

Hal Schrieve

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Gulbadan and Nur Jahan:

The Role of Women in the Creation of the Mughal Court and Imperial Policy

In the early Mughal Empire, succession, distribution of land and wealth, and other political decisions were determined in a way that was dependent upon the close personal ties and familial and cultural traditions of the Timurid court. As the Mughal state was consolidated, the apparatus of empire became focused on the symbolic visual center of the Emperor's person, and his behavior and preferences set a new and often evolving model for his nobles.¹ At all times within the Mughal Empire, the binary between "public" and "private" lives of nobles was a fuzzy one. Likewise any line drawn between women and high politics would almost inevitably be eventually crossed—or be revealed, upon moving back, to have been an illusion in the first place. Royal and elite women present in the court, in the tent cities of the early *padshahs* or the marble and sandstone *zananas* of Fatepur Sikri, were both on the periphery of "high politics" as remembered by historians and simultaneously deeply enmeshed in the most important business of court as well as the prosperity of the growing state. This can be witnessed in the lives of both Gulbadan Banu Begum and Nur Jahan, who lived at either end of Akbar's reign and experienced the results of the institutions he created. New Mughal institutions placed women within the court inside a formalized, hierarchical framework which mirrored that imposed upon the aristocracy and reflected Akbar's recognition of elite women and royal female relatives as one of the many

¹ John F Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 60-61. For a further example of emulation of imperial style, see Catherine Glynn and Ellen Smart, "A Mughal Icon Re-examined", in *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 57, 1-2 (1997), p. 5-15.

powerful groups of political agents who needed to be organized and placed in the service of the state. The Mughal state's transformation from a Central Asian warrior kingdom into a South Asian empire did not uproot earlier avenues for the expression of female power present in Timurid royal families. Rather, with the establishment of enormous women's palaces and the incorporation of thousands of women into the land revenue system, the scale of women's power grew within a new, enlarged, regulated court. The lives of Gulbadan Begum and Nur Jahan and the other court women who surrounded the early Mughal Empire should be understood as central to the process of creating and consolidating imperial institutions.

Timurid Origins: Elder Women and Domestic Space in the Early Empire

Under Babur and Humayun, the Mughal court was still being formed, and familial ties were at the heart of court politics. Under Babur especially, the "court" as known later was nonexistent, and no formal institutions had yet ensured the family of Babur a firm and predictable future. Instead, "the continually changing social and political circumstances, the context of long absences of the wandering king, and the instability that ensued necessitated strong political alliances"² Babur married 'Ayisheh Sultan Begum, Ma'sumeh Begum and Zainab Sultan Begum early in his period of struggle against various Timurid and non-Timurid Central Asian groups to cement family ties and ensure future alliances.³ These marriages were facilitated and encouraged by Babur's mother and other older female relatives. In Gulbadan Begum's life, it was common for the elder women who surrounded the emperor to offer counsel: these women occupied an intimate and politically significant place in court politics, particularly under the reign of Humayun. "On court days, which are Sundays and Tuesdays, he used to go to

² Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 115.

³ Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 114-116.

the other side of the river...when they had put up the pavilions and tents and the audience tent, The emperor came to see the camp and the splendid set-out, and visited all of us, the begams and my sisters,” Gulbadan writes, and elaborates on how Humayun visited with different of his female relatives in a regular pattern, holding conversation until late at night.⁴ Gulbadan also quotes Humayun as saying to a relative who asks why he has not visited her house, “That was not the place to make a complaint. You all know that I have been to the quarters of the elder relations of you all. It is a necessity laid on me to make them happy”.⁵ These elders were deeply respected and were active participants in the struggles of the early Mughal court. During the conflict between Humayun’s step-brothers, Mirza ‘Askari and Mirza Kamran, and the third step-brother Hindal, Humayun asked for the help of his aunt Khanzadeh Begum in mollifying them. Khanzadeh Begum, meeting with Kamran, was asked by him to have the *khutba* or Friday prayer read in his name. When she refused, he also wrote to his stepmother Dildar Begam to ask her, though Dildar referred him back to Khanzadeh.⁶ The elder women in this case supported Humayun and did not permit his step-brothers to claim status as an emperor through the *khutba*, and, significantly, they were obeyed. The court under Babur and Humayun, though dictated by rules and customs which had clear logic, was also deeply intimate. There were fewer boundaries between public and private life of those involved. Women were important allies to have in succession struggles at this point; they smoothed arguments out between sons and threw their support behind leaders they found most effective, often helping safeguard these men’s security. Moreover, the women present in this early phase of empire carried traditions with them and

