

History in Focus

11. Becoming Elizabeth + AHA 2023

Wednesday, February 1, 2023

Daniel Story

I'm Daniel Story, and this is *History in Focus*, a podcast by the *American Historical Review*. This is episode 11. A little later on, we'll hear from American Historical Association Meetings Manager, Debbie Ann Doyle. With Debbie we'll revisit the recent AHA Annual Meeting in Philadelphia as well as look ahead to the 2024 meeting in San Francisco. But our first stop is with historian Megan Robb. While serving as a visiting assistant professor at Oxford a few years back, Rob was given access to a family archive that, among other things, revealed, through letters and material objects, the life of Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa, a woman of Indian Mughal origin who at a young age was paired with British East India Company official Gerard Gustavus Ducarel and relocated with him to England in 1784. Shortly thereafter, they were married in London. All the while, as Robb outlines, Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa was becoming an English lady while at the same time maintaining complex ties to her Mughal past and identity. Robb's article "Becoming Elizabeth: The Transformation of a Bihari Mughal into an English Lady, 1758-1822" appears in the March 2023 issue of the AHR. Robb spoke with *History in Focus* producer Matt Hermane.

Matt Hermane

Yeah, so I was really excited to be able to talk to you because I also work on Persian subjects myself - a little bit earlier, but I also - these like kind of trans regional topics.

Megan Robb

That's wonderful. Thank you.

Matt Hermane

So maybe we could just start by having you introduce yourself and tell us what the title of your article is.

Megan Robb

Okay. I'm Megan Robb, and I'm the Julian Martin Franklin Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and I work on a range of subjects. I am really interested in print publics in Urdu, and this article is the result of several years trying to pay closer attention to the significance of relationships between indigenous women born in South

Asia and European men. The title of my article is "Becoming Elizabeth: The Transformation of a Bihari Mughal into an English Lady, 1758-1822."

Matt Hermane

So your article, it's about this Indian woman of the Persianate world who tries as best as she can to transform herself into this English woman. So maybe you can just tell us a little bit about Elizabeth and who she was.

Megan Robb

Yeah, so in the article, I refer to her as Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa because that's the one example that I've been able to find of her signing her own name. But I also like to combine both names because I think it's a good reminder to me and to readers that she was born and raised in a Mughal context and also someone who was becoming, you know, profoundly English. So, from what we know, she was born in 1758 in or around Purnea, a small town in modern day Bihar, in India, and I think most likely was part of a land owning or noble family who probably came to know the East India Company official Gerard Gustavus de Carell when he was appointed as the first district supervisor for Purnea. Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa had multiple children with Gerard Gustavus while they were both in India and the two eldest children, Elizabeth and Philip, were sent back to England ahead of both Gerard Gustavus and Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa; that was very typical of children of that period. I think there was a concern to make sure that they grew up properly English, right? But then the story becomes a little bit more unusual. Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa de Carell decided to accompany Gerard Gustavus back to England. And then in 1787, they became legally married. The fact that they got legally married also seems unusual, based on examples of those kinds of relationships. And then after they were married, Elizabeth began to train herself to take over the role of, you know, lady of the house. She taught herself to write English, of course, had already learned to speak English. She certainly was living the life of a Christian woman. It's not clear if there was ever a specific moment of conversion, but the language in her letters and the fact that her children also were very committed to, kind of, Christian life indicates that she really did connect to that subjectivity of being part of the Church of England. Her husband, Gerard Gustavus died in 1800, and Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa stayed in England, and she lived with her son for the remainder of her life, until 1822. What's interesting here is that her journey was one in contrast to the tale of another woman that we know maybe a comparable amount about, named Halima, that Durba Ghosh has written about. She had come as a partner to an East India Company official and been, kind of, exiled to a mistress's house when her partner had decided to discard her and marry a white, European woman. And she lived out her days in social isolation and complete mortification, by all accounts. And what's interesting is that even the addition of one story like

this opens up possibilities for the ways that similar women may have lived similar lives that we just don't know enough about.

Matt Hermane

There's a lot to unpack in everything you just said. But I think let's move on to the archive that you had at your disposal, I guess maybe you could just kind of describe this family archive.

