



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

The role of women in trade, property ownership and commerce during the Sultanate and Mughal periods

Dhruv Dev Chauhan.

M.A History, NET

ABSTRACT

The Sultanate and Mughal periods in India witnessed significant participation of women in economic, commercial, and property-related activities despite the dominance of patriarchal social structures. This study examines the role of women in trade, property ownership, and commerce during these medieval periods with special reference to influential figures such as Nur Jahan, Gulbadan Begum, Jahanara Begum, and Mariam-uz-Zamani. The research analyses how elite women exercised economic authority through ownership of jagirs, estates, maritime trade, commercial investments, and patronage of markets and architecture. It also explores the legal rights available to women under Islamic law regarding inheritance, dowry, and wealth management. The study highlights the Mughal harem as an important political and economic institution rather than merely a domestic space. By comparing the Sultanate and Mughal periods, the paper argues that women, particularly royal and aristocratic women, contributed significantly to trade networks, urban development, and the economic structure of medieval India.

Keywords: Women's Economic History, Mughal Empire, Sultanate Period, Property Ownership, Trade and Commerce

1. INTRODUCTION

The Sultanate and Mughal periods represent significant phases in the socio-economic and political history of medieval India, during which women played an important yet often underestimated role in trade, property ownership, and commercial activities. Although medieval Indian society was largely patriarchal and imposed several social restrictions on women through practices such as purdah and limited public mobility, many women, especially from royal and aristocratic families, exercised considerable economic influence. During the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, women were not confined solely to domestic responsibilities; they also participated in administration, managed estates, controlled wealth, financed architectural projects, and contributed to local as well as international trade networks. Islamic legal principles relating to inheritance, mehr, and property rights provided women with certain economic privileges that enabled elite women to own jagirs, gardens, markets, and commercial establishments. Mughal royal women such as Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, Mariam-uz-Zamani, and Gulbadan Begum emerged as influential personalities who combined political authority with



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

economic power. Nur Jahan exercised direct influence over imperial administration and trade policies, while Mariam-uz-Zamani actively participated in maritime commerce through merchant ships engaged in Red Sea trade. Similarly, Jahanara Begum controlled substantial revenue sources linked with Surat trade, and Gulbadan Begum contributed intellectually through historical writings that reflected women's agency in Mughal society. The Mughal harem itself functioned not merely as a domestic institution but also as a centre of political coordination and economic administration. This study aims to examine the role of women in commerce, trade, and property ownership during the Sultanate and Mughal periods by analysing the economic contributions of royal and aristocratic women alongside the legal and social framework that shaped their position. The paper further evaluates how these women contributed to urban development, cultural patronage, commercial expansion, and the broader medieval Indian economy despite the constraints imposed by contemporary social norms.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The history of medieval India during the Sultanate and Mughal periods reveals important developments in administration, trade, urbanisation, and cultural growth, in which women also played a notable role. Although historical narratives have traditionally focused on kings, military expansion, and political institutions, recent studies have highlighted the economic and social contributions of women, particularly those belonging to royal and aristocratic families. Women during these periods possessed certain legal rights related to inheritance, property ownership, dowry, and wealth management under Islamic law, which enabled them to participate in economic activities. Influential women such as Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, Mariam-uz-Zamani, and Gulbadan Begum contributed to trade, estate administration, charitable works, and commercial patronage. The Mughal harem also emerged as an organised political and economic institution. Therefore, studying women's role in trade, property ownership, and commerce is essential for understanding the broader socio-economic structure and gender dynamics of medieval Indian society.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE SULTANATE AND MUGHAL PERIODS

The Sultanate and Mughal periods represent two major phases of medieval Indian history that significantly influenced the political, economic, social, and cultural development of the Indian subcontinent. The Delhi Sultanate, established in the early thirteenth century after the Turkish invasions, introduced a centralised administrative structure, Islamic political traditions, and new systems of taxation, military organisation, and urban governance. The Sultanate period witnessed the expansion of trade routes, growth of cities, development of markets, and increased interaction between India and regions such as Central Asia, Persia, and the Middle East. Economic prosperity during this era encouraged the rise of merchant communities, artisan industries, and commercial centres. Although society remained patriarchal and women generally faced social



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

restrictions, elite and royal women exercised influence through court politics, charitable patronage, and control over property and wealth. The emergence of figures such as Razia Sultan demonstrated that women could also participate directly in governance under exceptional circumstances.

