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INFLUENCE OF NUR JAHAN
ON CONTEMPORARY COURT POLITICS:
SOME REFLECTION ON EUROPEAN ACCOUNTS

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In this article, the concern will be to unveil information contained from the European travellers’ accounts and trying to bring to height the significant aspects about the power of Nur Jahan which she exercised individually, not as a member of a group or so called “junta”.

As everybody know that Nur Jahan was born on a caravan travelling from Tehran to India with her parents. She belonged to a Persian family. Her Grandfather Muhammad Sharif was an important noble at the court of Safavi king, Mirza Ghayas Beg, father of Nur Jahan, started his career in the court of Akbar. The great with a rank of 300 in 1577. After accession of Jahangir in 1605 her father received the little of Itmad-ud-Daula and was appointed as wazir. But in 1607 due to involvement of two family members of Nur Jahan into the conspiracy aimed at killing Jahangir and secure the throne for Khursau, Itmad-ud-Daula was imprisoned and those two family members were executed. But later on Itimad-ud-Daula managed to retrieve his lost position.

Nur Jahan got married with Jahangir in May 1611. After the marriage she got the title of Nur Mahal and then Nur Jahan due to her devotion, ability and charm. She occupied the most exalted position at the court never before occupied by any Mughal queen. Coins were struck in her name. She used to sit in the jharokha and issued orders and nishan on different issues.

European travellers and merchants who visited India in the early years of the seventeenth century have recorded many details about Nur Jahan’s influence in the life of the emperor and in the Court. Among the pioneer was Pelsaert who stayed in Agra for some time. He remarks that Nur Jahan approved all orders (farman) and grants of appointment that went out under the king’s name ordering her own name, “Nur Jahan, the queen Begam,” to be jointly attached to the imperial signature. She controlled all promotions and demotions and the orders that issued from the royal court. He again says, “many misunderstand result, for the king’s orders or grants of appointment, etc., are not certainties, being of no value until they have been approved by the Queen.”

Terry also said that- “Jahangir’s most beloved wife Nur Jahan made such a thorough conquest on his affections that she engrossed almost all his love, (and) did what she pleased in the government of that Empire.”

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A quote from a Dutch Chronicles mentions thus, “People with gifts and presents to the queen easily get themselves transferred from one province to another.”

Bernier noted that “Jahangir thought only of his pleasures and left the management of public affairs to his wife, he used to say, and whose transcendent abilities rendered her competent to govern the Empire without the interference of her husband.” Nur Jahan issued an imperial farman concerning the financial and legal affairs. According to Iqbalnama, “all farmans also receiving the imperial signature, the name of Nur Jahan, the Queen Begam, was jointly was attached.” Every farman that went out was stamped with the royal seal, which was usually kept under the protection of queen and therefore stored in the harem. Nur Jahan had her own seal and, as the author of Iqbalnama noted, “no grant of land was conferred upon any woman except under her [the queen’s] seal,” and also gold coins were struck reflects her political power. The gold coin [muhar] of only one tola was called a Nurjahanī.

Pelsaert described about Nur Jahan’s power and position in the following statements: “she had made Jahangir a captive of her arts or of her persuasive tongue.” She took the full advantage of it and “enriched herself with super abundant treasures”. She had secured “more than a royal position for herself.” Her supporters were well rewarded and the king ruled the country in name only, she and Asaf Khan held “the kingdom firmly in their hands.” Emperor’s orders were not considered unless they were approved by her. She had built palaces, pleasure gardens and sarais in all directions “to establish an enduring reputation.”

In other place Pelsaert again emphasized, “If anybody obtained an audience and spoke to the Emperor he heard him alright, but never gave a definite reply, unless he consulted Asaf Khan, who referred it to his sister; the queen any one of them who obtains a favour must thank to them for it, and not the king.”

