



# THE TRUE EMPRESS OF MUGHAL INDIA- MEHRUNNISA

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## ABSTRACT

*A wonderful tale of love, hate and deceit all woven into one magnificent Mughal tapestry. Mehrunnisa right from the beginning was very adamant and wanted to fulfil the wishes which she made to herself. She wanted to marry the Emperor and lead a life of an empress right from the age of eight. Her diplomatic and administrative skills made her politically very strong and she was highly capable of handling the administration of her husband, Jahangir.*

*This article describes Mehrunnisa (Noor Jahan) as the true empress of Mughal India and how she held her administrative, political, strategic authority till her last days...*

**Keywords:** *Mehrunnisa, Noor Jahan, Jahangir, Mughals, Itimad-ud-daula, Persian literature, exquisite beauty.*

**Mehrunnisa-** the Sun among women, later given the name of Noor Jahan (The Light of the World), true to the meaning of both the names, characterized the personality of an incredible persona in the era of the entire Mughal Period.

*“The daughter, who had been to Aiafs in the desert... Was educated with the utmost care and attention. In music, in dancing, in painting, she had no equal among her sex her disposition was volatile, her wit lively and satirical, her spirit lofty and uncontrolled”*

Empress of Mughal India, brilliant political and military strategist, architect, and diplomat, who had absolute control in the Mughal court. Mehrunnisa was born in 1577 in Qandahar, Persia (Iran); died in 1645 in Lahore. She was the daughter of Mirza Ghiyas Beg and Asmat Begum. She was educated by private tutors and was keen on studying Persian culture and language as well as tradition and languages of adopted India. Mehrunnisa was married to Ali Quli (Sher Afghan and later she married Prince Salim (Jahangir) who was her love right from the age of eight.

Noor Jahan's story is one of political dexterity, military competence, and cultural achievements. As cultural manifestations change, her legend has reached mythological proportions; some of the reality of her life remains shrouded in mystery. Upon her marriage to the emperor (Jahangir) in 1611, Noor jahan became Jahangir's



twentieth and final wife and mistress (with her co-wives) of all Mughal India. She was not an ordinary queen, however, for because of Jahangir's extreme dependence upon alcohol and opium and because of his constant digressions into natural lore, religion, and the arts, a power vacuum emerged soon after his accession to the throne in 1605 which remained unfilled until their marriage.

First spying Noor Jahan at a palace bazaar in Agra in March 1611, Jahangir became consumed with the beauty and charisma of this Persian immigrant's daughter and married her at the first auspicious juncture of the planets.

*“When his eyes seemed to devour her, she, as by accident, dropt her veil; and shone upon him, at once, with all her charms. The confusion, which she could feign, on the occasion, heightened the beauty of her face”.*

In the months that followed the ceremony, Noor Jahan assumed de facto sovereignty over most of the lands of northern and central India and became supreme arbiter of the politics and culture of the court. Surviving the often brutal vagaries of palace intrigue; she remained in control of the government until Jahangir's death in 1627 when she was exiled to Lahore to live out her remaining eighteen years. Noor Jahan's accomplishments on the throne were many. In addition to her feats of personal bravery and courage - she was an excellent markswoman and, in her final years of power, led a massive assault on elephant back against would-be usurpers to the throne- Noor Jahan contributed much to the life of Jahangiri India. Early on, her own quick rise to power and firm place at the emperor's side ensured a permanent footing at court for the immigrant Persian nobility now arriving from the north. Moreover, she encouraged the opening up of foreign trade with Europe, and even she herself secured some of the earlier, more significant (though informal) contracts for shipments in of luxury goods and out of the standard indigo and cotton. In the arts she greatly expanded the thematic repertoire of miniature painting. She redirected the use of surface ornament in architecture away from the more abstract and formal elements of traditional Islam and instead toward the more representational figures of her Persian past and Hindu present. And she introduced white marble as a building clad for certain commemorative structures, a feature that was soon to be copied by her stepson Shah Jahan in his Taj Mahal.

Finally, and perhaps of most significance, she introduced the annual springtime trek to Kashmir, a holiday retreat from the heat still enjoyed to this day by large numbers of Indians from the plains. Two of all the contemporary chronicles of Jahangir's reign, it is the Iqbal Nama which gives the most detailed account of Noor jahan's powers: women who received land did so only under her seal; nobles coveted a seat at her palace balcony whenever she announced policy or bestowed largesse; gold coin was struck in her name (often with zodiac signs on one side); imperial orders (farmans) almost always carried her signature next to the emperor's; sanctuary at her feet was there for anyone subject to tyranny and oppression; and any orphan girl or needy maid could get a dowry and wedding portion from her upon request. Five hundred girls, in fact, are said to have done so.



When Noor jahan married Jahangir, she was thirty-four years of age. She was extremely beautiful even at that age. Besides, she was an educated, intelligent and cultured lady and was fond of poetry, music and painting. She wrote verses in Persian. She constructed a library which consisted of a large number of meritorious works. She had an inventive brain and devised new dresses, ornaments and styles of fashion and decoration.

At the time of her marriage with Jahangir, he prepared a very beautiful dress called Nurmahli which remained popular among the women of Harem for many years to come. She was interested in administration and had the capacity to tackle the relevant problems. She was courageous, patient, social, generous, religious and friend of the poor and oppressed.

She helped the poor and scholars and arranged marriages of hundreds of poor girls. She loved Jahangir and reduced the doses of his wine. Noor Jahan was highly ambitious as well. She participated in administration, interfered in the politics of her time, increased her influence and tried to keep the power of the state in her hands. Therefore, she influenced the history and politics of her time.

