Chapter V

Women at Work

The family and the household are the primary units of the society. Being so it combines economic, political, ideological aspects and thereby functions in a unique way in the various manifestations of the society. The maintenance of the household requires doing certain kinds of work and hard labour. Conservative theorists argue, that because men and women are socialized differently, they are suited to different types of work; men are concentrated in jobs that require more technical proficiency and decisions making ability, whereas women pre dominate in the more nurturing, expressive and creative jobs.

It is generally considered that the life of women in Delhi Sultanate was based on household chores. In this chapter we examine the various occupations where women played a vital role. Professions of entertainment were such an acknowledged arena. They were co partners of men in various household works as filling water from wells, collecting fuel, cooking food, nurturing children etc. Female slaves were also employed in various works as for domestic production; they were good singers, spies, guards of the harems etc.

Thus the study proposed here, is to provide a picture of women at work during the Thirteenth and Fourteenth century. In professional and entertainment spheres - women as dancers and singers, professional women, entertainers, domestic slaves, public women and concubines etc.


Generally the activities of the women mainly centred on household chores. They took keen interest in spinning, weaving, sewing cooking and in serving food.\(^1\) Isami has stressed that the place of woman was the home. Instead of wearing the crown they should take interest in spinning and weaving. Amir Khusrau, also considered spinning to be the chief activity of women. They should be able to spin

\(^1\) Fawaid-ul- Fuad, op. cit, p. 118.
dupatta for themselves.\textsuperscript{2} Even if they were wealthy, they should not abandon the task of spinning and weaving.

In case of majority of ordinary women, the work around household consists of a great variety of subsistence activities such as rearing children, carrying water, collecting fuel, cooking food, serving meals, food transportation, tending cattle, spinning cloth for home use, etc.

Women went to hauz,\textsuperscript{3} rivers and wells to fetch water in pitchers for household chores. Cooking and serving of food was another duty of the females. Some of them prepared delicious dishes for which they were often rightly rewarded. Asad Khan an influential noble of Sultan Sikandar Lodi, was so much pleased to savour tasty dish of fresh green leaves cooked by a common woman that he rewarded her with a plate full of gold coins. \textit{Nimatnama} manuscript depicts women involved in preparation of delectable dishes (see chapter III) During the reign of Alauddin Khalji, the majority of Hindus were in poor economic situation, because of his stern and stringent rules against khuts, muqaddams and chaudharies. In consequence of their impoverished state, the wives of the erstwhile landed proprietors, and chiefs even used to come to the house of the Muslims and do chores there, and receive wages for it.\textsuperscript{4} They often helped their husband in the fields where they especially looked after the cattle.\textsuperscript{5}

\section*{Women and Profession:}

In Medieval India, women played an important role in the organization of production. There was a wide range of activities and avenues which were open for women and so their role was very crucial. But this was not without the division of labour based upon gender.

Women provided assistance in agriculture. They worked for cultivation, planting seeds, smoothening and weeding of plants, husking and winnowing grains.

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\textsuperscript{4} \textit{The Reign of Alauddin Khalji}, op. cit., p.79.
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan}, op. cit., p. 114.
\end{flushright}
Pounding and grinding of grains was accomplished by women.  
6 Fawaid-ul- Fuad mentions women singing praise of Almighty while carrying such chores.  

Domestic handloom industry was carried with women skill. Amir Khusrau links needle and the spindle used by young woman with spear and arrow.  
8 Charkha is the device to spin yarn. Isami says that women are suited only to work on the spinning wheel.  
9 Sufi women are known to have been involved in this profession in order to earn a humble livelihood.  

Women of all classes were major consumers of products and their preferences clearly played a significant, if not decisive, role in determining the character of the market. There is a reference to the karkhanas where different types of clothes were made. Mohammad Tughluq employed no less than four thousand manufacturers of golden tissues for brocades which catered to Sultan Mohammad bin Tughluq, the nobles and his harem.  
11 The aesthetic interest of women determined the quality of imports from overseas as well. Foreign goods were quite popular with royal families.  

A- Guards:  

Apart from the household chores, women also worked across different functions and capabilities. They imparted duty of watch guards; they looked after the harem’s security whereas inside the harem they were employed to keep a record of its income and expenditure.

B- Spies:  

Ibn Battuta informs us that the emperor’s of India employed slave girls who acted as spies for the Sultan on the amirs. They proved to be a boon to the royal court when they acted as state informers, informing the Sultan about the minutest detail of the day to day development of the Sultanate.  
13 The Sultan also appointed female  

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10 Khair-ul-Majalis, ( Majlis-41), op. cit., p. 138.  
11 Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan, op. cit., p. 125.  
12 Ibid., p. 143.  
kannasat (scavengers) who entered the houses without permission and to them the slave girls communicated information. They informed the administration about the various developments which occurred within the territory. These female scavengers convey this information to the chief of the secret intelligence services (Malik-ul-Mukhibirin) who informs the Sultan accordingly\(^\text{14}\) for prompt and timely action.

C- Shopkeepers:

It has been observed that women workers believed in the theory of toiling hard and thus they earned their bread in a halal way.\(^\text{15}\) Female slaves served their masters with great sincerity and tried to make their life luxurious and comfortable.\(^\text{16}\) Women were employed to carry messages from one place to another. They ran shops and sold commodities in the market. Chamoo, a common woman ran a shop in Delhi where she used to sell opium. The saints also employed the females in several ways. The khangah of Sufi saints\(^\text{17}\) and the piri system indeed had a number of female workers.

Women were exempted from paying the religious tax jaziya. After the death of Sultan Iltutmish some women also held iqtas and enjoyed the privilege after the death of their husband. But Sultan Balban discontinued this practice and gave them allowances.

