



Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/202903/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Lambert-Hurley, S., Iyengar, R. and Ali, N. (2023) When history empowers: recovering the life stories of the Begums of Bhopal for women's learning and gender equality. *History Workshop Journal*, 96. pp. 134-152. ISSN: 1363-3554

<https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbad015>

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in *History Workshop Journal* following peer review. The version of record Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, Radhika Iyengar, Nafhesa Ali, When History Empowers: Recovering the Life Stories of the Begums of Bhopal for Women's Learning and Gender Equality, *History Workshop Journal*, 2023;, dbad015, is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbad015>.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

When History Empowers: Recovering the Life Stories of the Begums of Bhopal for Women's Learning and Gender Equality

by Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, Radhika Iyengar and Nafhesa

Ali

Sheffield University

s.t.lambert-hurley@sheffield.ac.uk

Columbia University

Iyengar@climate.columbia.edu

Northumbria University

Nafhesa.ali@northumbria.ac.uk

Bhopal in central India is celebrated as a 'city of lakes', but it also has a unique history. For four generations, it was ruled by a dynasty of Muslim women rulers. Serendipity may have brought them to power: the first, Qudsia (1801–81; r. 1819–37), was named regent after her husband died in a shooting accident, and three royal generations subsequently produced only daughters. But it was administrative savvy that enabled them to hold on to rule. Having negotiated multiple challenges to her authority within and beyond Bhopal (including from religious authorities, the state's powerful Maratha and Rajput neighbours, the East India Company's local agent and her own son-in-law), Qudsia initiated two defining projects: a system of waterworks to supply clean drinking water to the city's inhabitants, and an attractive mosque, Jama Masjid (now in Chowk Bazaar).¹ Her daughter Sikandar (1816–68; r. 1844–68) continued with administrative reforms, including to Bhopal's revenue and judicial systems, the military, transportation and schools, before a shrewd decision to remain loyal to

the British colonial state during the 1857 rebellion confirmed the dynasty in power. As long as the state's management was deemed fair and prudent, Sikandar's daughter and granddaughter Shah Jahan (1838–1901; r. 1868–1901) and Sultan Jahan (1858–1930; r. 1901–26) had free rein to pursue public works, cultural patronage, writing projects and socio-religious reform – most notably in the spheres of women's education and health.²

These Nawab Begums have left an indelible mark on the fabric of Bhopal: from the palaces and mosques that structure the old city to the roads, parks, hospitals and neighbourhoods that still bear their names. And yet, in Bhopal city today, they are rarely commemorated or even remembered. On the contrary, a Hindu nationalist agenda predominating in contemporary India means that it is Raja Bhoj – an eleventh century king from neighbouring Dhar – who dominates the city's commemorative landscape. Not only does he tower over Bhopal's upper lake in garish statue form, but his name is also given to the local airport, a university, a main road, a major bridge, a wetland and the lake itself, among other edifices. Children and their parents alike can recall his reputation as a 'scholar-king' devoted to poetry and philosophy, and some will be familiar with the Bhojeshwar temple dedicated to Shiva (housing a giant *lingam*) in the village of Bhojpur, a short distance from Bhopal, which is attributed to him.³ In this political and cultural situation telling Muslim histories, and Muslim histories of women especially, can be a particular challenge. Could the inspirational life stories of Bhopal's Begums be recovered to empower contemporary women?

To test this principle, we undertook an initial study in January 2020. The academic team brought together the authors of this article – historian Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and sociologist Nafhesa Ali with applied education researcher Radhika Iyengar – to collaborate with a local women's organization, Mahashakti Seva Kendra (MSK). MSK is a government-sponsored, non-profit initiative founded by local activist Indira Iyengar in 1992 to support

women victims of the city's infamous Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Deemed 'the world's worst industrial disaster', it was instigated by a leak of toxic gas from the Union Carbide pesticide plant in December 1984, with consequences still felt today.⁴ Many women who lived in the plant's vicinity experienced disability, as well as physical and mental illnesses, and while their families received compensation from the government, it was insufficient to maintain them for long. MSK's 'work shed', provided by the state government's Gas Relief and Rehabilitation Department, is located to the north of the city's main railway station in the vicinity of the abandoned Union Carbide factory – meaning that most women affiliated with MSK still come from families affected by the gas leak.

MSK identifies itself on its website as an 'all women' organization operating for the 'social and economic upliftment' of Bhopal's women.⁵ Its focus is on training women in practical skills that will enable them to contribute to the family income, and over the past two decades it has reached over 5000 women. Now led by the founder's daughter, Pooja Iyengar, MSK serves daily a core of around forty adult women from the local area. All these women reside in slum dwellings or resettlement colonies (residences provided by the Government after slum removal), reflecting a low income level. All but one are married, with husbands who are primarily daily-wage earners in the informal sector. Most have not received formal education past the age of twelve, but an average of five to seven years of education enables them to read and write in the local language, Hindi. The majority identify as Hindu by religion, though MSK does project itself as a 'safe place' with 'secular' values open to women of all different religious identities. Clearly, Muslim women do attend at times, and the founder's own affiliation is exemplified by a large wall-hanging depicting Mother Teresa in the main room of the work shed (see fig. 1). None of the women attending belong to 'Scheduled Castes' or 'Scheduled Tribes', official designations associated historically with the most marginalized caste groupings.⁶ Beyond that, caste affiliations are not known; as an

organization MSK intentionally does not probe into caste identities, recognizing that those it seeks to serve would be uncomfortable with the question itself.

[FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE (OR AT HEAD OF ARTICLE IF PREFERRED)]

A focus on delivering basic sewing skills means MSK's women usually spend the afternoon – after children are at school and housework is complete – at the organization's work shed preparing items for sale. Around the time of our visit, commissions included shopping bags made from old banners for the municipal corporation and stylish gifts for a local eco-friendly wedding. Plant pots made from cowdung (*gobar gamlas*) were also drying in the cool winter sun. Work is sometimes halted for visitors, with recent talks on single-use plastics and basic nutrition. Shortly after our visit MSK also opened a computer centre offering training in computer literacy, English and 'soft skills' in response to a local needs survey undertaken by students from Columbia University.⁷ This initiative has, in the intervening period dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic, reached multiple batches of twenty girls each. Though the focus has been on job-oriented training, at the core of the curriculum is confidence building and providing a 'brave space' for girls to discuss gender and health issues. Many more girls from the local community remain on the waitlist for the three-month course. Quite recently, MSK has also invested in training in natural dyes block printing and traditional art in tribal and rural parts of Madhya Pradesh. The centre at Jobat caters to more than thirty women receiving instruction in this eco-friendly art, with the hope of breaking gender barriers by entering a male-dominated profession.

Our project thus promised something rather different to the norm of MSK's activities, and our own as disciplinary specialists too: the chance to link history to contemporary gender empowerment. Could a local past be used to inspire women's agency and autonomy? Perhaps specific methods, including site visits, talks and discussion, would prove more effective for learning and engagement? What were the benefits of bringing an interdisciplinary academic

team into dialogue with a practitioner organization grounded in local context and problems? And what impact could this unique educational experience have, not just on the disadvantaged urban women with whom we had direct contact, but also the surrounding community? To explore these questions, this paper will consider, first of all, the theoretical underpinnings for our study in relation to life writing, gender empowerment, and translocational positionality. It will then explicate in turn our methods, findings and outcomes, including plans to develop this work in future. Though empowerment can be a hard concept to define and measure, we all – academics, activists and participants – came away from this study overwhelmed by its immediate impact and future potential for women's learning and autonomy in Bhopal's specific urban environment. This change was observed especially in terms of women's engagement with history and their understanding of their own agency in matters of education and health.

LIFE WRITING, GENDER EMPOWERMENT AND TRANSLOCATIONAL POSITIONALITY

Our study in Bhopal, it should be noted, ran as part of a larger project on 'advancing women's literacy and empowerment in Pakistan and India through life writing'. The proposal was to use historical research linked to women's life writing towards specific Sustainable Development Goals – gender equality (SDG5), quality education (SDG4), good health and well-being (SDG3) – as identified by the United Nations and pursued by local women's organizations in South Asia.⁸ Lambert-Hurley's earlier publications had revealed many examples of inspirational Muslim women who distinguished themselves as rulers, educators, healthcare professionals, spiritual leaders, writers, actors, musicians, travellers and politicians.⁹ Among these figures were the Nawab Begums of Bhopal. Recognizing that these historical women were not well-known in contemporary Pakistan or India, a main aim was to

use ‘biography as inspiration’. In other words, we sought to explore how women’s life stories could provide historical models for a new generation when crafted into accessible learning materials in local languages for girls’ school or women’s literacy and employment programmes. MSK was one of four NGO partners for the study, with the other three operating in Pakistan.

Life writing was identified as an appropriate cultural mode for our project due to its historical and literary significance within Islamicate societies. As Reynolds has noted of the Arabic tradition, life writing was a staple of Islamic scholarship from the earliest days of the faith: the Prophet Muhammad’s life was told in infinite variety alongside those of other prophets, saints, scholars, poets and emperors.¹⁰ It is notable that the form was conceived as highly didactic, presenting ‘lives as lessons’.¹¹ In South Asia there were many examples before the modern era too – not least the first Mughal emperor Babur’s famous *Vaqai*.¹² It was only in the colonial period, however, that life-writing really began to flourish, with the spread of print culture and the religious changes that accompanied it.¹³ Relevant to our focus was a growing interest in the lives of women, thanks to their centrality to the reformist movements that were gaining steam from the late nineteenth century onwards.¹⁴ Among the British Library’s Urdu collections are a number of biographies of women dated to the late colonial period. Exemplars from early Islamic history, including Khadija, Aisha and Fatima, were particularly favoured, though contemporary women also featured. Biography and autobiography similarly appeared in women’s journals in Urdu established around the turn of the twentieth century to provide suitable reading material for newly-literate girls and women.¹⁵

