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## Weak ties in a tangled web? Relationships between the Political Residents of the English East India Company and their munshis, 1798-1818

### Weak ties in a tangled web

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Although historians have long recognized the important role which Indians played in the English East India Company's operations, the focus has usually been on the mechanics of direct rule in 'British' India. Yet, the expertise of Indian cultural intermediaries was arguably even more important, as well as more contested, in the context of the Company's growing political influence over nominally independent Indian kingdoms. This article examines the relationships between the East India Company's political representatives (Residents) and their Indian secretaries (munshis) at Indian royal courts during a period of dramatic imperial expansion, from 1798 to 1818. The article considers how these relationships were conceptualized and debated by British officials, and reflects on the practical consequences of these relationships for the munshis involved. The tensions surrounding the role of the munshi in Residency business exemplify some of the practical dilemmas posed by the developing system of indirect rule in India, where the Resident had to decide how much responsibility to delegate to Indian experts better versed in courtly norms and practices, while at the same time maintaining his own image of authority and control. Although the Resident-munshi relationship was in many respects mutually beneficial, these relationships nevertheless spawned anxieties about transparency and accountability within the Company itself, as well as exciting resentments at court. Both Residents and munshis were required to negotiate between two political and institutional cultures, but it was the munshi who seems to have borne the brunt of the risks associated with this intermediary position.

In 1805, the political representative (Resident) of the English East India Company at the Indian court of Hyderabad wrote a letter to Acting Governor-General George Hilario Barlow about a munshi. Munshi was a term which Britons commonly applied to their Indian or Persian language tutors, interpreters, and secretaries. The subject of this particular letter was Azizullah, the Hyderabad Residency's long-time head munshi, and the topic was Azizullah's proposed retirement. For more than twelve years, Azizullah had played a crucial role in the Residents' negotiations with the Nizam of Hyderabad and his ministers, so much so that the former Governor-General Marquess Wellesley had awarded the munshi a pay rise and a pension in recognition of his vital work. In 1805, the Acting Resident Henry Russell wrote to inform the Acting Governor-General of the munshi's imminent retirement, and to remind him of Wellesley's promise. Russell also took the opportunity to express his own 'high Estimation of the Character and Talents of Meer Uzeez Oollah'. On the basis of many years spent working alongside the mir, Russell confirmed that Azizullah had performed important services in the name of the Company, and had, in so doing, earned the respect and admiration of his British superior officers.<sup>1</sup>

Russell's earnest commemoration of Azizullah's services at the twilight of his career speaks to the distinction which Indians sometimes acquired within the Company's political line. Like most Company employees, the Residents were heavily reliant on the work of Indian clerks, scribes, and go-betweens to do their job. In recognition of this broad pattern,

\* I would like to thank Renaud Morieux, Jamie Latham, and the members of the world history reading group, along with Norbert Peabody and the anonymous reviewers at *Modern Asian Studies*, for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.

<sup>1</sup> Henry Russell to George Barlow, 20 Nov. 1805, Papers of Maj-Gen William Kirkpatrick, Mss Eur F 228/51, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, London (hereafter OIOC), p. 6-7.

the role of cultural intermediaries in imperial administration and the construction of colonial knowledge has been a point of enduring interest in the historiography of British imperialism in South Asia. Recent interventions have highlighted the importance of Indian expertise as a basis for British understandings of Indian history, geography, tax-collection, and jurisprudence.<sup>2</sup> Despite this proliferation of scholarship on other branches of the Company's service, however, the munshi's essential contribution to Company diplomacy has continued to be overlooked since Michael Fisher first highlighted it as an object of consideration in his general survey of the Residencies, written almost thirty years ago.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the relationship between Resident and Residency munshi is worth investigating further since it differs in key respects from the cross-cultural working relationships underpinning direct rule in 'British' India which have attracted so much scholarly attention in the past. By contrast, Residency munshis operated in predominantly Indian social environments regulated by courtly norms which privileged the munshi's social and cultural capital over that of the Resident. More than a simple translator or informant, the munshi's expertise inhered just as much, if not more, in his internalization of courtly practices and ideals of behaviour, and his ability to perform on the stage of Indian politics. This kind of embodied knowledge was not easily or quickly learned, meaning that the munshi often acted in the Resident's stead, rather than simply furnishing him with the information requisite to do his duty. Residency munshis were therefore able to acquire considerable status and influence in comparison to other munshis in the Company's service. At the same time, Residents were senior officials intended to represent the power and authority of the Company at Indian courts; as such, it was essential for the Resident to establish and maintain an image of competence, control, and incorruptibility. The question of how much responsibility could or should be delegated to the munshi was thus particularly difficult to resolve conclusively in the Residency system, where the issue of public opinion was vested with so much importance, and the political stakes were perceived to be exceedingly high. The relationships between Residents and munshis can therefore be used to chart some of the practical dilemmas which emerged as the Company began to experiment with strategies of indirect rule in the early nineteenth century.