Most wealthy households included extra household female members such as mistress, wet nurses, slaves and concubines. The employment of maids among the richer families tended to lighten the work of the women who did less manual work. In these families, there were a number of lower class recruits to take over the responsibility of house work and child care.\(^\text{18}\)

Dance and Singing Artist:

Music has been a subject of controversy among the Muslim jurists. The orthodox school maintained that it was prohibited, whereas liberal thinkers claim that it was permitted. Medieval Indian history clearly shows that Muslim rulers have been

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{15}\) Hamid Qalandar, Khair-ul-Majalis, eds. Nizami K.A., Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 1959, p. 138.
\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{17}\) Rashid A., Society and Culture in Medieval India (1206-1556), Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969, p. 140.
great lovers of music. Wherever they went, they carried their love of this fine art with them.\textsuperscript{19}

The tradition of Indian music and the allied arts of dance and drama go back to times immemorial. Among other amusements and recreations, dancing and singing were quite popular. The presence of dancing and singing girls was supposed to enhance glory of the royal court.\textsuperscript{20}

The above entertainers were a differentiated lot. The core of entertainment was dancing and singing. It was the particular audience and the place that determined their rank, status, wealth and security of the performers. For the purpose of offering them to the Sultan’s services well known reprobates and old procuresses had trained young girls with elegance, mannerism, grace, bold brunets and shamelessness. Some capable women were trained to sing melodiously, to strike rubab, to recite ghazals and to engage in repartees and to play nord and chess.\textsuperscript{21}

Most of the Delhi Sultans,\textsuperscript{22} their nobles and men of upper classes listened to and patronized dance and music ungrudgingly. There was hardly a festive occasion which was celebrated without being accompanied by music both vocal and instrumental. The Sultans of Delhi, with few exceptions, were great lovers of music and were fond of both the Perso-Arab and Indian varieties.

Music assemblies were quite common. The text of \textit{Tabaqat-i- Nasiri} points to Sultan Ruknuddin, the son and successor of Sultan Iltutmish, who ruled over the Sultanate for less than a year (April -Nov.1236 ), was exceedingly interested in Indian culture, and patronized music and musicians at his court. He conferred his honourary dresses and presents to musicians and singers.\textsuperscript{23} Barani tells us that Sultan Nasiruddin advised Ruknuddin not to get submerged into pleasure and merry-making and to be just to his subject. He was cautioned to keep beautiful girls and musicians away from himself.\textsuperscript{24}

The ears of handsome boys were pierced by for pearl ear-rings; beautiful young slave girls were decked like brides.\textsuperscript{25} The account of Barani leaves the

\textsuperscript{21} Habib Mohammad, \textit{Politics and Society During Early Medieval India}, Delhi, 1981, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Society and Culture in Medieval India}, op.cit., p. 89.
\textsuperscript{24} Barani Ziauiddin, \textit{Tariikh-i- Firozshahi}, eds. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Calcutta, 1862, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 130-131.
impression that sensuality and darkness practiced and encouraged at the court proved to be contagious and corrupted many lives of that age. Parasites and pimps flocked in the city under the shade of every wall, persons of both sexes were seen mingling freely, and from every house-top beautiful women exhibited their beauty. Various classes of people of the kingdom, high and low, old and young, learned and illiterate, wise and fools, Hindus and Muslims, began to demonstrate the dictum that subjects follow the ways of their kings.  

During Raziya’s brief rule (1236-40 A.D.), Indian music received considerable encouragement, and masters of this art were richly rewarded by her.

Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban’s grandson and successor, Muizzuddin Kaikubad (1287-90 A.D.) indulged in wine, music and debauchery freely, and his indulgence proved so infectious that, during his short reign, the citizens of Delhi had no other business than pleasure, merry making, arranging bouts, eating, singing, listening to Music, mixing with pretty girls, playing chess and telling stories.

The fame of Kaikubad’s fondness for dancers and musicians, jesters and buffoons, had reached the remotest parts of the country and hosts of fair and gorgeously decked dancing girls and boys intercepted his advance at every stage of his journey back to Delhi, displaying their charms and skill to lure the repentant king back to the paths of folly. The king tried to resist the temptations, but he failed and fell prey to the eyes of beautiful dancers and the sparkles of the ruby wine, he sank lower and lower into the depths of licentious debauchery.

In the same way, Sultan Jalaluddin Firoz Khalji was a man of poetical bent and had a good ear for music and extended his patronage to this art. Ziauddin Barani’s graphic description of the pleasure parties organized in the palace of Sultan Jalaluddin Firoz Khalji on Friday after the congregational prayer tends to show that the singing and dancing girls, well adept in their arts enjoyed the patronage of the Sultan and nobles. By their charming appearance, melodious voice and delightful dance they captivated the hearts of the people.

The Sultan used to organize Majlis-i- Sultan where all types of merry making were possible. Barani gives an account of the bewitching and charming musicians of his court. He mentions the names of Mohammad Shah Changi, Futuha, the daughter

of Fiqai (the seller of drinker as well as cup bearers), Nusrat Khatoon and her daughter Mahr Afroz, as forming a brilliant galaxy of musicians at Jalaluddin’s court.

Barani writes that Nusrat Khatoon sang songs and on account of sweetness of her voice birds came down from the air and the listeners lost their senses; their hearts palpitated and their spirits got stirred.\(^\text{29}\) Besides two other ladies, Nusrat Bibi, Dukhtar Kasa, and Mahr Afroz were dancers par excellence. Amir Khusrau talks about Turmati Khatoon, a remarkable singer, entrusted with duties of Amir-i- Murtanin, sang and played with fixed principles of knowledge through art.\(^\text{30}\) It is said that the \textit{majlis} of Sultan was like the one that could be seen in dream.\(^\text{31}\)

They were associated with the royal household and possessed extraordinary beauty and charm. Well adept in amorous playfulness and delicate manners, they cast their spell in whatever direction they turned, looking languishly through half shut eyes in coquetry. Barani tells us that they performed dance to entertain the royal guests in the pleasure parties of Sultan Jalaluddin Khalji and everyone who chanced to cast glance at their step and witness their amorous manners desired to die for them. The lifeless ones got a fresh life and the sad hearts gladdened.\(^\text{32}\)

Ibn Battuta supplements Barani’s account, when he describes the decoration of Delhi at the time of Sultan’s return along with his army from a distant territory. The city is decorated with wooden pavilions, several stories high and covered with silk clothes. In every pavilion there were singing and dancing girls, wearing most beautiful dresses and ornaments. They greeted the Sultan and his followers with their performance.\(^\text{33}\)

Women were involved in festivals, rituals and public fairs. The feasts and festivals are major events created by an entire community to depict the essential life of that community. Alberuni is very prompt in saying that women and children celebrated most of the Hindu festivals.\(^\text{34}\)

The most conspicuous women present at public ceremonials were dancers, musicians and singers. Ibn Battuta writes that it was the greatest and most beautiful bazaars which was basically for male and female singers. He tells us that on the side


\(^{30}\) \textit{Sultan Razia- Her Life and Times}, op. cit., p. 67.


