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978-1-107-03024-4 - Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness

Ruby Lal

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## Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India

In this engaging and eloquent history, Ruby Lal traces the becoming of nineteenth-century Indian women through a critique of narratives of linear transition from girlhood to womanhood. In the north-Indian patriarchal environment, women's lives were dominated by the expectations of the male universal, articulated most clearly in household chores and domestic duties. The author argues that girls and women in the early nineteenth century experienced freedom, eroticism, adventurousness and playfulness, even within restrictive circumstances. Although women in the colonial world of the later nineteenth century remained agential figures, their activities came to be constrained by more firmly entrenched domestic norms. Lal skillfully marks the subtle and complex alterations in the multifaceted female subject in a variety of nineteenth-century discourses, elaborated in four different sites – forest, school, household and rooftops.

Ruby Lal is Associate Professor in the Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies at Emory University. She has written extensively on women and gender relations in Islamic societies in the precolonial and colonial world. In addition to numerous academic articles and political commentaries, she is the author of *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). She is currently writing *Uncrowned Empress*, a historical biography of the iconic Mughal Empress, Nur Jahan.

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*For Fanny, Aashna, Ananya –*

My dazzling nieces, who give me the vital clues to this history

*For Rita Costa Gomes –*

With love for sharing my American journeys

*For Gyan –*

Life companion and critic

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# Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India

*The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness*

RUBY LAL

*Emory University*



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## Photos

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## Acknowledgments

I began writing a book on the nineteenth century, shifting (temporarily) from my earlier work on the Mughal world, in order to enrich my understanding of the history of women in India. Every step of the way, the making of this book has been a gratifying, rewarding, and at once, humbling experience. *Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India* became what it is only because of the extraordinary generosity of a large number of colleagues, friends and acquaintances.

My primary academic debt is due to several scholars who have written on nineteenth-century northern India: “the first generation” writing on the North Western Provinces (NWP). I steal David Lelyveld’s beautiful title of his first book in order to emphasize the significance of the work of these scholars, which made my charting of a history of feminine figures possible. Barbara Metcalf, C. M. Naim, David Lelyveld, Gail Minault, Francis Robinson – and along with “the first generation,” in very special ways, Michael Fisher and Wendy Doniger – have supported me at each stage of my thinking and writing, from a discussion of the nineteenth-century north-Indian world and its archival complexities to reading various drafts of this work.

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in 2005, I have been part of two fabulous writers' groups: one with Lynne Huffer and Gyan Pandey, and the other with Laurie Patton, Leslie Harris and Lynne Huffer. Both these creative spaces, and the reactions of each of my friends, have been critical to my thinking, writing and being! I learned a great deal from conversations with several colleagues, who persuaded me to take my work in some of the directions it now follows: thanks to Barbara Ramusack, Gyan Prakash, Gayatri Reddy, Wendy Doniger, Mary Odem, Martha Fineman, Mark Jordan, Joyce Flueckiger, Bruce Knauft, Kamala Visveswaran, Anjali Arondekar, Mrinalini Sinha, Muzaffar Alam, Ulrike Stark, Rashmi Bhatnagar, Rupert Snell, Thomas Trautmann, Peter Stearns, Ruth Vanita, Jonathan Prude, Veena Oldenberg, Stephen Dale, Shalom Goldman and Suzanne Raitt. My colleagues in the Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies at Emory University in Atlanta have helped with ideas, archival material and translations of difficult passages. Special thanks to Rkia Cornell, Vincent Cornell, Gordon Newby, Oded Borowski, Ofra Yeglin, Benjamin Hary, Devin Stewart, Hussein Samei, Roxani Margariti, Scott Kugle and Robert Phillips. I am grateful to the Emory administration for its generous support; to the former dean, Bobby Paul, for two most-needed research leaves; and to Lisa Tedesco, Robin Forman, Michael Elliott and Wendy Newby for their consistent help, encouragement and interest. Emory's commitment to the arts and humanities makes its landscape an exciting and rewarding one, and for that I recognize the special efforts of my colleagues in the Emory administration.

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Marigold that this book is called *Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India*. My historical and conceptual concerns, as well as my methodology, are radically different from Margaret Mead (*Coming of Age in Samoa*, 1928) and Anne Moody (*Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 1968). Yet, I am delighted to be sharing this title, and with it, hopefully advancing several crucial debates in matters of gender and history. Special thanks to the two anonymous readers for their very insightful and gracious comments. And to painter Bhavna Sonawane for giving me permission to use her image *Sleeping Beauty* as the cover of this book. A small set of materials from Chapter 5 were used in an early article entitled “Gender and *Sharafat*: Rereading Nazir Ahmad,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 18, Part I (January 2008): 15–30. I then published “Recasting the Woman Question: The ‘Girl-Child/Woman’ in the Colonial Encounter,” *Interventions* Vol. 10 (3) (2008): 321–339, which became the basis for Chapter 1. This article was reproduced as “Recasting the Woman Question: The ‘Girl-Child/Woman’ in the Colonial Encounter,” in Gyanendra Pandey (ed.), *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010): 47–62. Both the journal and the edited volume are productions of Routledge Press, London.