The administration was taken over by Noor Jahan and no important decision concerning the state could be taken without her consent. Jahangir, who was gradually becoming accustomed to ease owing to age and indifferent health, was also not averse to delegate his authority to his intelligent and hardworking queen. He used to say that he had handed over kingship to Begum Noor jahan in return of a sir of wine and half a sir of meat.

Noor Jahan's political career may be divided into two periods. The first, from 1611-1622 A.D. when her father and mother were alive and kept a sobering influence on her ambitions. During this period, Noor jahan and the crown-prince Khurram worked together. The second period was that of 1622-1627 A.D. Her mother, Asmat Begum died in 1621 A.D. and her father, Itimad-ud-daula died in 1622 A.D.

Therefore, she was devoid of sobering and beneficial influence of her parents while Jahangir gave her more liberty to control the administration due to his ill-health during this period. That resulted in her ambition of capturing the power of the throne in her hands even in case of death of her husband and, consequently, conflict with Shah Jahan (Prince Khurram).

Soon after her marriage, Noor jahan formed a clique of her own called Noor Jahan Junta. It consisted of her mother, Asmat Begum, her father Itimad-ud- daula and prince Khurram besides herself. Each member of this clique was capable and occupied high offices in the state.

The crown-prince Khurram was married to Arjumand Banu Begum, better known as Mumtaz Mahal, daughter of Asaf Khan in 1612 A.D. He was given the right of sitting on-the right hand of the Emperor, awarded the title of Shah Jahan and promoted to the rank of 30,000 zat and 20,000 sawar.

Itimad-ud-daula received the rank of 7,000 zat and 7,000 sawar in 1619 A.D. while Asaf Khan received the rank of 6,000 zat and 6,000 sawar in 1622 A.D. Noor jahan remained supreme in administration till 1622 A.D. with the help of these powerful members of her clique. In the process of her political manoeuvring, she retained her integrity, and that of the house of the Mughals, and thus she has won considerable esteem and admiration.



Our interest here, however, is not what Noor jahan did with her power, which was considerable, but the ways she acquired and maintained that power. There is no doubt that Noor Jahan's personality alone played a decided role in her gathering of influence and imperial prerogative. Moreover, she was endowed with remarkable discernment and ambition which allowed her to survive even the bitterest of squabbles at court. Central here were her concentrated drive for power, her gift for intrigue, and her extraordinary ability to make alliances at all levels, which suggest that she, not Jahangir, was the true heir to Akbar. No doubt, as well, the particular nature of politics at court was exceptionally advantageous to Noor jahan's background and position, often providing obvious moments of leverage and sway. In all, for example, Nur Jahan had four distinct and competing networks of power: 1) her large and extended immigrant Persian family, whose members came to be widely accepted at court as educated and distinguished agents for the king; 2) the sons of Jahangir by his earlier wives (Khusrau, Parviz, Khurram [later Shah lahan], and Shahriyar), who independently schemed to succeed the father but whose chances of victory were nothing without the support of the powerful stepmother; 3) the upper ranks of the nobility, which was comprised of Muslim families of various sects and national backgrounds and Rajput families of conquered or otherwise allied local regions; and 4) the harem, which was so large and multifarious that the zenana (the women's apartments) often resembled an entire town in its complex array of caste, occupation, and religion. In each one of these networks Nur Jahan had a place, given either by birth or by office, and each place could be manipulated against the dynamics of another in order to enhance her accumulated position in the overall schema.

Nur Jahan is also known to have supported Jahangir's fervent devotion to the Sufi Saint Shaikh Moinuddin Chishti whose tomb was housed a short distance from the Agra court in Ajmer. Her talents also included hunting and she often joined her husband on such expeditions. According to one legend, Noor Jahan organised an army to rescue her husband when he was captured by rebel, joining the battle herself atop an elephant, shooting arrows into the direction of the enemy. Noor Jahan was not only talented but also loyal and a nature loving lady, she was also known for her benevolence towards poor women and children of the realm. Official historians of the empire such as Muhammad Hadi speak of the great care she took of poor women by providing land and paying dowries for orphan girls and directly sponsoring five hundred such girls. Noor Jahan is rightly remembered now as the most famous of all the royal Mughal women and a historical women and a historical figure whose story can inspire anyone even today.

She devoted her last years of life to the building of some famous Mughal tombs and making scent by rose flowers. She learnt this art from her mother. She even gave audience in her palace where she used to discuss the financial matters and strategies with the ministers of Mughal court. Jahangir himself permitted coinage to be struck in her name. She was really the developer of Mughal culture and Mughal architecture. For the rise from an immigrant to become an Empress of the great Mughal Empire, Noor Jahan was one of the most influential women of her era.



Noor Jahan, Empress of the Mughal Empire, is a perfect example of a Radical Change Agent for the Council for Change. Noor Jahan is such an influential figure for women due to the fact that in a time period where women were thought incapable of governing, she embodied the characteristics of intelligence, strong will, and assertiveness when effectively ruling an empire in place of a man.

In today's world, Noor Jahan would be a positive figure to have. She would definitely take on a stand in issues relating to women's rights. As a woman who succeeded when taking on a role predominantly for men, she would definitely attack today's issue of women's low wages in their workplace compared to men's wages. She will also try and attack the ideology that still does stand today of women's role being of the home. Noor Jahan would most likely tackle these women's rights related issues by organizing groups of women who are eager to make a change.

**In conclusion, Noor Jahan's story can truly inspire many to see what great power a woman can have in society. In her case, she brilliantly utilized her skills in administration, politics, economics, and culture to help rule and make an empire prosper. Most importantly, she does so as a woman and she does so as a woman not born into a high class but born into a family fighting to pursue happiness and prosperity. Without her actions, we would have one less role model of a true female ruler/ leader in today's world. With Noor Jahan and her story, one's mind can be opened, one's mind can be inspired, and one's mind can be pursued to make their own story.**

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