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Nur Jahan, Mughal Painting, 18th c.

Nur Jahan

A Woman's Power in a Mughal Court

Ellison Banks Findly

Many women of the Mughal era are known to history by name. Although secluded behind carved marble screens or by covered *haudas* when they went out, women of the Mughal families are available now to contemporary Indian culture as personalities of substantial education, considerable power and enduring charisma. This is due in large measure to the wealth of detail and the historical immediacy of the written sources of the period, whether they be Persian, Sanskrit, or European language. One of the women whose person has achieved some stature through this process of cultural reification is Nur Jahan, last wife of the emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), who came to the throne with their marriage in 1611 and whose virtual domination over court and imperial affairs lasted until Jahangir's death in 1627 and her own exile to Lahore.

Nur Jahan was born Mihrunnisa in the city of Kandhar as her family traveled from Tehran to Akbar's court in Agra in order to better its political and economic fortunes. Mihrunnisa was originally married to a Turkish adventurer, who had been given the

title Sher Afgan "tiger slayer" by then prince Salim and with whom she had one child, a daughter Ladli. Sher Afgan died in a political struggle in Bengal in 1607 and Mihrunnisa returned to the Mughal court with her daughter to live out four years of relative anonymity under the watchful care of one of the elder women of Akbar's harem, Ruqayya Sultan. Then, at the Nauroz bazaar of 1611, Jahangir spied the thirty-five year old widow and made immediate plans to marry her. This event took place a few months later. At that time Jahangir was increasingly under the influence of alcohol and opium, and Mihrunnisa (to be given the title Nur Mahal "light of the palace" on the occasion of her second marriage and Nur Jahan "light of the world" in 1616) quickly took control of the channels of decision and influence. The immediacy of this preeminence was recognized by William Hawkins, an early English trader at the Mughal court, who noted already in 1611 that he had "to seeke out for jewels fitting for the kings, new paramour" (*sic*) in order to win favor with the emperor.¹ Nur Jahan was soon established as the central figure of consequence in a

powerful configuration of rule, called the "faction" by the English ambassador Sir Thomas Roe, which included herself, her father Itimaduddaula, her brother Asaf Khan, and her step son Khurram (Shah Jahan). The extent of her control both through the faction and on her own has been given in a famous passage from the *Iqbalnama*: "Day by day her influence and dignity increased....No grant of lands was conferred upon any woman except under her seal....Sometimes she would sit in the balcony of her palace, while the nobles would present themselves, and listen to her dictates. Coin was struck in her name...On all *farmans* also receiving the Imperial signature, the name of 'Nur Jahan, the Queen Begam,' was jointly attached."* The uses, and perhaps abuses, of power by Nur Jahan were legendary and appeared in every arena in which she lived and worked. Using as a model increasingly far-reaching concentric circles (*mandalas* or fields of power), we will examine several examples of Nur Jahan's influence at court and in the countryside, maintaining throughout that while she used every channel

available to her through which to exert and manipulate power, she never overstepped the boundaries of propriety given to Muslim women, on the one hand, and to sovereigns over Indian life on the other.

Life with Jahangir

The *Iqbatnama* passage begun above continued with a statement by Jahangir that, as he “bestowed the sovereignty on Nur Jahan Begam,” he himself required “nothing beyond a *sir* of wine and half a *sir* of meat.”⁴ This sentiment pervaded all accounts of the private life of Jahangir and Nur Jahan in which the empress was depicted as nurse, governess, and *dominatrix terrible*. Jahangir was in part responsible for the widespread perception of her as having almost complete control over his personal life, for he routinely used his memoirs (the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*) to discuss such things as his illnesses, which he did with great intimacy, and then to declare that he told such things only to Nur Jahan “than whom I did not think anyone was fonder of me.”⁵ That Nur Jahan ordinarily acted as personal physician to her husband is confirmed in the memoirs for the year 1621 where Jahangir described the habitual care she gave in trying to reduce his cups of wine, to get him to accept the advice and medication of the court physicians, and even to make substantial medical decisions on her own based on his responses to care to date. Her “skill and experience are greater than those of the physicians.... She, by degrees, lessened my wine, and kept me from things that did not suit me, and food that disagreed with me.”⁶

