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Nur Jahan: The De Facto Ruler of the Mughal Empire

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

Nur Jahan (1577–1645) stands out as one of the most powerful and influential women in Mughal history. As Emperor Jahangir’s most beautiful and intelligent wife, She transcended the conventional role of a royal consort and emerged as the unofficial ruler of the empire during much of his reign. This paper examines Nur Jahan’s adept handling of court politics, her unprecedented authority to issue royal farmans, and the minting of coins bearing her name—an extraordinary privilege for a woman in the Mughal period. By leveraging her political insight, forming key alliances, and actively participating in governance, she not only influenced the administration but also defied the gender expectations of her era. This study reassesses her legacy as a pioneering female figure who exercised real power in a deeply patriarchal society.

Key Words

Nur jahan, Jahangir, Khusrau, Mughal, Power, Women.

Introduction

“The Mughal Empire was an empire that at its greatest territorial extent ruled parts of what is today's Afghanistan, Pakistan and most of the Indian Subcontinent, then known as Hindustan, between 1526 and 1707. The empire was founded by the Timurid leader Babur in 1526, when he defeated Ibrahim Lodi, the last of the Delhi Sultans at the First Battle of Panipat. “Mughal” is the Persian word for “Mongol”. The religion of the Mughals was Islam. The territory was largely conquered by the Afghan Sher Shah Suri during the time of Humayun, the second Mughal ruler, but under Akbar it grew considerably, and continued to grow until the end of Aurangzeb’s rule. Jahangir, the son of Akbar, ruled the empire between 1605-1627. Shah Jahan, the son of Jahangir, began his rule in October 1627. He. “succeeded to the throne”, where he “inherited a vast and rich empire” in India; and “at mid-century this was perhaps the greatest empire in the world”. Shah Jahan commissioned the famous Taj Mahal (between 1630-1653), in Agra. The Mughals faced stiff competition from the Marathas, and after Aurangzeb died in 1707, the empire started to decline in actual power, giving way to the rise of the Hindu Maratha Empire. The Mughals however managed to maintain some trappings of power in the India for another 150 years. In 1739 it was defeated by an army from Persia led by Nadir Shah. In 1756 an army of Ahmed Shah Abdali took Delhi again. The British Empire finally dissolved it in 1857, immediately prior to which it existed only at the sufferance of the British East India Company.”¹

Nur Jahan, renowned for her power and beauty, was the most influential wife of Mughal Emperor Jahangir. As the emperor succumbed to the effects of alcohol and opium, she effectively assumed control of the empire's administration. Her period of influence, spanning from 1611 to 1627, is considered a golden era in Mughal history, during which she significantly shaped developments in art, religion, and emerging trade relations with Europe. This compelling narrative of her life reconsiders traditional portrayals of Nur Jahan as merely power-driven or manipulative. Instead, it explores the avenues through which women in Islamic and Hindu societies could attain political power, offering a vivid insight into the life within the royal harem (mahal). Throughout her marriage, Nur Jahan was the de facto ruler of the empire, while Jahangir refined yet indulgent, much like France's Louis XV retreated into the luxuries of court life and gradually declined into alcoholism. Ruling in his name, she managed state affairs with remarkable skill and influence.

"The name Nur Jahan, meaning "Light of the World," stands out as one of the most captivating and celebrated female figures in medieval Indian history. For fifteen years, she held a dominant position within the Mughal Empire, winning the heart of Emperor Nuruddin Jahangir and emerging as a formidable and charismatic presence at court. Her legacy not only survives in historical records but has also found a place in folklore, with her memory cherished both in India and abroad. Interestingly, Nur Jahan was not her birth name it was an affectionate title granted by Jahangir, which eventually became more well-known than her original name.

Her family traced its lineage back to Persia. Her grandfather, Khwaja Muhammad Sharif, was a native of Tehran. According to the author of *Raihanat-ul-Adab*, since Sharif was raised in Yazd, he became known as "Yazdi." He was reputed for his honesty, intelligence, and refined character, earning admiration for his talents and eloquence."²

India was fortunate to have Nur Jahan as a ruler with remarkable intelligence and administrative skills. She had a keen eye for recognizing talent and fostering artistic growth during her time. Her influence extended beyond politics she shaped the tastes and aesthetics of the Mughal court, leaving a legacy that continues to be admired today. Her political significance was acknowledged by Emperor Jahangir himself, who permitted coins to be minted in her name an exceptional honor in an era when most women were confined to the *zanana* (women's quarters).

Alongside Razia Sultan, Nur Jahan was among the rare women in Indian history to abandon *purdah* and engage directly in the harsh political arena traditionally dominated by men. Though born in 1577 and of Persian origin, she defied the norms of her time and wielded power with strategic finesse. Yet, history has often painted her in a negative light as a cunning, power-driven figure who emasculated her husband and took control of the empire. Emperor Jahangir himself once remarked that he had "sold" his empire to his wife in exchange for "a cup of wine and a bowl of soup." Accusations of favoritism, bribery, and political scheming have further clouded her reputation though these were traits equally found in male rulers of the period.

