

## ROLE OF THE IMPERIAL WOMEN AS REFLECTED IN *TUZUK-I-JAHANGIRI*: THE CASE OF NUR JAHAN

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**Abstract:** Even as Mughal historians remain engaged with the political and economic bases of Mughal power, the study of gender relations at the Mughal court and the rethinking of political, social and cultural milieu in the light of new questions on women's role and engagement other than the purely trivial matters have hardly been explored. The mainstream historians have cited scarcity of source material to deal with such themes while the sources where such alternative history exists have been ignored and visual materials for accounts of women have been rendered peripheral by the existing historiography because they are thought to address trivial matters. However, in recent times there has been some advance in taking up the studies relating to imperial women. Ruby Lal in *Domesticity and Power in early Mughal world* has taken up to look at the engagements of the imperial women in the sixteenth century. However, no serious attention has been paid to study the Mughal women in the seventeenth century. This study aims at investigating the role of the imperial ladies in general and NurJahan in particular with the changing form of the empire, by analysing their projection in *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*. Nur Jahan's role emerged very different from other imperial ladies. Besides, her role emerges out to be very much political in nature.

**Keywords:** Exercise of sovereignty, Masculine qualities, NurJahan, Public Presence.

**Introduction:** The study of gender relations at the Mughal court and the rethinking of political, social and cultural milieu in the light of new questions on women's role and engagement other than the purely trivial matters have hardly been explored. The influence of the ideology of the modern nineteenth century 'separate spheres' that viewed public and private in dichotomous separation explains some of the neglect in taking up the theme of women's public roles for research. The traditional historiography has further treated royal women's spaces as strictly domesticated spaces devoid of any role in governance and political culture. The problem therefore of gender representation of medieval Indian historiography is not so much of a total invisibility of women from history rather it is in the manner of its treatment. However, some recent progress in gender history has provided us with fresh concepts and tools to take the study of imperial women's political role further.

**Method of Solution:** The study explores the original Persian text of *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* to bring out the roles of the Imperial ladies in the seventeenth century.

**Research Objectives:**

- To look at the role of the Imperial women in general and Nur Jahan in particular.
- To look at the nature of the role of Nur Jahan, as reflected in *Tuzuk*.

Looking at the imperial household establishment that emerged with the 16<sup>th</sup> century empire under Akbar, we find an impressive structure with strong rigours of *pardah* at least from 1580s. Along with the changing kinship and relationship patterns that came with the empire, the prestige of the empire also required the

creation of the 'sacred sublime space-the harem' that would denote the magnificence of the empire through keeping royal women at distance and away from public gaze. Royal women began to be referred as *pardagiyan* (the veiled ones)<sup>1</sup>, strengthening the notion of *pardah*. Concepts of women's chastity and as repository of honour of the royal family came to be understood through the dignity of royal women. AbulFazl uses other similar epithets besides '*pardagiyan*' like '*Ismatqubab*', '*hazrat saradiq-i-Ismat*',<sup>2</sup> which obviously were not simply respect epithets by which royal women could be addressed but exalts the honour of the royal women by attributes of chastity, veiling practice and distance from public gaze. Such arrangements were clearly made by the official historians, to keep imperial women, who became repositories of imperial honour, obscured from public gaze.

The further consolidation of the empire in the seventeenth century, witnessed certain other trends as well. As the hierarchy sharpened, the women of the immediate family apparently became more important compared to the rest of the other extended relations. All senior women- mothers, grandmothers, foster mothers etc. were relegated to the background with NurJahan becoming the premier lady in the harem. Thus, the institution with queen/princess at the top of the hierarchy became an established feature of the seventeenth century harem. Perhaps, as the role of kinship had shrunk and the power now rested in the immediate family, the tradition of shared sovereignty was now to be shared with one of the most trusted member in the family. The choice naturally felt on a devoted wife whose interest was totally tied to the emperor. With sons posing threat

to the emperor and Nur Jahan emerging as close and capable confidante soon after their marriage, therefore became a partner in the exercise of sovereignty.

Unlike, the reluctance of the official sources mentioning about the spouse of the king in the 16<sup>th</sup> century we find the mention of Nur Jahan by Jahangir in *Tuzuk*, and thus the emergence of Nur Jahan as the premier wife. Though an exceptional women in history, her rise to power and prestige speaks more about the development of emperor's persona and projection of an associated regal image, dazzling in shine as the emperor himself. Jahangir's first mentioned about Nur Jahan in 1614 and thus his projection of Nur Jahan in *Tuzuk* is worth noting as he speaks of his fondness and trust in *Tuzuk*. He says that when he fell ill (in 1614) he informed about his illness only to Nur Jahan as he did not think anyone was fonder him.<sup>3</sup> He praises her extraordinary abilities, her sure shot in hunting lions,<sup>4</sup> his descriptions of NurJahan hosting feasts, giving robes of honour, other regal functions etc. One does not know the motivation for Jahangir for raising NurJahan to this exceptional stature, besides that of conjugal love which again appears extraordinary given the reticence of the previous emperor to have the names of his wives public. Perhaps, the information shared about the seventeenth century royalty by the Jesuits at Jahangir's court would have impressed him to some extent to recreate it at his court.

