September 1989

Religious Resources for Secular Power: The Case of Nur Jahan

Ellison Banks Findly

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Religious Resources for Secular Power: The Case of Nūr Jahan

by Ellison Banks Findly

Upon her marriage to the emperor in 1611, Nūr Jahan became Jahāngīr's eighteenth and final wife and mistress (with her co-wives) of all Mughal India. She was not an ordinary queen, however, for because of Jahāngīr'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 Nūr Jahan at a palace bazaar in Agra in March 1611, Jahāngīr became consumed with the beauty and charisma of this Persian immigrant's daughter and married her at the first auspicious juncture of the planets. In the months that followed the ceremony, Nūr 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 Jahāngīr's death in 1627 when she was exiled to Lahore to live out her remaining eighteen years.

Nūr 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—Nūr Jahan contributed much to the life of Jahāngīr 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 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, turning the attention of painters, say some, more assuredly toward women and the sensual as subjects. She redirected the use of surface ornament in architecture away

1. The rapidity of Nūr Jahan's rise to power is confirmed in a note of William Hawkins, English merchant at Jahāngīr's court, 1608-1613, made probably in the summer of 1611. He mentions at this time that he has to find special gifts for the king's new wife and her family, Nūr Jahan now "being his [Jahāngīr's] chiefe queene." William Hawkins in William Foster, ed., Early Travels in India, 1583-1679 (Humphrey Milford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1921), p. 94.
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 Shâh Jahân 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.2

Of all the contemporary chronicles of Jahângîr's reign, it is the Iqbal-nâma which gives the most detailed account of Nur Jahân'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 (farmâns) 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.

At last her authority reached such a pass that the King was such only in name. Repeatedly, he [Jahângîr] gave out that he had bestowed the sovereignty on Nur Jahân Begam, and would say, "I require nothing beyond a sir of wine and half a sir of meat."3

Our interest here, however, is not what Nur Jahân did with her power, which was considerable, but the ways she acquired and maintained that power. There is no doubt that Nur Jahân's personality alone played a decided role in her gathering of influence and imperial prerogative. She is said to have been unbelievably beautiful and charismatic, confirmed by the fact that she was thirty-five when she married Jahângîr, and thus well past the requisite age of thirty when most women of her years were set aside for their younger.4 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 Jahângîr, was the true heir to Akbar.

No doubt, as well, the particular nature of politics at court was exceptionally advantageous to Nur Jahân's background and position, often providing obvious moments of leverage and sway. In all, for example, Nur Jahân had available 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 Jahāṅgīr by his earlier wives (Khusrau, Parvīz, Khurram [later Shāh Jahān], and Shahriyār), 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 zanānā (the women’s apartments) often resembled an entire town in its complex array of caste, occupation, and religion. In each one of these networks Nūr Jahān 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.

If Nūr Jahān’s power came from the combined advantages of a gifted personality and a unique positioning at court, it often got its persuasive edge because it invoked some aspect of contemporary religiosity: current sectarian alliances, government-sponsored religious policies, or ideals about women sanctified by hagiographical materials. Our argument here will be that overlying many of the channels of influence used by Nūr Jahān were religious structures and resources which she drew upon to provide legitimacy, whether it be acknowledged or submerged, to support her substantial base of authority. While the potency behind these religious resources was spiritual in referent and transformative in value, the effect of their use, we will argue, was entirely secular.

The ability to manipulate religious structures successfully depended very little on Nūr Jahān’s own religious persuasions but a great deal upon those of her husband Jahāṅgīr. Jahāṅgīr was, first of all, a Muslim. Although not a very pious or strictly observant one, he was nevertheless a member of the Sunni tradition who intended on governing, at least nominally, by Islamic law. While many at court, like the English chaplain Terry, assumed Jahāṅgīr was a Muslim in good standing, others like Terry’s employer, the ambassador Sir Thomas Roe, knew that the emperor was extremely deceptive about his religious preferences:

... when the Moores about him speak of Mahomett, hee will sooth them, but is glad when anyone will breake out against him.6

Jahāṅgīr, like his father Akbar, continued to pursue a number of religions during his life, courting the various officiants around him with the sugges-

5. Terry, p. 242.

Concerning the New Planted Christian Church he Confirmed and enlarged all their Priviledges, euery night for one yeare spending two howers in hearing disputation, often Casting out doubtfull woordes of his conversion, but to wicked Purpose.
Figure 1. “Emperor Jahāngīr Playing Holi with His Ladies,” from the Minto Album, fol. 4. Courtesy of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, ms. no. 7, no. 56.
tion that there may be imminent conversion to their cause. As in the case of Christianity, however, whose Jesuits Jahāngīr had wooed partly to support his bid for the throne, his attention would ultimately be seen as superficial, for he remained at least in name a quirky partisan of the family faith.