Knowing that Jahangir himself made such references to her high visibility in the attentive care given his body makes it easier to accept the similar accounts of contemporary Dutch traders. Francisco Pelsaert was a senior factor for the Dutch East India Company stationed in Agra from 1620



Mughal Painting, ca. 1615, said to be of Nurjahan and Jahangir

to 1627. His normally concise narrative fairly blooms when describing the daily life of Jahangir and, turning to the moment when the emperor was to go to bed, he noted that Nur Jahan and some female slaves came to him to “undress him, chafing and fondling him as if he were a little child.” Subdued and made responsive by drink Jahangir

had become easily malleable to those around him: “...his wife, who knows so well how to manage him that she obtains whatever she asks for or desires gets always ‘yes,’ and hardly ever ‘no,’ in reply.”? Pieter van den Broecke, Pelsaert’s superior while in India and from whom he may have derived his own contemporary

account, embellished this same story and went on to suggest that Jahangir “suffered in his mind because he found himself too much in the power of his wife and her associates....She did with him as she liked, his daily reward being *pretended* love and sweet words, for which he had to pay dearly.”

The portrayal of Nur Jahan’s influence over Jahangir in his own personal habits was elaborated by the next generation of European sources. Niccolao Manucci, originally from Venice, arrived in India in 1656 at the inauguration of Aurangzeb’s rule and, from either street bazaar gossip or court whispers, devised an elaborate account of Nur Jahan’s hold over her husband. “It was enough for the queen to deny him a drink of wine to drive him to tears,” he stated, “and to dry them you had only to present him a glass well filled with liquor.” More specifically, Manucci noted that Nur Jahan succeeded in getting Jahangir to agree to drink less, down to nine cupfuls, as long as they were offered by her own hand. The report continued, however, by describing what would happen when Jahangir wanted more and Nur Jahan held the line: “When he saw that the queen would not give ear to his words, he fell into a passion, laid hold of the queen and scratched her, she doing the same on her side, grappling with the king, biting and scratching him, and no one dared to separate them.”*

That these accounts have original support from passages in the *Tuzuk* suggest that there must have been some truth to at least the general tenor of the stories. Jahangir’s own remarks were probably grounded in his pride at Nur Jahan’s skill and attentiveness; the Dutch narratives in the need to pass on all information found in the local contemporary marketplace; and Manucci’s story in a love of embellishing material, now many decades old, spun from many threads.

The Khusrau Affair

Nur Jahan was involved almost daily in the intrigue at court, whether in the established palaces at Agra and Lahore, in more temporary settings such as Mandu, or in camp while travelling. She took on cases of promotion and demotion, allocation of *jagirs*, trade decisions, and marriage negotiations, for example, with such ease that most sources of the time assumed that she was the only one really making decisions. Said Ihe *Iqbalnama*: “At last her authority reached such a pass that the King was such only in name”. While most statements about her power were like this one in that they gave only a general description but no specific case examples, the case was played out in some detail: that of the political disenfranchisement of Jahangir’s eldest son Khusrau as hinted at by Jahangir and as stated more openly by Roe.

From Jahangir’s perspective, there had been trouble with Khusrau for a long time. Late in the reign of Akbar, Salim had become impatient for the throne and, in the breach that had occurred between him and his father, the eldest son (or grandson) had become a serious contender with serious courtly backing. Although Salim eventually reconciled with Akbar and mounted the throne upon his father’s death in 1605, Khusrau continued to entertain imperial designs and in 1606 went into revolt against Jahangir. Jahangir successfully quelled the sedition, humiliating or executing all the perpetrators, and from then on kept Khusrau under what amounted to house arrest until the son’s death in 1621 in the Deccan while under the supervisory care of his brother Shah Jahan.

