

The Power of the *Padshah*: Appropriation as Revenge in 17th-Century Mughal South Asia

Mehreen Chida-Razvi

Abstract

Shah Jahan, the fourth Mughal Emperor, would not have ascended to the Mughal throne if his step-mother, Nur Jahan, had her way. The two initially worked together to assure Shah Jahan's succession on the death of his father, Jahangir, but in the final years of Jahangir's reign Nur Jahan began to poison the king's mind against his heir-apparent. She succeeded in this endeavour and Shah Jahan only came to the throne through the support of his father-in-law, who, on the death of Jahangir, effectively imprisoned Nur Jahan and set up an interim puppet-king until Shah Jahan was able to claim the throne himself.

This scenario resulted in Shah Jahan having a great hatred for his step-mother when he became emperor in 1628, which in turn led to a great act of revenge. This occurred in the realms of the arts and concerned his father's mausoleum in Lahore. History, in the form of Shah Jahan's court chronicles, tells us that Shah Jahan was the patron of this tomb complex. This paper claims that Nur Jahan was heavily involved in the planning and construction of this mausoleum, and as part of a wider attempt to effectively erase Nur Jahan from Mughal court life and, indeed, from history, Shah Jahan appropriated complete responsibility for the tomb's construction during her own lifetime through the writing of his court histories. This not being enough, he also altered the Royal Burial Complex, originally intended to contain only the tomb gardens of Jahangir and Nur Jahan. However, Shah Jahan ordered the construction of his father-in-law's tomb enclosure between those of the royal couple. By doing so he further removed Nur Jahan from importance in the eyes of history as her tomb no longer occupied the premier site next to that of her husband, the deceased emperor.¹

Key Words: Mughal, art, architecture, Shah Jahan, Nur Jahan, Jahangir, tomb, Lahore.

1. Appropriation as Revenge

Imagine a 17th-century Mughal prince, understanding from an early age that he would inherit the throne of the most luxurious dynasty of the era and reign over a geographic area that included much of present-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan.² Expecting that one day this landscape would belong to him, accustomed to the pomp, ceremony and privileges that came with this designation, and having the explicit approval of his father, the *Padshah* (Emperor), as his heir-

2 *The Power of the Padshah: Appropriation as Revenge in 17th-Century Mughal South Asia*

apparent, imagine how the prince would feel if someone tried to take this position away from him and instead championed their own protégée as the successor to the Mughal throne? Certainly the prince would ultimately want to take revenge on such an individual.

This was the situation of Shah Jahan, the third son of Jahangir, the fourth Mughal emperor, some years after his father's marriage to Nur Jahan Begum, the daughter of an important courtier. Despite his step-mother's attempts to the contrary, Shah Jahan ultimately became the fifth Mughal *Padshah* after the death of his father, but her attempts to remove him from the succession left him with a deep hatred towards Nur Jahan, so much so that he went out of his way to revenge himself on her by obliterating her memory from many aspects of history. One of the most overt methods he used to accomplish this was by removing all traces of her association with the construction of Jahangir's mausoleum, instead appropriating full responsibility for the creation of the structure to himself. In his position as the *Padshah*, such an act of revenge would not have been difficult to accomplish.

2. The Power Struggle in the Mughal Court in the years 1622-1627

Before discussing the patronage of Jahangir's mausoleum, it is necessary to discuss the power struggle at the Mughal court in the later years of Jahangir's life. Prince Khurram was acknowledged as Jahangir's heir-apparent, being awarded the title of Shah Jahan ('Sovereign of the World') in 1616 and granted privileges no other Mughal prince had yet been allowed. For much of Jahangir's reign (r.1605-27) Shah Jahan enjoyed the great favour of his father and worked in tandem with other influential people at court to further his own aim of eventually becoming emperor; this included his step-mother, Nur Jahan, Jahangir's favourite wife.³

