

Educational Portfolio of Nurjahan Begum: The prominent Mughal Princess of Imperial Mughal Harem

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Abstract: *This study explores the life and educational achievements of Nur Jahan Begam, the influential Mughal Empress during Emperor Jahangir's reign in 17th-century India. Nur Jahan, born Mehrunnissa to Persian immigrants, rose to power through her marriage to Jahangir, displaying exceptional political acumen and becoming the de facto ruler of the Mughal Empire. Foreign visitors recognized her significant impact on politics and the royal harem, as she held decision-making power and influenced coinage and official decrees. She also excelled in poetry, music, painting, and design, leaving a lasting impact on Mughal culture, education, and the arts. Nur Jahan's achievements challenged societal norms, setting a precedent for future generations of women, highlighting her skills, diplomacy, and philanthropy. This paper utilizes historical accounts, primary sources, and secondary literature to illuminate Nur Jahan Begam's remarkable contributions as an administrator, poet, patron of education and arts, and influential figure in Mughal India.*

Keywords: Nur Jahan, Education, Royal harem, Mughal era, Poetry, Literature, Jahangir.

Mirza Ghiyas Baig, also known as Itimad-ud-daulah, and Asmat Begum, the Persian immigrants, gave birth to Mehrunnissa in Kandahar. Upon the passing of her husband, Qali Khan, in 1607, she began working in the harem. In 1611, Jahangir first encountered her, and he immediately fell in love. Following her marriage to the emperor, she was given the name "Nur Mahal" or "Light of the Palace" and five years later, "Nur Jahan" (Light of the World)¹ The titles of Nur Jahan Begam are also mentioned by Bernier.²

After their marriage, she personally took care of Jahangir with love and devotion and was devoted to him. She was a brave woman who was gifted with the ability to comprehend political issues and to have a keen interest in administrative issues. She provided her spouse with wise counsel. The emperor had a lot of faith in her. Naturally, she possessed a lot of power over her husband. In addition to being skilled in a variety of activities, like as riding, shooting, and stitching, Empress Nur Jahan was also a highly educated and sophisticated woman of the era, with one of her many interests being poetry.³

Nur Jehan Begum was a woman with various skills and many interests. During her time, she actively participated in almost every field. She expanded her efforts into the political sphere as well because she was not satisfied with her contributions to the creative community alone. Despite being a very intelligent, gifted, artistic, brave, generous, and stunning woman, Nur Jahan Begum was above all things extremely political ambitious and power-crazy. The emperor willingly entrusted the arduous responsibility of governing the Empire to Nur Jehan due to her significant influence over him, effectively making her the de facto ruler of the realm.

Many foreign visitors to India during the Mughal era mention Nur Jehan's effect on the Royal harem and on political issues during Jahangir's reign.

According to Pietro Della Valle, Jahangir holds one wife or Queen in high regard, considering her above all other women. It is said that his entire Empire is currently governed based on her wise counsel and guidance.⁴

Pietro Della Valley further remarks:

.....she commands and governs at this day in the king's Harem with supreme authority; having cunningly removed out of the Harem, either by marriage or other handsome wages, all the other women who might give her any jealousy; and having also in the court made many alterations by deposing and displacing almost all the old captains and officers, and by advancing to dignities other new ones of her own creatures and particularly those of her blood and alliance.⁵

Furthermore, as stated by Dr. Pant, the period following 1611 A.D. during Jahangir's reign can be considered as the reign primarily influenced and shaped by his consort, Nur Jahan.⁶

According to Pelsaert, Jahangir's position as king became symbolic, while Nur Jahan and her brother Asaf Khan firmly held control over the kingdom.⁷

Nur Jahan's significant role in the court was acknowledged by Roe, who emphasized the influential role she play in courts, noting her intelligence and cunning nature.⁸

Dow also recognized Nur Jahan's exceptional abilities, stating that she attained absolute power in a government where women were typically considered incapable. She defied societal norms and exerted her influence openly, surpassing Jahangir's authority through her own skill and cunning. Nur Jahan's power was extensive, as Jahangir trusted her judgment completely, and no decision was made in the Empire without her approval.⁹

Prior to Nur Jahan's approval, the emperor's orders, granting of positions, and removals were worthless. Because of Nur Jahan's widespread influence, coins bearing her name have been produced. This was a new discovery in the history of the Muslims. These coins were made of gold and featured one of each of the twelve zodiac signs.¹⁰ There are varying views on whether or not these coins were used in daily commerce. Although Pelsaert claims they weren't.¹¹ Manucci believed they were actual money.¹² According to Dr Pant, "the other prerogative of having prayers read in her name was denied to her on the ground of her sex....."¹³