More significant to Jahāngīr's religious posture ultimately, however, was his continuation of Akbar's policy of religious tolerance. From his father Jahāngīr had inherited a court which was open to all religious enthusiasts and a personal receptivity to the spiritual bents of a wide range of traditions. Of Akbar he said,

[the] professors of various faiths had room in the broad expanse of his incomparable sway... [and] He associated with the good of every race and creed and persuasion, and was gracious to all in accordance with their condition and understanding.7

Most who visited or lived at his court could testify to Jahāngīr's continuation of this policy of religious tolerance,8 and it is clear from the Tāzuk that it was more than just a nominal bow to the memory of his father, for in the text Jahāngīr tries fairly regularly to chart a course away from violent bigotry in favor of benign openness. As we have shown elsewhere,9 in fact, his advocacy of a policy of religious tolerance became a clear personal and spiritual choice after the years 1618-1619, for it was during these years that Jahāngīr worked through deep-seated anxieties concerning his father and came to terms with his own ability to rule.

As for the religious persuasions of Nur Jahan, there are only three things we know for certain. First, like all her colleagues, Nur Jahan must have participated regularly in the daily and seasonal cycles of religious observance, primarily Muslim and Hindu, which were part of the life of the harem. Although she herself was a Shi‘ite by birth and remained so throughout her years, Nur Jahan would certainly have shared in the festivities (if not in the practices) of all the traditions that were dominant in the zānāna. Note, for example, Figure 1, in which there are two women supporting (a presumably intoxicated) Jahāngīr during the Hindu Holī festival and where the one in the square hat is almost certainly identifiable as Nur Jahan.

Second, as chief queen of an Indian king and as a Muslim wife of a Muslim husband, Nur Jahan would, on both accounts, be obliged to charity. Writing at the time, Muhammad Hādī notes that “Nur Jahan won golden opinions from all people,” for, in addition to the wedding portions she gave to hundreds of impoverished girls, she “was liberal and just to all who begged her support... and thousands were grateful for her generosity.

8. N.B., “all religions are tolerated,” Terry, p. 418; and “Hee is Content with all religions” for “they lived vnder his safety and none... [did] oppress them,” Roe, II, 314, 382.
Jahāṅgīr was an extremely charitable emperor, giving not only to nobles of rank and commoner supplicants to the throne but to many religious mendicants and houses of worship as well. No doubt Nur Jahān followed course, if only because of her religious responsibilities to the umma, and local legend around Lahore describes her years in exile there as given over almost wholly to acts of benevolence.

Finally, Nur Jahān is known to have supported Jahāṅgīr's fervent devotion to the Sufi saint Shaikh Muṣīnuddīn Chishtī whose tomb was housed a short distance from the Agra court in Ajmer. The English gadabout Thomas Coryat reports having seen Nur Jahān some time between July 1615 and September 1616 at the 'urs festival there when the imperial couple walked to the tomb of the saint and prepared food in a large pot for the poor. Ordinarily sponsored by a rich devotee, the 'urs was on this occasion (as perhaps on others) patronized by Jahāṅgīr himself and, making "khitcherie" for five thousand poor, he served the supplicants "with his owne hands." Nur Jahān seems to have been an active participant in the ritual as well, and we can presume that the worship of Muṣīnuddīn had at least her official, if not her personal, support throughout.

1. Playing to the Shi‘ite Faction

Nur Jahān’s rise to power is commonly seen as the most public part of an increasingly dominant Persian presence at the Mughal court. Although there is debate as to just how important Nur Jahān’s influence was—some arguing that she alone masterminded the Persian infiltration, and others that she wielded the power she did only because the Persian network was already in place—there is no doubt that with Nur Jahān Shi‘ite factionalism became an active political (and sometimes religious) issue. Soon after her marriage to Jahāṅgīr in 1611, Nur Jahān formed a ruling junta which held the government in its control, in some fashion or another, for most of her time on the throne. Composed of Nur Jahān, her father I’timād-ud-daula, her brother, Aṣaf Khān, and the most skillful of her stepsons, Shah Jahān, the junta operated efficiently until about 1622 when, with I’timād-ud-daula’s death and Shah Jahān’s increasing need for independence, the junta as originally composed broke up. Thereafter, until Jahāṅgīr’s death in 1627, Nur Jahān ruled more or less alone, though she suffered the continued interference of her indomitable and duplicitous brother who damaged more often than served her cause.

10. Ta‘iminma-i Wāki‘-i Jahāṅgīrī in Elliot and Dowson (E&D), VI, 399.
(Āṣaf Khān, after successfully imprisoning his sister in Lahore in 1627, went on to become the highest ranking minister under Shāh Jahān, his protégé during Jahāngīr’s time and, since 1612, his son-in-law as well.)

The rule of the junta, supported as it was by the wide range of lesser Persian appointments spread throughout the empire, was made possible primarily by two conditions: the considerable influence of Nur Jahan and the exceptional competence and distinction of the Persian families involved. I’timād-ud-daula, who had left Iran after the misfortunes of his political patrons, was of a personally gifted and widely cultured lineage. The male members of his family were known as accomplished poets and litterateurs, and their skills in intimate counsel and conversation had made them excellent choices for appointment at various of the courts. I’timād-ud-daula himself, though not distinguished at verse, was nevertheless a wise adviser and patient minister whose excellent judgment and consistent common sense were marred only by an occasional burst of greed.