This article will focus on a brief, historically significant unit of time, from 1798 to 1818, when the Company concluded some of its most important subsidiary alliances with Indian kingdoms.<sup>4</sup> According to these treaties, the Company agreed to defend their Indian allies against attack by stationing Company troops in their dominions, on the condition that their Indian allies would finance these troops (whether through subsidies or the lease of productive lands) and consult with the Company on foreign policy decisions.<sup>5</sup> A further stipulation of these agreements was the establishment of a political Resident at allied Indian courts. With time, the Residents would increasingly become the exclusive medium for

<sup>2</sup> Philip B. Wagoner, 'Precolonial intellectuals and the production of colonial knowledge', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45:4 (2003): 783-814; Matthew Edney, *Mapping an empire: the geographical construction of British India, 1765-1843* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 25; Kapil Raj, 'Mapping knowledge: go-betweens in Calcutta, 1770-1820', in *The brokered world: go-betweens and global intelligence, 1770-1820*, (eds) Simon Schaffer et. al. (Sagamore Beach, Massachusetts: Science History Publications, 2009), p. 122; Hayden Bellenoit, 'Between qanungos and clerks: the cultural and service worlds of Hindustan's pensmen, c. 1750-1850', *Modern Asian Studies* (hereafter MAS), 48:4 (2014): 872-910; Kapil Raj, 'Refashioning civilities, engineering trust: William Jones, Indian intermediaries and the production of reliable legal knowledge in late eighteenth-century Bengal', *Studies in History*, 17:2 (2001): 175-209.

<sup>3</sup> Michael H. Fisher, *Indirect rule in India: Residents and the Residency system 1764-1858* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 316.

<sup>4</sup> Significant subsidiary alliances were concluded with Hyderabad in 1798; with the Peshwa of Poona in 1802; with Sindhia in 1817; and with the Rajah of Nagpur in 1818. Delhi was occupied in 1803.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Keen, *Princely India and the British: political development and the operation of empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), p. 5.

political communication between courts, as the Company sought to isolate and divide the Indian powers. By 1818, the subsidiary alliance system had brought most of central India under the Company's influence. At the point at which this article begins, however, the subsidiary alliance system was still in its infancy, and its underlying principles and mode of operation were still in the process of being worked out.

At this transformative stage in the history of the Residency system, there was no single, paradigmatic type of Resident-munshi relationship; this article instead recaptures the messy, varied, and experimental nature of early attempts to co-opt Indian political elites and consolidate the Company's political predominance in nominally independent Indian kingdoms. The Indian princely states numbered into the hundreds, but this article will concentrate on the Residents stationed at the major courts of Hyderabad, Awadh, Delhi, Travancore, Poona, Nagpur, and the itinerant court of the Maratha chieftain Sindhia (nominally based in Ujjain and Gwalior).<sup>6</sup> These Indian states differed from one another in important ways; most obviously, they had different relationships with the Company resulting in varying levels of intervention by the Resident.<sup>7</sup> Though the courts described in this article were therefore unique in certain respects, it is nevertheless worth considering them together because both British and Indian contemporaries explicitly made these comparisons at the time. The different Residencies were recognized to form part of a system of imperial influence which extended across the subcontinent. Residents and their munshis regularly moved between courts, as well as maintaining a routine correspondence with other Residencies. These connections make it necessary to take a broader view in order to understand the perspectives and experiences which informed Resident-munshi relationships.