The Mughal Empire, founded by Babur in 1526 after the First Battle of Panipat, further expanded political stability, economic prosperity, and cultural integration across India. Mughal rulers developed an efficient revenue administration, encouraged agricultural productivity, and promoted inland and overseas trade through strong commercial networks connected with Central Asia, Persia, Arabia, and Europe. The empire became one of the wealthiest political powers of the early modern world, supported by flourishing textile industries, handicrafts, urban markets, and maritime commerce. Within this environment, Mughal royal and aristocratic women acquired greater opportunities for economic and cultural participation. Islamic legal principles relating to inheritance, mehr, and property ownership allowed elite women to control wealth, jagirs, estates, and commercial investments. Women such as Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, Mariam-uz-Zamani, and Gulbadan Begum emerged as influential personalities who participated in administration, trade, literature, and architectural patronage. The Mughal harem itself evolved into an organised political and economic institution connected with imperial governance and financial management. Thus, both the Sultanate and Mughal periods created historical conditions in which women, especially from elite backgrounds, contributed to the economic and cultural life of medieval India despite the limitations imposed by patriarchal social norms.

4. STATUS OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL INDIAN SOCIETY

The status of women in medieval Indian society was shaped by social customs, religious traditions, economic conditions, and patriarchal values that varied across regions, classes, and communities. During the Sultanate and Mughal periods, women generally occupied a subordinate position within society, where their roles were primarily associated with domestic responsibilities, marriage, and family life. Practices such as purdah, child marriage, polygamy, and restrictions on female mobility became increasingly common, particularly among upper-class Muslim and Hindu families. Educational opportunities for ordinary women were limited, and most women remained economically dependent on male family members. Social norms often discouraged women from participating openly in political, commercial, and public activities. However, the condition of women was not uniform throughout medieval India, as elite and royal women enjoyed greater privileges, access to education, and economic independence compared to ordinary women.

Islamic law introduced during the Sultanate and Mughal periods granted Muslim women certain legal rights related to inheritance, property ownership, dowry, and mehr. These provisions allowed women to possess personal wealth, inherit family property, and manage economic



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

resources independently. Although practical implementation was often restricted by patriarchal customs, aristocratic and royal women frequently exercised considerable authority through ownership of jagirs, estates, jewellery, and commercial assets. Mughal royal women such as Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, Mariam-uz-Zamani, and Gulbadan Begum became influential figures in administration, trade, literature, and cultural patronage. They supervised charitable works, financed markets and architecture, and participated in court politics through their proximity to imperial authority. Similarly, during the Delhi Sultanate period, women such as Razia Sultan demonstrated the possibility of female political leadership despite opposition from conservative nobles.

5. WOMEN IN THE DELHI SULTANATE PERIOD

1. Social and Economic Position of Women

During the Delhi Sultanate period, women occupied a complex position within society that was shaped by religion, class, customs, and political authority. Medieval Indian society remained predominantly patriarchal, and most ordinary women were confined to domestic responsibilities, limited educational opportunities, and restricted public participation. Practices such as purdah, child marriage, and gender segregation became increasingly influential, particularly among upper-class Muslim and Hindu families. However, despite these social limitations, women belonging to royal, noble, and merchant families enjoyed relatively greater economic and social privileges. Elite women had access to education, literary culture, and wealth management, while some participated indirectly in administration and politics through family networks and court influence.

