

## THE EMPRESS BEHIND THE VEIL: NUR JAHAN'S SILENT SOVEREIGNTY AND CULTURAL RENAISSANCE (1611–1627)

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### Abstract

*Nur Jahan (1577–1645), the remarkable wife of Mughal Emperor Jahangir who was significant influencer, remains an enigmatic figure in the history of South Asia. Her contribution to enacting imperial decrees, influencing diplomatic relations, and leading military campaigns was unparalleled. The article is primarily focused on Nur Jahan's influential and peaceful reign, when she was neither formally a queen nor a princess but exercised her power through strategic alliances. Furthermore, this paper closely examines her diverse role in the renaissance of the Mughal Empire's cultural and artistic history by means of such actions as her support of literature, the creation of gardens, and construction of new buildings and monuments that's become iconic symbols of Mughal art. This research, which draws on the works of contemporary writers and historical narratives, places Nur Jahan in the larger debate on female political agency in the early modern empires. The figure of Nur Jahan, though set aside against her male counterparts, challenges preconceived ideas of authority and shows the intricate ways women can make their way through the power networks in the Islamic world. It is a qualitative analysis based on archive research and study of Tuzuk-e-Jahangiri to examine how Nur Jahan contributed in Mughal culture. Furthermore, it engages with secondary sources, including modern historiographical interpretations and gender studies, to analyze her political strategies and patronage of arts and culture. The research provides an opportunity for a broader perspective on debates about gender, governance, and cultural production in Islamic and South Asian history, which reconsiders the most traditional ideas of leadership and female empowerment in pre-modern empires.*

**Key words:** Nur Jahan, Mughal Empire, silent sovereignty, political influence, cultural patronage.

### Introduction

Nur Jahan, one of the most famous and influential leaders in Indian history, was born during the Mughal Empire that is the main theme of this subject. The distinguished, venerable, multi-functional supreme authorities in the history of India's Mughal Empire made it renowned. Among them, Nur Jahan, stands out not only due to her exceptional beauty and intelligence but also because of her distinct influence in political governance and cultural patronage. While women of there age were restricted by their communities, Nur Jahan emerged as very formidable leader, skillfully exercising her power from behind the veil. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine her role in fostering a cultural renaissance, especially her astute and skillful maneuvers within the court politics.

Nur Jahan (1577–1645) stands out one of the most remarkable figures in the Mughal history, which illustrates the main feature of the paradox of power and limitation. As the chief consort of Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–1627), she enjoyed a level of power in the court that had never been seen before, even though she was never officially granted the title of a sovereign. Her influence was not merely theoretical, but it was also that she in fact, issued imperial decrees, minted coins featuring her name on them, and it was she who played a lot of roles in the court politics. Regardless of the fact that she was a woman in a male-dominated society, she did manage to go beyond traditional limits and became a symbol of quiet power which was unusual and enabled her to effectively govern without officially taking the throne. (Findly 1993)

She was not just only a political figure but also influenced the cultural realm, where she played an influential role in shaping Mughal art. The way Nur Jahan engaged with architecture, textiles, and gardens demonstrates both the Mughal and Persianate culture, which is quite impressive. Nur Jahan's political wisdom was interwind with her cultural and especially artistic contributions which gave a lot of impact to the Mughal era. She basically helped to promote

architecture, poetry, and textile arts, which, in their turn, would become the unique feature of the Mughal aesthetic. It was her patronage that secured Nur Jahan's place in the Mughal history and also enhanced the Mughal artistic tradition. She was the crucial figure in the creation and promotion of the projects in the field of architecture, poetry, and textile arts that leaving a lasting impression on Mughal aesthetics. None of these architectural and artistic endeavors were merely decorative, but also demonstrate her power and authority within the empire. The works of art and architecture were not simply beautiful, but were also used as means of power, strengthening her rule within the empire and then thus she was able to create a legacy that outlived her political downfall. (Schimmel 2004)

This article aims to reevaluate Nur Jahan in the broader Mughal historical narrative by quietly exercising power and sponsoring cultural institutions. during her reign, she managed to blend gender differences power and compassion proving that authority may exist in an atypical way. By analyzing the primary sources and contemporary historiography, this investigation aspires to confer a discerning comprehension of the fact Nur Jahan's impact had stretched well beyond the confines of the harem, thus, she had become the pivotal figure in shaping the political and cultural tend.