Despite the significant yet contested role of Residency munshis, it is difficult to get a clear picture of their relationships with the Residents. As will shortly become apparent, when munshis were described by Residents it was often in negative, generic terms; meanwhile, surviving sources composed by Residency munshis during this period were written in the munshis' official capacity, and therefore do not reveal much about the munshis' personal opinions or experiences. One type of source which does survive in relative abundance in Company archives, however, are petitions. These include documents authored by munshis, as well as letters written by Residents on their munshi's behalf. These texts are instruments for making claims, and cannot therefore be read as transparent representations of Resident-munshi relationships. For instance, petitions are unlikely to contain inconvenient details which do not fit neatly into the narrative constructed by the author for the purposes of securing their objectives (in this case usually a pension). Nevertheless, petitions can be revealing. By identifying the demands which munshis made on the Company, and the ways in which these demands were explained or justified, we can acquire some insight into how munshis viewed the Company, and what they hoped to gain from it. Equally, by reading the letters which Residents wrote on the munshis' behalf, we learn how far the Residents were willing and able to draw on their own networks in their munshis' interests. As a result, we can reconstruct some of the transactions which prompted and sustained these cross-cultural relationships, making the Company's growing political influence at Indian royal courts possible. At the same time, it was precisely the transactional character of these cross-cultural

<sup>6</sup> The importance of these Residencies is reflected by the fact that they were directly supervised by the Governor-General-in-Council.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Residents attached to Sindhia and the Rajah of Berar were essentially ambassadors with little control over the administration, whereas the Resident at Delhi effectively ruled in the Mughal Emperor's stead and was charged with a range of responsibilities over neighbouring districts which other Residents did not have. For British relations with Rajputana and the Cis-Sutlej States, see K. N. Panikkar, *British diplomacy in North India: a study of the Delhi Residency, 1803-1857* (New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1968), p. 42-99.

relationships which concerned the Residents' superiors in Calcutta. Resident-munshi relationships, though crucial to the operation of the Residency, thus became a locus for British anxieties about transparency, accountability, and the freedom of action of their political representatives at Indian courts.

By considering a range of Resident-munshi relationships side by side, this article explores the different ways in which these relationships were conceptualized and debated by British officials, as well as the practical consequences they could have for the munshis involved. The first section will provide basic context by explaining who the Residency munshis were and how they were perceived by their British employers, focusing particularly on the stereotypes and suspicions which informed the Residents' treatment of Residency munshis. The second section will outline how the Resident-munshi relationship operated in practice, describing the important role which munshis played in Residency business as well as how the Residents attempted to monitor and control them. In the third section, this dyadic interaction will be situated within the larger political and corporate culture of which it was a part. Munshis benefited materially from the Residents' patronage, particularly as a result of the Residents' connections to other patrons across the subcontinent. Still, given their position at the interstices of personal employment to the Resident and service to the Company, munshis were especially vulnerable to contemporary suspicions about the commingling of personal relations of dependence and impersonal, bureaucratic lines of authority. The already ambivalent dynamics between Residents and munshi were therefore further complicated by the larger web of personal and professional relationships in which they were entangled.

### **Stereotypes and suspicions**

Residency munshis were part of a broad corps of clerks and writers who made their living through 'mastery of the pen'.<sup>8</sup> Some sold their services in the bazaar, others worked for commercial firms or individual notables. The greatest prestige was attached to royal munshis, state secretaries operating at the highest level of politics.<sup>9</sup> Munshis came to their work largely by way of family precedents, deploying networks of friends and kin to learn the craft and find employment. Entry and advancement depended on skills and connections rather than formal qualifications.<sup>10</sup> A munshi's skillset generally included penmanship and accountancy, as well as an in-depth knowledge of social etiquette, political norms, and literary conventions.<sup>11</sup> The East India Company's Residents employed a number of munshis to perform a range of administrative tasks, but most important was the head munshi or mir munshi, the Resident's personal agent. Mir munshis generally came from good families, and were for the most part, though not always, Muslim.<sup>12</sup> While some were of local provenance, their families already firmly established within the administrative world of the court, many mir munshis acquired the position because of their personal connection to the Resident in office or his network of friends and kin.<sup>13</sup> Practices varied from Resident to Resident, but in addition to overseeing the Residency's Indian staff, the head munshi usually met with ministers and other notables on the Resident's behalf.