From this brief historical overview of a literary genre, we summarize three main points of relevance for using life stories to promote gender empowerment in South Asia today. The first is how life writing’s rootedness in Islam, and more particularly South Asia’s

modern history, makes it an appropriate vehicle to pursue contemporary development goals. As Marilyn Booth has observed of biography in early twentieth-century Egypt, a ‘venerable’ tradition may be exploited for its ‘familiar features’, providing ‘markers of respectability and indigenous practice’, while at the same time being ‘sculpted’ in ‘new ways for new agendas’.¹⁶ The second is an established tradition of using the lives of historical and contemporary women to provide models for a new generation. As we have seen, literary examples from the early twentieth century onwards suggest a historical precedent for this study’s approach and goals. The third is life writing’s relationship to conceptions of a gendered self. In *Speaking of the Self*, Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley point to how women in South Asia’s past employed this mode as a means to ‘talk back’ – in other words, a tactic to ‘manoeuvre patriarchies’ alongside other social and political formations.¹⁷ So, we assert, may life stories be ‘a strategy for gaining agency’ (to quote Smith and Watson) within and beyond the cultural constraints of contemporary Pakistan and India.¹⁸

So far we have referred to gender empowerment – and its concomitant terms of agency and autonomy – rather glibly, when, undoubtedly, their definitions and measurements require careful consideration. At the heart of the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are the seventeen goals (SDGs) already mentioned, the fifth of which requires ‘gender equality’ and, concomitantly, the need to ‘empower all women and girls’.¹⁹ This agenda incorporates several different elements, also applicable to our own research context. A first is that women should have equal participation in decision-making in all platforms, including as elected officials. Gender-based violence must be eradicated, and women should be freed of the burden of unpaid work, particularly in the informal sector of domestic and care work. The SDGs’ targets include: ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls; enforcing equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex; eliminating harmful practices such as forced marriage and genital mutilation; ensuring

universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights; enhancing the use of enabling technology for empowerment; and adopting and strengthening sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at all levels.

Gender is, of course, key to belonging in the context of contemporary identity construction. In a seminal paper, Floya Anthias lends a critical eye to these themes by emphasizing how individuals are located in their given world through the interconnectedness not only of their relationship with others, but also of the ways these relationships intersect with gender, ethnicity, religion, class and other identities. What she terms ‘translocational positionality’ differs from intersectionality in that it is significantly more interested in the interrelation of social locations and their processes. Anthias applies this framework for understanding social boundaries and divisions created predominantly as a consequence of migration. Here, we transpose it to gender (in)equality and empowerment in India, where: ‘Location and positionality (and translocational positionality) are more useful concepts for investigating processes and outcomes of collective identification – that is, the claims and attributions that individuals make about their position in the social order of things, their views of where and to what they belong (and to what they do not belong).’²⁰ In our context, this approach allows us to examine the ways in which economic inequalities are implicated in wider social, cultural and political divisions. We can be attentive to ‘residual elements of essentialization’ that may be preserved within a model of ‘fragmented and multiple’ identities, while still enacting some strategic essentialization of womanhood, as necessary to this project.

METHODOLOGIES: A WEEK IN BHOPAL

A visit by our international research team to Bhopal in January 2020 (immediately before the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic) provided the opportunity for a series of activities and discussions with women at MSK. Over the course of a week, we planned to engage a group of twelve to fifteen participants in learning and reflection on Bhopal's history. As researchers, we were acutely aware of the limitations of what we thought could be achieved in such a short time (under the constraints of university term dates and restricted budgets, as well as MSK's order deadlines and the participants' need to earn a daily wage), and building trust was paramount. Iyengar's family links to Bhopal and the organization – with her mother as the founder and her sister as the current lead – as well as her previous experience of running educational projects with MSK and other NGOs was vital. So too was Lambert-Hurley's long engagement with the city, its peoples and its history – her research on the Begums of Bhopal spanning over twenty-five years – despite her obvious foreign birth and scholarly location. As a British-born Muslim of Pakistani heritage also embedded in 'Western' academia, Ali's position was strangely complicated, but having identified her grandparents' birthplaces in what is now India in the process of applying for her visa, she found herself connecting to the site of research in the most intimate of ways: through her Muslim faith and family heritage. Shared language and shared interests – not just in the work undertaken at MSK, but also in quotidian matters, like clothes and food – allowed friendships to grow early in the research process between the research team and participants.

The local project group had an average age of twenty-five years old and a socio-economic, educational and religious profile reflective of that outlined in this paper's introduction. Our emphasis was thus on making lessons and activities relatable to their lived experiences. The importance of linking history to a sense of place was stressed consistently in our planning meetings – first held remotely in December 2019 and then in person throughout our visit – by MSK's lead, Pooja Iyengar. Nearly all our women participants, including

Iyengar herself, had lived their whole lives in Bhopal (apart from two women who had migrated to the city, one from Tamil Nadu and another from a rural district in Madhya Pradesh). And yet they all confirmed to us that they had never learned anything about Bhopal's history, either at school or informally. Their lack of knowledge should not be taken as a lack of interest. Friends in Bhopal outside our partner organization were often bemused by our efforts, proclaiming that these 'poor women' would not be interested in history. The women from MSK articulated the opposite: most said they 'loved knowing about history', even if they struggled to find time to read or preferred learning through 'discussion'.²¹

