

Harem Life of First Mughal Emperor Babar

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In the Memories, women have generally been kept in purdah. There are very few references to the part some of them might have played in shaping the course of Babar's life. There are brief remarks in a few places about the parentage of the ladies of the royal household, but nowhere does he talk of them in detail. The exotic names they carry are perhaps the only clue to their style and their charm. Three of Babar's seven wives are not even mentioned in the book. The remaining four, taken together, cover not more than one of the 716 pages of the autobiography.

This lacuna is filled to some extent by Gulbadan, Babar's daughter, who wrote a fascinating account of her father's family life and the Fairley large harem. From a few direct and indirect references in her book to the physical and mental qualities of her "mothers", it is possible to construct a somewhat hazy picture of Babar's marital life.

It was at the age of five (when he was on visit to Samarkand) that the young prince of Farghana was betrothed to Ayisha-Sultan Begum, the daughter of his uncle Sultan Ahmad Mirza. She was a sprightly little child who ran away, rather unceremoniously, to join her maidservant after the religious rites had been performed. Babar recorded years later, presumably after their separation, that he thought her to be a somewhat stuck-up child. They had married eleven years after their betrothal, at Khujand. Babar's fortunes at this time were at a low ebb. He possessed neither a kingdom nor a home. When he managed to capture Samarkand for the second time in 1500, Aysha joined him. She gave birth there to a child, a girl, who died within a few days. Shortly afterwards, she left him. Babar thought her action was instigated by her elder sister but, apparently, there were deeper reasons for her decision to desert Babar.

About the time of their marriage. Babar was infatuated with a handsome young boy named Baburi. He himself records. In these days when I had not much to do, I discovered in myself a strange emotional upsurge. A boy named Baburi in the camp bazaar fascinated me beyond

words. I was made after him. My heart was tormented because of him. Up till then, I had not been emotionally attracted towards anyone. In fact, the very meaning of love and desire was not known to me. From time to time Baburi used to come to my presence, but out of modesty and bashfulness I could never look straight at him. How could then I make conversation with him? In my joy and excitement, I could not thank him (for coming). Neither was it possible for me to reproach him for going away. What power had I to command the duty of service from him?

One day during that time of intense desire and passion, when I was going with companions along a lane and suddenly met him face to face. I got into such a fit of confusion that I almost lost my balance. To look straight at him or to try to speak to him was impossible. Tormented within, I kept on walking with my companions.

In that upsurge of desire and passion, and under the stress of that youthful folly. I used often to wander bare-head and barefoot through street and lane, through orchard and vineyard. I showed courtesy neither to friend nor to stranger, and took no care either of myself or others. Sometimes, like a madman, I used to wander alone over hill and plain. At times, I betook myself to gardens and rear by suburbs. My wanderings were not of my choice. I did not know what I was doing. My brain had lost control over my actions. I was a derelict.¹

Under such an emotional stress, there was no place in Babar's heart for Aysha or for anybody else. Though I was not ill-disposed towards her, yet this being my first marriage and out of modesty and bashfulness I used to see her only once in ten, fifteen or twenty days. Later on, my apathy towards her increased. Then my mother would coax me to go and see Ayisha every thirty or forty days. It is understandable that Ayisha could not take this neglect. She was a proud lady, and she decided to leave Babar. Perhaps she consulted her elder sister and other members of the family before she left him, but it seems that the decision to end the marriage was hers alone.

Three years later when Babar had captured Kabul, he married Zainab- Sultan Begum, fifth daughter of his uncle Sultan Mahmud Mirza and Khanzada Begum, grand-daughter of the great Amir of Tirmiz.²

Under my mother's insistence, I married her at the time of the capture of Kabul (1504). She did not display much love and interest in me. In fact, she was positively hostile and catty. Two or three years later, she was struck by small-pox and passed away. Babar could not tolerate aggressive women. "A hostile woman can make a good man's

life thoroughly miserable". Possibly, Zainab, too proud of her high parentage, failed to win Babar's affection. He does not even remember the year of her death. There was a political marriage, thrust upon her by his mother. It may not be wrong to presume that Zainab was neither a good-looking nor a good-tempered woman.³

In 1506, at the age of 23, Babar married Maham Begum, the mother of Humayun. The parentage of Maham is not recorded anywhere either in the Memoirs or in the Humayun-Name. This lends credence to the view that she was not of royal blood. Babar married her in herat shortly after the death of Sultan Hussain Mirza. Abul Fazal gives a brief account of her parentage, but he too leaves many blanks to be filled. Her father's name is not given. She is said to have belonged to 'a noble Khorasan family, ' to have been related to Sultan Hussain Mirza, and to have traced her descent from Shaikh Ahmad of Jan.

