

Empire, Orientalism, and Native Informants: The Scholarly Endeavours of Sir Attar Singh Bhadour

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It is no more tenable to view the relationship between the West and the East through simple binaries like powerful metropolitan knowledge and powerless vernacular cultures. The production of colonial knowledge was not simply a matter of what was advanced by knowledge practitioners in the West. Indigenous intellectuals and antique traditions of knowledge actively, if not equally, shaped the imperial agenda. Thus, we can no longer confidently speak of a hegemonic western discourse. While the imperial powers may have had powerful illusions of a fully autonomous archive, the reality on the ground was that a massive repertoire of Munshis, Pandits, and Bhais, the traditional bearers of indigenous knowledge systems, enabled and greatly expanded colonial knowledge. The workings of indigenous knowledge systems and the makings of colonial archives are explored in this essay through the masterly translations and writings of Sir Attar Singh Bhadour (1833-1896).

“Thought is a labyrinth.” Hugh Kenner

“Beneath every history, another history.” Hilary Mantel¹

Edward Said in his influential work, *Orientalism* passionately argued that the West since ancient times but particularly during the period of modern imperialism sought to subjugate the East through a powerful discourse made up of essentialized caricatures, negative images and insidious categories. Collectively this discourse under the cover of complex knowledge systems, like philology, travelogues, taxonomy, anthropology and the study of world religions, showed the West to be all prevailing and powerful and the East always ready for submission and subordination. Colonialism thus was not simply a matter of guns, frigates and superior technology but also involved a complex network of texts, symbolic systems and scholarly traditions.² While a great deal of what Said proposed was initially enthusiastically accepted within the academy, most recent scholarship is uncomfortable with the Saidian paradigm and suggests radical amendments and revisions, if not a complete

abandonment of the Saidian project. It is no more tenable to view the relationship between the West and the East through simple binaries like powerful metropolitan knowledge and powerless vernacular cultures. The production of colonial knowledge was not simply a matter of what was advanced by knowledge practitioners in the West. Indigenous intellectuals and antique traditions of knowledge actively, if not equally, shaped the imperial agenda. Thus, we can no longer confidently speak of a hegemonic western discourse.

In a recent essay, Nicholas Dirks has extensively documented how Colin Mackenzie's (the first Surveyor-General of India) cartographic, ethnographic and historical work was greatly facilitated by his Indian collaborators.³ Since Mackenzie (1754-1821) did not know any Indian languages, he could not have conducted his monumental work across a very challenging terrain, both in a physical and social sense, without the assistance of his native informants. Key among his indigenous collaborators was a man by the name of Kavelli Venkata Boria. A Brahman by caste, Boria knew four languages (Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Kanarese) and had an extensive social network across the Deccan. Dirks as a historian wants to tell us more about his talent and achievements. But he is helpless. The colonial archive has only left faint traces concerning the life-story of Boria. We would like to know much more about where was he educated. What turned him into a polyglot? What sort of cultural registers did he work within? What sort of indigenous systems of knowledge did he master? How did he conceive of his collaboration with Colin Mackenzie? Was it purely an employment contract or something more? Historians of South Asia can barely answer these urgent questions and as a result Boria is condemned to perpetually live in the shadows. But when it comes to Colin Mackenzie the colonial archive is overflowing with data and information. We have his lavish publications and survey reports, the gigantic ethnographic collection he assembled is well preserved in the British library and his life-story is the subject of a hallowed biography.⁴ With such asymmetrical grids of information so firmly embedded in our archives it is not surprising that the Scottish enlightener Mackenzie looms large as a master narrator. The best that Dirks can do is to point us towards Boria and complicate the story of the colonial archive.

Nicholas Dirks is not alone in this revisionist pursuit. An increasing number of Indologists and historians are putting forward a similar plea. Rosane Rocher, Christopher Bayly and Vasudha Dalmia would all like us to enlarge our biographies of the Pandits, Maulvis and Munshis, the collective ensemble that so deeply and consistently contributed in the production of colonial knowledge.⁵ And only by doing so can the canon of orientalist historiography move beyond standard names like James Mill, Mounstuart Elphinstone, John Malcolm and Alexander Dow. In other words, we need an amended list that would also include names like

Ali Ibrahim Khan, Bapu Deva Shastri, Radhakanta Tarkavagisa and Sir Attar Singh Bhadour, the subject of this paper. But how does one go about matching one's historiographical aspirations with empirical realities? Is it possible for us to transcend the near silence of the colonial archive? I do not want to sound too optimistic about this project particularly when it comes to the Punjab, for it was not the site of major colonial institutions like Fort Williams at Calcutta or the Sanskrit College at Benares. Yet, the tools of historical research promise a considerable yield. I hope to illustrate this possibility of historical recovery by now turning to Attar Singh, the key protagonist in this paper.

