and was an envoy to Harem Begum for marriage negotiations (Gulbadan, 1975:228).

Bibi Fatima also had a daughter named Zohara. She was married to Akbar's uncle Khawaja Muazzam, who was known for his violent temper and brutality. In 1564 Fatima complained in royal court. Akbar himself rode off to the couple's home. However, learning that royal troops were on their way, Muazzam stabbed and killed Zohara. Muazzam was imprisoned where he eventually perished (Gulbadan, 1975:228).

These female guards Urdu-begis and other pious women servants (Zanan I Parsa) were also allotted separate cells. These women servants appear to belong to the lower category than the concubines (Ahmad, 1976:115). The monthly salaries of the female servants and concubines (parastaran I Huzur) varied greatly, from 51 to 20 and 40 to 2. They received many privileges as food from the imperial kitchen and different kinds of gifts (Ahmad, 1976:41).

When the royal ladies attend there, they never go in with empty hands, but always carry costly presents to be offered to the working class. Manucci writes (Manucci, 1908:345).

Akbar's ordered to emancipate the imperial slaves in 1582 A.D (Badaoni, 1980:309). It was not clear that women were exempted thus or not. The context of this order suggests that in practice the women attendants were no longer held to an unfree status. Abul Fath Gilani, a Mughal noble writing from imperial camp in the Punjab to his friend at Fatehpur Sikri asking him to search for female slaves there and send them to him. Abul Fath purchased two beautiful "Dahs" (Female slaves) one for Tamar Khan Badakhshi, the other from Khwaja Murad for his brother from capital city Fatehpur Sikri (Gillani, 1968:46).

A term *Saheli* (in Hindi means female companion) also used for the female servants of royal household and aristocratic families in Mughal society. When NurJahan took the charge of Imperial harem, she got all the Sahelis of the palace who were between 12 to 40 years of age married to Ahadis (troops) and chelas (men slaves). As far the women from the age of 40 to 60 or 70 years, who were in

the palace, were free to choose whether they would leave the palace and find a husband or stay within the palace (Haq, 1970:49).

The royal harem consisted of wives, usually three or four, living in separate apartments in the same palace called the Mahal. Each wife has separate apartments for herself and her slaves there may be 10 or 20 or 100 according to her fortune, Pelsaert comments (Pelsaert, 1972:64).

Sometimes slave servants were badly treated by the masters. "A physician and administrator who possessed three hundred slave women kept each one of them occupied from early morning till late evening on the basis of maximum work if women are kept idle, they fall prey to mischievous plots". Moreover he allowed them very little for their sustenance (Haq, 1970:97).

If a person got married to a slave girl, her first wife could sell her in the market and kept this money with her as her financial security. Such a condition was made a part of marriage contract given in accountancy manual of Aurangzeb's reign (Ram, 1879:89). It was a common trade of that period to acquire slave girls.

The acquisition of slave girls by purchase continued through out the Mughal period. A model document in an accountancy manual of Aurangzeb's reign (1659-1707) A.D shows how sale could follow captivity. A woman named Seoti captured in a raid by a commander Abdullah Khan was sold by him as a dah for Rs. 40 to Nur Muhammad (Ram, 1879:89). Prices of these slaves were not quoted in any official or private account of Mughal history.

The price of beautiful Abyssinian was sometime higher than Rs.250. It was not lawful for the owner of the slave to sell the man and his wife separately. If they have children even they could be separated from their parents. In many cases children of the poor were bought by the rich and wealthy servants even for their sexual purposes (Chaudhry, 1998).

Indian women also worked as primitive doctors and physicians. They served as midwives and nurses of babies. These nurses and midwives also appear in Mughal paintings. There is depiction of the scenes of births of princes, for example the birth of emperor Akbar and his son Jahangir (Sen, 1964:128). There are references of women who looked after agricultural lands and urban properties.

