A princess’s pilgrimage: Nawab Sikandar Begum’s a pilgrimage to Mecca [introduction]

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AN INTRODUCTION TO NAWAB SIKANDAR BEGAM’S ACCOUNT OF HAJJ

Siobhan Lambert-Hurley


Introduction: Women Travellers, Muslim Travellers

Between July and October 2004, the National Portrait Gallery in London featured a special exhibition entitled ‘Off the Beaten Track: Three Centuries of Women Travellers’. It highlighted the journeys of predominantly British women as they travelled to other parts of the globe, including the Americas, Africa and Asia, between the 1660s and the 1960s. Only in the final section of the exhibition, in a small corner to itself, did it recognise women travelling in other directions, specifically ‘a selection of the world’s women who made Britain their destination’. Of these twelve, four hailed from the Indian subcontinent, while just two were Muslims: Princess Dur-i-Shahvar of Berar, daughter of the last Turkish Caliph and daughter-in-law of the last ruling Nizam of Hyderabad, and Begam Zubeida Habib Rahimtoola, wife of the first High Commissioner for Pakistan in the United Kingdom. That these women were included at all is certainly to be commended for its recognition of South Asian and Muslim women’s participation in the culture of travel, yet their few numbers and bounded location suggest the marginalization of their experiences, even as their stories provide unique insight into the places they visited, the people they met, and the changes they underwent as individuals as part of the journey. As one elderly gentleman commented rather aptly as he rounded the corner to face these women’s portraits, ‘Well, this is quite a different kettle of fish.’

Over the past two decades, some scholarly writers have sought to capture the experiences of ‘this kettle of fish’ as part of the project of historicizing Britain’s multiculturalism and deconstructing colonial encounters. A pioneering effort in this direction was Rozina Visram’s Ayahs, Lascars and Princes in which she documented the substantial numbers of Indians, many of whom were Muslim and some of whom were female, who resided in Britain in the capacity of servants, sailors and labourers from the early eighteenth century. The explicitly gendered nature of these ‘cultures of travel’ was subsequently drawn out by Inderpal Grewal and Antoinette Burton through a focus on Indian women that sojourned ‘at the heart of the empire’ in the high Victorian period, the most well-known being Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) and Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954) – the latter even being pictured in the NPG exhibition. It is only very recently, however, that Michael Fisher has explored in any depth the way in which Indian women travelled to Britain from the earliest years of contact between Britain and the sub-continent, not only as the wives and daughters of Indians and Britons, but also as servants, slaves and independent noblewomen in a ‘counterflow to colonialism’. One prominent example of a Muslim woman who fulfilled this function was the Queen Mother of Awadh, who, as a veiled woman accompanied by a large coterie of exotically dressed attendants, attracted the curiosity of the British press – though not always in a sympathetic fashion – when she visited the imperial capital in 1856-7 to protest the annexation of her son’s kingdom. Even less celebrated were the many cases of bonded servants, a fair percentage of whom –
certainly larger than their share of the population as a whole – appear from Fisher’s evidence to have been Muslim women.\textsuperscript{5} What this latter example suggests is that South Asian Muslims, whether male or female, were enabled by established patterns of movement within the Islamic world to go abroad in larger numbers and with greater ease than many of their fellow Indians. The assumption may be that they took motivation from a religious doctrine that prescribes travel for the purpose of hajj (pilgrimage), hijra (emigration) and rihla (learning and other purposes), among others, and that, if inspired by one of these forms of ritual movement, they would have been drawn closer to their faith and fellow Muslims through the experience.\textsuperscript{6} Yet, as Dale F Eickelman and James Piscatori have argued, this phenomenon of the ‘Muslim traveller’ is actually far more complex if one accepts that their journeys, like those of other travellers, are as much about a ‘journey of the mind’ – an ‘inventive journey’ – as ‘temporal movement’. Not only is the point of departure – ‘home’ – reimagined through the process of travel, but so, too, are notions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ – even if that ‘other’ is Muslim. To be sure, one of the great ironies to emerge from Eickelman and Piscatori’s edited collection is the way in which Muslims travelling to other parts of the Islamic world expected to be enveloped by a sense of Muslim solidarity – the ‘spiritual unity of the umma’ – yet, as often, found their ‘consciousness of locality and difference’ heightened.\textsuperscript{7}

This introduction aims to explore some of these possibilities relating to women and Muslim travellers by analysing the hajj narrative of one exemplary woman, Sikandar Begam (1816-68). She ruled the Muslim princely state of Bhopal in central India, first as regent from 1844 until 1860, then as full-fledged nawab from 1860 to 1868. Her account of ‘a pilgrimage to Mecca’, undertaken in 1863-4, was first published in 1870 after being translated into English from the original Urdu manuscript by the wife of a British colonial officer, Mrs Emma Laura Willoughby-Osborne (1835-1905). In her ‘translator’s preface’, she noted that she had embarked on this task on the basis that an account of this nature by a ‘Mahomedan Princess’ would surely be of interest to the general reader. She listed four reasons as justification: firstly, because no ‘work’ written by an ‘Eastern lady’ had, to her knowledge, ever been published; secondly, because very few European travellers had visited Mecca; thirdly, because, in her words, ‘the opportunity of viewing things from an Oriental point of view is a novel one’; and, fourthly, because the author had already earned herself a reputation in India and England for the ‘sagacity, shrewdness and enlightenment’ of her administration, as well as her loyalty to the British government during the recent ‘Sepoy War’.\textsuperscript{8} Though her assumptions about Indian women’s literary output may not have been entirely accurate, most of these reasons do, in some way, still have resonance well over a hundred years later and, thus, offer at least partial explanation as to why this particular text warrants detailed attention.

In analysing this narrative, this introduction will highlight three main themes. First of all, it will examine the text’s location within an Islamic tradition of travel writing as negotiated within a colonial context. Issues of motivation, audience, structure and style will be addressed, as well as the possible reasoning behind the book’s published form. It will then seek to identify ways in which notions of the self were depicted in this narrative, questioning whether Sikandar’s main aim was to chart a personal journey of faith, as one may expect, or craft an identity more closely related to political concerns. In the third section, this paper will turn to investigating the Begam’s perception of Arabia – the ‘other’ - as an alternative construction of ‘the Orient’. Her travelogue will, thus, be treated as a form of ethnography in which her perspectives on gender roles, sanitation and religious practice can be revealed. A
final section will then offer some concluding thoughts on what can be gained in terms of our understanding of travel and travel-writing from looking at the *hajj* narrative of an Indian Muslim women. Together, this analysis will provide insight into a spiritual journey that, while influenced by the colonial milieu, remained distinct from any European experience of travel. Before tackling these various issues, however, some explication needs to be provided of Mrs Willoughby-Osborne’s final point in order to locate the author, her journey and her text within its appropriate historical context.