His family and the extended Iranian family of Aqa Mulla, who were allied by marriage and who were also at the Indian court, contributed substantially to the sophistication, erudition, and overall courtly ambience of the Jahāngīrī period.

The Persian network operated alongside many others in the large arena of secular power and took as its main agenda the preservation of family interests. It did not, for the most part, however, act as a religious block promoting or proselytizing for its own religious interests, since Jahāngīr’s fairly open policy encouraged a live-and-let-live atmosphere for all concerned. But there were times when family interests (i.e., the interests of Nur Jahan) were threatened and when the network (i.e., Nur Jahan) needed to resort to the religious/Shī‘īe overlay as a rationale for its responses. In one case in 1619, for example, Jahāngīr called to court the Sufi, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindī, for apparently spreading hypocrisy and deceit in the region and sent him to the fort at Gwalior for what turned out to be a year’s imprisonment. Although a number of explanations can be given for this somewhat bizarre action, one likely influence was Nur Jahan who, say scholars like Friedmann, had been insulted by Sirhindī’s earlier anti-Shī‘ī remarks. Although she may actually have been angered by Sirhindī’s polemics, she rarely operated from such purely religious

15. Nur Jahan was born in Kandahar as her family traveled south to India, and at that time was given the name Mihrunniṣa. Upon her marriage to Jahāngīr in 1611 she was given the title Nur Mahal “Light of the Palace,” by which she is known to some of the foreign travelers including the English, and sometime later (certainly by 1614, note Tūzuk, I, 206) the title Nur Jahan “Light of the World.” See Muhammad Hādī, E&D, VI, 398 and the Iqābalnama, E&D, VI, 405.

16. Says Muhammad Hādī: I’timād-ud-daula “was so charitably disposed that no one ever left his door dissatisfied; but in the taking of bribes he certainly was most uncompromising and fearless,” E&D, VI, 397. Pieter van den Broecke notes one instance in which I’timād-ud-daula was accused of “misappropriating” Rs. 50,000 for which he was arrested and fined Rs. 200,000. Pieter van den Broecke, A Contemporary Dutch Chronicle of Moghal India, trans. Brij Naraṇ and Sri Ram Sharma (Calcutta: Sasil Gupta (India) Limited, 1957), pp. 39-40.

17. See Findly, “Jahāngīr and the Sūfīs.”
motives. Rather, since the year was 1619 and the bonds of the junta were already beginning to fray at the edges, Nur Jahan is more likely to have been somewhat nervous about the known alliance between Sirhindī and her colleague Shāh Jahān. Hoping to cut off an avenue of power and support from her newly restless stepson, she would have had no qualms in charging the shaikh with anti-Shī‘ī rhetoric and thus, on the grounds of the shaikh’s religious intolerance, in encouraging Jahāngīr to rein in the unruly saint. 19

The overlay of religion was also present in Nur Jahan’s efforts against the family of Shaikh Salīm Chishti which she made in favor of her own non-Sunni lineage. Shaikh Salīm had successfully prophesied to the sonless Akbar that the emperor would some day have three sons. 20 The first of these was Jahāngīr who, in thanksgiving, had made a practice of promoting and otherwise honoring the descendants of Shaikh Salīm. Husain has argued that the continued and benevolent patronage of this Chishti family, however, began to come to a decided end around the year 1621, the period when Nur Jahan, now just beyond the junta, had begun taking more complete power into her own hands. 21

It happened that before she was married to Jahāngīr, Nur Jahan had been married to a former attendant at the Iranian court of Shāh Ismā‘īl II who, on coming to India, had so distinguished himself in combat that Jahāngīr had given him the title of Sher Afgan. 22 This soldier, now married to the young Mihrunnisa as a part of his reward, was stationed in Bengal when a confrontation broke out in May of 1607 between him and a foster-brother of Jahāngīr’s, Qutbuddīn Khān Koka, who was by chance a descendant of Shaikh Salīm’s. In the ensuing fray both Qutbuddīn and Sher Afgan were killed, each at the hands of the other in a particularly bloody and unsavory series of attacks. 23 Although Jahāngīr grievously mourned the loss of Qutbuddīn 24 and took decided action against Sher Afgan’s family (Mihrunnisa and the couple’s one daughter, Lāḍī, however, were taken back to the emperor’s harem to live out the ensuing years as handmaidens), the longer lasting repercussions were exacted instead against Qutbuddīn’s family. Harboring a need to redress the death of her first husband, it is thought, Nur Jahan finally took revenge against the family members of Sher Afgan’s murderer, i.e., the descendants of Shaikh Salīm, by systematically cutting them out of the promotional structures at court. This theory, first hinted at by Husain, 25

23. The persistent rumors that Qutbuddīn had actually been sent to kill Sher Afgan so that Jahāngīr could marry his wife are problematic, but there are too many contingencies of timing and providential location to make any such theory seriously plausible.
accounts for the dramatic loss in stature for the Chishtī family beginning around 1621, and suggests a process of demotion that could easily have been covered (in the face of Jahāngīr's continued ill feelings for Sher Afgan) by a pro-Shī'ī polemic which blasted the Chishtīs' Sunnism. Jahāngīr was losing interest in all the Chishtīs about this time anyway—most dramatically in the worship of Muṣṭafā Chishtī of Ajmer—and the rise of such things as Persianized ornament in architecture could well reflect an increasing Shī'ite overlay to the more deep-seated personal grievances of Ṣūr Jahan.

