

Rohini Dasgupta

PhD Student in History of Science, Medicine, and Technology

IRIS Award — 2025

In July 2025, I used my IRIS Award to travel to India and the UK to conduct archival research for my master's thesis. Broadly, my research lies at the intersection of the history of medicine and public health in 20th-century colonial and postcolonial India. I am particularly interested in the questions of women's bodies as embodied subjects in health crises, with a focus on the complex relationship between reproductive health and chronic disease—especially the tensions between visible and invisible identities of their diseases in medical discourse.

As I began defining my research questions and identifying gaps of inquiry, I planned visits to Kolkata and London to consult colonial official health reports, personal accounts, sanitary commission reports, missionary writings, and vernacular sources.

During the first stage of my trip, I went to India and worked at the Directorate of State Archives, West Bengal; the National Library, Kolkata; and the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. At the State Archives, I found crucial records of Bengal Government sanitary commission reports, which helped me conceptualize the invisibility of chronic diseases of women, such as cervical cancer in colonial India, despite their likely links to reproductive health crises among them. I also examined vernacular materials at the National Library and Bangiya Sahitya Parishad to better understand contemporary debates and arguments emerging within native intellectual and cultural circles.

From Kolkata, I traveled to London, where I worked at the British Library and the Wellcome Collection. Over two weeks, I photographed and analyzed a wide range of documents, focusing on colonial government accounts of women's health in 20th-century India. At the British Library India Office Records, I found valuable sources, including the personal accounts of IMS officials such as V.B. Green-Armytage and C.C. Barry, the autobiography of British nurse C.A. Wilson, and materials produced by Claire Thompson, a medical missionary in India. These included personal journals, medical books, women's health education booklets, reports, letters, and teaching aids. I also studied volumes of the Indian Medical Gazette, uncovering articles by both British and Indian gynecologists and surgeons who argued that women's abdominal health should be seen not only through the lens of reproduction but as part of broader systemic health concerns. At the Wellcome Collection—a rich repository for medical historians of British colonialism—I also consulted the personal diary of Scottish physician Margaret Ida Balfour, along with several related medical texts.

This research trip was invaluable not only for collecting sources but also for refining my core research questions. Initially, I aimed to focus primarily on maternal health and hoped to trace explicit connections between cervical cancer and reproductive health. However, archival work

revealed that discussions of women's health often extended beyond their identities as mothers. For my MA thesis, I intend to use this realization as an entry point to broader inquiries about the socio-medical construction of motherhood in colonial India, and the contested visibility and invisibility of cervical cancer within that framework.

I am deeply grateful to IRIS for supporting my research journey. This award not only enabled access to archives across two continents but also gave me the opportunity to reframe my research questions in meaningful ways that will shape the foundation of my future doctoral work.