2. Participation of Women in Trade and Commerce

Women during the Delhi Sultanate period participated in trade and commercial activities both directly and indirectly. Although large-scale commerce was dominated by male merchants and state officials, women from wealthy households invested in trade through agents, family partnerships, and commercial networks. Female participation was especially visible in textile production, jewellery making, perfume preparation, food processing, and local market exchange. Some women managed shops, supervised domestic industries, and controlled business activities linked to artisan households.

3. Property Rights and Inheritance Practices

Islamic legal principles introduced during the Sultanate period granted Muslim women certain rights related to inheritance, dowry, and property ownership. Women could legally inherit family property, receive mehr after marriage, and possess personal wealth independent of male relatives. Elite women owned jewellery, land, houses, gardens, and movable wealth, while some exercised control over estates and revenue assignments. Although social customs often restricted the practical implementation of these rights, aristocratic and royal women frequently enjoyed



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

financial independence through inherited property and royal grants. Hindu women's inheritance rights remained comparatively limited, though elite Hindu families sometimes allowed women to control personal wealth and dowry resources.

4. Influence of Royal and Elite Women

Royal and elite women exercised considerable influence within the political and economic structure of the Sultanate. Women such as Razia Sultan demonstrated that female authority could extend into governance and state administration despite resistance from conservative nobles. Queens, noblewomen, and members of the royal household influenced court politics, diplomatic relations, and charitable activities. Their patronage of mosques, educational institutions, markets, and public works contributed to urban growth and economic stability.

5. Market Administration and Economic Contributions

The expansion of cities and markets during the Delhi Sultanate created opportunities for women's economic participation. Women contributed to the production and circulation of goods through domestic industries and urban crafts. Textile manufacturing, spinning, embroidery, and decorative arts often depended on female labour. Royal women and noble families invested in caravanserais, marketplaces, and charitable institutions that facilitated trade and supported travellers and merchants. Although women rarely held formal positions in market administration, their indirect economic influence was visible in revenue management, estate supervision, and patronage of commercial infrastructure.

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of women in medieval Indian history has gained considerable scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly regarding the political, cultural, and economic influence of Mughal royal women. Bokhari (2013) in *Imperial Women in Mughal India* examines the active participation of Mughal women in administration, diplomacy, trade, and court politics. The work challenges the traditional assumption that women of the Mughal court remained confined within the harem and detached from public life. Bokhari argues that imperial women exercised authority through property ownership, political alliances, and economic patronage. The study highlights that royal women managed jagirs, supervised estates, financed architectural works, and indirectly influenced imperial administration through court networks. Similarly, Lal (2005) in *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* presents the Mughal household as an important political and administrative institution rather than merely a domestic sphere. Ruby Lal explains that women in the Mughal harem played central roles in maintaining dynastic stability, family politics, and imperial legitimacy. The author analyses how elite Mughal women exercised influence through kinship relations, ceremonial authority, and economic control over wealth and property. Lal's work is particularly important because it reinterprets the concept of domesticity



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

and demonstrates that women's participation in political and economic activities was integrated into the functioning of the Mughal state.

Lal (2018) in *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan* specifically focuses on Nur Jahan as one of the most influential women in Mughal history. The study presents Nur Jahan not only as the wife of Emperor Jahangir but also as a political strategist, economic administrator, and patron of arts and commerce. Ruby Lal explains that Nur Jahan controlled extensive jagirs, issued imperial orders, influenced court appointments, and participated in luxury trade involving textiles, perfumes, jewellery, and decorative industries. The book demonstrates that Nur Jahan transformed her royal position into direct political and economic authority, thereby becoming an exceptional example of female leadership in medieval India. The author also highlights Nur Jahan's contribution to architecture, artistic production, and charitable patronage, which stimulated urban and commercial development. Mukherjee (2001) in *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions* expands this discussion by examining the collective role of Mughal queens, princesses, and aristocratic women in administration, education, trade, religion, and cultural patronage. Mukherjee argues that Mughal royal women were financially independent through jagirs, pensions, and commercial enterprises. The study explains how women such as Jahanara Begum and Mariam-uz-Zamani participated in inland and maritime trade networks and financed markets, mosques, gardens, and caravanserais. This work is significant because it broadens the analysis beyond individual personalities and demonstrates the wider contribution of Mughal women to imperial economic and cultural life.

