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Mughal empire and the role of royal women

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Abstract

The history of the Mughal Empire (1526-1857) is often narrated through emperors, military conquests and administrative reforms. However, the women of the Mughal harem-queens, princesses and royal consorts played a significant role in shaping the political, cultural, and economic landscape of the empire. This paper examines the lives and contributions of major Mughal queens including Hamida Banu Begum, Ruqaiya Sultan Begum, Salima Sultan Begum, Mariam-uz-Zamani (Jodha Bai), Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara Begum and Zeb-un-Nissa, focusing on their political agency, architectural patronage, literary and economic contributions. Drawing upon primary chronicles such as the *Baburnama*, *Akbarnama*, and *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, along with insights from modern historians, this research establishes that Mughal queens were not passive royal figures but influential contributors to imperial governance, diplomatic strategies and the cultural landscape of the empire.

Keywords: Mughal, women, political, influence

Introduction

The Mughal Empire was one of the biggest and most powerful empires in Indian history. It was founded in 1526 by Babur after he won the Battle of Panipat. Over the next three centuries, the Mughals created a strong and organized government, built beautiful monuments, and developed a rich culture that blended Persian, Central Asian, and Indian traditions. Emperors like Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb expanded the empire and shaped its administration, art, architecture, trade, and society. But alongside these powerful rulers, the women of the Mughal court also played major roles in shaping the empire. Mughal queens and princesses were educated, wealthy, and influential figures who supported political decisions, managed trade, guided diplomacy, and promoted art, literature, and charity. Mughal royal women-including unmarried princesses, influential sisters and authoritative empresses-usually exercised their power quietly from within the zenana. Yet, several among them broke these boundaries. Some accompanied armies onto the battlefield, others commissioned remarkable architectural works, negotiated political alliances, managed overseas trade, and even issued coins bearing their own names.¹ Hamida Banu Begum helped stabilize the empire during its early struggles, Mariam-uz-Zamani strengthened ties with Rajput kingdoms and became a major trader, Nur Jahan directly took part in governance and issued royal orders, Jahanara Begum supported architecture and Sufi culture, and Zeb-un-Nissa enriched literature with her poetry. These women not only lived in the royal household but also contributed to the empire's growth and stability. Their involvement shows that the Mughal Empire was shaped not only by its emperors but also by remarkable royal women whose impact can still be seen in India's cultural and historical legacy. This paper explores the biographies and contributions of major Mughal queens, emphasizing their political influence, cultural achievements, architectural legacy, and socio-economic power.

Hamida Banu Begum

Hamida Banu Begum (1527-1604) was one of the most influential women of the early Mughal period, remembered for her courage, dignity, and quiet but enduring political presence. Born into a distinguished Persian scholarly and Sufi family, she received a cultured upbringing that shaped her refined personality and spiritual inclinations. Her marriage to the displaced Emperor Humayun in 1541, though initially resisted, marked a crucial alliance that not only strengthened Humayun's position but also brought Hamida Banu into the centre of imperial affairs during one of the most turbulent phases of Mughal history. She accompanied

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Humayun through his long and perilous exile across Sindh, Kandahar, and Persia, enduring physical hardships and political uncertainty, even during her pregnancy. At the Safavid court, her composure and diplomatic grace contributed to maintaining cordial relations with Shah Tahmasp, whose military support eventually helped Humayun reclaim the Mughal throne. Her son Akbar was born in 1542 in Umarkot under extremely difficult conditions, and she remained a stabilizing presence in his early life, offering emotional strength and moral guidance. Historians note her political wisdom and influence in guiding imperial negotiations, especially in re-establishing Mughal authority after Akbar's birth.² After Humayun's death in 1556, she played a supportive role in securing Akbar's early reign, and throughout his rule she remained a respected matriarch, honoured with the epithet "Maryam Makani" for her piety and compassion. Her influence extended into cultural and architectural realms, most notably through the commissioning of Humayun's Tomb in Delhi, a monument that introduced a new architectural grandeur later echoed in the Taj Mahal. She also engaged in charitable works, patronized scholars, and undertook a significant pilgrimage to Mecca, enhancing the empire's diplomatic prestige. Spending her final years at Akbar's court, she witnessed the consolidation of the Mughal Empire and died in 1604, leaving behind a legacy of resilience, cultural patronage, and moral authority that deeply shaped the early Mughal dynasty.

