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WRITING LIVES OF INDIANS IN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY INDIA AND BRITAIN

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Abstract

By the mid-19th century, 20–40,000 Indian men and women of all classes had traveled to Britain. All left oral accounts that have not survived. But among the notable few who represented themselves directly in written sources (in Persian, Urdu, Nepali, or English), the entangled lives of Sake Dean Mahomet (1759–1851) and David Ochterlony Dyce Sombre (1808–1851) have proved engaging, challenging, and fruitful to study. Born only 600 miles apart in north India, they created dramatically different careers. Mahomet transformed himself from camp follower in the East India Company's Bengal Army, to early self-published autobiographer in Cork, Ireland, to failed restaurateur in London, to famous bathhouse keeper and "Shampooing Surgeon" for the British royal family in seaside Brighton. Dyce Sombre went from heir apparent to a doomed princely state near Delhi, to wealthy but exiled traveler in southeast Asia and China, to first Member of the British Parliament who was Asian (and the second non-white), to notorious legal lunatic who vainly self-published an autobiographical book and fought judicially to disprove his insanity. Individually and together, their transcultural lives present distinct challenges and also insights for today's biographer, due both to multifarious and often contradictory source materials and also to inherent cross-cultural interpretive issues.

1. Writing transcultural and entangled lives in a transcontinental imperial arena

When people cross between cultures, especially between geographically and culturally distant ones marked by power inequalities, they and their host society each impose new (and not always consistent) meanings on their lived lives. As these immigrants try to succeed in their new environment, they strategically retain and give up cultural elements from their past identities, making choices of what to include or exclude, and how to do so. They try to make the components of their identities into a currency that they can exchange for desired social status, commercial gain, or other goals. Simultaneously, members of the surrounding society, to differing degrees, inscribe on immigrants stereotypes about the places and people from which they came, but also sometimes recognize features,

locating them into national narratives. The genres of these representations of self and other vary, producing for their intended audiences hybridized forms with multiple voices. The biographer writing afield must constantly consider the complex relationships between personhood and subjectivity, object and narration, as preserved in original sources reflecting often contested perspectives.

People from India have for many centuries been moving around the Indian Ocean region and the rest of Asia. But European imperialism created new opportunities as well as challenges by linking India with the West by the direct sea route around the southern tip of Africa. From about 1600 onward, a “counterflow” of Indian men and women of all classes began venturing to England.¹ Some settled, usually marrying into British society; others returned to India with their personal accounts of themselves in the West that they orally recounted to their relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Britain, by means of its East India Company’s armies, rapidly conquered India. Ever more Indians had to adapt to expanding British colonial rule and its cultural imperialism, even as Britons shaped their colonialism in light of local conditions. Many autobiographical works and biographies exist written by and about Britons who went to rule the colonies; these form a substantial part of British national and imperial narratives. However, of the 20–40,000 Indian visitors and settlers who reached Britain by the mid-nineteenth century, relatively few wrote about themselves or their experiences of life there. Nor do these Indians appear much in either British or Indian national narratives.

Since the oral accounts of these Indians in Britain have virtually all been lost, we must reconstruct most of their lives from fragments in a variety of British-authored sources. The distinctive physical appearance and behavior of Indians (either personally expressed or else stereotypically imposed) meant that they occasionally appeared in autobiographies, diaries, and descriptive accounts written by Britons in Britain or on the voyage there or back. Dozens of European paintings included Indians either as members of European households or as individuals, distinctive for their exotic “oriental” status. British fiction often reveals both abstract British attitudes and, occasionally, thinly disguised representations of actual Indians in Britain. Further, collective statistics and individual biographical fragments entered East India Company, Anglican parish, and British government archives through early British censuses, marriage, death, tax, and criminal records.

1 See VISRAM, 2002 and FISHER, 2004.

A notable number of, but proportionately few, early Indian visitors and settlers in Britain did represent themselves directly. In different ways, they availed themselves of the relative openness and spontaneity of their singular situations as alien immigrants who had gained access to new British representational forms. Hundreds of Indians wrote formal letters and petitions in English, particularly to the East India Company or royal law courts, containing extensive self-representations. To achieve their goal, these Indians customarily used the established and often stylized British discourses of self-representation for such missives. Professional petition writers, for example, advertised and worked in east London's "Oriental Quarter," commercially crafting Indian expressions and agendas into written discourses that British authorities would recognize.²

But at the start of the East India Company's conquest of north India in 1757, the genres and media available for life-writing differed significantly between India and Britain. A few rare individuals in the Mughal empire had composed substantial autobiographical works, including the first emperor Babur (1483–1530) and the Jain jewel merchant Banarasi Das Biholia (1586–ca. 1641).³ But these autobiographical works by Indians, like other written texts there, remained in manuscript, intended only for and read only by a select circle of friends and descendants. The practice of writing personally about oneself and selling one's life-writing through printing for an anonymous audience did not develop in India until the late nineteenth century. The issue did not seem to be technological: presses with moveable type had been available in India since the seventeenth century; lithography became available over the eighteenth century. Indeed, British and Indian proprietors printed or lithographed and publicly sold newspapers in English and in several Indian languages from the late eighteenth century onward. However, the genre of published autobiography was not customary or current in pre-colonial India. Consequently, Indian authors in India did not begin to publish autobiographies until after British colonial rule was established well into the nineteenth century.

In contrast, in Britain over the eighteenth century, Britons developed an extensive practice of commercially published autobiographical works with established conventions about forms of self-representation. Today's scholars debate the degree that the spreading use of the "modern" genre of autobiography

2 FISHER, 2011.

3 BABUR, 1996. BIHOLIA, 1981. While autobiographical writing also became a significant form in seventeenth century China and there are earlier individual examples from Japan, neither of these seems to have influenced India.

was exclusively or primarily the result of European Enlightenment emphasis on the “sovereign self” as autonomous and self-reflective.⁴ Further, as feminist and subaltern scholars have demonstrated, we should not privilege this particular liberal-humanist Euro-centric definition of autobiography to the exclusion of other forms. Further, some British women also gradually created a public voice for themselves as published autobiographers.