Ray (2022) in the article *The Multifaceted Women of the Mughal Harem* provides a modern interpretation of the Mughal harem as a dynamic institution connected with politics, economics, and culture. The author argues that the harem was not simply a secluded domestic environment but a highly organised administrative space where women exercised authority through patronage, property management, and financial control. Ray explains that elite Mughal women supervised servants, managed estates, funded religious institutions, and influenced political negotiations within the imperial court. The article also highlights women's participation in artistic and commercial activities, particularly in textile production, jewellery, architecture, and luxury crafts. Sharma (2004) in *Veil, Sceptre, and Quill: Profiles of Eminent Women, 16th–18th Centuries* focuses on prominent women who contributed to politics, literature, and governance in medieval India. The study presents detailed profiles of women such as Gulbadan Begum, Nur Jahan, and Jahanara Begum and explains how they combined intellectual achievement with political and economic authority. Sharma particularly emphasises Gulbadan Begum's contribution through *Humayun Nama*, which provides rare insight into women's experiences and court culture during the Mughal period. The work also demonstrates that elite women exercised influence through literary patronage, charitable activities, and commercial investments.



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

Yasmin (2012) in Study of Attainments of Women in Mughal India analyses the educational, social, cultural, and administrative achievements of women during the Mughal period. The study argues that elite women received education in Persian literature, religion, administration, and fine arts, enabling them to participate in court affairs and intellectual life. Yasmin highlights the contributions of women to architecture, charity, trade, and literature while also acknowledging the social limitations imposed by purdah and patriarchal customs. The author concludes that Mughal women achieved a remarkable degree of influence within the framework of imperial society. Chandra (2007) in Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals (1526–1748) provides broader historical context regarding the political economy, trade systems, and social structure of medieval India. Chandra explains the growth of urbanisation, revenue administration, and international trade during the Sultanate and Mughal periods, which created opportunities for aristocratic women to participate in economic activities through property ownership and commercial patronage. The study also discusses Islamic inheritance laws and the administrative structure of the Mughal Empire, which allowed royal women to acquire wealth and influence through jagirs and revenue assignments. Collectively, these works indicate that women during the Sultanate and Mughal periods were not entirely excluded from public and economic life. Instead, elite women emerged as influential participants in trade, administration, property management, cultural patronage, and political decision-making. The literature therefore supports the argument that women played a substantial role in shaping the economic and social structure of medieval Indian society.

7. WOMEN IN THE MUGHAL PERIOD

1. Economic Structure of the Mughal Empire

The Mughal Empire possessed a highly organised economic system based on agriculture, land revenue, urban markets, handicrafts, and international trade. Revenue administration under the Mughal rulers promoted commercial expansion, urbanisation, and the growth of manufacturing centres across India. Trade routes connected the empire with Central Asia, Persia, Arabia, and European markets through inland and maritime commerce. In this prosperous economic environment, women, particularly from royal and aristocratic families, emerged as important participants in economic and commercial activities. Although the broader social system remained patriarchal, elite Mughal women exercised considerable authority through ownership of jagirs, control of wealth, and involvement in trade networks. Their economic participation reflected both the opportunities created by imperial prosperity and the privileges associated with royal status.

2. Position of Women in Mughal Society

The position of women in Mughal society varied according to class, religion, and social background. Ordinary women generally remained confined to domestic responsibilities and



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

faced restrictions through purdah, limited mobility, and patriarchal customs. However, aristocratic and royal women enjoyed greater educational, cultural, and economic privileges. Many Mughal princesses and queens were educated in literature, Persian language, religion, and administration. Women participated indirectly in political affairs through court influence, family alliances, and advisory roles within the imperial household. Elite Mughal women possessed servants, personal wealth, estates, and separate residential establishments, which provided them with financial independence and social authority.