Mariam-uz-Zamani

Mariam-uz-Zamani, popularly known as Jodha Bai though not mentioned by that name in contemporary sources, was one of the most influential queens of the Mughal Empire and the chief consort of Emperor Akbar. Born a Rajput princess of the Kachhwaha clan of Amer, she married Akbar around 1562 in a political alliance that symbolized a new era of Mughal-Rajput relations based on diplomacy, mutual respect, and cultural synthesis. Her marriage not only ensured the loyalty of the influential Rajput states but also helped shape Akbar's broader policy of religious tolerance and imperial integration. As queen, she held a uniquely elevated status in the imperial household, retaining her Hindu identity while commanding respect as the emperor's favoured consort and the mother of his successor, Jahangir. Chroniclers such as Abul Fazl and Jahangir describe her as a woman of dignity, intelligence, and considerable economic influence. She became a prominent figure in trade, managing a large commercial fleet involved in long-distance spice trade to the Red Sea region.³ Her active participation in commerce challenges the idea that Mughal noblewomen were confined to domesticity. She also exercised considerable political leverage at court, influencing diplomatic relations and supporting architectural patronage.⁴ She controlled a vast administrative portfolio, including her own ships and extensive trading ventures, most notably in the Arabian Sea where she operated large commercial fleets that transported goods and pilgrims to Mecca. Her financial independence, rare for royal Mughal women, reflects her exceptional authority within the empire's economic sphere. She also undertook the prestigious pilgrimage to Mecca in 1582, during which she was honoured with the title "Mariam-uz-Zamani," symbolizing her piety and maternal significance. Her role as queen extended into architecture and patronage, contributing

to temples, gardens, and charitable structures, and her influence strengthened the cultural fusion of Rajput and Mughal traditions within the court. As the mother of Jahangir, she remained a central political figure through the transition of power and continued to shape imperial decisions indirectly through her son's deep affection and respect for her. Mariam-uz-Zamani died in 1623 and was buried in a beautiful tomb at Sikandra, Agra, leaving behind a legacy as a powerful queen, diplomat, entrepreneur, and cultural mediator whose life embodies the pluralistic spirit of Akbar's empire.

Ruqaiya Sultan Begum

Ruqaiya Sultan Begum, born around 1542, was a Timurid princess of exceptional lineage and the first and chief wife of Emperor Akbar, occupying a position of prestige and authority unparalleled by many other Mughal royal women. As the daughter of Hindal Mirza and granddaughter of Emperor Babur, she married Akbar at a very young age in a union that reinforced the Timurid family's internal political alliances and preserved the purity of the royal bloodline. Although she never bore children, Ruqaiya maintained a central role in the imperial household throughout Akbar's reign, distinguished by her intelligence, composure, and close personal relationship with the emperor. Ruqaiya was known for her administrative discipline and understanding of imperial practices, which contributed to her enduring authority in the harem.⁵ Contemporary chroniclers, describe her as a woman of strong personality, refined education, and acute political awareness, whose presence in the harem was marked by dignity and influence. Her status remained so high that Akbar entrusted her with the upbringing of his beloved grandson, Prince Khurram (the future Emperor Shah Jahan), a responsibility that reflected her wisdom, experience, and maternal authority within the royal family. Ruqaiya also participated in diplomatic activities and accompanied Akbar on several significant political and religious journeys, indicating her mobility and involvement in imperial affairs. Even during Jahangir's reign, she retained immense respect and continued to receive honors, allowances, and estates befitting her position as the senior-most matriarch of the Timurid dynasty. She spent her later years in Agra and Kabul, maintaining her influence and continuing charitable works, patronage of scholars, and management of extensive jagirs. Ruqaiya Sultan Begum died in 1626 in Agra and was buried near the Gardens of Kabul, closing the life of a queen whose quiet authority, royal stature, and moral presence shaped the Mughal household for more than six decades, making her one of the most enduring and distinguished figures of the Mughal imperial women's world. Women at the top—such as Ruqaiya Begum and Jahanara Begum—controlled vast jagirs, supervised staff, and generated independent income from land revenues and trade.⁶ Their financial autonomy granted them both influence and mobility within court politics.