Their reference to learning methodologies flags how our approach differed significantly from regular history-teaching in Indian schools. This difference may be noted in terms of style and content. According to Raina's analysis, the vast majority of teachers in India (eighty-six per cent) rely on lectures or 'narration' methods to teach history at the secondary school level, while a minority (thirty-six per cent) follow that up with a mixture of lecture and discussion. Only three per cent reported getting out of the classroom for museum visits.²² While a lack of financial resources or facilities may play a role, the demands of the curriculum as captured in a set textbook appear to be the main factor. This point was reinforced by our participants who noted that their children did not know about the history of Bhopal because 'it is not given in the [text]book'.²³ School time is divided to ensure all chapters are covered with the textbook acting as the main, if not sole, guide to topics and approaches.²⁴ The politics of writing history textbooks for Indian schools makes this reliance especially problematic. Indeed, it has been well-documented how, since the success of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in national elections (forming governments in 1998–2004 and 2014 to the present), history books have been rewritten to glorify Hindu contributions to the nation and vilify or exclude Muslims, as well as those of other faiths.²⁵

[FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE]

Our first activity was a tour of local historical sites associated with the ruling Begums led by a local heritage enthusiast, Sikander Malik. With family links to the former royal family, Malik has a well-deserved reputation in Bhopal for his encyclopedic knowledge of historic buildings and textual collections, as well as his ability to enliven the city's history through engaging storytelling. He regularly leads heritage walks that seek to interpret Bhopal's history as 'a story of women's empowerment and development of a syncretic culture'.²⁶ Three main sites were visited in Bhopal's old city: Qudisia Begum's lakeside palace Gohar Mahal (also transliterated as Gauhar Mahal); Iqbal Maidan, a square bordered by the later Begums' palaces and the Moti Masjid; and the city's largest mosque, Taj-ul Masjid (see fig. 2). They are, it should be mentioned, in varying states of repair. While the mosques remain living heritage and Gohar Mahal is promoted by Madhya Pradesh tourism, Sadr Manzil (the former rulers' hall of public audience on Iqbal Maidan) was in the midst of a costly restoration and other palaces were in state of collapse.²⁷ Touring these destinations on a local holiday (*maharsankranti*) – when bright clothes were worn and sweets cheerfully distributed – gave a picnic air to this rare outing for our participants, which was only possible with express permission from their families (see fig. 3). It also facilitated dialogue around monuments that, despite their location on main thoroughfares and architectural prominence, remain overlooked: a kind of 'white noise', as we identified in a debrief.²⁸

[FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE]

On another day, Lambert-Hurley drew on her own historical research to give a more formal talk at MSK's work shed, highlighting the Begums' contributions to architecture, education, health and literary culture. The presentation began with a simple graphic of the relationships between the four Begums and their descendants to clarify names and dates introduced on the city tour. It also linked the family (through a marriage to the Pataudi royal family in the late 1930s) to famous cricketers and film stars familiar to the participants,

including ‘Tiger’ Pataudi, his wife Sharmila Tagore, their son Saif Ali Khan and his wife Kareena Kapoor. As highlighted by fig. 4, simple text and historical images were used alongside contemporary photographs taken on the group’s own city tour to connect past and present. A main aim was to associate each Begum with tangible locations in the city exemplifying women’s rule that were visited or visitable by the participants. In the course of the talk, MSK’s women often pitched in to relate personal experiences of buildings or locations they had not known to be connected to the Begums – for instance, the Sultania Zenana Hospital (named after the last Begum) where several had given birth to their children or experienced medical care themselves.

[FIGURE 4 NEAR HERE]

The discussions continued into sessions dedicated to reflection (excerpts from these reflective sessions, recorded by MSK lead Pooja Iyengar, have been made into a short film, available on YouTube here: <https://youtu.be/JltJona9Cdk>). During these sessions participants were encouraged to express their own ideas in response to a series of informal questions, primarily articulated by Ali and Iyengar in a conversational style. Some of these questions were focused on the Begums of Bhopal in order to assess engagement with the historical knowledge and its relevance to contemporary women. Others were more targeted to gender equality and empowerment. How did the Begums gain and maintain power in the state? What were the challenges faced by these historic women? Which of the four women rulers did participants find most impressive? Could the Begums’ ‘bravery’ inspire contemporary women in their own lives? Were there lessons to be taken from these historic role models for participants and their own families? Applying a co-production model, participants were also invited to articulate ways in which a women’s history of Bhopal could be shared and used to inspire others. Particularly effective for thinking about the impact of this educational programme was a question on the ‘characteristics of the Bhopali woman’ – for which, as we

turn in the analysis that comes next, very different answers were given at the beginning of the interaction than at the end.

FINDINGS: THE BHOPALI WOMAN IS A TIGRESS!