⁴ Gulbadan Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, trans. Annette S. Beveridge (Lahore: Sang-e-meel Publications, 1974), 129-130.

⁵ Gulbadan, *Humayun-Nama*, 131.

⁶ Gulbadan, *Humayun-Nama*, 161.

continued to be politically active under later emperors even as the situations they lived within shifted rapidly.

Hierarchy, Control and the *Haram* under Akbar

Within the newly massive empire of Akbar and Jahangir, women's power and influence was drastically dissimilar to what it had been when Babur's family controlled (or did not control) the kingdoms that made up their homeland in the Fergana Valley. The rapid rise of new institutions designed for elevated imperial permanence changed the way that emperors interacted with their family, while the influx of unprecedented wealth and power led to an attempt to define the opportunities and limitations placed on Mughal royal and noble women.

One of the trappings of empire was a massive and expansive harem or *haram*, established by Akbar and encompassing thousands of women and attendants from around the empire. Unlike the smaller women's living spaces which would have been present in the traveling courts of Babur and Humayun, the palaces constructed at Agra and Fatehpur-Sikri for thousands of women marked a new phase of Mughal expansion and power. Gulbadan Begum spent her later life living in one of the *zanana* which housed the royal women and their attendants in addition to the emperor's wives.⁷ Decades later, the widowed woman who was to become Nur Jahan resided in Jahangir's *zanana* as a lady-in-waiting to Ruqayya Begam until her marriage to him in 1611.⁸ Women's space within the new imperial order was intended to be removed from the outside world and also set at a certain distance from the emperor: while the emperor had access to the women's palace, the women, at least in theory, could not access the emperor in the same fashion.

⁷ Sardar Najmus Saqib Khan, *Gulbadan Bano Begum : first woman historian of the subcontinent* (Islamabad: ICCTS Publications, 2004), 21.

⁸ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 34.

Ruby Lal writes that “courtly and domestic spaces came, for the first time, to be separated from one another. A neatly compartmentalized haram was designed to place women in a strictly segregated space—for ‘good order and propriety’, as Abu-l Fazl has it.”⁹ Lal sees this process, especially the shift by Akbar to honoring women with titles while emphasizing their veiled and cloistered state and omitting even the name of his son’s own mother from birth announcements, as an attempt to center visible imperial power on the emperor and “veiled women thus serve as icons of the sacred empire, and their veiling preserves the sanctity of the empire”.¹⁰ This secluded space, or the idea of it, certainly formed a central structure in the lives of Mughal women, and its sheer size under Akbar and Jahangir means that its structure was vast and formalized. The *haram*, however, needs to be dealt with carefully, because of the cultural assumptions and ahistorical rhetoric which can accompany any invocation of its existence.

The hundreds to thousands of noble women of the court who occupied the *haram* under Akbar existed, to be sure, in a realm that was dependent on the emperor. Under Akbar and Jahangir the women’s palace had a defined order, “divided into sections headed by ‘chaste women’ superintendents known as *dharogas*”, and documented by women writers who kept detailed accounts of *zanana* life.¹¹ According to Rekha Misra, the women’s palace also had an office called the *mahaldar* who “acted as a spy in the interest of the Emperor.”¹² The women within this court, organized and apparently very effectively so, relied on the emperor for their material wealth, food, shelter and protection, and travelled en masse with the emperor on campaigns and seasonal migration to new palaces.¹³ However, in this respect they shared

⁹ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 176.