Not only a hold on imperial affairs, Nur Jahan also had great control over the person of emperor, Pelsaert said, “When the king comes home in the evening from hunting, he takes his seat in his Ghusalkhana. Everyone leaves when the last cup has been drunk, and the king goes to bed... the queen comes with the female slaves, and they undress him, chafing and fondling him as if he were a little child; for his three cups have made him so happy that he is more disposed to rest than to keep awake. This is the time when his wife, who knows so well how to manage him that she obtains whatever she asks for or desires, get always ‘yes’ and hardly ever no in reply.” Pelsaert further elaborates, “It is the practice of the king or rather of his wife, to give rapid advancement and promotions to any soldiers, however low his rank, who has carried out orders with credit or has displayed courage in the field. On the other hands, a very small fault, or a trifling mistake, may bring a man to the depth of misery or to the scaffold.”
After the death of Itimad-ud-Daula in 1621 the emperor assigned entire establishment of her father including the privilege of beating drums after that of the emperor to Nur Jahan. In the last phase of emperor Jahangir’s reign, Nur Jahan also played a vital role into dealing with Khurram’s revolt. She issued a nis’an with a royal farman of Jahangir to Mahabat Khan ordering him to immediately come to court to suppress the Khurram’s revolt. Again, when in 1626, after successfully suppressing Khurram’s revolt, Mahabat Khan arrested the emperor on the bank of river Jhelum. Nur Jahan with the help of other nobles managed the affairs successfully. She won over supporters of Mahabat Khan to her side and raised her own army and finally through her effort, she secured the release of her husband. At the time of Jahangir’s death or accession of Shahjahan, she continuously tried to bring her own candidate Shahriyar for the throne.

Not only exercising political powers in the court and state affairs, Nur Jahan had taken keen interest in other matters also. She initiated the series of construction of buildings. She is also known for promotions of education, undertaking social works, composing poetry, for her interest in hunting, stitching, preparation of perfumes, etc. She designed fabrics and dresses, ornaments and even carpets in a style of her own. She was an accomplished poet also. She was well educated and possessed power of expression and exposition. She was a keen hunter and would shoot tigers from a close range sitting on a hawda on top of an elephant, on one occasion using only six bullets to kill four tigers. She also had immense interest in trade and granted favours to English as she was eager to send her goods on English ships outside India. She collected duties on goods from merchants who passed though the empire’s lands, and traded with Europeans who brought luxury goods from the continent. She had her own ship also which took pilgrims as well as cargo to Mecca. She also kept an eye on all establishment of trade. A letter of Roe to the East India Company, January 25, 1616, mentioned that, “At the end of 1617, Roe received a Servant of Nur Jahan who announced that with Shahjahan’s consent the queen had obtained a farman “that all our goods might be in her protection...and [that she] was ready to send down her servant with that, to see and take order for our good establishment that she would should not be wronged.” Such subjects were always treated as royal prerogatives. These too have been described by various contemporary historians.

Nur Jahan took keen interest in the construction of buildings, she built many sarais. Pelsaert mentions about her building projects that “she erects very expensive buildings, in all directions sarais, or halting places such as no one has ever made before-intending thereby to establish an enduring reputation.” She built tombs for her father, Itimad-ud-Daula, and for herself. Her two most famous and historically important sites were the Nur Manzil garden outside of Agra, called by Jahangir, as “garden of delight.” Various gardens also were laid out in regular walks and planted with fruit trees, like – apple, pear, plum,
apricot and cherry etc. According to Peter Mundy, Motibagh was also built by Nur Jahan at Agra.

The Nurmahal sarai at Jalandhar was, perhaps, the greatest and most beautiful structure built by a queen in the Mughal Empire. About this sarai Mundy said, "It is a very fair one built by the old queen Norre Mahal... It could take five hundred horses and two to three thousand people. She also got constructed a high place and garden at Nur Sarai." Nur Jahan's great monument to her father is important as well because reflected architectural transitions. All these initiatives on her part suggest the extent of the influence she exercised inside and outside the royal harem.