For this analysis, the focus will be on the more reflective discussions held with those women from MSK who had joined the city tour and talk on the Begums of Bhopal.²⁹ It is notable that, throughout this exchange, participants referred to Bhopal's former rulers as 'ranis', a feminine term for a monarch derived from Sanskrit and thus more associated with Hindu-ruled princely states, as opposed to the Hindustani 'nawab' ('nawab begum' for women), derived via Persian from the Arabic honorific for a 'deputy' (*naib*), and usually employed in Mughal successor states ruled by Muslims. The morphing of the Nawab Begums into ranis bestowed upon them a familiarity when discussed in the everyday Hindi of contemporary Bhopal. Parallels could be drawn with other ranis participants may have learned about at school or gained knowledge of in a local context, including the Rani of Jhansi and Rani Kamalapati. The first is often celebrated in nationalist historiography as a leading figure of the 1857 rebellion after her state in central India, located near to Bhopal, was annexed by the East India Company in 1853.³⁰ The second was the wife of a Gond chieftain who had ruled the territory around the city before the establishment of Bhopal state, later ruled by the Nawab Begums, in the early eighteenth century. Significantly, when the redeveloped Habibganj Railway station was renamed in Kamalapati's honour (and inaugurated by Prime Minister Modi no less in 2021), this 'brave and fearless' woman was described by Madhya Pradesh's BJP Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan as 'the last Hindu queen of Bhopal'.³¹ Previously, her name was already known to locals through her palace located in Kamala Park on the bridge between Bhopal's upper and local lakes.

Having established our participants' interest but lack of previous engagement with Bhopal's history, a first set of questions focused on how they would describe a typical woman from Bhopal, or a woman with 'Bhopali' characteristics. The emphasis at the start was on changing dress codes. Previously, Bhopali women were identified as wearing a *bindi* (a coloured dot at the centre of the forehead) and certain 'traditional' attire, like saris and salwar kurta, perhaps made of handwoven cloth (*khadi*), with 'lots of makeup and jewellery'. This dress, or alternatively a long skirt (*lehenga*) and veil (*ghoonghat*), was also mandated for girls: 'jeans were not allowed'. In general terms, these styles were indicative of those associated with Hindu women of different caste and class groups by the anthropologist Doranne Jacobson during her fieldtrips to a rural area near Bhopal city throughout the 1960s and 1970s.³² MSK's women countered that, now, 'girls can wear anything they like' – in some families at least. Jeans were deemed to have become common (though only MSK's lead Pooja Iyengar was wearing them under a long kurta on this occasion), and the bindi and bangles – the latter a customary symbol of marital status – were disappearing.

The previous form of dress was connected to limits on women's movement understood to be required by British or Muslim rule in earlier periods of history. As one woman explained, 'My mummy [said] that they never used to go out. If they did, they would put a curtain on the horse carriage. They had to be hidden because the British could take away the girls. Even when the Muslims used to rule us, the girls had to be behind curtains.' The reference to 'Muslims' implied Mughal rule in early modern India, not more recent princely rule by the Begums and their descendants in Bhopal. When the questioning sought to link this more modest dress to Bhopali women's demeanour, it became clear that confidence was understood as a feature of male backing. One participant gave an example of her father who, because he was worried about her, restricted her movement during childhood with the effect that her confidence was also low. She went on to say, 'Now things have changed a lot.'

Now it is much better.’ She associated the change with education that allowed girls to stay at school longer and marry later. For comparison, she offered the example of an elder sister who, in the 1960s, had left school to be married at the age of just ten. Others chimed in to relate women’s new freedom to the ability to work. As one participant expressed confidently: ‘Girls are standing next to men and also doing work. These days, wives don’t listen to their husbands; they do whatever they wish. Earlier on, the man used to lead, the woman tagged behind. Now it’s the opposite.’

Following on from the presentation on the Begums of Bhopal, participants were also invited to narrate which contributions impressed them most. Interestingly, the discussions on this theme were interrupted by an unexpected visitor – the wife of the former Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Digvijay Singh – who purported to listen, but also asked a leading question: were they not impressed by the architectural designs of the many grand palaces – now dilapidated or in severe disrepair – built by the third Begum, Shah Jahan? One participant spoke up to capture the general view, reflective of how a gendered approach to their socio-economic positioning shaped historical imagination. It was, she asserted, the last Begum, Sultan Jahan, who was most interesting to them. A hundred years before their own educational initiative, she had founded and patronized schools for Bhopal’s girls and women, as well as a library, a museum and a women’s club.³³ Among the schools was the Asfia Technical School, which had instructed those who needed to earn a living – in other words, women like them – in practical skills like spinning, weaving, embroidery and beadwork. This provision for economic independence resonated with participants, particularly due to the tailoring and stitching that they undertook at MSK. Indeed, it was recognized that they still do the gold embroidery, or *zari* and *zardosi* work, featured in Sultan Jahan’s curriculum. As indicated previously, they also expressed gratification for the medical facilities still provided to women, rich and poor, at Sultania Zenana Hospital (see fig. 5).