Financial support from the side of state

Mughal emperors gave some relief even to the needy and destitute women of Indian society. A special officer named Sadr-i-nath (Talbot & Wheeler, 1975:261), had been appointed under Sadr ul Sudur (Officer dealt with the religious affairs as well as charities) to grant lands for the financial help to the women .It was expected that the Sadr would hold all rents made under her signature. The first incumbent of this post was Haji Koka, Akbar's foster sister who was appointed by Jahangir (Jahangir, 1975:76).

In Nur Jahan's sway Dilaram (nurse) was appointed to this position (Khan) During the reign of Shahjahan Sati un Nisa sister of famous poet of Jahangir's

reign Talib Amuli rose to this position. The state documents bearing the seal and signature of Sadr-i-Inath were very few in number but indicates the existence of this department and authority of the officer. Under the recommendation of Haji Koka Jahangir had granted 30 bighas to a woman named Adar Banu (Bilgrami, 1998:208).

During the reign of Aurangzeb 100 bighas of cultivable land in Parganah I Narauli (sanbhal) was given to Musammat Aiyshah. This farman bear the seal of Mah Banu. Most probably Mah Banu was holding the post of Sadr inath in the reign of Aurangzeb Alamgir (Bilgrami, 1998:208).

The only condition for eligibility to grant a piece of land to women was that they had no means of livelihood. During Jahangir's reign more liberal policy to grant lands seems to have followed. Women did not have to present themselves at the court for receiving like men. Probably Nur Jahan was also taking interest in the well being of her own sex as she was known for her generous grants (Findly, 2005:208).Some women also received grant of land in the form of Madad-s-Maash(Abul Fazal,1989;199).Mazhar-i-Shahjahan mentions two categories of Chak lands;

- Chak Ha Mustami Land(held by women)
- Chak Ha Muzkarti Land(held by men) (Mazhar-i-Shahajahani,158).

In the Fifth year of Jahangir ,s reign when a widow complained against Muqarab Khan(governor of gujrat) that he had shielded one of his servant s, who had murdered her daughter. Jahangir gave away half of the jagir of governor to that widow as Madad-a Maash (Habib,1999;352).

Seventy *bighas* of land was measured by *illahi Yard* in the *pargana Kol* (Aligarh) and it was given to a *Khatoon* as *Madad I Maash* in the 41st year of Aurangzeb. Some of the ladies held Zamindaris, Milkyat rights and land. They had the rights to inherit, sell and dispose of their properties. A lady named Sahebanu, the sister of heir Maham singh confirmed through an agent (Vakil), the sale of the two third of the village named *Debidaspur* in 1681 A.D (Habib,1999;192).

Another lady *Blikan* was the owner of two villages *Baidaura* and *Baidaur* in the year 1672 A.D. Zorawar Kaur, a Hindu women sought the 'authorities' assistance to recover property possession over a village in *Sarkar Saran*. Her right had been snatched by two persons .Muslim women often obtained their shares in Zamindari in the name of their mehr or dowry claims upon their husbands. According to Muslim Law, the daughter receives half share of the son and the widow gets the eighth share of the husband's property.(Habib,1999;192)

Aurganzeb laid down rules for inheritance of grant lands in 1692 A.D. and declared that as it was loan raiyat), Shariat rules were not to be applied. The rules drafted for the women grantees were:

1. If a married daughter was a co-sharer with a son in the grant of a land and she had a property from her husband's side also, she was debarred form inheritance. If the daughter as a widow with-out any source of income and

there were other female heirs then the son was responsible for their maintenance from the income of the grant of the Land.

2. If the daughter was the only child of the deceased and there were other heirs also, the daughter's succession to the whole grant was to be recognized in the elimination of the other heirs.
3. If a grantee is childless, the wife would enjoy the revenues of the grant during her life time. After her death the grant would pass to the other relatives of her husband. If there were no relatives of her husband then the land would belong to the relatives of the wife.
4. In case of mother, grand mother or some female heir served the grantee, the only Shariat law of inheritance was to apply. In practice the land either inherited or granted always utilized by the male section of society (Bilgrami,1998;211).

The working women of medieval Indian society were even appreciated by the state. Mughal Emperors have taken many steps to facilitate them. But in patriarchal political history of medieval India there are only passing references of working class of women.

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