Significantly, in the late eighteenth century, non-white immigrants to Britain also started using this genre to demonstrate their humanity to the often skeptical British public. Most prominently, a former slave, Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797), wrote and commercially published his autobiographical work in London as part of the British anti-slavery campaign: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself* (London: The Author, 1789). Less famously, a Christian Armenian born in Iran but raised in Calcutta, Emin Joseph Emin (1726–1809), wrote in India but published in London his autobiography: *The Life and Adventures of Joseph Emin, An Armenian, Written in English by Himself* (London: The Author, 1792).⁵ He personally recounted his rise from a seaman to a military officer in Britain, as part of his much-frustrated effort to claim status as a gentleman in British society, both in Britain and in India. The emphasis by each author in his title of “by Himself,” which had also become conventional for British life-writers, illustrates the non-white author’s goal of acceptance into the class of literary men recognized by elite Britons.

In particular, four Indian authors had written book-length, ego-centered travel narratives about themselves in Britain by the end of the eighteenth century. Three were written in Persian by Muslim male scribes and scholars, intended for the author’s own Indian social circle, where they all returned after brief visits to Britain.⁶ These texts largely used Persianate literary forms,

4 See HANSEN, 2011: 300–314.

5 Reprinted as EMIN, 1918.

6 Mirza Shaikh I’tisam al-Din (1730–1800) went to France, England, and Scotland in 1766–68, and then wrote “Shigarf-nama-i Vilayat” (“Wonder-book of England/Europe”) in 1784/85. Munshi Isma’il traveled to Britain in 1771–1773 and then wrote his brief “Tarikh-i Jadid” (“New History”) around 1773. Mir Muhammad Husain ibn Abdul Azim Isfahani went to Britain in 1775–76 and wrote, first in Arabic and later in Persian, his brief “Risalah-i Ahwal-i Mulk-i Farang wa Hindustan” (“Letters/Essays about the Conditions of the Land of Europe and India”) soon after his return. Only the first of these three books has been published. It was incompletely translated into English and Urdu as I’TISAM AL-DIN, 1827. For a full translation (via Bengali) see I’TISAM AL-DIN, 2001.

including poetical quotations from prominent Persian authors. But they also show some influences of British-style travelogues, in both form and content.⁷ However, during the author's lifetime, all three remained in manuscript thus having limited circulation and influence in either India or Britain.

Dean Mahomet (1759–1851), wrote his first autobiographical book in 1794 for a British audience. He later published two other autobiographical texts (which substantially contradict his first) in 1820 and 1822 (the latter he republished in ever expanding editions in 1826 and 1838), again for British readers. Subsequently, as British colonial rule spread in India, the number of elite Indians coming to Britain, and also their growing adoption of British autobiographical genres, both increased. By the middle of the nineteenth century, at least four other Indian visitors had written extensive first-person narratives in Persian, Urdu, or Nepali, designed variously for particular audiences in India. Further, a dozen Indians had written book-length autobiographical texts in English for British readers, adapting their life-writing in different degrees to current British genres. One of them, David Ochterlony Dyce Sombre (1808–1851), published his massive autobiographical book in 1849, which he republished in an abridged form as a pamphlet in 1850.

Our understanding of writing biography afield can thus be enriched by closely considering these two particularly complex case studies, singular and distinctive for themselves but also suggestive of larger patterns: the transcultural and entangled lived lives and also life-writing of Sake Dean Mahomet and David Ochterlony Dyce Sombre. Both emigrated from north India and settled in Britain. Each rose to unprecedented fame (or infamy) largely due to the ways his textual and other cultural self-representations of his Indian origin interacted with British representations and valuations of him. The discrepancies between the contested representations of their lives, by themselves and others, informs and problematizes the debate about biography and anti-biography.

2. Sake Dean Mahomet/Mahomed (1759–1851)

The first Indian to write and commercially publish an autobiography, indeed any book, in English, was Dean Mahomet, who emigrated to Britain in 1783 and remained there for his remaining sixty-eight years, repeatedly remaking his

7 For description and analysis see KHAN, 1998.

identities in print and in his serial professions. He claimed that his Shi'ite Muslim family had emigrated from Iran and settled during the previous century in the wealthy imperial Mughal provinces of Bengal and Bihar. There, they had established themselves as part of the empire's service elite, with Persian and Urdu as their family languages. But Dean Mahomet's immediate family did not achieve enough prominence in religion, politics, or literature to be included in the biographical or historical writing in Indian languages prevalent in the region.⁸

In 1757, the English East India Company suddenly displaced the virtually autonomous Mughal imperial governor of Bengal and Bihar and began to assert its own right to collect taxes and enforce order over his provinces. Many Indians began to serve them as *sepoys* (Indian infantrymen with British officers and semi-European training, weapons, and accoutrements). Indian scholars and officials also began to produce manuscripts in European-influenced genres of biography, history, and sociology, usually in Persian. Many of these Indian authors had European patrons, who occasionally translated these into English and published them.⁹

Dean Mahomet's father soon joined the newly constituted East India Company's Bengal Army as an officer, but met an untimely death in battle. Dean Mahomet, then only age eleven, described how he determined to leave his widowed mother and attach himself to the East India Company's Bengal Army. Under the patronage of an Anglo-Irish subaltern officer, Ensign Godfrey Evan Baker (d. 1786), Dean Mahomet rose from camp follower to market master to *subedar* (equivalent for Indians of the rank of lieutenant). For fourteen years, he and Baker marched hundreds of miles up and down the Ganges plain, conquering various Indian regional rulers and resistant local communities. The general outline of Baker's military career and the movements and battles of the regiments in which he and Dean Mahomet served are preserved in the archives of the Bengal Army, which combined the detailed commercial account genre of the English East Indian Company with the military record genre of the British royal army.¹⁰

Then, in 1783, Baker and Dean Mahomet resigned their commissions and sailed together for Cork, Ireland. Baker's family was prominent there and Dean

8 See CHATTERJEE, 2009.

9 For example, KHAN, 1902 (reprint of 1789 original translation).

10 Now partly preserved in the National Archives of India, New Delhi, and the British Library, London.

Mahomet entered Anglo-Irish society under their patronage. After two years living in Cork, in 1786, Dean Mahomet (age twenty-seven) eloped with an Anglican gentry-woman, Jane Daly (ca. 1760–1844), whom he married nearby.¹¹ Their Anglican marriage legally required Dean Mahomet to attest to his membership in the Church of England, even if just nominally. They evidently prospered and had children, all raised as Anglicans. His eclectic attitudes toward religions generally, as well as his cultural identification as a Muslim Indian, come out clearly in his autobiographies.