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## Note on Transliteration, Translation and Citations

There is no standard practice of transliteration from Persian, Urdu and Devanagiri to English.

For Urdu, I use the system practised by *The Annual of Urdu Studies* <http://www.urdustudies.com/pdf/22/01TitleTranslit.pdf>.

For Devanagiri, I rely on the discussion on the conventions of Hindi and Urdu in the following volumes: Christopher Shackle and Rupert Snell, *Hindi and Urdu Since 1800: A Common Reader* (London, 1990); and R. S. McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (New Delhi, 1993).

For Persian, I use a modified version of the IJMES (*International Journal of Middle East Studies*) system developed by Layla S. Diba and Maryam Ekhtiar for their edited volume, *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch, 1785–1925* (New York, 1998).

\*I have chosen to omit all diacritical marks. For nonspecialists, this removes a source of visual distraction, making the text less cumbersome. The specialist, in any case, should have no difficulty in recognizing the Urdu, Hindi and Persian terms.

\*I have retained the common English form of well-known places and persons.

\*Original spellings have been retained in quotations. As a result certain names or places appear with two spellings: differently in citations and in my text.

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\*All translations of Urdu, Devanagiri and Persian texts are mine unless indicated otherwise. I have made it a consistent practice to provide the reference to the available translation in English even where I have relied extensively on my own translation of texts.



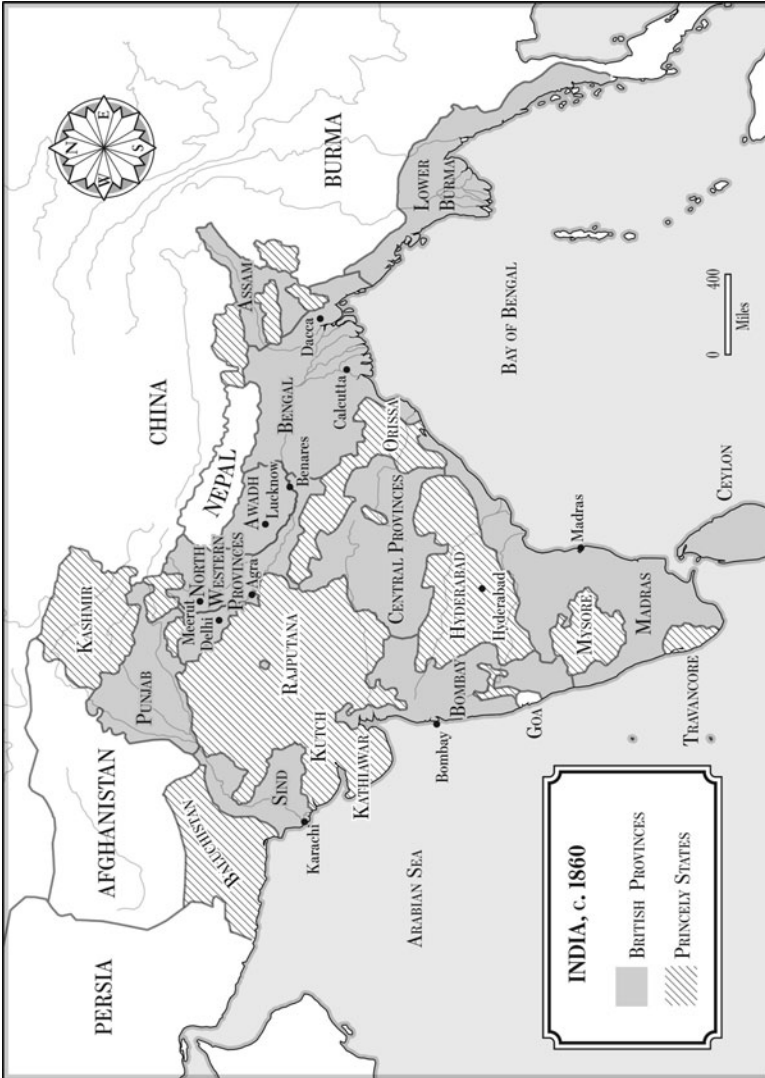
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Map I. India, circa 1860.