<sup>8</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Empire and information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> J. F. Richards, 'Norms of comportment among imperial Mughal officers', in *Moral conduct and authority: the place of adab in South Asian Islam*, (ed.) Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 256.

<sup>11</sup> Rajeev Kinra, 'Master and munshi: a Brahman secretary's guide to Mughal governance', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter *IESHR*), 47:4 (2010): 530.

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, *Indirect rule in India*, p. 321.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 332.

Included among the voluminous papers of the major Residencies are a number of reports, authored by munshis, detailing their meetings with rulers and ministers. The Residents' own everyday working relationship with their munshis, however, often went undocumented. The Resident and munshi met in person to discuss points of policy, and these conversations were only occasionally recorded in writing. When corresponding with the Governor-General-in-Council in Calcutta or their families in Britain, Residents conventionally passed over the mechanics of the Residency, including the activities of its Indian staff. When taken to task by his mother for failing to adequately describe his 'habits and life', Alexander Fraser, secretary to the Resident at Delhi, explained that such elisions were only to be expected in letters from Indian officials, 'since the history of his life is a mere routine of business, whose nature is nearly unknown in Europe; or whose variety & complication renders it difficult to describe.'<sup>14</sup> Kate Teltscher has portrayed the familiar letter as a site for dramatizing the colonial self, 'a form of performance where the letter-writer stages the encounter between cultures, locations, and peoples', but it is for precisely this reason that many of the more complicated or banal elements of the Residents' day-to-day life were elided; they simply did not make for easy or compelling reading.<sup>15</sup> As a result of these kinds of epistolary conventions, even some of the more distinguished or notorious munshis make only sporadic appearances in the sources, occasionally disappearing from view entirely. Meanwhile, the surviving sources authored by Residency munshis during this period were written in their official capacity. In consequence, certain aspects of these Resident-munshi relationships have proven elusive to the historian, particularly how they were viewed and experienced by the munshis in question.

When reflecting on why munshis might have attached themselves to British Residents, it seems logical to assume that their trajectory was at least partly shaped by their history. Most analyses of human agency, while recognizing the importance of emergent events, nevertheless stress the 'conditioning quality' of the past.<sup>16</sup> When confronting new situations, we generally draw, albeit creatively, on previous experiences and pre-existing repertoires. Munshis appear to have reacted in a similar fashion as the Company emerged as a major political player in the Indian subcontinent. At Indian royal capitals, there was a long historical precedent of service gentry seeking patronage from the local representatives of rival Indian powers.<sup>17</sup> C. A. Bayly has argued that Indians in the eighteenth century had a strong sense of attachment to particular homelands, customs, or political and religious institutions, which he terms 'old patriotism', but he made some exception for the munshis who depended for their livelihood on elite patrons.<sup>18</sup> Many munshis were itinerant, moving from the land of their birth to regional cultural capitals in pursuit of learning or employment opportunities.<sup>19</sup> Their identity was tied up in particular forms of expertise and family traditions of service to the state.<sup>20</sup> As historians of early modern India have observed, this scribal elite had long been

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Fraser to his mother, 20 Aug. 1810, Fraser of Reelig Papers, vol. XXXIII, Private Collection, National Register of Archives for Scotland, p. 208.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Teltscher, 'Writing home and crossing cultures: George Bogle in Bengal and Tibet, 1770-1775', in *A new imperial history: culture, identity, and modernity in Britain and the empire, 1660-1840*, (ed.) Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 282.

