

Empress Nur Jahan

[Dr Amanda Foreman]

Wife, diplomat and artistic visionary, Nur Jahan ruled the empire, in fact, if not in name - when she became the twentieth and last wife of Emperor Jahangir.

They governed from here, the Red Fort in Agra, just north of Delhi, the centre of politics and commerce.

Throughout history one of the most controversial routes to power and one that frequently ended in bloodshed was that of a marriage of a weak or incapacitated king and a strong queen who then went on to usurp his role.

Legend has it that Jangahir used to joke that he put his wife in charge because all he really wanted out of life was Nur Jahn herself, the arts in general, and wine in particular! Nur Jahan modernised what it meant to be a woman in the Mughal court; she encouraged artists to take up the depiction of women, redesigned clothes to encourage more freedom and movement, but also went hunting and was famed for her shot.

But when it came to politics, as Nur Jahan couldn't show her face, she had to find ways to rule discreetly.

There are accounts that she observed purdah by standing behind a thin marble screen, whispering her commands to Jangahir.

Foreign merchants from the East India Company soon discovered, that if they wanted to trade with India, they had to work under Nur Jahan's authority.

Every treaty, every contract, every trade route all required Nur Jahan's signature.

In recognition that she was real force of imperial power there were coins minted in her name.