

Ritual and Symbolism in the Anti-infanticide Campaign in Early Colonial Punjab

Andrew J. Major

Pannasastra University of Cambodia

This paper is a preliminary exploration of a campaign mounted by the British in 1853 to eliminate female infanticide in the Punjab. It examines the form, rituals and symbolic intent of public meetings convened by the British for this purpose. It is suggested that such an examination throws new light on how the nascent 'Punjab School' of colonial administrators sought to adopt a morally activist and intrusive role with regard to Punjabi society, and how the Punjabi elites responded to that initiative.

As the East India Company expanded its authority over northern India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, official thinking demanded that newly-acquired authority be deployed to 'reform' Indian cultural and religious practices that were glaringly at odds with current Evangelical and Utilitarian principles. Consequently, Company officials readily identified a number of 'social evils' that needed to be investigated, reported, outlawed and eliminated - sati, thugi, dacoity, 'hereditary' criminality and female infanticide.¹ The campaigns against sati and thugi are perhaps the best-known examples of this multi-dimensional attempt at Evangelical-Utilitarian social reform in early colonial India.

Much less is known about the campaign to abolish female infanticide. This evil was first 'discovered' by the magistrate of Benares in 1789 and although it was regarded as particularly horrific, it was for a while regarded as a relatively rare and isolated practice confined to certain high-status Rajput clans. But as the Company extended its influence up the Gangetic valley, the 'true' extent and scale of infanticide gradually became clear. The word 'gradually' needs emphasising. Because of infanticide's intrinsic private nature (occurring within the women's quarters of households, and performed by midwives and family matrons), infanticidal practices came to light only when officers began their enquiries into village life at the time of the first land revenue surveys and noticed that in many villages girls were greatly outnumbered by boys, or sometimes were altogether missing. By the mid-1850s these surveys had been completed as far west as the Punjab, the last sizeable territory to fall under the Company's authority, and by then it was apparent that virtually all parts of northern India westwards of Benares were inhabited by infanticidal castes, tribes and clans.²

This paper is a preliminary exploration of certain features of the anti-infanticide campaign mounted by the British in the Punjab in the early 1850s, a few years after the annexation of the remaining territories of the Sikh kingdom of Lahore. A good deal more work needs to be done, particularly amongst legislative and judicial records, before a full picture of this campaign can be gained.³ In the meantime, however, this paper draws largely on published government papers on Punjab infanticide⁴ to probe the form, content and symbolic meaning of a series of anti-infanticide meetings convened by the British in various parts of the Punjab in 1853. It is hoped that an analysis (tentative though it must be at this stage) of these meetings will suggest new ways of looking at the intersection of the colonial state and Punjabi society at this important time in the region's history. Strategically, militarily and economically, the Punjab was a most important acquisition for the British. And the fact that it was the last significant territory to be annexed permitted Dalhousie, the grand annexationist, to allocate the cream of his administrative talent to the Punjab and to provide them with extraordinary powers to pursue a programme of rapid and thoroughgoing modernisation. What has been termed the Punjab School of Administration gained a considerable reputation, between 1849 and 1857, for paternalistic despotism in the service of modernisation. What light does the anti-infanticide campaign throw on the Punjab School's methods of operation? Let us begin by briefly reconstructing the discovery of infanticide in the Punjab and the formulation of a policy for its suppression.

British Encounter of Female Infanticide

It is sometimes thought that the British first encountered female infanticide in the Punjab amongst the Bedis of Dera Baba Nanak when Major Lake, Deputy Commissioner of Gurdaspur, brought it to the notice of his superiors in 1851.⁵ Lake's report was certainly the catalyst for the crafting of a 'Punjab policy', as we shall see presently. But it was not the first encounter. That had occurred five years earlier, in the Trans-Sutlej territory (annexed by the Company at the end of the first Anglo-Sikh War). John Lawrence, the Commissioner of this territory, had found infanticide to be rife amongst the Bedis there, and noted that across the Punjab the Bedis were known as *kurimars* (those who killed female children). Those Bedis who claimed direct lineal descent from Guru Nanak, belonging as they did to the same *got* (subcaste) of the Khatri *zat* (caste) as the founder of Sikhism had, were recognised, in Sikh society at least, as constituting a hereditary priestly class, and the Sikh rulers had granted them extensive *jagirs* (assignments of land revenue) for their maintenance. One Bedi extended family held extensive jagirs at Malsian, Jullundur. While investigating these and other jagir tenures in 1846-7, Lawrence had made continuation of them conditional on their claimants promising to abandon infanticide (as well as the practices of burning widows alive and drowning or burying alive lepers).⁶

It is not merely from a concern for chronological accuracy that we date the first ‘official’ British encounter with infanticide in the Punjab to Lawrence in the Jullundur Doab. Of greater importance for this paper is the fact that Lawrence’s encounter involved what appears to have been a serious personal and political falling-out with a particularly strong-willed Bedi chief and Malsian *jagirdar* (holder of a jagir) named Baba Bikram Singh. According to the British, Bikram Singh had, in the tumultuous last days of Sikh rule, usurped the spiritual headship of the Bedi line from his nephew, Baba Sampuran Singh, who was head of the senior Bedi family. Bikram Singh had also excommunicated another relative, Punjab Singh of Mokandpur, for defying Bedi custom by preserving two female children ‘and caused him to be subjected to every imaginable social indignity for this deviation from the murderous custom’.⁷

