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Reflective Essay

Despite this academic year being online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I discovered and learned from the extensive variety of resources offered by the library through my research project by focusing primarily on the online platform. By conducting a well-rounded analysis and examination of my research topic, I honed my existing research skills and gained new ones. This gave me the knowledge to utilize different resources to effectively form and support my research.

For my HSTAS 402 History of Medieval and Mughal India course, I conducted and wrote a quarter-long research paper assessing the intricacies surrounding the visibility of royal Mughal women in visual and written sources during Emperor Akbar's reign. I became interested in this topic when I noticed the limited mention of women and their impact in our course materials, intriguing me of their role in the empire. I then realized this topic was quite challenging due to the minimal research and secondary sources available in this area, with many sources being one-sided and outdated. This made me uncertain about formulating my question and argument, leading me to brainstorm my research process. I centered my research strategy around assessing the setbacks of primary and secondary sources commonly utilized, to create an evaluation and offer a new perspective on the visibility of Royal Mughal women through my work.

I first examined the overarching role of women in the Mughal Era. My professor provided me reliable sources such as journals and books to start my research, which introduced me to the types of resources available in the library system. I was excited when I noticed a trend in the historians such as Lisa Balabanlilar and Ellison Findley, and journals commonly cited, leading me to look into their works further. I then narrowed down my topic to focus on royal women, noting their lack of mention and research, specifically during Emperor Akbar's rule. After receiving feedback from my professor, I obtained key primary sources that were available through several online databases such as the HathiTrust Digital Library and JSTOR. These sources consisted of written and visual works, as well as online and physical versions, introducing me to the diverse databases provided by the UW Library. Then, I evaluated my sources, understanding their biases and effectiveness in communicating their argument which helped me finalize my primary and secondary sources. Through this process, I noticed a widely assumed perspective surrounding royal women that connected their lack of freedom and autonomy during Akbar's era due to the institutionalization of the *harem*. After conversing with my professor, I understood it to be a misinterpreted narrative, and realized I wanted to further examine this perspective to support my argument. Course materials like the Glenn and Smart article, accessed through the Library database, showed how visual works provided key insight on royal households, and helped me find artworks both in our Fine Arts Library and outside. I located high quality paintings from the *Akbarnama* on archive websites like The Victoria and Albert Museum, and the *Hamzanama* Illustrations, to argue the inclusion and depictions of women in artworks, compared to texts.

The biggest obstacle in my process was the limited research done on my topic which primarily included not up-to-date sources. To overcome this, I took the approach of evaluating existing sources, both primary and secondary, to provide a new perspective on a common narrative about

the invisibility of royal Mughal women in historical accounts. I evaluated a famously cited source on this topic, a book by Historian Ruby Lal, which I felt provided a one-sided perspective on the issue, using primary courtly sources without understanding their purpose or context. Through the UW Library borrowing services, I obtained the *Akbarnama*, an account of the workings of the empire, which includes five translated volumes all available at the UW Library. I used a second primary source, the *Ain-i Akbari*, which I accessed through the HathiTrust database, thus, providing me with two critical primary sources to effectively create my argument. Through this, I learned the importance of evaluating the different sources available and understood the context and biases of the authors.

Another obstacle I faced was that when using physical versions of a text, I oftentimes was unable to locate specific instances where royal women were referenced as there were limited direct mentions in written works, and they were only described or addressed by their given names. I was frustrated and confused as I was unable to find the specific evidence to support my argument, but after consulting with my professor, I found my solution. I made use of the glossary and looked through my secondary sources on online databases to note the different ways the texts were cited and provided examples of key women being mentioned. This method not only gave me a new understanding of my argument, but made me realize new ways to find information, especially in translated works.

Through this experience, I gained a deeper understanding of my topic, better understood how to use different types of resources to support my claims, learned to evaluate sources and their credibility, and lastly evaluated my own argument with the use of sources found. I relied mainly on UW Libraries Search, article databases, and archive websites such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, to conduct my research. I discovered critical tools such as the citation generator, the option of looking up specific terminology on online databases, and filtering works based on media and resource type (articles, reviews, and peer-reviewed journals). This entire experience was immensely challenging and oftentimes I found myself unsure about my topic and argument, with the online format of courses this year adding to the rigor and stress. However, critical guidance from my professor and the exciting nature of exploring a topic not extensively researched, kept me going and helped me produce a piece that I am very proud of. I am grateful for the invaluable skills and the knowledge of adapting research strategies I gained, which I am excited to apply to my endeavors in the future.