Beni Prasad's History of Jahangir has aroused a controversy among modern historians with the hypothesis that a faction or 'junta' under Nur Jahan was formed soon after her marriage with emperor Jahangir, which enjoyed unlimited powers and influence at the court. Itimad-ud-Daulah, Asaf Khan and Prince Khurram were prominent members of this group. Beni Prasad also writes that the promotions and rewards in the empire entirely depended upon good-will of these bonafide members of junta. According to him, because of the concentration of all powers into the hands of these members, a large section of the nobility failed to receive promotions. As a consequence, a group opposed to the junta also emerged. Beni Prasad also divided the period of Nur Jahan's ascendency into two periods first from 1611 to 1622; and second from 1622 to 1627.

Nurul Hasan rejected the above assumption of Beni Prasad. He is of the view that the period between 1611 and 1620 historically should not be studied as a period of Nur Jahan's junta. He completely disagrees with the view of Beni Prasad that the court of Jahangir was broadly divided into two opposite groups like one consisted of the Nur Jahan and her junta and its allies, and the other of those who opposed the junta. The spokesman of the opponents was Mahabat Khan due to the fact that he failed to receive promotions in his rank and important assignments. Nurul Hasan had also provided a long list of those Mughal nobles who, according to Beni Prasad did not belong to the junta, but received regular promotions.

Irfan Habib drawing on the contemporary sources took a review of the debate and tried to once again prove the limit of power and position Nur Jahan and her family enjoyed during Jahangir's reign. Although he does not totally agree with Beni Prasad's junta theory, but to a certain length supports the view that Nur Jahan and her family not only enjoyed considerable power from 1611 to 1620, they occupied significant positions even before the marriage took place. Although Nurul Hasan rejects the theory of Beni Prasad saying that this theory is based principally on few European sources like that of Thomas Roe. But at the same time he himself found agreeing with the fact that many European sources refer to Nur Jahan enjoyed immense influence till 1616. However, he
totally disagrees with any factional alliance between Nur Jahan and Shahjahan.
This hypothesis was also not accepted by Habib. He also mentions that
Shahjahan got promoted due to his being a prince, not due to Nurjahan.

To provide a glimpse of Nur Jahan’s influence in the contemporary court
politics, eminent historians are in support of their arguments relying on the
European travellers’ accounts also. Somehow, these European sources are still
not used by such great historians like Irfan Habib, Nurul Hasan, and others
extensively. Beni Prasad also consulted various contemporary European
travellers’ accounts for compilation his work *History of Jahangir*, like Thomas
Roe, Edward Terry, Petro Della Valle, Bernier, Tavernier, British East India
Company records and earlier letters received by East India Company etc., only
in the context of ‘Junta’ which reveal the degree of political power enjoyed by
her and other associate members. However, we study carefully the same
sources; these not only depict Nur Jahan’s personal influence on the court
politics but simultaneously reflect on her keen interest into other fields as well.
However, we study carefully the same sources which not only show that
Nur Jahan’s personal influence into the court politics but had keen interest into
other important affairs and she was an important personality of the
contemporary Mughal court. Nurul Hasan also does not mention the views of all
the Europeans, visiting India during this phase and also has not utilized
Iqbalnama and other Persian sources which were written during Shahjahan’s
reign are anti-Nur Jahan, hence, are biased. To support his arguments, he too
has relied more on provided the data of *mansabs*, promotions and appointments
on the basis of *Tuzuk*. Irfan Habib has based his argument mainly on the
contemporary Persian sources like *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri, Iqbalnama-i Jahangiri,
Zakhirat-ul Khawanin* and has brought to light the facts about the power and
influence of Nur Jahan and her family members in the Mughal court. He has
hardly used European sources, except a *Dutch Chronicles of Mughal India*¹¹
that has been cited at two places, and only two volumes of *English Factories in
India*¹² in few places. Still bulk of information contained in these European
accounts remain untouched.