Megan Robb

So I think I'll start by describing how I came across it. One of my first jobs was a kind of, visiting assistant professor of Urdu and Hindi in the Department of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies in Oxford. And while I was there, an alumni of one of the colleges in Oxford wrote to a colleague in Oxford asking for help in, first of all, determining the language of a number of letters that were in the family's possession; they thought they might have been Urdu, at that time. And so I met with a member of, you know, the extended family who were interested in finding out more about their ancestor who had long been talked about in the family for at least, I gather, a generation or two as quote unquote "the Persian Princess." I was extremely excited to see perfectly preserved Persian letters from the 1770s and 1780s. And they invited me to the house to see not only the letters but also some material items that had belonged to Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa. And the range of, the range of materials that they had managed to preserve was remarkable and exciting. They had a very strong commitment to preserving their family's heritage, which created what felt to me like a very unique collection of materials that gave us insight into how an eighteenth-century woman lived her life. And it was even more remarkable, because of the rarity of evidence that people working on relationships between Indian women and European men - we usually have access to. I think working on a family archive is a very interesting process because it's impossible to work, I think, not just ethically but also just with dignity with a personal archive without building a relationship of mutual respect and trust with the family who owns those materials, and so I've been very honored by their willingness to allow me to do research on their ancestors life. It's been a great privilege.

Matt Hermane

You mentioned, of course, that this is not just a written archive, it's also a material archive. I want to, in a little bit, talk about the materials that you were able to examine. But before we do that, you seem to set up this kind of, I think, a juxtaposition between the family archive and the colonial archive. In this case, we're talking about the archive of the English East India Company. Could you maybe kind of talk about what this archive allows you to do in comparison, or in contrast, if you had just worked with that colonial archive?

Megan Robb

Yeah, one of the major challenges for historians that are trying to write on this topic of native women cohabiting with European men. And I use that term "native" in the sense that Durba Ghosh used it in her seminal work on sex in the colonial family as a way of referring to women who were locally grounded in what's contemporary India. So scholarship on native women has tended to depend just by necessity on archival records that were published and created by British institutions. Those bureaucratic archives do tend to invite scholars to consider women in only specific contexts - specifically legal contexts: when they're petitioners, when they are owners of property or disputing property, when they have been accused of crimes or trying to defend themselves against crime, or when they're victims of crimes. So these archives make it difficult to gain a nuanced sense of the hybridity of these women's lives. It can sometimes risk leading us to a place where we assume that any contact with the colonial apparatus endangers a woman's essential authentic subjectivity, and women who were outside of the archive are presumed as authentic or kind of stable in their quote unquote "native identities." What's useful about this particular archive is that it helped me to explore the ways that even though her decisions were undoubtedly strategic, she was certainly not functioning in an environment where she could make any choice at any time. She could exercise what Sedgwick has called those "middle ranges of agency" in order to create a hybrid subjectivity that combined multiple aspects of the many different cultural influences that she was interacting with. In a way, I'm trying to get us to think about what powerful possibilities are in front of us if we don't assume that women in these relationships are either in a position of kind of authentic purity when they're not interacting with colonial institutions or strategic and compromised when they are interacting with colonial institutions but instead looking closely at how did the women in these complicated social positions construct their own hybridity within severe constraints?

Matt Hermans

I'm actually glad you ended there - you know, the ways that women may have fashioned their identities. So let's talk about those ways, what you saw in your archive. Maybe you can kind of just, like, run us through the different materials you worked with and what they tell us about Elizabeth.