[FIGURE 5 NEAR HERE]

Though these responses highlight a history that resonated with these working women's present needs, participants still indicated an appreciation of the Begums' building programmes in their close attention to architectural details. Recalling elements of the city tour, they noted the fleur-de-lys emblem, slanted terraces and pitched roofs that reflected French influence at Gohar Mahal, as well as the steep stairs and mirrored roof detailing. The Taj ul-Masajid elicited particular interest among the primarily Hindu party. Most noted that they had passed by the colossal structure – deemed to be the largest mosque in India and one of the largest in Asia – many times, but, in line with chauvinistic understandings of Islam circulating freely in the era of Hindutva, had presumed women were not permitted to enter. During the tour and talk, it was explained that the mosque had, in fact, been commissioned by a woman ruler, Shah Jahan, who included dedicated areas for women to pray.³⁴ Their initial presumption stimulated a number of assertions and recollections about Hindu-Muslim relations in Bhopal – where, reflecting a historical legacy of princely rule, Muslims remain a significant minority at over twenty-six per cent of the population in comparison with sixty-nine per cent identifying as Hindu.³⁵ Some noted that they were fearful of Muslim neighbours after communal riots or bigotry at school, while others recalled a more convivial past at odds with divisive tropes common in today's India: of 'open' houses, shared sweets on Diwali and visits to the dargah of a Sufi saint. The response to the mosque's interior was, in contrast, entirely positive: the grandeur, decoration, age and serenity of the prayer space were all admired. Belying binaries of past and present, participants indicated that, when they passed by again, they would proudly relate how they visited the 'peaceful' space inside (see fig. 6).

[FIGURE 6 NEAR HERE]

The discussions relating history to gender empowerment were less straightforward, sometimes differentiating the Nawab Begums on the basis of their exceptional status as

rulers, and at others linking their experiences as women to those of more limited means in the room. Responding to questions intended to draw out their views on gender parity, participants responded favourably to women being able to rule ‘in the olden days’. Their view was that the Begums’ daughters *should* have been given responsibility for the state because they belonged to the royal family – implying that privilege blurred gender distinctions. Asked if girls should still be allowed to rule, even if there was a son too, the answer was: ‘both should be given the same opportunity.’ It was recognized, however, that, had there been male children in the Bhopal family, girls’ claims to the throne might have been revoked – and, even as it was, the ‘ranis’ had to fight to ensure female rule. Some pointed to the quality of their administration as an important factor here, and especially their efforts to help ‘the poor’ – a detail that resonated with their own economic challenges. Others noted the role of goodhearted (male) ministers who supported the Begums in their plight, rather than working against them as rulers. This observation connected their historical reflections to the earlier discussion in which contemporary women were also noted to need the backing of sympathetic male relatives.

The same theme resurfaced when participants were asked for lessons they could take from the Begums’ history – though this time it was in the context of women assisting women. The earliest Begums, it was noted, had provided the necessary backing for their daughters to become rulers, just as, in a different historical and social context, their own mentors at MSK supported them. As one participant explained, ‘If you support us, then we can progress. We need someone who can help us move forward.’ It was also recognized that the Begums had acted as role models for future generations, providing knowledge of how a state could be run so that their descendants could ‘follow in their footsteps’. Regardless of class, caste and religious variations, there was an example in this for mothers today: ‘I will treat myself like a rani in my [own] house for the [sake of my] kids, so that they get the support they need to

prosper in life. I will make them learn and give them the support they need to be self-sustaining... I can bring the change in my home.’ It was clear that the bravery and confidence of the Begums could be an inspiration in fulfilling these goals. Just as these women had ‘fought back’ when others had tried to ‘steal’ or undermine their kingdom, so would our participants ‘fight back’ if their property or family was under threat.

[FIGURE 7 NEAR HERE]

To conclude our reflection, we followed up this discussion of the Begums’ contributions to local history by asking again about the ‘characteristics of a Bhopali lady’. Dress still featured, but the particular attire flagged at the start had given way to ‘Anarkali dress, dupatta and churidar’. The description evoked historic images of the last three Begums shown as part of the talk at MSK’s work shed, in which they wore loose dresses, tight-fitting trousers and a simple scarf more suited to an active lifestyle and the rigorous demands of statesmanship, including administrative tours on horseback, tiger hunts, fencing and polo. Most archetypal was probably a studio portrait of Shah Jahan Begum taken around 1877, in which she stared with intensity and determination into the camera wielded by Bourne & Shepherd of Calcutta (see fig. 4 for how this portrait was presented to the participants).³⁶ Participants also recalled an image of Sultan Jahan at the 1911 Delhi Durbar, in which she sat front and centre alongside the king-emperor, looking ‘so confident’ despite being the only woman (and a veiled one at that) in a large crowd of otherwise male Indian princes (see fig. 7). Recalling a story recounted on the city tour of how Sikandar had bravely killed a tiger threatening a village, all of Bhopal’s women took on the qualities of her prey: the Bhopali woman was now envisioned as a ‘very dangerous tigress’.

CONCLUSIONS: LET US TELL THE STORIES NOW ...

The dramatic transformation in the imaginary of the Bhopali woman after MSK's participants engaged with the Begums' life stories for the first time was not limited to their own self-perception. To engage with this history through active learning methods, including site visits, interactive talks and reflective discussions, changed their interaction with the city. There was a pride in knowing that the local hospital was named for a woman ruler who had put a qualified female doctor at the helm, introduced training for local midwives and furnished it with the most modern equipment.³⁷ Never again would they travel along a main thoroughfare, Sultania Road, without recognizing its namesake's efforts for female education. How had they not recognized that the area of the city known as Shahjahanabad was named, not for the Mughal ruler, but for a local Begum who had, among her many architectural commissions, ordered the construction of the monumental Taj-ul Masajid? Even the railway station opposite MSK's work shed was connected to Sikandar Begum's dream to make Bhopal Junction the connecting point between east and west, north and south, on a national grid.³⁸ Through the use of history, Bhopal could be reimagined as a woman's city: a place where a mother could take responsibility for the health of her family and community, where MSK's impressive educational initiatives had a backstory, where the mosque could be entered and travel was not just a man's prerogative.