Shī'ite factionalism was evident, finally, in Ṣūr Jahan's advocacy of the official policy of religious tolerance. As noted above, Jahāngīr's support of religious pluralism at the court, though initially perhaps a nominal holdover from his father's reign, was in time an authentic part of his official policy as well as of his own spiritual presence. While it would not have been unusual for a wife to disagree with, or even to campaign against, a husband's public platform, in this case it was to Ṣūr Jahan's benefit, and the benefit of her Shī'ite allies, to support Jahāngīr's religious pluralism wherever it might be manifest. Even though the Islam of Mughal India was a loosely knit network of competing factions, orthodox Sunnism (promoted by the likes of Bādāmī and of Naqshbandī advocates) was a decided force in the culture, and to promote an exclusivistic brand of Shī'ism would have been a dangerous course indeed.

Although Ṣūr Jahan's support of a policy of religious tolerance was designed to protect her Shī'ite alliances, it appeared in such a variety of forms that it may well have been a commitment of genuine spiritual depth. In addition to promoting non-Shī'ite forms of Islam, as in her participation in the 'urs festival in Ajmer, Ṣūr Jahan seems to have been particularly open to the prevalent practices of Hinduism. A large number of the girls she sponsored in marriage were probably Hindu, and Figure 1's depiction of the Hindu Holī festival as kept in the Jahāngīrī zamāna suggests little hesitation on Ṣūr Jahan's part to celebrate events (here, the divine sport of Kṛṣṇa) outside her faith. Moreover, in building her Nur Sarai (traveler's rest house) in Jalandhar Ṣūr Jahan created a comfortable mix of traditional Islamic abstract forms, Persian trees of paradise, Mughal court figures, and Hindu elephants and lotuses [see Figure 2]. Furthermore, Pal goes so far as to say that it "was due perhaps to the influence of Ṣūr Jahan, the favorite queen of Jahangir...that women became more popular as the subject matter of painting."27 Mughal painting under Akbar traditionally showed women as either secluded and veiled inmates of the harem or exhibiting some decidedly deviant behavior, while Jahāngīrī women instead lounged at the court with open bodices

26. See the Persian-style images used by Ṣūr Jahan on the inlaid marble tomb of her father Ḥumād-ud-daula in Agra, which was begun in 1622.

27. Pratapaditya Pal, Court Paintings of India. 16th-19th Centuries (New York: Navin Kumar, 1983), p. 44.
Figure 2. Ornamental Relief, Western Gateway, Nur Sarai, Jalandhar, Punjab. Courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi.
and midriffs. The influence of Nūr Jahān in the Jahāngīrī period, then, undoubtedly carried with it the Hindu celebration of sensuality and bodily pleasure as itself an acceptable vehicle to salvation. Finally, Nūr Jahān gave at least passive support to Jahāngīr’s increasingly waning interest in Christianity. The letters of the Portuguese Jesuit, Father Joseph de Castro, written in the summer of 1627, for example, suggest that Nūr Jahān and Jahāngīr had asked to visit the Church in Lahore and that the emperor, oddly, had wanted to eat and drink inside it. Thus whether hollow or genuine, Nūr Jahān’s commitment to religious pluralism was a pervasive fact and, probably, the safest assurance she could establish for a strong Shi‘ite foothold in the empire.

II. The Harem as Kitchen Cabinet

The seclusion of large numbers of women by men of the upper classes was common in Hindu and Muslim India long before the establishment of the Mughal empire, but with the Mughals harem life became grander and more expansive than it had ever been before. Jahāngīr’s zānāna is said to have housed between three hundred and a thousand women, comprising a broad mix of caste, religious, and national background, and one noble in his empire, Nasiruddīn, is said to have “collected as many as 15,000 women in his harem.” The practice of taking multiple wives was considered, aside from the pleasure afforded the male principal, a wise move for two reasons: first, as an act of family planning, it assured the emperor in this case that he would have sons to carry on the empire, and second, as an act of political expediency, it allowed the emperor to make marriage alliances with rivals and potential enemies and thus ensure, in quick fashion, stability and compliance all around. Furthermore, the practice of excluding these wives provided greater internal control over their activities as well as a substantial measure of status. Any household where women didn’t have to work in the open was thought to be eminently well-off, and the more women the emperor could house and maintain within his quarters, the greater his stature in the eyes of his subjects.