Sussanah Beverage, who translated the memoirs into English, tends to agree that Maham was not of royal blood. She writes :
It is strange that it is not stated by Babar when the records the birth of her son Humayun. Neither Gulbadan nor Abdul Fazl fills this gap. Her brothers belonged to Khost and, to judge from a considerable number of small records, they seem to have been quiet, unwarlike Khwajas.

Her marriage took place in a year of which complete record survives; it is one in the composed narrative, not in the diary. In the following year, this also being one included in the composed narrative, Babar writes of his meeting with Ma'suma Begum in Herat, of their mutual love, and of their marriage. If the marriage with Humayun's mother had been an equal alliance, it would agree with Babar's style and custom to mention its occurrence and to give particulars about Maham till descent⁴ It is thus fairly obvious that Maham did not have royal blood in her veins. She must have been a member of the Khwaja family of Khost. At the time of their marriage, Babar had neither a wife nor a child. After his experiences with Ayisha and Zainab, he perhaps wanted to bypass royalty and to have for wife a girl from a lower section of society.

Maham was extremely intelligent and good-looking Gulbadan confirmed these qualities of her stepmother. She bore her husband five children, four of them-Babul, Mahar Jahan, Aisan-Daulat and Farouq-died in infancy. Humayun was the only one to survive, and Maham took great care to ensure that he secured the throne at Agra after Babar's death.

With age, the once meek and docile Maham became more aggressive. She took a decisive part in foiling the plot by Nizamud-din Khalifa to have Mehdi Khwaja named successor to Babar. But for her secret letter to Humayun in Badakhshan, the story of the Mughal rule in India might have been a different one. She was aware of her influence on Babar, and to keep she made it a point not to say or do anything which might offer the emperor. She even suppressed her jealousy, and pretended to ignore Babar's infatuation with the two Circassian girls which Shah Tahmasap had sent to his court, Gulbadan tells of "one or two occasions when My Lady spoke rather harshly to my royal father, "but Maham quickly made up for her lapses and retained the Emperor's favour with her ready wit and geniality.

Babar was stricken with grief when Humayun lay prostrate with an ailment the physicians were at a loss to diagnose and treat. Seeing her husband's disturbed state of mind Maham said:

The Emperor should have no cause for serious concern. He has three other sons to shower his love upon. It does not behove His Majesty to be moaning in agony. The trials of royalty have to be borne with detachment. The Emperor's sorrow is casting its shadows all round. Let Him be reconciled to the will of God. I am.

Babar was pleased at the words of wisdom spoken by Maham, and said : I may have other sons, but I love none more than I do Humayun. He is the light of my eyes. Your reference to God's decree is apt and touching. I greatly appreciate your thoughts, Maham.

Hazrat Walida, as Maham came to be called after the birth of Humayun, grieved over the death of her four infants. Humayun, she told Babar one day, yearned for a full brother or sister in the house. She thought of adopting a royal child. In 1519, she asked Babar for the custody of Dildar Begum's unborn child. Whether it be a girl or a boy-this is immaterial to me. I shall take my chance. Give me the unborn child of Elder Begum. I will declare it to be my child, and will look after. Babar agreed. Three days after he was born, the child was taken away from his mother and brought to Maham's house. The news of the birth of a son to Dildar and his adoption by Maham reached Babar when he was engaged in subduing Bhera. "They named him Hindal. His birth at this time was taken to be a good omen for our success in Hindustan."

Dildar, the last of Babar's Turk wives, was, from all accounts, a serious contender to Maham for the Padshah's favour. She had borne him five children, one of whom (Alwar) died in infancy. There was no

male surviving child of Dildar when Maham planned to wrest her (Dildar's) next child and bring it up as her own. That Bahar fulfilled Maham's high-handed request bespeaks of her hold upon the Padshah and also perhaps of the love he bore for Humayun. Babar married Dildar some time between 1508 and 1549. Neither her parentage nor the year of the marriage is recorded anywhere. Perhaps these details were lost with the missing pages of Babar's diary. Many historians consider Dildar to be of royal blood. But there is no evidence available about her parentage. To quote Mrs. Beveridge.