Attar Singh first comes to our attention within the imperial archives, when he receives a brief mention from the German Indologist, Ernest Trumpp in the introductory essay to Trumpp's infamous translation of the *Adi Granth*. In narrating the biography of the ninth Guru of the Sikhs, Trumpp approvingly notes: "The Sakhis, which Sirdar Attar Singh, chief of Bhadour, who with an enlightened mind follows up the history and religion of his nation, has lately published, throw a very significant light on the wanderings of Tegn Bahadur ..."⁶ However, soon after this warm proclamation of Attar Singh's achievements Ernest Trumpp resumes his imperious tone and henceforth Attar Singh appears in his text only in a series of footnotes. Some of these footnotes are worth reproducing here as these are of considerable help as we reconstruct the Attar Singh archive and his role as a native informant. The first of Trumpp's footnotes states: "Their title is: The Travels of Guru Tegn Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh. Translated from the original Gurmukhi by Sirdar Attar Singh, Chief of Bhadour. January, 1876. Lahore, Indian Public Opinion Press. It would have been very useful if the translator had also added some critical apparatus about the probable time of the composition of these Sakhis. They cannot be very old, as the British territory thereabout is already mentioned."⁷

Trumpp despite his critical reservations is deeply intrigued by Attar Singh's scholarship. He again observes, as if talking to himself: "We must remark here, that in these Sakhis no distinct line is drawn between the wanderings of Guru Teg-bahadur and those of Guru Govind Singh, so that it remains uncertain, where the first end and where the second commence. As I have not the original text at my disposal, I cannot say, if this is owing to some fault of the text or to some oversight of the translator. This great defect seems at any rate not to have struck him, as he makes no remark about it. It is certain that the Sakhis from 51 refer to Guru Govind Singh, the fight at Mukt-sar having taken place under him. In Sakhi 56 it is also stated that the Guru was only thirty-five years old, which could only be said of Govind Singh."⁸

Having made some constructive suggestions concerning Attar Singh's translation, Trumpp again acknowledges his debt to the Sikh intellectual as he begins to record the importance of the Rahit and manuals of code of

conduct (*rahitnamas*) for the Sikhs. In a footnote he once again seeks corroboration from Attar Singh's writings by observing: "Two of these Rahit-namas have lately been published in an English translation by Sirdar Attar Singh of Bhadour; but it is a pity that he has not given the Gurmukhi texts also. The translation is very free and gives only the sense generally, not verbally. Fortunately I brought the original text of the Rahit-nama of Prahlad-rai with me, so that I am enabled, for the sake of accuracy, to quote it, where it may seem necessary. The title of Sirdar Attar Singh's publication is: The Rayhit Nama of Pralad Rai, or the excellent conversation of Daswan Padsha, and Nand Lal's Rayhit Nama, or rules for the guidance of the Sikhs in religious matters. Lahore, printed at the Albert Press, 1876."⁹

While the Orientalist archive covering Attar Singh's scholarship can be said to begin with Ernest Trumpp, it continues to expand as other European and British authors take note of the Sikhs. In the early 1880s Max Macauliffe wrote a famous essay concerning Banda Bahadur. And almost at the very beginning of his text, he noted in a footnote: "In the Pant (sic) Parkash, a Sikh work compiled by Ratan Singh to glorify the Sikh religion and clear it of the aspersions cast upon it by one Bute Shah. The work was presented to General Ochterlony. Sirdar Attar Singh, C.I.E., chief of Bhadaur, has favoured me with a MS. Copy. I am principally indebted to it for the following narrative as far as the death of Banda."¹⁰ Here Macauliffe is acknowledging another aspect of Attar Singh's scholarship and erudition. Among the learned, Attar Singh was famous for his private library. He possessed one of the largest collections of Gurmukhi, Persian and Sanskrit manuscripts in the Punjab. It is hardly surprising that Macauliffe received a copy of Rattan Singh Bhangu's justly famous history of the Sikhs from Attar Singh. But what sort of other conversations took place between Attar Singh and Macauliffe? Although Macauliffe was to emerge as a major historian of the Sikhs, in the early 1880s he was just beginning his interest in Sikh history and texts. In what way was his voice shaped by his long association with Attar Singh? Unfortunately, the existing historical record is of no help in this crucial matter. Despite these shortcomings within the colonial archive we know that Attar Singh's intellectual influence continued to expand. Increasingly he becomes indispensable for all those scholars who want to write anything important concerning the Sikhs.

We next get to notice Attar Singh's presence in the writings of the Hungarian Orientalist, Doctor G.W. Leitner. While Leitner is not a name we often encounter in Sikh Studies, he was in many ways critical to the formation of modern Punjabi. As Principal of the Government College in Lahore, and the first registrar of the Punjab University, he pushed hard for the recognition of north Indian vernaculars within the educational curriculum. When many in Lahore refused to have Punjabi language courses taught at the Oriental College, he turned to his close friend Attar

Singh for help. Attar Singh was able to show the detractors of Punjabi that the language had an ancient history in the province and possessed a vast literary canon. He demonstrated all this by producing books from his private library and Leitner duly published this extensive list in his report on the state of indigenous education in the Punjab.¹¹