When the British acquired the Trans-Sutlej territory in 1846, Bikram Singh had preferred to relinquish his jagirs and fortresses there rather than submit to British rule. And when Lawrence had sought to enlist his influence in the drive to eradicate infanticide,

that turbulent and bigoted priest replied ... that he had long given up intercourse with the female sex, and therefore had no temptation to perpetuate the crime; but he did not consent to use his influence to put it down.⁸

Bikram Singh joined the rebellion against the British-dominated Sikh court in 1848, and after the annexation of the ‘Punjab Proper’ in 1849, following the second Anglo-Sikh War, forfeited his remaining lands and retired to Amritsar to live on a small pension granted by the British. The importance of these details lies in the fact that, when John Lawrence (now as Chief Commissioner of the Punjab) authorised the issuing of invitations to representatives of the leading families of the Punjab to attend a grand anti-infanticide meeting at Amritsar in 1853, he insisted that no such invitation be extended to Bikram Singh. We shall come back to this point later.

To return to Major Lake at Gurdaspur. Lake’s report on the prevalence of female infanticide amongst the Bedis of his district, particularly in and around the town of Dera Baba Nanak (the birthplace of Guru Nanak), prompted the Board of Administration to direct all Commissioners of the seven Divisions of the Punjab to report on the extent of the ‘crime’ in their districts, and to suggest measures for suppressing it. As these reports came in, during 1852, it was realised that infanticide was almost as prevalent in the Punjab as in the adjacent North-Western Provinces. Not only was it generally practiced by the Bedis, but another priestly Khatri *got*, the Sodhis (lineal descendants of the fourth and subsequent six Sikh Gurus), also frequently killed their daughters. In fact, all the higher-status Khatri *gots* – Hindu as well as Sikh, non-priestly as well as sacerdotal – were held to be guilty of practising infanticide.

Besides the Khatri, other middle- and high-ranking castes and clans were accused of the crime: the Rajputs of both the Himalayan foothills and the northern

plains, Sikh Jats of the Jullundur Doab and Manjha, certain Muslim clans with pretensions to being of ancient royal stock, and even - surprisingly - one subcaste of Brahmins.⁹

A number of other interesting patterns emerged from the Commissioners' reports. Some infanticidal groups had practiced female infanticide for so long that they had invented spurious explanations for it, such as claims that the water in village wells led to only boy children being conceived, or the Bedi belief that if they remained true to their faith, and lived clean lives, God would reward them with male children.¹⁰ Generally, however, the people who practiced infanticide candidly admitted - and British officers almost universally agreed with this - that it was due to two things: 'pride and poverty', or the institutions of hypergamy and dowry.¹¹ In many sections of Indian society (and this cuts across religious identities) the practice of hypergamy has traditionally been the norm: families generally seek marriage alliances for their daughters with subcastes or clans which are of a superior rank, in terms of both ritual and economic status. It follows that the giving of a daughter signals inferiority (just as the taking of a daughter-in-law indicates superiority). For many Punjabi gots, in whom pride of descent and status was intense, and who declined to recognise any social superiors, it was often thought far better to kill daughters at birth than to risk the disgrace of leaving them unmarried, or of marrying them to boys of inferior rank, at a later date.

Although nineteenth-century infanticide can thus be seen to have been deeply rooted in Punjabi social structure, it is clear from several of the Commissioners' reports that the crime was not a primordial custom dating from the start of Indian civilisation. Rather, it seemed to many that infanticide had grown out of rivalries and animosities that had developed, in the past few centuries, between gots of the same *zat* who used to inter-marry but now did not, owing to deep-seated suspicions and antagonisms surrounding past insults and injuries. For example, the entire *zat*, or 'super-tribe', of the Khatri was riven with jealousies that were expressed in a mutual abhorrence of inter-marriage.¹²

A second general feature of Indian society is that it is generally the bride's family that meets the marriage expenses and pays a dowry to the groom's family. The desirability of matching girls with boys from superior families meant that the latter could demand lavish weddings and exorbitant dowries. Many proud but not wealthy families found this to be quite ruinous (raising a daughter was thus sometimes likened to 'watering one's neighbour's plant'), and so avoided the problem of marrying their daughters by killing some or all of them at birth.¹³

Naturally, the new colonial masters of the Punjab were keen to suppress the 'barbarous' and 'heinous' crime of infanticide. But how might this be achieved? Earlier, in the Cis-Sutlej States and Trans-Sutlej territories, officers had issued proclamations declaring infanticide to be a punishable crime; yet while several parties had been charged with the crime, they had subsequently been released for want of proof.¹⁴ What was clearly needed was a coherent and comprehensive Punjab policy for the suppression of female infanticide.