Interfamilial politics played a part in this shared goal as Nur Jahan's brother, Asaf Khan, was also Shah Jahan's father-in-law and an important, high-ranking court official himself. This brother and sister team, along with their father, I'timad ud-Daula, wielded immense power at the Mughal court but with the latter's death in 1622 fissures began to appear between brother and sister. Until 1622, the three worked in conjunction to maintain Shah Jahan as Jahangir's heir-apparent. Nur Jahan, however, realised that her power at court would be drastically reduced if Shah Jahan succeeded to the throne. As Jahangir's Queen she was an immensely powerful figure, having rights and a level of influence previously unattained by any woman at the Mughal court. Perhaps it was due to this that she married her daughter from her first marriage, Ladli Begum, to Jahangir's fourth son, Prince Shahryar, in 1621, and after her father's death began an overt campaign to make Shahryar Jahangir's new choice as heir to the throne. Such was Nur Jahan's influence over Jahangir that a rift occurred between him and Shah Jahan which lasted effectively the remainder of Jahangir's life. Asaf Khan, on the other hand, never wavered in his support for Shah Jahan as the next Mughal *Padshah* and his

alliance with his sister fractured as a result. Such was the power-struggle centred at the Mughal court in the latter years of Jahangir's reign and which subsequently affected the construction of his mausoleum.

In 1622 Shah Jahan went into open rebellion against Jahangir, before being 'reconciled' and sent to campaign in the Deccan. During this time, Nur Jahan's power held firm and her perpetual dismissal of Shah Jahan had a continued effect on Jahangir's relationship with his former favourite. All the scheming on her part came to naught, however, for after Jahangir's death Asaf Khan quickly moved to limit her ability to influence the succession.⁴ Shah Jahan was eventually crowned in Agra in February 1628, Shahryar blinded and killed, and Nur Jahan effectively exiled to Lahore.

3. Jahangir's Tomb: A Brief History of Construction and the Contemporary Documentation

Having established the political backdrop to its construction, let us now turn to the mausoleum of Jahangir, its patronage and the power of the *Padshah*. After ruling the Mughal Empire for twenty-two years, Jahangir, the fourth Mughal Emperor, died on October 24, 1627, at Rajaora, en route to Lahore from Kashmir. Immediately after, his body was transported to Shahdara, a suburb of Lahore, and buried there in the centre of a garden owned by his beloved wife, Nur Jahan.⁵ The next ten years saw the construction of a large square tomb surrounded by a pillared arcade, with four *minars* rising from its corners (Image 1), built in the centre of a *charbagh*, a classical Persian four-part garden.⁶ Of the monumental Imperial Mughal mausoleums, Jahangir's stands apart in multiple ways, the most immediately obvious being that it is the simplest in design and was located in the city of Lahore, a site which had no prior precedent for Imperial Mughal burials.⁷

As the tomb of Jahangir was built during the first ten years of Shah Jahan's reign, it is from the latter's court histories that the only contemporary documentation of the tomb's construction is found. 'Abd al-Hamid Lahauri's *Badshahnama*, the work regarded by many scholars as the primary and most authoritative history of Shah Jahan's reign, relates that Shah Jahan built the tomb in accordance with Jahangir's wishes for an orthodox Sunni burial, thus explaining its simplicity; that it took ten years to build; and that it cost ten *lakhs* of rupees,⁸ a comparatively small sum to spend on such an important structure.⁹ This information was then repeated by the remainder of the court chroniclers of Shah Jahan's reign, and has since been used by historians subsequently stating Shah Jahan as the patron of the mausoleum.