**Bhopal, Paramountcy and the Indian Pilgrimage**

Bhopal, the state ruled by Sikandar in the mid-nineteenth century, was one of nearly six hundred principalities – encompassing two-fifths of the area and one-third of the population of the British Indian Empire – that retained nominal independence in the colonial period. This imperial system, known as ‘subsidiary alliance’ or ‘paramountcy’, was established as a result of a series of ‘treaties of friendship and cooperation’ that were negotiated between regional Indian states and the East India Company in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – 1818 in the case of Bhopal. According to these agreements, ‘princely’ or ‘native’ states, as they came to be known, retained their own rulers, systems of law and even rudimentary military forces, but sacrificed control of their foreign affairs to the British overlord and accepted the appointment of a resident British advisor. In Bhopal, this figure was the political agent who was based at the British cantonment at Sehore approximately twenty-five miles from the state capital. Significantly, it was this post that Mrs Willoughby-Osborne’s husband, Lieutenant-Colonel (later Colonel) John William Willoughby-Osborne (1833-1881), filled at various points between 1863 and 1881 in alternation with that of resident in neighbouring Gwalior.9

It is worth noting that, in the period before 1857, these formal treaties between the Company and the ‘native princes’ were often abrogated – a key example already mentioned being that of Awadh in 1856 – on the basis of administrative inefficiency or the lack of a natural male heir. The latter were in short supply in Bhopal throughout the nineteenth century for the simple reason that no male children were born into the family for four generations. Yet Sikandar’s mother, Qudsia (1801-81), was able to convince the British overlord that she should be allowed to rule as regent until her daughter came of age and married – at which time her son-in-law would restore male succession – after the accidental death of her husband, Nawab Nazar Muhammad Khan, in 1819. This unorthodox arrangement seems to have been negotiated in response to factional fighting in the state at a time of political instability in central India, but it was confirmed when Qudsia proved herself to be an active and able administrator. Perhaps her best known project was a system of waterworks for the supply of clean drinking water to the people of Bhopal city, which, thanks to a perpetual endowment, continued to help fight waterborne diseases, like cholera, well into the twentieth century.10 On the premature death of her own husband in 1844, Sikandar was able to call on this precedent to have herself named as regent for her infant daughter, Shah Jahan (1838-1901), subsequently using the opportunity, as Mrs Willoughby-Osborne’s comment suggests, to demonstrate her own political and administrative acumen. Not only did she patronise religious and cultural activities, but she also reformed the revenue and judicial systems, military and police forces, transport, education and civil administration within Bhopal.11

Her prudence in the eyes of the British was confirmed by her actions during the large-scale military and civilian rebellion of 1857 – referred to by Mrs Willoughby-Osborne, as in later colonial historiography, as the ‘Sepoy War’ or
‘Indian Mutiny’. Though it was characterised by the British as a ‘Muhammadan Conspiracy’, there were several Muslim princes, including the Nizam of Hyderabad, who chose to remain uninvolved in this uprising on the basis that it was perceived by them to be led by their former Maratha enemies. Sikandar also seems to have taken this line, suppressing the mutinous forces within Bhopal, offering refuge to British civilians in the region, and providing troops to aid the British cause outside of the state, despite her own mother and the Bhopal ‘ulama (religious scholars) encouraging her to rebel. In the Queen’s Proclamation of 1858, this loyalty on the part of the princes was richly rewarded with a guarantee that their treaties would be duly respected in future. Sikandar was also recognised individually, subsequently being granted the title of nawab that enabled her to rule Bhopal in her own right from 1860, as well as a nineteen-gun salute, the return of territory lost to a neighbouring prince and the Grand Cross of the Star of India. Interestingly, this latter honour made her, at the time, the only female knight in the British Empire besides Queen Victoria, a position that underlines her unique status, as well as her close relationship with the British – a connection much vaunted by her successors.

Sikandar has also been celebrated by her descendants on account of being the first Indian ruler, male or female, ‘from the most powerful emperor down to the smallest chieftain,’ to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. At least part of their approbation seems to be due to the extremely perilous nature of this journey before the mid-twentieth century by which the prevalence of fatal illnesses, armed bandits, tribal wars, corrupt officials and transportation mishaps meant that many hajjis – including some of Sikandar’s own party – simply did not return. Even the greatest of the great Mughals, the emperor Akbar, had been discouraged from performing the hajj with his aunt, Gulbadan, and other female relatives in the 1570s on account of the length and danger of the journey. That his womenfolk went anyway suggests that travel for the purpose of pilgrimage had long been an accepted pursuit for Indian women. Their numbers may, therefore, be presumed to make up a reasonable percentage of the five to seven thousand that, according to William R. Roff’s estimates, departed on hajj from India each year in the mid-nineteenth century – numbers that were perhaps boosted in 1863 when Sikandar went with her party of nearly a thousand. Of course, these figures are still a far cry from the two to two and half million from around the world that go annually today, a change that may be attributed at least in part to improvements in transportation that were just beginning in Sikandar’s time – the first railway line in India, for instance, had only been laid a decade before her departure.

The numbers participating in the hajj in the nineteenth century also highlight that, whereas pilgrimage had taken on distinctly metaphorical connotations by this time in Europe, it remained among Muslims then, as now, a spiritual journey with a prescribed form: a scripted visit to the Ka’aba in Mecca undertaken at an assigned time in fulfilment of the requirements of the Islamic faith. Of course, that is not to say that Muslims did not undertake other forms of pilgrimage as well. Indeed, it has been noted how visitations to shrines, a practice known as ziyara, retained their popularity in India in the modern period with the tombs of Sufi saints, like Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti at Ajmer, Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi and Baba Farid at Pakpattan in the Punjab, offering an important source of political and religious authority despite opposition from religious reform movements with their emphasis on scripture. Yet only hajj was obligatory, a point that reflects on issues of motivation, as well as perceptions of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ within the Islamic world. Most Indian Muslims, as Michael Pearson has noted with regard to South Asian experience
of hajj in the early modern period, went on pilgrimage accepting that Mecca was ‘the
source of correct Islamic doctrine and conduct’ with the effect that most experienced
an ‘increase in orthodoxy’ as a result of their journey, though some remained
unchanged in their religious practice or, indeed, were inspired to ‘greater tolerance’.23
How this Muslim journey was written about in the colonial environment of British
India will be explored in the following section.

Writing a Muslim Journey in a Colonial Environment

In her article on South Asian accounts of the hajj, Barbara Metcalf has charted
the emergence of this genre from the eighteenth century, suggesting that it is very
much a ‘modern phenomenon’.24 She makes this point on the basis that pre-modern
South Asian Muslims were curiously silent about their experiences on hajj, even
when they took the time to prepare their memoirs. The aforementioned Gulbadan, for
instance, made no mention of her seven year pilgrimage to the Hijaz in her narrative
account of the reigns of her father, brother and nephew, the Mughal emperors Babur,
Humayan and Akbar, instead leaving it to court historians to record the most basic of
itinerary.25 The late Victorian translator of her work, Annette Beveridge, commented
on this omission in her introduction to the English version with a sense of frustration
clearly recognisable to any historian:

How interesting it would have been if our princess had told us what it was in
her heart that carried her through the laborious duties of piety she
accomplished during her long stay in her holy land! She might have given us
an essential principle by which to interpret the religious meaning which
devout women attach to the rites commanded on the pilgrimage.26

Interestingly, this lack of introspection has been interpreted to be a feature of
autobiographical writings in the medieval Islamic world more generally, despite a few
exceptions.27 From a Muslim perspective, the assumption seems to have been that, as
hajj takes a prescribed form, there was little need to record what went on there beyond
perhaps the receiving of visions or the advancement of Islamic knowledge.28

