



## **LIFE INSIDE THE ZENANI DEORHI OF RAJPUTS DURING THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD**

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A family constitutes the basic cell of a society, and the life inside it, represents a mirror image of the advancements in a society. In order to assess the position of women in a particular society, an insight into the family and understanding its structure becomes essential. An examination of the condition of royal Rajput ladies can enlighten us about the direction society was taking in medieval Rajputana.

A Rajput family was patriarchal in nature, where the authority was centered in the hands of the eldest member, with all the other members being submissive to him. After the death of the head of a family, it was a practice, that his eldest son succeeded him. However, the law of primogeniture was not rigidly followed in the ruling families. This can be seen from the instance of Rao Kehar, the ruler of Jaisalmer, who got annoyed with his elder son Kelhan at some issue, therefore he made his younger son, Lakhman, his successor.<sup>1</sup> Rao Ridmal of Mandore had sent marriage proposal for his sister to Kunwar Chuda of Chittor.<sup>2</sup> Chuda's father Rao Lakha remarked that he is an old man who will marry him. At this Chuda insisted that marriage be performed with his father only, Rao Ridmal however did not agree, considering the age difference between Rao Lakha and his own sister. After a lot of persuasion Rao Ridmal agreed for the above mentioned alliance but on the condition that instead of Chuda, Rao Lakha's elder son, it would be Ridmal's sister's son, who would succeed Lakha on Chittor's throne.

The women in the male dominated Rajput family, where the males exercised control over the women, were accorded a subordinate position. The elite Rajput women kept in purdah. The family can be broadly called as joint family since all the members used to reside at one place.

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<sup>1</sup> Muhto Nainsi, Nainsi Ri Khyat; vol 2, Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur, 1962, P.P. 75-76

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, P.P. 331-334

Within a Rajput family, a difference existed between the status of a married and an unmarried woman. The latter was to be respected and was not to be humiliated. Rao Kheewa of Pokaran had rejected the marriage proposal of Jaisalmer's Kalikarn Bhati's daughter, saying that the girl's teeth were not in order. The girl was married to Rao Suja of Jodhpur. Once while talking to her son Nara, this queen is reported to have commented that she was being disrespected as a spinster, had she been disrespected after marriage, it was understood.<sup>3</sup> The unmarried girls seem to be aware of the changes that came after marriage, into their status and thus seem to be mentally prepared for any neglect or ill treatment, after marriage.

The married women of royal Rajput and noble families, though were not facing the problem of sustenance, they could not enjoy equal rights and status due to the practice of polygamy by the elite Rajput men.<sup>4</sup> A wife receiving the title of 'patrani' from the ruler or nobleman, was given comparatively more facilities and privileges than the other wives, and held the position of highest importance and respect. It was she, who used to accompany the king in all the religious and political activities. A huge ceremony used to take place for bestowing the title of patrani.<sup>5</sup> After conferring this title, the king used to give her additional pattas which brought her a handsome income. In 1662, Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur had conferred this title on the Sisodia queen Pratapde, and she was entitled to an annual income of Rs. 1,75,000/= from the pattas of several villages.<sup>6</sup> But these privileges were not permanent and the position of the patrani was not secured, as the aforesaid privileges and facilities could be forfeited from the patrani during the lifetime of the same Raja or nobleman.<sup>7</sup>

In the ruling house of Jodhpur, patrani was addressed as 'Raniji' and the other queens were called as 'Bahuji'.<sup>8</sup>

This kind of favouritism towards one wife and distinction in rank may have made the once upon favourite wives and the other wives feel unimportant, as if they were only for the personal pleasure of their husband, besides which they had little recognition and position, as they could be discarded at the king's will.

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<sup>3</sup> Nainsi Khyat; Vol 3, P.105.

<sup>4</sup> Shashi Arora, Rajasthan mein Nari Ki Sthiti, Prerna Prakashan, Bikaner, 1981,P.P. 71-72

<sup>5</sup> Ibid,P.P. 79-80

<sup>6</sup> Ibid ,P.P. 71-72

<sup>7</sup> Shashi Arora; Status of women in Rajasthan' G.S.L. Devda ed. 'Some Aspects of Socio Economic history of Rajasthan', Rajasthani Granthagar, Jodhpur, 1979.P.63. 1981.P.P. 79-80

<sup>8</sup> Ibid P.81.