Megan Robb

Yeah, absolutely. This is like the heart of the article. When we have access to these material items it allows us to gain a new set of insights into how that subjectivity was being formed through embodied action. So Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa kept a penmanship journal where she practiced English calligraphy, she was training herself in the arts of the English hostess, she's practicing writing grocery lists, she's practicing writing invitations to dinner, as well as more kind of basic skills of practicing individual letter forms. Ultimately, what I see the penmanship book as doing is it allows us access, as historians, into how she cultivated a set of moral dispositions that allowed her to navigate this new world, because their success in that world was an extremely high stakes endeavor, right? For children's success, for this, you know, ability to get her children married, and her ability to function socially in that world. Some of the really interesting parts of the penmanship notebook are sections where she is copying typical aphorisms. So they might be phrases like "Prosperity seldom attends the undeserving." She also wrote phrases that were really common in the Church of England context, like "You must renounce the devil and all of his works." And these would have been really typical phrases that many young ladies would have copied. But there's a few aspects of the penmanship notebook that I think are more pointed in the ways that they give insight into how she might have been negotiating her place in the world. On one page she copies a phrase that says, quote, "The inhabitants of Europe are fair; of Asia, part dark, part fair," end quote. And so I talk a bit in the article about how this phrase and its copying gives us that kind of insight into this period as a time where there wasn't of course a firm sense of kind of race and racial categories in the same way as we think of it today. A lot of the works that were circulating around in, like, the milieu that Sharaf un-Nisa and Gerard Gustavus would have been aware of - like Blumenbach's on the natural varieties of mankind or by Francois Bernier or Carl Linnaeus - they are talking about how complexion relates to moral status and moral virtue. She was a very fair person, and her copying this phrase, to me, seems to indicate that her light complexion was, I think, a really significant factor in her ability to come back to England and her ability to be integrated into English life. And all of these sources that are circulating in that environment indicate that complexion could be linked to a greater kind of porousness, to Christian conversion as well, right? - so the idea that having fair skin indicated a kind of moral status. So that's part of the penmanship notebook that I spent a lot of time thinking about. We know that that's a time when the racialization of social difference was being worked out. And so we can see that Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa was acknowledging her origins outside of England, but also aligning herself to a sense of a kind of universal aristocracy because of her complexion. So some of the other pieces that I look at in this article are her jewelry. There's a cannetille crucifix, as well as a pear shaped pendant that's more Mughal in style that originated on the subcontinent. These two pieces, to me, indicate the mutual presence of material items that exercise, like, Mughal

vocabularies of jewelry and a, kind of, Christian-English material culture as well. I think about the motion of taking one necklace off and putting the other one on as the way that she actually really actively constructed a hybrid identity. We also look at some of the Persian correspondence that her brothers wrote to her and the fact that she had a seal with the Persian-script inscription that was used to sign the end of the letter and make sure that nothing can be added after that. And so what that seal tells me is that she was also maintaining Persian as well as English correspondence, even though we don't have any Persian letter that she actually wrote. In addition to that, we have a miniature painting of her which is really striking. In it, her clothing is very distinctively British; she has an empire waist dress on, her curly hair is covered by a lace cap. But at the same time, these British aspects of the painting were complemented by her Mughal jewelry. And I talk a bit in the article about how she was demonstrating and choosing, curating for her portrait jewelry that emphasized her noble local origins as well. And this practice is in stark contrast to women living at the same time who made different sorts of choices. And then one more thing I'll mention, the perfume bottle that Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa used was really an exciting object to consider as well. So we know from the maker's mark, and from the style, it is similar to the style of other perfume bottles created in South Asia in that period. And perfume was considered an essential method of adornment for Mughal elites. And the presence of that object indicates that scent remained an important part of this self-fashioning. And maybe she did, like with her jewelry, alternately engage with European and South Asian scent traditions as well. So these are some of the examples. I know I haven't talked about everything, but these are some of the ways that I'm trying to read these material objects in ways that allow us to at least ask new questions about how a woman like Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa was cultivating her new self.

Matt Hermene

Let's talk about microhistory. I've had a hard time trying to figure out the right question to ask for this. But what I'd like to do is you've brought up this other woman, Halima. And you also mentioned that her and Elizabeth have very different stories. So I was kind of hoping to frame the question of what this microhistorical approach can yield by talking about differences. Earlier, I was struck by this phrase you used -"the powerful possibilities" of this family archive. So kind of thinking about these two different women and their individual lives, what do you think these types of microhistories can tell us?

