

women power

The queen of queens

Ruby Lal re-creates the fascinating life and times of the Mughal Empress, Nur Jahan



RUBY LAL'S latest literary endeavour, *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan* details the reign of the 20th wife of the Mughal emperor, Jahangir, while looking beyond popular perceptions of the strong female historical figure as an object of affection. "The history of erasure of her leadership has deep resonances with the way in which women leaders are perceived in the modern world," Lal says, adding how scholarly works on the queen focus on her love story with Jahangir, often at the cost of the romance erroneously being taken as "the explanation for her rise" in the court. Here, the author chats about what sets apart her take on the Mughal queen, and the importance of oral traditions.

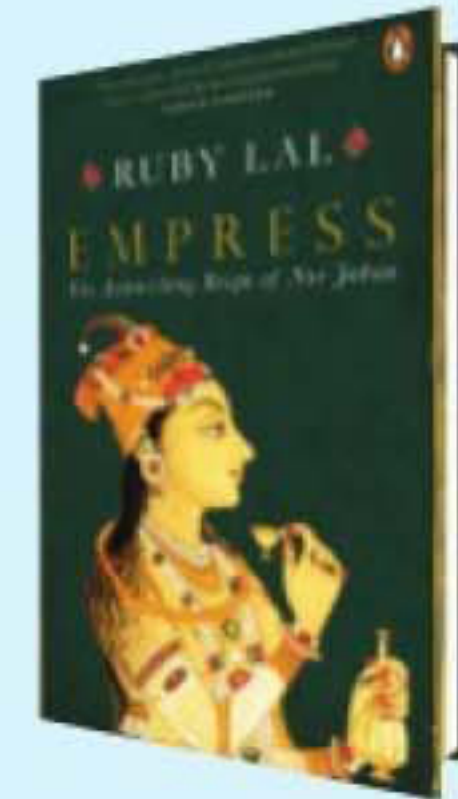
Is it essential today, for stories such as Nur Jahan's to come to the fore?

Absolutely. Very important indeed. Having Nur Jahan as the central

figure of the history of India changes everything. It means emphasising pluralism, different ways of being, a tolerant and respectful India, with women at the centre-stage.

What makes *Empress* stand apart, in its attempt to recount Nur Jahan's life?

Empress is the first book to propose the term 'co-sovereign' and I detail the rich and wide-ranging aspects of Nur Jahan's sovereignty. Scholars have acknowledged her power, almost in bullet points, but never in any concrete way thought through her power. There is still the tendency in scholarly and other



writings to lock Nur's power in a romantic story with Jahangir: in fact, that romance

becomes the explanation for her rise. The records are plenty and rich. It's how you approach the courtly documents, paintings, poetry, coins, architecture — and even legends.

You mention that oral traditions of storytelling were a key aspect of your research. Elaborate?

I first heard about Nur Jahan from my mother when I was a girl. She called her 'Maharani, Queen of Queens', a description so vivid that it enchanted me. I never heard that description in the popular imagination, such as in renderings

of tour guides or those of history aficionados I interviewed in India and Pakistan. But magnificent legends soak her life. And, I wanted to think about these as they converged with facts of history. Indeed, they are central in the public imagination.

Read the complete interview online at indulxpress.com Penguin Random House, ₹599.

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Ruby's top picks

- Stacy Schiff's *Cleopatra*
- Julia Baird's *Victoria*
- Amitava Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*