Whatever the actual functions of the harem as a political and social structure, it was legitimized by a code of morality which both complemented women (women were to keep the honor of a society sacred by their conduct) and denigrated them (women were too weak to do this on their own and for it needed the constant protection of men) at the same time. The chastity of a woman, except with the emperor, was an issue so sacred that it precipitated elaborate layers of protection around the zānāna—e.g., armed female guards, hordes of eunuch middlemen, doors
locked from the outside, and regular reports to the throne— and ideally guaranteed them from harm during war and devastation. “It proceeds from religion,” says Dow, in commenting on his late Mughal texts, that what “men are most solicitous to secure” is honor, and an honor that can only be found in the chastity of their women. While the paraphernalia of harem protection supported the religious overlay of moral probity for zanānā women, that it be ironclad was not absolutely necessary given the more acute functions of the institution. The fairly widespread practices of adulterous trysting, eunuch seduction, and women’s business ventures beyond the walls were well within acceptable boundaries, it seems, so long as the political alliances by marriage remained stable and the birth of a significant number of sons could be assured.

One of the advantages of being an older or more senior woman in the harem was that such women were allowed to sit behind the perforated screen or grille (known as jali work) which was situated close to the emperor during his various darbār sessions with nobles or the public. Although the screen was designed to ensure privacy while allowing the free flow of light and air, it also allowed the women there to hear the goings-on in the official quarters of the court. Such an anonymous presence of women at official functions was taken for granted by regular Indian appointees, but for a foreigner like Roe it proved considerably disconcerting:

At one side in a window were his two Principal wives, whose Curiosity made them brake little holes in a grate of reede that hung before yt to gaze on mee. I saw first their fingers, and after laying their faces close nowe one eye. Now another; sometyme I could discern the full proportion. . . . When I look'd up they retyr'd, and were so merry that I supposed they laughd at mee.34

While women usually listened indifferently to the petitions, arguments, and discussions which passed before the emperor during these sessions as a matter of course. some very senior women with decided cases to make often spoke directly through the grille to the emperor in the hopes of influencing his judgment. Such tactics were increasingly used by Nūr Jāhān who, even though she had Jāhāngīr’s ear in the private rooms of the zanāna, more and more made her cases in public as well. That decisions were her decisions most of the time and not Jāhāngīr’s was increasingly obvious to visitors at court, and many resented this de facto rule of the empress. Says Roe: “The King. . . . had yeelded himself into the handes of a women. . . . Hee either sees not the ambition or trusts it too far in Confidence of his owne Power, and consentes.”35 As Jāhāngīr sank deeper and deeper into intoxicated oblivion, Nūr Jāhān’s judgment thus spread

34. Roe, II, 321.
35. Roe, II, 293.
quickly through all matters of imperial jurisdiction, whether it covered issues of investment, movements of the army, promotion, or treason.

In public and in private, Nur Jahan’s power and influence were thus complete. Although the only thing that separated her from the absolute authority of a real sovereign was the reading of the *khutba* in her name on Friday noon in the mosques, she did enjoy something which the more legitimate Jahangir did not: the protection of the harem. While the physical trappings of the *zanana* did not ultimately amount to much, the moral trappings did. Guarded by the religious hedge of separation for the purposes of honor, Nur Jahan was assured of not ever actually having to dirty or bloody her own hands in the real world of politics but at the same time was also assured of exerting enormous sway in its dealings. As emperor she would have had to take the considerable consequences of her often brutal decisions, but protected behind the “grille of state” she had all the rights and few of the responsibilities of a regular head of government. Thus, while most women allowed the harem to circumscribe their freedom, Nur Jahan used its protective code of honor to expand hers considerably.

III. Hagiographic Ideals of Women

While Shi‘ite factionalism and the moral protection of the harem were religious structures which Nur Jahan could manipulate actively, there were other such structures which she could play to only passively. She was empress solely because it was Jahangir who was on the throne, and in many ways her power was a direct result of the peculiar dynamics and propensities of his very singular personality. We have noted above that in stepping into the vacuum on the throne in 1611, Nur Jahan was taking advantage of Jahangir’s dependencies on alcohol and opium as well as of his preference for the symbolic trappings of power over real power brokerage. She was also taking advantage of other things as well. In his “religious confusion” Jahangir had allowed certain figurative images involving women to take hold and, caught up in their power as religious symbols, had let them shape his ultimate personal and political needs. We will argue here, then, that Nur Jahan fit favorably into the dynamics of two hagiographic ideals, the Muslim Khadija image and the Christian Madonna and Child, and that through them she indulged Jahangir to invest substantial power in her as it fed upon his deepest personal needs. A third structure, the Hindu image of divine consorts, was also an issue in that Hindu views of marriage and of the mutual powers of men and women in marriage projected views of exaggerated symbiosis onto the couple, while their role as rulers in luxury encouraged popular views of divinity.

36. Says Muhammad Hadi: “Nur Jahan managed the whole affairs of the realm, and honours of every description were at her disposal, and nothing was wanting to make her an absolute monarch but the reading of the *khutba* in her name,” E&D, VI, 398.
One would think that Nur Jahān's advanced age (thirty-five) at the time of her second marriage would have been a drawback to the fashioning of a new alliance. Instead, it seems to have been a decided advantage. Of all the women in Jahāngīr's large entourage, it was the older, senior, more nurturant women who had the greatest influence on him, to whom he gave the greatest honor, and over whom he grieved the most when they died. Islamic family life encourages tremendous bonding between mother and son and, while for the mother the son is always the chief male in her life (all children were raised in the Mughal zanāna, boys included), for the son his mother is often the only figure who can successfully mediate a crisis, no matter how old he is, and the only person who receives unconditional affection. (Note how often the emperor Akbar went out of his way to carry the litter of his mother and how important it was for him, finally, to hold up her bier.)