¹⁰ Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 183.

¹¹ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 95.

¹² Rekha Misra, *Women in Mughal India, 1526-1748 A.D* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), 78.

¹³ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 106.

important commonalities with the nobility under Akbar in general. The creation of the new land revenue system under Akbar brought autonomous nobles into a bureaucratic system where they depended upon Akbar for their salary. John F Richards analyzes this process in the now-standard work *The Mughal Empire*. Richards writes that ““in forcing its agrarian system upon the variegated aristocracy of the North Indian plain, the Mughals began to compress and shape a new social class. The latter, despite resistance, found itself becoming dependent upon the state for its prosperity and for an essential aspect of its identity.”¹⁴ In the context of a growing state, systems of regulation and hierarchy which ensured dependence on the emperor protected and insulated Akbar against what could otherwise be a perilous balancing act of factions and favoritism. Just as women within their segregated quarters were ranked in a rigid hierarchy, kept track of by spies, and granted cash allowances and land-holdings, the nobility were ranked in terms of *zabt* ranking, spied upon, extensively audited, and had access to wealth on the condition they remained assiduously loyal to the Emperor.¹⁵ The women within Akbar’s court and those within his family circle were necessarily part of a shift which extended far outside “domestic” life. The expanded and regulated haram, with women from all over India and Central Asia, and the increased formal distance between the Emperor Akbar and his female relatives, should be looked at in the context of the simultaneous systems of control exerted elsewhere.

Women’s Wealth in the Early Mughal State

While the new revenue systems brought constraints and a sometimes embarrassing lack of autonomy, the expanding state also worked hard to keep the loyalty of its powerful elite by enriching them. The careful documentation of land revenue combined with the acquisition of

¹⁴ John F Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 90-91.

¹⁵ Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 91.

new territories led to an influx of wealth; this wealth found its way into the personal coffers of elite women. While these women remained secluded and dependent within the courts of Akbar and his nobles, they also put their wealth to use, both for personal pleasure and in business ventures or political causes that enhanced the prosperity or legitimacy of the empire.

Wealth distributed to women was not a new aspect of imperial life. Gulbadan in her memoirs recalls an instance where Babur, having conquered Sultan Ibrahim, gave away “the treasure of five kings” to his elder relations, sisters, and women of the court; these spoils of war included gold plates “full of jewels—ruby and pearl, cornelian and diamond, emerald and turquoise, topaz and cats-eye”, which Gulbadan describes in specific and ornate detail.¹⁶ During the time of Nur Jahan, the wealth of women was somewhat different. While still including jewels, revenue came primarily not through new conquests but from regular taxes, and women were each given allowances of cash and *jagirs*, or landholdings, which could be fairly large.¹⁷ The practice of distributing land to women, which had begun with Babur and been slightly curtailed under Akbar, became routine under Jahangir.¹⁸ Ellison Banks Findly writes pessimistically in *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* that “more often than not... the landholdings of his women provided personal pleasures for the emperor and were often sites of entertainment whenever Jahangir and his party happened to be passing through.”¹⁹ This casual dismissal, which is part of Findly’s larger tendency to treat women in the court as external to politics, ignores both that any noble, male or female, was expected to provide the emperor with gifts, entertainment and “personal pleasure” if he was nearby. Even Findly herself acknowledges elsewhere that “entertainment” given for a visiting emperor was by definition a political activity.

¹⁶ Gulbadan, *Humayun-Nama*, 95.

¹⁷ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 110-111.

¹⁸ Misra, *Women in Mughal India*, 60-62.

¹⁹ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 111.