There is some debate among historians as to when the first hajj narrative was
produced in the South Asian context. Metcalf follows the example of most Indian
writers in attributing it to Maulana Rafiuddin Muradabadi, a disciple of the renowned
hadith scholar and Delhi reformer, Shah Waliullah, who had gone on pilgrimage in
1787 and later wrote an account of it.29 Challenging this perspective is Pearson who
claims that another had appeared over a century earlier by the hand of a certain
mullah called Safi bin Wali Qazvini.30 Either way, what is clear is that there were
very few accounts, whether in the form of published travelogues, journals or letters,
before the publication of Sikandar’s narrative in 1870. After that time, however, they
began proliferate with ‘several dozen’ appearing between then and 1950 and ‘ever
more’ after that, according to Metcalf’s judgement.31 What this suggests is that the
impetus to write hajj accounts, like that to write novels, memoirs, biographies and
other forms of modern literature, was closely related to the establishment of colonial
rule in the Indian sub-continent, as well as the introduction of certain types of
technology, most importantly the printing press. It has been noted already that
Sikandar Begam had close connections with the British in India, and her familiarity
with European ways is also evident from the text – a reference to some people in
Jeddah riding donkeys astride, while others ‘sit sideways as European ladies ride’,
providing just one example.32 This text, then, provides further evidence of Metcalf’s
findings that it was those Muslims involved with colonialism that wrote pilgrim
narratives on the basis that it was they who sought to contest and negotiate the
‘multiple cultural values’ with which they were familiar against the seemingly fixed ‘cultural symbol’ of the *hajj*.33

The influence of contact with Europeans on this process may also be seen in terms of the motivation to write. Sikandar Begam states explicitly on the first page of the first chapter of her narrative – the point having already been drawn out in the translator’s preface – that she began the process of writing about her pilgrimage ‘in compliance with a request’.34 This request came, significantly, in written form even before she had departed in 1863 from Lady Durand and her husband, Colonel (later Major-General Sir) H M Durand, formerly political agent in Bhopal, but, by then, foreign secretary of the Government of India.35 Viewed within the context of the increasingly asymmetrical power relations of the ‘subsidiary alliance’ system, this seemingly informal appeal may almost be interpreted as an order. The appropriateness of this interpretation is supported in that the request involved Sikandar offering not only an account of what went on in Mecca, but also ‘impressions of Arabia generally’.36 The eliciting of this information could be understood to be an innocuous interest in foreign climes on the part of the Durands, but, equally so, it may have reflected a political motivation at a time when this region was viewed as a legitimate imperial aspiration, the British having already established a protectorate in southern Yemen in 1839.37 At the same time, however, it should be noted that the way in which Sikandar abdicates responsibility for writing to the Durands evokes, what Metcalf has called, a ‘convention of passivity’ within the long tradition of recording life stories and journeys within Islam. Just as a *hajji* must be ‘called’ to go on *hajj*, so must Sikandar portray herself as responding to someone else’s invitation to write about it.38 Thus, even while being inspired by the colonial milieu, her narrative retains an essentially Muslim characteristic.

The importance of the colonial context is also evident in that Sikandar’s published work was very clearly directed at a British – or at least British in India – audience. The most obvious indication of this intended readership was that it was first published and then later republished in English by British publishers in London and Calcutta, but never appeared, as far as can be seen, in the original Urdu of the manuscript, although it was kept ‘bound in quatro’ by the royal family in Bhopal, at least until the late nineteenth century.39 Later on in the twentieth century, this language of publication might have been interpreted as an attempt on the part of the author to reach across religious and national boundaries within South Asia to a sub-continent wide audience.40 But, in 1870, English was understood by too few Indians – not even Sikandar herself – to have fulfilled this purpose, despite having been famously adopted as the language of elite education, government and the higher courts by the utilitarian governor-general, Lord William Bentinck, under the influence of his law minister, Thomas Babington Macaulay, in 1835.41 To publish the narrative only in English implicitly placed Sikandar apart from other Muslims in South Asia, not least traditional Muslim elites, in favour of fulfilling, what Eickelman and Piscatori have identified as, ‘the British image of the good and loyal Muslim’.42

As noted above, the English text also drew a number of parallels in describing what the ruling Begam observed in Arabia with European practices, thus making it intelligible to a British readership. Perhaps Sikandar was thinking of Lady Durand herself when she remarked that the Georgian wives of the Sherif of Mecca wear ‘very small, fine handkerchiefs’ on their heads such as ‘English ladies carry in their hands’.43 Conveniently, many of the references to money and costs were also converted from the currencies of Arabia into the more fathomable rupees and pounds.44 One might also conclude on the basis of their nature and content that the
book’s two appendices were also intended for a British audience. The first is a ‘sketch’ of Bhopal history, perhaps adapted from an imperial gazetteer or summarised from one of the many books written by British officers on the ‘native states’ at this time, in which the exploits of the Sikandar and her predecessors were briefly recounted – with a strong emphasis on their relations with the British in India – for those unfamiliar with this ‘loyal’ state.45 The second is a ‘descriptive list of the holy places of Arabia’ in which well over a hundred sites are detailed, some with reference to Sikandar’s experience of visiting them, though certainly not all. Translated from Urdu by the Chaplain of Sehore and dated according to the Muslim calendar, one may assume that it was drafted by a Muslim scholar well-versed in the religious practices and early Muslim history of the Hijaz – perhaps the ruling Begam’s diwan (chief minister) and influential theologian, Maulvi Jamaluddin Khan. Yet, in its method of ordering and classifying the data, it could just as easily have been the work of an Enlightenment thinker, an observation that again highlights the process of negotiation involved in producing Muslim literature in a colonial context.

Yet another sign of the intended British audience were the illustrations, which included ‘views’ of Bhopal, as well as a photograph of the author herself. This latter feature in particular is very rare in South Asian accounts of hajj, most likely on account of the suspicion with which iconography tends to be viewed in Muslim cultures.46 In this connection, it is also worth noting that, in the photograph, Sikandar does not appear in ihram, the dress of the pilgrim, or even modestly veiled, as may befit a good Muslim woman. Instead, she is crowned, enthroned and flanked by bearers, proudly wearing on her chest what appears to be the medal bestowed upon her by the British government, complete with its portrait of the Queen-Empress.47 Alongside it at the beginning of the publication is a dedication to Queen Victoria followed by a letter of thanks from Sikandar’s daughter, Shah Jahan, who had succeeded her as Nawab Begam of Bhopal upon her death in 1868. Contained in its lines was effusive praise for the English monarch for having brought ‘undisturbed tranquillity’ to the ‘Empire at large’, as well as a hint of the practical considerations behind her stance: ‘that my descendants may merit, as their ancestors did, the favour of the British Government’.48 Sikandar’s reputation for loyalty, as established during the ‘Sepoy War’, was, thus, on show to be admired by British readers – as, indeed, it often was in the contemporary British press.49 As Sikandar herself noted towards the end of her narrative, however, the same reputation earned her very few favours and, more often, animosity from her fellow Muslims in the Arabian peninsula, notably the Sherif and Pasha of Mecca and the Pasha of Jeddah.50

The matter of the dedication, not included until after Sikandar’s death and apparently at the initiative of Mrs Willoughby-Osborne, raises the question of the latter’s influence over the final form and content of the published work. The assumption may be that she had a fairly crucial role in determining the additional elements to be included, as well as the structure and even meaning of the text, especially if one considers that she is recognised on the title page as having ‘edited’, as well as translated, the work. The extent of her intervention also seems to be suggested by Shah Jahan’s comment in her own history of Bhopal that her mother’s manuscript was just a diary kept during her travels until the wife of the political agent converted it into publishable form.51 This judgement conflicts, however, with Sikandar’s own assertion that the narrative was penned upon her return – in 1867, according to the translator’s preface.52 In this context, Mrs Willoughby-Osborne also records that the only ‘license’ that she allowed herself in translating the manuscript was the ‘occasional transposition of a paragraph’, deemed necessary on account of the
‘wholly unstudied’ nature of the draft, it having been ‘compiled’ from ‘rough notes’ made during the journey.\textsuperscript{53} There is evidence of this type of intercession in the body of the work – for instance, in a footnote in the first chapter in which the translator comments that she has moved a paragraph on ‘preparatory religious observances’ for the \textit{hajj} from the end of the Begam’s manuscript to the beginning on the basis that this was a ‘more appropriate position for it.’\textsuperscript{54} This remarks points to the way in which she felt it necessary to enforce at least a rough chronology on Sikandar’s narrative.