The first step towards the creation of such a policy was taken in April 1853 in the Trans-Sutlej Division. There, two public meetings between British local officers and leading representatives of infanticidal gots were convened. These meetings secured agreements between brother gots (in one case between Bedis and Bunjahi Khattris, in the other case between two groups of Rajputs) that in future they would accept each other's daughters as brides, and would follow mutually-acceptable, fixed scales of wedding expenses.¹⁵ These meetings were consciously modelled on a similar meeting of Rajput chiefs that Charles Raikes had convened at Mainpuri in the North-Western Provinces two years earlier. Raikes' scheme had been officially published in 1853, and he had now been appointed as Commissioner of the Lahore Division.

In June 1853, Robert Montgomery, formerly magistrate at Allahabad in the North-Western Provinces and now the Judicial Commissioner of the Punjab, drew up a Minute on Infanticide, in which he summarised the findings of the district and divisional reports, and set out a plan for combating what he called 'this dreadful crime'. The key proposals of his plan were: (1) that a general Proclamation be issued throughout the Punjab declaring infanticide to be a crime, punishable as murder, (2) that *lambardars* (village headmen) be required to report cases of infanticide in their villages, on pain of losing their positions, (3) that annual censuses be made of infanticidal villages and 'tribes', giving returns of numbers of boys and girls born, and (4) that a series of meetings be held, along the lines of the two recent meetings held in the Trans-Sutlej Division, to discuss the issue of inter-marriage between infanticidal gots and to draw up agreements on marriage expenses. Concerning the last proposal, the first of the public meetings was to be a 'grand general meeting' of representatives of infanticidal groups from within a 200-mile radius of Amritsar city, during the next celebration of the Divali festival, with subsidiary district-level meetings held thereafter.¹⁶

When he forwarded Montgomery's Minute to the Governor-General at Calcutta, John Lawrence (now the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab) added some suggestions of his own – suggestions which neatly characterise the principals of Punjab School authoritarian paternalism. He was opposed to any strict system of police supervision of infanticidal villages or classes on the grounds that this would be 'liable to be used as an engine of extortion and oppression'. Nor did he think that *lambardars* should be punished for non-reporting of infanticide, other than in cases of 'flagrant neglect of duty'. He did, however, think that there was a greater role for the police to play in controlling and punishing the 'importunities and exactions of the lazy mendicant classes, such as Bhats, Meerasees, and Fuqeers', hereditary bards, genealogists and jesters, who congregated at the houses of brides at the time of weddings and insulted their families if they were not paid for their 'entertainment'. He also suggested – in a manner more reminiscent of the earlier pro-aristocratic sentiments of his elder brother Henry Lawrence than of his own radical pro-peasant ideology¹⁷ - that it would be wise to work with and through the heads of the leading aristocratic, landowning and mercantile families of the Punjab,

people whom he collectively called ‘influential natives’. ‘If’, his secretary wrote, ‘we can get influential natives to set their faces against female infanticide, to consider it a crime and a disgrace, our eventual success may be deemed certain’.¹⁸

Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General, fully approved of these proposals and added two further provisions: first, that Bedi families who continued to practice infanticide should not only incur the penalty of murder but should forfeit any jagirs or pensions that they held from Government; and second, that he would be pleased to sanction the granting of ‘rewards, or honours, or even titles’ to ‘a few of those who may have been most forward in abandoning the inhuman practices which their fathers pursued’.¹⁹ These provisions were subsequently incorporated into the vernacular general Proclamation that was issued throughout the Punjab.²⁰

A policy for the suppression of female infanticide in the Punjab had now been created. Although it incorporated a number of different strategies, both conciliatory and coercive, that had been experimented with earlier in different parts of northern India²¹, the ‘Punjab System’ (as Panigrahi calls it) was distinguished by three distinctive features. First, the campaign against infanticide was to be a united, concerted effort by all members of the new administration. As Montgomery put it,

the whole influence of our Government, which I think is greater in the Punjab than in any part of India, [should] be brought to bear on the subject.... The high-born Rajpoots of the hills, and the priestly Bedees of the plains, must be inspired with alarm and impressed with the conviction that our Government is thoroughly in earnest.²²

Second, the aim was to give a sharp jolt to customary beliefs and practices through the holding of a series of almost simultaneous public meetings – starting with a ‘grand general meeting’ at Amritsar – at which measures for the suppression of infanticide would be devised. Third, by requesting the presence of ‘influential natives’ at these meetings, and holding out the prospect of rewards for conspicuous conversion to the new ‘moral order’ that the British were endeavouring to introduce, the policy aimed at social change by elite example, through percolation from the top down. Moreover, the elites were expected to exemplify the new ‘moral order’ not merely in their own reformed personal behaviour, but also through their determination to marginalise the customary behaviour of the professional bards and genealogists.

The Amritsar Anti-Infanticide ‘Durbar’

The great Amritsar anti-infanticide meeting was held on the last three days of October 1853, and this served as a model for subsidiary meetings later convened at many other places including Multan, Gujranwala, Sialkot, Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Shahpur and Kangra. What form did these meetings take? Who attended? What happened? What were the impressions that were sought to be conveyed to those who participated in these meetings, or witnessed them?