Just as Babur felt compelled to visit with his elder relatives in order to “make them happy”, close contact between the emperor and his lords and ladies of the court in the context of a post-1590 institutionally organized state served political ends by cementing the emperor’s personal prestige in demonstrating his subjects’ subordination and giving *mansabdars* or court women the opportunity to obtain imperial favor. John F. Richards writes that, while bureaucratic rigidity helped to define the new state, “overriding all other relationships within the system were direct personal links between the emperor and all officials.”²⁰ Events like parties were one of the few ways nobles had access to the emperor, and could be of tremendous strategic importance. Findly’s conclusion about the use of women’s land also sidesteps the obvious: many noble women were using their wealth for projects entirely separate from providing “personal pleasures” to the emperor.

Patronage, Trade and Political Influence of Noble Women in an Expanded Court

As Findly reports, women’s money went to pay for marriage ceremonies, gift-giving to maintain political alliance, and religious festivals within the palace. Outside the walls of the *haram* noble women’s money went towards investments in trade. Nur Jahan, Jahanara and Maryamuzzamani all notably invested in both inland and overseas trade, stationing officers in Agra to collect duties on imported goods from Bengal.²¹ Imperial *parganas* for women also paid to create gardens, construct travelers’ houses, build mosques, and give in charity to the poor.²² Women patronized poets and artists in addition to writing their own poetry.²³ While Gulbadan and other women had maintained the image of the early Mughal court as highly literate, the

²⁰ John F. Richards, “Norms of Comportment Among Imperial Mughal Officers”, in *Power, Administration and Finance in Mughal India*, (Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1993), 257.

²¹ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 111.

²² Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 111, 218-225, 255-259, and Pant, *Nur Jahan and Her Family*, 115

²³ Chandra Pant, *Nur Jahan and Her Family*. (Allahabad: Dandewal Publishing House, 1978), 113-116.

patronage of artists expanded in this later period. Nur Jahan sponsored Mehri, a Persian immigrant to the Mughal court.²⁴ The artistic and architectural works of Jahangir's rule are some of the most significant souvenirs of his reign, and it is telling to note that many of them were funded by women. Nur Jahan funded the Nur Manzil garden outside of Agra, remembered by Jahangir as a "garden of delight" and a famous and visible symbol of the Mughal court's wealth and grace²⁵.

This tradition of construction continued under later noble women, with Zinatunnisa, a daughter of Aurangzeb, constructing massive tombs, garden houses, mosques, wells, bazaars and monasteries.²⁶ The political and economic impact of thousands of rich women pouring money into these endeavors is not negligible for the empire as a whole, especially as the diversity of the court ensured that the women in the imperial palaces were investing in projects in different parts of the empire, patronizing international artists and giving charity among diverse groups. The wealth of women in the Mughal court, established early on in the empire's creation, was elaborated and expanded on in later periods and under Akbar and Jahangir becomes impossible to ignore for its tremendous impact as an economic factor and a political and symbolic tool.

Ruby Lal emphasizes examining the creation of and dynamic changes to gendered and domestic institutions in the imperial court which happened under Akbar, but emphasizes the qualifications she argues this position within. "It could hardly be the case," she writes, "that the construction of Mughal institutions and practices was completed for all time in Akbar's reign (or that of any ruler, however innovative)...it is important to stress the considerable element of

²⁴ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 113, 222.

²⁵ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 114.

²⁶ Misra, *Women In Mughal India*, 110.

uncertainty and experimentation that marks the making of regimes".²⁷ It should be pointed out that even under Akbar, physical seclusion of women did not mean permanent imprisonment or even inhabiting one place: the court spend most of the year in transit between Agra, Lahore and a few other cities, and for the greater part of the year the women, while secluded within the encampment, were not physically within the confines of the new, magnificent zanana that Akbar constructed in his palaces. During transit, many women also took trips of their own, especially the Rajput princesses in the haram, who frequently went with their retinues to visit their family's holdings.²⁸ The scale of Akbar's court was many times larger than the scale of his predecessors, and in terms of its complexities and formality it certainly would have appeared alien to Babur, whose campaigns depended on close, rapid communication and personable contact, and to Humayun, whose female relatives had such influence. However, Akbar was still actively creating the institutions which defined imperial formality, and his court remained both dynamic and literally mobile. In such a context, while it is true that there were new restrictions and distance between the Emperor and the women of his court, it is hard to say that any new order decided upon by Akbar was rigid or that earlier cultural understandings of the role of family in court life were extinguished.

