INTRODUCTION

Paintings are relatively a new source from which much valuable information can be gleaned for the material culture of Indian history from ancient to Mughal India. Through the years of successive reigns, these paintings came to represent a mass of evidence for the material culture as well as the social and cultural history of Mughal India.

Art is a mirror of society. In other words, it is a visual commentary on women’s life and her activities: and it is possible to reconstruct the history of material culture of the people in enriched and vivid form from the pictorial art, i.e. sculpture, cave paintings and illustrated manuscript paintings. In view of the vast store of information on our past that comes from the written sources, we tend to forget that pictorial depictions preceded pictographs and ideographs, the early form of writing.

In the present thesis an attempt has been made to study life of women and their contribution to the society and culture from Ancient to Mughal times. The emphasis of the thesis is on the study of their social condition through their representation in sculptures and paintings and of course, the textual evidences. It thoroughly presents a picture of a working woman and gives information about their pastimes, social and economic condition during the period. The centre focus of my study is the women of Mughal India. Some work has been done on social condition of women of Mughal India, but no systematic study has been made till date. This thesis is a humble attempt to fill this lacuna in our studies. The study is largely based on paintings, as well as on contemporary textual evidences.

First of all, without almost any previous warning, came the wall paintings of Ajanta with their breath taking mastery of colour and line. Here women appear to us in devotion and at work, affected by all varieties of emotion. Despite much willful and natural destruction, enough remains of these paintings remain to tell about the real life of the times what we would have never learnt from any other source. The sculptures in ancient Indian history represent the best examples of cultural continuity. The women figures are excellent. These exhibit the skills of the sculpture in the carving figures with delineating expression and movement. The ancient textual sources also provide information about the life of women.
The Buddhist palm leaf manuscripts and illuminated Jain palm leaves with painted wooden covers represent scenes of Buddha’s and Mahavira’s life. Depiction of various deities like Manjusri, Prajnaparamita and Maya (Mother of Buddha) is remarkable. These palm leaf paintings are also valuable for social and cultural history of Bengal and Gujrat.

Miniature painting in early medieval times often suffered from stylization that limits the value of its evidence for the study of the life of people at large. Realism began to intrude in the work of the Malwa and central India schools, but it acquires true dominance in the splendid Mughal school. The Mughal Art is essentially court art, but it is still one in which ordinary women are brought into complete the picture. And, since every part of a Mughal painting, aims at perfection in rigorously accurate detail, we have more intimate views of material life than we can get anywhere else in pre-modern Indian art.

The famous Rajasthan and Hill schools are limited in themes and less exciting in detail, but much of what are artists depict is set in rural scenes, and these, too are therefore useful quarries for reconstructing the history of the people. Of late, there has been an emphasis on the social and cultural history – a study of the people at the bottom of the society, but their daily life and work yet remain to be brought under full focus. These people constituted the largest section of society but never occupied a central place in historical works. Thus their story largely remains untold.

Pictorial representation in the absence of textual evidence, nothing can be greater value than contemporary pictorial records: sculpture and painting. Through this medium we find, in illustrated form, a variety of evidence that supplement or explain textual descriptions. The importance is still greater, when as in the case of ancient and medieval India, textual evidence on common women is so limited. The pictorial evidence comes to us in the form of sculpture, cave paintings and miniatures, both in albums and manuscripts. These manuscript paintings depict rural women in their daily life, artisans and professionals at work with their tools and implements. Fortunately the Mughal period is the richest in this respect. The Mughal Emperors maintained atelier employing a large number of painters. Consequently we have fairly continuous record of their works. A good many of these have been lost; yet those surviving, provide us ample material for studying the culture of the time.
A brief survey of my work illustrates the life of women in general. There are quite a few miniatures depicting present life of women. A woman did most of the domestic work. She grounded corn, churned butter milk, fetched water from the well and spun cotton and also carried food and water for their men at work in the fields.

Mughal miniatures represent that dancers and musicians are part of court entertainment. The illustrations depicting women engaged in various professions like building construction work, hunting, painting, water carriers, washer women and attendant etc. These women attendant can be seen fanning and standing ready to serve their mistresses.