Clearly, contrary to Jahangir's projection of NurJahan in *Tuzuk*, he do mentions his other wives not with name, but with their identity mainly as daughters of different Rajas and chiefs, as a number of them might have entered the harem in positions of inferiority, as daughters of defeated foe<sup>5</sup> with a total neglect of their role in empire making. Still his wives appear with some mention. Jahangir speaks that 'at the request of her father (he) took the daughter of Ram Chandra Bandilah into his service.'<sup>6</sup> We know that Ram Chandra Bandilah was defeated, imprisoned and later released by Jahangir.<sup>7</sup> Even in such case when marriage was with the daughter of Jagat Singh and sister of Raja Man Singh, one of the great noble of Akbar, he would still write - he 'demanded in marriage the daughter of Jagat Singh'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, he does not give the name of mother of Khusro, mentioning her as sister of Madho Singh, and by the title given to her. His wife, "daughter of Kalyan of Jaisalmer" is mentioned simply as belonging to people coming from ancient tribe of loyal people.<sup>9</sup> The hierarchy clearly tilted in favour of women in the immediate imperial family.

Emperor's mother was projected as epitome of regality, as the most important of all the mothers and senior relations. Perhaps, this was in continuation of

the trend that started with Akbar's empire when only mothers retained public visibility among other relations.<sup>10</sup> Jahangir similarly emphasized the lofty stature of his mother.<sup>11</sup> Jahangir's mother now being referred only by her lofty title *Maryam-uz-Zamani* represented the formal seat required for display of royal prestige. All the imperial ceremonies like solar weighing of the Emperor,<sup>12</sup> marriage feasts,<sup>13</sup> lunar weighing etc.<sup>14</sup> took place in her house.

Some senior women are mentioned without any role or status in the familial set up. For instance, Ruqayyah Sultan Begum, Salima Sultan Begum, Akbar wives, are mentioned- Ruqaiyya Sultan when a garden was given to her as gift, and when she went to visit Humayun's tomb; and Salima Sultan on her death.<sup>15</sup> The high lineage of these ladies are every time emphasized. Some women ancestors are named, like ShahrBanu Begum, who built Shahr-ara garden in (Kabul),<sup>16</sup> Bika begum, Akbar's stepmother. However, the names of other women in the family are not forthcoming. Jahangir does not mention the names of the *begums* who welcomed Jahangir on his entering FatehpurSikri, or those who received gifts from Itimaduddaulah<sup>17</sup> and similarly does not mention the name of his foster mothers, as was found during Akbar's reign where the texts at least give names of Akbar's foster mothers. Women of the family are generally described in a group. For instance, he mentions 'ladies' visit' to Akbar's tomb,<sup>18</sup> his going out with 'ladies' for hunting, with those who were 'screened by the curtains of honour' (sisters and other ladies).<sup>19</sup> While the concepts of honour of the empire resting in imperial women, accounted for this reticence in naming the women of the imperial household, there appears also a definite hierarchy that allowed only few ladies with public roles and visibility. Nur Jahan's feats and presence was repeatedly recorded and presented as exemplary.

The position of concubines deteriorated in this period as Jahangir no longer refers to them as *paristarana* but as *khawas-khidmatgaran*,<sup>20</sup> literally meaning lady servants. Jahangir only mentions these *khawas-i-khidmatgaran* while giving an account of mothers of his children and nowhere else. Jahandar and Shaharyar were born of concubines.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, we find Jahangir also appreciating 'devotion and fidelity from the concubines', highly praising the act of suicide committed by LalKalawant, a concubine of a noble of Akbar's time when he died in his old age.<sup>22</sup> The expectation of service from concubines therefore was also in terms of complete fidelity.

Thus a new hierarchy emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It became so sharply narrow that all senior women – mothers, grandmothers, foster mothers etc. who previously were important, were now relegated to the background with NurJahan becoming the premiere

lady in the harem. The broad base of wives and inferior wives were now simply clubbed together in reference as 'ladies' *ahl-i-Mahal*.<sup>23</sup> The concubines were now reduced to *khidmatgaran*.