Approximately a decade after Leitner's influential work on indigenous education we once again find a reference to Attar Singh's scholarship in Lepel Griffin's first-ever English biography of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Griffin was closely associated with the British colonial administration in the Punjab and in the early 1890's he was asked by W.W. Hunter on behalf of the prestigious imprint, Clarendon Press, to write a biography of Ranjit Singh. Griffin was eminently suited for the commission as he had earlier compiled such books as *The Punjab Chiefs* (1865), *The Law of Inheritance to Sikh Chiefships* (1869) and *The Rajas of the Punjab* (1870). It is highly likely that Attar Singh greatly assisted Griffin in the production of his detailed histories of royal lineages in the Punjab. For Attar Singh himself had authored in Urdu a genealogical account of royal lineages in the Malwa region of the Punjab entitled: *Tawarikh-i-Sidhu Bairaran, Khandan-i-Phul*. However, we have no definitive evidence regarding such a collaboration. Generally, we are beginning to understand the European Orientalists preferred to stay silent about their native sources of information. Griffin is in very many ways a part of this colonial convention. But in his biography of Ranjit Singh, he records a very enlightening footnote: "A valued friend of mine, Sirdar Attar Singh of Bhadour, the head of one of the first Cis-Sutlej families, has translated and published an interesting collection of Sakhis, describing the wanderings and adventures of Guru Tegh Bahadur and his son Guru Govind Singh."¹² Once again, much like in the writings of Trumpp, Macauliffe and Leitner, the key subject of this essay, Attar Singh makes a brief appearance in a footnote. Griffin, clearly deploys Attar Singh's findings in reconstructing the lives of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh. It was generous of him to publicly record his intellectual debts.

But after Griffin our archive suddenly goes cold. Although we have the master narrative of the European Orientalists very much alive and present in our midst, and still asserting a considerable influence, Attar Singh recedes into the shadows. This is unfortunate as in many ways he and many others like him are critical, if we are ever going to understand how the modern Sikh archive was put together. So, we urgently need a thick description of his life and scholarly pursuits. And this is what I turn to in the following section of this essay.

Sir Attar Singh Bhadour

Attar Singh was born to blue-blood in 1833. His father, Sardar Kharak Singh, a well known member of the Sikh landed gentry and a close relative of the Maharaja of Patiala, was the head of the house of Bhadour.¹³ Kharak Singh was very keen for his son to receive a first-class education. While some of his early education was imparted by distinguished private tutors at home, Attar Singh was also sent away to the city of Benares to receive extensive training in classical languages, philosophy, logic and music. By his early twenties, the young aristocrat had mastered five languages: Persian, Sanskrit, Urdu, Punjabi and English. In many ways, Attar Singh is a great exemplar of what the social historian Christopher Bayly has recently conceptualised as the “north Indian ecumene.”¹⁴ Besides being a forum for public opinion and debate, this ecumene also served as a huge circuit for the circulation of languages (particularly Persian, Sanskrit, and Urdu), pre-colonial knowledge systems (in fields as diverse as rational learning, philosophy, rhetoric, astronomy, legal discourse, and mysticism), and personnel (landed gentry, city merchants, lawyers, judges, doctors and healers). “The guardians of the ecumene,” writes Bayly, “represented the views of bazaar people and artisans when urban communities came under pressure. Their connections spread across religious, sectarian, and caste boundaries, though they never dissolved them. A common background in the Indo-Persian and, to a lesser extent Hindu classics enlightened them. The theme of high-minded friendship animated the poets, scholars, and officials who conversed along these networks and set the tone for them. Though suffused with pride of country, the ecumene remained cosmopolitan, receiving information and ideas from central and west Asia as well as from a dimly defined Hindustan. In this sense, it was closer in spirit to the groupings of philosophers, urban notables and officials in the world of late antiquity – the Christian-Greek ecumene – than it was to Habermas’s modern public.”¹⁵

Drawing on the cosmopolitan tenor of the ecumene, Attar Singh with unusual grace, charm and wit established a large network of affiliates made up of both native elites and the European scholars and administrators. Well-versed in music, philosophy, history and the arts, he took an active interest in the province’s public affairs. We get a glimpse into his passions and interests from a recent biographical sketch: “A great man, Attar Singh, lived here [the city of Ludhiana] in the 19th century. His life forms an important chapter in Ludhiana’s history. He built a big residence for himself. The palace-like complex of buildings had a princely lodge, an audience hall for music and poetry, a prakash-kirtan room, guest-houses, servant quarters, guard rooms, stores, stables, cattle sheds, etc. It had a garden with fountains, lawns and foot-paths. It was called Bhadaur House. The most noteworthy part of this princely

residence was its library. It had a rich collection of books. Historians have recorded it and researchers have benefited from it. This library could match Khuda Baksh Library of Patna. The fact that Bhadaur House existed in Ludhiana sounds unreal. The history of this late 19th century building would read like a chapter of a historical novel.”¹⁶

Sardar Attar Singh excelled in historical research and was one of the first Punjabis to become an elected member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1869, and later the Royal Asiatic Society, London.¹⁷ Attar Singh’s profound knowledge of Sikh tradition, together with his overall appreciation of Indian culture, his close contacts with many leading Punjabi figures and his possession of the best equipped private library in the province, made him a much-sought after person among the upper echelons of the provincial bureaucracy. His advice was often sought on religious, social and political matters. For his part Attar Singh readily sounded out the administration on potential flashpoints and prepared exhaustive reports on current affairs for submission to high officials. Such earnest loyalty won him several titles and sinecures from the colonial administration. In 1877, on the occasion of the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi under the auspices of Lord Lytton he was conferred with the title: *Mulaz-ul-ulama-o-ul-Fazal*. This title celebrated Attar Singh’s learning in Persian and Urdu. Another imperial Darbar in 1887, this time to mark Queen Victoria’s Jubilee celebrations led to him receiving the title: *Mahamahopadhyaya*. This award honoured his learning in Sanskrit and Indian classics. The very next year he was knighted and now came to be known as Sir Attar Singh Bhadour.