3. Mughal Harem as an Economic and Political Institution

The Mughal harem functioned not merely as a domestic space but as a complex political and economic institution closely connected with imperial administration. The harem included queens, princesses, female attendants, guards, servants, and administrators who collectively formed an organised internal structure. Royal women often influenced succession politics, diplomatic decisions, and court administration through their proximity to the emperor. The harem also controlled substantial economic resources, including jagirs, gifts, pensions, and commercial revenues. Women supervised workshops, textile production, charitable institutions, and construction projects financed through imperial wealth. As a result, the harem became an important centre of political negotiation, financial management, and economic activity within the Mughal Empire.

4. Women's Rights in Property Ownership

Islamic law granted Mughal women legal rights related to inheritance, mehr, dowry, and property ownership. Royal and aristocratic women possessed land grants, gardens, houses, jewellery, and revenue assignments that generated independent income. Women could inherit family property, manage estates, and use their wealth for trade, religious charity, or architectural patronage. Prominent Mughal women such as Jahanara Begum and Nur Jahan controlled extensive jagirs and commercial assets, which enhanced their economic and political influence. Although practical limitations existed due to patriarchal customs, elite women often exercised significant financial autonomy within the imperial structure.

5. Participation in Inland and Overseas Trade

Mughal women actively participated in both inland and overseas trade through commercial investments, merchant agents, and maritime enterprises. Mariam-uz-Zamani, the mother of Jahangir, became well known for owning merchant ships engaged in Red Sea trade and pilgrim voyages to Mecca. Jahanara Begum maintained commercial connections with Surat, one of the most prosperous ports of Mughal India. Royal women invested in luxury goods, textiles, perfumes, jewellery, and international trade networks linking India with West Asia and Europe. Their participation in commerce demonstrates that elite women contributed directly to the economic expansion of the Mughal Empire.



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

6. Commercial Patronage and Financial Administration

Mughal royal women played an important role in commercial patronage and financial administration by funding markets, gardens, mosques, caravanserais, roads, and urban development projects. These activities encouraged trade and strengthened commercial infrastructure across the empire. Women such as Nur Jahan exercised influence over imperial finances and administrative decisions, while others supported artisans, scholars, and merchants through charitable grants and patronage. Their investment in architecture and public institutions not only reflected cultural prestige but also stimulated economic activity and urban growth.

8. COMMERCIAL INFLUENCE OF MUGHAL ROYAL WOMEN

1. Mariam-uz-Zamani and Maritime Trade

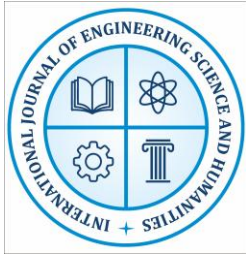
Mughal royal women played a significant role in the commercial and economic development of the empire through trade, financial management, property ownership, and patronage activities. Among them, Mariam-uz-Zamani, the Rajput wife of Emperor Akbar and mother of Jahangir, emerged as one of the earliest Mughal women actively involved in maritime trade. She owned large merchant ships that operated in the Red Sea and Arabian Sea routes, carrying pilgrims to Mecca and transporting luxury goods, textiles, spices, and other commodities. Her commercial activities connected Mughal India with West Asian trade networks and demonstrated that royal women could directly participate in overseas commerce. The profits generated from maritime trade strengthened both her personal wealth and the economic influence of the Mughal court.

2. Nur Jahan as an Entrepreneur and Political Authority

Nur Jahan became one of the most powerful and influential women in Mughal history by combining political authority with economic and commercial power. As the wife of Emperor Jahangir, she exercised direct influence over imperial administration, state policies, and court decisions. Coins were issued in her name, and imperial farmans carried her seal, reflecting her exceptional authority within the empire. Economically, Nur Jahan controlled extensive jagirs, managed revenue assignments, and participated in luxury trade involving textiles, jewellery, perfumes, and decorative goods. She encouraged artistic industries and promoted trade through royal patronage.