Megan Robb

Yeah, I think one of the challenges of doing research on women like Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa is that because there are so few that we know a lot about, any one case can end up overdetermining our view of all of these women, and that's a risk that I really wanted to be

aware of from early on and try to guard against. But on the other hand, paying close attention to the details of her material archive allows us to think about specific emotional and material constraints that influenced the choices that women were making. At a really granular level, how were they negotiating that meaning in their life? How were they as bodies moving through the world? And it allows us, at least, to imagine what life may have been like in a different way. And it also, I think, makes us more deeply aware of the complicated nature of the subjectivity of women like Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa. So Halima traveled back to England, and, when she arrived, she was basically placed aside. She was a marginalized figure. She was described as a kind of odd figure living this very lonely life. And so clearly that one story, because we have so few stories, primes us to consider how difficult it would be to live a life as, and be accepted as, an English woman if you had origins in India. So Elizabeth Sharaf un-Nisa's story indicates a greater range of possibilities. It suggests the possibility that more women were able to live a life like hers. But I also don't want her tale to become like the new explanation for how women must have lived their lives. So I think that, on the one hand, microhistory I see as a strategy that helps us guard against those over-determinations. I'm also combining the method of micro history with looking at new types of sources as well. Like material sources and trying to recover vocabularies to talk about those sources so that they can make sense alongside some of the more traditional colonial archives. But on the other hand, I also want it to be always provisional, right? Each time we discover a substantial new archive that gives us insight, we should also lean really hard as historians into the provisional nature of those conclusions and emphasize, above all, what new questions does this open up? How does this push us to inquire differently? That's what I hope will be part of the outcome of this article.

Matt Hermane

It sounds like you're saying there's this range of possibilities between the experience of Halima and someone like Elizabeth. And the more of these microhistories like yours that we can do, the more we can fill in what exactly what that could be.

Megan Robb

Yeah. And also taking very seriously the way that there are irrecoverable erasers as well, right? I think listening to the silences is also a really important part of the process. I think, as historians, it feels like it would be amazing to be able to fill in all the gaps and have a complete story of someone's life, but ignoring those erasures and the desire to find a narrative thread causes us to potentially overlook the violence that comes with some of those attempts to prune the narrative and the meaning of those erasures. Those silences are important to

Matt Hermane

Meghan Robb, thank you very much for talking about your article with us.

Megan Robb

Thank you so much for having me and for taking the time. This has been a great conversation.

Daniel Story

That was producer Matt Hermane in conversation with Megan Robb about her article "Becoming Elizabeth: The Transformation of a Bihari Mughal into an English Lady, 1758-1822." Up next, my conversation with AHA Meetings Manager, Debbie Ann Doyle.

Airport noise

Daniel Story

My Wednesday before the conference started in a very sleepy San Jose International Airport, followed by a long day of flying, but I'm curious, for you and for the team that you work with, what was your Wednesday before the conference like?

Debbie Ann Doyle

Oh gosh. Well, it started at - we were all, the team was all there in Philadelphia. My day started with checking the office and making sure our shipment was there at about eight o'clock in the morning. And then, at 11, we had a meeting with the Philadelphia Marriott, and then we had meetings later that day, also, with the Loews and the Notary to make sure everything was in place for the meeting and they had all of the instructions we'd sent them on setting up the rooms, and everything was in place for the conference to start on Thursday.

Daniel Story

Yeah, and then full steam ahead.

Debbie Ann Doyle

Yes, yeah. And then Thursday morning is just kind of get up and start running.

Meeting crowd noise

Daniel Story

It's always interesting and exciting to me, as an attendee, to be around the registration area on the first day and kind of hear all the conversations going, people navigating the line - seemed to go pretty smoothly, from my point of view, at least. Did it for you guys?

Debbie Ann Doyle

Yeah, it did go really smoothly. And it was nice to see, kind of, the registration area active. And there was a lot of conversation going on and people interacting and seeing each other, which was a kind of a contrast to New Orleans where there weren't that many people at the meeting. So it was nice to see people there enjoying themselves again.

Daniel Story

So I'm thinking for people who maybe have never attended an AHA meeting, or maybe haven't in a really long time, or maybe even people who are not that familiar with an academic history conference, how would you sum up, or what kind of picture would you paint for them of the AHA Annual Meeting? What is this thing?