Despite these criticisms, her substantial contributions to the Mughal court ranging from cuisine and fashion to cultural trends are often dismissed as mere 'feminine' embellishments, rather than being acknowledged as significant elements of South Asian political and cultural history.

"Nur Jahan's story is, at its core, one of ambition, political acumen, military strategy, and resilience within the royal court. Similar to other remarkable women of medieval India such as Raziyya Sultan, Rani Durgavati, and Chand Bibi her rise to power was facilitated by a male relative who recognized her exceptional capabilities and leadership potential. Like many women who managed to wield political influence in male-dominated societies, Nur Jahan was adept at navigating the intricate structures of authority, knowing both how to exploit opportunities and when to retreat within the bounds of socially accepted conduct. What truly set Nur Jahan apart from her contemporaries was not only her talent but also the favorable circumstances of her life. Her second marriage to Emperor Jahangir, the most powerful ruler of India at the time, positioned her at the very heart of imperial power. She lived during an era of profound cultural exchange and growing global

influence, as European presence on the Indian subcontinent began to increase and the trade of luxury goods flourished. Her bond with Jahangir was unique marked by a deep personal connection that greatly influenced the administrative decisions and cultural advancements attributed to her name. Beyond her political and economic influence, Nur Jahan possessed a wide range of talents. She made notable contributions to various aspects of Indian life, including art, architecture, literature, religious affairs, travel, and landscape design. The breadth of her influence on Indian culture remains extraordinary, rarely matched even in modern times. As many writers of her era noted, there was virtually no field that Nur Jahan touched and did not leave her mark upon.”³

Nur Jahan stands out as one of the most influential women of her era. As the favored wife of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir, she found herself in a rare position that allowed her to apply her talents in governance, politics, economics, and cultural affairs with remarkable success. By the time of their marriage, Nur Jahan was already a widow her first husband had fallen out of favor with the emperor and she was neither young nor the only woman in Jahangir’s harem, which included several wives and concubines who had borne him children.

Despite these circumstances, within less than a decade, she had effectively assumed the authority and responsibilities typically reserved for the emperor himself. From that point until Jahangir’s death in 1627, Nur Jahan held near-total control over the empire’s administration. Her rise was largely enabled by Jahangir’s increasing dependency on opium and alcohol, as well as his deep affection and admiration for her, which elevated her above all others in his *zanana* (the women’s quarters of the court). It was this combination of personal influence and political necessity that positioned her as the true power behind the throne.

Due to the custom that forbade women from appearing openly before men in the royal court, Nur Jahan exercised power indirectly, acting through a network of trusted male figures. Nonetheless, it was she who made the final decisions on official decrees and appointments issued in Emperor Jahangir’s name. She oversaw promotions and dismissals within the imperial administration and played a pivotal role in shaping court policies.

Nur Jahan took a particular interest in improving the lives of women, often granting land and providing dowries for orphaned girls. Her authority was further solidified when coins were minted bearing her name a remarkable feat for any woman of that time. She levied taxes on goods transported through Mughal territory and actively engaged in trade with European merchants importing luxury items.

Her influence over both domestic and international commerce made her patronage highly desirable and frequently rewarded. She even owned ships that carried both pilgrims and trade goods to Mecca, which helped expand her economic reach. With her growing wealth and extensive business network, her agents were present throughout the empire. Under her influence, Agra, the Mughal capital, flourished into a bustling hub of trade and cultural exchange.

Nur Jahan also exercised control over the emperor’s extensive *zanana* (women’s quarters), which housed hundreds if not thousands of individuals. This included Jahangir’s other wives, concubines, attendants, slaves, female guards, entertainers, artisans, relatives, spies, eunuchs, and the numerous children born to the women of the harem. Within this intricate and diverse community, Nur Jahan held considerable influence, especially in shaping its aesthetic and cultural life.

She played a major role in defining trends in beauty, fashion, cuisine, and the arts. Known for her extravagant tastes, Nur Jahan invested heavily in luxury goods experimenting with perfumes, hair oils, intricate jewelry, fine silks, brocades, imported porcelain, and exotic dishes. Court fashion evolved under her guidance, merging Persian elegance with practical adjustments suitable for India’s climate, such as lighter fabrics for the heat.

Coming from a literary lineage, Nur Jahan was also a poet and actively encouraged writing among the women of the court. She hosted poetry competitions and extended patronage to talented female poets, including those from outside the palace. One notable example was the renowned Persian poet Mehri, whose work Nur Jahan supported and promoted within the courtly circles.