A high window in the palace is where Nur Jahan is supposed to have sat for the "jharokha Darshan"¹⁴, where he conducted administrative business with the common people while also listening to their cries. Even in the practise of "jharokha Darshan," which was the sole responsibility of the emperor, Nur Jahan equaled Jahangir. Sometimes she issued 'Farmans' on her own initiative and under her name. The fact that so many of these Farmans deal with gifts of land and other things that Begum Nur Jahna made to different persons shows how important a role she played in Jahangir's administration.¹⁵ These Farmans have dates ranging from 1027 A.H. (1617 A.D.) to 1028 A.H. (1618 A.D.), 1028 A.H. (1618 A.D.), etc.¹⁶ Nur Jahan Begam's name is typically referred to in these Farmans as "Nawab Mohd Uliya" or "Mohd Uliya."¹⁷

Power-crazed though she was, Nur Jahan Begam was also a capable administrator. She was a great judge of men and things, and she approached everything with pragmatism. She always went straight to the heart of a problem to determine its true nature rather than leaving it to the edges. Even her opponents acknowledged that when she touched something, it simply melted. Even in the face of severe challenges, she remained clever, diplomatic, bold, and unafraid. She could not remain hidden under the veils despite the tight purdah regulations. She possessed outstanding heart traits in addition to her mental and mental faculties. She donated a large portion of her personal money to charities that assisted widows, orphans, and underprivileged girls in finding husbands. Any person in need who sought out her assistance and generosity was almost never unhappy with the results. She was also a lady of taste, elegance, and education. All of these factors combined to create Nur Jahan Begam a deserving and competent administrator and ruler.

Her bravery, wit, cleverness intelligence, and mental stability in the face of danger and difficulty are unquestionably commendable. Future generations of women might take a lot from the admirable traits displayed by this stunning Persian woman and Mughal Empress in War and Peace. Jahangir's famous wife, Nur-Jahan, had a special talent and endowment. She was well-versed in Arabic and Persian literature. She also wrote poetry. Her own poetry is displayed on her tomb in Lahore. She shown a keen interest in literature and culture. She was able to properly manage the administration because of her extensive education. She was truly brilliant in the spheres of politics, administration, and culture.

Nurjahan Begam had a solid education starting in her early years. Her father paid qualified tutors to instruct her in a variety of disciplines, while Maulvis taught her religion. She had mastered Persian and historical texts by the age of fifteen.¹⁸ She knew Arabic and spoke it, too.¹⁹ Being well educated and literarily oriented since a young age for Nur Jahan Begam is not a strange characteristic. Her ancestors had a long history of academic and literary success, and many of her relatives had taken up poetry. Her father, her great-uncle Khwajagi Razi, her grandfather Muhammad Sharif "Hijiri," her father's brother Muhammad Tahir "Wasli," and her great-uncle's son Mirza Ahmed "Shapur," were all poets, and many of their works have survived.²⁰

Nur Jahan had a passion for poetry, and she wrote Persian lines that were an unrestrained expression of her feelings. Her words reverberate with a sense of deep love, sadness, anguish, and Sufi sentiments. This is attested to by the fact that Khafi Khan cited a few of her verses in his writing. Humour and wit are particularly apparent in Nur Jahan's extempore verses, the majority of which were written as answers to Jehangir's questions and the exchange verses between them. Here are a few instances-(Tr)

Jahangir expressed,

"I do not possess the voice of a Nightingale to fill the air with sorrowful cries. Rather, I am akin to a moth that perishes in silence, without uttering a single sound."

In response, Nur Jahan conveyed, "I am not comparable to the moth that meets instant demise. Instead, I endure a prolonged death, much like a candle that burns throughout the night without expressing any lamentation."²¹

When Jahangir inquired,

"Why do elderly men walk with their backs bent?"

Nur Jahan responded, saying,

"They are seeking in the dust for the days of their youth."²²

During an incident when Emperor Jahangir was adorned in a Qaba embellished with ruby buttons, he remarked,

"Beloved, your collar has not been dyed with saffron, but rather reflects the pallor of my own complexion."