Nothing in her daughter, Gulbadan's book suggests that she and her children were other than of the highest rank. Numerous details and shades of expression establish their equality with royal personages. She may have been the third daughter of Sultan Mahmud Mirza and Pasha Begum. It is also likely that a daughter of hers may have been the mother of Salima-Sultan Begum who was given in marriage by Humayun to Bairam Khan. Later, Akbar married her. She was a woman of charm and literary accomplishment.⁷

When Babar came to the throne of Kabul the proud and fiercely independent clan of Yusafzais posed a serious threat to his power. Babar invaded their territories with a large army. He devastated their lands, but failed to subjugate them. Their fort at Mahura Hill looked impregnable. To assess at first hand the nature of its defenses, Babar one dark night dressed himself in the clothes of a qalandar and went with a few similarly attired companions to the hill where the fortress was situated. It was id-uz-Zuha and there was a great assemblage of guests at the house of Shah Mansur.⁸

At this time Bibi Mubarika, Shah Mansur's daughter, was sitting along with other ladies of the family in a tent near the courtyard. Her eyes fell on the qalandar's and she sent at the hands of a maidservant, some cooked meat sandwiched between two loaves of bread for them. Babar asked who had sent the food; the servant said it was the Shah's generous daughter. Bibi Mubarika. "Where is she?" he asked. The servant pointed towards the divan where she was sitting. Babar's eyes fell on her, and he was enchanted with her face. He asked the maidservant several questions inquired about her age and whether she was betrothed. The servant extolled the virtues of her mistress and also said that she was not betrothed. Babar then left with his companions. At the back of the house he hid between two stones, the food that had been sent to them⁹

Babar then wrote one of the finest letters of his life, giving details about his visit to the house of Shah Mansur and, in proof, asked

Ahmad Malik to recover the meat pies he had hidden at the back of the house. Though Ahmad and Mansur still had reservations, the majority of the chiefs considered it impudent to turn down Babar's request. In the end, they all agreed to give Bibi Mubarika in marriage to Babar for the good of their people.¹⁰

When their consent was made in own to Babar, "the drums of joy were beaten" and costly presents were sent to the bride. Babar also sent his sword as one of the gifts- a symbolic gesture that henceforth he would not take wars against the Yusafzais. The two Maliks set out to escort the girl to Babar's camp. A large number of male and female Afghan servants accompanied the bride. Bibi Mubarika was seated with all honours inside a large tent in the middle of the camp. Wives of many begs and generals called on the bride to pay their homage. The bride remained intriguingly silent during these visits. The wives of the officers went away with the impression that she was a proud person. Nevertheless, they all agreed on her great beauty.¹¹

The 'gift girls' did not, however, involve themselves in palace intrigues. They had been sent by Tahmasap to "amuse and please" a friendly monarch. Their mandate was clear. It is to their credit that they did not go beyond it. Babar liked them all the more for their bohemian ways. Subtly they helped him realize totally, his craving for sensual pleasure. In the end, Maham too was reconciled to them and accepted them as her partners who had brought comfort to one in the grip of extreme mental and physical pain. Babar rewarded them generously. He even wrote a poem about "the alluring flocks of their long black hair and the heart-catching poise of their well-groomed manners."¹²

After Babar's death, the Aghachas became so much a part of the Mughal household that Gulbadan often mentions their taking part in royal festivities and family conferences. Abul Fazi states Gulnar was one of the ladies who accompanied Gulbadan to Mecca for a pilgrimage in 1575.

References :

1. Munilal, Babar : Life and Times, p. 108.
2. Munilal, op.cit. p. 109.
3. Ibid.
4. Beverage Quateal in Humayun-Nama.
5. Munilal, Babar: Life and Times, pp. 111.
6. Munilal, op.cit, p. 112.
7. To quote Mrs. Beveridge in Humayun Nama.
8. Ibid, pp. 113-114.
9. Ibid, 114
10. Ibid, pp. 114-115.
11. Ibid. p. 115.
12. Munilal, Babar: Life and Times. p. 116.