Paintings of the period also portray different type of entertainments. Picnics by ladies were occasions when they sought and found pleasure. Women of royalty also enjoyed drinking party with their man folk. Music and dancing was a necessary accompaniment of court life. It is well known that Mughal aristocratic women participated in various games. These games were not only indoor but also outdoor. Chess, chaupar playing cards and chandalmandal were the main indoor games and were the chief among the indoor games and were accessible to the rich and poor alike. The Mughal ladies also played wide and seek and chaugan or polo.

Women of Mughal India were also educated. Some royal ladies were interested in promoting the cause of education. Some aristocratic women like Bega Begum, Maham Anga, Qultuq Nigar Khanum, Aisan Daulat and Gurukh Begum etc. were educated and cultured ladies.

The women of harem celebrated festivals with great pomp and show. These women arranged parties on various occasions i.e. birthday, marriage and picnic etc. In the observance of festivals and ceremonies the role of religious or semi-religious people’s significant. Many Mughal paintings represent vividly various festivals observed by the men and women both. These are Holi, Diwali, Dashehra, Rakshabandhan, Shab-e-barat and Id, etc. Holi and Diwali are the ancient Hindu festival, all these were adopted by the Mughal emperor. There is unmistakable pictorial evidence of an animated participation of the Muslim ladies as well as Hindu ladies in the celebration of these festivals.
Sati system was considered by the Hindus as an act of chastity. A widow had to burn herself with the dead body of her husband or had to lead a life of suffering and misery. In medieval India, the custom of sati gained an upper hand. Custom of sati and jauhar (of women on self-immolation the eve expected defeat in battle), which were so greatly in vogue in Rajput society, both in the region of Rajasthan and in Punjab hills.

The lives of the harem ladies were governed by the strict rules of purdah and seclusion. These women rarely went out of the palaces, but when they did, their faces, were well hidden behind veils. When they travelled, they were not seen by the outsiders. But inside the harem quarters these women could move about freely.

Many of the royal ladies were educated, but their interest in learning did not stop with their receiving good education. Many of them composed beautiful verses and some of them have left behind works of great literary value. They spent much of their personal allowances in giving active support to the spread of education, establishing educational institutions, patronizing men of learning, maintaining their own libraries and collecting rare and valuable books.

An attempt has been made to study the social, cultural and economic life of women, which is depicted in sculptures, Ajanta cave paintings, ancient literature, eastern and western school of Art, Malwa School, Mughal, Rajsathani and Pahari miniature paintings. Painting was colourful art, which was employed in Mughal and pre Mughal times. Most of the paintings are in collection abroad, I have largely depended on their photo plate in institutes in India as well as on the reproductions in various books, journals and articles. I also used published photos for the study of sculptures and paintings.

I have however been fortunate to study some original painting – the Anwar-i-Suhaili illustrations at Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi and some folios (contained in Albums) at Raza library, Rampur. I have covered at galleries of National Museum, New Delhi, Sawai Man Singh II Museum Jaipur and art gallery of Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi.

As state earlier this work is primary based on sculptures, Ajanta cave paintings, eastern and western school of art, Malwa, Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahari paintings.
Literary sources have been used to clarify, or to shed light on some pictorial depictions.

This study as it describes the middle ages of Indian history, has mainly utilized Persian as well as English sources. The Persian sources, like any other source disregard women but one does find incidental references to women that are helpful for this study. In standard Persian histories, such as *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Akbarnama, Tuzuki-Jahangiri, HumayunNama, Maathir-ul-Umara, Maasir-i-Alamgiri, Muntakhab-u-Tawarikh* etc. one does find references to women’s social, cultural and economic life of such work.

The Sanskrit sources *Manu Smriti, Satapatha Brahmana, Vishnu, Dharma Sutras, Upanishads, Vedas*, etc. has been useful for women’s life in Ancient India.

The travelogues, English as well as other languages, translations, though exaggerated many a times, account for a vast literature on India. To name a few, we have Thomas Roe, Bernier, Tavernier, Manucci and so on.

The other important source of information has been the sculptures of Bharhut, Mathura, Gupta, the cave paintings of Ajanta and the paintings of Mughal, Rajasthan, Pahari, Jaina, Pala and Malwa schools. All these visual and literary sources capture glimpses of social, cultural and economic life of women in history.