Jahāngīr was particularly needy in this respect, and his years were filled with mothering figures who supported him from one crucial moment to the next. His own natural mother was a Hindu princess from Amber known by the title of Maryam-uz-zamānī. She was memorialized in paintings such as "The Birth of Jahāngīr," now housed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, in which the general celebration of women as bearers of sons was coupled with the specific joy of Akbar over finally having an heir to the throne. Maryam-uz-zamānī was best known as an adventurous patron of trading ships and hostess for many of the imperial birthday parties at home and, although Jahāngīr's comments on her death in 1623 were brief, his affection was consuming. Other women figured prominently as well. There was Maryam Makānī, his paternal grandmother, who frequently interceded on his behalf in the turbulent times with his father; Salīma Sultan Begam, another wife of Akbar's who has become best known in history for shouting out through Jahāngīr's darbār screen a plea of intercession on behalf of a wayward old foster-brother of Akbar's named Mīrza 'Azīz Koka; and the childless Ruqayya Sultan Begam, yet another wife of Akbar's, who took Mihrunnisa in as a handmaid after Sher Afgan died and employed her for the four years before her marriage to Jahāngīr. The mother of Qutbuddīn Khān Koka, who died only a few months before her son in 1607, was also a favorite. She had been one of Jahāngīr's wet nurses (making her son the emperor's foster-brother), "a mother to me or even kinder than my own mother," and her death was ranked together with her son's as the two worst events

40. Tūzuk, I, 84–85.
for Jahāngīr since coming to the throne in 1605. Finally, though not exhaustively, was the mother of Nūr Jahān herself, Asmat Begam, who, though honored as the wife of Jahāngīr’s most trusted minister I’timād-ud-daula, was a wise and patient counsel in her own right and must certainly have been the central nurturing hub of the junta in its heyday. When she died in late 1621, Jahāngīr gave this eulogy:

Without exaggeration, in purity of disposition and in wisdom and the excellencies that are the ornament of women no Mother of the Age was ever born equal to her, and I did not value her less than my own mother.

Thus the Mughal harem with its many multiple wives and swarms of suckling cohorts expanded the possibilities for the Muslim divinization of the mother ideal. The older women around Jahāngīr, and especially those who had privy relationships with him, were at once self-suffering and indulgent and at the same time sensible, learned, and strong. The harem, then, encouraged mother-son bonding to the extreme and, while it may seem to have dispersed the nurturant responsibilities among many, in at least Jahāngīr’s case, it served to accent and develop the filial needs almost out of proportion.

This history of orientation toward the mother was surely operative in Jahāngīr’s marriage to Nūr Jahān. If he already had his choice of young and beautiful wives, as well as sufficient sons to withstand any calamity, why take on, now in his early forties, another woman who had already been married before and who was well past what was thought to be her sexual prime? Nūr Jahān could no doubt compete with any woman already living in the zanāna in beauty, wit, and cultivation, and no doubt Jahāngīr fell passionately and hopelessly in love with her. His feelings, however, must have been complicated by the loss of many of the “mothers” around him to old age and by his increasing weakness due to dependence upon drugs. A woman with the strength, stamina, and experienced wisdom to accommodate these needs would certainly have been the ideal match in his years of advancing middle age. That Nūr Jahān’s primary relationship to him was in fact a mothering one is seen less in the fact that they had no children together and more in the kind of praises he gives her in his memoirs:

Nūr-Jahān Begam... was fonder of me [than anyone];... Nūr Jahān Begam, whose skill and experience are greater than those of the physicians, especially as they are brought to bear through affection and sympathy.... She, by degrees, lessened my wine, and kept me from things that did not suit me, and food that disagreed with me.

Note here that Jahāngīr expresses what he thinks Nūr Jahān feels toward him (i.e., the child as passive recipient of affection) and that the actions

41. Tūzuk, I, 115.
42. Tūzuk, II, 216.
43. Their childlessness together can be attributed to many things: his impotence from drugs, her near-menopausal condition, his having four sons already, her distraction by political issues, etc. There is no indication, however, that their relationship was celibate.
44. Tūzuk, I, 266; II, 213, 214.
which are accentuated here are those in which Nur Jahan guides and comforts, rather than teases or seduces.

The model for Jahangir's marriage to an older woman who subsequently becomes his nurturing companion as well as his lover is given in Islam as far back as Muhammad and his first wife Khadija. Although there is no existent record of Jahangir's appeal to the Prophet's choice in his own marriage to Nur Jahan, the prototype of the religious founder's marrying his main patron, confidant, and religious backer, a woman who was also some years older than he, must surely have given a kind of authority, if only subconscious, to the act of 1611. Khadija had been an independent woman of property who had already had two husbands by the time she and Muhammad had met. She had originally employed him to be an agent on her caravan to Syria, and when he successfully concluded the trip, she proposed marriage to him. While the parallel between the two alliances here is limited (that both women were married before is purely coincidental), the pattern of close intimacy with a wise, influential, and older woman is not to be overlooked. Coupled with the strong mother-son bonding so encouraged in Muslim families, the Muhammad-Khadija model provides, in this way, a sanction for widened boundaries in marriage which could incorporate as it does here considerable filial needs. Nur Jahan could not have known what she was getting into by way of personal dynamics with Jahangir when she married him. That she could respond with such appropriateness is testimony both to Jahangir's perception about her and to his honesty about himself.