In 1793, seven years after his wedding, Dean Mahomet (age thirty-five) advertised publically to the elite Anglo-Irish society around him that he would write and publish a two volume book in English recounting his own life and describing India, its peoples, and their customs. Writing and publishing such autobiographical accounts had become a statement of literary accomplishment, not just for white British gentlemen but for women and non-whites as well. The famous immigrant autobiographer of African descent, Olaudah Equiano, had recently visited Cork in 1791, perhaps inspiring him. Dean Mahomet, while he may have known about the Persian and Arabic genre of *Rihla*, first-person travel accounts, chose rather to emulate the current British autobiographical genre valued by the people he wished to impress.

As was customary for many British authors, Dean Mahomet took out a series of newspaper advertisements describing his proposed literary work. In addition to the authority of his own direct testimony, he promised “The Authenticity of this Work can be certified by a great number of [British] Gentlemen of the first distinction in these [United] Kingdoms, who had been in India at the time.”¹² Reflecting his respectability and the faith that he inspired in those around him that he would be able to fulfil his authorial promise, he personally secured the patronage of 320 Europeans. They each entrusted him with half a crown (2s. 6d.) or more, long in advance of the book’s completion and over a year before its delivery. Of the 238 males who subscribed, over 85 percent were gentlemen distinguished by a title, rank, or the epithet “esquire,” while less than 15 percent bore the label mere “Mr.” The 82 women, who made up over a quarter of the subscribers, included a Viscountess, five Ladies, and several Honourables (i.e., daughters of titled families). They all agreed to have their

11 “Index to Marriage Licence Bonds, Cork and Ross Diocese, Deane Mahomet and Jane Daly, 1786,” Public Record Office, Dublin, Ireland.

12 CORK GAZETTE, 16 March 1793.

names listed as “subscribers,” officially patronizing his book and publicly displaying their recognition of Dean Mahomet as a literary man.

Dean Mahomet then crafted his first autobiographical work: *Travels of Dean Mahomet, A Native of Patna in Bengal, Through Several Parts of India, While in the Service of The Honorable The East India Company, Written by Himself, In a Series of Letters to a Friend* (Cork: The Author, 1794). Despite his conventional self-authorship claim “by Himself,” we cannot, fully recover how much influence his wife, friends, and patrons had over his words. Many of the literary quotations as well as less elevated poetry which Dean Mahomet included clearly came originally from his teachers and friends.

He largely accepted the current English definitions of authorial voice and content inherent in the epistolary travel narrative genre (at the time) which favored intertwining pleasure-giving depiction, useful and instructive description, and only limited and modest personal narration.¹³ England had produced some 800 epistolary novels by 1790; this form was especially strong in the 1750–1800 period, when approximately one out of every six works of fiction used it.¹⁴ Like most of his contemporary authors of epistolary travel narratives, he used the fiction of pretending to have written his letters contemporaneously with the events they described. Unlike many other travel works of his day, however, he did not back-date these letters or devise a fictitious dialogue with an imaginary correspondent. Although Dean Mahomet began each of the 38 letters in his book with “Dear Sir,” he did not seem to have any single real or even imagined individual as his intended audience throughout his book. While he occasionally responded to the expectations he imputed to his British readers, he never even pretended to dialogue with his fictional correspondent. In part, the epistolary style enabled an author to write more intimately and confidently, to notionally address an (unnamed) friend, rather than a faceless world of unknown readers.

Much of his book was pleasure-giving descriptions of India in which his own Indian identity is implicit and his own life absent. However, in his opening chapter, he was the most autobiographical in the classical British sense. He included a touching description of his pre-teenage parting from his mother and transfer to the martial world of the East India Company’s Bengal Army under Baker’s patronage. He wrote how each sight of the British officers passing by their home in Patna “excited the ambition I already had of entering on a military

13 See BATTEN, 1978.

14 See ADAMS, 1983; DAY, 1966.

life.”¹⁵ Despite his widowed mother’s pleadings, he left home to live in the East India Company army cantonment. After six months’ separation, he recounted how his mother personally entered the military camp to appeal to her son to return home with her: “I was extremely affected at her presence; yet [...] I told her – I would stay in the camp; her disappointment smote my soul – she stood silent – yet I could perceive some tears succeed each other, stealing down her cheeks – my heart was wrung – at length, seeing my resolution fixed as fate, she dragged herself away, and returned home in a state of mind beyond my power to describe.”¹⁶ Next, she sent her elder son, offering the substantial sum of 400 Rupees to Baker if he would return Dean Mahomet home. Instead, Baker provided this same amount for Dean Mahomet to give to his mother in lieu. But “I could not, with all my persuasion, prevail on her to receive them, until I told her she should never see me again, if she refused this generous donation. Thus, by working on her fears, I, at length, gained my point, and assured her that I would embrace every opportunity of coming to see her: after taking my leave of her, I returned [...] to the camp.”¹⁷ This emotional parting from his mother marked Dean Mahomet, who recalled it so powerfully a quarter century later.

While the sentiments and phrasing that he used were personal and poignant, they were not unique to him. Indeed, they had become a widely used trope in English fiction and ego-centered accounts of the period. Nonetheless, we can see in this account Dean Mahomet’s self-representation as an immigrant to the Anglo-Irish elite around him of what must have been a traumatic turning-point in his early youth.

The rest of Dean Mahomet’s book richly described his fourteen years of travels with the East India Company’s Bengal army across north India. But, near the end of the book, when he explained his decision to emigrate, he again recounted his personal feelings and motivation: “Captain Baker disclosed his intentions of going to Europe: having a desire of seeing that part of the world, and convinced that I should suffer much uneasiness of mind, in the absence of my best friend, I resigned my commission of Subidar, in order to accompany him.”¹⁸ Significantly, Dean Mahomet’s own first autobiography ends with his arrival in Britain at age twenty-four.