“Nur Jahan’s rise to power can be attributed not only to her intelligence and compelling personality but also to the particular character of Emperor Jahangir. As her second husband and companion for over a third of her adult life, Jahangir was a man of deeply conflicting traits that often clashed within him. Historians have long observed that Jahangir’s personality was filled with contradictions he could be ruthlessly cruel one moment and astonishingly fair and gentle the next. He was described as both weak and charming, meticulous and disciplined yet also impulsive and whimsical. Scholars and observers alike have noted this duality, portraying him as a curious blend of brutality and compassion, of intolerance mixed with understanding, and of emotional volatility tempered by empathy. Although it’s accurate to view Jahangir as a ruler marked by inconsistency his reign alternating between harsh punishments and a genuine desire for justice there was a deeper coherence to his outlook. The seemingly contradictory elements of his nature were grounded in a personal worldview that, while complex and unconventional, had its own internal logic. Within his mind, this vision appeared both clear and rational, even if it seemed puzzling or inconsistent to others.”⁴

Nur Jahan reached the peak of her authority while supported by a circle of devoted allies, many of whom were members of her own family. Although contemporary accounts often viewed this transfer of influence with skepticism or disapproval, Nur Jahan exercised her expanding power consistently and effectively. Under her leadership, the Mughal Empire witnessed a period marked by stability, peace, and remarkable prosperity.

Though writing long after her time, historian Alexander Dow accurately captured the extraordinary nature of Nur Jahan’s achievements. He remarked that her capabilities were exceptional, allowing her to assume absolute authority in an empire where women were traditionally excluded from governance. While it was not uncommon for women to exert influence from within the confines of the haram (royal women’s quarters), their power typically remained subtle and unseen comparable to the hidden force of a magnet. Nur Jahan, however, defied convention. She emerged publicly, breaking through the established norms, and rose to power not merely due to Emperor Jahangir’s weaknesses, but largely because of her own intelligence and political skill.

She had access to numerous avenues of power. Every royal decree (farman) and administrative appointment required her approval, and she ensured that her title, “Nur Jahan, the Queen Begum,” was affixed alongside the emperor’s signature. She personally oversaw promotions and dismissals in the royal administration, making her the true authority behind many state decisions. The emperor’s commands held no weight unless they had been confirmed by her, often leading to confusion about the actual source of imperial directives. Nur Jahan also oversaw the distribution of land grants to women, especially championing the welfare of orphan girls by arranging marriages for them and providing generous dowries. She regularly appeared at the jharoka (palace balcony) to hear appeals and petitions from nobles and citizens, offering fair and compassionate judgments. Coins were minted in her name some even bearing the twelve zodiac signs underscoring her unprecedented status. She imposed trade duties on merchants passing through Mughal territories, particularly near Sikandra, and maintained commercial relationships with European traders who imported luxury items.

Her responsibilities extended to screening foreign visitors and managing diplomatic relations with influential women abroad. Beyond politics and trade, Nur Jahan also devoted attention to architectural patronage funding the construction of caravanserais (rest houses), gardens, palaces, and tombs, with the intent, as the Dutch traveler Pelsaert observed, of leaving behind a lasting legacy.

“Nur Jahan stood out as a woman of exceptional talent and intellect. Gaining considerable influence over her husband, Emperor Jahangir, she effectively became co-sovereign of the Mughal Empire. As Jahangir’s health deteriorated due to chronic asthma and an increasing dependence on alcohol and opium, he gradually withdrew from the day-to-day affairs of governance. By the year 1620, his ability to manage state matters had significantly declined, leaving a power vacuum that Nur Jahan confidently filled with remarkable political

insight, boldness, and strategic thinking. Her influence at court expanded rapidly, and she emerged as a dominant, capable, and highly respected leader in a relatively short span. With growing power came greater ambition, and Nur Jahan began taking a more active and decisive role in shaping imperial policies and administration. Her sharp judgment and leadership abilities rightfully earned her the status of a queen in both title and responsibility. In a historic first for India, Jahangir authorized the minting of coins bearing Nur Jahan's name a symbol of her unique status and influence. These coins featured the twelve zodiac signs and circulated as legal tender during her tenure. Her name also appeared on the imperial seal, marking an unprecedented moment in Indian history where a woman wielded such direct authority. One of the most famous examples of her legacy is the issuance of a grand gold coin valued at 1,000 muhars. This intricately designed coin is now regarded as a cultural treasure of global importance. While the creator of the following couplet remains unknown, the verse beautifully encapsulates the significance of Nur Jahan's influence: Following the reign of Shah Jahangir, who mourned deeply the passing of Emperor Jahan, Gold reached its peak of splendor when adorned with the name of Queen Nur Jahan.

This poetic tribute reflects how deeply her presence and power were felt during her era her name itself elevating the value and beauty of the empire's wealth."⁵

Conclusion

Nur Jahan proved to be an exceptional administrator and a competent leader. She emerged as one of the most influential and powerful women in Indian history. Despite holding significant authority, she exercised her influence with integrity and never abused her position. She did not seize power unlawfully, nor did she reduce Emperor Jahangir to a figurehead. Rather, she supported his reign while skillfully managing the affairs of the empire. Her ability to assert authority in the heart of Mughal politics positions her as a trailblazing figure in Indian history and an enduring symbol in the global discourse on women's empowerment. Nur Jahan's story continues to inspire as an example of how wisdom, resilience, and courage can transcend societal limits and alter the course of history. The Mughal era was indeed fortunate to witness such a capable ruler. The years of her prominence, from 1611 to 1627, are considered a golden period in the history of the Mughal Empire.

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