In response, Nur Jahan commented,

"Indeed, it is the crimson essence of my heart that has bestowed its hue upon those ruby buttons adorning your silk coat."²³

Nur Jahan was a talented musician and even wrote music for songs.²⁴

Beni Prasad claimed that Nur Jahan was a skilled painter.²⁵ A copy of Hafiz's diwan, which Khwaja Abdus Samad Shirinqalam wrote during Akbar's reign and illustrated with miniatures during Jahangir, carries Nur Jahan's seal, indicating that Jahangir may have given it to her at some point.²⁶ This demonstrates her keen interest, comprehension, and level of education in the field of painting. According to legend, she had a significant impact on the rising popularity of women as painting subjects throughout Jahangir's reign.²⁷

Textile, clothing, and jewellery design all advanced greatly under the skillful direction of Nur Jahan Begam. Nur Jahan introduced some novel textiles like the panchtoliya, the kinari,²⁸ and the Nur Mahal.²⁹ She introduced fresh patterns and sophisticated designs for gold jewellery.³⁰

Several speciality dishes that Nur Jahan Begam introduced into Mughlai cuisine can still be found in standard cookbooks and the best restaurants today.³¹ According to historians, Nur Jahan Begam owned a beautifully carved fruit knife with gem accents that is currently on display at the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad.³²

The art of decorating reached its pinnacle under Nur Jahan, whose ingenuity knew no limitations. She had a fantastic eye for colour harmony and design symmetry. The Musamman Burj at the Agra Fort, where Shahjahan spent his incarceration days and which served as Nur Jahan's residence during her lifetime, was furnished according to her own specifications.³³ She also created the exquisite "pietra dura" inlay work on Etimad-ud-Daula's tomb in Agra. The Emperor's Court was attractively redecorated.³⁴ Her excellent household management skills significantly reduced spending. The royal chambers now got high-quality, contemporary furnishings as well as other decorative items.³⁵

When Babar first designed Ram Bagh, it was known as the Gul-Afshan (flower scattering) Garden. It is located on the Jamuna River's left bank. This garden belonged to Jahangir's queen Nur Jahan during his reign.³⁶ Now referred to as the Nur Afshan (Light Scattering) garden. Babar's design is claimed to have undergone minor modification by Nur Jahan.³⁷ Here, Nur Jahan had additional structures built.³⁸

Achabal was a lovely area with springs, flowers, and plants and it was transformed into a beautiful garden by Nur about 8 km south of Srinagar, adjacent to the old direct road from Jammu to Srinagar, when the valley of Kashmir abruptly stops and the vast hills begin to drop. Achabal was originally known as Begamabad because Nur Jahan gave it that name.³⁹

The Shalamar Bagh is one of Kashmir's most impressive and well-known gardens, built by Jahangir and Nur Jahan.⁴⁰ Jahangir's planning of the Shalamar Bagh was undoubtedly greatly influenced by Nur Jahan, and Nur Jahan's sense of style and inventiveness can be seen throughout the entire structure. The Shalamar Bagh, which Bernier describes as the most admirable of the King's Gardens, is described in great detail.⁴¹

Ellison Banks Findly is of the opinion that Nur Jahan's contribution to Shalamar's design is more clearly visible in the functional segmentation of the individual terraces, which transformed it into a location not only for personal enjoyment but also for the performance of imperial tasks.⁴² In the Zenana garden, where "women were no longer veiled bearers of morality by visible paradigms of the affirmation of the body and its sensual attributes,"⁴³ women had undergone the biggest transformation.

Emperor Jahangir's wife Nur Jahan Begam frequently accompanied him on hunting trips. She had good shooting skills. She once killed a bird called a qarisha that weighed 19 tolas and 5 mashas.⁴⁴ Another time, she used six rounds to kill four tigers.

About this Jehangir writes:

Until now such shooting was never seen, that from the top of an elephant and inside of a howdah (amari) six shots should be made and not one miss, so that the four beasts found no opportunity to spring or move. As a reward for this good shooting I gave her a pair of bracelets (pahunchi) of diamonds worth 100,000 rupees and scattered 1,000 ashrafis (over her).⁴⁵ Nur Jahan Begam also successfully shot and killed a tiger in this instance despite the odds.⁴⁶

In the trade and business of her era, Nur Jahan Begam was quite active. Nur Jahan's involvement in the economic field was also highly significant, just as it was in other fields like the arts, architecture, education, literature, and even politics.

Nur Jahan Begam engaged in more than only marine trading for his business. She is renowned for having constructed marketplaces and sarais and owned ships that engaged in brisk sea trade.⁴⁷

She used a significant portion of her personal funds to execute a successful trade. And without sufficient training in trade and commerce, this is impossible. She must therefore have acquired some kind of trade education.

