

8th Professor Abidi Memorial Lecture

Title & Abstract

Historian's Craft: The erasure of India's Great Mughal Women

Nur Jahan was the only woman ruler in the long dynasty of India's great Mughals. How did the Empress's extraordinary strengths, the emperor's lamentable weaknesses, the twists and turns of 17th-century politics, and the power of their love combine to defy a time and a culture that ought to have made the reign of Nur Jahan impossible? And why is it that this phenomenal figure has been effectively expunged from Mughal histories? What happens to the question of evidence that historians fervently guard when it comes to history-writing? Might it be the case that our beloved propositions of the "archive" – and indeed those of history and biography – are unsettled when we turn to narrating history? Based on my biography of Nur Jahan, *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan*, I will address the question of evidence and the status of archive in historical practice. I will illumine parallel practices of erasure of the unique prose work of the only woman Mughal memoirist, Gulbadan Banu Begum's book - and a literary mystery that surrounds its missing pages.

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Books:

Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan

(W. W. Norton, NY, 2018; PB, 2020) LA Times Books Prize Finalist in History; Winner, Georgia Author of the Year Award in Biography

Coming of Age in Nineteenth Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness

Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World