The first thing that needs to be said, even though it might appear obvious, given the time and place, is that women - either Indian or European - were conspicuous by their seeming complete absence from these meetings. At the official, public level, at least, the whole anti-infanticide campaign in the Punjab was conducted by, and amongst, men. This is - to say the least - supremely ironic, given that infanticide was a 'crime' carried out by and against females.

As to form, these meetings could be said to have been based on the 'darbar' (from the Persian *darbar*), or ceremonial court of an Indian ruler. In India the British applied the word 'darbar' to the imperial assemblies which they organised from time to time to meet their subjects in a ritual way. Such durbars ranged from district or provincial meetings called by governors to confer honours and rewards on the aristocracy and other loyal notables of their jurisdictions to the vast all-India meetings such as Lord Lytton's Imperial Assemblage called at Delhi in 1877 to proclaim Queen Victoria empress of India and the Imperial Durbar of 1911 at which George V crowned himself emperor of India. The underlying purpose of such durbars was, of course, to proclaim the might of British authority by linking it to Indian tradition and ritually mark the subordination of Indian princes and other 'influential natives'.

The British liked to claim that their durbars merely followed Mughal tradition, and that they innovated nothing in the rituals and ceremonies that were observed on these occasions. Thus the setting of the 1911 Durbar was a vast city of tents spread over 25 square miles of the Delhi plain that was - outwardly - just like the vast capitals of canvas that the Mughal emperors had erected when they went about their empire on inspection and hunting tours. But in fact, as Bernard Cohn showed in a seminal essay published more than 20 years ago²³, the British re-invented the tradition of the durbar to suit their own purposes. Cohn's essay provides valuable theoretical insights as well as a sense of wider historical context for our examination of the Punjab anti-infanticide meetings.

Prior to 1858, when the British monarch was vested with the sovereignty of India and a new theoretical relationship was forged with the people of India, the durbars that the British called (as opposed to the princely ones they attended) were full of contradiction and difficulty. One problem concerned precedence. In a traditional Indian durbar an individual's rank and prestige were signified by how he was greeted on arrival, and by how close he sat or stood in the presence of the ruler. This question of precedence the British found tricky, because of competing status claims by Indian princes, and because the Company itself was still - in theory - but a servant of the Mughal emperor. Another problem concerned the customary and ritualised exchange of gifts and other markers of respect between ruler and subject at an Indian durbar. The British were inclined to ignore the deeply symbolic nature of these exchanges, and to view them as instances of bribery and tribute in return for favours. It was only after the assumption of direct crown rule and the elimination of the Mughal emperor's ritual status in 1858, says Cohn, that the British were able to formulate a unified 'cultural-symbolic constitution' in which the shell of the

traditional *darbar* was retained, but its inner core of Indian symbolism was replaced with British orders of precedence, systems of honours and titles, a graded system of gifts to be given and received, and graded gun salutes, all of which had to be invented anew.

We see some of the pre-1858 contradiction and difficulty in the Punjab anti-infanticide meetings of 1853. On the one hand, they took the form of the traditional *darbar* under canvas. For the great public meeting at Amritsar, a series of large pavilion tents, covering a space measuring 200 feet by 62 feet and capable of accommodating 3,000 people, had been erected for the occasion (these tents had been sewn together by the inmates of the Amritsar jail). The ground beneath these tents was richly carpeted, in the traditional fashion. At the subsidiary district meetings, too, tents, awnings and cotton side screens, along with carpets and bunting on tent poles, were all used to recreate the visual spectacle of a traditional Indian *darbar*.²⁴

Also traditional was the semi-circular seating arrangement for the British and their principal guests at the Amritsar meeting (and at some of the subsidiary meetings). Appended to Cave-Browne's *Indian Infanticide* is a ground plan for the 'general *Darbar*' that was held on the third day of the Amritsar meeting, which Cave-Browne says he obtained from one of the two British officers responsible for the arrangement of this meeting. The plan shows that four of the principal British officials in the Punjab (but not the Chief Commissioner, John Lawrence, who could not be present) sat at the centre of this semi-circle, in the position that the ruler would have occupied in a traditional *darbar*. Behind them sat subordinate British officers from the districts. To the left and right of the four principal officials, the remaining front seats in the semi-circle were occupied by the selected guests of the British, 60 of the leading 'Rajahs and Sirdars' of the Punjab, with ten British Deputy Commissioners interspersed amongst them. *Vakils*, ministers and others in attendance on these aristocrats occupied three rows of seats behind their masters, while attendants 'not entitled to chairs' stood at the very back. The whole area in front of this semi-circle was occupied by 'Punches, Chowdries, Zemindars, Lumberdars and others' from the villages of central Punjab, seated on the ground in the order of their nine districts. The ground plan was clearly an exercise in presenting the British as Indian rulers.