Therefore, as a whole one can say that she was a lady who had many qualities
which was never seen before into Mughal history. She governed the whole
empire, enjoyed immense power and position, and influence the Mughal court
politics. She was a multifaceted personality, a fact which was accepted by not
only European travellers but all her contemporaries. Her image not only in her
own times but also in posterity attracted the attention of the painters who
painted her portraits. This paper is appended with some images of Nur Jahan,
her coins, *muhar*, scripts and buildings constructed under her patronage.
Influence of Nur Jahan on Contemporary Court Politics

Mughal Miniature -
Mughal Empress Nurjahan,
c 1740-50 AD,
National Museum, New Delhi

Jahangir and Prince Khurram
with Nurjahan

Portrait of Nurjahan

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Endnotes

1. Motammid Khan Bakhshi, Iqbalnama-i Jahangiri, Asiatic Society of Bengal (Vol. 3), 1865, Nawal Kishore Press, Lucknow (All three volumes in one), 1870, p. 54.


3. Iqbalnama, II, pp.122-123.


5. Pelsaert tr., Jahangir’s India, Geyl and Moreland, Delhi, 1972 on page no 29, said “very little trade, however, is done with these gold coins, seen that most of them come from the king’s treasures, and further the great men hoard them, and search for their khazana (treasures).” (Francisco Pelsaert was born in Antwerp. He sailed to India in 1618, where he was posted as a junior merchant; spending seven years in Agra during which time he became a senior merchant. He was a Dutch merchant who worked for the Dutch East Indies Company. He became most famous as the commander of the ship Batavia.) Storia Do Mogor, 1653-1708 Nicholas Manucci, tr. with introduction and notes, William Irvin, Pb., Low Price Publication, Delhi, (1907-1908), reprinted, 1990, p.157, however, said that “in her time these (zodiac coins) were current money.” Nicolao Manucci (1639-1717) was an Italian traveller. He worked in the Mughal court. He worked in the service of Dara Shikoh, Shah Alam, Raja Jai Singh and Kirat Singh. Manucci is famous for his works Storia do Mogor, an account of Mughal history and life. Manucci had first-hand knowledge of the Mughal court, and the book is considered to be the most detailed account of the Mughal court. It is an important account of the time of the later reign of Shah Jahan and of the reign of Aurangzeb. Manucci spent almost his entire life in India.

6. Pelsaert, Iqbalnama, p. 25; p. 29; Some of the nisha’ns issued by Nur Jahan preserved in the state Archives of Bikaner dated, 1617, see, Descriptive list of Farmans and Nisha’ns addressed by Mughal to prince of Rajasthan. pp. 38-39.

7. Ibid., p. 50.

8. Ibid.

9. Terry (1622). Rev. Edward Terry’s Voyage to East Indies, written for the most part in 1622, London 1655. Also in Purchase, IX, and PP.1-54 and in Early Travels, p.406. Edward Terry was born in 1590 and was educated at Rochester school and Christ Church, Oxford. In 1616 he accepted the offer to become the chaplain of the fleet commanded by Captain Benjamin Joseph. Sir Thomas Roe Ambassador to the Great Mughal had died. He accepted the job and came to Surat in 1617. He also visited Ahmadabad, Gujarat, Malwa and left India in September 1618. Terry was one of the first writers to describe vegetarianism (in India) to early modern England.


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11. Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, 1656-1668*, V. A. Smith (ed.), p.5, François Bernier was born on 25 September 1620 at Joué-Etiau in Anjou. He was a French physician and traveler. He was briefly personal physician to Prince Dara Shikoh, the elder son of Shah Jahan, and after Dara Shikoh’s fall was attached to the court of the emperor Aurangzeb for around 12 years during his stay in India. His work *Travels in the Mughal Empire*, is mainly about the reigns of Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb. It is based on his own extensive journeys and observations, and on information from eminent Mughal courtiers who had witnessed the events at first hand.


13. Ibid.


17. Pelsaert, op. cit., p. 53.

18. Ibid., p. 56.


The India Office Records are a very large collection of documents relating to the administration of India from 1600 to 1947, the period spanning Company and British rule in India. The records come from four main sources: the English and later British East India Company (1600-1858), the Board of Control (1784-1838), the India Office (1858-1947), and the Burma Office (1937-1948). The collection also includes records from many smaller related institutions.