3. Jahanara Begum and Trade Networks

Jahanara Begum, the daughter of Shah Jahan, also played a vital role in Mughal commercial activities. She possessed substantial wealth through jagirs and imperial grants and maintained close connections with Surat, one of the most important ports of Mughal India. Through her involvement in inland and overseas trade, she accumulated considerable financial resources and supported commercial expansion. Jahanara invested in urban markets, gardens, caravanserais, and religious institutions, which stimulated trade and facilitated the movement of merchants and



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

travellers. Her patronage of commercial infrastructure reflected the economic independence enjoyed by elite Mughal women.

4. Economic Contributions of Royal Mughal Women

Royal Mughal women contributed significantly to the imperial economy through estate management, trade investments, artisan patronage, and financial administration. Many royal women supervised workshops producing textiles, embroidery, jewellery, carpets, perfumes, and luxury goods that were sold in domestic and international markets. They also managed servants, accountants, and trade agents who conducted business activities on their behalf. Through ownership of jagirs and commercial enterprises, royal women generated independent income and strengthened their political influence within the empire. Their economic participation demonstrates that women were active contributors to Mughal prosperity rather than passive members of the royal household.

5. Charity, Architecture and Commercial Investments

Mughal royal women invested heavily in charitable works, architectural projects, and commercial infrastructure that promoted urban growth and economic development. They financed mosques, gardens, roads, bridges, markets, inns, and caravanserais that supported merchants and travellers across the empire. These projects enhanced trade networks and encouraged economic interaction between regions. Nur Jahan and Jahanara Begum, in particular, sponsored architectural works and public institutions that reflected both cultural prestige and commercial interests. Their investments illustrate how royal women used wealth and patronage not only for religious and social purposes but also to strengthen the economic structure and commercial stability of the Mughal Empire.

9. GULBADAN BEGUM AND WOMEN'S INTELLECTUAL-ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

1. Life and Historical Background

Gulbadan Begum was one of the most remarkable women of the early Mughal period whose literary and intellectual contributions provide valuable insight into the political, social, and economic life of Mughal India. She was the daughter of Emperor Babur and the half-sister of Emperor Humayun, and she spent much of her life within the Mughal imperial court during a period marked by dynastic struggles, political expansion, and administrative consolidation. Raised in an educated and culturally refined environment, Gulbadan Begum received training in Persian literature, court traditions, religion, and history. Unlike many ordinary women of medieval India who remained outside formal education, royal Mughal women such as Gulbadan enjoyed access to intellectual and cultural resources that enabled them to participate indirectly in administration and court affairs. Her life reflects the privileged position of elite Mughal women who exercised influence through family networks, political mediation, and cultural patronage.



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

2. Contribution through Humayun Nama

Gulbadan Begum is most famous for writing Humayun Nama, one of the earliest historical works authored by a woman in medieval South Asia. Commissioned during the reign of Emperor Akbar, the text records the life of Humayun, the internal affairs of the Mughal court, and the experiences of royal women within the imperial household. Unlike official court chronicles written by male historians, Humayun Nama presents a personal and intimate perspective on Mughal political and social life. The work not only documents royal events and military campaigns but also highlights women's interactions, emotional relationships, travel experiences, and participation in court activities. Through this literary contribution, Gulbadan Begum established herself as an important intellectual figure in Mughal historiography.

3. Representation of Women's Agency in Mughal Society

The writings of Gulbadan Begum reveal that Mughal women exercised agency and influence despite living within a patriarchal social structure. Her accounts demonstrate that royal women participated in political negotiations, accompanied rulers during journeys, managed households, and acted as mediators during dynastic conflicts. The text challenges the common assumption that Mughal women remained completely isolated within the harem by showing their active involvement in social and political life. Gulbadan's observations also reflect the respect and authority enjoyed by senior women within the imperial family. Through her narrative, women emerge not merely as dependents but as individuals capable of influencing court culture, family decisions, and imperial relationships.