\(^{32}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 200.


of hauz-i- khas (the lake build by Sultan Alauddin Khalji), where about forty domes and around it musicians ahl-ut-tarab and their place is called Tarababad (pleasure spot). They have there a market which is one of the largest in the world, a congregational mosque and many other mosques, in which the imam recites the taravih prayer during the month of ramzan\(^{35}\) and female singers living there also recited congregational prayer in the mosque.\(^{36}\) The dancing girls and musicians lived in this colony.\(^{37}\)

These Tarababads were ideal recreation centres. It has numerous shops and every shop has a door which leads into the house of its proprietor, the house having besides this door another exit. Tastefully decorated and furnished with dining rooms and shops containing inner apartments with a cradle on which sat or lay the female singer decked out in all kinds of finery while her female attendants swung the cradle, as well as with markets containing a large cupola lavishly carpeted in their midst in which sat the Amir-ul-Mutribin (head musician) takes his place every Thursday after the asr prayer in the presence of his servants and slaves, while the female singers came in successive batches before him and danced.\(^{38}\) All the musicians, both male and female, came and paid their respect to the chawdhari by displaying their skill. Such ceremony continued till sunset when the chawdhari left the palace. Even some Muslim rulers did the same.

In this bazaar there are more favourable circumstance for an all around development of Indian music reached during the reign of Sultan Alauddin’s reign,\(^{39}\) when on the conquest of Hindu kingdoms, singers migrated to the North to seek the patronage of Muslim Sultans and nobles.

Qutbuddin Mubarak Shah son and successor of Alauddin Khalji, also encouraged music. At his instance Amir Khusrau wrote his Nuh Siphir, in which he describes, a jashn (celebration) held at the birth of the heir. Apparently in which both Iranian and Indian dancing girls of repute displayed their skill.\(^{40}\)

During Sultan Mohammad Tughluq, Ibn Battuta informs us of the ‘Id’ being celebrated at the court of the Sultan, attended by singers and dancers. He writes that first of all, daughters of kafir (Hindu) rajas captured during the course of the year,

\(^{35}\) Ibn Battuta, Tr. Mahdi Husain, p. 171.
\(^{36}\) Ibid.
\(^{37}\) Ibid.
\(^{38}\) Ibid.
\(^{39}\) Rizvi S. N., ‘Music in Muslim India’, Islamic Culture, op. cit., p. 331-40.
\(^{40}\) Ibid. p. 334
came, sing and dance. Thereafter they are bestowed upon *amirs* and important foreigners. After this daughters of other *kafirs* dance and sing. The Sultan gave them to his brothers, relatives, sons of *maliks* etc. On the second day the *darbar* is held in a similar fashion after *asr*. Female singers are brought out, and the Sultan distributes them among the *Mamluk amirs*.\(^{41}\)

The author of the *Masalik-ul-Absar* refers to the employment of one thousand musicians in the court of Mohammad Tughluq. Firozshah Tughluq was equally enthusiastic in his patronage of music and lavishly rewarded the masters of the art. He used to encourage musicians and the dancers to a great extent. On every Friday musicians and dancers used to gather in the hall popularly known as *Chhajai- choubin* and entertained the Sultan throughout the day and received rewards at the time of their departure. Even in the program of *‘Id*’ celebrations music formed an important item before the Sultan left the palace for the prayers. On this day the Sultan rewarded the musicians as well. Amir Khusrau\(^{42}\) has given vivid details about the dancing girls. Such captivating dancing and singing girls charmed the atmosphere of the court by their grace and talents.

Writing about them, the poet says that mostly the dancing girls had pleasant personalities. Their long black hair often touched the floor.\(^{43}\) Big eyes, beautiful lips, charming personality and sweet voice, all added charm to their beauty. These women wore costly dress and were decked with ornaments. Their clothes were generally tight and transparent.\(^{44}\) They often wrapped *dupatta* of silk. Various beauty aids were applied by them which added grace to their personality. Betel leaves afforded redness to their lips, while black spot on their cheeks was placed in the belief that it would protect them from evil.\(^{45}\)

*Mushk*\(^{46}\) (a scent derived from deer’s tail and sandalwood paste) was used by them on their face and armpits. Henna too was popular amongst them. They also wore earrings in their bored ears and took pleasure in drinking wine.\(^{47}\)

\(^{42}\) Nuh Siphir, M.S.S., part. VII. , op. cit., folios. 45-47.
\(^{43}\) Ibid.
\(^{44}\) Ibid.
\(^{45}\) Ibid.
\(^{46}\) Ibid.
\(^{47}\) Ibid.
Entertainers:

They were also skilled in playing instruments like flute, Majamir and Tabla etc. They could write, recite verses, relate stories and play musical instruments like sitar. Painting, swimming and riding were their other means of entertainment.\(^{48}\) Amir Khusrau considered singing and dancing good and amusing in the early stage of a woman’s life but he warned women not to patronize it, because it also brings ill fame to them. Women also took delight in display of their ability in playing polo, _chaupal_ and chess.\(^{49}\)