After their tour of the Begums' Bhopal, MSK's women were also keen to visit more historical sites – including Islamnagar fort some distance outside the city, where Qudsia and Sikandar had withdrawn to fight for women's rule in Bhopal after the British political agent had intervened on behalf of a male claimant to the throne in the 1830s.³⁹ They also expressed their ambition to share their newfound historical knowledge – especially precious because it had come to them before their husbands or relatives – with their own and other children. Various modes were suggested to make this inspirational history 'famous' – among them, WhatsApp, TikTok and a website drawing on their new computer skills. The most popular

idea, however, was to work with our academic team to prepare a short, illustrated book on the contributions of the Begums to Bhopal that they could take into schools themselves to share with teachers and schoolchildren. ‘We can make an exciting story’, they explained, if only given the chance to take the lessons. Our participants also hoped to replicate their own experience by leading tours for children to local sites. A suggestion was Bhopal’s Central Library, now named for nationalist hero Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, though, appropriately, it still bears the original plaque on the façade recognizing in Urdu and English the building’s founder Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum.⁴⁰

Sharing their city’s forgotten history with children was deemed to have the greatest impact because those children would then take the stories home to their families – and ‘parents listen to their own kids’. This reflection underlined the importance of intergenerational storytelling to our context: from old to young and young to old. That MSK’s women were so committed to being the ones to tell the stories, however, points to the success of the pilot programme in fostering women’s agency and autonomy: not only did they make links between a local past and their own gender empowerment, but they also wanted to take the lead in making a change for others. We thus see the realization of a number of SDG targets for gender equality – not least women’s equal participation in decision-making, their enhanced access to paid work and the use of technology for empowerment. In time, we may hope that a programme of this sort would also contribute to the elimination of gender-based violence and harmful practices, while encouraging access to effective and affordable education, sexual and reproductive health care and economic resources. ‘I want to bring the change’, stated one woman unequivocally, ‘We should become like the Begums.’

NOTES AND REFERENCES

This research was funded by a Sustainable Partnership Award granted through the QR GCRF programme at the University of Sheffield for a project entitled ‘Advancing Female Literacy and Empowerment in Pakistan and India through Life Writing’ (2019-21). Our initial findings were first published as a short blog entitled ‘Empowerment Women through History: The Begams’ Bhopal’ for *History Matters*, 6 March 2020, <http://www.historymatters.group.shef.ac.uk/empowering-women-history-begams-bhopal/>

¹ Quite recently, this mosque has been targeted by local organizations associated with the Hindu right for an archaeological survey and excavation to ascertain if it was built on the ruins of an earlier Hindu temple. See ‘Now, Hindu outfit demands archaeological survey of Bhopal's Jama Masjid, rakes up temple theory,’ *The New Indian Express*, 20 May 2022, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2022/may/20/now-hindu-outfit-demands-archaeological-survey-of-bhopals-jama-masjid-rakes-up-temple-theory-2455645.html>.

² On the history of the Begums of Bhopal, see Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage: Sultan Jahan Begam of Bhopal*, London, 2007; and Shaharyar M. Khan, *The Begums of Bhopal: A Dynasty of Women Rulers in Raj India*, London, 2000. A more potted history is available in Lambert-Hurley’s entry on the ‘Nawab Begums of Bhopal’ for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, 2010. More detail on the initiatives alluded to here is also given in the course of this article.

³ For a popular history of Raja Bhoj, see ‘Raja Bhoja: the Scholar-King’, *Live History India*, 1 August 2017, <https://www.livehistoryindia.com/story/people/raja-bhoja-the-scholar-king>.

⁴ Apoorva Mandavilli, ‘The World’s Worst Industrial Disaster is Still Unfolding’, *The Atlantic*, 9 July 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/07/the-worlds-worst-industrial-disaster-is-still-unfolding/560726/>.

⁵ ‘The Birth of Mahashakti’, <http://www.mahashakti.org/>.

⁶ For information on these groups from the United Nations, see

<https://web.archive.org/web/20211122121505/https://in.one.un.org/task-teams/scheduled-castes-and-scheduled-tribes/>.

⁷ This was an unpublished study, the results of which fed into an informal report prepared by the Columbia interns for MSK lead Pooja Iyengar.

⁸ On the United Nations' Sustainable Development goals, see <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

⁹ Lambert-Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage*; Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography and the Self in Muslim South Asia*, Redwood City, 2018.

¹⁰ Dwight F. Reynolds, ed., *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, Berkeley, 2001.

¹¹ Barbara Metcalf, 'The Past in the Present: Instruction, Pleasure, and Blessing in Maulana Muhammad Zakariyya's *Aap Biitii*' in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, ed. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, Delhi, 2004, pp. 116–43.

¹² See Stephen Dale, *The Garden of Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)*, Leiden, 2004.

¹³ Francis Robinson, 'Religious Change and the Self in Muslim South Asia' in his *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, Delhi, 2000, pp. 105–21.