Jahangir’s own accounts over developments with Khusrau indicated clearly his paternal worry over “the unhappy affair of Khusrau.” They showed his “concern for the physical

well-being of his son: “I ordered him not to be kept in the fort like a prisoner, but that they should provide everything necessary for his comfort and convenience in the way of eating and clothing.” And they also showed the firmness with which Jahangir wanted filial submission: “As his appearance showed no signs of openness and happiness, and he was always mournful and dejected in mind, I accordingly ordered that he should not come to pay his respects.” Late in the imprisonment, Jahangir relented and, in the spirit of forgiveness, said: “I accordingly sent for him and bade him salute me.” Khusrau’s death, however, noted a full half year after it actually occurred, was recorded in one sentence, simply that he had died from a disease of colic pains.” No mention was made of the murderous affair that Jahangir probably suspected it really was. If we had relied only on Jahangir, nothing would be known of Nur Jahan’s involvement in the Khusrau affair. For this, we must go to the travel memoirs of Thomas Roe who was present at the court from 1616 to 1618. His account implicated Nur Jahan explicitly as the author of the “impudent bouldnes in a faction that dare attempt anything.” “Normahall attempts the king with the false tears of womans bewitching flattery” and, with the faction specifically, “resolved it was not possible for them to stand if the Prince Sultan Corsoronne liued...therefore Practised how to bring him into their Power, that poyson might end him.” (*sic*)” Nur Jahan, he argued later in 1616, was party to a plot to ally Khusrau with her brother Asaf Khan, to the ultimate detriment of the former, and in this acted with “witt and subtiltye.” (*sic*)¹³ Although the alliance was made and Khusrau’s deceptive “liberty” effected, it did no good for him in the end for these very same people and, in particular Nur Jahan, were involved in persuading

Jahangir to let Shah Jahan take Khusrau to the Deccan with him, presumably for safekeeping but (as all knew) for a quick end, far from the watchful eyes of the Mughal *darbar*.

In spite of how suspect Nur Jahan may be as the pivotal engineer in the oppressive court machinations against Khusrau in the latter part of his life, we must understand her role in the intrigues around him not necessarily as malevolent actions towards him but as actions protective of her own family's interests. Khusrau had rejected Nur Jahan's overtures for marriage to her daughter Ladli and, while part of her support of hostilities towards him may stem from motives of revenge, most reflected her attempts to clear the way for whoever her son-in-law should be, in the hopes of gaining the throne and thus ensuring the continued presence of her family at the center of power for at least one more generation. By happenstance, that son-in-law would turn out to be Shahryar, a weak off-spring of Jahangir and a concubine, who would die in the succession struggles following the death of Jahangir. Nur Jahan's efforts here, then, would be for naught.

Martial Prowess

While many Mughal women attended their ailing husbands and worked the channels of power with adroitness, Nur Jahan added to these what appears to be the unique achievements of skillful marksmanship, military strategy, and tremendous courage in battle. We focus here on two somewhat unrelated expressions of this in her life: her skill in shooting rifles, and her physical involvement in countering the rebellion of Mahabat Khan.

We first hear of Nur Jahan's facility with the rifle in a 1616 passage from the *Tuzuk* in which Jahangir noted that she had used a gun to shoot a large bird, the likes of which in size and color had not ever been seen before.¹⁴ The

next year Nur Jahan offered to kill tigers with her gun if Jahangir so ordered—which he did.

“She shot two tigers with one shot each and knocked over [i.e., killed] the two others with four shots.” The unusual aspect of this feat was not so much her accuracy, which Jahangir would in fact go on to make much of, but that Nur Jahan shot from inside a *hauda* mounted on the back of an elephant. How she managed so many good shots without causing the tigers

to spring or move was a great marvel to Jahangir.¹⁵

The final *Tuzuk* account took place in 1619. Jahangir had taken a vow of non-violence “that I would not injure any living thing with my own hand” and, when his party was faced with an approaching tiger, had to call on Nur Jahan to kill it, which she did with one shot. Jahangir remarked here again on the two unusual features of her action: that Nur Jahan's elephant was so well controlled that it did not get scared of



Courtesy: Rampur Raza Library

“Lady with a Rifle”, probably Nur Jahan, Mughal Painting, ca. 1612 -15

the tiger (“An elephant is not at ease when it smells a tiger, and is continually in movement, and to hit with a gun from a litter is a very difficult matter”), and that Nur Jahan needed only one shot when Mirza Rustam, Jahangir’s best marksman,” “has several times missed three or four shots from an elephant.”¹⁸