Soon after the Lahore Singh Sabha was founded in 1879, Attar Singh became a member. He acted as a patron to both Gurmukh Singh and Ditt Singh, the two leading lights of the Lahore Sabha, and in fact helped Ditt Singh secure a job at the Oriental College. Jagjit Singh, in his history of the Singh Sabha movement argues that without the financial assistance of Attar Singh the Khalsa Press and the newspapers started by the Sabha like the *Khalsa Akhbar* might not have survived. In order to promote the activities of the Sabha and its ideology, Attar Singh helped start a Singh Sabha at Ludhiana in 1884 and in turn became its first President. His three other prominent positions within contemporary Sikh organizations included the presidentship of the Khalsa Diwan Lahore in 1889, the vice-Presidentship of the Khalsa College Establishment Committee and the trusteeship of the College Fund. From the late 1880s Attar Singh played a key role in the foundation and promotion of the college. Outside Sikh institutions Attar Singh contributed to the Bengal Philharmonic Society, the Senate of the Punjab University College and the influential cultural body Anjuman-i- Punjab headquartered at Lahore. His aristocratic lineage led to him being inducted to serve on the board of the Aitchison’s Chiefs’ College.

Given Attar Singh's literary and scholarly tastes and his interests in public affairs it is not surprising that when in 1873 the Kuka civil rebellion broke out, he became interested in exploring the reasons for this millenarian insurgency. After consulting the writings of Bhai Ram Singh and an apocryphal text called the *Sau Sakhi* (literally, A Hundred Stories), Attar Singh concluded that the Sikhs were basically loyal to the Raj but the circulation of prophecies wrongly attributed to Guru Gobind Singh had prompted them to rebel. As he succinctly put it: "A prophecy worked up, Government disregarding, may be more potent for disturbance than fifty years of authority over them [the Sikhs]."¹⁸ His findings were so well received by the colonial administrators that they encouraged him to publish the results of his research, as well as a translation of the *Sau Sakhi* text into English. Never to shirk from pioneering work, Attar Singh took on the arduous task of translation and in late 1873 released a well-researched book entitled: *Sakhi Namah; Sakhee Book, or the Descriptions of Gooroo Gobind Singh's Religion and Doctrines* (Benares, Medical Hall Press).

While we may not think much of translation as an activity today, when tens of thousands of people are fluently bilingual in Punjabi and English, at the time when Attar Singh carried out his translation he was a rarity. Very few people in late nineteenth-century Punjab could write well in English, the newly introduced colonial language. And we should also underscore the fact that the translation project carried out by Attar Singh would call for far greater linguistic skills than ordinary English literacy. The cultural critic Walter Benjamin, in a famous essay on the role of the translator reminds us that translation is no ordinary task.¹⁹ Translation, Benjamin philosophically proposes is a creative mode of knowledge closely affiliated to scriptures, revelation and redemption. The freight that a good translator carries is a heavy one for in giving an afterlife to literary texts, a translator Benjamin informs us is obliged to transmit a vector of values: conceptual purity, transcendence, and visions of the extraordinary.²⁰ Besides the virtues that Benjamin lists in his remarkable essay, a translator also needs a variety of technical skills in linguistics, grammar, language conventions and archaic usages. What distinguishes a mere translator from a good translator is that the latter possesses a certain magnitude of self-reflexivity, a deep familiarity with communal traditions, and in a frontier province like Punjab, a command of several language registers. Attar Singh possessed all of these technical and reflexive skills in ample measure.

We get a taste of these skills in his "Translator's Preface." I have selected three passages from this preface as each one demonstrates Attar Singh's intellectual vision and technical prowess. He opens his text with the following statement: "Oh how wonderful is the creation of God that above all worldly things, religion is the supreme thing. With its corruption, the corruption and degeneration of all things generally

happen, for, it is religion that binds thousands in one cord of union. It is the saying of the sage, that religion and secular things are the twins. It is owing to disunion in religion, that rebellion and other disturbances in the country generally happen. The learned foreigners have justly separated religion from legislation. But the real and true management of a country depends upon the strength of religion. Such points of niceties are generally observed by those who are learned and experienced and who are in short, able statesmen to govern a country. Such benign government as this, is an act of kindness of the Almighty, and the management of such a country entirely depends upon human beings.”²¹

Attar Singh was fifty-years of age when he wrote this passage and while he in many ways is rather cryptic in what he wants to say and yet we find in these words a profound understanding of things South Asian. He writes about the importance of religion in the subcontinent and the beginnings of secular modernities under the Raj. It is worth asking here how does he come to associate himself with the modern category religion? Is this a translation of the Sanskrit *Dharma* or is his usage part of a much older Indo-Persian genealogy that through Islam had introduced the people of the subcontinent to words like *mazhab*, *din*, and *iman*.²² It is equally possible that he acquired the category religion in its modern usage through his learning of English and exposure to Christian missionaries. The city of Ludhiana where he lived for much of his life was a major centre of Presbyterian missionary activities and it was in this city that the first English-Punjabi dictionary was published and the project to translate the Gospels initiated. So it is quite possible that his usage of the category religion has modern lineages, for after all he lived in Punjab's premier city of translation. But this is all conjecture. We will never really know how Attar Singh appropriated the category religion. However, independently of this history of appropriation or should we say of translation, Attar Singh gives contemporary scholarship a major reason to pause. He configures in the above cited passage many things historical and sociological to do with religion and secularism that in our general consensus within the academy supposedly happened much later.