15 MAHOMET, 1794: Letter 2.

16 MAHOMET, 1794: Letter 5.

17 MAHOMET, 1794: Letter 5.

18 MAHOMET, 1794: Letter 35.

While Dean Mahomet presented the bulk of his *Travels* from his perspective as an Indian member of the Company's army, he did on occasion explicitly adopt the viewpoint of the Anglo-Irish gentry and aristocracy who comprised the book's intended audience. In one example of this, he described an Indian palanquin being borne "much in the same manner as our sedan chairs are carried in this country [Ireland]." ¹⁹ In another instance, he wrote that a *ghat* in Benares was named "Benegaut; as if we said, Sullivan's-quay, or French's-slip" — two wharves on the Cork riverfront. ²⁰ In contrast, he only referred to Catholic tenant farmers in Ireland from much the same distance as he did villagers in India.

Further, a substantial part of his book implicitly but literally used the voice of other authors. Close analysis of Dean Mahomet's book reveals that at least seven percent was directly copied or closely paraphrased from the earlier travel narrative of John Henry Grose, *Voyage to the East Indies* (1766). He also used two paragraphs that Jemima Kindersley nee Wicksted had written and published in her *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe [...] and the East Indies* (1777).

Based on a careful analysis of these works, we can conclude that Dean Mahomet evidently practiced selective appropriation for two reasons. First, he used Grose's phrases for descriptions of topics which Dean Mahomet did not know, most notably Surat and Bombay (which he never visited), and classical references by Seneca and Martial. These totaled about a quarter of his borrowings from Grose. Second, Dean Mahomet took and reformed descriptions and phrases about topics which he personally knew very well but apparently felt that Grose or Kindersley had stated more fluently or authoritatively for an Anglophone audience. Such topics included descriptions of: Fort William in Calcutta; Allahabad architecture; the diet of Hindus; shampooing (therapeutic massage); coconut trees; jugglers and snake-charmers; the camel, elephant, and rhinoceros; betel; Indian music and dance; and the Prophet Muhammad and Islam. Most extensively, as Dean Mahomet's own "Explanation of Persian and Indian Terms," he mostly copied Grose's "Glossary." Dean Mahomet obviously knew the English meanings of these Indian terms but evidently wished to rely on Grose's assessment of which terms a European audience would want defined. Of the 97 terms in Dean Mahomet's Glossary, he included only six terms that were unique or substantially different in definition from those of Grose: Bazar, Baudshaw, Baudshawjoddi, Codgi, Jemidar, and Mulna (all words of special interest to Dean Mahomet). He also altered 41 of Grose's definitions in some

19 MAHOMET, 1794: Letter 6.

20 MAHOMET, 1794: Letter 17.

way, while 50 he took exactly from Grose. Dean Mahomet deliberately omitted 22 of the terms which Grose included, particularly terms not relevant to his *Travels*. We should also keep in mind that such extensive copying from earlier works remained quite common in the eighteenth century. Indeed, Grose himself only added his Glossary in his later editions of his book, taking much of it from the 1761 travel narrative by Richard Cambridge, who himself copied parts of it from yet earlier works.²¹

Despite whatever prominence and stature Dean Mahomet's book gained him in Britain and his distinctive status as an Indian immigrant to Cork, he did not draw the attention of any British or Indian biographers.²² However, he did garner brief notice in a quite different autobiographical travel narrative by a Muslim Indian traveler who wrote in Persian for an Indian audience: Mirza Abu Talib Khan Isfahani (1752–1806).²³ Like Dean Mahomet, Abu Talib claimed descent from emigrants from Iran to north India and had served Britons as they conquered and ruled India. By 1799, Abu Talib found himself unemployed but obtained the invitation of Captain David Richardson to accompany him to London. At the end of a difficult sea-journey, adverse winds kept Abu Talib's ship from reaching London directly; instead, he disembarked at Cork. While there, on 7 December 1799, Abu Talib briefly met Dean Mahomet.

Later, after traveling to Dublin, Abu Talib selected as his identity a stereotypical title from among those proffered to him by an ill-informed Irish crowd: the "Persian Prince." Following Abu Talib's triumphant seasons in London's high society, he returned to India and unemployment. Thirteen years later, he wrote up his Persian language account of his travels in Europe based on his notes of the trip. Abu Talib never published his account, but the manuscript circulated among his Persian-reading peers in India and was posthumously published in translation into English and later in Persian.

A complete retranslation of Abu Talib's account of his chance meeting with Dean Mahomet reads:

Mention of a Muslim named Dean Mahomed

Another person in the [Baker] house [...] is named Dean Mahomed. He is from Murshidabad [in Bengal]. [...] Baker raised him from childhood as a member of the family. He brought him to Cork and sent him to a school where he learned to read and write English well. Dean Mahomed, after studying, ran off to another city with the daughter, known to be

21 CAMBRIDGE, 1761: glossary of "Indian and Persic Terms."

22 The first full biography is Fisher, 1996.

23 KHAN, n. d. For a partial translation see KHAN, 1814.

fair and beautiful, of a family of rank of Cork who was studying in the school. He then married [*nikah*] her and returned to Cork. He now has several beautiful children with her. He has a separate house and wealth and he wrote a book containing some account of himself and some about the customs of India.²⁴

We should note that Dean Mahomet is described remarkably factually and unemotionally by Abu Talib, given the surprise that we might have expected him to have expressed in finding in Cork an immigrant from a similar north Indian Muslim elite background to his own. This may indicate that the former considered himself socially superior and Dean Mahomet beneath extensive notice. Nevertheless, he states Dean Mahomet's social position provided him some independence in income and living arrangements, clearly not the status of a servant. Further, Abu Talib considered Dean Mahomet still a Muslim and his marriage legal in Islam [*nikah*]. In his writings and self-reported behavior, Abu Talib showed a particular interest in sexual relationships between Indian men and European women, so he notes Dean Mahomet's and Jane's social status and children. This extremely fortunate but unfortunately brief independent description of Dean Mahomet's life in Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century seems to confirm the sketchy internal evidence in *Travels* about his life there.