<sup>16</sup> Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, 'What is agency?', *American Journal of Sociology*, 103 (1998): 975.

<sup>17</sup> Karen Leonard, *Social history of an Indian caste: the Kayasths of Hyderabad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Origins of nationality in South Asia: patriotism and ethical government in the making of modern India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Maria Szuppe, 'Circulation des lettrés et cercles littéraires: entre Asie Centrale, Iran et Inde du Nord (xve-xviiiè siècle)', *Annales*, 59 (2004): 997-1018.

<sup>20</sup> Kumkum Chatterjee, 'History as self-representation: the recasting of a political tradition in late eighteenth-century eastern India', *MAS*, 32:4 (1998): 931.

flexible and diverse, bridging regional Brahmanical traditions and a wider Indo-Islamic culture; they were therefore accustomed to negotiating religious and cultural difference.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, when munshis found employment with the Company, they were adjusting to changing circumstances, but there was some continuity in the nature of their employment.

There is even reason to think that munshis and Residents might have had broadly similar impressions of the reciprocal services to be expected from such a patron-client relationship. In India, relationships between elite patrons and their munshis could be powerful and long-lasting, almost resembling a family connection.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Naomi Tadmor has illustrated how in the British context membership of the 'household-family' was flexible and capacious, encompassing servants, apprentices, and other dependants.<sup>23</sup> The servant's place within the patriarchal household meant that the household head had recognized obligations towards him or her.<sup>24</sup> In line with these prescriptions, Residents acknowledged a certain accountability for their munshi's welfare, even after the working relationship had ended. Henry Russell (Resident at Hyderabad 1810-1820), for instance, found a post for his former munshi (who he called 'Munshi Bankir') at Hyderabad upon that munshi's request. 'He has Claims upon me,' Russell explained, 'from having been my first moonshy at Hyderabad; and I will cheerfully do for him every thing that I can with Propriety.'<sup>25</sup> Richard Jenkins (Resident at Nagpur 1807-1828) likewise appealed to a Company official at Bareilly on behalf of a former munshi Ghulam Hussein, for, in his words, 'notwithstanding the unfortunate circumstances under which I parted with Gholaum Hoosseini, I am still as solicitous as ever to serve him.'<sup>26</sup> This vertical relationship of mutual obligation approximated the connection that the munshi would have shared with Indian patrons.<sup>27</sup> Historians have been inclined to draw stark distinctions between the modern, bureaucratic Company and a more patrimonial Indian political culture, but in both British and Indian society, vertical relationships of service and obligation were an integral part of the texture of social and political life.<sup>28</sup> The expectations surrounding these relationships provided a common ground on which British officials and Indian munshis could negotiate.

Still, there were no doubt disjunctions, aspects of the munshis' experiences in the Company's service which were shaped by the particular beliefs and assumptions of their British employers. Prominent among these was the distrust with which British officials tended to regard munshis as a group. Tellingly, although Resident John Munro (Resident at Travancore 1810-1818) strenuously denied the charges of corruption levelled at him by the inhabitants of Travancore, where he was stationed, he was far less enthusiastic in defending the good name of his munshi, Reddy Rao. While Munro's investigation into Reddy Rao's conduct produced no evidence of wrongdoing, Munro concluded that 'however high my

<sup>21</sup> Kumkum Chatterjee, 'Scribal elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal', *IESHR*, 47:4 (2010): 463; Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'The making of a munshi,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 24:2 (2003): 71.

<sup>22</sup> Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'The making of a munshi', p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> Naomi Tadmor, *Family and friends in eighteenth-century England: household, kinship, and patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Cissie Fairchild, *Domestic enemies: servants & their masters in old regime France* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 139.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Russell to Charles Russell, 4 Jun. 1810, Russell Papers, MSS Eng. lett. d. 151, Bodleian Library, Oxford (hereafter Bodl. Oxf.), p. 101.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Jenkins to J. Brooke, 21 Jul. 1811, Letter Books of Sir Richard Jenkins, Mss Eur E111, OIOC, p. 149.

<sup>27</sup> Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'The making of a munshi', p. 65.