The second passage that I want to cite here speaks eloquently of Attar Singh's linguistic abilities and his extraordinary proficiency in deconstructing texts. He states: “This work [*Sau Sakhi*] was originally written in Hindi prose and poetry. The meanings generally differed from the rules of Grammar and as a matter of course, men of shallow intellect and understanding generally misunderstood those ambiguous meanings and phrases. But such misunderstood words and phrases were considered as words of prophecy, and hence they (the ignorant) always failed to comprehend what the original meanings are. I have tried my best to translate into English those words and phrases with clearness and accuracy. There are words in this book so arranged and placed under the rules of Rhetoric and Syntax that when they are closely read and

consulted, they imply that some rebellion will happen soon. It is for this reason that the book is considered strange and uncommon even by the learned sometime. All these will be evident to the reader when they will peruse it.”²³ Clearly, Attar Singh has mastered the skills that we today describe as close textual reading and translation hermeneutics. By using the rules of grammar, rhetoric and syntax he is able to warn his readers that they ought not to affirm the foundational claims of the text. He demonstrates to us with great élan how the life of the mind can lead to autonomy and critical historical judgment.

And finally I want to cite Attar Singh on historical reasoning. He writes: “After a deep research and careful investigation I observe that the book in question was written in the year 1894 Vicramaditya, corresponding to the Christian era 1834, for there are many events and circumstances happened in and about the above year and some years after it. It contains also the prophecies about some distinguished persons who flourished in the above year. Therein such names are mentioned that if any event happens, the corroboration of event or events comes to pass. This will be proved by several tales that are written in the book.”²⁴ The *Sau Sakhi* text still confounds scholars as to when it may have been written.²⁵ Attar Singh is the first scholar wanting to establish its chronology and he proposes that the apocryphal text under discussion was written in the year 1834. He come to this conclusion because he feels that certain events and persons described in the text can only be dated to the year 1834 and thus the text could not have been written at an earlier date. Besides chronology, Attar Singh provides us with an extensive editorial commentary through footnotes. Some of these glosses are worth reporting here for they tell us much about Attar Singh’s way of thinking. I have selected the following six annotations for this purpose (1) ‘*Toork*: Mahammedans,’ (2) ‘*Sungut*: A body of the true followers of Gooroo Gobind Sing,’ (3) ‘*Pauhul*: Baptism of the Seikh religion,’ (4) ‘*Ardasia*: A Servant of Gooroo’s shrine,’ (5) ‘*Maleches*: Nations against Hindooism,’ (6) ‘*Punth*: The whole body of Seikhs as the word Church denotes whole body of Christians.’²⁶ In this list, composed at a time when many of our key terms were still not standardized, we can recover a bit of Attar Singh’s voice, presentation and philological rigour.

Three years after publishing his first book, the energetic Attar Singh released another major work of translation in 1876. His scholarly preoccupation with the question as to which prophetic texts contributed to the Kuka uprising continued and he translated, *Malwa Des Ratan di Sakhi Pothi*, a Punjabi manuscript into English. This seminal text, possibly written by an Udasi mendicant sometime in the early nineteenth century documents Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh’s travels through Eastern Punjab, particularly in the Malwa region. Once again much like his first book, Attar Singh provides the reader with an introduction, extensive annotations and editor’s comments. In his

introductory note, Attar Singh shares with us his understanding of the text. He states: "These Sakhis were originally written in a very crude language, intermingled with poetry. Through them we become acquainted with the origin of the Seikh religion, the manner and custom of the Seikhs, and many of their prophecies bearing upon political and ecclesiastical matters. Such prophecies are always found scattered through their historical books, as in the Hadis of the Mahomedans, and are the main sources of errors into which they have often been led."²⁷

Clearly, Attar Singh had no confidence in prophecies and he sought to warn both the colonial authorities and his co-religionists as to how the prophecies could be so easily misread and mistranslated. However, as a good scholar Attar Singh is profoundly aware of the fact that civil-disturbances in the Punjab or historical change in general always flows from multiple sources and causes. This self-understanding of the complex rhythms of history is apparent when he proposes: "The ignorance of the people, the tolerance of the government, and the jealousies and suspicions arising out of antagonistic creeds, have often endangered the country. Designing men prompted by the extravagant assurances of prophecy have often lured their countrymen to destruction, and impregnated their minds with an underlying hostility to rulers. Religion itself appears to have lost its hold upon men's minds, for we find many endeavouring to establish new religions, but the old prophecies still retain maintain their ground, and will yet lead to important changes."²⁸ So while prophecies were important, many other passions and hatreds contributed to social upheaval or what Attar Singh calls "destruction." While he once again uses the category religion here, we still do not get a sense of whether he is translating a term from the Indo-Persian cosmopolis or has he appropriated this term through his encounters with muscular Christianity and his learning of English.