4. Economic and Cultural Influence of Mughal Women

Gulbadan Begum's work indirectly highlights the economic and cultural influence of Mughal women through references to wealth, gifts, property, travel arrangements, and royal patronage. Mughal women possessed personal wealth, jewellery, servants, and estates that contributed to their economic independence. They also supported religious institutions, charitable works, literature, and artistic activities, thereby strengthening Mughal cultural life. Elite women supervised domestic management, organised ceremonies, and participated in exchanges of luxury goods and gifts that reflected their economic significance within the court structure. Such activities reveal that women were integrated into the broader political economy of the Mughal Empire.

5. Gulbadan Begum as a Historical Source for Women's History

Gulbadan Begum remains an important historical source for understanding women's history in medieval India because her writings provide rare firsthand evidence about the lives of Mughal women. Humayun Nama offers historians insight into female education, court culture, social customs, travel, family relations, and women's participation in political and economic affairs. Her work helps reconstruct the experiences of women who are often absent from traditional



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

historical narratives dominated by male rulers and military achievements. Consequently, Gulbadan Begum occupies a significant place in Indian historiography as both a historian and a representative of women's intellectual and cultural agency during the Mughal period.

10. PROPERTY OWNERSHIP AND LEGAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN

1. Islamic Law and Women's Property Rights

The Sultanate and Mughal periods introduced significant legal and economic frameworks that shaped women's rights related to property ownership, inheritance, and financial independence. Islamic law, which influenced administrative and social practices during these periods, granted women certain legal rights that were comparatively progressive for the medieval era. Muslim women possessed the legal authority to inherit property, own wealth independently, receive mehr after marriage, and engage in transactions involving land, jewellery, houses, and commercial assets. Unlike many contemporary patriarchal societies where women's economic identity was fully dependent on male relatives, Islamic jurisprudence recognised women as independent legal individuals capable of holding and managing property. These rights, however, were often implemented differently depending on class, family customs, and social conditions. Royal and aristocratic women enjoyed greater opportunities to exercise these rights because of their access to wealth, education, and political influence, whereas ordinary women often remained restricted by conservative social traditions and economic dependency.

2. Dowry, Mehr and Inheritance Systems

The systems of dowry, mehr, and inheritance played an important role in shaping women's economic status during the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Mehr, which was a mandatory payment provided by the husband to the wife under Islamic marriage law, served as a form of financial security and personal wealth for women. Women retained full ownership over their mehr and could use it independently without interference from male family members. Inheritance laws also guaranteed daughters, wives, and mothers a share in family property, although the share was generally smaller than that of male heirs. Despite these legal protections, practical implementation often depended upon family structure and social hierarchy. Among elite households, women frequently accumulated large amounts of wealth through inheritance, royal grants, dowry, and gifts. Jewellery, cash, gardens, houses, and agricultural lands formed an important part of women's economic assets. In contrast, Hindu women during the Sultanate and Mughal periods generally experienced more limited inheritance rights, although dowry and personal ornaments sometimes functioned as sources of financial security.

3. Ownership of Jagirs and Landed Estates

One of the most significant aspects of women's economic authority during the Mughal period was the ownership of jagirs and landed estates. Royal Mughal women such as Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, Roshanara Begum, and Mariam-uz-Zamani controlled extensive jagirs that



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

generated substantial annual revenue. These estates provided women with independent financial resources and enhanced their political influence within the imperial structure. Women managed agricultural income, supervised estate officials, collected revenues, and occasionally influenced local administration through their economic authority. Land ownership also enabled women to invest in trade, charity, architecture, and cultural activities. In many cases, Mughal emperors rewarded royal women with revenue assignments and property grants that strengthened dynastic loyalty and consolidated imperial prestige. Ownership of estates therefore became an important source of both wealth and political power for elite women.