It seems fair to conjecture that Mrs Willoughby-Osborne was also responsible for the insertion of chapter breaks – though these are only numbered, not named – on the basis that some of them at least seem to interrupt what is otherwise a continuous narrative. Consider, for instance, the concluding line in chapter XIII in which Sikandar asserts that she would ‘now proceed to describe’ her visit to the Sherif of Mecca only for the chapter to end abruptly. The subsequent chapter then begins with the apparent sequitur: ‘I went on foot to the Sherif’s house….’\textsuperscript{55} Beyond this, the translator’s impact on the published narrative actually seems to have been fairly limited, even in terms of the meaning of the text. Indeed, she makes the point in her preface that she has ‘endeavoured to adhere to the literal meaning of the Urdu as closely as possible’.\textsuperscript{56} And, where there was confusion due to literary convention, she tended to include literal translations in brackets. In a section on the climate in Mecca, for instance, she translated the Begam’s words as ‘the heat had been intense (lit. “it had rained fire”).’\textsuperscript{57} Elsewhere, she went so far as to include lines of transliterated Urdu text.\textsuperscript{58} That is not to say, of course, that certain aspects of the original have not been lost through the rendering of this narrative into English. At the least, it denies us the opportunity to undertake the careful analysis of language in terms of vocabulary, grammar and tense that has proved so revealing of cultural personality, political identity and social attitudes in, for instance, Stephen Dale’s thoughtful study of the autobiographical writings of the Mughal emperor Babur.\textsuperscript{59}

In terms of style and structure, it seems that Mrs Willoughby-Osborne also did not make too many changes. Though the narrative is, on the whole, sequential in nature, it remains interspersed with thematic interludes that discuss specific problems faced and locations observed with little regard for the constraints of chronology. The entire second chapter, for instance, is dedicated to the ruling Begam’s wranglings with the customs authorities in Jeddah as they occurred both at the beginning and the end of her stay in Arabia. The author herself signals this shift in context by making reference to goods being sent from Mecca to Jeddah, rather than Bombay to Jeddah, only to have it reinforced by the translator in a footnote in which she explained that the Begam was referring to ‘what happened at a subsequent date’.\textsuperscript{60} One is reminded of scholarly observations in relation to the renowned travel account, or \textit{Rihla}, of the fourteenth century Moroccan traveller, Ibn Battuta (d. 1368–9), in which it is argued that he also ‘combined reminiscences’ from visits on the journey out and back, thus ‘sacrificing chronology to literary neatness’.\textsuperscript{61}

In the portrayal of time itself, a parallel may also be drawn with earlier Muslim travel writers. In the early chapters, there are regular references to the dates on which activities occurred, carefully documented according to the Islamic and Christian calendars, as in the case of the arrival of Sikandar’s party at Jeddah ‘on the 13\textsuperscript{th} of the month Sh’aban, in the year of the Hejra 1280, corresponding to the 23\textsuperscript{rd} January, 1864 of Christ’.\textsuperscript{62} In the middle sections in which the Begam describes her residency in Mecca, on the other hand, the sense of time often seems to disappear with very few dates or hours being provided to give a suggestion of the length of time
involved in an activity or the periods between episodes. Where it does reappear, it is only with reference to a Muslim fast or festival – 'the sacred month of Ramzán' or 'the second day of the 'Íd-ul-Fitar' – or the rhythms of the Muslim day – 'after midday prayers'.

This method of depicting time, along with the mixed form of organisation, suggests the intermediate status of this work, sometimes displaying the qualities of modern literature, but sometimes harking back to earlier Muslim models.

The second chapter, as quoted in the previous paragraphs, is also useful for illustrating the way in which the 'rough' and 'unstudied' character of the original account, as alluded to by Mrs Willoughby-Osborne in her preface, was retained in the published version – suggesting, in turn, that she did little to smooth it out. This assertion is made on the basis that it, like many other sections as the story progresses, reads more like a collection of official correspondence than a coherent narrative.

Consider the following opening lines from a series of paragraphs in this chapter:

'I then wrote to Mahomed Baksh, Deputy Harbour of Jeddah, to tell him that…'

'A letter came in answer from Shams-ud-dín, Custom House Officer, saying:…'

'To this Páshá 'Izzat Ahmed replied:…'

'After this I again wrote to the Custom House Officer, saying:…'

'To this Shams-ud-dín replied:…'

This literary method gives it the appearance of including dialogue, as one would find in a novel, thus conveying an 'immediacy of experience' that is, according to Metcalf, a feature of the most recent accounts from South Asia. In this case, however, it does not seem to be so much a sign of modernity, as an attempt on the part of the busy Nawab Begam to recreate her story with as little effort as possible. Her haphazard approach to this task is confirmed in that the narrative has no real introduction, beyond the brief assigning of motivation, or conclusion. Indeed, the final chapter is simply another set of letters intended to provide evidence of why she did not travel to Medina, as well as Mecca, the main reasons being cited being the dangers posed by the Bedouins, the poor quality of the route and the expense involved. There is no retrospective on the journey as a whole, nor even an account of her return to India or events upon her arrival in Bhopal, though she does take a few pages in the second to last chapter to 'recapitulate' her 'impressions of Mecca and Jeddah', seemingly in direct response to Durand’s request.

Interestingly, Sikandar’s account also fails to include any reference to the initial journey from Bhopal to Bombay, assumedly taken partially by road and partially by rail being that Bhopal was not connected to the national rail network until 1884, or the sea journey from Bombay to Jeddah, beyond an assertion that the author completed the 'prescribed religious exercises’ en route. These omissions may be explained on the basis that she did not feel the need to describe what would have already been familiar to her and her specified audience of the Durands. But it also gives the sense that ‘discovering India’ as part of a nationalist project at this very moment when the concept of Indian nationhood was being forged was not central to the ruling Begam’s agenda in the way that it was those members of the Bengali bhadralok writing travel narratives in this same period, as studied by Kumkum Chatterjee. This observation raises the question of what, then, her agenda – or leitmotif, in the language of autobiography – was in writing: was it, as one may perhaps expect of a pilgrim narrative, to chart her spiritual development as she undertook this grand journey of faith? Or did it have more mundane concerns? Was it, for instance, related to those political matters that proved so important in her
motivation to write? And how did Sikandar express these notions of self and identity, especially at this point in history when the category of ‘Indian Muslim’, not to mention ‘India’ itself, was only just being constructed? These queries, as they provide insight both into the character of this narrative and the historical moment in which it was written, will be addressed in the following section.