Gulbadan Begum

A crucial early source about Mughal women is Gulbadan Begum, daughter of Babur and author of the *Humayun-Nama*. Her memoir remains one of the few female-written chronicles from the early Mughal era. Gulbadan documented royal negotiations, marital politics, and the emotional world of the imperial household. Her writing highlights the agency of women in decision-making and

travel, including her participation in the massive hajj caravan organized by Akbar.⁷ This text stands as an indispensable resource for reconstructing Mughal women's everyday lives.

Nur Jahan

The most politically influential Mughal queen was Nur Jahan, whose power during Jahangir's reign remains unmatched. She issued firmans (royal orders), minted coins in her name, and shaped imperial appointments and diplomacy. Her partnership with Jahangir was a unique political collaboration that functioned as a dual authority at the centre of the empire.⁸ Indian scholars emphasize her administrative intelligence, courtly refinement, and decisive role in managing rebellions and succession disputes.⁹ Her power demonstrates that women in Mughal politics were not merely symbolic figures but actual architects of important state decisions. Nur Jahan, born Mehr-un-Nissa in 1577 to a Persian immigrant family of high learning and administrative talent, emerged as the most politically powerful woman in Mughal history and one of the most influential female figures in early modern South Asia. Her rise began after her marriage to Emperor Jahangir in 1611, a union that transformed her from an aristocratic widow into the central force of the Mughal court. Known for her exceptional intelligence, political acumen, and cultural refinement, she soon became Jahangir's closest confidante and advisor, exercising unprecedented authority in matters of governance, diplomacy, imperial finances, and courtly protocol. Nur Jahan's influence extended into military affairs as well; she strategized during periods of rebellion, negotiated with nobles, and personally led diplomatic interventions, including the rescue campaigns for her father and stepson. Beyond politics, she was a distinguished patron of architecture, literature, textiles, and garden design, contributing to monumental works such as her father Itimad-ud-Daulah's tomb in Agra, a forerunner of the Taj Mahal's aesthetic elegance. Her innovations in fashion, embroidery, and court culture became iconic trends across the empire. Although her power declined after Jahangir's death in 1627, she lived the remainder of her life in relative seclusion in Lahore, continuing charitable works and literary pursuits until her death in 1645. Nur Jahan's legacy endures as that of a remarkable stateswoman whose intellect, administrative capability, artistic vision, and political boldness reshaped the contours of Mughal rule and redefined the possibilities of female authority within a highly patriarchal imperial world.

Mumtaz Mahal

During the reign of Shah Jahan, his beloved consort Mumtaz Mahal shaped the cultural and emotional environment of the court. Mumtaz Mahal, born Arjumand Banu Begum in 1593 to the prestigious Persian noble family of Asaf Khan and niece of the influential Empress Nur Jahan, is remembered as one of the most beloved and iconic figures of the Mughal dynasty, celebrated for her beauty, refinement, compassion, and deep emotional bond with Emperor Shah Jahan. Betrothed to him at the age of fifteen and married in 1612, she became his inseparable companion, accompanying him on military campaigns, political tours, and court journeys, which reflected not only their personal closeness but also the respect and trust she commanded within the imperial world. Although not

politically active like Nur Jahan, she wielded considerable informal influence through her moral authority, intelligence, and charitable works, playing an essential role in strengthening social welfare initiatives and supporting poets, artists, and widows. She bore fourteen children, of whom seven survived, including the future emperor Aurangzeb, and her personal relationship with Shah Jahan profoundly shaped his emotional life, cultural sensibilities, and artistic vision. Mumtaz Mahal died in 1631 during the birth of her fourteenth child in Burhanpur, an event that devastated Shah Jahan and led to the creation of the Taj Mahal one of the most extraordinary architectural achievements in world history.¹⁰ Her death marked a turning point in the emperor's life, influencing his later architectural patronage¹¹ aesthetic choices, and emotional withdrawal from courtly pleasures. Though her life was largely centered on the private sphere, her legacy-enshrined in the marble elegance of the Taj Mahal continues to symbolize love, devotion, and the cultural grandeur of the Mughal Empire, making her one of the most enduringly revered figures in South Asian history.