Given that, when the attendants on the 60 *rajahs* (princes) and *sardars* (chiefs) are taken into account, 'more than 200 natives of rank' had been assembled on this occasion, the order of precedence was a particularly delicate question. In 1851 Charles Raikes' Mainpuri meeting of Rajput chiefs had nearly broken up over this. The chiefs, resplendent in their golden and embroidered robes, had arrived at Raikes' meeting on their elephants and camels, but had then retired in a huff because they were not happy with the seating arrangement.²⁵ At Amritsar this situation was avoided by the formation of a reception committee of five British officers, headed by two who had firsthand knowledge of the rules of etiquette and procedure that had been followed at the court of the erstwhile Sikh kingdom. According to the official

report on the Amritsar meeting, this committee ‘received each native gentleman as he entered the reception tent and conducted him to his seat with marks of consideration’. In this way, the report went on, ‘though an unprecedented number of natives of rank were assembled, there was not a single expression of disapproval, disappointment, or displeasure’, and ‘order was maintained and silence secured’.²⁶

On the other hand, there were certain features of the Punjab anti-infanticide meetings that represented a departure from the traditional *darbar*. One was the recourse to modern, Western political formalities: the establishment of committees, the passing of resolutions, the signing of consensus agreements. Another was the location of these meetings. Because the British were anxious to convey the impression that ‘influential natives’ themselves were taking a key role in the suppression of infanticide, the meetings were, it would seem, consciously located at places that had symbolic meaning for Punjabis rather than the ruling British. The meeting between Bedis and Bunjahi Khatris at Jullundur in April 1853 had been convened at the Hai Tank – a place of pilgrimage for Hindus – thus avoiding, as one British officer put it, ‘the authoritative appearance which such a meeting would assume if held in one of the Government Courts’.²⁷ The great Amritsar meeting was held not at Lahore, the provincial capital, but at neighbouring Amritsar, the chief commercial city of the Punjab and a city of great religious significance to Sikhs and Hindus. It was held in the grounds of the Ram Bagh, a formal public garden in the Mughal style. And, as we have seen, it was timed to coincide with the annual Divali festival, celebrated by Hindus and Sikhs alike (though for different reasons²⁸), when the city would be illuminated and packed with pilgrims and festival-goers.²⁹ The district meeting at Gujranwala, which was the birth place of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was convened in the grounds of the palace of Ranjit Singh’s legendary general, Hari Singh Nalwa.³⁰

Another novel feature, adopted at the Gujranwala meeting (and possibly elsewhere), was that the customary presentation of *khelats* (ceremonial robes of honour) by the ruler to his loyal subjects at *darbar* was replaced with the presentation to each of the sardars who attended the meeting of a basket of fruit and flowers.³¹ What the recipients made of these gifts is not something that can be determined yet – no doubt, however, they accepted them dutifully as an expression of obeisance to their new rulers. The Gujranwala meeting also concluded with that most nineteenth-century British exhibition: a fireworks display and the illumination of the city. Can we see this as a substitution for the customary music and other forms of entertainment at a traditional *darbar*?

Just who were the ‘influential natives’ who attended the Punjab anti-infanticide meetings (and whether they did so entirely of their own free will) is not a question that can be answered completely owing to the limited amount of information found in the records consulted so far. In the case of the great Amritsar meeting, however, the task is somewhat easier because the names of the 60 ‘Rajahs and Sardars’ are given on the ground plan for the ‘general *Darbar*’, although not always in sufficient detail to enable us to identify them exactly. Certainly, representatives of the leading

Sikh chiefly families of central Punjab (the Ahluwalias, Sindhanwalias, Majithias and Atariwalas) and members of the erstwhile Sikh government (for example, Raja Tej Singh and Raja Dina Nath) were present, and occupied seats to the immediate right of the principal British officials. In fact, it seems to have been very much a meeting of the remnants of the erstwhile Sikh court, with only a sprinkling of Hindu and Muslim religious leaders present. Otherwise, it is clear that a good sample of the aristocracy of central Punjab had been brought together at Amritsar. As the Punjab government's annual administration report for that year put it:

At this important gathering all the nobility, chivalry, and hierarchy of the old regime, and the wealth, rank and influence of the new, were assembled. The Seikh sirdar, the priest of Nanak, the Hill chieftain, the commercial millionaire, the Mahomedan nawab, the Hindoo pundit, were all there.³²

The reference in this quotation to the overlapping of the old (Sikh) regime and the new (British) one is instructive, suggesting as it does that the purpose of these meetings was not entirely philanthropic, that besides promoting the suppression of infanticide, these meetings were designed to re-affirm political relationships between the British and the Punjab's nobility. This explains the proximity to the principal British officials at the Amritsar meeting of those 'influential natives' who had supported the British during the rebellion and war of 1848-9, and the relegation to the wings of the semi-circle of representatives of the so-called *mufsid* (rebel) Sikh families of that earlier period. Clearly, the British wanted to enlist the influence that these *mufsid* families still possessed. Equally, however, they wanted to remind these families of their diminished favour in the eyes of government. Cave-Browne explained the situation well:

The Punjab Government, while gladly accepting the co-operation of these *Moofsid* Sikhs in the great work before them, did not suffer it to be forgotten that by their former rebellion they had forfeited their high rank among their brethren, and that even a humble place in that proud assembly was obtained rather by favour than by right.³³