Nur Jahan’s skill with a gun and her courage in the face of real physical danger were exhibited in a second context, that of the river battle during the rebellion of Mahabat Khan. Mahabat Khan had been an old colleague and friend of Jahangir’s who had been involved in imperial affairs for almost all the years of the emperor’s reign. In 1626, however, a year before Jahangir died, Mahabat Khan acted on decades of repressed feelings of hostility towards the throne and took Jahangir and his party captive while encamped on the bank of the Jumna river. After long hours of feinted actions and secret negotiations, most master-minded by Nur Jahan, a river battle ensued.

At the high point of the battle, after the search for passable fords had proved hopeless, Nur Jahan plunged into the river on elephant back to join the volley of arrows as those imperial troops not yet captured tried to move up river to free Jahangir. By the account of the *Iqbalnama*, Nur Jahan fought well and most bravely, but her most famous act was to save one of her own party. “The Begam Nur Jahan had in her litter the daughter of Shahriyar [her own grand daughter], whose *anka* or nurse was the daughter of Shah Nawaz Khan. The

anka received an arrow in her arm and the Begam herself pulled it out, staining her garments with blood.” Nur Jahan’s own elephant suffered blows to the side,¹⁹ but the entire party survived and returned to the royal camp. Eventually Mahabat Khan gained control of all of the imperial retinue, but was tricked out of dominion several months later, again in almost full measure by the stratagems of Nur Jahan.²⁰

The Dutch trader van den Broecke, being present at the time, made much of the battle in his accounts, saying that Nur Jahan’s preeminence was due to “her great bitterness” on account of which “she wanted to show her woman’s courage to Mahabat Khan.” In comparison to others on her side, including her brother Asaf Khan who retreated almost immediately, Nur

Jahan “fought longer and bravely, and would have gladly rallied their retreating troops.”²¹

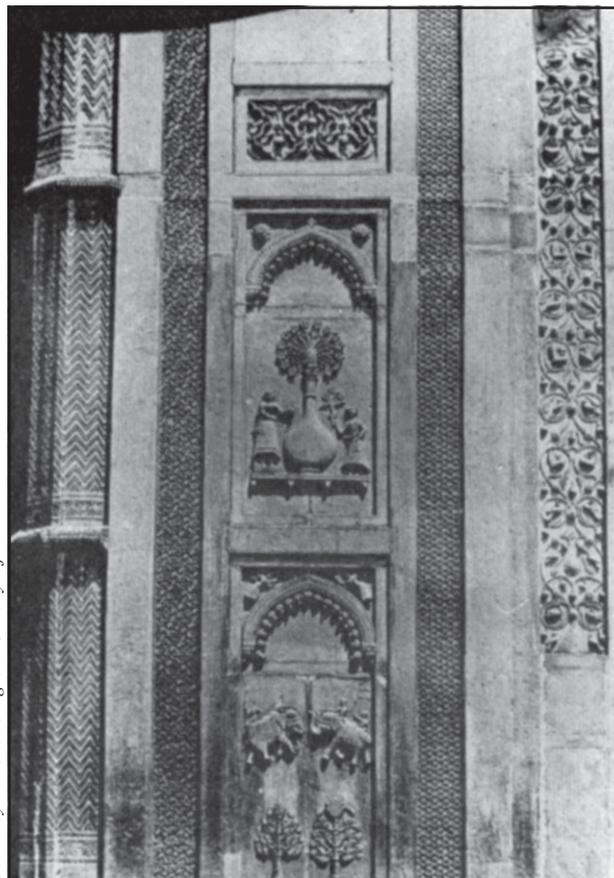
Once captured by Mahabat Khan Nur Jahan suffered tremendous indignities: “When formerly Nur Jahan Begum used to ride out, with people playing and singing before her, she was received by every one with marks of excessive honour and reverence, even like a goddess. This was forbidden by Mahabat Khan.”²²

Nur Jahan went on, however, to recover her place and, through her own devices, to regain control of the throne for Jahangir for the last year before his death.