Jahanara Begum

Shah Jahan's daughter Jahanara Begum became one of the most influential women in Mughal history. After her mother's death, she served as the First Lady of the Empire. Jahanara controlled extensive landholdings, mediated political disputes, and supported the Chishti Sufi order. She commissioned important architectural works, including parts of Chandni Chowk and caravanserais that facilitated trade and urban growth in Shahjahanabad.¹² Her cultural patronage reveals the active role princesses played in shaping the Mughal aesthetic world.¹³

Zeb-un-Nissa

Aurangzeb's daughter Zeb-un-Nissa represents the intellectual facet of Mughal womanhood. A gifted poet and scholar, she composed the *Diwan-i-Makhzan-ul-Ghaib* and engaged with Persian literature, theology, and philosophy. Despite political tensions with her father, Zeb-un-Nissa remains a prominent literary figure, and her writings offer insight into the spiritual and intellectual world of Mughal women.¹⁴ Her expertise and contributions challenge assumptions about women's education and roles in Islamic courts.¹⁵ Zeb-un-Nissa, born in 1638 as the eldest daughter of Emperor Aurangzeb and Dilras Banu Begum, was one of the most intellectually gifted and culturally influential women of the Mughal dynasty, renowned for her extraordinary scholarship, literary talent, and deep engagement with Persian poetry and Sufi thought. Educated by the finest tutors of her time, she mastered theology, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, history, and multiple languages at an early age, earning admiration across the empire for her intellectual brilliance. Writing under the pen name Makhfi ("the hidden one"), she composed a vast corpus of Persian poetry distinguished by its lyrical beauty, spiritual depth, and emotional sensitivity, and her *Diwan* circulated widely among literary circles. She was also a generous patron of learning, supporting scholars, poets, and calligraphers, and fostering an environment of artistic and intellectual vibrancy despite her father's orthodox policies. Although she enjoyed Aurangzeb's affection in her youth, her philosophical openness, political sympathies, and independent mind eventually led to tensions within the imperial family. Her rumored support for Prince Akbar

during his rebellion and her disapproval of Aurangzeb's harsh policies contributed to her long imprisonment, traditionally believed to have lasted over two decades at the Salimgarh Fort near Delhi. Even in confinement, she continued her writing and devotional pursuits, leaving behind poetry that reflects both resilience and spiritual longing. Zeb-un-Nissa died in 1702, her later life marked by isolation but her legacy enduring as that of a remarkable scholar-poet whose intellectual brilliance, literary mastery, and quiet defiance made her one of the most extraordinary women in the Mughal cultural world.

The political involvement of Mughal queens also extended to succession struggles, one of the most volatile aspects of Mughal governance. Nur Jahan supported Shahryar's claim after Jahangir's death, while Jahanara backed Dara Shikoh against Aurangzeb. Their involvement significantly influenced imperial outcomes and demonstrated the strategic intelligence and power that royal women wielded.¹⁶ Their actions reveal that female participation in politics was an inherent and structural part of the Mughal imperial framework.

Overall, the contributions of Mughal queens-political, economic, intellectual, and cultural-demonstrate that Mughal India cannot be understood without acknowledging the profound influence of its royal women. Their authority was legitimized by lineage, intelligence, economic independence, and courtly duty. Through their patronage, diplomacy, and strategic interventions, they shaped not only the Mughal court but also the broader cultural and social history of India.¹⁷ Thus the study of Mughal queens becomes essential for understanding gender, power, and governance in early modern South Asia.