The final two texts that Attar Singh translates are the early *Rahitnamas* of Nand Lal and Prahlad Rai.²⁹ These are perhaps the very first translations into English by a Sikh scholar of the important *Rahit* corpus. One wonders what exactly are the connections between Attar Singh's earlier books and his interest in the *Rahit* codifications? This question once again takes us back to European Orientalism and the production of colonial knowledge, a central theme of this essay. In translating the *Rahitnamas*, Attar Singh is publicly signaling to the colonial knowledge-brokers the critical importance of the *Rahitnamas* in the self-understanding and religious practises of the Sikhs. We know from the historical record that Attar Singh's intervention proved to be highly influential. Ernest Trumpp, the German Orientalist, who got so much about Sikhism wrong and mistranslated the scriptures, however did manage to get one thing right. His understanding and presentation of the Sikh *Rahit* was in many ways solid and well-documented. This was in large measure because of Attar Singh's influence and mediations.³⁰ The

Sikh aristocrat wrote extensively to the British government and made sure that the man they had hired to act as the official interpreter of Sikhism would include translations of the Rahitnamas in his account.³¹ As mentioned earlier, we do find Trumpp somewhat grudgingly acknowledging Attar Singh's influence and translation work. And while Orientalist scholars may not have always generously acknowledged their intellectual debts, our thick description of Attar Singh's scholarly writings helps solidify the argument that Orientalist knowledge was not merely an outcome of the European gaze. In many ways it was highly dependent on indigenous scholarly traditions and conversations.

Independently of Trumpp, Attar Singh's translations of the Rahit were deeply imbibed by the army officials who wrote recruitment manuals for Sikh districts in the Punjab.³² Given the wide and enduring impact of Attar Singh's writings it is imperative that we consider him as a significant scholar in his own right. He was very much the virtuous translator that Walter Benjamin wrote about. We see Attar Singh's intellectual autonomy in the way he presented his findings, his subtle variance from colonial discourse on matters of religion and secularism, and his leadership positions across a wide spectrum of public institutions. It is not without reason that T.H. Thornton, one of the most senior colonial officials in the Punjab described Attar Singh as, "the most learned of the Sikh aristocracy."³³

Conclusions

Our case study of Sir Attar Singh Bhadour's scholarly endeavours lends itself to some larger conclusions. First, it allows us to query what Tony Ballantyne so aptly describes as "the systematization of Sikhism."³⁴ This "systematization" as we have come to understand, at least within the Orientalist discourse, begins with James Browne's well-known tract: *An History of the Origin and Progress of the Sicks* (1788).³⁵ But while we widely acknowledge Browne's contributions to our knowledge concerning Sikhism, we rarely pause to reflect on how much of what he learned about the Sikhs was based on what he had appropriated from his two key native informants: Budh Singh Arora and Ajaib Singh Suraj.³⁶ In fact, the largest portion of Browne's tract entitled, "History of the Origin and Progress of the Sicks," was based on Budh Singh and Ajaib Singh's Persian manuscript: *Risala Dar Ahwal-i-Nanak Shah Darwesh*. It is remarkable that Browne only wrote 15 pages of his tract, the other 27 pages were simply an abridged translation of the Budh Singh and Ajaib Singh manuscript. Interestingly, Browne never fully acknowledges his informants. All he tells us is that while he was in Delhi in 1783 he met "met with two Hindoos of considerable knowledge, who were natives of Lahore, where they had resided the greater part of their lives, and who had in their possession, accounts of the rise and progress of the Sicks,

written in Nuggary (or common Hindoo) character, I persuaded them to let me have a translation of one of them in the Persian language, abridging it as much as they could, without injuring the essential purpose of information.”³⁷ It is only because of the pioneering work of the late Ganda Singh that we now know that the so-called “two Hindoos,” the key informants of Browne or rather his co-writers, were actually two Sikhs, Budh Singh and Ajaib Singh.³⁸ Contrary to what Edward Said has narrated, the non-metropolitan scholars had plenty of agency and intellectual agility. The knowledge base of Budh Singh and Ajaib Singh continues to be available to us and serves as a solid reminder of how native intellectuals were so very central in the chain of European knowledge-gathering.

Much like Brown, John Malcolm another employee of the East India Company, also acknowledges his debts to a native informant. In the introduction to his well-known work on the Sikhs Malcolm enlightens us about the nature of his knowledge-gathering enterprise. With exceptional candor he writes: “When with the British army in the Penjab, in 1805, I endeavoured to collect materials that would throw light upon the history, manners, and religion of the Sikhs. Though this subject had been treated by several English writers, none of them had possessed opportunities to obtain more than very general information regarding this extraordinary race; and their narratives therefore, though meriting regard, have served more to excite than to gratify curiosity. In addition to the information I collected while the army continued within the territories of the Sikhs, and the personal observations I was to make during that period, upon the customs and manners of that nation, I succeeded with difficulty in obtaining a copy of the *Adi Granth*, and some of the historical tracts, the most essential parts of which, *when I returned to Calcutta, were explained to me by a Sikh priest of the Nirmala order, whom I found equally intelligent and communicative, and who spoke of the religion and ceremonies of his sect with less restraint than any of his brethren whom I had met with in Penjab* (emphasis added).”³⁹ This native collaboration should compel us to read Malcolm in a very different light. And we need to know much more about his Nirmala instructor. In what language did the two converse? Did Malcolm’s Nirmala instructor provide him with translations? Unfortunately, for the moment we know much more about John Malcolm than the Nirmala scholar. This ought to change and it is only when we have ample thick descriptions of native intellectual traditions that we will be able to write a cogent account of modern Sikh Studies.