25. Ibid., p. 81. A quote from a letter sent by a native junk to Mokha, by Thomas Kerriidge, William Biddulph, Thomas Rastell and Giles James at Surat to the Company on March 12 and 13, 1619, that “it may please you therefore well to consider this point; the debts are unlikely to be soon recovered, and these are a people that curb will be brought to any reason, and it suffered in their own ways grow insolent and insupportable, which they exercise not on the Portingals, that encroached as much on them, permit none of their ships to sail without license, and even now since the Anna’s departure have forced the Goga junk, appartaining to the beloved queen, to pay them 65,000 marnoodles for custom to the port of Dey, which striving to infringe lost her voyage the last year, and made great show off wars; yet after much contention have submitted again to the yoke..., Cargo of the Annae. Their letters sent by her in ‘a box sealed, mould, and covered’, entrusted to Roe for delivery to the Company. Goods dispatched to Aschin in the Dragon. The Lion has taken to Mokha Indian goods to the value of over 55,000 mahmudis.
with broadcloth, sword-blades, & co., that bring up total to 66,463 muhamdis 5½s.

26. William Foster (ed.), The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India (1615-19), Oxford University Press, London, 1926, Vol. II, p. 410. Roe was born at Low Leyton near Wanstead in Essex, the son of Sir Robert Roe of Gloucestershire and Cranford, Middlesex. In January 1615, Sir Thomas Roe presented his credentials to the Emperor Jahangir as the Ambassador of the King of England. In 1614, Roe was elected Member of Parliament for Tamworth. From 1615 to 1618, he was ambassador to the court at Agra, India, of the Great Mughal, Jahangir. The principal object of the mission was to obtain protection for the East India Company’s factory at Surat. At the Mughal court, Roe allegedly became a favourite of Jahangir and may have been his drinking partner. This greatly enhanced Roe’s status with the Mughals. His journal was a valuable source of information for the reign of Jahangir. Sir Thomas Roe was an experienced, firm, courageous, combined with management skills and clever person, who lived as a resident of Agra till 1619.

27. Pelsaert, op. cit., p. 53.
30. Bernier, op. cit., p. 413
31. Sir Richard Carnak Temple (ed.), Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia (1508-1667), Vol. 2, Travels in Asia (1630-1634), Hakluyt Society, London, 1907-1917, II, p. 214. Peter Mundy (1600 –1667) was a seventeenth century British merchant trader, traveller and writer. He came to Surat on 30th September 1628. In November 1630 he travelled to Agra while in the employ of the East India Company, and remained there until 17th December 1631, when he proceeded to Puttana on the borders of Bengal. He returned to Agra and Surat, and leaving the latter in February 1634, arrived off Dover on 9th September 1634. He went on further voyages to India, China, and Japan, when he started from the Downs on 14th April 1636. His manuscripts were published by the Hakluyt Society.

32. Mundy, op. cit., II, p. 214; Pelsaert, op. cit., p. 50. S. N. Sen (ed.), Indian Travels of Thévenot & Careri, Thévenot, 1949, p.34; Thévenot was an accomplished polyglot, skilled in Turkish, Arabic and Persian, and a curious and diligent observer. He was also well skilled in natural sciences, especially in botany, for which he made large collections in India. He was sailed for India on 6th November 1665, in the ship “Hopewell,” arriving at the port of Surat on 10th January 1666. He was in Mughal Empire of India for thirteen months, and crossed the country by Golconda to Masulipatam, returning overland to Surat, from which he sailed to Bandar-Abbas and went up to Shiraz.

33. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. *Ibid.*, Beni Prasad said in the first phase ‘junta’ was maintained but in latter phase after the death of Nur Jahan’s father and mother or marriage of Shahriyar ‘junta’ was broke up.


42. The Family of Nurjahan during Jahangir’s Reign, a Political Study, *Proceedings of Indian History Congress, Allahabad Session, 1965*.


44. *A Contemporary Dutch Chronicles in Mughal India*, pp. 92-93.