### **Research Methodology**

This study utilizes a qualitative historical method of research to examine Nur Jahan's political role and her cultural contributions in the Mughal Empire. It comprises both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include original Mughal records such as Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri (Memoirs of Jahangir) that contain direct accounts of her part in court politics. The secondary documents consist of publications of the modern era that are based on the scholars who have reassessed Nur Jahan's legacy within feminist and political frameworks. Through the interdisciplinary approach, the goal of the research is to provide a subtle understanding of Nur Jahan's concealed sovereignty both in court and her contribution in the Mughal cultural renaissance.

This research methodology on the textual analysis of the historical documents, inscriptions, and architectural evidence to assess the dynamics of power between Nur Jahan and the Mughal courtiers. Additionally, cultural studies perspectives are adopted to examine her patronage of arts, textiles, and architecture, which illustrate how she gave shape to Mughal aesthetics. The research aims to present a very nuanced understanding by the association of various sources with Nur Jahan's silent sovereignty and her enduring impact on South Asian history.

### **Literature Review**

The book Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri translated by Alexander Rogers, provide significant insights into the rule of Mughal Emperor Jahangir. This book also addresses the political influence and cultural contribution of Nur Jahan. Unlike earlier Mughal empresses, Nur Jahan held substantial influence and enabling her to gives orders independently and have her name engraved on the coins, that was something not known to the woman in the empire. Jahangir was highly impressed by her intelligence and skills in administration and leadership, which he clearly demonstrates by emphasizing her pivotal involvement in matters like military campaigns, succession politics and court intrigues. Additionally, the Mughal aesthetic was also significantly influenced by Nur Jahan's patronage of arts, architecture, and literature. She also played an essential role in the organization and communication related to architectural projects, along with promoting an elegant courtly culture. Tuzk-i-Jahangiri is an important primary source that helps to broaden debates on the female political agency in Islamic empires and presents Nur Jahan's remarkable role in Mughal history.

The comprehensive biography of Nur Jahan by Findly titled Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India highlights the story of Nur Jahan and her impact during Mughal era. A story of notable and royal woman because of her exceptional skills and leadership. Nur Jahan attained

significant power and took the control of government and due to her extraordinary skills she traded with foreign merchants, minted coins, managed court developments and finances, initiated new advancement in art and architecture. This book provides profound investigation into the life and influence of Nur Jahan, one of the most dominant, powerful and culturally significant figures in the history of Mughals. This book examines her rise to power, her involvement in the Mughal court and her enduring impact on the Mughal empire. This book also analyzed the study of female leadership, authority, power and her cultural contributions especially in arts and architecture in Mughal India.

A work by Sharmita Ray titled *The Multifaceted Women of the Mughal Harem: A Historiographical Essay* analyze the versatile roles and impacts of women in the Mughal harem with remarkable emphasis on Nur Jahan. The writer describes the significant impact of Nur Jahan outside Mughal harem, emphasizing her contributions to politics, culture, and economy. The most prominent woman of the Mughal empire is Nur Jahan, the last wife of Emperor Jahangir, who wielded significant influence and power in the matters of state. It also delved into various dimensions of Nur Jahan's influence. Politically, she was deeply involved in administrative decisions, Economically, she introduced policies that improved trade and luxury goods production, thus contributing to the prosperity of empire.

Another work that is relevant to this research is *Role of Women in the Mughal Empire* written by Mohd Asim Zaidi examine the diverse roles, prominent contributions of women during Mughal era, emphasized their influence in several domain such as politics, culture, and society. He examines one of the renowned woman Nur Jahan during the Mughal era. Nur Jahan was the wife of emperor Jahangir. She was acknowledged for her intelligence, shrewdness and political abilities. In politics she played an active role as Jahangir's advisor and took important decision for the state. During the reign of Jahangir, the power and influence of Nur Jahan was so eminent that some historian argued that she has the real power behind the throne. Furthermore, also highlights her role in promoting the arts, literature, and architecture. Additionally, she was talented in poetry, calligraphy and considered as great and skill poet. She also supported the arts and commissioned many significant buildings, including her father's tomb.