Turmati or Trimati Khatoon\(^{50}\) besides having melodious voice excelled in playing musical instruments like vina, sitar and sarangi. She enjoyed the capacity the leader of all the Iranian and Indian musicians of the court.\(^{51}\) Sultan Bahram Shah was so much impressed by the melodious voice of a Chinese maid named, Dilaram that she always accompanied him.\(^{52}\)

As noted earlier, these dancing girls were often called by the Sultan on the ceremonial occasions like birth and marriage in the royal household.\(^{53}\) Mubarak Shah celebrated the birth of his son with great éclat. Pavilions were erected and decorated with velvet and brocade curtains. The royal band played at the top of the arch. Amir Khusrau tells us that on the occasion of the marriage of Khizr Khan with the daughter of Alp Khan the whole town was decorated, tents were pitched, and embroidered clothes and curtains were hung. The party of sword- wrestlers displayed their skill. Indian as well as Persian dancing girls were seen on the occasion of Prince Mohammad’s birth.\(^{54}\) They also entertained the royal guests and often graced the occasion of royal reception in the court.

Domestic Slaves:

In our enumeration of Muslim social classes, we might conveniently treat here the important class of domestics and slaves who were a familiar feature of Medieval


\(^{50}\) _Society and Culture in Medieval India_, op. cit., p. 114.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.

\(^{52}\) _Hasht Bihisht_, M.S.S., op. cit., folio. 16.

\(^{53}\) _Society and Culture in Medieval India_, op. cit., p. 107; _The Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan_, op. cit., p. 244. _The Life and Works of Amir Khusrau_, op.cit., p.187.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
India. The most important section of these domestics comprised of male and female slaves.

Slave is a term of closest approximation in order to explain the nature of bondage in the Delhi Sultanate. Slaves were generally referred to as, *bandagan (banda)*, *ghulam*, *kaniz*, *laundi* and *mamluk* in the sources of the Delhi Sultanate. The term *bandah* or *ghulam* were also used metaphorically in order to depict loyalty and association of both free and unfree persons, towards a particular person or God.\(^{55}\)

In Delhi Sultanate slavery ranged from elite military slavery to menial slavery. It had neither economic, racial, linguistic, cultural connotations nor was it an emblem of powerlessness or dependency always while elite slaves were financially more powerful than the free common people. Military victories of the Sultans sustained mass enslavements of the defeated populations. The act was meant for dual purpose, that is expansion and subduing the rebels. Enslavement of the tax defaulters and war captivation led to large scale slave trade, both import and export. Thus the slave labour emerged as a significant component of urban labour, during the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries. As mentioned earlier, the number of slaves in the Sultan’s establishments witnessed noticeable increase; fifty thousand under Alauddin Khalji and one lakh eighty thousand under firozshah Tughluq.

The two main source of obtaining slaves were by capture and purchase while means of their disposal were by manumission and sale. Prisoners of war were also an important source.\(^{56}\) The natural calamity as famine made victims source of enslavement.\(^{57}\) The Thirteenth Century Lekhapaddhati documents of Gujarat cite one *svayamagata-dasi patra vidhi* where one lady being distressed by famine and malecchas sells herself off.\(^{58}\) It is Barani who says, the subjects were so obedient that they paid tax even by selling their wives and children.\(^{59}\)

No study of the life and conditions of women in India during medieval times is complete without a reference to female slavery. The institution of slaves continued to flourish during the Sultanate period. A slave could be sold, mortgaged by owner in

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\(^{56}\) *Campaigns of Alauddin Khalji*, op. cit., p. 33.


order to obtain money from his creator dhanika, she could be sold for cash and kind
and against a gift in order to earn more income. Brahaspati smriti says, a female slave
could never be acquired and possessed without a written deed. There are references to
female slaves in ‘sale deed’ in Lekhapaddhati (13th Century Gujarat).\(^6\) The
Fourteenth Century Mithila documents talk of mortgaging of slave- Rs. 6 for a male,
Rs. 4 for a female and Rs. 3 each for a son and a daughter.\(^6\)

It has been seen that women and children were special targets for enslavement
throughout the medieval period. Slave trade was a profitable business. The specialized
slave markets\(^6\) were present in many cities and towns. Import and export both were
carried out in the markets. Besides large number of Indian slaves, of whom the
Assamese slaves were most liked because of their strong physique, male and female
slaves were imported from other countries including; Rum, China, Turkistan, Central
Asia and Khurasan.\(^6\) The eunuchs were imported from Bengal and Malay Islands.

In fact, female slaves were more in demand than the male slaves in all the
civilized countries. Maid slaves were needed both for domestic service and the pursuit
of pleasure. In India they were supplied from the different countries as far as eastern
Europe in the west and China in the Far East. Though abominable the slave trade had
become quite lucrative and therefore the training and education of a slave in arts and
craft no matter whether male or female was considered a good investment. Barani
states that the fairy faced girls were trained in singing ghazals and the art of
blandishment before their breasts fully developed; their coquetry could even turn
away the recluse from the path of righteousness. Most of the medieval chroniclers
have given detailed information about the enslavement of women in times of war. Of
the women captured in war, some were presented by the king to the nobles and many
other were sold.

Slave women did much of the household tasks. Lekhapaddhati cites women
slaves doing household works as grinding, cutting, mopping the floor, sweeping the
floor, fetching water, milking cattle, agricultural work, etc.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Andre Wink, Al-Hind-the Making of Indo-Islamic world. The Slave Kings and the Islamic
\(^6\) Nizami K. A., Royalty in Medieval India, op. cit., p. 193.
\(^6\) Pushpa Prasad, Female Slavery in 13th Century Gujarat: Documents in the Lekhapaddhati, op.
cit., pp. 269-270.
Women captured during war were sold as slaves. Once a girl was brought under the fold of slavery, she severed her family ties including her husband. The document shows that relatives of the slave girl from either the father or the husband’s side could not claim her or even disturb her in any way while she was working as a slave. The slave was the exclusive property of the owner, who was called janmaagrahaka in recognition of his right or even her life.65