<sup>28</sup> For the first point, see for example Nicholas Dirks, *The hollow crown: ethnohistory of an Indian kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 354; for patronage in Indian and British society, respectively, see Leonard, *Social history of an Indian caste*, p. 22, and Harold Perkin, *The origins of modern English society 1780-1880* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 44.

opinion of Reddy Rows integrity may be, yet, it is impossible that I can positively affirm that his conduct, or that of any other native servant has invariably been pure and honorable.’<sup>29</sup> From John Munro’s perspective, Reddy Rao’s status as a native servant meant that his probity could not be vouchsafed. Though Residents sometimes ascribed positive traits to specific munshis in this way, they almost always described munshis as a group using negative, highly stereotyped language.<sup>30</sup> The underlying foundations of this prejudice are difficult to disentangle. In part this indeterminacy is a product of the sources; Residents often repeated these stereotypes, but rarely reflected on them at length. The influence of nascent biological conceptions of ‘race’ is not readily apparent, though it is possible that Residents were simply unwilling to enter into explicit discussions of racial ideologies or racist practices in their letters to professional colleagues, and rarely discussed these relationships at all when writing to family.

Of more obvious significance were contemporary attitudes towards Indian political culture; to some extent, the Residents’ attitudes towards their munshis seem to have been informed by a more generalised set of British preconceptions. The gist of these stereotypes is evident in a passage from John Blakiston’s published memoirs of his military service in India, where Blakiston writes that a unique feature of Indian society was ‘their policy to withhold every fact they possess, even though it cost them nothing to give it; and to deceive you by every means in their power, even when they can themselves derive no apparent benefit from so doing.’<sup>31</sup> Alena K. Alamgir has identified a long-term continuity in the language of mistrust with which Britons described their relationships with Indians; in the personal papers of the Residents, Indian courtly politics were certainly characterized in terms that resonated with this convention.<sup>32</sup> The Resident at Poona Sir Charles Malet (Resident 1793-1798) compared the position of the Company in India to ‘that of an honest Man thrown by Circumstances into the society of Swindlers [...] & Highwaymen.’<sup>33</sup> In line with this general view of Indian politics, Residents often described their munshis’ activities as crafty or conniving. Henry Russell, during his brief period as Acting Resident at Poona, claimed to have been obliged to expel his munshi for ‘intriguing,’ as he put it, commenting that ‘there is something in the air of Poona which is not only villainous itself, but is also the Cause of Villainy in others.’<sup>34</sup>

Another potential factor explaining the Residents’ distrust of munshis more specifically could be socioeconomic difference. Imperial historians have long remarked the similarities between the language of race and class. Ann Stoler has theorized that racial and class language were not only parallels of one another, but were in fact overlapping and interchangeable ways of constructing and explaining what contemporaries considered to be similar kinds of human differences, to do with variant attitudes and behaviours.<sup>35</sup> Munshis, it is true, were recognized by Britons to form a hereditary class of respected and highly trained

<sup>29</sup> John Munro, ‘Observations on a petition delivered to the government dated 16 September 1813’, Board’s Collections, IOR/F/4/445/10674, OIOC, p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> This is characteristic of representations of out-groups. See Mark Knights, ‘Historical stereotypes and histories of stereotypes’, in *Psychology and history: interdisciplinary explorations*, (eds) Christian Tileagă and Jovan Byford (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2014), p. 246.

<sup>31</sup> John Blakiston, *Twelve years military adventure in three quarters of the globe, or, memoirs of an officer who served in the armies of His Majesty and of the East India Company, between the years 1802 and 1814* (London: H. Colburn, 1829), p. 107.

<sup>32</sup> Alena K. Alamgir, “‘The learned Brahmen, who assists me’: changing colonial relationships in eighteenth and nineteenth century India”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 19:4 (2006): 426.

<sup>33</sup> C. W. Malet to G. F. Cherry, Diaries and Papers of Sir Charles Malet, Mss Eur F149/56, OIOC, p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Russell to Charles Russell, 18 Dec. 1810, Russell Papers, MSS. Eng. lett. d. 152, Bodl. Oxf., p. 63.