Religious and Social Influence of Mughal Queens

The Mughal queens played an important role in shaping the religious and social life of the empire. Many queens were deeply spiritual and supported religious harmony, charity, and welfare activities that helped people from different backgrounds. For example, Hamida Banu Begum and Mariam-uz-Zamani promoted peace between different communities and often donated money to build temples, mosques, wells, and rest houses for travellers, showing their commitment to religious tolerance and social welfare. Queens like Nur Jahan and Jahanara Begum were especially active in helping the poor. They supported widows, orphaned children, and women in need by providing food, clothes, shelter, and financial assistance. Jahanara Begum, who followed Sufi traditions, built hospitals, public gardens, rest houses, making her one of the most respected figures in the empire. Many queens also supported scholars, poets, and holy men by giving them grants and encouraging their spiritual work. Their influence created a peaceful environment in the empire, where different religions and communities could live together with respect. Through charity, religious donations, and social work, the Mughal queens played a major role in strengthening the cultural and moral foundation of the Mughal Empire.

Economic Contributions of Mughal Queens

The Mughal queens made many important economic contributions that strengthened the financial system of the empire. Most queens were given large land estates called **jagirs**, and the income from these lands allowed them to support several public and cultural activities. Queens such

as Mariam-uz-Zamani, Nur Jahan, and Jahanara Begum used this income to build wells, caravanserais, gardens, and religious buildings, which helped in improving trade, travel, and the lives of common people. Mariam-uz-Zamani was especially famous for her trading activities; she owned ships that travelled to Arabia and carried goods such as spices, textiles, and ornaments. She earned large profits from overseas trade, and this helped increase the commercial wealth of the Mughal Empire. Similarly, Nur Jahan had her own factories where she supervised the production of textiles, perfume, carpets, and jewellery. These industries not only added to the royal income but also provided employment to many artisans and workers. Jahanara Begum invested in trade and managed markets and properties in major cities. She also supported the development of ports and trade routes, which improved the economic connections of the empire with foreign regions. Through trade, land management, industries, and construction works, the Mughal queens played a major role in strengthening the empire's economy and supporting its cultural growth.

Architectural and Cultural Contributions of Mughal Queens

The Mughal queens played a major role in shaping the architectural and cultural beauty of the empire. Many queens sponsored the construction of forts, gardens, mosques, markets, wells, step wells, caravanserais, and tombs that enriched the cultural landscape of India. For example, Hamida Banu Begum supported the building of Humayun's Tomb, which later inspired the architectural style of the Taj Mahal. Mariam-uz-Zamani built temples, wells, and large resting places for travellers, showing her interest in public welfare and cultural harmony. Nur Jahan made some of the finest contributions to Mughal architecture; she designed gardens in the Persian style, built caravanserais, and constructed the beautiful Tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah, which is considered a masterpiece of early marble architecture. Mumtaz Mahal inspired Shah Jahan to build the world-famous Taj Mahal, one of the greatest monuments in history. Jahanara Begum, known for her artistic taste, designed important parts of Shahjahanabad, including Chandni Chowk, markets, mosques, and rest houses. She also built gardens and supported the construction of Sufi structures. Apart from buildings, the queens supported painters, poets, musicians, and calligraphers, helping Mughal culture reach its golden age. Their patronage enriched literature, art, textiles, and handicrafts. Through their architectural projects and cultural support, the Mughal queens left a lasting legacy that continues to shape India's heritage today.

Conclusion

The Mughal queens were not simply women who lived behind palace walls-they were strong, intelligent, and capable leaders who shaped the empire in many important ways. They influenced politics, guided trade, supported art and culture, built beautiful structures, and helped create peace between different communities. Their actions show that women in the Mughal period played powerful roles, even when society expected them to remain in the background. Each queen contributed something special to the empire. Hamida Banu brought courage and stability in difficult times, while Mariam-uz-Zamani encouraged peace and trade across countries. Ruqaiya helped raise future emperors, and Nur Jahan became one of the most influential

women in Indian history with her political skill. Mumtaz Mahal inspired the world-famous Taj Mahal, Jahanara built markets and gardens that shaped Delhi, and Zeb-un-Nissa enriched literature with her beautiful poetry. Together, these queens showed that women can be administrators, thinkers, artists, and leaders. Their lives remind us that history is not only made by kings and rulers, but also by the women who stood beside them and contributed with strength, creativity, and vision. The legacy of Mughal queens continues to shine in India's culture, architecture, and historical memory.

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