Female slaves were of two kinds, those employed for domestic and menial work and others who were brought for the company of their masters under various forms of concubinage.66 The former, wanting in education and skill and bought expressly for rough domestic work, were often subjected to all sorts of indignities. The latter had a more honourable and sometimes even a dominating position in the household. As Minhaj-us-Siraj in his Tabaqat-i-Nasiri mentions that Shah Turkan, wife of Sultan Ilutmish was originally a Turkish hand maid,67 who rose to the status of chief queen of the Sultan’s harem by dint of her merit and charm and was honoured with the title of Khudavanda-i-Jahan of her name. Apart from the slave girls of India, female slaves were also imported from China and Turkistan68 as mentioned by Amir khusrau in his Ijaz Khusravi. In spite of this there was no restriction on the purchase of female slaves who could be bought and sold like ordinary commodities in the open market.69 Ibn Battuta informs us that women taken as captive during war were generally distributed amongst the nobles and officers as slaves.70 He even writes that women as female slaves were generally given and accepted in the form of gift.71

These female slaves were at the courtesy of their masters. In the royal harem these female slaves shouldered many responsibilities. Sultan Ghiyasuddin of Malwa had 16,000 female slaves in his harem.72 And every female slave used to receive two tankas of silver and two mands of grain every day for their services.73

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71 Ibid. p. 237.
73 Ibid.
As noted earlier female slaves attended to the household duties. They went out to fill water from wells in pitchers. Arrangements were made for their security. During the reign of Sultan Balban, Barani informs us that the female slaves were molested by the *mewatis* when they came out to fetch water. This was too much for the Sultan, who strongly dealt with the *mewatis* and did justice to the female slaves.

Female slaves could be bought and sold like other commodities, great variation in their prices was seen due to their nature, beauty, charm and talent. Sultan Alaauddin Khalji while enacting his market control policy, set the following norms for female slaves. Barani in his *Tarikh-i- Firozshahi* writes that the price for an ordinary working female slave ranged from five to twelve *tankas*, whereas the one having charming personality could be bought for twenty to thirty *tankas* or even forty *tankas*. He also informs us that a female slave of peerless beauty was sold for even two hundred *tankas*. The price of a slave girl does not exceed 8 *tankas* in Delhi and those who were fit for service as well as concubinage cost 15 *tankas*. But cheap prices existed outside Delhi for female slaves. Ibn Battuta writes that in Bengal a female slave of accomplished beauty and talent could be bought for one golden dinar. He also informs us that a female slave of peerless beauty was sold for even two hundred *tankas*. The price of a slave girl does not exceed 8 *tankas* in Delhi and those who were fit for service as well as concubinage cost 15 *tankas*. But cheap prices existed outside Delhi for female slaves. Ibn Battuta writes that in Bengal a female slave of accomplished beauty and talent could be bought for one golden dinar.

The difference in price was caused by grace of her department or refinement of her manners. Besides, there was another regulation later on that if a slave girl or a

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concubine of a person had fled away, the administrator of royal affairs should find them out and restore them to rightful owner. Barani furnishes the prices which he affirms were current in the bazaar of Delhi. The prices are in tanka, the heavy and pure silver coin of circa 170 grains. The following table illustrates the prices of the slaves.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slave</th>
<th>Prices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Details</td>
<td>From</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A servant girl</td>
<td>5 Tankas</td>
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<tr>
<td>A male Consort</td>
<td>20 ,,</td>
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<tr>
<td>A concubine</td>
<td>30 ,,</td>
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<tr>
<td>An experienced servant boy</td>
<td>7 ,,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An experienced servant man</td>
<td>10 ,,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Barani also mentions a rise in the price in the days when he was writing in 1359. This was undoubtedly part of a general rise in prices. It also reflected a possible fall in the supply of slaves on the markets, due to the decline in the military power of the Sultanate.

In the Sultanate sources, the number and prices of the slaves are given to explain the economic status of the masters and also to depict the fiscal conditions of the country at a particular time. The prices fluctuated in the times of war and famine. The talented and well trained slaves were undoubtedly very expensive and were only meant for those who could afford them.

The Sultans of Delhi considered slaves among the most valuable goods to be utilized in form of gift as a diplomatic tool for appeasement. Therefore, on one

86 Mirat-i-Ahmad, Tr. Lokhandwala M.F., op. cit., p. 223.
88 Ibid.
occasion Nasir-ud-din Mahmud gave forty slaves to Balban.\textsuperscript{90} The Sultans also favoured their nobles by presenting themselves as gifts. Those who visited the Sultan also presented slaves as gifts to them. Ibn Battuta gives an account of this transaction of presents in his travelogue. He presented a slave girl to the mother of Mohammad Tughluq, who in turn gave one thousand rupees, gold jewelry and expensive clothes to him.\textsuperscript{91} Similarly, the slaves were among the recipients of the royal robes, endowed by Mohammad Tughluq.\textsuperscript{92} The female slaves also entertained the masses on special occasions. Just as when the Sultan returned to the capital after some expedition the slave girls entertained everyone in the celebrations. There were thousands of slaves who paraded in front of the Sultan while the army marched behind him.\textsuperscript{93}

The slave system was organized on an efficient basis by Firozshah Tughluq. Afif has given an interesting account of the slave system as it prevailed during Firozshah. When the feudatories went to the court, they took with them beautiful slave girls dressed and ornamented in the most splendid style. Great number of slaves were thus collected and employed in the service of the state. The Sultan was very anxious to have expert artisans to work in the state karkhanas and hence the most intelligent of the slaves were taught mechanical arts so that about 12,000 slaves became artisans of various kinds. In fact there was no occupation in which the slaves of Firozshah were not employed.\textsuperscript{94} The aristocratic classes also kept slaves and maintained harem. Beautiful slave girls fit to act as mistress were available. Khan-i-Jahan kept beautiful maids in his harem. He had two thousand women of Rome and China in his harem. It was the practice of the nobility to take along slave girls whenever they travelled.\textsuperscript{95}