Most of the elite women did not react to such a treatment, which could be taken as their devotion and respect towards husband. Although it was extremely doubtful whether all of them earnestly felt devoted to their husbands, especially due to polygamy and other reasons like absence of the husbands due to wars. As a result, some of the Rajput queens did not even get a chance to be in contact with their husband, hence any sort of affection was a remote possibility.

It is natural, that in the day when polygamy was an accepted norm of the society, all the wives could not be given equal treatment and they were well aware of their position after getting married. But, there is no shortage of examples, when these elite women were not willing to suffer humiliation at their husband's hand reflecting their self respect.

The folk song of Bainabai is famous in Rajasthan.<sup>9</sup> It is an instance of a woman who revolted against her husband, who had hit her at some issue, and wrote to her father asking for army to be sent against her husband. On hearing this, the husband tried to lure her by promising her a precious necklace, but Bainabai rejected this.

Rawal Jagmal of Mehva, had Chauhan wife with three sons from her. Though the very purpose of a marriage was complete, i.e. of the continuation of line by male successors, Jagmal married a Gehlot princess. As a result the Chauhan wife got annoyed, as she feared a loss of favour to herself from her husband's side after he married the Gehlot princess and as a mark of protest, went to Barmer along with her sons.<sup>10</sup>

In another instance of protest, Umade Bathiani, queen of Rao Malde, left her husband and refused to return back to him.<sup>11</sup> Pabuji's sister had written to her brother to take action against her husband, who had insulted her on not having brought dowry.<sup>12</sup>

These instances clearly reveal that the elite Rajput women, were not always prepared to lose their self respect and were keen to preserve their dignity as wives. Moreover, an attitude of protest is reflected in their actions, as they were not always prepared to accept the norms laid down for a married woman which were unfavourable to them and thereby giving unrestricted authority to their male counterparts.

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<sup>9</sup> Manohar Sharma; Rajasthan Ki Vishisht Nariyan, Maru Bharti, Jaipur Year 2, Vol.3, Jan.' 1995, P.P.12-13

<sup>10</sup> Muhto Nainsi, Nainsi Ri Khyat; vol 3, P.3

<sup>11</sup> Ibid , P. 215

<sup>12</sup> Ibid , P.P. 63-72



Supiarde, was married to Nar Singh Khindawat of Mandore. Once he got annoyed with her and decided to teach her a lesson. In a bid to humiliate her, Nar Singh decided to have physical relation with her 'Saut' in her presence ignoring her pleas. In retaliation Supiarde vowed not to have sexual relations with her husband and subsequently left his house as a mark of protest.<sup>13</sup> Nar Singh chased her, by that time, this incident had become a topic of gossip at the village well. When Nar Singh reached the well, a village woman asked him whose wife had run away. In reply he told her that she was his wife and tried to strengthen his stand by commenting that a woman by nature is a wanderer, who cannot be stopped, As a reply, the village woman made a very interesting comment that you must have badly insulted her, otherwise, she would not have left you.

The appropriation of this comment becomes established, on the basis of the above discussed instances, where all these women took the decision of leaving their husbands, not out of their personal wish, but as a result of the circumstances which compelled them to take this action, to show their anger.

Within an aristocratic Rajput family, the relationship between the co-wives was also not very cordial. This was due to the reason that some of the wives were king's favourites and were known as 'Suhangans' ; While the others were known as 'Duhaqans' i.e. the rejected ones. Such a favour and disfavour of the wife depended upon her personal charm, her family status, and the dowry she brought at the time of wedding. According to the Khyats, the Duhagan wife and her sons were generally discarded and sometimes were not provided any kind of economic security.<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes the relations between the co-wives became strained due to the political rivalries in their parental families. The favourite wife used her influence to seek the favour at the cost of other wives, and the rules used to comply accordingly. Maharaja Udai Singh Devda was married to Mandan's daughter. Mandan's daughter was a Suhagan while Seeha's daughter was a Duhagan.<sup>15</sup> Mandan used his daughter's favours to persuade Udai Singh not to assist Seeha in their war. Further when Seeha was killed Udai Singh's, the Maharaja got furious. But again the Suhagan wife used her charms to prevent her husband from taking action against her father.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, P.P. 144

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, Vol 2, P.210

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, Vol. 3, P.P. 124-125.