Soma Mukherjee's book *Royal Mughal Ladies and Their Contributions* examine the significant influence and roles of women from ancient to medieval period and focus mainly on the royal women of the Mughal era. This book examines the lives of royal Mughal ladies that how they contributed in politics, society and culture. It presents the comprehensive biography of several royal women just like Nur Jahan, demonstrate how they were actively involved in the politics and culture. One of the most significant women during the reign of Jahangir that is Nur Jahan. As a strong political leader Nur Jahan had a lot of influence on Jahangir's rule. The contribution of Nur Jahan not only in the field of politics but also in the art. Nur Jahan was the woman with diverse interest and huge talent. She was also interested in poetry and in Persian language composed many of her verses. Her verses show a reflection of deep love, sadness and Sufi sentiments. Under the patronage of Nur Jahan, many writers, scholars and poets were appeared in the court if Mughal. It highlights the contribution of Nur Jahan in the art and architecture that is highly remarkable during the reign of emperor Jahangir. Although she is the most versatile of all the Mughal women.

Another work that is relevant to this research is done by Zahied Rehman Ganie under the title, *Contribution of Royal Mughal ladies in the field of art and architecture from 1526-1707 A.D:* A brief survey, examines the role of royal Mughal ladies and their contribution especially in the field of art and architecture in the medieval India. It highlights how Nur Jahan contributed a lot to the field of art and architecture. How she designed, organized and contributed in the construction of three significant tombs which including her father, her husband and her own

tomb. Furthermore, she also interested in the development of painting, textiles, and garden design.

cultural contribution of Nur Jahan an article by, Subia Hashmat examine the contribution, influence and significant impact of Nur Jahan. As the wife of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, Nur Jahan made a substantial contribution to the advancement of architecture and art. It highlights the contribution of Nur Jahan left a long-lasting impact in the history. It describes Nur Jahan also interested in poetry and also in collecting books so she had her own private library. The contribution of Nur Jahan in the field of literature and many other fields that is remarkable, so the most significant and impressive royal woman of the Mughal dynasty. She also took interest in the constructions of many buildings including serais, gardens and tombs. Hence Nur Jahan was multifaceted woman that had extensive contribution to art and architecture.

Another view is reflected by Catherine B. Asher's in her book, *Architecture of Mughal India*. It describes the contribution of Nur Jahan in the realm of art and architecture during Jahangir reign. It emphasizes the influence of Nur Jahan in Mughal architecture, illustrating her role as an idealistic and patron of monumental projects. It describes the most remarkable contribution of Nur Jahan and how the constructions of buildings, serais, gardens and tombs under the supervision of Nur Jahan. Some of the architectural projects of Nur Jahan that is still preserved but some have disappeared. It also describes the impact of Nur Jahan on culture. She invented a rose perfume, fabricated clothing styles, generated new carpet design and also interested in writing poetry. It examines how the ideas and creativity of Nur Jahan helped to define the architectural splendor of her time.

### **Discussion**

Women in India played a vital role in the country's political, social and economic growth and development. During the medieval era, women made notable contributions to their masculine counterpart. The medieval civilization got to see the change in the concept of women in Indian society. In Mughals, both men and women made remarkable contribution. They were significant builders, artists, musicians, designers, painters, and patrons. The Mughal dynasty saw amazing achievements from the end of emperors, princes, and princesses. One of the most eminent and remarkable women under the Mughal rule of Jahangir was the empress Nur Jahan, who was seen as the true power and authority behind the Mughal throne. (Shiji 2022)

### **Mughal Empress Nur Jahan**

Nur Jahan also known as Nur Jahan was daughter of Mirza Ghiyas Baig born in 1577 A.D. near Qandahar. In 1594 firstly Nur Jahan, when she was seventeen years old married Ali Quli, also known as Sher Afghan. After the death of Ali Quli, later on Mehr-un-Nisa got married to Emperor Jahangir in 1611. Afterward Jahangir declared his power to her empress and devoted her with the title of Nur Mahal (light of the Palace) and then Nur Jahan (light of the World) due to the light of Jahangir's eyes. Her addition in the harem invigorated the Mughal court. Gradually she extended her influence everywhere. (Zia 2012)

Nur Jahan, the Mughal empress, took the active role of governance, diplomacy, and military service drawing attention to her remarkable political acumen. Besides politics, the empress Nur Jahan made cultural contributions that significantly changed Mughal architecture, poetry, and fashion. As an excellent poet and arts patron, she also impacted that aesthetics of the Mughal court by building several grand architectural projects with their production and the textiles and jewelry designs she was promoting and that Mughal elegance was given birth. Her part in the artistic patronage and her capability of managing the patriarchal society were both responsible for making her an historical figure that distinguishes her from the others, and in addition, she was challenging the narratives about women's agency in the early modern Islamic world. (Zoya 2016)