The relationship between the female slaves and the household women was a complex one, but where the former enjoyed sexual intimacy of the male head, jealousy was common. Sheikh Nasiruddin Chiragh told a prosperous female disciple murid that she could become his disciple if she behaved well with the slaves.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{90} Banerjee J. M., \textit{History of Firoz Shah Tughluq}, op. cit., p. 133.
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 109.
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Society and Culture in Medieval India}, op. cit., p. 90.
\textsuperscript{96} Qazi Hamid Qalandar, eds, \textit{Khair-ul Majalis: Discourses of Sheikh Nasiruddin Chiragh-i- Delli}, Urdu Tr. M. Ahmad Ali, Delhi, not dated, p. 139.
Since these slave girls had an access to the royal court, they were well acquainted with the etiquette of the court. Some of the Muslim slave girls knew the Quran by heart and they lived a chaste life, performed prayers and observed fasts regularly. They observed purdah and moved about from one place to another in closed litters. These girls were trained in the art of coquetry and elegance and were taught riding, polo game and wielding the lance with accomplishments and graces.

Thus in the Sultanate economy, female slaves played indispensable role and thus could not be kept secluded. There was always a scope for accommodating them in every sphere by allowing them to work in veil.

It was not uncommon for a Sufi or darwesh to have a slave girl. It is said about Mian Zain-ud-din, a religious man that whenever a slave, was brought for him from bazaar, he placed him/her under charge of a tutor for teaching prayer. Again our text Masalik is enumerates the refinement of manners.

The female slaves who extended their selfless and sincere services to their masters were called for a mild treatment by the Sufis. Their intelligence and efficient services often enabled them to get emancipation from slavery on various occasions. Imam Shafai once happened to be the guest of one of his friends. The latter instructed his female servant to prepare dinner. The Imam brought about some changes in the prescribed menu by adding a few more dishes of his liking. When the host enquired about the change in menu the maid told him about the alterations made by the Imam. The female servant was highly praised by her master for her efficiency. Not only this, she was eventually set free. Thus the Sufis treated their maid servants kindly. On occasions when they showed skills, efficiency and tact, they were voluntarily set free.

Sheikh Jamaluddin Hansvi had a maid servant who used to carry the letters of her master to Baba Farid. The latter used to call her mother of Muslims, because of her sincere and sweet nature. The khanqah of Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya presents an ideal example of a number of female slaves employed in service of men and God. The

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97 Ibn Battuta, Tr. Mahdi Husain, p. XXV.
98 Ibid., p. 122.
100 Fawaid-ul- Faad, op. cit., p. 118.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
Sufis believed that maid servants could perform both the services simultaneously without any hindrance.\textsuperscript{105}

Another episode illustrating how the wishes of a poor old working female (who used to sweep the floor in Abul Syeed-ul- khair’s khanqah ) were acceded to her, by her master.\textsuperscript{106} The old women performed her duties well and expected reward. Once a handsome youth entered in the services of the Sheikh, she expressed her wish to the Sheikh to arrange her marriage with him.\textsuperscript{107} The Sheikh mediated and asked the youth to marry the old woman.\textsuperscript{108} Again the old female insisted that the marriage be performed with all the ceremonies jalwa, nikah, and feast. Elaborate preparations were made and the marriage was solemnized. The maid servant also made the youth swear in front of the Sheikh to remain loyal to her throughout his life.\textsuperscript{109}

This is how the Sheikh fulfilled the wishes of an old maid servant and also expressed his gratitude for the long services which she rendered in the khanqah. The services which the female slaves generally performed for their masters consisted mostly of cooking and serving the food.\textsuperscript{110} Rashid Pandit had one such female servant who carried out her duty well. Being a merchant, Rashid Pandit was always busy in his work. The female servant once enquired to lay food for him, which he declined. Again she reminded her master to take the meals because the food was getting cold but Rashid Pandit refused to eat. At night again she requested him politely to have his food and she was then told that he had already eaten it. The maid servant was quite surprised at this answer\textsuperscript{111} and boldly enquired about the time when he partook his meal. Rashid calmly told her that since he was too busy in his work he hardly remembered the time when he had his food.\textsuperscript{112} The incident shows deep concern and sincerity of the female slaves towards the welfare and comforts of her master. Perhaps female servants by virtue of their natural feminine tenderness looked after their masters well.

Prophet Mohammad (S.A.W.) enunciated that a maid servant who served both the divine master and the earthly master was commendable. The Sufis also stressed
this fact that the maids should look after the welfare of their master and perform their duties loyally for which they would be rightly rewarded.

Since slaves being an article of property, constituted wealth, their manumission would be an act of charity, at par the merit with other gifts of the needy. These anecdotes are valuable in demonstrating to us clearly what an important element the slaves were in urban life of the Delhi Sultanate.\textsuperscript{113}

**Public Women:**

The institution of the public women was quite active during the Sultanate period.\textsuperscript{114} The prostitutes and courtesans were an important source of entertainment and it was an important profession too. The prostitution in India was inseparably associated with professional entertainers. As far as Medieval India is concerned, the women employed in this profession combined it with a large number of other skills, such as dancing, singing etc.

Alberuni points out, that the kings made them an attraction for their cities, a bait of pleasure for their subjects for none other but financial reasons. By revenues, which they derive from the business both as fines and taxes, they wanted to recover the expenses which their treasury has to spend on army.\textsuperscript{115}

Though public women were looked down in the society, yet they were considered to be the main source of entertaining the youth. Once they resolved to undertake this profession all their ties with their families were cut off,\textsuperscript{116} and they led a life devoid of family love and emotions. Bibi Tabha,\textsuperscript{117} received a humiliating reception at the hands of Amir Khusrau. The poet placed her on an ass and took her round the city to investigate as to whom she belonged. To his surprise none came forth to claim her. Thus Amir Khusrau finally took her to the hakim to punish for her undesirable acts.\textsuperscript{118}

