



Asian Studies Centre
St Antony's College
University of Oxford
South Asia Seminar Series, Week 8



Tuesday 8th March, 2pm, Fellows' Dining Room, St Antony's College

*Histories of the ephemeral:
writing on music in the late Mughal world*

Katherine Butler Schofield (King's College London)



How do we write histories of the ephemeral: of affective and sensory experience, of devotional states and journeys, of the live performance of music and dance—of the tangible yet transient texture of the experiential moment? More critically, how do we write such histories when the moment has long passed into silence? Can emotion, devotion, and the arts tell us critical things about the harder-edged worlds of political,

economic and social history that we couldn't otherwise access? What is the relationship between the aesthetic, the affective, the ethical, and the political in South Asian history? And how do we track and account for changes in the texture of ephemeral experience over time?

In this paper, Katherine Butler Schofield will be considering these questions in relation to music and listening in the late Mughal world, c.1748–1858. In 1691, the Mughal notable Sher Khan Lodi put the dilemma most succinctly: that “it is impossible to capture the essence of music in pen and ink on the surface of the page.” All we have left, he wrote, are the “sibilant scratches of a broken pen.” Nevertheless, he, and many others like him, tried their best over and over again to put down in words their own histories of the ephemeral as it pertained to musical experience. The speaker's recent European Research Council project has uncovered a vast and rich archive of writings on music in the late Mughal world, hitherto almost entirely unexplored. Through a series of short examples she will discuss some of the new genres of writing on music that emerged in Hindustan c.1748–1858 and explore their wider historical implications. In doing so, she will also evaluate the act of writing on music at this time: what it entailed for late Mughal and early colonial men and women; what they thought was important, or possible, to record in writing; and why.

Katherine Butler Schofield is a historian of music in the Mughal empire and the colonial Indian Ocean. Through stories about ill-fated courtesans, overweening ustads, and captivated patrons, she writes on Mughal sovereignty and selfhood, friendship and desire, sympathy and loss, and power, worldly and strange. She has just finished a €1.2M European Research Council grant (2011–15) on the ways in which music and dance were transformed c.1750–1900 in the transition to colonialism in India and the Malay world. Her first book, with Francesca Orsini, is *Tellings and texts: music, literature, and performance in North India* (Open Book, 2015).

All are welcome

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Picture: Chanda Bibi dancing for the Raja, Rag Darshan f. 24r. Copyright University of Pennsylvania.