Shah Jahan was renowned even in his own time as a great and very involved architectural patron, and in the written sources from his reign the varied and numerous architectural projects he commissioned were discussed, warranting multiple lines of description which, at times, was quite detailed; this applies not only to the primary structures that were commissioned by the *Padshah* but also the

settings and secondary constructions. On Jahangir's tomb, however, there are only a few lines about the mausoleum which relay the information listed above, and nothing on the complex. If Shah Jahan was the patron of his father's tomb, why was more time not spent on discussing the structure of Jahangir's tomb or on other aspects of the tomb complex, including the subsidiary structures or the garden?¹⁰

It is the court chronicles of Shah Jahan's reign which are seen as irrefutable proof that he was the patron of his father's mausoleum, and as these documents mention only him, there is no written evidence to support the idea that anyone else may have had a role in the commissioning of Jahangir's tomb. However, a contrast between text and image occurs in regards to this structure, as there are many traits of the building which actually speak to the patronage of Nur Jahan.

4. Comparative Funerary Architecture of Nur Jahan

As there is not enough space here to discuss the multiple architectural commissions of Nur Jahan's that link the mausoleum of Jahangir to her patronage, two examples will have to suffice: the Tomb of I'timad ud-Daula (Image 2), the mausoleum she constructed for her parents in Agra between 1622 and 1628, and her own tomb in Shahdara (Image 3), within the same burial complex as that of her husband, built at some point between 1628 and 1645 during her exile in Lahore. In form, these two mausoleums have an immediate visual link with Jahangir's as they were all constructed as *takhtgah*, or 'platform tombs,' a style of funerary architecture that was, for the most part, peculiar to Jahangir's reign, and was the mausoleum style patronised by the emperor himself for members of the royal family, including his father, mother, and first wife. That Nur Jahan subsequently constructed both her parents' tomb and her own in the same style, and that Jahangir's mausoleum was the largest of the *takhtgah* funerary monuments constructed, is indicative of the importance placed on this particular tomb type by the royal couple. Shah Jahan, conversely, did not commission any tombs in this style. Furthermore, the design of the *takhtgah* tomb of I'timad ud-Daula appears as a diminutive precursor of Jahangir's: both are square structures with a single entrance on each side, with corner turrets/towers that were built as an integral part of the architecture and topped with *chattris*. Both contain the true graves of the deceased in the central chamber on the ground floor, while the false cenotaphs, a common feature in Mughal burials, were kept on a platform in the centre of the roof terrace. While today there is a marked difference in the external facades of these two structures, this was not always the case as what we see today at Jahangir's mausoleum is incomplete; originally there was an upper storey on the roof terrace with the cenotaph of the *Padshah* at its centre enclosed by some sort of pierced-railing system, possibly very similar to the type used to accentuate the second storey of I'timad ud-Daula's tomb.¹¹

Decoratively, there is also much in common between the tomb of Nur Jahan's parents and that of Jahangir, but the most pertinent for this discussion is the

inclusion at both sites of multiple instances of animate imagery. This was unheard of in relation to Mughal tomb decoration as these funerary sites, especially those of the emperors, were considered to be sacred; it should be remembered that in Islam the inclusion of figural imagery in a religious setting was forbidden. The inclusion of such animate imagery in their architecture and architectural decoration was something which characterised the building commissions of both Jahangir and Nur Jahan, setting their architecture apart from that of Shah Jahan, who very rarely employed such figural imagery as decoration in his buildings. There is only one instance that comes to mind in which he included such imagery in an architectural setting: on the wall behind the *jharoka* throne in the Public Audience Hall of the Red Fort in Delhi. Here, multiple inlaid *pietra dura* birds were placed around a *pietra dura* panel of Orpheus playing his lute surrounded by wild animals; the inclusion of such a scene by Shah Jahan in this instance was due to the strong, symbolic, political statement the Orpheus panel made about the ideals of Solomonic kingship, which were then reflected on Shah Jahan when he was enthroned in front of this image.¹²

Turning now to Nur Jahan's tomb and its strong visual relationship with Jahangir's, she purposefully built her mausoleum to look like a smaller version of her husband's, albeit without the *minars*. Furthermore, her tomb was also placed in the middle of a 16-part *charbagh*, just like her husband's. These traits speak to Nur Jahan's personal desire to visually relate the two sites.