It is noteworthy that the European rendering of Nur Jahan’s part in these military campaigns, both mental and physical, highlighted the ways in which she wanted to expand the repertoire of activities available to woman; memorable here is that throughout she showed a “woman’s courage.”

Architectural Interest

By the luck of history, Nur Jahan’s time on the throne coincided with a tremendous upswing in the Mughal arts. While it would be convenient to argue, as some have done,²³ that she was the one primarily responsible for the great profusion of buildings, gardens, paintings, and decorative arts that now began to grace Mughal life with new standards of luxury and elegance, it is safer to conclude that, although her influence was ubiquitous in the arts, documentation of that influence is in many cases hard to find. Nevertheless, if we turn to perhaps the easiest field, that of architecture, we can certify in a number of instances (here, two) the great



Ornamental Relief, Nur Mahal Sarai, Jalandhar

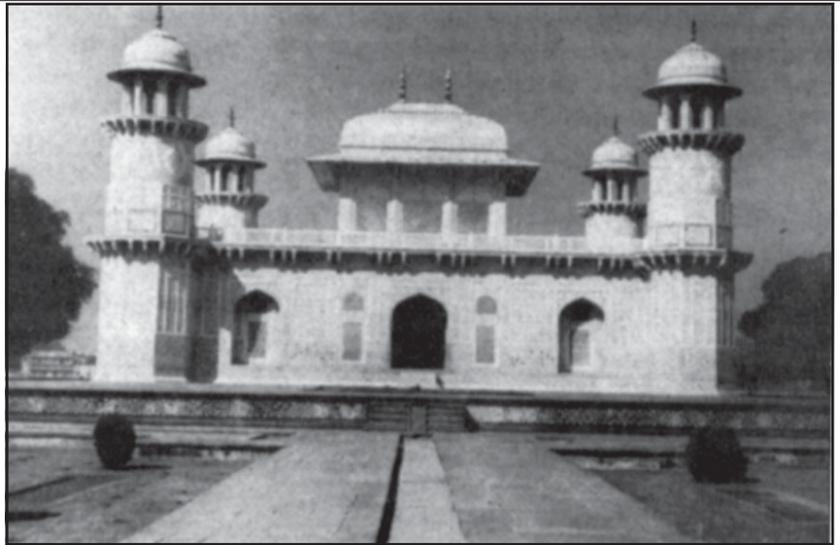
Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India

confluence of influences she brought together in her own buildings: e.g., the Nur Mahal Sarai in Jalandhar and the Itimaduddaula tomb in Agra.

In late 1620, the *vakils* of Nur Jahan completed a large rest-house for travelers (*sarai*) in Jalandhar along the route from Agra to Lahore. There is no doubt that Nur Jahan was both the chief designer and financial patron of this building, known as the Nur Mahal Sarai, for both an inscription on the building itself and a notice in the *Tuzuk* confirm it: "On the 21st of the same month I took up my quarters at Nur-saray. At this spot the Vakils of Nur Jahan Begam had built a lofty house, and made a royal garden. It was now completed."²⁴

The *sarai* was substantial, with large carved gateways, many compartments for travelers, a bathhouse, and a mosque. In terms of the contributions Nur Jahan made to Mughal architecture through it, it was also substantial. Nur Jahan combined two types of ornament in this building. On the one hand were traditional Islamic arabesques, of both the geometric and organic variety, which covered in continuous pattern whole panels of the two-dimensional surface. This ornamentation, which saw an expression of the divine in repeated abstract patterns of nature, paid homage to Nur Jahan's own Shiite theological back-ground. Interspersed between these panels, on the other hand, were some which housed representational images reflective of both her cultural origins in Persia and her new-found religious milieu of Hinduism.

The tree of life, for example, and the *guldasta* (or *purnakalasha*), pot filled with flowers, were images reminiscent of Persian iconography, while *mahout-driven* elephants, human figures, and peacocks indicated influence from the Hindu arts. In the particular panel given here, the winged



Tomb of Itimaduddaula, Agra

cherubs above the lower arch may have reflected images of angels currently coming in on European prints and drawings to the Mughal studios. Jahangir miniatures of this period, in fact, were just beginning to show such figures which were clearly patterned after European prototypes. The surface on the Nur Mahal Sarai, then, reflected a design direction in Mughal arts which synthesized the abstractions of Islamic art with the naturalism and representationalism of Hindu art. Nur Jahan, we argue, was positioned strategically at the confluence and, with self-conscious direction, facilitated the integration.