Defining the Self against a Muslim Other

In his article on ‘religious change and the self’, Francis Robinson charts how Muslims in South Asia experienced a shift in terms of their understanding of the self from the nineteenth century, closely linked to their contact with European ideas in a colonial context and the spread of communications technology, among other factors. This change led to a much greater focus on, what he terms, ‘self-instrumentality’, ‘self-affirmation’ and ‘self-consciousness’ in a way that heralded the emergence of a modern Muslim identity.70 Barbara Metcalf has drawn out this theme with regard to *hajj* narratives in particular, arguing that, increasingly, this genre became about ‘representation of a self’ and ‘constituting a persona’: less about the *hajj* and more about the *hajji*. According to this interpretation, we may expect more emphasis in ‘modern’ accounts on ‘individual experiences, perceptions, and feelings’ from authors who ‘present themselves not only as observers but as active participants in what they describe’.71 An illustrative example developed by Metcalf is that of the renowned Pakistani novelist and intellectual, Mumtaz Mufti, who first published his *hajj* account in book form in 1975. From the title alone – *Labbaik* – one gets a sense of the intimacy and immediacy of the described experience in that it means ‘I am here’: the Arabic call of the *hajji* as he enters Mecca.72 The opening sections in which this ‘nominal Muslim’ recounts a series of fantastical happenings – best exemplified by his idolatrous vision of the smiling face of Allah upon entering the Ka’aba itself – offer further evidence of the personal journey undertaken by the author.73

Written over a century earlier, Sikandar’s account contains almost no trace of this spiritual soul-searching – even in a less unorthodox fashion – as she relates her pilgrimage to Mecca. Indeed, she rarely writes about spiritual matters at all beyond recording in a list-like fashion that she completed various religious rituals as required. Even upon arriving at Mecca – a point when many pilgrims express their wonder at seeing the Ka’aba for the first time – she merely states with archetypal precision and briefness what happened, not what she felt or experienced:

> The hour of my arrival at Mecca was the ‘Ishá (first watch of the night), and the call to evening prayers was sounding from the different mosques. I entered within the holy precincts by the Báb-us-Salám (gate of peace), and, arriving at the house of Abraham, I stood and read the prescribed prayers. After that, I performed the ceremonies of the Toáf-ul-Kudúm, and of running at the Safá and Marwáḥ.74

It is only thanks to footnotes directing the reader to the appendix, assumedly inserted by the translator, that we get any sense of what these activities entailed. She then returns to her preferred subject of the difficulties that she had in negotiating with the Sherif of Mecca, in this case for the rental of a house. Elsewhere, she discusses in great detail the arrangements involved in travelling to ‘Arafa, Muzdalifah and Mina, but never explains why she was going or her reaction to this often challenging portion of the pilgrimage. There is a whole paragraph on the arrangements that were made for procuring guards, but only one line in which she makes reference to religious matters: ‘I then proceeded to ‘Arafa, and having completed the whole of the prescribed duties of the pilgrimage, I returned to the exalted Mecca.’75
Another point when the modern reader may expect a sense of spiritual reflection is upon Sikandar’s completion of the hajj, but this moment again passes without any reference to her thoughts or feelings. To be sure, it is only mentioned at all in a description of a piece of correspondence from the Sherif of Mecca in which he offered his congratulations on the occasion of ‘Id and, as if as an afterthought, ‘of my having accomplished the pilgrimage’. Much more attention was directed to the arrangements involved in holding a feast for the Sherif and the Pasha in commemoration of this event. Only on one or two occasions does the reader get a more explicit sense of the emotional investment involved in going on hajj from Sikandar’s point of view. One such occasion was when she expressed her concern at being unable to complete a particular section of the hajj on account of her party repeatedly getting mobbed by crowds attracted by her mother’s reputation for generosity to the poor. As she writes, ‘I felt perfectly helpless, and began to question the utility of having gone to Mecca for devotional ends.’ On the whole, however, one cannot help thinking that Annette Beveridge, that disappointed Victorian translator of Gulbadan’s memoirs, would have been equally dissatisfied in not finding ‘what it was in her heart’ when this later Muslim princess completed the pilgrimage.

Yet, even if there is little overt exploration of the spiritual self in this narrative written on the cusp of modernity, there was, as perhaps already suggested, an implicit set of concerns that shaped the account. The reader becomes aware, through the way the Nawab Begam presented herself and others, of whom she understood herself to be. And, as with many hajjis travelling from British India in the late nineteenth century, it was, as Metcalf has noted, ‘imperial issues’ that were ‘close to the surface of their perceptions’. She provides the example of Mirza ‘Irfan ‘Ali Beg, a deputy collector in the Indian Civil Service, who published an account in 1895 in which he reflected on his expectations for good government as they would impact on the emerging political category of the ‘Indian Muslim’ – specifically the provision of ‘order, protection, comfort, and cleanliness’ – directing his words both at the British government in India (to the point that he had his Urdu account translated into English) and the Turks in the Hijaz. In a very similar fashion, Sikandar portrayed herself as every bit the reforming princess – the ‘improving landlord’ modelled on the estate-holders of Britain – that the imperial overlord expected her to be. Her ongoing critique of Arabia’s officials – depicted in this narrative as corrupt and decadent as any ‘Oriental despot’ of the British imagination – demonstrates the degree to which she had internalised these ideals and become active in their reproduction.

A useful illustration of this theme can be found in a reported conversation between Sikandar and the Pasha of Mecca in which she expressed her opinions on administrative matters in an entirely forthright manner. When the Pasha informed her that the present Sultan of Turkey had a ‘great liking’ for ‘cannons, guns, ships and road-making’, she responded by asking if he had ‘any railways or telegraphs in his country’. Upon being told not, she proposed that, as the latter was the ‘most important’ of ‘all public works’, he ought to install one between Mecca and Constantinople. Further evidence can be found in a section towards the end of the narrative in which Sikandar reflected on why the Sherif and the Pasha were, as noted above, so antagonistic towards her. She suggested that it might have been because one of the Pasha’s servants had been present when she had proclaimed to her own party that the administration of the Hijaz was so poor that she should take over! It is worth quoting this passage at length in order to get a clear sense of her self-perception as it was inextricably entwined with British standards of good government:
The Sultan of Turkey gives thirty lakhs of rupees (£300,000) a-year for the expenses incurred in keeping up the holy places at Mecca and Medina. But there is neither cleanliness in the city, nor are there any good arrangements made within the precincts of the shrines. Now if the Sultan would give me those thirty lakhs, I would make arrangements for the Government of Bhopal to be carried on by my son-in-law and daughter, and you would see what a state of order and cleanliness I would keep the august cities in, and what arrangements I would make for the proper maintenance of the holy shrines; so that the Sultan would find out that dishonest people had been diverting his money from its legitimate uses, and had not kept a single thing in order; while I, in a few days, would effect a complete reformation!

The faith of this Indian Muslim princess in her own administrative abilities still reads as surprising over a hundred years on. Even in recounting the story, she expressed no sense of humility or remorse: ‘If he had been a man of liberal views, he would have been rather pleased than otherwise, and have asked me to explain what arrangements I thought were required.’