¹⁴ See, as just one example of many studies, Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, Delhi, 2007.

¹⁵ Lambert-Hurley, *Elusive Lives*, pp. 34–35.

¹⁶ Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt*, Berkeley, 2001, p. xiv.

-
- ¹⁷ Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, 'Introduction' to their edited volume, *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance and Autobiography in South Asia*, Durham, 2015, p. 13.
- ¹⁸ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis, 2010, p. 235.
- ¹⁹ 'Goal 5', <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>.
- ²⁰ Floya Anthias, 'Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality: an intersectionality frame for understanding identity and belonging', *Translocations: Migration and Social Change* 4: 1, Winter 2008, pp. 5–20; Floya Anthias, *Translocational Belongings: Intersectional Dilemmas and Social Inequalities*, London, 2020, p. 491.
- ²¹ Reflective discussion at MSK's work shed, 16 January 2020.
- ²² Vijay K. Raina, 'Instructional Strategies Used by Indian History Teachers', *Teaching History* 67, April 1992, pp. 24–27.
- ²³ Reflective discussion at MSK's work shed, 16 January 2021.
- ²⁴ Vijay K. Raina and Harry Dhand, 'Reflections on Teaching History in the Developing World: An Indian Experience,' *The Social Studies* 91: 2, 2010, pp. 84–88.
- ²⁵ Hema Ramanathan and Jessica Levknecht, 'Speaking Volumes: Religion and Teaching History in India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 41: 36, 9 September 2007, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2006/36/perspectives/speaking-volumes.html>; Romila Thapar, 'The History Debate and School Textbooks in India: a Personal Memoir', *History Workshop Journal* 67: 1, Spring 2009, pp. 87–98. For a useful set of resources on the most recent rewriting of Indian history, see <http://ektara.org/magazine/rewrite-history.html>. Removal of the chapter on Mughal history from the Class 12 textbook produced by India's National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has drawn particular attention. See

Zoya Mateen, 'India history debate after chapter on Mughals dropped', BBC News, 20 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-65229515>.

²⁶ 'Heritage walk, storytelling session mark heritage day in Bhopal', *The Times of India*, 19 April 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/heritage-walk-story-telling-session-mark-heritage-day-in-bhopal/articleshow/58249624.cms> Also see 'A "Heritage Walk" through the rich history of Bhopal', *The Pioneer*, 17 September 2018, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/state-editions/a----heritage-walk----through-the-rich-history-of-bhopal.html>.

²⁷ On Sadr Manzil's restoration, see Jamal Ayub, 'Restored for crores, now Begums' heritage to be leased for decades', *The Times of India*, 14 April 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/restored-for-crores-now-begums-heritage-to-be-leased-for-decades/articleshow/90831365.cms>.

²⁸ Debrief after city tour, 15 January 2020.

²⁹ Reflective discussion at MSK's work shed, 16 January 2021. These conversations were originally in Hindi, but direct quotations are given here in English translation from a transcript analysed with QSR NVIV011 software. The themes were pre-set as nodes and coded accordingly. A simple word frequency count also gave a sense of the discussion priorities. All subsequent quotations from our participants in this section and the next come from this dataset.

³⁰ For a recent biography, see E. Jaiwant Paul, *Rani of Jhansi, Lakshmi Bai*, New Delhi, 1997.

³¹ See 'PM Modi inaugurates redeveloped Rani Kamlapati Railway Station in Madhya Pradesh', *The Times of India*, 15 November 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-inaugurates-redeveloped-rani-kamlapati-railway-station-in-madhya-pradesh/photostory/87714252.cms>; and Avishek G Dastigar,

‘Habibganj to Rani Kamlapati: How a railway station’s name is changed’, *The Indian Express*, 16 November 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/habibganj-rani-kamlapati-name-change-railway-station-7622433/>.

³² Doranne Jacobson, ‘Hidden Faces: Hindu and Muslim Purdah in a Central Indian Village’, PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1970; and Doranne Jacobson, ‘Studying the Changing Roles of Women in Rural India’, *Signs* 8: 1, Autumn 1982, pp. 132–37.

³³ On these initiatives, see Lambert-Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage*, ch. 3, ‘Scholars and Schools’.

³⁴ Lambert-Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage*, p. 36.

³⁵ ‘Bhopal city population 2011–22’ at <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/city/302-bhopal.html>.

³⁶ This image is accessible from the British Library collections:
[https://imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/27696/..](https://imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/27696/)

³⁷ On Sultan Jahan’s medical reforms, see Lambert-Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage*, ch. 5, ‘Medicine and Motherhood’.

³⁸ Khan, *The Begums of Bhopal*, p. 93.

³⁹ For a colourful account of this struggle for power, see Khan, *Begums of Bhopal*, pp. 75–86. In a recent paper, Barbara Metcalf explained this British action in terms of a ‘masculinization of property rights’. ‘The Begums of Bhopal: Becoming “a Muslim Woman” in Colonial India’, a talk for Indian Diaspora Washington DC Metro, 9 April 2022.

⁴⁰ See ‘Govt. Maulana Azad Central Library Bhopal’, <https://central-library-bhopal.business.site/>.