### **The power behind the throne: the silent sovereignty of Nur Jahan in Mughal court**

The rise to power of Nur Jahan within the Mughal court marked a significant deviation from the traditional role of imperial consorts

#### **From Mehr-un-Nisa to Nur Jahan: the rise of Mughal Empress**

Mehr-un-Nisa was married to Jahangir in the year 1611. After marrying Jahangir gave Mehr-un-Nisa the title of f Nur Mahal ('Light of the Palace') and later Nur Jahan ('Light of the World'). In addition, Jahangir granted her royal rights to take care of the state, which consequently benefited not only herself but also her relatives. Nur Jahan exerts her influence over Jahangir as he constantly struggled with alcohol and opium addiction. Her rise in political influence transformed into the control over Mughal Empire that was the golden age of India. (Bharti 2018)

Soon after the influence of Nur Jahan over Jahangir, she also started to exercise influence over the entire Mughal empire. Nur Jahan entered the Mughal harem not as a queen but as a companion to the women at court. Through her charm, strategic acumen and diplomatic skills she swiftly drew the attention of Emperor Jahangir, rising in power and prominence to become his final wife and the most prominent woman in his harem during his reign. Mehr-un-Nisa was a widow when she married Jahangir and then assumed the title of Nur Jahan, with her rise to power remaining uncontested from that moment forward. (Sharmita 2022)

The rise of Empress Nur Jahan can be divided into two distinct phases, each varying differently in duration: the first phase which spans from 1611-1622 when Nur Jahan influenced over emperor Jahangir and her status were elevated Padshah begum that symbolized her political authority and she also exerted control over governance and court rulings. She also had significantly influenced over the state affairs due to her family's court position, especially her father Itimad-ud-Daula's ascendancy to a high rank. However, the second phase which spans from 1622-1627 when she faced political challenges, internal and later ultimate decline in power. (Parsad 1930)

#### **Political Authority, Administration, Governance and Influence on Court Policies**

##### **Administrative Authority and Issuance of Farmans**

Nur Jahan held a significant role in the Mughal administration and later on her function extended far beyond the limits of Badshah's women as she exercised a direct control over administration. Regarding the nation's army, its foreign affairs, or even its internal arrangements, Nur Jahan was in the center of it all. Additionally, she was among the very few Mughal empresses whose name was recorded as being involved in the issues of imperial edicts, a power which normally was not bestowed upon anyone of her rank. Furthermore, she took part in the issuing of the coins in which her name was inscribed, which was a strong mark of her political authority. She also authorized all orders (farmans) and appointments that were issued in the name of the king, ensuring that her own name, "Nur Jahan, the Queen Begam," was also attached to the imperial signature. She managed all promotions and demotions that originated from the royal administration. (Findly 1993)

##### **Influence on Court Policies**

Nur Jahan was not just the royal advisor but played a significant political role. She was the part of powerful group Junta which consisted of Nur Jahan, her brother Asaf Khan, her father Itmad-ud-Daula (the prime minister), and Prince Khurram (the son of Jahangir). (Rashid 2024). She put her family members in key spots on purpose. Her father became chief minister, and her brother got involved in military matters. This smart and clever strategy enabled her to strengthen her influence at various tiers of government. (Richards 1993)

##### **Influence of Nur Jahan on trade policies and management of trade**

Nur Jahan played an essential role in managing the economy of empire, particularly in trade and textiles. She assisted in regulating the silk trade and encouraged the superior textile

production. Her policies also increased trade with foreign entities such as Portuguese and the British East India Company. This had a significantly impact on the empire's economic stability reflecting her strong dedication and deep commitment to a successful economy. (Finkbeiner 2021)

### **Involvement in Military Affairs**

Nur Jahan was an influential, intelligent capable and skilled female leader who made significant contribution in politics, Mughal administration, and military tactics. She was the first female Mughal empress to actively participate in the military matters. Alongside Jahangir she engaged in military campaigns, helped plan strategies, and even commanded troops in battles. Her role and involvement in fighting the Rajput and Deccan armies helped to maintain the stability of empire during wars and conflicts. (Anand 1992)