Related to this concern was Sikandar’s consistent portrayal of herself as a frugal – and, hence, prudent – ruler. On a number of occasions, she reported how she had underestimated the expenses involved with her pilgrimage, not, for instance, being willing to pay the exorbitant customs duties at Jeddah or give gifts of expected value to the Sherif of Mecca. Even her decision not to go to Medina was influenced by these pecuniary matters as the following quotation illustrates: ‘The Bedouins demand Bukhsheesh at every step, and if they do not obtain money or food, frequently grossly insult, or even kill one. Where am I to find money to satisfy all their demands?’ That is not to say that she was not generous with her charitable donations, as would be expected of a Muslim pilgrim, but she denounced the ‘indiscriminate’ nature of her mother’s liberality. At the same time, her narrative made it clear that she saw the world through a hierarchical lens with herself placed towards the top of the ladder of rank and status. In a section on methods of transport in Jeddah, to take just one example, she noted that ‘people of rank’ rode a particular type of camel and, hence, one had been hired for her as well – though only after the price had been carefully negotiated.

In her eschewing of extravagance, one may see the ruling Begam’s identification with the Muslim socio-religious reform movement traced in the Indian context to the Delhi theologian, Shah Waliullah (1703-63). Her association with this school of thought is also suggested by her attempt during her stay in Mecca to have the Qur’an translated into Turkish – ‘in order that those Turks who were unable to understand it in the original, might be acquainted with it by this means’ – just as Shah Waliullah had translated it into Persian and his son, Abdul Qadir, into Urdu. She did so at the suggestion of her first minister, Maulvi Jamaluddin, who himself had studied with the descendants of Shah Waliullah in Delhi. Interestingly, the Pasha of Mecca actually forbade her from going ahead with this project on the basis that ‘a translation of the Korán itself was not allowed’; if ‘the lower orders’ wanted insight into the holy book, he advised her, they could consult a commentary in Turkish instead. Predictably, she ignored his advice on the basis that it seemed ‘adverse to the weal of the common people’ and ordered for the translation to go ahead anyway. In doing so, she anticipated what was to become a central tenet of the programme of Turkish nationalists, like Ziya Gökalp (1875/6-1924), in the early twentieth century.

What is clear, then, from this narrative is that the differences between the Begam of Bhopal and the Sherif of Mecca or Pasha of Jeddah, as she understood
them, were not just a simple clash of personalities or even Qur’anic interpretations. It was against this Muslim ‘other’ that Sikandar formed a sense of what it meant to be an Indian Muslim. Over and over, she reported the grievous misunderstandings that arose between her and Arabian officials over matters of custom – from her ‘disgraceful’ cash gifts on arrival (nazar) to their disconcerting habit of visiting without warning – to the point that she actually made the suggestion that officers be appointed on both sides to ensure that ‘proper etiquette’ was observed. Yet it was language more than other issue that acted as an impenetrable boundary between the Nawab Begam and the people of Arabia. Not only did she complain repeatedly about not being able to communicate except through a translator, but she also issued an order at one stage that the guards only let into her quarters ‘ladies who spoke Hindustani’. The matter also arose in explaining why she did not complete the journey to Medina: ‘I know nothing of Arabic, or of the language and customs of the Bedouins, so cannot understand what they say, or what they do.’

This statement highlights how Sikandar Begam, like the case studies in Eickelman and Piscatori’s collection, might have come to Mecca expecting to be enveloped by a sense of Muslim solidarity, but certainly did not leave with it. To the contrary, she reveals a heightened sense of identity with her fellow Indian Muslims whom she, like Mirza ‘Irfan ‘Ali Beg, identified as a persecuted group in Mecca. In light of this experience, it seems appropriate to investigate in the next section of this paper what her impressions were more generally of this ‘other’. How did this Indian Muslim princess construct ‘the Orient’?

An Alternative Construction of ‘the Orient’

Edward Said’s groundbreaking 1978 work, Orientalism, drew attention to the way in which Europeans had appropriated ‘the East’, crafting a vision of ‘the Orient’ by which ‘Orientals’ themselves – whether Turkish, Arabian, Indian or otherwise – had little power or control over their own self-depiction. This idea was subsequently developed further with regard to travel literature by authors like Mary Louise Pratt who interpreted this genre as a method by which the imperial centre could ‘present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself’. Yet to argue for this single hegemonising discourse denies the agency of anyone outside of Europe in creating knowledge about themselves or others. In response, Antoinette Burton has highlighted the way in which travelogues, letters and newspaper articles written by colonial subjects abroad may be read as ‘complex and critical ethnographies’ of the places they visited in which Orientalist assumptions may be upheld, negotiated or contested depending on the author and historical moment. One of the examples that she provides is Cornelia Sorabji, mentioned in the introduction, whom she identifies as not fitting easily with the dialectic of either ‘complicity’ or ‘resistance’ in her depictions of Victorian Oxford and London in that she employed certain tropes – like that of ‘the Indian woman’ – selectively in her articles and letters home as part of an elaborate strategy to enable her to ‘survive the pressures’ of attending Somerville College. To approach travel writing in this way allows us to appreciate, as Burton notes, ‘how agency is possible while recognizing at the same time the constraints imposed upon it by structural determinants’.

Sikandar Begam’s narrative also has the quality of travelogue as ethnography, perhaps especially so in that she had, as noted in an earlier section, been asked to give her ‘impressions of Arabia’ by the Durands. Indeed, there are entire sections that would not seem out of place in the work of a social anthropologist. Consider, for instance, the lengthy passage in chapter XIV in which she described her visit to the
home of the Sherif of Mecca’s seven wives. It provided a detailed record based on careful observation of the elaborate method of greeting (culminating with a touch of cheeks and a light kiss on the lips), the costumes worn (in particular, the satin dresses encrusted with jewels and the ‘coquettish’ headaddresses of the Sherif’s two Georgian wives) and the food served (‘cups of coffee and pomegranate sherbet’), as well as the code of behaviour observed by the women, their servants and their visitors in relation to each other and the Sherif – how only those wives who had borne children were permitted to sit in the Sherif’s presence and the way in which servants kissed the chair of state, rather than the Sherif’s hand or dress, as did visitors of greater or lesser importance. Another representative section is one on slavery in which, over several pages, Sikandar explained how ‘male and female slaves of all races’ were bought and sold in the slave market in Mecca, as well as describing the duties completed and the treatment received. The quality of her record is suggested in that the high-ranking colonial administrator and Arabist, Sir William Muir, subsequently used it as evidence of the continuation of domestic concubinage among Muslims in the second edition of his Life of Mahomet, published in 1877. To be sure, her observations in these sections were, on the whole, recorded in an objective fashion that emphasised accuracy, seemingly in deference to a kind of scientific method, even as it revealed its debt to an Islamic literary mode of ‘reportage’.

There are also several chapters dedicated entirely to her ‘impressions of Mecca and Jeddah’ in which she commented on a wide range of subjects from confectionary and horses to weather, vegetables and windmills. In these sections, she cast her judgement more freely, giving valuable insight into her cultural reality. It becomes apparent immediately that there were certain features of Arabia that were to her liking: the horses were ‘very handsome and well bred’, the fruit ‘better and sweeter’ than that in India, the moonlight in Mecca ‘magnificent’ and the sweets of Jeddah ‘well made’. Other aspects elicited curiosity. The Arabian-style windmills, for instance, with their ‘openings in the side’, warranted a paragraph’s description, as did the ‘small pebbles of all colours’ on a hill outside Mecca. Most aspects of Arabian culture, society and environment, however, elicited a harsh and critical reaction from the visiting Nawab Begam with the greatest invective saved for the Arab people. The majority of this group, she summarised, were, in terms of character, ‘miserly, violent-tempered, hard-hearted, and covetous’, not to mention ‘awkward and stupid’. She developed this critique throughout her narrative, providing ample examples of the bribes expected by officials, the cheating that went on between employers and employees, and the difficulties involved in ‘buying and selling’ when one could expect the tradesmen to ‘spit in [your] face and insult [you]’. There are even echoes of the European stereotype of ‘lazy Arabs’ in her proclamation that, in Mecca, ‘it is no disgrace to any one to beg; high and low, young men and old, women, boys and girls of all grades, are more or less beggars… It seemed to me that begging was held to be as honourable as working’.