**Queen's Acts of Real Sovereignty:** Jahangir does not mention in *Tuzuk* about his marriage with Nur Jahan, but we see that immediately after his marriage with NurJahan, the mention of the occurrences of Nur Jahan in *Tuzuk* increases and this shows the increasing ascendancy of Nur Jahan over Jahangir. Perhaps, Jahangir himself appears quite keen to speak about the capacities of his queen, Nur Jahan that ranged from her perfect shoot in hunt, her sagacity and wisdom, her advice and guidance in many crucial moments, and to her real intervention in the court affairs. In an unprecedented act Jahangir transferred all property of *Itimadu-d-daulah* to Nur Jahan.<sup>24</sup> Such references of queens acts of real sovereignty had led scholars to call it a 'petticoat government' and Jahangir reduced to Emperor only in name, though this was more on account of histories based on texts written in Shah Jahan's reign.<sup>25</sup> which was openly critical of Nur Jahan owing to Shah Jahan's hostility towards her.

The rebellious crime of the rebel were also pardoned when they apply to Nur Jahan Begum, expressing their repentance and shame that brings out the power and influence wielded by the queen on account of king's complete confidence in her.<sup>26</sup> The power and prestige of Nur Jahan at the court was also supported by her strong financial base.<sup>27</sup>

**Queen's power at Jahangir's Court:** This description of exercise of power matches well with the ritualistic aspect of sovereignty wielded at the court and beyond. Jahangir even ordered that her drums and orchestra should be sounded after those of the king, a privilege never given to any other lady prior to Nur Jahan.<sup>28</sup> She received gifts from foreign rulers (like mother of ruler of Turan) and also sent gifts in return.<sup>29</sup> Besides, the rituals shared with the ruling elite was for public display at the court, queen communicated her power to the laity through unapproachable distance, *pardah* and a number of other rituals. *Tuzuk* informs that the queen undertook to organize feasts etc. Though the scale of these feasts now assumed enormous proportions, there were fresh rituals observed at the court. These were not only the usual marriage celebrations, earlier organized by the senior ladies, but now the feasts were organized also for political victories, for striking alliances etc. usually by the queen with much more fanfare. She gave Prince Parwiz a dress of honour, a horse and an elephant when he was sent by Jahangir to overthrow Prince Khurram<sup>30</sup> a rich dress of honour, a jewelled sword, a horse and saddle, and an elephant to Karan Singh, son of Rana Amar Singh of

Mewar who had submitted to the mughal authority,<sup>31</sup> dresses of honour to great Amirs and servants.<sup>32</sup>

Jahangir gives details of NurJahan organizing the feasts on various occasions. He praised the feasts organized by Nur Jahan (in 1617) on the occasion of *Shab-i Barat*, saying that such a wonderful feast was never arranged before.<sup>33</sup> In the feast arranged by Nur Jahan in 1621 Jahangir praises the arrangements made by NurJahan on the occasion of his solar weighing (*wazn-i-shamsi*).<sup>34</sup> Organising feasts and such grand celebrations were seen as accomplishment of the empire. Such feasts had great significance for the empire as Jahangir mentions the scale and spending in these festivities with great pride. This also indicates the magnificent stature the queen assumed next to King that brought out the grandeur of the state. She also constructed *sarais* for the accommodation of travellers, like the one also known as Nur Sarai that found its mention in *Tuzuk*<sup>35</sup> and a Nurafshan garden.<sup>36</sup> When otherwise the empress in *pardah* remained distant from laity, these public works symbolized empress' presence in the public domain.

Nur Jahan's participation was not limited to the arrangement of feasts and distribution of gifts. Even royalty in hunt became a major ritual of the empire. The prowess and exertions of the emperor exhibited in shoot, and recounted in the text, would inspire awe among the subjects- a ritual been well laid out as the empire sought to frame its distinct masculine code.<sup>37</sup> In this Jahangir was keen to elaborate Nur Jahan's talent for shooting and ascribed 'masculine' qualities to her, as these became important in exercise of sovereignty. He mentions every time Nur Jahan accompanied him on hunts. In 1619, Jahangir ordered NurJahan to shoot the tiger which was endangering the *ryots*, as at that time he had taken a vow that he would not injure any living thing with his own hands. Jahangir thus extends Nur Jahan a share in the show of power.<sup>38</sup>

During the revolt of Khurram Nur Jahan was having the charge of suppressing the revolt or we can say that she played an active role in its suppression as we find Nur Jahan giving instructions to Mir Husamu-d-din (incharge of the fort of Malwa and Mandu) not to allow Prince khurram come near the fort.<sup>39</sup>

**Findings of the Investigations:** The paper thus brings out no active role by the Imperial ladies in the governance of the empire, except Nur Jahan having a great share in the exercise of sovereignty, which were allowed by the dynamics of seventeenth century empire. The nature of the role of Nur Jahan that comes to the forefront was of political in nature. Nur Jahan remaining veiled in *pardah* made her presence in the public. Though Jahangir brought her to the forefront, but the capacity of Nur Jahan in performing the role given to her also cannot be undermined. This

development quite new to the empire, only reflects a stage of further consolidation in the seventeenth century.

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