Turning now to the tomb of Itimaduddaula in Agra, we find a number of decorative conventions introduced under her aegis. Begun in 1622, this building was completed by 1628 and had as its financial and artistic patron, according to all traditions, the daughter of the man who was honored by it. With this tomb, Nur Jahan introduced not only the full scale use of marble as a building clad, but also the full scale use of a sophisticated style of stone inlay known in Persian as *parchin kari* and in Italian as *pietra dura*. In this technique, the marble

surface was incised with a design and carefully cut pieces of semi-precious stone (e.g., agate, onyx, cornelian, mother-of-pearl) were then set in place.

In addition to these innovations of technique were innovations of design as well. In the spirit of honoring the Persian origins of her father, Nur Jahan included in her representational imagery, first of all, such Safavid derived elements as the wine flask/rose water ewer, covered cups, flower-filled pots, fruit trays (with grapes and pomegranates), and cypress trees. Second, she introduced the widespread use in architectural ornament of the single flower, isolated out of the continuous background of Islamic arabesque and placed against an empty white ground. Many attribute this fascination with the single flower to the 1620 Mughal trip to Kashmir during which Jahangir, Nur Jahan, and Shah Jahan were introduced to the floral extravaganza of the springtime valley in the north. This single flower motif would become one of the most recognized motifs of Mughal art, and would be played out to beautiful extreme in the decoration of the Taj Mahal.

Third, Nur Jahan translated the domestic women's arts of carpet design

and embroidery into more permanent forms in the tomb: on the floor of the upper pavilion, around the two cenotaphs, we see floral arabesques suggestive of carpet patterns designed, say oral traditions, by Nur Jahan, and inside arches and along lower dados we find carved relief suggestive of embroidery designs created by Mughal women in their leisure. Not only was the carved relief imitative of the three-dimensional quality of embroidery, but the white-on-white effect suggested the style of *chikan kari*, embroidery said to have been brought to India by the Mughals from Persia. These examples from architectural ornament illustrate the power of Nur Jahan, in that she had available to her and made exceptional use of whatever channels of imperial expansionism she found to hand. More than this, however, they illustrate that one of the tremendous freedoms given to her was a freedom to experiment visually, to make unusual associations and conjunctions of discrete iconographical elements. With this freedom, Nur Jahan made a statement about the great value of syncretism: not only between cultural and religious traditions, but between artistic media as well.

Controlling Overseas Trade

It seems to have been quite common for noble women to engage in trade within regular commercial channels, whether they be bazaars held in various palace spaces to which tradesmen and women would come, or established market places on lands owned and operated by palace women. Pelsaert, for example, described just such a one belonging to Nur Jahan outside of Agra: "Here the officers of Nur Jahan Begam, who built their sarai there, collect duties on all these goods before they can be shipped across the river."²⁵

The Mughal period, however, saw substantial shift in the way this

commerce was carried out. As India was increasingly placed at the threshold of European mercantilism in its outreach to Africa, the Middle East, and all parts of Asia, Nur Jahan again found herself well-positioned historically: in both the timing of her reign and in the office she occupied, she was poised to take advantage of the new openness to foreign goods, in terms of controlling what came in and went out and of negotiating trading contracts to govern such commerce. While none of her trading activities were mentioned in Jahangir's memoirs, they were mentioned in some detail in the documents preserved from the first official English embassy to the Mughal court, particularly those penned by Thomas Roe.

Although Roe had arrived in India early in the fall of 1615, he did not make it to Jahangir's court until January of 1616 because of changes within his party and an extended sickness of his own. When he did arrive, he was immediately confronted with the power of the women around Jahangir: "not only did his weomen watch within" all doings at court, but they "guard him with manly weapons." To his great surprise, moreover, his official credentials could not be officially accepted until arrangements had been made "to show his [Jahangir's] queene the seale;" (*sic*) it was only when Nur Jahan approved the documents that Roe could stay at court and carry out his negotiations.