The women of Arabia were, in particular, objects of her wrath on the basis that they were ‘noisy’, ‘large-made’ and displayed ‘great muscular strength than the men’. She also expressed disapproval with their habit of singing comic songs and dancing at weddings, commenting that ‘they do both so badly, that one had not the slightest pleasure in hearing or seeing them, but is rather disgusted than otherwise’, following it up with the sardonic comment that amateur musicians of this kind in India ‘practise it stealthily in their houses’. These observations suggest that Arab women did not fulfil Sikandar’s expectations of modesty and demureness from the ‘weaker sex’, as they were rooted in Indian patriarchal values and coloured by
Victorian notions of domesticity – though one must remember that these criticisms were coming from a female ruler who had, in her younger days, taken part in a battle on horseback against her own husband! Reflecting this background, Sikandar’s most vicious diatribe was directed against Meccan women’s habit of contracting multiple marriages. Consider the scorn implicit the following passage:

Women frequently contract as many as ten marriages, and those who have only been married twice are few in number. If a woman sees her husband growing old, or if she happen[s] to admire any one else, she goes to the Shéřiff, and after having settled the matter with him, she puts away her husband, and takes to herself another, who is perhaps young, good-looking, and rich. In this way a marriage seldom lasts more than a year or two.104 This description fed in to Victorian ideals of companionate marriage, but it was also informed by the Bhopali ruling family’s Afghan roots – reflected in the text in references to ‘We, Afgháns…’ – by which divorce and widow remarriage were not acceptable practices, regardless of what it said in the Qur’an.105

Another feature of Arabian society that garnered the especial attention of the ruling Begam were the sanitary arrangements. Upon arriving in Jeddah, for instance, the first observation that she made was that, though it appeared ‘from a distance’ to have an ‘imposing appearance’, one was struck upon entering the city by the ‘dirty aspect of the streets and their total want of drainage’ – a point that she also made repeatedly with regard to Mecca.106 Elsewhere, she noted that that Turks in particular were ‘very dirty in their habits’, both in terms of their ‘very dirty’ houses and ‘untidy’ dress.107 Interestingly, she related this lack of cleanliness to religious values in a section in which she recorded a conversation between herself and the Pasha of Mecca’s son, Suliman Beg. Apparently, she had questioned him as to why the people of Mecca wore ‘very dirty clothes’ when it was dictated by the Islamic faith that they should have ‘clean clothes, a clean body, a clean spot to worship in [and] clean water for ablution’. Unsatisfied with his explanation that the Pasha could not afford to provide new clothes for all of the poor people that descended on Mecca, she advised that the problem could be more easily resolved if he simply employed more washermen and reduced the rate for laundry, as well as issuing a decree to his own servants and subjects that ‘cleanliness is expected’. This statement reflects, not only the Begam’s projected image of herself as an administrative reformer as discussed in the previous section, but also the way in which her participation in a colonial discourse on sanitation was shaped by hygienic concepts central to indigenous systems of knowledge in the Muslim world.108 In doing so, it was part of a proliferation of medical writings in India from the late nineteenth century that, as Guy Attewell has noted, blended Islamic principles relating to the functioning of the body with sanitation in its ‘western medical connotations’.109

What also emerges from this quote is the way in which Sikandar’s experience on hajj led her to reject Arabia – usually conceived, due to its proximity to the ‘sacred space’ of Mecca, as a place of ‘greater sanctity and, thus, religious or political legitimacy’, in the words of Eickelman and Piscatori110 – a centre of good Islamic practice. Not only did the people of this region disregard Islamic laws on cleanliness, but they also drank ‘wine and other intoxicating liquors’ strictly prohibited by the Prophet Muhammad, to her manifest surprise.111 Disappointment was also expressed in relation to the quality of the Arabic spoken, the Begam noting that only a few expressed themselves in its ‘pure’ form, despite it being the language of conversation – though, in light of her professed ignorance of the language, it is not clear how she would have known. Regardless, her observations led her to conclude that, while
urban dwellers knew ‘something of religion’, those who inhabited the mountainous regions were ‘totally ignorant of it’. Notions of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ within the Islamic world were, thus, reconfigured as a result of her hajj with India no longer being relegated to *l’Islam périphérique*, to use the terminology of some French scholars. One may fairly assume that Sikandar was not inspired to practice a more Arabian-style of Islam upon her return in the manner of those Mughal pilgrims discussed by Pearson. On the contrary, she constructed an image of ‘the Orient’ that reflected and contributed to a colonial discourse, but in terms that exhibited her composite identity as an Indian Muslim woman of Afghan descent who ruled – and wrote – within the constraints of the subsidiary alliance system.

‘Viewing Things from an Oriental Point of View’: Conclusions

It was noted in the opening section that one of the ‘novel’ aspects of Sikandar’s *hajj* account as identified by its translator, Mrs Willoughby-Osborne, was that it offered a rare chance to ‘view things from an Oriental point of view’. Analysing this narrative nearly 140 years on, the insightfulness of her words, particularly with regard to the study of travel and travel writing, are all the more evident. Here is a documentary record that provides unique insight into the factors that went in to writing a Muslim journey in a colonial environment, the process by which notions of the self were redefined against a Muslim ‘other’, and the way in which Arabia was constructed by a colonial subject as part of a modernist discourse about ‘the Orient’. It tells the story of Indian Muslim princess as she underwent a journey ‘at once inner and outer’, to borrow the words of Barbara Metcalf, redefining and reimagining her sense of self, home, away and other as she fulfilled an obligatory tenet of the Islamic faith. What emerges is a snapshot of a genuinely complex individual as she negotiated with the colonial power, her fellow Indians and her South and Western Asian co-religionists to craft an image of herself as an effective administrator, a loyal subject and a good Muslim. In doing so, she produced an intermediary literary work that revealed its debt to a European presence in India – not least in the very act of writing this type of account – while preserving important features of the long tradition of recording journeys and life stories within Islam: passivity was retained, chronology was fluid, time was sacred and introspection was minimal. Even as it was inspired and influenced by the colonial milieu, so Sikandar’s account of a pilgrimage to Mecca remained an essentially Muslim account of a quintessentially Muslim journey.

