
The Aura and Enigma of Nur Jahan

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The present paper attempts to study the representation of the life of enigmatic Nur Jahan, the great Mughal empress, who dared to question the limits and borders on women in the 17th century when Indian women were banished from public and political activities. When woman are portrayed from the societal norms which are defined by the patriarchy the representation becomes imperfect. Women's' achievements in history has often been silenced by patriarchal hegemony or erased. Nur Jahan defied the norms when she refused to be satiated only by leading the life of an empress in luxuries and in interior works, rather redefined her role in administrative affairs. Eraly wrote "But there was one fatal flow in her. She was a woman... And in the prejudice of the age women had no public role, and ambition was the prerogative of men".

Nur Jahan has always been represented as crafty and her involvement in administrative affairs as manipulative. She formed a 'junta' or a clique with people she relied and played a significant or dominant role along with Jahangir in the administration. Her influence has always been represented in a pessimistic way. She ruled the empire in the name of the king but was not given an adequate and revered position. Nowhere has she found a place of dignity along the Mughal rulers when it was actually she who regulated the Mughal court. Her political significance has been trivialized only because she was a woman.

Nur Jahan's influence in Jahangir's life is portrayed in the writings of many Europeans who often came as ambassadors or travelers. Men like William Hawkins, an early English trader at Mughal court found Nur Jahan as the central figure to be appeased in order to win favour with the emperor. Dutch traders like Francisco Pelsaert, Pieter van

den Broecke opined that subdued by drinks Jahangir became malleable in the power of his wife and her associates. However Manucci, a traveler from Venice had noted that Nur Jahan was successful in getting Jahangir to agree to drink less. Even in his memoirs *Tuzuk* –i- Jahangiri he had discussed the habitual care Nur Jahan gave and endeavoured to reduce his cups of wine, persuading him to accept the advice and medication of the court physicians and even made medical decisions on her own based on his responses. It does show that Nur Jahan was never short of her obligations as a caring wife. The *Iqbalnama* passage bears a statement by Jahangir that he “bestowed the sovereignty on Nur Jahan Begam”. Thus it is conspicuous that the strength of Nur Jahan’s character permitted to earn the trust and conviction of Jahangir who entrusted upon her the charge of administration. She was primarily responsible for the proliferation of buildings, gardens, paintings, construction and arte that graced Mughal life with new standards of elegance. She constructed rest houses for travelers, palaces, gardens and tombs. In reality these gave her an opportunity to participate in the political process for building activity was deeply political act. She also ruled the vast *zenana* or harem. In the realm of arts she expanded the thematic repertoire of miniature painting and turned the attention of the painters toward women as sensual subjects. She redirected the use of surface ornament in architecture from the elements of Islam and turned toward the representational figures of her Persian past and Hindu present. She had introduced white marble for certain commemorative structures, a feature that later her step son Shah Jahan imitated when he erected Taj Mahal. She was even adept in shooting rifles and had killed tigers which Jahangir had confessed in *Tuzuk*. Her courage in battle was unique which was witnessed when she got physically involved in countering the rebellion of Mahabat Khan, even Dutch trader Van der Broecke says that “she wanted to show her woman’s courage” to Mahabat Khan. He basically highlighted the ways which she wished to expand the repertoire of activities available to women.

While the chronicles and the contemporary traveler's account portray a picture of an important ruler in the complete grip of his spouse, the *tazkiras* as he delegated political and administrative responsibilities in Nur Jahan's favour. *Tazkira* is a biographical anthology or almost poem. Bhakkari in his *tazkira Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin* informs that even after Nur Jahan's bitter encounter with Mahabat Khan Jahangir had been very polite to him. This is the depiction of Jahangir having his own mind though he delegated the administrative duties to Nur Jahan. Nevertheless, Nur Jahan even tackled Shah Jahan's revolt against her father at Balochpura to which Bhakkari applauds her by the statement – "The Begum made name in statesmanship and all manliness".

Bhakkari's *tazkira* written in the 17th century recognizes Nur Jahan as an independent lady who despite her gender was not dependent on her father and spouse. He eulogizes her by using the terms like 'queen of the world' and 'lady of the time'. He credits her for donating huge sums of money as charity to help the paupers and especially the women. She collected duties on goods from merchants, traded with Europeans bringing luxury items and even controlled promotions and demotions issued from the royal government. The coins, *farmans* or imperial orders were associated with Nur Jahan portrays that the power she wielded in Mughal court politics. Tirmizi says that Nur Jahan's orders were wide ranging and bear resemblance to *farmans* of the emperor. Jahangir had delegated many of his powers to Nur Jahan mainly after the death of her father Itmad-ud-Daulah in 1622.