The Timurid traditions which Babur and Humayun observed, with a prominent place for women relatives near the emperor's ear, continued to influence nobles at the court of Akbar and Akbar's descendants. Hamida-banu Begum, Akbar's mother, for example, protested against Christian ambassadors in the court under Akbar.²⁹ In addition, Hamida Begum engaged in constant political competition with Akbar's nurse Maham Anageh, herself a powerful figure

²⁷ Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 140.

²⁸ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 106.

²⁹ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 117.

within the court who ensured the promotion of her sons to the position of *vakil* (vice-regent) and whose family subsequently intermarried with the Emperor's own.³⁰ Gulbadan herself helped to defend Prince Salim (later Jahangir) after his rebellion against his father Akbar.³¹ The continuing activity of women in the court under Akbar indicates that in regulating women Akbar was attempting to manage a group of people who remained close to the center of power rather than successfully sealing a door between "women's" and "men's" spaces in court. This persisted after Akbar's death. Chandra Pant writes that under Jahangir, "scattered and stray references in the chronicles indicate that the lady members' activities extended beyond the domestic domain".³² Akbar himself, despite the names of women from official documents and secluding them,³³ put his mother in charge of Fatehpur-Sikri upon his brother's invasion of Punjab.³⁴ Noble ladies in the women's palace frequently intervened or were given a say in court politics in Jahangir's time. An example of this can be found in the pardoning of Aziz Koka, an ally of Jahangir's son Khusrau who assisted the son's plot against the emperor. Aziz Koka, as a collaborator dangerously close to the throne, almost certainly would have received capital punishment had it not been for the intervention of Salima Sultan Begam and the rest of the women of the *zanana*, who forced Jahangir to meet with them by threatening to otherwise exit the palace and travel to where he sat, and who ultimately convinced him to pardon Aziz Koka.³⁵ The historical lens on this topic, drawn around the accounts written by Mu'tamad Khan and Kamgar Husaini during the reign of Shah Jahan, tends to focus on Nur Jahan and her reputed power to dominate Jahangir's policies and determine the outcome of his reign. Nur Jahan was, clearly, not the only woman at

³⁰ Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 193.

³¹ Beveridge in Gulbadan, 76.

³² Chandra Pant, *Nur Jahan and Her Family*, 14, 113-126.

³³ Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 183.

³⁴ Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 41.

³⁵ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 122.

court to influence Jahangir; other women also had the power to turn political events. It is necessary to examine this singular fascination with her career and determine to what extent her power and authority was unique and surprising—which in some ways it certainly was—and also where her authority came from and, most importantly, what purpose it served during the reign of Jahangir.

Nur Jahan and Historical Myth: The Problem of Defining Female Power

Nur Jahan herself stands in a puzzling position in history. She had a title, “light of the world”, which paralleled Jahangir’s own name “world-conqueror” and another title he gave himself, “nur-ud-din”, “light of religion”. This use of “light” invoked the cult of divine light begun by Akbar.³⁶ Nur Jahan was, through her title, tied to this divinity and the symbolically unassailable power of the state. Furthermore, Nur Jahan was honored in ways that implied her full equality to Jahangir: she had coins minted in her name, she interacted with international traders and determined imperial policy.³⁷ She was renowned as a huntress: according to Sayyid Ahmad, a poet wrote of her “though Nur Jahan be in form a woman/ In the ranks of men she’s a tiger-slayer.”³⁸ She left little written dialogue behind her (although certain Persian verses of poetry remain)³⁹ and no memoirs or works of writing as long as Gulbadun’s *Humayun-nama*. Indian history and historiography around her created near the period of her life was created, moreover, almost explicitly to demonize her. In discussing Mu’tamad Khan’s *Iqbal Jahangir-nama* and Kamgar Husaini’s *Ma’asir-I Jahangiri*, Corinne LeFevre writes that in order to legitimize Shah Jahan’s rise to power, the two chroniclers present the rebellion of Shah Jahan “as

³⁶ Corinne LeFevre, “Recovering A Missing Voice From Mughal India: The Imperial Discourse of Jahangir in his Memoirs.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 50, no. 4 (2007), 463.