The males and females in a Rajput family were segregated in two separate sections, as the Zenani Deorhi and Mardani Deorhi. According to Nainsi's vigat, Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur had reorganised the harem on the pattern of the Mughals whereby, males above the age of seven years were not allowed to visit the Zenani Deorhi. Before that, there was no such rigid barrier and there was a certain amount of openness.

The Zenani Deorhi was the residing place of all female members of the family and the life inside it, needs to be speculated in detail.

The females residing in the Zenani Deorhi were, the wives, that the rulers had. It also comprised of the female relatives and the kept women who were not legally married to the ruler and were given titles like 'Paswan', 'Khawas' and 'Paddayatan'. They could belong to any caste other than the Rajputs, but could not be married by the rulers because inter caste marriages were not very popular.<sup>16</sup> This meant that women of different castes used to live in the Zenani Deorhi, and were allotted quarters and given facilities according to their status. This practice of maintaining harems, which included kept women, was adopted by the zamindars and nobles as they had means to imitate the royal lifestyles and their practices.

The Ranis, Majis and other relatives had their separate apartments, kitchen staff, and servants. They were given maintenance grants known as 'Hath Kharch ki Jagir' for their personal expenses. Out of their personal income, the Ranis, Maharanis, Patranis and Majis had the right to donate a part of their money, or to order the construction of a temple or digging of a water tank (Bari).<sup>17</sup>

Widow Ranis were also entitled to a fixed amount of money provided for maintenance. Chandrawatji Maji, widow of Maharaja Lal Singh of Bikaner, held five village in jagir, and also received Rs. 2,000/= per annum from the state treasury.<sup>18</sup> Chota Bhatianiji, widow of Maharaja Sardar Singh of Bikaner, held two villages- Mundsar and Surat-from which, She got an annual income of Rs. 3,700/= and Rs. 1,300/= respectively, free from all state demands.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> G.N. Sharma; Social life in Medieval Rajasthan, Lakshmi Narayan Agarwal, Agra, 1968, P.116

<sup>17</sup> Shashi Arora; op.cit. P.P. 71-72

<sup>18</sup> Sodhi Hukum Singh; A Biological Account of the ladies of the ruling house of Bikaner, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner, P.3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid ; P.4

However, the property that was given to a Rajput woman by her parents at the time of her wedding, in the form of dowry, was recognized as her personal property. It seems that the dowry became popular in order to ensure the security of the bride in view of the widespread practice of polygamy among the elite Rajputs, when all the wives were not given equal amount for maintenance. Although, there was a practice of granting maintenance allowance to all the women of an elite Rajput family, but, some of them were not getting enough and were not satisfied with amount sanctioned to them. This is evident in the letters<sup>20</sup> that were written by Ranis to the rules, where they have complained about their receiving very little money for sustenance, whereas some of the Ranis were getting much more than the others.

The women of an elite Rajput family were kept in seclusion inside the Zenani Deorhi. These inmates of Zenani Deorhi had very little contact with the outside people and had to depend upon their maids to be a mediator between them and any outsider. Whenever they went out for participating in some function or to visit the temples, they were escorted by their maids<sup>21</sup> and travelled in covered palanquins. They had very little freedom of movement outside the Zenani Deorhi.

Although, purdah had prevailed among the Rajput women in early times but it was a way to show respect to the elder relatives and was not very rigid. But it seems that purdah became stringent with the coming of the Mughals. This was mainly a result of the imitation of the custom and manners of the Mughal aristocracy by the elite Rajputs who had established close relations with the Mughals and wanted to emulate their example in their own family. Prior to the mughal's arrival, there was some openness in their elite Rajput families. This is evident in the instance of Lakhas wife Sodhi, having got indulged in illicit relationship with a Doom, who was appointed by Lakha himself,<sup>22</sup> to entertain Sodhi, in his absence. This could have been possible because in those times, the elite Rajput women were not entirely cut off from the outside world, which may have enabled Sodhi to invite the Doom to her apartment. The ordinary women also seem to have been influenced by the value system prevailing among the elite women. The ordinary women who had to work out in the fields, did not observe purdah, but used to veil faces whenever any stranger passed by them.