Dean Mahomet's life in Cork and his first autobiography did not, however, fit easily into any national narrative: Indian, British, or Irish. His book remained largely unknown anywhere, although scattered copies exist on three continents. Nor did his life evidently inspire other Indian authors to emulate him.

Soon after meeting Abu Talib, Dean Mahomet decided in his forties to begin a new life by emigrating from Cork to London, remaking himself once again. He brought at least some of his Anglo-Irish family with him. We can next identify him working as an oriental-style therapeutic masseuse for the Honourable Basil Cochrane (1753–1826), a wealthy aristocrat recently returned from India. Cochrane, to improve his infamous reputation for corrupt self-enrichment while in India, established a charitable steam-bath in his London mansion, with Dean Mahomet providing a pseudo-Indian “medicated vapour bath” with “shampooing” (derived from *champi* or a full-body therapeutic massage widely practiced in India). Commercial British bathhouse keepers in the fashionable parts of London soon imitated Dean Mahomet's shampooing method.

As part of his revised self-identification, Dean Mahomet also changed the spelling of his name to Dean Mahomed, the more conventional transliteration in England, and added the honorific Sake (from *Shaikh*, “venerable-one”). He also

24 KHAN, n.d., vol. 1: 97–98.

married another Englishwoman, Jane Jefferys (1780–1851), in 1806.²⁵ During that period, legal divorce was virtually impossible, requiring an expensive Act of Parliament. Hence, bigamy was not unusual. Some children from his first wife, Jane Daly, lived with him and their half-siblings in London (it is possible that she did as well since she seems to have died nearby in London in 1844).

In 1810, at age fifty-one, Dean Mahomet started a new career as a restaurateur. He left Cochrane to start The Hindostanee Coffee House a few blocks away, the first Indian-style restaurant in London run by an Indian. As with his textual autobiography, this undertaking used his distinctive status as an exotic Indian in order to attract British patrons. Here, he proffered Indian-style dining, including hookas (tobacco water-pipes), bamboo furniture, and curries. Located in a fashionable district, far from the east London “Oriental Quarter” where most Indians lived, this restaurant did not solicit them. Rather, it targeted elite Britons who had lived in India and others who wished to savor Indian-style cuisine and ambiance. While his restaurant also attracted epicures and favorable reviews, it proved undercapitalized. In 1812, Mahomed had to petition for bankruptcy and distributed all his property among his creditors.

Following his bankruptcy, he sought yet another career. He published an advertisement of his skills in London newspapers: “MAHOMED, late of HINDOSTANEE Coffee House, WANTS a SITUATION, as BUTLER, in a Gentleman’s Family, or as Valet to a Single Gentleman; he is perfectly acquainted with marketing, and is capable of conducting the business of a kitchen; has no objections to town or country. Direct, post-paid, to D.M., 36, Paddington-street, Baker-street.”²⁶ While this soliciting self-representation included the name of his restaurant, it did not feature his distinctive Indian origin. Nor was this new career successful.

Next, he determined again to capitalize upon his Indian identity by settling in the burgeoning seaside resort of Brighton, where the ongoing reconstruction by the Prince-Regent (later King George IV) of his Royal Marine Pavilion made pseudo-oriental exotica fashionable. Finding employment in a bathhouse there in 1814, Mahomed developed and vended a line of allegedly Indian-style cosmetics and medicines, including “Indian tooth powder” and hair-dye. He also proffered his distinctive steam-bath with Indian oils and shampooing. Gradually, he opened a series of modest but ever more popular bathhouses of his own, all

25 CAMERON, n.d.

26 *TIMES* (LONDON), 20 April 1813.

featuring his unique “Indian Medicated Vapour Bath” as well as shampooing at his expert hands (his wife massaging female customers).

To enhance his professional medical reputation, in 1820, he published a book of testimonials: *Cases Cured by Sake Deen Mahomed, Shampooing Surgeon, and Inventor of the Indian Medicated Vapour and Sea-Water Bath*. This book used a popular English advertising genre for medical establishments and health-giving resorts. But Dean Mahomed as author and purveyor infused it with an exotic oriental content that none of his British competitors could match.

Reflecting his successful commercialization of his Indian-style medical methods, during 1820–1821, Dean Mahomed built a magnificent, purpose-built “Mahomed’s Baths” on Brighton’s stylish King’s Road, overlooking the sea. The interior decoration of this distinguished establishment evoked an Asian ambience for its clients. Further, he expanded his 1820 book into a medical casebook, *Shampooing, or, Benefits Resulting from the Use of the Indian Medicated Vapour Bath*, with three ever expanding editions: 1822, 1826, 1838. In this book, he represented himself as extensively Anglicized, and yet still of Indian origin so as to validate his personal authority, unique in Britain, as an expert in Indian medical arts.

While little of what he sold was actually Indian, his generalized image of India gave him a commercial advantage. Hindu elites, who might know more about *ayurvedic* or other Indian medical systems, rarely traveled to Europe; indeed, there was a strong social sanction against Brahmins and other high-born Hindus traveling aboard trans-oceanic ships across the *Kala Pani*, “Black Waters.” Hence, he claimed exclusive status as an authentic Indian medical practitioner and also a surgeon who had also professionally studied Western medicine.

In *Shampooing*, he claimed professional credentials through official medical training and extensive experience as a surgeon in the East India Company. To accommodate those years, he moved his reported birth-date a decade earlier to 1749:

The humble author of these sheets, is a native of India; and was born in the year 1749, at Patna, the capital of Bihar, in Hindoostan, about 290 miles N.W. of Calcutta. I was educated to the profession of, and served in the Company's Service, as a Surgeon, which capacity I afterwards relinquished, and acted in a military character, exclusively for nearly fifteen years. In [...] the commencement of the year 1784, [I] left the service and came to Europe, where I have resided ever since.²⁷

This reconstructed life history omits his years in Ireland and London, implying that he had immigrated nearly fifty years earlier directly to Brighton (which is how local Brighton histories portray him, then and today).