Christianity: Madonna and Christ Child

The mother-son relationship which so fascinated Jahangir in Islam had its complement in the Christian image of the Madonna and Christ Child. More than any other religious image, it was this one which took hold of Jahangir, both publicly and privately, and which was the cause both of his entertaining Portuguese Jesuits for so long at court and of his encouraging trade with Europe, particularly in objects of art.

Even as a prince from a very early age, Jahangir contracted with Jesuit fathers who traded out of Goa to bring him whatever quality portraits of the holy mother and child they could find. Father Pierre Du Jarric notes that, as a prince in Agra (probably ca. 1604-1605), Jahangir showed the Fathers... many proofs of his devotion to our Savior and His holy Mother, whose images he held in the highest veneration. Indeed, the Fathers could make him no more acceptable present than a well-executed representation of either.45

William Finch, an early English merchant at the court, remarks several times that he saw palace galleries of the emperor's hung with pictures of Christ and the Virgin Mary,46 and Hawkins mentions a black throne of

46. Finch in Foster, Early Travels, pp. 163, 184.
Jahāṅgīr's with "pictures of Our Lady and Christ...graven in stone" at the upper end. Moreover, the contemporary narrative of another Jesuit, Father Fernão Guerreiro, indicates that "so high is his [Jahāṅgīr's] esteem for Christ and our Lady, that all the orders and letters which he sends," whether they be to Muslims, Hindus, or Christians, are stamped with wax impressions of the two figures.

While Jahāṅgīr's passion seems to have been for images of both Christian figures, the Madonna held an especially high place in his regard. Du Jarric notes that the father Akbar "showed special devotion and affection for the glorious Virgin Mary," and that his eldest son "showed a similar devotion." Once Jahāṅgīr got exceptionally angry that the Jesuit Fathers "had not brought him any picture of our Lady from Goa," and he went immediately to another group which was about to go there and charged them "not to forget to bring a beautiful picture of our Lady." Some time later (1623–24), in fact, the Italian traveler, Pietro Della Valle, reports that "an Image of the Virgin Mary...[used to stand] expos'd to publick view" on one of the open balconies, having been placed there by Jahāṅgīr "who, they say, was devoted to her." By Della Valle's time this image had disappeared and he surmises that it may have been taken away by Shāh Jahān who was a known enemy to Christians. Whether it was taken away by Shāh Jahān (prior to the outbreak of his rebellion in 1622) or whether it disappeared under Jahāṅgīr's own waning interest in Christianity is not, however, the central issue here. More significant is that images of the Madonna, and of her relationship to the Christ Child, were of substantial import to Jahāṅgīr from his early days as a prince and that they remained so throughout his formative years with Nur Jahan.

Pictorial examples of Jahāṅgīr's profound attachment to Madonna and Christ images abound in the extant collections of Jahāṅgīr miniatures. One particularly noteworthy painting is the front cover illustration, "Jahāṅgīr and Prince Khurram Feasted by Nur Jahan," which depicts the festivities given by Nur Jahan on the occasion of Khurram's conquest of the Deccan in 1617, the occasion, in fact, on which he received the title Shāh Jahān. This painting is thought to contain "the only known contemporary likeness of Nur Jahan," a problematic claim if we are right about the identity of the woman in Figure 1, and shows her to be "a delicate woman of rare charm and beauty." Important here are the small pictures of Christ and the Madonna which have been placed, together with

---

47. Hawkins in Foster, Early Travels, p. 115.
52. Asok Kumar Das, Splendour of Mughal Painting (Bombay: Vakils, Feffer & Simons Limited, 1986), p. 38. Concerning her physical attributes, some argue that she was tall and imposing, but this painting and the Chester Beauty painting (Figure 1) show her to be fine-featured and diminutive.
portraits of notable Europeans, along the upper border of the zanāna wall confirming the contemporaneity, at least, of Jahāngīr’s affections for both women. Moreover, fully detailed images of the Madonna and Christ Child are found in some abundance in Jahāngīr’s albums: some are European originals, some European copies of European originals, and some Mughal copies of (or elaborations on) European originals. One example is the back cover illustration, “Madonna and Child with Angels,” which, though relatively weak as a painting, nevertheless demonstrates the kind of iconography so pleasing to Jahāngīr. This particular painting is, according to Beach, a European copy of a European original and was probably painted at one of Jahāngīr’s most needy moments. When no picture appeared for him from Goa, for example, Jahāngīr had one copied from another painting:

As the Fathers had brought with them a Portuguese painter, the Prince straightaway ordered him to make a copy of the picture of our Lady which they had brought from Goa.