There was, however, one *mufsid* Sikh whose attendance had been expressly forbidden, and that was Bikram Singh Bedi. When John Lawrence's secretary authorised the issuing of invitations to the Amritsar meeting, he specified that 'especially Supoorun Sing, and his brother' be invited. But no invitation was to be addressed to Bikram Singh:

This man is, as you are aware, the representative of the younger branch of the same family as Supoorun Sing, and previous to the late war had usurped the rights of that Bedee, and has always been much opposed to the efforts of our Officers to suppress Female

Infanticide, and moreover took a prominent part in the late Rebellion.³⁴

What exactly took place at the Punjab anti-infanticide meetings? We can best answer this by looking at the three-day Amritsar meeting, which then served as the model for the subsequent district meetings.³⁵ On the first day at Amritsar, a small, intimate durbar was convened at the British camp: this was the equivalent, on a much smaller scale, of the courts convened by the Mughal emperors in the Diwan-i-Khas (Hall of Private Audience) when they had business of a consultative nature to conduct. Here the British Deputy Commissioners met a select number of ‘the most intelligent and influential Rajahs and Sirdars’³⁶ and formed a general committee. The Indian delegates from the two earlier meetings in the Trans-Sutlej Division were then summoned before this committee and asked to explain the agreements on wedding expenses that they had reached. Then the remaining rajahs, sirdars and heads of the district village committees were called in to be told that these agreements were to be taken as the basis for future proceedings.

On the second day, private meetings and discussions amongst the committees representing about fifteen different caste or clan groups (among whom it was hoped to revive the practice of giving and receiving brides) were held in the Ram Bagh garden. These meetings were expected to lay down graduated scales of dowries, marriage expenses, and fees and gratuities to priests and the mendicant classes according to different ‘classes’ within their own communities. For example, the Bedis of Dera Baba Nanak came up with the following agreement regarding outlay on marriages of their daughters:³⁷

We agree to the following scale of expenditure to be incurred on marriages; exclusive of jewels for the bride, the number and value of which will depend on the circumstances of her parents:

Persons of the:

1 st class	Rs 500
2 nd	Rs 400
3 rd	Rs 202
4 th	Rs 155

The third day at Amritsar was, as already noted, devoted to the convening of a grandiose general durbar, which we can see as a British equivalent of the highly ritualistic courts that the Mughals held in the Diwan-i-Am (Hall of Public Audience) when there was executive business to be attended to. Here the British were able to give full expression to their conviction that Indians were especially susceptible to pomp and ceremony.³⁸ Once the ‘natives of rank’ had been settled in their allotted seats, and the ‘rest of the humbler ranks’³⁹ had been shepherded to their places on the ground at the front, the Financial Commissioner rose to read a translation of the Governor-General’s letter sanctioning the meeting and promising severe punishment of those convicted of female infanticide and honorary distinctions for those who

cooperated in the suppression of it. He then read out a general agreement, or 'Ikrar-Nama', which declared the crime of infanticide to be 'so hateful to God, and execrable in the eyes of Government and of all pious and good men' that the people of the Punjab would report perpetrators to the authorities and 'expel from caste' any people who refused or showed reluctance to join the campaign for its eradication. The Ikrar-Nama also committed the people to observe the specific agreements, reached the previous day, on the reduction of marriage expenses and of fees to 'Bhats, Raes, Duts, Bhands, Naees, Meerasees, and beggars'. The former agreements were, presumably, to be enforced through mutual self-regulation. The reductions on fees to the Bhats and others, however, were to be enforced through the twin forces of social ostracism and punitive action:

If any such party shall in future be found to conduct himself in such an outrageous and harassing manner, he will be apprehended and handed over to the police, and we will never allow him admittance to weddings, or give him anything in charity; and will apply to the district officer for aid in the matter.⁴⁰

When the assembly signalled its general assent to this Ikrar-Nama, numerous copies were handed around for the signatures of the various representatives of the people. After a speech by the Commissioner of the Trans-Sutlej Division, in which he exhorted all present to commit themselves fully to the agreements into which they had entered, the durbar came to a close – and the crowd presumably repaired to the city to enjoy the Divali celebrations.

Conclusions

What is the significance of the 1853 anti-infanticide meetings in the Punjab? Tentatively, three conclusions may be offered. The first is that, without in any way wishing to question the commitment of the Punjab School to genuine social reform, the anti-infanticide campaign of 1853 needs to be seen as an exercise in legitimising British power. This explains the careful attention to the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of the anti-infanticide meetings.