Syed Nuruddin Mubarak Ghaznavi, a saint who flourished during the days of Sultan Iltutmish failed to take the step of wiping off the presence of the public

\begin{footnotes}
\item[113] Irfan Habib, ‘Slavery in the Delhi Sultanate, Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries- Evidence from Sufi Literature’, *Indian Historical Review*, op. cit., p. 268.
\item[116] Ibid.
\item[118] Ibid., p. 152.
\end{footnotes}
women. He was anxious that these public women should carry on their profession in a quiet and subservient manner.\textsuperscript{119}

Amir Khusrau tells us, that all prostitutes, who with their locks under their ears had broken their chains and stretched their feet, have now been lawfully married. From the ribbon, that tied their hair, they have now turned to the ribbon that ties them in marriage. Those, whose skirts had obtained a bad reputation because they earned their living by prostitution, have now been so reformed that they may set in their houses. Vidyapati who flourished in the Fifteenth Century found prostitutes at Jaunpur. He says that the prostitute, who had no husband, used vermilion. They decorated their bodies, marking their faces with dot or variegated colours and their lips were painted. They wore rich clothes and dressed their hair. They looked at men with smile. They bedecked their hair with flowers. Some of them were old; some were fond of cutting jokes.\textsuperscript{120}

In the absence of any restriction imposed by the state, the number of these public women swelled and by the reign of Sultan Alauddin Khalji, it reached to the extent of causing public anarchy. To avoid such a state of confusion, the Sultan deemed it necessary to curb the nefarious activities of these public women.\textsuperscript{121} The attitude of Sultan Alauddin Khalji towards public women was very queer. He regularized the institution by fixing up the prices of the prostitutes after categorizing them into three grades. In compliance of his market regulations the Sultan classified public women into first, second and third categories, the charges of their services were also fixed accordingly.

The prostitutes could not charge higher than the rate fixed by the state.\textsuperscript{122} Their relations with the visitors were to be governed by a strict code of conduct. To improve the moral values of the society, it is said that during the reign Sultan Alauddin Khalji, he also made measure to stop this abominable profession and prostitutes had to be lawfully married.\textsuperscript{123} Further some sort of registration was officially done without which these women were forbidden to carry out trade in flesh.\textsuperscript{124} No doubt these women were involved in vice but they did follow certain

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Society and Culture in Medieval India}, op. cit., p. 90.
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 91.
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Campaigns of Alauddin Khalji}, op. cit., p. 11.
norms. It was the practice that once they accepted an amount in advance from an individual they entertained that person only at the appointed time. No matter how much more money was provided to them, they refused to accept the proposal of another client.  

Apart from getting royal patronage, these captivating women were also encouraged by the nobles. Their beauty coupled with their skill in dance and music was instrumental in popularizing them amongst men in high ranks as well ordinary birth. Nizamuddin Sughra, the Sheikh-ul- Islam during the reign of Sultan Iltutmish, sought the co operation of a public woman named Gauhar to inflict the charge of adultery upon a Sufi saint, namely Sheikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi. Their conspiracy failed to provide an evidence. 

Maulana Shams Asadi, who had acquired respectable position in religious field, also visited the house of public women. In the Sharqi Dynasty of Jaunpur the institution of public women too flourished. These women wore transparent garments, used various aids of beautification and attempted in every possible way to lure innocent people for immoral acts. These women were completely devoid of morality and their mode of life was undesirable.

To illustrate the anecdote of Amir Khusrau deserves to be mentioned. The poet specially refers to Lang Khatoon an ill reputed woman, who refused to entertain her client because she had to maintain herself for other customers. It is difficult to analyze the cause for the popularity of prostitution. The account of Amir Khusrau gives an idea about it.

Amir Khusrau refers to Argawan Khatoon (prostitute) who was also seen in her attire decked with ornaments and jewels. There was a necklace around her neck and bindi on her fore head. She was fond of betel leaves. Another prostitute, Baghachi Khatoon was devoid of physical charm yet she was adored by sensuous men. In spite of her swollen body and large teeth, she was very charming and much in demand. Gazacha Khatoon was another public woman who attracted the poet’s

125 Ibid.
126 Akhbar-ul - Akhyar, op. cit., p. 44; Siyar-ul- Arifin, op. cit., folio. 142 b.
127 Ibid.
129 Society and Culture in Medieval India, op. cit., p. 91.
131 Ibid., pp. 127-28.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
(Amir Khusrau) attention. She was short necked; one of her shoulder was higher than the other but she was not so popular. These references show that physical beauty mattered a lot in the popularity of public women. Moreover they applied various beauty aids to add charms to their personality.

The wishes of the some of these public women were strange. Garara Khatoon, a prostitute, aged ninety years was passionately in love with a youth of eighteen years and her earnest desire was to marry him. But whenever the boy saw her, fled. Thus all her hopes were shattered. Mushba Khatoon was fond of eating all the time. She used to keep ten sheers of roasted grams in her dupatta and all the time she was busy in eating it. Her mouth produced sound like that of a grinding machine.

The Sufis were not silent on the issue of prostitution. The presence of prostitutes in society served the purpose of its own but their activities were to be carried on secretly without making much publicity. Complete eradication of prostitution perhaps would have meant a menace to the pious women who would be exposed to unquenchable human lust. No doubt, it is an offensive profession, but it served to divert and satisfy lascivious men.

Another heinous crime was adultery. It was an unpardonable act and those who indulged in it were subjected to harsh public punishment (stoning to death). This was to infuse a sense of fear in the hearts of the people to keep them away from immoral acts. It also combated the growing evil of prostitution.

The aim of Sufi saints was to lead a pious and holy life but they were often made victims of the crafty designs of men who were envious of their fame and prestige. Such men organized conspiracies to cast a slur on their fair name with the help of public women.

