

RUBY LAL

Dr. Lal's Continuing Research in Gender, Islam, and South Asian Studies



My research sits at the intersection of studies of gender, Islam and South Asia, and makes important contributions to the history of each. It straddles the history of pre-colonial and colonial South Asia -somewhat unusually, since colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent produced a sharp division between the study of modern India (using English and modern Indian languages) and medieval or early modern India (using Persian and regional Indian languages). I have expertise in the languages and archives relating to both periods, and write and teach on both.

I have persistently focused upon two interrelated questions in my writings: what counts as evidence, and therefore as history? And what is it that creates the 'present-yet-absent' figures of women and girls, and the difficulties of investigating their histories? Explored in a variety of contexts, these are the questions

at the heart of my two books, a third one in progress, and the scholarly articles that I have published in India and the West.

I became particularly interested in these questions in the course of my work for a D.Phil. in History at the University of Oxford (1996-2000) in which I explored the domestic world of the early Mughal Emperors of India. Historical writing on pre-colonial India had for too long concentrated on warfare, political and administrative institutions, economic conditions and trade of the Mughal Empire. The paucity of challenging social histories of this period was striking. What lay behind this were two particularly intriguing assumptions. One was a belief in the existence of sharply separated 'public' and 'private' domains in pre-colonial (as in colonial and post-colonial) South Asia, with the Mughal private sphere collapsed into a stereotypical image of something called 'the harem'. The second was an assumption about the inadequacy of source materials for social history. A leading historian once asked: "How will you write a history of the domestic life of the Mughals? There are no sources for it?"

In spite of this historiographical ultimatum about sources, my dissertation and the book that came out of it, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (CUP, 2005), showed that other kinds of histories could be written. The problem, I suggested, is not one of sources alone; it is about the politics of history

writing. The sources exist for very different kinds of histories, as long as the right questions are asked. I focused, for instance, on the memoir of a Mughal princess, Gulbadan Banu Begum, an aunt of the Mughal king Akbar (1556-1605). Scholars had been aware of this source, especially since its translation and publication in English in 1902, but it had remained peripheral in previous writings. Through an exploration of mundane details regarding the so-called 'soft society of women' via accounts such as Gulbadan's, my book unfolded the domestic world of sixteenth century Mughal kings. Detailing the complex relations in which noble men and women negotiated their everyday lives, and the public-political affairs conducted in the 'inner' quarters as well as the 'outer' courts, I drew attention to the historically specific meanings, the richness and the ambiguity of Mughal domestic life. A principal proposition of my work was that the coming into



being of a more institutionalized harem under Akbar was part of the making of a new Mughal imperium. The first two Mughal kings spent much of their lives wandering in Afghanistan, Central Asia and India, with courts and harems following them in camps. Their better-known successor, Akbar, built the first grand sandstone palaces and haram. The domestic world was pivotal in the transition towards imperial exaltation and regulation.

My reading of Gulbadan Banu Begum's memoir brought to life a complex sphere of domestic relations: her memoir depicted the Mughal family as altering over time, being creative, contradictory, and very fluid in terms of personal relationships and kinship structures. Returning to the mainstream official chronicles in the light of 'peripheral' sources such as Gulbadan's allowed many new findings to appear. On the basis of this 'rediscovered' archive, I suggested a number of new ways in which Mughal social history could be written. As a gendered and more self-consciously political history, my book showed that a history of court life cannot simply be hived off from mainstream political history as 'supplementary'. Indeed, an account such as the one I put forward served to reopen other questions of crucial importance in Mughal history, including the very processes of the making of an empire, and the establishment of distinct court ceremonials and symbols of grandeur.

The obvious sequel to *Domesticity and Power* would have been a second book, dealing with the later Mughals. I decided, however, to break what might become a mere extension of my previous work, and perhaps a repetition of my original propositions, transposed onto the more



archivally accessible later Mughals. Instead, I chose to explore issues of domesticity, women's education and reform in a later period - the long nineteenth century - that marked the transition from late Mughal to colonial society. Here, other issues emerged. One was the overwhelming historiographical focus on the mature phase of colonialism, from the 1870s onwards. Again, although 'women' had been at the heart of the colonial and reformist writings, their image was frozen. Actual life stages such as girl-hood disappeared, and there was no history of girls becoming women. The so-called 'lack of sources,' problem appeared again. Deliberately beginning with the 1800s, and harking back to textual traditions even earlier, my second book *Coming of Age in Nineteenth Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness* (CUP, 2013), opens up the archive for histories of the girl-child and woman. By using a diverse range of texts in Hindi, Urdu, and Persian - didactic and fictional accounts, tales, instruction manuals, biographies, and family portraits, I critique linear models of the transition from girlhood to womanhood. I 'resuscitate' and describe the 'play-

fulness' and creativity of girls and women even in the confining circumstances of the nineteenth century. I explore the sexuality, emotion, adventurism, friendship and potential of women - many critical facets of the female subject - as articulated in four different sites: forest, school, household, and rooftops.

As I was examining these female worlds of duty, aspiration, and 'freedom' in my two books on pre-modern and early modern India, I received an invitation from Random House (India) to write a 'critical biography' of Mughal Empress Nur Jahan. Nur Jahan is an iconic figure, legendary and celebrated in popular memory, yet there is no definitive history of her time and activities. The only substantial study on her came out more than twenty years ago. The invitation to write about her allowed me to return to the Mughals and take the questions of evidence, historical imagination, and the making of feminine worlds, to a wider public domain. Under contract with W.W. Norton (USA/UK) and Random House-Penguin (India), some draft chapters of the book are now under review by the editor.