Nur Jahan being guided by *junta* or a clique is something that few historians represent her. It is undeniable that her family had immense influence. The author of the *tazkira* Ma'asir ul Umara Shah Nawaz says that on account of the marriage between Nur Jahan and Jahangir, her family members were assigned with high ranks. Whereas Bhakkari's work gives the fact that the elevation of Nur Jahan's family was only because of their loyal and dedicated service to the Mughal court. Nur Jahan's family gained power and position only

post marriage with Jahangir. Irfan Habib believes that Nur Jahan's family formed the Persian nobility. Habib says that the nobility was divided into 2 factions – the Khurasanis or Persians and the Rajputs and the Chaghtais. Thus Sanjay Subhramanyam says that the Iranian elites were valued for their 'administrative cum commercial savoir faire'. Moreover Khurram (later Shah Jahan) was recognized as heir apparent of Jahangir. Arjumand Banu Begum or Mumtaz Mahal who was Nur Jahan's niece was given in marriage to Khurram in 1612 which according to Beni Prasad was a political one. This symbolized the alliance of Nur Jahan with the heir apparent Prince Khurram and they formed a 'family clique' or *junta* that rallied around Nur Jahan.

Several Mughal historians doubt the existence of the *junta* and view it as a later day construct to tarnish Nur Jahan's image. Nurul Hasan points out that theory of *junta* is based on European sources, i.e. the works of travelers like Thomas Roe, Peter Mundy and Bernier. Nurul Hasan holds the opinion that Nur Jahan's family members had attained exalted administrative posts due to their loyalty and dedication to service at Mughal court much before Nur Jahan's marriage to Jahangir.

Nur Jahan was certainly ambitious. She had even approached Khusrau, an able successor of Jahangir who had also been very popular among the subjects and even endeavoured by his grandfather Akbar, for the hand of her daughter Ladli from her previous marriage to Ali Quli Beg Sher Afghan. Khusrau had rejected Nur Jahan's overtures which may have made her a pivotal engineer in the oppressive court machinations against him in the latter part of his life as revenge or to clear the path of her future son –in-law to ensure the presence of her family at the centre of power. Later she had given the matrimony of her daughter to Shahryar, a weak successor of Jahangir. Nur Jahan was determined to break the power and prestige of Mahabat Khan as she became insecure that he might throttle her dream of putting Shahryar on throne by supporting the kingship claims of Prince Parvez, the eldest son of Jahangir. Findly says that to support Shahryar's claims to the Mughal throne Nur Jahan deprived

Shah Jahan of his fiefs in Hindusthan, alienated from his supporters and made use of various tactics to push him to the path of rebellion. Thus the rebellion saw murder, destruction and devastation. Subsequently Shah Jahan emerged as the winner.

The conspiracy theory or the love affair between Nur Jahan and Jahangir before her matrimony and Jahangir devising a plan to slay Sher Afghani to secure Nur Jahan appeared at a time when Shah Jahan was determined to create an ill image of Nur Jahan because of her predominance at court and Shah Jahan had set his eyes to obtain the coveted throne. Later it became an entertaining bazaar gossip, because this information was unavailable in contemporary sources. When the European travelers came mainly later during Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb's reign they came across these gossips and wrote them down in their travelogues.

Nur Jahan had left an indelible mark because of her deeds and enigmatic personality. Nevertheless she was ambitious, scheming, and had her sights on being empress of India. Unlike Jahangir's other meek and impassive wives, Nur Jahan refused to be a silent observer under her husband and rather played an active and intellectual role. She has deconstructed the stereotyped role of a queen in Mughal India. History has shown how Mughal successors have embroiled themselves in succession conflicts to acquire the coveted throne with the lust for power. If a woman like Nur Jahan endowed with strength, stamina and wisdom held high aspirations and even executed the administrative works with adroitness requires to be lauded. Her beauty, charisma and elegance only enhanced her aura. Her deft ability had truly made her a true heir to Akbar enhancing the authority, glamour and influence of the empire.

Historians mainly write focusing from the perspectives of political achievements and military exploits of the emperors. Very few women in history have been talked about such as Razia Sultan and Nur Jahan and that too in a negative sense because they pursued their ambitions and treaded that path which was deemed 'unwomanly'.

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