Roe never saw Nur Jahan, as she was protected from foreign view by *parda*, but he felt her influence in all he did. She was eventually able to procure for herself the official sponsorship of English trade and, in October of 1617, Roe was notified by a servant of Nur Jahan's "that she had moued the Prince [Shah Jahan] for another *Firman* that all our goods might be in her protection, and that she had obtained it, and was readie to

send down her servant with that, to see and take order for our good establishment; that she would see that we should not be wronged."²⁷ (*sic*)²⁷ With this Nur Jahan officially became the "Protectresse" of the English.²⁸

Although Roe was not successful in procuring the trading contracts with the Mughal government that he had come for, the passage of goods which ensued was substantial. Whatever trade was to happen had to be primed with the constant flow of gifts into the hands of the imperial family and, as Roe knew from the beginning, the most significant recipient was Nur Jahan: "If the Queene must be presented (which I will not aduise too, and doe purpose, as well out of necessitye as ludgment, to break this Custome of daylye bribing)...[a list of things] are here rich presents."²⁹ (*sic*)²⁹ Roe knew that the fate of his efforts in India depended on the good will he could generate with gifts and, although he tried to stem the court's insatiable requests, he complied with regular offerings of paintings, prints, and drawings (the most favored gift) to Jahangir, and mirrors, embroidery, gems, coaches, and beaver hats to Nur Jahan. Many gifts turned out to be unsuitable leather that decayed, steel knives that rusted, horses and dogs that fell sick, and woolens (except in red) that proved too hot but the indomitable Roe kept on experimenting until he found the most pleasing items.

The trade which Roe so desperately wanted was primarily in cotton textiles and indigo dye. By the time the English embassy came Mughal women, especially Jahangir's mother Maryamuzzamani and Nur Jahan, were running their own ships in the sea channels which trafficked with the Middle East and Africa. Unlike the Dutch who were interested for the most part only in spices, the English wanted to sell Indian textiles and dyes in the markets across Europe and in

other parts of Asia and Africa. To do this they had to offer Indian merchants (and the Mughal court) something desirable in return and, since most English goods were unsuited to the Indian environment, they had to fall back on whatever silver bullion they could procure in Japan which was a most welcome item in India. The silver almost always ended up in imperial hands, and it is not clear at this early date if any of the European goods actually brought in for trade ever reached non-noble buyers. NurJahan's role in the early years of international trade with the English was substantial, for not only did she control the Indian goods run out in her own ships in the Arabian Sea, but she regulated the vacillations of interest and disinterest that marked the Mughal posture at this time. On a regular basis she bought goods through the agents of the English. In October of 1617, for example, Roe told his factors in Surat: "I have ordered your Factory to sell to the servants of Normahall and her brother whatsoever may be spared," (*sic*)^M and repeated letters written to the East India Company during these years by factors like John Browne in February of 1617, James Bickford in March of 1617, and a group letter of November 1621 all stated clearly that Nur Jahan was a major buyer of English goods. There is good reason to believe, as well, that Roe's ultimate failure at sealing his trading contracts may have been due to Nur Jahan's control behind the throne. Aside from matters of mismatched diplomatic etiquette and problems over what goods would vent well in India, Nur Jahan's only interest was in procuring elegant luxury items for the court. India did not need European goods the way Europe needed Indian cottons and dyes; Nur Jahan recognized this and used it to best advantage.



Jahangir Dispensing Food at Ajmer

In these ways, Nur Jahan had a visible hand in the many reaches of power which flowed out from her: her husband's private toilet, intrigue at the court, Mughal military matters, imperial architecture, and international trade. Her hand was felt elsewhere as well, in areas not covered here: international diplomacy with wives of foreign rulers, Mughal garden design, and the formation of official policy on religion. There were many avenues to power available to her and she used them all; but she did not abuse them in ways any different from other courtiers. Her actions in all cases were motivated by two things — her protective love of her own Persian family, and her love of fine, elegant things and both loves enriched Mughal culture tremendously.

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