The asymmetry of the imperial intellectual grid continues to haunt us as we probe the colonial archives. Although the acerbic Trumpp pauses to pay homage to his native informant, true to character he does so with far less gratitude and enthusiasm than Malcolm. The huge debts he must have incurred are only worthy of a single sentence: “One Nirmala Sadhu

of the Amritsar establishment, Atma Singh, was for a considerable time my instructor.”⁴⁰ And as with much else, it is only with Max Macauliffe that we get a massive outpouring of affection and acknowledgement of native paradigms of learning. With great humility, he notes: “For literary assistance I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Sardar Kahan Singh of Nabha, one of the greatest scholars and most distinguished authors among the Sikhs, who by the order of the Raja of Nabha accompanied me to Europe to assist in the publication of this work and in reading the proofs thereof; to Diwan Lila Ram Watan Mal, a subordinate judge in Sind; to the late Bhai Shankar Dayal of Faizabad; to Bhai Hazara Singh and Bhai Sardul Singh of Amritsar, to the late Bhai Dit Singh of Lahore, to the late Bhai Bhagwan Singh of Patiala, and to many other Sikh scholars for the intelligent assistance they have rendered me.”⁴¹ It was these men who in many ways made it possible for Macauliffe to write his six-volume magnum opus. But despite the considerable respect and warmth that Macauliffe demonstrates, the imperial order makes it impossible to render fully transparent the production of colonial knowledge. We may never know which parts of Macauliffe’s volumes rely upon Bhai Kahan Singh’s encyclopedic knowledge or which parts are the exclusive product of Macauliffe’s intellect. It is worth noting here that Macauliffe in the preface to his six-volume work on the Sikhs noted: “It is believed that a work of this nature cannot be accomplished again.”⁴² We may find it hard to interpret as to what Macauliffe is alluding to. But one possible interpretation is that having spent considerable years among the Sikhs in the Punjab, Macauliffe knew that the coming of colonial modernity would eventually completely destroy traditional articulations of knowledge and understanding.⁴³ And in that sense, any potential project of knowledge, particularly the monumental scale that Macauliffe liked to work on would be impossible to mount because the sort of traditional intellectuals who sustained him would be no more. An entire way of being and a complete knowledge-system was headed towards total dissolution and was to be replaced by the furies of colonial modernity.

This consideration of Macauliffe brings me to the second of my conclusions. Edward Said, while often brilliant and incisive, was wrong in conceiving that imperial knowledge was exclusively the product of metropolitan scholarship. All knowledge about the East did not simply flow from the West. This mistaken belief led Said to focus on European figures like Ernest Renan, Edward Lane, and Hamilton Gibb. But we get no documentation concerning men like Kavelli Venkata Boria, Bapu Deva Shastri, Ali Ibrahim Khan or for that matter Sir Attar Singh. While Said has recently been attacked for numerous factual errors in his scholarship and the partisan nature of his work (for instance, his support for Palestinian nationalism), it would be much better if we within the academy were to test his truth-claims purely on theoretical grounds.⁴⁴

And based on theoretical testing his hypothesis concerning the making of the imperial archives has considerable drawbacks. While the imperial powers may have had powerful illusions of a fully autonomous archive, and one could argue that Said was duped by these illusions, the reality on the ground was that a massive repertoire of Bhais, Gyanis, Munshis, Pandits and Maulvis, the traditional bearers of indigenous knowledge systems, enabled and expanded colonial knowledge.

I want to close this essay with a question that takes us back to the central figure in this study. Attar Singh belonged to what Bayly has described as the “north Indian ecumene.” Based on Attar Singh’s biography we could view him as a core member of this cosmopolitan ecumene. The son of an aristocrat, who from an early age excels in languages and receives extensive training in the city of Benares in the domains of philosophy, logic, poetics, aesthetics and music, and turns into a leading litterateur and raconteur, Attar Singh could have been easily crowned as a prince of the ecumene. And yet by early 1870 we can see him parting ways with the ecumene. Why this transformation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century? Why did he abandon his natural habitat, the cosmopolitan ecumene? Our preliminary answers to these questions would include a list made up of such things as the policies of the colonial State, the census operations, the workings of the Arya-Samaj and other socioreligious organizations, evangelical Christianity, print-capitalism, vernacular nationalism, and cultural homogeneity that is so central to the project of modernity. But there is something deeply dissatisfying with this list. How could an ecumene that was the product of several centuries dissolve so easily? Perhaps a more confident answer to this and similar questions will only emerge once we have fully mapped not only colonial but also pre-colonial modes of knowledge. This paper is a minor contribution in that direction.

Notes

¹ The two epigrams for this essay are from Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 561 and Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London, Fourth Estate, 2009), p. 66.

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

³ Nicholas B. Dirks, “Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of An Archive,” in Carol A. Breckenbridge and Peter van der Veer eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 279-313.

⁴ W.C. Mackenzie, *Colonel Colin Mackenzie, First Surveyor-General of India*, (Edinburgh: W&R Chambers, 1952). Also see, Jennifer Howes, *Illustrating India: The Early Colonial Investigations of Colin Mackenzie* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵ Rosane Rocher, “British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government,” in Carol A. Brenckenbridge and Peter van der Veer, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, pp. 215-249, V. Dalmia, “Sanskrit Scholars and Pandits of the Old School: The Benares Sanskrit College and the Constitution of Authority in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 24, 1996, pp. 321-37 and Christopher Bayly, “Orientalists, Informants And Critics in Benares, 1790-1860,” in Jamal Malik ed., *Perspectives Of Mutual Encounters in South Asian History 1760-1860* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 97-127.