Second, these meetings provide evidence that even before the 1857 Revolt and the 'conservative reaction' that followed, there was a tendency to temper John Lawrence-style radical intrusion into Punjabi social customs and practices with a Henry Lawrence-style recognition of the need for the support of the 'natural leaders of society'. This in turn suggests that the Punjab School was already moving towards an accommodation with a 'loyal' traditional political order, and that the importance of the post-1857 change in administrative style might have been somewhat exaggerated in the historical literature.⁴¹

The third conclusion concerns the actual impact of the anti-infanticide meetings. This is, at present, difficult to gauge precisely. The Punjab School, as might be expected, claimed that the whole exercise had been a resounding success: the fame

of the Amritsar meeting, asserted the administration report of 1853, 'spread far and wide throughout the Province, and the impression it created sank deep into the minds of the people'.⁴² The same report gives the names of thirteen 'influential individuals of high caste and station' - former servants of the Sikh court, prominent bankers, and Sikh religious leaders - who had recently been issued with letters of commendation for having set examples in their own families of reducing marriage expenses; so clearly, some elite Punjabis supported the anti-infanticide campaign, at least for a while.

Panigrahi claims that, amongst many Punjabi families, the sumptuary rules drawn up at the meetings held in 1853 continued to be recognised benchmarks of marriage expenditure well into the twentieth century, despite rises in income and living costs.⁴³ Against this, Malhotra wryly wonders whether the gradations of expenses agreed to at these meetings did not merely formalise social one-upmanship (which, after all, was one of the root causes of female infanticide) and encourage some who aspired to a higher 'rank' or 'class' to defy these agreements by indulging in 'excessive' expenditure at the time of their daughters' marriages.⁴⁴

However, one thing is certain: the campaign of 1853 did not succeed in eradicating female infanticide. The practice very likely declined after 1853. After all, the colonial state had many resources, such as army service and canal colony land, to distribute to 'loyal' and 'progressive-minded' subjects, and few sensible Punjabis wanted to risk getting off side with their rulers by continuing with a social practice that was so abhorred by the British. But it never disappeared entirely (as some historians like Khushwant Singh have erroneously assumed⁴⁵). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the British found it necessary to apply the Female Infanticide Act, 1870 (which provided for a proclamation system in the most infanticidal areas of the North-Western Provinces) to parts of the Punjab.⁴⁶ In the early twentieth century, Punjab officials like Malcolm Darling who had intimate knowledge of Punjabi village life asserted that infanticide – though very much reduced in comparison to a century earlier – was still practised in isolated areas.⁴⁷ In all probability, infanticide was generally replaced with a comparative neglect of female children (poorer diet and health care) that continued to produce the abnormal ratios of boys to girls that the British had noted in many villages in the first place. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the advent of the technologies of amniocentesis and ultra-sound scanning facilitated a dramatic burgeoning of pre-natal sex determination and abortion of unwanted female fetuses. Amritsar – the city that hosted the great anti-infanticide meeting of 1853 – was the place where modern India's first sex determination clinic opened its doors to business in 1979, while Amritsar District recorded India's worst district sex ratio (861 females to 1,000 males) in 1991.⁴⁸ One can only speculate as to what the Punjab School would have made of these grim facts.

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am grateful to fellow delegates for their comments. I am also grateful for the suggestions of the anonymous reviewer for this journal.]

Notes

¹ Judging that its claim to exclusive authority rested not merely on military conquest but also on moral superiority, the Company could not refrain from interfering in these 'barbaric' and 'degraded' practices: Sandra Freitag, 'Collective Crime and Authority in North India', in Anand Yang (ed), *Crime and Criminality in British India* (Tucson, 1985), 141-2.

² The standard work on infanticide during the British period is Lalita Panigrahi, *British Social Policy and Female Infanticide in India* (New Delhi, 1972). For a map showing generalised areas of female infanticide in nineteenth-century India, see Barbara D. Miller, *The endangered sex: neglect of female children in rural North India* (Delhi, 1997), 54.

³ Besides the chapter in Panigrahi, *British Social Policy*, there is a flowery, contemporary account of the 'Punjab System' of infanticide suppression in Rev. John Cave-Browne, *Indian Infanticide: Its Origins, Progress and Suppression* (London, 1857). Anshu Malhotra offers some interesting observations on this topic in her recent *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* (Oxford, 2002). I am grateful to Hew McLeod for drawing my attention to Malhotra's work.

⁴ These are *Selections from the Public Correspondence of the Administration for the Affairs of the Punjab: 1955: Minute on Infanticide in the Punjab*, by R. Montgomery. No.6. Art.16, pp.391-510; 1961: *Supplementary Papers on Infanticide*. No.9. Art. 21[A, pp.161-248 (Lahore, 1853).

⁵ For example, Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, 49.

⁶ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs* (Princeton, 1966), v. 2, 95, n. 19.

⁷ Cave-Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 162.

⁸ For a less caustic representation of Bikram Singh's actual response to Lawrence's request, see R. Bosworth Smith, *Life of Lord Lawrence* (London, 1885), v. 1, 179.

⁹ Minute on Infanticide in the Punjab, by R. Montgomery, 16 June 1853: *Selections from the Public Correspondence*, No. 6.

¹⁰ Malhotra points out that Denzil Ibbetson, compiler of the 1881 Census, also advanced the improbable theory that generations of infanticide had created a hereditary tendency in the Punjab to produce male children: *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, 50.

¹¹ I do not intend here to enter any detailed discussion on the causes of infanticide. An important contribution, however, is to be found in Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, 51-7.