Debbie Ann Doyle

Well, the easy answer is it's the largest annual gathering of professional historians in the world. It is a chance to meet your fellow historians and talk about both research but also life in the discipline, and network and get to know each other. I think one of the most interesting aspects of the AHA Annual Meeting is that we have historians there, that, who cover pretty much every time, place, and subject. So it's a really good chance to talk to people who do something adjacent to your research but not people you would see at your normal field conference. We also have a lot of professional development opportunities and just chances to get to know people.

Daniel Story

So for this particular conference, could you give us a sense of, sort of, what was happening and what was notable, and maybe just start by breaking down some of the numbers. How many people attended?

Debbie Ann Doyle

We had nearly 3,000 people there. There were over 400 sessions, both selected by our program committee or recruited by our affiliated societies, who are smaller organizations that focus on particular aspects of the past. The sessions really started in earnest on Thursday

afternoon and go through Sunday at 12:30. So it was four days of sessions and workshops and meetings and receptions.

Daniel Story

And for anyone who has never attended these sessions, kind of any number of them are running concurrently, right? So you, you do have to do a bit of picking and choosing.

Debbie Ann Doyle

Yes, yeah. We have a perpetual complaint that all of the interesting sessions are happening at the same time, but I think that's because we have so many interesting sessions. But at any given time, there are probably a lot of things of interest to any person, especially on Friday and Saturday, we could have up to 45 sessions going on at any given time. So...

Daniel Story

Wow, yeah. Speaking of sessions, that probably, you know, I'm guessing the nature of your role at the annual meeting means that you don't necessarily get to go to a lot of these sessions yourself. But I wonder if you could give us a little bird's eye view of some of the, kind of, more unique or notable sessions that popped up this year, or things that you've heard a bit of buzz about at the conference or since the conference?

Debbie Ann Doyle

I think one thing we tried this year, that was new, was something we called "continuing conversations," which was Sunday afternoon, as a kind of wrap up event, which was focused on small group conversation and ended up being kind of a chance to just sit and chat with the staff about the meeting. So that was a new, new idea we tried this year. The plenary on Thursday night on the past, the present, and the work of historians I thought was really interesting and was a really lively and interesting conversation. What others? There's so many things. We had an op-ed workshop on Sunday that, I thought, that, was a nice new addition to the program. I think more teaching workshops than we've ever had before. So we had quite a few different opportunities to sit down and talk about teaching different aspects of the past. And we had some interesting ones on teaching divisive concepts, too, which are part of an initiative we've been working on. So there's a really quite robust strand of sessions on that.

Daniel Story

A lot of the sessions that I ended up going to were AHR related. So I had a great time attending the Odeuropa session that, that was dealing with historical smells.

Dr. Inger Leemans introducing the Odeuropa session [Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to this session "Knowing by Sensing." Really great to have you all in the room and to smell and discover the history of scents with us. And in order to immediately kickstart this nose-on meeting, William Tullett is handing around some blotters for you.]

Daniel Story

And on the subject of teaching, there was the I think it's called the #AHR syllabus project that is being launched later in the year by the journal, and there was a session that had some of the participants presenting on the different lesson plan syllabi that they were preparing that would be part of that project. That was pretty cool. Like you said, there's just so many different, kind of, rabbit tracks to go down, depending on what you're interested in. The other one that I always tried to hit each year, and I did make it to this one this year, is the digital projects, kind of, lightning round session, where people who have worked on various kinds of digital projects stand up and, you know, talk about, about what they've done for about three minutes or so. And that's a really cool one that, you know, you get to hear from a lot of people in a short amount of time.

Debbie Ann Doyle

Now, we've been trying to have more lightning rounds on the program because it's a chance for people to get on the program and present their research who maybe don't have the network to put together a full 90-minute session, or at a stage of their project where they don't have 15 minutes of stuff to say yet but would like to get some feedback. Our community on LGBTQ scholars in the profession did a lightning round on queer history that was really successful.

Daniel Story

Fantastic.