⁶ Ernest Trumpp, *The Adi Granth Or The Holy Scripture of the Sikhs* (London: WM.H. Allen & Co, 1877), p. lxxxviii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. lxxxviii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. lxxxix.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.cxiii.

¹⁰ M.A. Macauliffe, “The Sikh Religion Under Banda,” *The Calcutta Review*, vol. lxxiii, p. 155.

¹¹ “Appendix IV – List of 389 books in the Gurmukhi characters in the possession of Sirdar Attar Singh of Bhadaur,” in G.W. Leitner, *History of Indigenous Education in the Panjab* (Patiala: Languages Department Punjab, 1971, first published, 1883).

¹² Sir Lepel Griffin, *Ranjit Singh* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press: 1892), p. 48.

¹³ The life-history of Attar Singh is indebted to Sir Lepel Griffin, *Rajas of the Punjab*, (London: Trubner & Company, 1873), Loke Nath Ghose, *The Modern History of the Indian Chiefs, Rajas, Zamindars*, part II (Calcutta: J.N. Ghose and Company, 1879), pp. 471-75, Harbans Singh ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1992), pp. 216-218 and my own, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), pp. 290-292.

¹⁴ C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 368. For the following description of the Indian ecumene I have particularly drawn from chapter 5 of the book, pp. 180-211.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹⁶ M.S. Cheema, "Sir Attar Singh and His Bhadaur," *The Tribune*, December 17, 2000.

¹⁷ The following few paragraphs concerning Attar Singh's biography, unless otherwise indicated, are from my book, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, pp. 290-92. Additional information is based on sources listed in footnote 13.

¹⁸ Sir Attar Singh, "Political Suggestions, Information And Other Services of Sir Attar Singh K.C.I.E., Chief of Bhadaur," Attar Singh Papers, p. 2.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of The Translator," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 69-82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, particularly see pages 72-82 of Benjamin's essay.

²¹ Attar Singh Bhadour, *Sakhi Namah; Sakhee Book, or the Descriptions of Gooroo Gobind Singh's Religion and Doctrines* (Benares, Medical Hall Press, 1873), p. v.

²² On the evolution of Indo-Persian vocabulary pertaining to matters religious and secular see the excellent book by Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam in India 1200-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

²³ Attar Singh Bhadour, *Sakhee Namah*, pp. v-vi.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.vii.

²⁵ For an extensive discussion on when the *Sau Sakhi* text may have been written see W.H. McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa, A History of the Khalsa Rahit* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 139-48.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, all six terms are citations From Attar Singh Bhadour's, *Sakhee Namah*, pp. 2, 19, 20, 117, 177.

²⁷ Attar Singh Bhadour, *Travels of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh* (Lahore: Indian Public Opinion Press, 1876), quote from the section entitled, "Preface".

²⁸ Ibid, p. ii.

²⁹ Attar Singh Bhadour, *The Rayhit Nama of Prahlad Rai, or the Excellent Conversation of the Duswan Padsha and Nand Lal's Rayhit Nama, or Rules for the Guidance of the Sikhs in Religious Matters*(Lahore, n.p., 1876).

³⁰ Ernest Trumpp, in Chapter III, "Sketch of the Religion of the Sikhs," in *The Adi Granth*, pp. cxii-cxvi.

³¹ See T.H. Thornton to C.U. Aitchison, Foreign Department, No. 2696, dated 14 July, 1873.

³² For instance see R.W. Falcon, *Handbook on Sikhs for Use of Regimental Officers*, (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1896), pp. 6-10.

³³ See T.H. Thornton as per footnote 27

³⁴ Tony Ballantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 34.

³⁵ James Browne's essay on the Sikhs appeared as part of his larger work, *India Tracts*, Blackfriars, Topographic Press, 1788, pp. i-xii and pp. 1-30. Browne's essay on the Sikhs can also be accessed in Ganda Singh ed., *Early European Accounts of the Sikhs*, (Calcutta: Indian Studies Past & Present, 1962).

³⁶ A historian who is an exception to this is the late Fauja Singh. See his excellent essay, "Early European Writers: Browne, Polier, Forster and Malcolm," in Fauja Singh ed., *Historians and Historiography of the Sikhs*(New Delhi: Oriental Publishers & Distributors, 1978), pp.1-20.

³⁷ James Browne, *India Tracts*, pp. iii-iv.

³⁸ Ganda Singh ed., *Early European Accounts of the Sikhs*, pp. 1-8.

³⁹ Lieutenant-Colonel Malcolm, *Sketch of the Sikhs* (London: John Murray, 1812), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁰ Ernest Trumpp, *The Adi Granth Or The Holy Scripture of the Sikhs* (London: WM.H. Allen & Co, 1877), p. cxiii.

⁴¹ Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), pp. xxix-xxx.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. xxxii.

⁴³ For pre-colonial knowledge systems see Ashish Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) and a special issue on “Knowledge in Circulation in Early India,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 44, 2, 2010, particularly see articles by Rosalind O’ Hanlon and Nile Green.

⁴⁴ For an extensive list of factual errors in Said’s *Orientalism* and a critique of his political affiliations see Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 277-309. The most incisive theoretical critique of Said is provided by Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory, Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 159-220. Also see, James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 255-76.