¹² The most frequently mentioned inter-got antagonism was that between the Bedis and other Khatri which was caused by the slighting of Dharm Chand Bedi, a grandson of Guru Nanak, by a wedding party of Khatri who had come to his house to take his daughter. The story is that Dharam Chand issued an injunction that henceforth Bedis would not allow their daughters to live: Major H. B. Edwards to D. F. McLeod, 30 June 1852: *Selections from the Public Correspondence*, No. 134, 1852.

¹³ Paul Hershman, *Punjabi Kinship and Marriage* (Delhi, 1981), 156.

¹⁴ Minute on Infanticide.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ During the period of the Council of Residency at Lahore (1847-49) and that of the Board of Administration (1849-53), fundamental differences in political viewpoint between the Lawrence brothers had come to the fore. Henry Lawrence was a defender of the rights of 'loyal' princes, chieftains and jagirdars, while John Lawrence saw himself as a protector of the poor against what he regarded as the parasitic classes in Indian rural society. See my *Return to Empire: Punjab Under the Sikhs and British in the Mid-nineteenth Century* (New Delhi, 1996).

¹⁸ P. Melville, Secy to Ch. Comm., to Offg Secy to Govt of India, Foreign Dept, 8 July 1853: *Selections from the Public Correspondence*, No. 458.

¹⁹ J. P. Grant, Offg Secy to GoI, to J. Lawrence, 7 Sept. 1853: *Selections from the Public Correspondence*, No. 3894.

²⁰ A translation of the Proclamation is given in Cave-Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 142-4.

²¹ The history of these earlier strategies is set out in Panigrahi, *British Social Policy*.

²² Minute on Infanticide.

²³ Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

²⁴ Details of the Amritsar and subsidiary meetings are found in Report Of Meeting At Umritsur, and in Supplementary Papers on Infanticide: *Selections from the Public Correspondence*.

²⁵ Cave-Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 86.

²⁶ Report Of Meeting At Umritsur.

²⁷ Capt. Farrington to D.F. McLeod, 11 April 1853: *Selections from the Public Correspondence*, No. 108.

²⁸ Hew McLeod, *Sikhism* (London, 1997), 152.

²⁹ 'List of Fairs in the Punjab', Circular no. 36-2815, 16 Sept. 1869, in *Selected Circular Orders of the Board of Administration in the General and Political Departments* (Lahore, 1871).

³⁰ Major John Clarke to Charles Raikes, 8 Dec. 1853: *Selections from the Public Correspondence: Supplementary Papers*, No. 360. Cave-Browne notes, however, that a church was subsequently erected on the spot where the Gujranwala meeting

had occurred, ‘as if to attest that here...anti-infanticidal zeal and Christian piety have gone hand in hand: *Indian Infanticide*, 167.

³¹ Ibid.

³² *Selections from the Records of the Government of India (Foreign Department)*, No. VI, *General Report on the Administration of the Punjab Territories, Comprising the Punjab Proper and the Cis-and Trans-Sutlej States, for the years 1851-52 and 1852-53* (Calcutta, 1854), para. 174.

³³ Cave-Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 160-1.

³⁴ Melville to Montgomery, 19 Sept. 1853: *Selections from the Public Correspondence*, No. 263.

³⁵ Report of Meeting At Umritsur.

³⁶ Cave-Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 146.

³⁷ Report Of Meeting At Umritsur, Appendix E.

³⁸ Cohn sardonically identifies an ‘assumed special susceptibility of the Indian to parade and show’ as one of the defining themes of the 1877 Imperial Assemblage: ‘Representing Authority’, 188.

³⁹ Report Of Meeting At Umritsur.

⁴⁰ Ibid. In the Report, the term ‘Inkar-Nama’ is used. I am grateful to Shinder Thandi for pointing out that ‘Ikrar-nama’ is the correct term in this context.

⁴¹ For example, Major, *Return to Empire*.

⁴² See n. 30 above.

⁴³ Panigrahi, *British Social Policy*, 109.

⁴⁴ Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, 59.

⁴⁵ See n. 7 above.

⁴⁶ For the operation of this Act in the North-Western Provinces, see Malavika Kasturi, ‘Law and Crime in India: British Policy and the Female Infanticide Act of 1870’, in *Forums*, 13 Oct. 2000: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/grhf/SAsia/>

⁴⁷ Malcolm Lyall Darling, *Punjab Peasant Life* (New Delhi, reprint 1984), 55-6.

⁴⁸ I have made a preliminary exploration of the linkages between ‘traditional’ infanticide and ‘modern’ foeticide in ‘The Practice and Suppression of Female Infanticide in Early Colonial Punjab’: paper presented to the New Zealand Association for the Study of Religions Biennial Conference (Nelson, 4-7 December 2000). For recent discussion of female foeticide by urban Indian feminists, see Rashmi Luthra, ‘The Women’s Movement and the Press in India: The Construction of Female Foeticide as a Social Issue (1)’, in *Women’s Studies in Communication*, Spring 1999, v. 22, i, 1-17.