4. Women as Patrons of Urban and Commercial Development

Women during the Sultanate and Mughal periods contributed significantly to urbanisation and commercial development through charitable and architectural patronage. Royal and aristocratic women financed the construction of mosques, gardens, sarais, wells, roads, bridges, markets, and caravanserais that facilitated trade and public welfare. Such projects promoted urban growth, supported merchants and travellers, and strengthened commercial connectivity across regions. Jahanara Begum, for example, played an important role in developing markets and urban centres connected with trade routes. Nur Jahan sponsored gardens, tombs, and artistic industries that stimulated economic activity and artisan production. Through investment in infrastructure and public institutions, women actively contributed to the economic and cultural prosperity of medieval India.

11. CONCLUSION

The study of women's role in trade, property ownership, and commerce during the Sultanate and Mughal periods reveals that women, particularly those belonging to royal and aristocratic families, occupied a more significant economic position than is often acknowledged in traditional historical narratives. Although medieval Indian society remained deeply patriarchal and imposed social restrictions through practices such as purdah, women still exercised considerable influence in political, economic, and cultural spheres. Islamic legal principles relating to inheritance, mehr, and property ownership provided women with certain financial rights that enabled them to own land, jagirs, jewellery, and commercial assets. During the Delhi Sultanate period, women contributed to domestic industries, artisan production, and urban economic activities, while elite women influenced politics and charitable patronage. The Mughal period witnessed a greater expansion of women's economic authority due to imperial prosperity, organised administration, and flourishing trade networks. Royal women such as Nur Jahan, Mariam-uz-Zamani, Jahanara Begum, and Gulbadan Begum emerged as powerful personalities who combined political influence with commercial and intellectual contributions. They participated in inland and overseas trade, managed estates, financed architecture and markets, and supported urban development through charitable investments. The Mughal harem also



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

functioned as an organised political and economic institution rather than merely a domestic space. Gulbadan Begum's literary work further demonstrates that women possessed intellectual agency and played an important role in preserving historical memory. Overall, the study concludes that women during the Sultanate and Mughal periods were active contributors to the medieval Indian economy and society. Their participation in trade, property management, administration, and cultural patronage highlights the presence of female economic agency within the broader framework of medieval Indian history and challenges the assumption that women remained entirely excluded from public and commercial life.

REFERENCES

1. Bokhari, A. (2013). Imperial women in Mughal India. I.B. Tauris.
2. Lal, R. (2005). Domesticity and power in the early Mughal world. Cambridge University Press.
3. Lal, R. (2018). Empress: The astonishing reign of Nur Jahan. W. W. Norton & Company.
4. Mukherjee, S. (2001). Royal Mughal ladies and their contributions. Gyan Books.
5. Ray, S. (2022). The multifaceted women of the Mughal harem. *Hans Shodh Sudha*, 2(4), 45–53.
6. Sharma, S. (2004). Veil, sceptre, and quill: Profiles of eminent women, 16th–18th centuries. Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library.
7. Yasmin, A. (2012). Study of attainments of women in Mughal India. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 73, 602–610.
8. handra, S. (2007). Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals (1526–1748). Har-Anand Publications.
9. Hasan, F. (2004). State and locality in Mughal India: Power relations in western India c. 1572–1730. Cambridge University Press.
10. Mukhoty, I. (2018). Daughters of the sun: Empresses, queens and begums of the Mughal Empire. Aleph Book Company.
11. Rizvi, S. A. A. (2005). The wonder that was India: Medieval India-II. Picador India.
12. Sharma, Y. K. (2010). Women in medieval India: A socio-economic study. *Indian Journal of Social Research*, 51(3), 215–228.
13. Ali, M. A. (2008). The Mughal nobility under Aurangzeb. Oxford University Press.
14. Habib, I. (2015). The agrarian system of Mughal India, 1556–1707. Oxford University Press.
15. Thakur, V. (2021). Economic and social status of women during the Mughal period. *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies*, 7(2), 18–25.