³⁷ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 221, Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 102.

³⁸ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 16.

³⁹ Pant, *Nur Jahan and Her Family*, 114-115.

an act of self-defense directed, not at his father, but at the ambitious Nur Jahan who threatened his legitimate right to the throne.”⁴⁰ Nur Jahan does not fare much better with European visitors to court, such as Terry and Roe, who tend to demonize her as something between a temptress and a witch and leave the reader with the impression that through some sort of miraculous sexual charisma Nur Jahan rose to power entirely of her own volition and captivated the emperor before absconding with his absolute power. Roe, for example, wrote that Jahangir “will not long stay anywhere, he whose course is directed by a woman, and is now as it were shut up by her so, that all justice or care of anything or public affairs either sleeps, or depends on her, who is more unaccessible (*sic*) than any goddess.”⁴¹ The European travelers who attempted to interact with Jahangir’s court usually concluded that there was a conspiracy of favorites, headed by Nur Jahan, who was controlling Jahangir, and it is certainly true that Jahangir frequently relied on the advice of Nur Jahan and placed trust for a time in Asaf Khan and Kurram as well.⁴² Findly fails to notice the definite political bias of Europeans she cites like the Dutch Van der Broecke, who says Jahangir “found himself too much in the power of his wife and her associates, and the thing had gone so far that there were no means of escaping that position”; instead of recognizing that van der Broecke was writing under Shah Jahan, whose court had an interest in presenting this vision of Jahangir, Findly announces that van der Broecke “must have preserved some of what was authentic” in his 1627 account.⁴³ This model of “startling”⁴⁴ power on the part of Nur Jahan cannot be the whole story, since women had a prominent place in the court before Nur Jahan and were to do so again after her. However, even modern biographers like Ellison Banks Findly do

⁴⁰ Corinne LeFevre, “Recovering A Missing Voice”, 456.

⁴¹ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 47.

⁴² Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 102-103.

⁴³ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 84.

⁴⁴ Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 102.

not do much better than colonial antecedents when seeking the origins of Nur Jahan's authority or even identifying the social grounding of her power as important. Findly somewhat enthusiastically calls Nur Jahan an "Empress", emphasizes Jahangir's political incompetency, and lingers on how she presumably turned female charm to her political advantage, but leaves the reader with a sense of bafflement about why this woman was tolerated by the court and how even the most magnetic personality could propel a career like Nur Jahan's. However, the available material does allow for readers of this history to make informed guesses at what factors might have been at play. The comprehension of Nur Jahan's power requires combining colonial sources and biased histories aimed at discrediting Jahangir with other sources.

In Corinne Lefevre's article "Recovering a Missing Voice from Mughal India: The Imperial Discourse of Jahangir (r. 1605-1627) in His Memoirs", she asserts "although informed by altogether different ideological motives from those underlying the European travelogues of the seventeenth century, the Mughal historiography on Jahangir nonetheless combined with these accounts to fuel the unflattering judgement most historians of the colonial and postcolonial periods subsequently came to pass on the monarch."⁴⁵ As LeFevre acknowledges, some historians have recently examined the role art and symbolic propaganda played in Jahangir's reign and how strategic decisions were made to turn Jahangir's distance from bureaucracy to the advantage of his reign, such as John F Richards and Richard Ettinghausen.⁴⁶ Findly and the older scholar Rekha Misra also point out the ways that Jahangir might have had a genuine strategy in his delegation and increased distance from state activity. Findly, for example, says that "his aesthetic vision beautified the court with its symbolic trappings and ritual posturings and created in the

⁴⁵ Lefevre, "Recovering a Missing Voice", 457

⁴⁶ LeFevre, "Recovering a Missing Voice", 457.