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<sup>20</sup> Zenani Tehrir, Jaipur Records, v.s. 1700-1812, Bundle No.1, letter written to Maharaja Bishan Singh from queen Devadi, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner.

<sup>21</sup> Arjadast; Jaipur records, v.s. 1750-1761, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner.

<sup>22</sup> Arjadast; Jaipur records, v.s. 1750-1761



There are instances of some of the Zenani Deorhi inmates being actively engaged in the politics since they had access to outside information. Some Rajput Ranis were daring enough to conspire against the ruler. They were scheming in nature and did not hesitate even to plot against their husbands even if they were not gaining anything in the process. Songari, wife of Rawal Luna assisted Rao Jodha, a relative from her maternal side, conspired against her husband, and helped Jodha plunder her husband's property.<sup>23</sup> This shows her affection more towards her parental relatives rather than her husband.

The Rajput aristocracy, and other propertied classes of nobles and zamindars, were practicing polygamy from the earlier times and also they kept their wives in purdah. But a strict segregation of males' and females' apartments, and a rigid seclusion of elite Rajput women, came with the Mughals.

This practice of seclusion, turned out to be favourable to the Rajput males to assert their complete hold over their female's thereby making them weak and submissive to the male authority as they were left with very little freedom of movement on their own, outside their apartments. The queens were even required to take permission from the rules before taking any action outside the zenani Deorhi. The submissiveness of the Ranis is evident in the letters<sup>24</sup> that were sent by the elite Rajput women from the Zenani Deorhi to the rulers in which even while complaining about something, a carefulness is shown, of not annoying the latter in any way. In fact, effort were made to flatter the rules by devoting most of the letter, by complimenting them, comparing them with precious moon etc. thereby showing their complete faithfulness.

Sexual relations are a part of married life. The Rajput rules were visiting the female quarters to see their wives and their physical contact with their wives was natural. However, due to the long absence of the husband on war or posting outside as per service conditions, some of these Rajput women used to get indulged into illicit relationship with other men which is evident from Nainsi's Khyats and other primary sources.

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<sup>23</sup> Muhto Nainsi, Nainsi Ri Khyat; vol 3, P.8.

<sup>24</sup> ZenaniTtehrir, Jaipur Records, v.s. 1700-1812, Bundle No.1

Sodhi, the wife of Rawal Lakha got physically indulged with a Doom, as her husband had gone on war. However, on returning back when her husband himself saw his most favourite wife's indulgence with another man, she was given away by her husband, to the Doom.<sup>25</sup>

Kelakot's ruler Phool's wife Dhan tried to have illicit relations with her step son, Lakha, in Phool's absence from Kelakot: on being snubbed by Lakha, she falsely implication Lakha, and he was made to leave the palace.<sup>26</sup> But, illicit relations were possible only when the rules governing Zenani Deorhi were not rigid. With the imposition of strict rules of Zenani Deorhi, what did the royal women do to satisfy themselves in the absence of their husbands, is not known. As all the women were not involved in adultery, it seems some of these royal women were suppressing their desires due to the influence of the code of conduct prescribed for women, which expected chastity from the royal ladies.

As these women were in constant contact with each other inside closed quarters, and due to some of them having experience widowhood at an early age, there was a possibility of development of lesbian relationship among the inmates of the harem. Because this point is not evident in the sources that we have used, therefore, we are not in a position to establish its validity.

After going through all this discussion, it is clear to us that the present condition of women is not just the outcome of present circumstances. Its roots go at least as back as medieval period as per our sources. The present is just a continuation of past.

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<sup>25</sup> Muhto Nainsi, *Nainsi Ri Khyat*; vol 2, p.p. 232-234

<sup>26</sup> Ibi, vol 2, p.229



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