

Book Review

Sudha Sharma. 2016. *The Status of Muslim Women in Medieval India*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd. pp. 270. ISBN 978-93-515-0566-2.

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Sharma obtained her Ph.D. in History from Punjab University and the title of her doctoral thesis was “Changing Status of Muslim women in Medieval India Till 1761” (p. x). She began her career as a lecturer of History in Jalandhar. Later on she joined the Income Tax department, then the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) and then Indraprastha Gas Limited in New Delhi. She is clear that she did not remain as an academician.

Since the book literature largely emanates from the doctoral thesis, this book has very extensive notes for each chapter and list of many types of bibliographical sources covering primary sources, English, Persian, Hindi, Urdu and Sanskrit sources and foreign travelers’ notes and records because as well as the articles in the journals and encyclopedias. This book has six chapters, a preface and a conclusion. The preface is written by the author herself to briefly explain the book contents. She states that her book “is an attempt to analyse the changing socio-economic-politico-cultural status of Muslim women of all classes in medieval India (13th-18th century)” (p. viii).

The 1st chapter is on Islamic heritage (1-43pp) as a background to the following chapters. This chapter presents the religion of Islam, the women and their status in pre-Islamic Arabic society, Islam and women or women in Islam.

The 2nd chapter is on the social profile of Muslim women in medieval India (33-97pp). As a result of their interactions with Indian environment, the Muslim women social status underwent many changes including unwelcome births of Muslim girls, early marriages, unmatched marriages, the dowry, the divorces, the treatment to widows, the polygamy, the female relation, the sati and jauhar, the female slaves, the prostitutes, the female dancers and singers, the morality of women and the general attitudes toward women.

The 3rd chapter presents economic milieu (98-136pp). Muslim women were granted economic and property rights through many means in medieval India. Muslim wives and daughters were provided the maintenances by their husbands and fathers. The Muslim women in the harems were provided the maintenances by their masters and patrons. Other types of the maintenances for Muslim women were in the forms of *jagirs* and *inams*. *wazifa* and land grants, the *mahr* from their husbands, the inheritances from their fathers and husbands, the gifts and presents granted to Muslim women, and some Muslim women did some trading activities and services to earn incomes for themselves or their family members.

The 4th chapter focuses on the harem and purdah (137-175pp). The term “harem” was the segregated and exclusive place of residence for women maintained by the sultans, rulers or kings, the emperors and the *wazirs* and *amirs* to indicate their greatness and power. “Harem consisted of wives, concubines, mothers, sisters, daughters, and other female relatives, female slaves, the eunuchs and the attendants” (p. 137). the examples were the harem of Babur had about 200 occupants and so did the harem of Humayun. The harem of Akbar had more than 5,000 women. The harem of Jahangir had 300 wives and other women. The harem of Shah Alam had 2,000 women (p. 136). The accommodation for the women in the harem was provided based on their important

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relationships with the harem master. The harem was administered internally by the eunuchs. They were the messengers between the women in the harem and the harem master. There were female guards for the harems. The eunuchs and the female guards worked for the harem master to protect the women in the harem from other men. The women in the harem were granted with different titles and epithets to indicate their important relationship with the harem master. The women in the harem were also provided with different types of clothes and adornments and different kinds of decorations for their dwellings in the harem. There were many fairs and festivities in the harem. The women in the harem “passed their lives in extravagant festivities, meaningless intrigues, vocal jealousies and showy vanity that affected the status of women adversely” (p. 146). The women in the harem were fully provided by their harem master but majority of them were in the condition of unsatisfied and neglected because of the harem master did not have sexual relationship with them if they were not his wives and concubines.

About the purdah in medieval India, it began with the order from Amir Timur when he conquered India. He ordered the Muslim men to conceal their women from “the view of stranger.... The Muslim men were very zealous in guarding their women from public gaze and considered it a dishonour if they were exposed unveiled” (pp. 158-159). Sharma sees the negative impacts of the purdah on Muslim women in medieval India. She states, “With the observance of purdah, Muslim women were destined to a virtual life of prisoners, suffering from feeble health, dulled senses, ignorance and prejudices” (p. 165).

The 5th chapter is on political roles of some Muslim women played in the Sultanate and Mughal periods (176-204pp). This chapter illustrates the names of Muslim women who played their roles in the politics during the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Their political roles were in three ways namely as “a sovereign...as regents of minor kings or incapacitated monarchs” and “as political manipulators” behind the scene (p. 177). During the Sultanate political period and the Mughal political period until the reign of Aurangzeb, the Muslim women who were able to take part in the political activities were the queens, princesses or ladies of high birth, royalty and nobility. “In the post-Aurangzeb period, instead of queens, princesses or ladies of high birth, concubines and dancing girls of low origin became prominent in the power politics” (p. 177). Political activities were not for the common Muslim women in both periods in medieval India. “The common women, at large, had no role in the political sphere” (p. 196).

The 6th chapter illustrates the cultural spheres covering education, artistic activities, dress and aesthetics, religious pursuits and beliefs, as well as acts of piety and charity (205-235pp). The chapter describes that the queens, princesses, and wives of nobles played a significant role in these cultural spheres. The common Muslim women had little to contribute to the cultural spheres because of their educational backwardness and economic poverty. The conclusion section of the book begins on page 236 and ends on page 243. It briefly concludes the contents of the book which were considered significant and important to highlight in the conclusion.

This book is an academic research book because it was originally intended to fulfill the academic requirements for a doctoral thesis in history in medieval India under the supervision of late Dr. R.C. Jauhari who was the Professor of History, Panjab University, Chandigarh. To make the reading more contemporary, the author adds some additional references. I tend to agree with the author who thinks that her book “holds authentic reference for those who studying the position of Muslim women from all aspects in medieval India”(p. xi). This book is a good and authentic reference for Muslim and non-Muslim readers who have some inclinations to see the disparities between the teachings of Islam at the meta-religion and Islamic teachings as understood and practiced by Muslim rules, sultans and Muslim commoners.