The *takhtgah* tombs built for royal burials were commissioned by either Jahangir or Nur Jahan, so it is clear that this style resonated with each of them, so much so that it was chosen as the burial style for both of their respective tombs. The physical similarities between the tombs of Jahangir, Nur Jahan and the tomb of I'timad ud-Daula presented here may be viewed as circumstantial, but as the Mughals were exceptionally particular when it came to their architecture this would not have been the case. It is when one takes into account the personal and political backdrop to the construction of Jahangir's tomb that these 'circumstantial' points start to take on more meaning and can be used to argue against Shah Jahan's patronage of the structure.

5. The Revenge of the *Padshah* and the Displacement of Nur Jahan in the Production History of Jahangir's Mausoleum

It is my contention that contrary to the official court histories of Shah Jahan, Nur Jahan played a very strong role in the creation of Jahangir's mausoleum, both conceptually and financially, and that this explains many of the traits of the tomb which set it apart from the remainder of the monumental imperial Mughal mausoleums.¹³ There is a contradiction between text and image in relation to this monument, for while the contemporary texts ascribe responsibility of its construction to Shah Jahan, the mausoleum of Jahangir itself and the historical circumstances of its production speak of Nur Jahan's patronage. This is also

evident in the layout of the Royal Tomb Complex of Shahdara, although this cannot be fully explained at present due to space constraints. It is enough to say that the original layout of the Royal Tomb Complex was disrupted; as we see it today, containing the tomb gardens of Jahangir, Asaf Khan and Nur Jahan, is not the original configuration. Asaf Khan's tomb (Image 4) was a posthumous construction, commissioned by Shah Jahan after the death of his father-in-law in November 1641.¹⁴ Both his and Nur Jahan's tomb gardens, constructed in the immediate vicinity of Jahangir's tomb complex, were complete by Nur Jahan's death in 1645. The accepted chronology of construction of these three tombs and their corresponding gardens is that Jahangir's was built first, followed by Asaf Khan's, and Nur Jahan's was the final one to be constructed.

It is my contention that the original royal burial complex, as planned by Nur Jahan, contained only Jahangir's tomb complex and her own tomb garden. This is based on a reconstruction of Nur Jahan's original tomb garden enclosure, which indicates an overlap with the existing original walls of Asaf Khan's tomb garden. This would not have occurred if the layout of her tomb enclosure was planned after Asaf Khan's as both she and the architect of her complex would have taken into account the boundaries of the Imperial commission (it must be remembered that Shah Jahan ordered the construction of Asaf Khan's mausoleum in this location). However, as a figure weakened in power, if Nur Jahan's funerary enclosure was already planned and possibly already constructed at the time of Asaf Khan's death, Shah Jahan had the power to disrupt this planning and plant the tomb of his father-in-law in its present location, which would have resulted in the loss of the original layout of the funerary garden of the Dowager Queen. Furthermore, a visual disruption of the site was also created by the inclusion of Asaf Khan's mausoleum as it was constructed in a local Punjabi style, completely different from the *takhtgah* tombs of the Royal couple. Remembering the political backdrop and the enmity between Shah Jahan and Nur Jahan, the disruption to the original layout of Nur Jahan's tomb garden, which placed the royal couple adjacent to each other for eternity, can be seen as a malicious act of revenge on the part of Shah Jahan.

To say that a strong hatred existed for Nur Jahan by Shah Jahan would not be an exaggeration, and as such it appears that Shah Jahan went out of his way to alter Nur Jahan's place in history. This idea has been summarised succinctly by Ellison Banks Findley:

...through his court chroniclers, painters and artisans, Shah Jahan worked hard to sully the memory of his once-powerful stepmother, with the result that almost all of the historical works from his reign were explicitly critical of Nur Jahan and blamed her for much of Shah Jahan's early misfortune. This invidious spirit was so contagious that European writers of the early Shah Jahan years were infected and the opinions of valuable historians

like van den Broeke and Pelsaert, for example, became hostile whenever they turned to Nur Jahan. Shah Jahan did not stop with defamation, however, but launched a contemporaneous campaign “to wipe out all memory of her erstwhile sway.” As if to erase her presence from history, he withdrew from circulation all coins stamped with her name, contravening current practice of keeping coins issued by predecessors in circulation, and he cleansed his administration however else he could of her ubiquitous hand.¹⁵

