

# Mughal Lite

Recent biographies of Jahangir and Nur Jahan may have made the royal couple more accessible, but they often slip into the realm of conjecture



By Audrey Truschke

INDIA IS GRIPPED by Mughal fever these days. Seemingly obsessed with premodern India's most famous empire, the saffron brigade works tirelessly to scrub Modi's India clean of vestiges of the Mughals by writing them out of school textbooks, renaming cities and roads, and neglecting Mughal monuments. When Hindu nationalists are not marginalising the Mughals, they villainise these long-dead kings as proxies for modern-day Indian Muslims. All actions provoke a reaction. And so popular curiosity about the Mughals has expanded apace with Hindutva's anti-Muslim exertions. The political abuse of Mughal history raises the stakes of popular knowledge about this dynasty and their legacies in India.

Parvati Sharma's *Jahangir: An Intimate Portrait of a Great Mughal* (Juggernaut; Rs 599; 319 pages) and Ruby Lal's *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan* (Viking; Rs 599; 304 pages) are among the most recent efforts to wade into these fraught waters and educate the public about key Mughal figures. Sharma tracks the life of Jahangir (1569-1627), the fourth Mughal king, while Lal devotes her attention to his favourite wife, Nur Jahan (1577-1645). Jahangir and Nur Jahan were only married for 16 years (1611-1627), but their alliance defined much about both of their lives. They were the ultimate power couple. He sat on the throne, and she wielded power behind the scenes (how much power is the subject of scholarly debate and a question that animates Lal's book). Still, neither author has written about this pair, but rather each has chosen to write a narrative biography of a single royal figure.

Biography has been a late-bloomer in the discipline of history, and the jury is still out on its ultimate acceptance as a productive way to analyse the past. For decades, most professional historians wrote off biography as a crummy way to do history. Things began to shift in the 1980s and 1990s as some historians saw anew in biography a way to produce social history. Still, the genre has its share of detractors. Writing in 1999, Stanley Fish slammed biography as 'minutiae without meaning' and 'a bad game' that is less edifying to readers than watching professional wrestling. In recent years, historians

have characterised biography as 'the bastard child of academe,' 'the [historical] profession's unloved stepchild' and, quite simply, 'a lesser form of history.'

While many professional historians have long turned up their noses at narrative biography, everybody else feels differently. As Richard Eaton has observed: 'People are profoundly drawn to the personalities and life-stories of others.' Seeking to quench or at least address this popular thirst for biography, William Dalrymple—who has done more than any scholar to awaken public interest in Mughal history—wrote in 2005 that more historians ought to write 'serious biography or narrative history' of India's pre-colonial rulers. Historians have responded to this call. For instance, Sunil Khilnani told the history of India

through 50 lives as a radio programme, set of podcasts, and a book (*Incarnations: India in 50 Lives*, 2016). In addition, non-historians have attempted to produce narrative histories.

Parvati Sharma and Ruby Lal have authored the two most recent contributions in this vein. They share a dual identity as biographers and fiction writers. Parvati Sharma turned from writing short stories to amateur history. She proclaims her outsider status to history bluntly in her 'A Note on Sources', writing, 'I am not a historian'. That said, her book is a straight-up positivist biography of Jahangir. While 'positivist' has become a dirty word amongst historians who have grown fond of criticising problematic notions of facticity and objectivity, Sharma's project is quite welcome, even needed, within India's saffron climate that often privileges brazen mythologies about the past.

Ruby Lal—who holds a DPhil (the Oxford equivalent of a PhD) in history and teaches at Emory University—identifies herself, in the book and elsewhere, as a 'feminist historian'. I admire her goal to recover the lives of Mughal women, so often sidelined in premodern and modern histories alike. Simultaneously, Lal devotes significant attention to reconstructing historical memory surrounding Nur Jahan in subsequent centuries, which lends her book a rich texture. Lal has also published fiction and is currently revising a collection of her short stories.

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*Empress* with a discussion of the popular memory of Nur Jahan and published the book with trade presses (rather than with academic presses) for both its Indian and North American editions. There is significant value in making Mughal history accessible to a wider audience, and I commend both authors for writing quite readable, even enjoyable narratives. Despite their virtues, however, Sharma's *Jahangir* and Lal's *Empress* are marred by some critical flaws.