Although it is clear that Madonna and Christ Child images were important to Jahāngīr, it was not documented at the time why. Some may argue that Jahāngīr was a pious man, as his reverence of Muṣīnuddīn Chishtī shows, and that general Christian devotion to these figures may simply have infected him as well. This explanation does not account for the power of his feelings, however, and in view of this we are obliged to turn to the content of the images. For the Mughals, as for Muslims in general, Madonna and Child were prototypical reflections of the ideal mother and son. Hümayūn’s sister (and Jahāngīr’s great-aunt) Gulbadan once wrote of a noblewoman who had met her sick son in Mathura: “From Mathura the two, mother and son, like Jesus and Mary, set out for Āgra.” As Christian exemplars of the mother-son bonding which is so central in every Muslim family and which achieved its exaggerated form in the multiple mothers of the harem, Mary and Jesus proved timely. With European paintings, drawings, and etchings so easily available from the Portuguese Jesuits, it is no wonder that Jahāngīr indulged his personal needs through the imagery of a neighboring and related tradition.

We have already noted that Nur Jahan may well have fallen into a mothering relationship with her second husband. Although we have no evidence that Jahāngīr actually associated Nur Jahan and the Madonna as a conscious act, we do know that they were contemporaneous concerns and that they were probably important to him for the same reasons. The front cover illustration with its visual conjunction of an affectionate Jahāngīr and Nur Jahan and of recognizable Christ and Madonna images is our best evidence of some connection. Gazing upon his wife at the

height of his own son's glory, Jahāngīr could easily be presenting himself to the mother for approval and affirmation. Painted in 1617, at the height of the junta’s power, this painting is the most convincing evidence we have that Nur Jahan’s sway over her husband may well have derived, at least in part, from the earlier sway of the Madonna.

**Hinduism: Divine Consorts**

While Nur Jahan almost certainly benefited from the power of the Khadija and Madonna images over Jahāngīr, the imperial couple together must have benefited from their likeness to the divine consorts of Hinduism. Though not always kind to Hinduism, Jahāngīr remarked favorably at times upon the Hindu concept of *ardhāṅgini*, the notion that, in marriage, husband and wife are inextricably bound in a unit in which each is spiritually barren without the other. This concept applies to gods and their divine consorts as well, suggesting an interdependence of powers and a shared set of responsibilities that give the woman in each pair considerable stature. While Nur Jahan and Jahāngīr are never actually compared to a specific divine couple in any of the extant records, the parallels between them and, say, Pārvatī and Śiva are remarkable.

The mythology of Pārvatī-Śiva describes, in brief, a married couple in which the woman plays a dominant role, both before and after the union, and in which she is responsible for pursuing most of the matters pertaining to the real world. The male in this model has a passive, cerebral persona which can occasionally break out into intoxicated states of madness, symbolized in dancing; the female, on the other hand, has an active, material persona whose energy (as Śakti) moves and accomplishes things in the realm of ordinary phenomena. Jahāngīr might well have been a real-life Śiva, for his bouts with violence recall the god’s madness, his interest in asceticism, the god’s primordial *yoga*, and his sovereign passivity, the god’s own distance from the world; and Nur Jahan might equally well have been a real-life Pārvatī with her single-minded ambitions, her unceasing energies, and her love for the realia of humans. Moreover, as Pārvatī’s role vis-à-vis Śiva is to tame his dysfunctional aloofness and to stabilize his frenetic deviancies through the socializing institutions of marriage, so Nur Jahan made Jahāngīr’s rule an effective whole by using their marriage as the main vehicle of his sovereignty, by curbing his profligate weakness for drink and drug through her ministrations, and by propping up the tatters of his imperial house with symbols of strength, benevolence, and control. As Pārvatī provides for Śiva, one could argue, so Nur Jahan provided for Jahāngīr in a marriage which complemented and completed and without which he could not have been whole.

No doubt the Hindu subjects of the Mughal king and queen projected patterns of divinity onto them as they had onto many other figures over

---

the centuries who exhibited unusual qualities. We argue here, however, that the peculiar nature of the Nūr Jahān-Jahāngīr relationship might have so paralleled a divine relationship like that of Pārvatī-Śiva that it brought even greater recognition of possible divine attribution. No evidence exists today to confirm this, but we do know from van den Broecke that whenever Nūr Jahān went out, people played and sang before her, and that on all accounts “she was received by every one with marks of excessive honour and reverence, even like a goddess.”57 Certainly this description does not confirm that one or both of the couple were actually thought of as a godhead, but it does suggest that they may have actively played to popular views of the divine (as may have all the Mughals) in order to enhance their authority and influence in the empire.

Nūr Jahān, then, was not a simply beautiful and charismatic woman who used her personal gifts and fortuitous positioning at court to garner power. She also had at hand religious structures and symbols which could be manipulated advantageously in the vacuum left by Jahāngīr’s addictions. To say that it was luck alone, however, which afforded her the chance to move into the real channels of power is to forget all those women of similar station who, for whatever reasons, did nothing with it.

57. van den Broecke, p. 77.