Successfully representing himself as the only native Indian expert in England about Indian medical arts, he gained a distinguished and substantial clientele. As he put it: "The herbs and essential oils with which my Baths are impregnated, are brought expressly from India, and undergo a certain process known only to myself, before they are fit for use."²⁸ His professional and social prominence received recognition through appointment by Royal Warrant as "Shampooing Surgeon" to Kings George IV and William IV. He also occasionally dressed in Indian-style attire (or what might appear to Britons as authentically Indian).

His fashionable success enabled him to open a London branch of his bathhouse, managed by his sons. Some other Indian settlers sought his treatment, including the first Indian Member of the British Parliament, D.O. Dyce Sombre, who purchased custom-made exercise equipment and received full-body massages from Dean Mahomed; Dyce Sombre's £1,000 tip to Dean Mahomed's son, however, was disallowed on the basis of Dyce Sombre's alleged lunacy.²⁹ Further, Dean Mahomed's popularity and patronage by aristocracy and gentry led white British competitors to jealous appropriation of his method. But, as he entered his mid-eighties (mid-nineties according to his revised birthdate), he faced financial difficulties and lost Mahomed's Baths, which eventually sold at public auction. The new owners kept his name but not him. He then largely retired until his death in 1851.

In the resort of Brighton, he and his Indian medical practices stood out for both assimilating and remaining different. He became a respected citizen, gaining the legal right to vote. His Baths boasted prominent patriotic displays on special occasions, illuminated with the innovation of gas-lights. But Dean

27 MAHOMED, 1832: v–vi, xiii.

28 MAHOMED, 1822: viii, 17.

29 FISHER, 2010: 189.

Mahomed remained best known as a distinctive local character with his eccentricities highlighted in promotional accounts by town fathers and local historians. For a time, long after his death, a local cocktail bar bore his name and a city bus route still does. Despite his fashionable innovations, Dean Mahomed's medical practices soon faded from his control. Within a decade, his proprietary Indian Medicated Bath method became famous as the Turkish Bath and his shampooing became, in English, mere hair-wash instead of an exotic therapeutic medical massage. His descendants integrated with British society, including as a Church of England vicar and a prominent London medical professional, so they lost his distinctive Indian identity. Neither Indian nor British national narratives have celebrated him, although advocates of multicultural Britain have recently worked to recuperate him as an early precursor of the post-World War II Asian settler population of Britain.

In retrospectively reconstructing Dean Mahomet/Mahomed's biography, we need to appreciate how entangled his transcultural and trans-continental life was with British colonialism in Asia and Ireland and growing racial stereotyping in Britain. As a multiple immigrant, he clearly shaped and reshaped his self-representations in light of his intended audience and goals of that point in his life. He revised his birthdate and the events of his life, but he could not change his race. However, he could capitalize on his commercially valuable racial difference from the Britons around him when he highlighted his distinctive origins and therefore expertise. Dean Mahomed's contemporary, whose life entangled both physically and also culturally with his own, David Ochterlony Dyce Sombre, presents today's biographer with some similar challenges but also different ones.

3. David Ochterlony Dyce Sombre (1808–1851)

Dyce Sombre was born only 600 miles from Dean Mahomet. But Dyce Sombre came from a highly prominent, even notorious, racially and culturally mixed north Indian family, and was born half a century later, so we can recover far more evidence about his early life in India.³⁰ After his emigration to Europe, he drew even more public attention for his flamboyant behavior, election to

30 See extensive records in the British Library, United Kingdom National Archives, and National Archives of India. For accounts of him and his family, see FISHER, 2010, and SHREEVE, 1996, 2000, 2001.

Parliament, and many legal cases. He published autobiographical works in English and deliberately distributed them widely in English society, not for commercial advantage but for vindication of the wrongs he felt Britons had unjustly inflicted on him. However, his private and published accounts of some key events in his lived life substantially differ from each other and from accounts of him written by contemporary Europeans and Indians. He was for the last eight years of his life a convicted lunatic, engaged in legal contests which centered on his identity as Black or White, as Indian or European, as sane or lunatic. Hence, much of the available evidence about his life remains contradictory and problematic, for both interpreting his intentions and also recording his deeds.

From his early youth, many Britons wrote about Dyce Sombre, in both personal and official accounts, particularly in light of the prominent Begum Sombre (ca. 1749–1836) who adopted him at his birth and raised him as her possible heir. Begum Sombre, as a rare female ruler and a colorful character in her own right, drew much attention (and has continued to do so in a wide array of biographies and fiction). Begum Sombre had begun as a dancer of uncertain origins who had been purchased, or simply taken, by a German-speaking mercenary, Walter Reinhardt (ca. 1720–1778), alias Sombre or Somru. After Reinhardt's death, Begum Sombre seized rule over the small princely state, Sardhana, near Delhi, that he had acquired during the political instability of the late-eighteenth century. As her officers and courtiers, Begum Sombre recruited diverse Europeans of many nationalities and religions, as well as Indian Muslims and Hindus; her army and subjects were largely Hindu. Uniquely among her contemporary Indian rulers, Begum Sombre converted to Roman Catholicism and made large financial donations to that Church, although she also gave lavishly to Anglican, Hindu, and Muslim religious institutions. In 1803, she made a strategically astute shift in loyalties from the Maratha warlords (who had controlled the Mughal Empire) over to the British (who had just conquered her region).

Begum Sombre took Dyce Sombre from his birth mother (the great-granddaughter of Reinhardt) and father, George Dyce (1788–1838, a man of mixed Scottish and Indian descent whom she had earlier recruited as a potential heir but later exiled). She raised Dyce Sombre as Roman Catholic and alternately indulged and threatened him to keep him almost constantly in attendance on her and uncertain of his future.

Dyce Sombre thus grew up in the culturally extremely complex Sardhana court, with many languages current, most prominently Persian and Urdu. He highly valued Mughal imperial court culture but simultaneously regarded the

British as the rising arbiters of his future. During his short absences from Begum Sombre's side, he alternately socialized in the nearby Mughal imperial capital in Delhi and the nearby British military base in Meerut.