Sharma and Lal crafted unabashedly personality-focused biographies. But when their historical materials do not provide enough fodder for this approach, both authors sometimes slip into the realm of conjecture, even fantasy. For instance, in order to fill gaps in her story, Sharma sometimes imagines what people thought and felt (example: 'Was Akbar beginning to feel...' and 'How must it have felt [to Jahangir]...'). She even invents speech at times (page 122). Insofar as such narrative devices are designed to help a modern reader imagine the choices available to a historical actor and so make that historical figure relatable, Sharma's heart is in the right place. But her methodology is problematic. A responsible analyst of the past should enliven a dry set of historical facts, not with whimsy, but by identifying larger social processes, scouring the available sources, and making grounded arguments about historical causality. The problem here is not only that Sharma spikes history with fiction, but that in so doing she eschews historical analysis.

What Sharma achieves with narrative devices, Lal does with guesswork that seeks to fill the considerable holes in our knowledge of Nur Jahan's life. Others have called out Lal's 'questionable conjectures,' and so I will not provide another list of her leaps of faith that fail to pierce the opaqueness of the past. One wonders, however, why Lal mixed the tools of fiction and history while categorising her work as the latter. If Lal judged, as she puts it, that 'neither the popular legends nor conventional scholarly work fully tell [Nur Jahan's] story', why not write the book as a historical fiction where creative interjections would strengthen, rather than undercut, the project?

One of Lal's goals is to escape the cliché of romance that has long ensnared popular memory of Nur Jahan. This ambition is solid, but Lal's substitute trope of a powerful female protagonist who is 'beautiful and accomplished' and had an 'astonishing reign' is heavy on eulogy and light on historical criticism. Lal's laudatory view of Nur Jahan inclines the reader to like the queen, but does it help the reader to understand Nur

Jahan in historical terms? Equally important, it is difficult to see how praise gives insight into what Nur Jahan's life can tell us about the nature of power, society, and the status of women in Mughal India.

Jahangir's reign has been the subject of scholarly attention for decades, but one would not know that from Parvati Sharma's book. Sharma's bibliography is wafer-thin, and she honours the scholarly practice of documenting evidence in footnotes more in the breach than in the observance. No book is ever exhaustive regarding prior scholarship, but Sharma's extreme paucity, especially regarding secondary sources, sharply limits her ability to make sense of Jahangir's reign.

**F**OR EXAMPLE, SHARMA talks a lot about how Mughal princes related to their fathers, but fails to recognise the larger framework of how Mughal princely rebellions and competition were key dynamics in the ever-evolving Mughal Empire. She devotes more than one-third of her book to Jahangir's princely years, especially his bumpy relationship with his father, Emperor Akbar. Without understanding the nature of Mughal princely life and the pressure to build alliances—discussed at greatest length by Munis Faruqui (*The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504-1719*, Cambridge University Press, 2012) and addressed more briefly by many Mughal scholars in the past decade—Sharma is left with no convincing historical explanation for the tensions between Akbar and Jahangir. Accordingly, she portrays the relationship as characterised by a cascade of misunderstandings and dysfunctions, attributable mostly to chance and idiosyncrasies. This makes for an attractive story perhaps, but it is weak history that misses how princes and their households contributed to Mughal state formation. Sharma may have declared herself a non-historian writing for other non-historians, but readers should still expect the baseline due diligence of accessing major, English-language secondary scholarship and contextualising political behaviour.

Lal does far better than Sharma in terms of using secondary sources, but she still makes some notable omissions. For instance, Lal does not address the Nur Jahan junta theory, which posits that Nur Jahan and a small cadre of largely Persian expatriates wielded the real power of the Mughal Empire for years. Perhaps this theory, which some Mughal historians have

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criticised, is too close for comfort to Lal's core argument that Nur Jahan was Jahangir's co-sovereign. In not discussing the theory at all, Lal fails to engage with a recurrent topic in prior scholarship on Nur Jahan. The theory also seems important to mention in light of Sunil Sharma's *Mughal Arcadia: Persian Literature in an Indian Court* (Harvard University Press, 2017), which argues that Persian expatriates played a central role in another aspect of Mughal court life, namely Persian literary culture.