During the reign of Sultan Iltutmish, the Sufi saints were welcomed and patronized by the royal court. The Sufis flocked around the city of Delhi where Sultan Iltutmish provided facilities and comforts to them. When Sheikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi visited Delhi, after his arrival from Baghdad, the royal reception was so grand and honourable that it aroused undue envy in the hearts of Sheikh-ul-Islam,
Najmuddin Sughra. The latter hatched a conspiracy in connivance with a singing public woman, named Gauhar who lived in Delhi, to defame the Sheikh.\footnote{Akhbar-ul- Akhyar, op.cit., pp. 44-45.}

Najmuddin Sughra promised to pay Gauhar five hundred gold coins for her cooperation in casting aspersions on the Sheikh by alleging him of committing adultery.\footnote{Siyar-ul- Arifin, M.S.S., op. cit., folio., 141 a.; History of Sufism in India, op. cit., p. 200.} For this work Najmuddin Sughra paid half that amount in advance to Gauhar, and gave the rest to Ahmad Sharaf a bagqal (grocer) of Delhi, to be paid later on after the completion of the work. Gauhar was a nymph and tried her best to attract and seduce people. She was very pretty and was often called at the royal court for entertainment.\footnote{Ibid., folio., 142.} Her greed provoked her to charge Sheikh Tabrizi with adultery. In order to make the charge appear genuine she even produced false witnesses.\footnote{Ibid.}

A mahzar (court) was summoned under the aegis of Hakim Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya.\footnote{Ibid.} Sheikh Tabrizi and Gauhar were asked to clarify their position. When Sheikh Tabrizi entered the court, hakim Sheikh Bahauddin stood up and out of sheer respect took the sheikh’s sandals in his hands.\footnote{Ibid.} This act of reverence plunged Gauhar into panic. She could not contain herself and while taking oath to speak the truth she flattered down and confessed the crime.\footnote{Ibid.}

The conspiracy was deducted; Ahmad Sharaf was summoned and examined. Finally the case was withdrawn and Sheikh Tabrizi was absolved of the charge.\footnote{Ibid. folios 142-43.} Sheikh-ul-Islam, Najmuddin Sughra was then dismissed from the royal service. Sheikh Tabrizi ultimately left for Bengal saying that this false charge had undermined his prestige and reduced him from pure gold to silver.\footnote{Ibid. folio. 144 b.} Thus with the convenience of public women attempts were made to defame the Sufi saints, by evil minded people. But their efforts always proved futile.

Khwaja Zikrullah narrated the account of a man\footnote{Fawai- ul-Fuad, op. cit., pp. 219-220.} who went from Delhi to Ajodhan\footnote{Ibid.} to confess his sins before Baba Farid and then to start a fresh pious life. On his way he accosted a woman of captivating charm who had earlier lured him on several occasions. But the man never fell victim to her carnal instincts. While

\begin{footnotes}
\item[141] Siyar-ul- Arifin, M.S.S., op. cit., folio., 141 a.; History of Sufism in India, op. cit., p. 200.
\item[142] Ibid., folio., 142.
\item[143] Ibid.
\item[144] Ibid.
\item[145] Ibid.
\item[146] Ibid.
\item[147] Ibid. folios, 142-43.
\item[148] Ibid. folio. 144 b.
\item[149] Fawai- ul-Fuad, op. cit., pp. 219-220.
\item[150] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
travelling on a boat the women sat next to the man and almost succeeded in achieving her goal. But another man who knew of her evil intentions interfered at the right moment and warned him to keep off from that vile woman. Thus the man who was going on a pious mission was saved from falling a victim to the seductions of the lustful woman and reached to Baba Farid safely.

The Sufi saints knew well that it was their duty to espouse the cause of the helpless and down trodden people in the society. Women received priority in attention from the Sufis. They readily accepted women as their disciples without making any gender discrimination. The Sufis also kept them as their personal care takers. They considered it better than offering prayers, to help the needy women. It was their prime objective to unite people, inculcate in them love for God and serve the humanity. Thus their effort was to bring peace and bliss to the people at large and women were no exception to it.

Sheikh Nizamuddin was not reluctant even to help the prostitute, if they were found in need. His treatment of the prostitutes casts light on his humanism. Sheikh Muhammad Gesudaraz tells us on the authority of his father and the disciples of the Sheikh that his holiness, every time when he went to visit the shrine of sheikh-ul-Islam Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, he fixed allowance for the prostitutes who sat in the open tents along the route. Once he sent someone to tell them in the summer that the Sheikh would like to take rest under the shade if they moved aside for a while. In the meantime, all the prostitutes came out as they waited for the Sheikh for salam (paying respect). They stood in the middle of the road. The Sheikh fixed allowance for every one of them and ultimately it took the form of a regular stipend. On the occasions of urs celebration (death ceremonies of the past saints ) he sent for them victuals and money in addition to their stipend. Some of them got two silver tankas and two varieties of victuals, while others got one silver tanka and single variety each.

Thus it seems that public women were quite popular during the Sultanate period. The names given by Amir Khusrau are fictitious (which the poet himself confessed) but their activities gave an idea of the social milieu which was prevalent in the society.

151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
154 Society and Culture in Medieval India, op. cit., p. 91.
**Concubines:**

The Sultans gave liberal patronage to concubines, but they did not enjoy the status of a married wife. It appears that the children born from them were deprived of various privileges and opportunities. This fact can be well illustrated by the case of Kai Khusrau. The elite overlooked the claim of Kai Khusrau to the throne inspite of Sultan Balban’s will. The nobles considered it improper to extend support to the son of a concubine and elevate the offspring of such union to the throne of Delhi. This indicates that though the concubines were accepted and patronized, yet their issues could not claim certain legal rights. They received discriminative treatment in several respects.

**Conclusion:**

The evidence presented indicates that women were co sharers with in major economic activities. Women played an active part in craft production such as spinning and weaving. Romila Thapar in the context of Mauryan society acknowledges women as assistance to husband such a situation is gleaned here in the context of cultivation. In the sphere of entertainment and amusement they were acclaimed as efficient dancers and singers. The other professions like acting as intelligence agents, guards assigned them responsible services.

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155 Afif Shams Siraj, *Tarikh-i- Firozshahi*, op. cit, p. 288.
156 *Futuhus- Salatin*, op. cit., p. 184-85.