Representing his transcultural identity, he kept a personal diary for much of his life (five years of which, in two sections, have survived).³¹ Dyce Sombre briefly studied with an Anglican teacher, Reverend Henry Fisher, who evidently taught him how to shape this private account in the conventional British form. Dyce Sombre wrote most of his diary in English, but the most intimate parts in Persian. Further, although Dyce Sombre often used printed and bound diary books in the English style, he sometimes transgressed the chronological discipline that this format tried to impose. For example, Dyce Sombre wrote across the printed lines, not in accord with them; he used printed diaries from different years so that the days of the week and numbers of the day did not agree; and he began in August and, on reaching the end of the book, continued from January until he reached August again.³²

Just before Begum Sombre's death in 1836, she transferred to Dyce Sombre her throne, which he lost, and also her vast treasury containing £500,000 cash (worth £35,000,000 today), which he kept. Thus, British annexation of Sardhana immediately upon her death made Dyce Sombre an exile, albeit a wealthy one. Finding no congenial home in Asia, Dyce Sombre emigrated to England in 1838.

Reaching Britain at age thirty, he lavishly used his wealth to try to purchase a place in high society. While Dyce Sombre aspired to be considered a European, most Britons classed him as an alien of inferior race. Diverse European, Asian, and American journals and newspapers tagged Dyce Sombre variously as "Black," "Copper-coloured," "Dark," "half-washed Blackamoor," "Indian," "mixed breed," "Negro," "Orientalist," "Othello," "sable," "Sambo," and "tawny alien"; French newspapers identified him as "excessivement brun" and "le prince noir."³³

Within months of his arrival in Britain, he proposed to the Hon. Mary Anne Jervis (1812–1893), a daughter of Viscount St. Vincent. Despite Dyce Sombre's Catholicism, dark complexion, and obesity, she and her family accepted him as a very wealthy and exotic husband. After a tumultuous engagement, they married

31 In the United Kingdom National Archives and the British Library.

32 United Kingdom National Archives, PROB 37/1700.

33 E. g., BOBSON, 1846: 534–542; *AGRA UKHBAR* 14 August 1841; *FRIEND OF INDIA* 2 September 1841; *SATIRIST* 10 March 1849; *SATURDAY EVENING POST* 29 September 1860; NEUMAN, 1928:164–165; *LE SIÈCLE* 21 March 1844.

in 1840. However, they repeatedly failed to communicate about major issues, particularly concerning the public role of married women. Accounts by her and her family about her and his words and deeds differed widely in fact and meaning from his accounts of them.

In 1841, Dyce Sombre bribed the voters of the English constituency of Sudbury to elect him to the British Parliament, becoming the first ever Asian (and evidently second non-white) Member. He voted repeatedly as a Whig-Radical, however, never on the winning side. Finally, after ten months of investigation, Sudbury, a notoriously corrupt constituency, was disenfranchised and therefore Dyce Sombre (and a second M.P. from Sudbury) had their elections “controverted” (denied). Given Dyce Sombre’s notoriety, both Indian nationalist and British multi-cultural narratives celebrate as the “first” Indian M.P. not him but instead a more heroic figure, Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917), elected a half century later in 1892.

Dyce Sombre increasingly expressed his antipathy against the British establishment around him. He challenged countless men, including his father-in-law, to duels over his and his wife’s “honour”. He made a series of escalating public assertions about his wife’s immorality, including her alleged promiscuous sex with their social acquaintances, servants, and her own father. Such anti-social behavior provoked his wife’s family to have him examined by high society “mad doctors,” who specialized in isolating such disruptive men. Indeed, his father-in-law had arranged in 1829 for the confinement as a “Chancery Lunatic” of his son and heir, William Jervis (1794–1839).

In 1843, Dyce Sombre’s in-laws used the same British legal “Chancery Lunatic” process to incarcerate him. Court-appointed doctors examined him, testifying in open court (with their testimony, transcripts of their examination, and official analysis often republished extensively in public newspapers) that he was not mentally competent (*non compos mentis*, in popular parlance, a “nin-compoop”) based primarily on his accusations against his aristocratic wife of gross sexual improprieties. This conviction as a lunatic voided his legal control over his great wealth. Hence, when Dyce Sombre directed in his will that Dean Mahomet’s son receive £1,000 for services rendered as a masseur, the British Lord High Chancellor disallowed this. Court-appointed teams of warders confined him, although in luxurious housing appropriate to his social position.

After six months in confinement in Britain, Dyce Sombre dramatically escaped to continental Europe. During this period of forensic psychiatry, European jurists and physicians clashed repeatedly in public over their various inconsistent, ever-changing, and heatedly contested legal and medical definitions

of lunacy. Unusually in his case, his legal status as a lunatic depended on his alleged racial and cultural identity as Indian or European.

Over the next eight years and his six successive public trials, one English lay-jury, several Lord High Chancellors, and an eventual total of eight British court-appointed physicians confirmed his legal status as lunatic. But Dyce Sombre countered these rulings by traveling through France, Belgium, Scandinavia, German states, Italy, and Russia, everywhere subjecting himself to investigation by what would become over the years a total of forty-five physicians, including leading experts on “lunacy”. These physicians all testified that he was fully mentally competent. They legally swore that all of his behavior, however unconventional by European standards, was fully appropriate for an “oriental” gentleman who would naturally not fully appreciate or conform to European social norms, particularly regarding standards for women’s modesty in public spaces. His several legal defense teams also used this argument that his actions arose naturally and excusably from his Asiatic race, so evident in his complexion:

His parentage proves, and his aspect confirmed, the fact of the great preponderance of the Asiatic over the European blood in him [...] [H]e was essentially an Asiatic, having inaccurate, confused, erroneous or superficial knowledge of European Society [...] [A]ll the eccentricities he had been guilty of were the fruits of his Asiatic education, and had no reference to any unsoundness of mind [...] Jealousy of women is an overwhelming passion of the Oriental mind, and seems in a high degree to have existed in his, [...] born and bred in countries where incest is common, and treachery habitual.³⁴

Indeed, the several British Lord Chancellors in his repeated trials largely concurred that if he were Indian, he should be declared sane.