### **Challenges and Decline**

In spite of her influence, Nur Jahan faced resistance from Mahabat khan and prince Shah Jahan because her did not like her control and rule. After the death of Jahangir in 1627, she was pulled away from political matters, while Shah Jahan making sure that she had no exert any further influence in court affairs. No doubt she was powerful figure who wish to wield power but she lived actually peaceful, quite and retired life in Lahore, where she passed her final years in devotion to charity and architectural patronage. Despite her being ousted from power, her legacy endured through the buildings she built and the political tactics she had practiced during her reign. (Anand 1992)

### **Cultural Renaissance Under Nur Jahan**

#### **Patronage of Art and Architecture**

In Mughal architecture, Nur Jahan introduced a significant transformation. She was a co-sovereign and she directed the commissioning, designing, and building of numerous monuments that blended Persian and Indian styles. Her architectural works reflected her personal artistic taste and served as demonstration of her power and culture manifestation. Nur Jahan's architectural legacy is the one achievement of her art that is most lasting because the designs of the buildings and monuments she created and the style of architecture patronized by her have become the standard. These projects included the tomb of her father, the Itimad-Ud-Daula, in Agra as well as the Nur Mahal Sarai near Jalandhar, the Pathar Masjid in Srinagar, the Tomb of Jahangir in Shahdara, Lahore, and her own tomb in Lahore. (Mukherjee 2001)

Beyond impressive monumental architectural works, Nur Jahan contributed significantly design the gardens. The Mughal had a deep fondness of gardens, and Nur Jahan was not an exception. She also constructed a garden, Shah Dara, near Lahore. Nur Jahan designed numerous notable and remarkable gardens such as the Shalimar Bagh in Srinagar, Kashmir, considered an epitome of the Persian charbagh, four-part, garden style. (Subia 2021)

#### **Influence of Nur Jahan on Mughal textile and Mughal fashion**

Nur Jahan was just a fascinating political leader but also a great and magnificent patron of different arts and notably crafts and textiles. She played a key role in introducing the trendy style of 'white on white' embroidery which is popularly reffered as chikankari to the Mughal court. This craft came to symbolize the brilliance of the Mughal Empire. ( Bakhtawar and umer 2022)

Nur Jahan inspired several new designs and stitching technique. She introduced a very light outfit which weighed only two dams, called the dudami, instead of the peshwaz which was a full-dress gown. Her panchotoliya which weighed a mere five tolas, also replaced the head cover or orhani and was a simpler scarf. Her fashion innovation demonstrated her power not only in political sphere but also in the cultural sphere. (Subia 2021)

### **Jewelry design and Perfume**

Mughal glamour and elegance was further elevated by Nur Jahan due to her inclination towards luxurious jewellery and delicate perfumes. She emerged as a trendsetter for intricate designs adorned with diamonds and pearling, which became the signature trademark of Mughals. Asmat Begum, mother of Nur Jahan, was also active in courtesan life, as she created perfumes. The Mughals charished their pommade and other perfumes because of the excessive heat in Agra and Delhi regions which made them sweat profusely. (Mukhoty 2018)

### **Nur Jahan's Literary Influence in Mughal India**

At the Mughal court, Nur Jahan played an active role in the development of literary and poetic arts. Nur Jahan was educated as most other Mughal women during Jahangir's reign. She was a versatile writer. She had truly a poetic spirit and composed many verses spontaneously. She was a really intellectual woman who had exceptional talents and capacity. She was a highly well-educated lady with an exceptionally brilliant and capable mind. She was versatile, skilled in political matters and talented in literature as well. She was proficient in the literatures and languages of Persian and Arabic. Nur Jahan Begum engaged in creating delicate, profound, and touching verses. Nur Jahan wrote poetry in Persian, a distinct language, which reflected her innermost feelings, submissiveness, humility, pain as well as Sufi sentiments. (Subia 2021)

### **Conclusion**

Nur Jahan was not only a queen of Mughal empire but also a significant female leader who made a substantial impact on politics, art and culture. She was the one who ruled from behind the veil, making crucial decisions, issuing royal commandment, and shaping the administration of the empire. At the same time, she also played a significant role in the Mughal cultural renaissance by promoting architecture, poetry, textiles, and fashion. Even after her political demise, her legacy continued in the artistic and cultural realms she cultivated. Nur Jahan's story proves that true power does not always require a throne, it can quietly flourish, leaving a meaningful and enduring impact on history.

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