By dissociating Nur Jahan with the burial site of Jahangir in his court histories, Shah Jahan was able to guarantee an eventual change in how history would remember the construction and therefore be sure of his own historical association with the site. This dissociation of Nur Jahan with the site’s patronage is evident not only in Shah Jahan’s court histories, but also in his alteration of the original plan of the Royal Tomb Complex in Shahdara. By altering the physical site of the Shahdara tomb complex, and in doing so separating the tombs of Nur Jahan and Jahangir, he was able to alter the history associated with the site. This act of revenge stands today as a living monument to Shah Jahan’s alteration and removal of Nur Jahan’s place in history.

Notes

¹ For their financial support of my PhD research, from which this paper is derived, I am grateful to the Barakat Trust, the Wingate Foundation and Intach UK.

² The Mughals were the dynastic Islamic rulers of South Asia from 1526 to 1858.

³ Given the name Mihrunnisa at birth, Nur Jahan was the daughter of Mirza Ghiyas Beg, a Khurasani who arrived at the Mughal court during Akbar’s reign (r.1556-1605) and rose to prominence before being awarded the title of I’timad ud-Daula (‘Pillar of the Government’) on Jahangir’s accession and ultimately serving as his grand *wazir*. Mihrunnisa had been married to a courtier, Sher Afghan, but was widowed in 1607, after which she was brought to Jahangir’s harem to act as a lady-in-waiting to one of Akbar’s widows, Ruqayya Sultana Begum, his first and principle wife.

⁴ Asaf Khan confined Nur Jahan with Jahangir’s body and sent troops to capture Shahryar, who had taken refuge in Lahore. Asaf Khan then sent word to Shah Jahan of Jahangir’s death, hastening him to return from the Deccan to take the

throne, setting up a puppet king in the meantime to discourage others from attempting to take the throne.

⁵ The burials of the Mughal elite took place within gardens. Typically these were pleasure gardens which were subsequently transformed into funerary landscapes. Those of the emperors were large, enclosed spaces entered via a monumental gateway with, until the construction of the Taj Mahal, the tomb in the centre of the garden and subsidiary buildings placed on the remaining enclosure walls. With the construction of the Taj Mahal in 1632, the mausoleum was shifted to one end of the garden.

⁶ *Charbagh* literally means ‘four gardens,’ and is a term used to refer to a Persianate walled-in garden divided into four parts, which can also be subdivided further.

⁷ The Imperial capital cities of the Mughal Empire were Delhi, Lahore, Agra and, for a brief period, Fatehpur Sikri. The monumental Imperial mausoleums built before Jahangir’s were those of Humayun and Akbar. Humayun’s was built in the immediate vicinity of Delhi while Akbar’s was constructed in Sikandra, a day’s ride from Agra. Both Delhi and Agra served as the political centre of the Empire at the respective times each Imperial tomb was built in their respective locales. Conversely, at the time of Jahangir’s burial, Lahore was no longer serving as an Imperial capital, instead having been relegated to the role of merely a provincial capital, as a result of which it had less political importance than either Delhi or Agra.

⁸ 1 *lakh* is equal to 100,000 rupees, therefore the mausoleum of Jahangir cost 1 million rupees to construct.

