



The one who ruled

What makes NUR JAHAN the first Mughal feminist icon? Author RUBY LAL goes back four centuries to rediscover the empress who broke all the rules, empowered women and reigned sovereign

I first met Nur Jahan when I was a restless nine-year-old growing up in Dehradun. I loved stories, and my mother had a bagful of wondrous tales. She would dish out selections as she played with my sisters and me on summer afternoons or even when she was tired after a long day of running the household. Though some of

my mother's stories were about animals—a parrot that advised its owner; a clever fox that fooled peasants—most were about unusual women. We heard about the brave Rani of Jhansi as well as the British Queen Victoria; Heer from the eternal love story *Heer-Ranjha*; the goddess Parvati, who stood up to her husband, the terrifying Shiva. Each story a reminder to us to behave more like these amazingly brave and independent women.

One lazy afternoon, my mother and I sat playing gaid-gitta, bouncing a small ball with one hand and moving five dice with the other. At some point, I grew bored. "I want a story," I said. I can't remember whether we finished the game but I remember the story well.

Her story was about Nur Jahan, wife of the 17th-century Mughal emperor Jahangir. Years later, my fascination with Nur's story translated into my love for the history of the Mughal world—and the Mughal women, to be precise. In time I became a feminist historian, and soon I was writing *Empress: The Astonishing Reign Of Nur Jahan*, a biography of my childhood icon.

HOLDING COURT

As I researched, I noted that Jahangir's memoir was full of Nur's hunting feats. Hunting, a kingly right, was more than a leisure activity—it denoted imperial dominance. Nur's fiery shots would kill a tiger that prowled the streets of Mathura and harassed her people, making her their saviour. But hunting wasn't the only thing that made her so unusual.

In 1611, at age 34, Nur, daughter of an eminent noble at Jahangir's court, and widow of a subversive official, became the 20th and most cherished wife of Jahangir, a moody, philosopher king. He was a lover of the arts, a naturalist who adored statistics and travelling. He saw Nur's political savviness, and, little by little, defied tradition by transferring his power and duty to her capable hands. By early 1613, in a regal encampment stretched for nearly three miles across Ajmer, in north-western India, Nur issued her first legal document as a sovereign, becoming the only woman in the Mughal dynasty to rule openly and actively. Jahangir was so infatuated with the "strength of her personality," one courtier said, that the fabled Islamic lovers Majnun and Khusraw paled next to her. Nur's influence grew—in the harem, with her husband and, ultimately, in governance.

Her reign was a massive feat. Only a few decades earlier, Akbar the Great, Nur's father-in-law, had instructed royal women to live in the sacred and secluded Mughal harem. Apart from playing the sovereign behind tented walls, cour-

tier historians noted that Nur would sit like a goddess in the imperial balconies and show her person to the masses—a practice thus far reserved for the male kings. Unprecedentedly, coins of the realm—signs of sovereignty—bore her name along with her husband's.

THE MUGHAL FEMINIST

As I delved further into her reign, she emerged not just as the huntress and administrator but also an astute politician and champion of women's rights. She devoted her early years to building political alliances and observing affairs of state closely. She was known for her "boundless and unlimited" generosity. She gave jewels, horses, elephants and cash to royal men and women. And she went on to support the weddings of 500 orphan girls and even designed an inexpensive wedding dress. Agra tour guides say the dress still sells and is still used today by brides of poorer families!

Nur initiated marriages of her women companions under the age of 40 to Jahangir's troopers and attendants, and gave those between 40 and 70 the choice of either leaving the palace to look for a husband, or staying with her. By offering choices to the underprivileged and to the most vulnerable inhabitants of the harem, she sparked a "feminist" moment in Mughal history.

Nur Jahan, a feminist icon approximately four centuries ago? We're likely to differ on the use of this word: after all, it is birthed by our politically concerned mid-20th-century women ancestors. Even so, we are likely to agree on a most basic tenet of feminism. It urges us to be curious about different styles of creativeness and enterprise of women across time and space. And everything Nur did—politically, aesthetically, in building her life and that of the empire—had an intimacy about it. She went about it deliberately, directly, rolling up her sleeves (just as we do), never giving up. Astutely, persistently, brilliantly.

My mother called her maharani (queen of queens in Hindi). Of all the stories I'd heard about Nur Jahan, what stuck with me was that while she ruled the empire alongside her husband, dispensing justice and masterminding daring rescues, she also wrote poetry and designed clothing, gardens and even buildings. She was a new royal with the experiences of an unusual past. Nur's assertion of authority and talent is revelatory, not least because she moved towards a direct and visible kind of power. In a time and place when her power ought to have been squashed, it tells us something about her commitment, boldness, independence and confidence in who she was. Is that not feminist? ■



Ruby Lal's *Empress: The Astonishing Reign Of Nur Jahan* is published by Penguin Random House India and WW Norton, USA and UK