Nur Jahan Begam engaged in marine trade with other countries with great zeal. She was the owner of many ships. Her brother Asaf Khan served as her principal agent in all of her foreign trade-related endeavours.⁴⁸ Her ships also ran between Surat and the shores of Arabia. A extremely intelligent woman, Nur Jahan. She understood that her ships wouldn't be able to transport her goods to other countries because of the competition and hostilities between the Mughals and the Portuguese. She therefore made an effort to gain the favour of the English in order to put her cargo on English ships.⁴⁹

John Fryer and Sir Thomas Roe claim:

"... The one and twentieth at this instant, came unto me from Asaph Chan, a servant, in the name of Normahal, that she had moved the Prince for another firman, and that shee had obtained it, and was readie to send down her servant with that, to see and take order for our good establishment, that shee would see that wee should not be wronged.⁵⁰ Indigo and embroidered cloth were the main articles of foreign trade undertaken by Nur Jahan."⁵¹

Additionally, Nur Jahan Begam showed a keen interest in domestic trade. Many goods produced in Agra were shipped to other areas of the nation via the river Jamuna, and many goods for trade and commerce also entered Agra via this channel. Pelsaert stated in his accounts of the city of Agra that Nur Jahan Begam had offices there that "collect duties on all these goods before they can be shipped across the river: and also on innumerable kinds of grain, butter, and other provisions, which are produced in the Eastern provinces, and imported thence."⁵²

De Laet too in his description of Sikandra mentioned,

"Hither are brought all kinds of merchandise from Purob, Bengala, Purbet and Bouten (Bhutan); these pay dues to the queen before they are taken across the river."⁵³

CONCLUSION:

The study provides a comprehensive analysis of Nur Jahan Begam, also known as Empress Nur Jahan, and her significant influence and contributions during the Mughal era, highlighting various aspects of her life, including upbringing, Education, marriage to Emperor Jahangir, and her remarkable abilities as an administrator, politician, poet, artist, and entrepreneur.

Nur Jahan Begam emerged as a powerful figure in the Mughal court, surpassing societal norms and defying traditional expectations of women. Her intelligence, political ambition, and cunning nature allowed her to exert her influence over Jahangir, effectively making her the de facto ruler of the empire. Foreign visitors to India during that era acknowledged her role in the political sphere and the royal harem.

Her extensive education and cultural interests played a vital role in her ability to manage the administration effectively. Nur Jahan's talents extended to various fields, including poetry, music, painting, textile design, jewelry, and architecture. She introduced innovative textiles, jewelry designs, and dishes to Mughlai cuisine, leaving a lasting impact on these artistic and cultural aspects.

Nur Jahan's impact on the Mughal Empire extended beyond the arts and culture. She actively participated in trade and business, demonstrating her entrepreneurial skills and economic influence. Coins bearing her name were produced, marking a new development in Muslim history.

Nur Jahan Begam's life and achievements showcase her as a capable and multi-talented individual who left a significant mark on Mughal history. Her intelligence, political acumen, artistic abilities, and entrepreneurial spirit make her a deserving and competent administrator and ruler. Her legacy serves as an inspiration for future generations, especially women, in both war and peace.

There have been several pieces of evidence that demonstrate Nur Jahan's status as an educated woman. Firstly, it mentions that she received education from qualified tutors in various disciplines, indicating a deliberate effort by her

father to provide her with a solid education. This early education included instruction in Persian and historical texts, which she had already mastered by the age of fifteen. Additionally, she was well-versed in Arabic and spoke the language.

Moreover, the study explains Nur Jahan's interest in literature and culture. She had a passion for poetry and wrote her own verses, which are displayed on her tomb in Lahore. Her involvement in the exchange of extempore verses with Emperor Jahangir, showcasing her wit, humor, and poetic abilities, has also been understood. Her poetry being cited by Khafi Khan affirms her literary talent.

Nur Jahan's education extended beyond the realms of literature and poetry. Her skills in painting, music, and textile design have been found out. She was said to be a skilled painter and even wrote music for songs. Her keen interest and comprehension in the field of painting are demonstrated by her ownership of a beautifully carved fruit knife with gem accents, as well as her influence on the popularity of women as painting subjects during Jahangir's reign. Additionally, she introduced novel textiles and sophisticated designs for gold jewelry, showcasing her artistic sensibilities.

In terms of administration and governance, Nur Jahan's competence in managing the affairs of the empire have come into picture. She had a keen interest in political and administrative matters and provided wise counsel to Jahangir. The emperor trusted her judgment completely, and no decision was made in the empire without her approval. This level of trust and responsibility suggests that Nur Jahan possessed a high level of intelligence and understanding of governance.

The study highlights her mastery of multiple languages, her involvement in literature, poetry, painting, music, and textile design, as well as her competence in administration and governance. These various facets of her education and intellectual pursuits establish her as a highly educated and sophisticated woman of her time.

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