⁹ Of comparative expenditure on funerary monuments, the following is known: On his father’s mausoleum at Sikandra Jahangir is said to have spent 15 *lakhs* (see Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama* (Washington D.C.: 1999), 99). On her parent’s tomb, a much smaller structure and complex than that of Jahangir’s, Nur Jahan is supposed to have spent 35 *lakhs* (see Muhammad Azhar, *European Travellers Under the Mughals (1580-1627)* (Delhi: 1975), 117). Built during Shah Jahan’s reign was the tomb of a noble in Lahore by the name of Abul Hassan Khan, whose tomb, built for him by his wife, cost 10 *lakhs* (see Syed Muhammad Latif, *Lahore: Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities* (Lahore: 1892), 152), the same as that of Jahangir’s, an emperor’s tomb. Of Shah Jahan’s royal tomb commissions, the Taj Mahal was originally budgeted to cost 40 *lakhs* but in reality ended up costing 50 (see ‘Inayat Khan, *Shah Jahan Nama*, trans. W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai (eds.) (Delhi: 1990), 73, 200). In addition to this, the gold screen originally created to surround the cenotaphs in the central tomb chamber cost the equivalent of 6 *lakhs* (see ‘Inayat Khan, *Shah Jahan Nama*, 95).

¹⁰ It is necessary to highlight the esteem and importance that was attached to the Imperial Mughal mausoleums, not only for the deceased emperor who was buried at the site but also for the patron of the tomb. These became places of pilgrimage and were considered to be some of the most important Mughal architectural commissions as they were signifiers of the Mughals' reign, and effectively became architectural representations of the *Padshah* interred there, and therefore the dynasty.

¹¹ For further explanation and a complete discussion of the original second-storey of Jahangir's mausoleum, please consult the author's PhD thesis, *The Imperial Mughal tomb of Jahangir: History, Construction and Production*, 2011, held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

¹² This inlaid wall and the importance of the Orpheus imagery to Shah Jahan has been discussed in several publications by Ebba Koch. See, for example, her recent publication on Shah Jahan, Orpheus and Solomonic Kingship.

¹³ Due to constraints of space it has not been possible to fully explain the unique elements of Jahangir's tomb and how they create an argument for Nur Jahan's patronage of the mausoleum. For further discussion on these points, the author's thesis can be consulted (see note 11).

¹⁴ 'Inayat Khan, *Shah Jahan Nama*, 282.

The placement of Asaf Khan's tomb garden was therefore intentional and it is evident that there was an obvious desire to spatially relate it with that of Jahangir's as Asaf Khan's was centrally aligned to the same east-west axis as that of the forecourt and garden of Jahangir's tomb complex, creating an overall bilateral symmetry which had become a hallmark of Shah Jahan's imperial commissions.

¹⁵ Ellison Banks Findley, *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (New Delhi: 1993, rpt. 2000), 287.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

'Inayat Khan, *Shah Jahan Nama*, trans. W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai (eds.), Delhi, 1990.

Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir, *Wakiat-i Jahangiri*, trans. and ed. H.M. Elliot and John Dowson (Lahore: 1875, rpt. 2006).

---, *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, trans. Alexander Rogers, ed. Henry Beveridge, (London, 1909-14; rpt. Delhi, 1989).

---, *The Jahangirnama, Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, translated, edited and annotated by Wheeler M. Thackston, (Washington, D.C., 1999).

Abu Talib Kalim, *Padshahnama*, British Library, MS. Ethé 1570. Fols. 52a, 53b

Muhammad Amin Qazvini, *Padshahnama*, British Library, MS.OR.173.

Secondary Sources

Muhammad Azhar, *European Travellers Under the Mughals (1580-1627)* (Delhi, 1975).

Ellison Banks Findley, *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (New Delhi, 1993, rpt. 2000).

Syed Muhammad Latif, *Lahore: Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities* (Lahore, 1892).

Jean-Marie Lafont, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Lord of the Five Rivers* (New Delhi, 2002).

Mehreen Chida-Razvi completed her PhD in the History of Art from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She has lectured on the Asian Art Courses at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the V&A Museum and Sotheby's Institute of Art and has participated in and been an academic consultant for an Open University educational film on Islamic Art and a documentary on the Taj Mahal. Her research interests include the History of Mughal Art and Architecture, particularly as it relates to the construction of tombs, History of Islamic Art and Architecture and the relationship between the arts of Europe and the Islamic world.