Mughal arts... a lasting expression of the refinement, sophistication and luxurious repose the Mughals have come to exemplify.”⁴⁷ LeFevre expands on this: in her exploration of Jahangir’s memoirs and imperial agenda, she details how his enthusiasm for naturalistic catalogues demonstrated his aspirations to be ruler over not just the human but the natural realm and how, like his father, he used the collection of surveys and numbers about his realm as both a practical tool and a demonstration of the reach of the arm of the state. LeFevre concludes that Jahangir’s actions as an emperor were all aimed towards the legitimizing project of cementing imperial power, and more specifically enhancing the legendary mystique of his own father and maintaining many of the central administrative practices of Akbar’s reign.⁴⁸ Jahangir simultaneously allowed autonomous agents to bring their skills to his court and wield substantial power on his behalf. This action, which LeFevre deems successful⁴⁹, was, by necessity, the stabilization of the experimental changes of Akbar; under Jahangir, the court was not merely aesthetically pleasing but was, for the first time, established, stable and permanently settling into the fabric of Indian society.

If one understands Jahangir’s delegation of power to his wife in the context of a strategy of empire and intentional cooperation rather than domination, Nur Jahan’s ability to enact legislation, mint coins and make important decisions as a representative of her husband are not startling, but comprehensible. Nur Jahan still maintains all the positive qualities attributed to her in this interpretation. She was still remarkably skilled in protecting the interests of her family while promoting the prestige of the Mughal court and managing aspects of its function, including international trade. Given the context of his rule, Jahangir’s choice of Nur Jahan as co-

⁴⁷ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 65.

⁴⁸ LeFevre, “Recovering a Missing Voice”, 469.

⁴⁹ LeFevre, “Recovering a Missing Voice”, 485.

administrator was sensible and entirely in Jahangir's interests. Jahangir, addicted to opium, mediocre to incompetent in warfare and strategy, required assistants and also may have needed a confidante who would help to pull together the many competing aspects of his eccentric and eclectic personal style of rule. Putting Nur Jahan in this position drew on a long tradition of powerful women at court who assisted in deciding issues of vital importance such as succession without presenting a threat to the rulers they served under. Jahangir and Nur Jahan cooperated in creating what Jahangir hoped would be a permanent legacy from his reign: public works projects, syncretic architecture, and a mature court full of reverent followers of the emperor which would in theory pass on succession bloodlessly to the next splendid and ambiguously divine ruler.

Conclusion

Even though the establishment of seclusion, the distancing of the emperor from his older female relatives, and the *haram* under Akbar marked a significant change, it does not represent a total break from the close-knit traditions of Babur and Humayun in which female relatives wielded power, and nor did it mark an end to the cultural influence or social power of women within the imperial court. Akbar's efforts at distancing the emperor from the pressure of women could not be completely successful, however, in a courtly culture where inheritance and familial alliances via marriage brought women necessarily into the heart of politics and where elder women had a long tradition of exerting political power. Meanwhile, the enormous wealth channeled into the aristocracy under Akbar enriched noble women simultaneously with noble men and attracted immigrants, like Nur Jahan's Persian family. Nur Jahan and other women found within the court the opportunity, in personal and social interaction with the emperor and other nobles, to achieve immense political power for themselves and their families. In an empire

where the ruler grew up in the haram among many women, where mothers were routinely central in organizing support for sons' succession, and where women were wealthy enough to establish their own businesses and powerful enough to secure the loyalty of nobles and their armies (albeit, like their male counterparts, often conditionally), the divide between elite women's spaces and elite men's spaces is often superficial. The "private" or "domestic" spaces associated with women were also a core component in the function of the Mughal state, and women struggled along with men to use alliances, personal contacts, and symbolic gestures for success within the state. Far from being politically alienated by the creation of imperial structures, women relatives of the emperor helped to elaborate on imperial institutions and maintain them.

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