However, Dyce Sombre asserted that he was European, opposing his own lawyers and probable best legal interests. Most of the prosecution teams paid by his in-laws, likewise argued that he was European (or enough European) by culture to be measured by European norms. But they and the British judges drew the unwelcome conclusion that he was therefore a legal lunatic, since no sane European would act as he had done toward his wife.

To prove to the world, and especially British courts and society, that he was indeed sane, European, and much wronged by his in-laws, Dyce Sombre published in Paris a 591-page, extensively documented autobiographical account: *Mr Dyce Sombre’s Refutation of the Charges of Lunacy in the Court of*

34 *TIMES* (LONDON) 5 March 1849.

Chancery (1849). To “ghost-write” his autobiography, he hired Professor Catherin John Henry Montucci – who had a doctorate from the University of Siena and appointment as Professor of Industrial Arts and Commerce at the University of Paris. Montucci’s thinly disguised voice appears most evidently in the extensive Introduction and Conclusion to this book. Dyce Sombre also published his account in a much abridged twelve page pamphlet entitled: *Petition to Lords Temporal and Spiritual and to the Commons* (1850) which he had distributed in Members of Parliament and prominent London gentlemen’s clubs.

Dyce Sombre’s book and pamphlet consist mainly of an autobiographical sourcebook that justified and documented all he had been contending over his years in Europe. Dyce Sombre selectively narrated his heroic family history, building his case for his own distinguished lineage and respectable youth. He openly declared what his own lawyers had been consistently denying: “calling me a native of India does not annoy me in the least, but I only wish it to be understood: I was certainly born in India, but I consider myself not Indian, which according to the late meaning of the word, required one of the parents of the party to have been entirely native of India. My grandfather was a Scotchman; my father, his son, was married to a lady whose grandfather was a German; her mother was half French; this therefore could not be taken either in law or in reality to be the case of a native of India.”³⁵

Much of the text published key selections from the correspondence, many affidavits, and other papers that he had accumulated during his many legal struggles. However, not all of the included documents actually advanced his cause for an outside reader. Indeed, Dyce Sombre’s own footnotes contest some of the very evidence that he included. Further, comparison with the originals shows that he was unscrupulous about altering some documents. Overall, he conceded none of his long-held contentions: he was European and totally sane; he had been unjustly persecuted by almost everyone around him, particularly the his immoral wife, in-laws, and all the Lord High Chancellors; and that these documents and his own logic would convince all readers of his ultimate vindication and the unmitigated evil of his persecutors. He also expressed his frustration: “Dead men are never heard, otherwise they would be taken for ghosts; and such is the case with Chancery Lunatics. I am a dead man, according to the existing law.”³⁶

35 DYCE SOMBRE, 1849: 19.

36 DYCE SOMBRE, 1849: 244.

The most passionately phrased passages come in *Refutation*'s twelve page conclusion, which Montucci later admitted writing anonymously in order to articulate his own understanding of Dyce Sombre's position as representative of the unjust treatment of all legal lunatics by the British judicial and medical systems:

My own painful example must convince every impartial mind, that personal liberty, so jealously guarded in England by the law, is liable to be infringed with the greatest ease on the mere plea of lunacy [...] Thus it is, that by the combined efforts of intrigue, ignorance, and misrepresentation, and by the defective state of the English law as regards lunatics, I am debarred from personal liberty in my mother-country, the management of my property is withheld from me, while it is wasted through negligence and cupidity, and myself cast out as far as possible from the society of reasonable men, a lunatic among the sane, by the mere dictum of a few men who openly profess to set their wisdom against that of the rest of the world.³⁷

He printed 2,000 copies of his *Refutation* and distributed this book extensively, sending copies to various officials in England and elsewhere around the world. A score of copies still exist, enshrined in libraries in Britain and the United States.

Over his last eight years of life, Dyce Sombre pursued his goal of proving himself legally sane in Britain and restoring full control over his vast fortune. Due, in at least some degree, to Dyce Sombre's chronic venereal diseases, extensive medical treatments for those diseases (using chemicals like mercury considered highly dangerous today), obesity, and unconstrained diet, drink, and general lifestyle, he died at age fifty-one in London, on the eve of his sixth rehearing before the British Lord Chancellor into his lunacy. Court cases about the origins and disposal of his vast wealth did not conclude until more than twenty years after his death. Due to his connection with the infamous Begum Sombre, oriental race, vast wealth, prominent marriage, notorious election to Parliament, and scandalous anti-social behavior in the highest circles of the British aristocracy, Dyce Sombre was the subject of more than 700 articles in newspapers and journals across Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

37 DYCE SOMBRE, 1849: 571.

4. Writing Biography Afield

The cases of Dean Mahomet and Dyce Sombre suggest how entangled trans-cultural lived lives and life-writing can be. Their geographical trajectories criss-crossed, in India and then in Europe. They both made cultural journeys, coming under British colonial rule in India and then as immigrants to metropolitan Britain. There, each innovatively used self-representations, in written texts as well as in other cultural expressions, to create unpredicted roles for themselves in British society. In some measure, their Indian origins distinguished them from the Britons around them. But, in the context of growing British imperialism and racial attitudes toward non-whites, neither had control over how Britons regarded them.

In each case, their autobiographical accounts provide challenges for today's biographer. When their specific assertions about themselves conflict, both with their own earlier accounts and also with those of people around them, we begin to approach anti-biography. But, by probing these very inconsistencies, we can begin to understand more deeply the cross-cutting social and cultural forces at work. When Dean Mahomed excises his earlier lives in Cork and London (well-documented by himself as well as others) and when he retrospectively revises his date of birth to a decade earlier, we can understand these in light of his current goals. When Dyce Sombre presents published evidence that he asserts proves himself rational, but which contradicts his own diary and private letters and also the testimony of many eye-witnesses, we can appreciate his current purposes. Further, we must recognize how arbitrary and relative the categories Asian and European, both lunatic as well as sane, are. Despite their unprecedented accomplishments, neither was a "Great Man" who fits comfortably into any national narrative. Privileging written evidence endangers our comprehension of multivalent personhood. Thus, considering such singular cases compels us to re-examine and problematize our own larger systems of classification, authority, and the process of writing biography afield.

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