In drawing these conclusions, this case study seeks to highlight that there is much to be learned from Indian Muslim women travellers in terms of the complex nature of cultural encounters within the context of world history. Not all had the same experiences; when Sikandar’s own granddaughter, Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam of Bhopal (1858-1930; ruled 1901-1926), went on *hajj* in the first years of the twentieth century, she returned, in the words of a contemporary observer in her state, ‘a much more ardent follower of the Prophet’ and ‘much more zealous in her own religion’. Nevertheless, women and gender do need to be recognised, as Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton have done very recently, for their ‘constitutive role in the shaping of global power and cross-cultural social organization’ – ‘the politics of mobility and the mobility of politics’, as they put it in a travel-related context. These examples also provide further evidence, of what Antoinette Burton has called elsewhere, ‘colonial migrancy’: the process by which people, goods and ideas ‘criss-crossed’ the globe in the colonial period, rather than being contained by the one-way flow between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ – in this case, Britain and its colonies – implicit in the recurrent
Victorian metaphor of the ‘voyage out’. Yet the historical experiences of non-European women travellers continue to be marginalized more often than not, just as they were in the otherwise fascinating exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. Indeed, they find no place at all in The Virago Book of Women Travellers, nor Jane Robinson’s charmingly-titled anthology of women’s travel-writing, Unsuitable for Ladies. In the introduction to the former, however, the editor does ‘regret the absence of more multicultural voices’ and express her hope that ‘in the future these gender and racial gaps will be bridged’. This book aims to take a step in that direction.

Endnotes:

5 Fisher, Counterflows, pp. 222-4.
6 See, for instance, Grewal, Home and Harem, p. 140.
15 Sultan Jahan, Account, 10. For this honour, Sikandar was also celebrated in the contemporary British press. See “The Begum of Bhopal,” Illustrated London News (London), 16 May 1863.
16 Khan, Begums, p. 108. See also Shah Jahan, Taj-ul-Iqbal, p. 102; Sultan Jahan, Account, p. 17.
17 For an account of the perils faced by hajj pilgrims in the late nineteenth century, see the appendix to The Mecca Pilgrimage (London: Thos. Cook & Sons, 1893), pp. 13-19. It consists of an article originally written by a ‘gentleman who has for several years been engaged in the Pilgrim trade
as commander of a steamer’ for The Times of India, 9 November 1885. Even in the 1920s when statistics first became available, death rates during hajj sometimes reached 13%. Mary Byrne McDonnell, ‘Patterns of Muslim Pilgrimage from Malaysia, 1885 – 1985’ in Eickelmann and Piscatori, Muslim Travellers, p. 114.


This argument has been made in the Malaysian context by McDonnell, ‘Patterns’, p. 114.

For an introduction to these rites and rituals, see Gustave E. Von Grunebaum, Muhammadan Festivals (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951), pp. 15-49.


Beveridge, ‘Introduction’, p. 72-3. Gulbadan’s omission may be contrasted with a highly emotive hajj account written in poetic form by a widow from Isfahan in the late seventeenth century. According to Kathryn Babayan, this ‘singular female expression of sorrow’ takes the form of a ‘mystical journey toward God’ that ‘reveals how piety and life experiences kindled her desire to circumambulate the Ka’ba’. See ‘“In Spirit We Ate Each Other’s Sorrow”: Female Companionship in Seventeenth-Century Safavi Iran’ in Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (eds), Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).


Pearson, Pilgrimage, p. 16-7.


Metcalf, Pilgrimage, p. 41.


It may be surmised from a speech given by Major (later Colonel) G.B. Malleson at the Dalhousie Institute in 1865 that this written request came in the form of reply to an earlier letter from Sikandar. Apparently, she had written to Durand before departing on her journey in order to ‘solicit forgiveness’ for any offence that she may have caused him during his five or six years in Bhopal. Her intention was to leave on pilgrimage ‘with as much purity as possible’. ‘The Begum of Bhopal’, The Times (London), 11 April 1865, p. 6.


Shah Jahan, Taj-ul Iklbal, p. 102. Sikandar’s later descendants make no mention of this original manuscript, nor has it been located through my own searching in either family collections in India or Pakistan or the National of Archives of India in Bhopal. These omissions suggests that it, like many other documents in Bhopal – notably, a diary written by the founder of the dynasty, Dost Muhammad Khan (1672-1728) – may have been lost, perhaps during the tumult that accompanied Indian independence or on the death of the last ruling Nawab, Hamidullah Khan, in 1960. For a later reprint in English, see The Nawab Sikandar Begum of Bhopal, A Pilgrimage to Mecca, tr. Mrs Willoughby-Osborne (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1906).

I have made this argument with reference to the memoirs of Sikandar’s great great granddaughter, Princess Abida Sultaan of Bhopal, published in English in 2004. See my ‘Introduction:

41 Literacy rates as a whole were only just over 4% according to the census of 1881.
44 See, for instance, ibid., p. 41.
48 ‘Letter from H.H. Shah Jahan Begum, present Ruler of Bhopal, to Mrs Willoughby-Osborne, on hearing of Her Majesty’s most gracious acceptance of the Dedication of the following Narrative’ in Sikandar, *Pilgrimage*, viii.
49 For just one example, see ‘The Capital of India’, *The Times* (London), 14 December 1868, p. 10. Unfortunately, no evidence has been found, either in the form of full reviews or passing comments in other sources, as to how the book was received by its intended British audience.
50 Sikandar, *Pilgrimage*, p. 140.
54 Sikandar, *Pilgrimage*, p. 4fn1
55 Ibid., pp. 116-7.
57 Sikandar, *Pilgrimage*, p. 73.
58 Ibid., p. 40.
59 Dale, *Garden*.
60 Sikandar, *Pilgrimage*, p. 25.
63 Ibid., pp. 116, 126, 131.
64 Ibid., p. 9-14.
66 Sikandar, *Pilgrimage*, ch. XIX.
67 Ibid., pp. 143-7.
68 Ibid., p. 6. This part of Sikandar’s journey may, however, be recreated at least in part from contemporary news reports. See, for instance, articles on her arrival, departure and activities in Bombay in ‘The Bombay Mail’ section of *The Times* (London), 25 January and 6 February 1864.
72 Ibid., p. 95. Also see Metcalf, ‘What Happened in Mecca’.
75 Ibid., p. 138.
76 Ibid., p. 135.
77 Ibid., p. 95.
Ibid., p. 141-2.
81 Ibid., p. 150. Interestingly, Sikandar’s account of the threat posed by ‘Bedouin highwaymen’ was supported by the above-mentioned article in *The Times of India*. It reported that, if pilgrims did not book their camels to Mecca with the ‘Safe Carrying Company’ – said to have an arrangement with the Bedouin – their safety could not be guaranteed. *The Mecca Pilgrimage*, p. 17.
83 Ibid., pp. 40-2.
87 Ibid., p. 94.
88 Ibid., p. 149.
89 Ibid., p. 34, 84.
92 Burton, *At the Heart of Empire*, pp. 3, 16-17.
94 Ibid., pp. 87-9.
96 On this, see Dale, *Garden*.
98 Ibid., pp. 36, 85.
99 Ibid., p. 146.
100 Ibid., pp. 35-6, 81.
101 Ibid., pp. 80-1.
102 Ibid., p. 146.
103 Ibid., p. 79.
104 Ibid., p. 82.
105 Ibid., p. 66. For comparison, see Sultan Jahan, *Account*, p. 103-4.
106 Sikandar, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 32, 78. According to the above-mentioned article on *hajj* in *The Times of India*, this impression of Jeddah and Mecca was widespread among pilgrims. The author himself went so far as to proclaim that Jeddah was ‘one of the most dirty and foul smelling places that I have ever met with during my 20 years travelling over this globe’. *The Mecca Pilgrimage*, p. 16.
111 Sikandar, *Pilgrimage*, p. 35.
112 Ibid., p. 83.
115 Quoted in my ‘Out of India’, p. 268.
117 Burton, *At the Heart of Empire*, pp. 7, 10, 15.