Debbie Ann Doyle

Oh, and we do an undergraduate research lightning round as well, which is, it's nice to get undergraduates involved in the meeting too.

Daniel Story

Absolutely. I'm really curious to ask you too, given that you've worked with the Annual Meeting for such a long time and really, like, sort of headed things up organizationally for the last several years, how would you sort of describe the evolution of the AHA meeting and, maybe looking back a ways, but also in these last few years, where we've all had this enormous challenge of navigating life through what is really still an ongoing pandemic?

Debbie Ann Doyle

Yes, it's kind of two questions, a two-part question. So over the last, at least 10 years and probably more, we have been rethinking what the Annual Meeting should look like, as opposed to what it has always been. So when I first started working at the AHA, there were a lot of papers that were read with the chair on panels, and we have been actively trying to encourage more roundtables in a more conversational format for quite some time now, and also move away from thinking of it as just a research meeting. It's a meeting for every aspect of the discipline. So we also talk about professional issues, we talk about teaching, talk about careers, and it's a chance to network about all of those topics, not just present your research. So we've been trying to include more workshops, and more teaching sessions, and practicums that will help people learn the new skill that's relevant to their career. We've added a career fair for learning about different places historians could work. So that's been a kind of ongoing effort to make this a more interactive meeting. And then I would say that, since the pandemic, we've really started to think about what can we do together that we can't do apart. So you know, if you can watch someone read their paper on Zoom, maybe you don't need to watch someone read their paper in Philadelphia, but you can talk to that person and learn something from them, and they can learn from you. That's one reason we're trying to have more opportunities for small group conversation and make it a place where people can build their network and meet other historians and talk to each other about their work. So the "continuing conversations," for example, was originally our idea was that it would be almost an "unconference" where people would come and say, "I went to, like, a bunch of really great sessions on this topic, let's all talk about it." We didn't get great turnout, so that didn't end up happening. But we're gonna, we've got an idea of how to try that again next year in San Francisco. So we want to make this meeting a chance to really have those face-to-face conversations that we all missed when we were only talking on Zoom. So we're really trying to think that through and also to develop almost a parallel structure of online programming that's not tied to the same calendar as the in-person Annual Meeting so that, basically, there are two ways to interact with the AHA.

Daniel Story

So you already brought up next year's annual meeting in San Francisco, which, by the way, this much closer to me, which I'm very happy about. So yeah, what can you tell us, if anything, about that, and I guess what should folks know, in particular people who might be interested in proposing to, you know, present a panel or something like that?

Debbie Ann Doyle

And the first thing they should know is that the deadline for submissions is February 15th, which is a lot earlier than people might anticipate. So the call for proposals is already up on our website, and the portal for submitting proposals is open. There's a lot of information on the website about how to put sessions together. Again, we do welcome creative ideas of what a session might look like. So it definitely does not have to be three other people who are going to present papers and a chair. There's a space on the website with a bunch of suggestions for different creative session ideas, and any new ideas are also welcome.

Daniel Story

Sounds fantastic.

Debbie Ann Doyle

Yeah.

Daniel Story

Is there anything else that I didn't ask you about?...

And that was about when Debbie's connection cut out.

Are you still with me, Debbie? Maybe that's our cue to end the interview. I think we were pretty much there anyway...

Thanks, Debbie, for hanging in there and for talking with us about the AHA Annual Meeting just past in Philadelphia. You can find information about next year's meeting in San Francisco at historians.org. And keep in mind, the deadline to propose a presentation is fast approaching, on February 15th. So if that's of interest to you, don't delay. Earlier we heard from Megan Robb, about her article, "Becoming Elizabeth the Transformation of a Bihari Mughal into an English Lady, 1758-1822," which you can find in the March 2023 issue of the AHR. *History in Focus* is a production of the American Historical Review in partnership with the American Historical Association and the University Library at the University of California Santa Cruz. Episode 11 was produced by Matt Hermene and me, Daniel Story, with engineering support from Myles Ryder-Alexis. You can learn more about this and other episodes at americanhistoricalreview.org. That's it for now. See you next time.