Modern Mughal history has long been tarnished by over-reliance on the same old line-up of standard Mughal-period histories and citing English translations rather than the Persian originals. Sharma falls prey to both traps due to her openly-acknowledged handicap of not knowing Persian. It is a curious, although time-honoured, idea that one can proclaim ignorance about the vast majority of the Mughal archive and still write about Mughal figures. Even granting this oddity of popular Mughal history, Sharma could have done more to reflect on her own complicated relationship to premodern sources mediated through problematic translations and her potential role in promoting bad ideas. For instance, Sharma relays a fanciful story of Nur Jahan's birth that was promoted by a late 18th-century Orientalist, Alexander Dow, only noting afterwards that modern historians consider the tale 'more legend than fact'. This late labelling of the story as fiction does not address the potential harms of retelling it without context. Of all the available legends—and there are many of Nur Jahan's birth (see Lal, *Empress*, pages 22-28)—why amplify one made famous by an Orientalist well-known for his anti-Muslim views? After all, bigotry is hardly a problem confined to the Indian past. Perhaps some critical attention to context and sources would have helped Sharma and her readers to see that legends are not just fanciful stories but rather come laden with baggage, in this case the baggage of colonialism and bias.

What is unavoidable—or at least unsurprising—for Sharma, an amateur historian with no facility in Persian, is inexcusable for Lal, a trained scholar of Mughal history. Lal ignores altogether some important primary sources on Jahangir's reign, such as *Majalis-i Jahangiri*, a text discovered a

few decades ago whose importance has been underscored by several historians (such as Muzaffar Alam, Gulfishan Khan, Corinne Lefevre, Shireen Moosvi, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam). *Majalis-i Jahangiri*, as printed, covers the period between 1608 and 1611 and contains numerous references to Ghiyas Beg, Nur Jahan's father. Lal has a chapter on the same time period that discusses Jahangir's relations with Nur Jahan's family, but she makes no mention of *Majalis-i Jahangiri* (Sharma, to her credit, mentions the text in *Jahangir*). One is left with the gnawing feeling that Lal did not exhaust her potential resources for reconstructing the life and context of Nur Jahan.

More startlingly, Lal bases her narrative, in large part, on outdated colonial-era translations. She cites untranslated Persian sources, including manuscripts. But for many key Mughal texts—including *A'in-i Akbari*, *Baburnama*, *Iqbalnama-i Jahangiri*, *Jahangirnama*, *Maathir al-Umara*, and *Muntakhab al-Tavarikh*—Lal gives an initial reference to both the English and Persian versions and thereafter refers primarily, often exclusively, to an English translation. This raises uncomfortable questions regarding Lal's research practices. Did Lal access the Persian originals of these texts (all six listed above are printed) to confirm the accuracy of their translations? If so, why did she leave no trace of that crucial scholarly practice in her footnotes? Is Lal aware that colonial-era renderings of Mughal texts are brimming with misleading translations, omissions, and interpretive additions (sometimes unmarked as such)? If so, she evinces little concern with how the layered biases of her sources may shape her own narrative, even when it concerns the main topic of her biography. For instance, Lal cites *Iqbalnama-i Jahangiri* in its excerpted translation by Elliot and Dowson (examples: note 6 on page 252, note 7 on page 253, note 4 on page 272, notes 2-3 on page 279, note 6 on page 287, and note 13 on page 287), despite a clear note by these two masters of colonial propaganda that they truncated a section on Nur Jahan (*History of India*, note on page 404, of volume six). Even after reading Lal's *Empress*, it remains an open question what real digging into the Persian archive might change about our view of Jahangir's favourite queen.

Writing history is a difficult, often thankless, job that requires in-depth and critical research. After one's best efforts, the resulting narrative and arguments are subject to intense scrutiny from one's peers. But the stakes of understanding the Mughal past are too high to reduce history's stringent standards. In Modi's India—where arguments can often be won by sophistry, sleights of hand, and inchoate screaming—many crave the powerful antidote of concrete historical analysis. Even with all their compromises, Lal and Sharma both contribute to our knowledge of the Mughal Empire. One hopes that future biographers do even better in the ongoing quest to recover and make sense of the Mughal past. □

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