<sup>35</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the education of desire: Foucault’s history of sexuality and the colonial order of things* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 127.



service gentry; Susan Bayly has shown how these specialists emerged as a prestigious and prominent class of people in the eighteenth century as the proliferating successor states competed for legitimacy and administrative expertise.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Residents purposefully chose, as much as possible, munshis of good family and reputation, believing that this would increase the munshi's credit in the eyes of the courtly elite, as well as acting as a form of insurance for the munshi's good behaviour.<sup>37</sup> Still, in his pamphlet directed at members of the political line John Malcolm highlighted the class of the munshi as an object of consideration when he warned his readers from investing them with too much power or favour, contending that Indian servants 'cannot be supposed to have even the same motives with those of native rulers for good conduct, much less the same title to regard.'<sup>38</sup> Munshis were still subordinate figures who were not always trusted to act according to the same principles as their aristocratic British employers. Tellingly, when writing to the secretary to government on the subject of his Residency expenses, Henry Russell refused to reduce the wages of his head munshi on the grounds that 'it is vain to expect honesty from any Native Servant, who is not placed beyond the reach of ordinary Temptation.'<sup>39</sup>

Munshis were also routinely accused of immoral behaviour by their British employers, mirroring language used to describe the lower social orders in Europe.<sup>40</sup> In the words of Thomas Williamson, munshis, 'having only to attend their employers at stated hours, and the residue of their time being wholly unoccupied, it is not to be wondered, that, with their liberal salaries, they should rather court, than shun, pleasure.' Williamson elaborated that 'what with venery, drinking, smoking, &c. nine in ten of them exhale the most intolerable effluvia!'<sup>41</sup> This complaint features prominently in the correspondence of Resident Mountstuart Elphinstone while at Nagpur (1804-1807), who grumbled to his friend John Adam that he was 'very ill off for natives,' having 'a Moonshee who is drunk half the day & an intelligencer who is drunk the whole day.' To give substance to his grievances, Elphinstone recounted how when he sent his munshi to wait on the Raja 'he [the munshi] was so drunk that he could not stand, was taken sick during the interview & fell off his horse on the way home.'<sup>42</sup> These allegations, though they echo the rhetoric surrounding the lower social orders more broadly, also resemble the discourse of a supposed 'servant problem' in England. Elphinstone's complaints call to mind the prevalence within British court records and family papers of dysfunctional relationships between masters and servants in which servants are ceaselessly charged with vice, cheating, idleness, and drunkenness.<sup>43</sup>

This resemblance suggests that a parallel can be drawn between the distrust with which the Resident viewed his munshi and the distrust with which masters sometimes regarded their servants in Europe and the colonies. In both cases, intimacy with a stranger

<sup>36</sup> Susan Bayly, *Caste, society and politics in India from the eighteenth century to the modern age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 66; see also J. F. Richards, 'The formulation of imperial authority under Akbar and Jahangir', in *Kingship and authority in South Asia*, (ed.) J.F. Richards (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 311.

<sup>37</sup> Fisher, *Indirect rule in India*, p. 321

<sup>38</sup> John Malcolm, 'Notes of instruction', in John Briggs, *Letters addressed to a young person in India, calculated to afford instruction for his conduct in general, and more especially in his intercourse with the natives* (London: John Murray, 1828), p. 203.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Russell to John Adam, 5 Sept. 1816, Notes and intelligence of Mountstuart Elphinstone regarding the Peshwa and Trimbuckjee, Elphinstone Collection, Mss Eur F88/60, OIOC, p. 149.

<sup>40</sup> R. C. Richardson, *Household servants in early modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 175.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Williamson, *The East India Vade-Mecum, or, complete guide to gentlemen intended for the civil, military, or naval service of the Honourable East India Company*, 2 vols. (London: Black, Parry, and Kingsbury, 1810), vol. I, p. 194.

<sup>42</sup> Mountstuart Elphinstone to John Adam, 3 May 1804, Papers of John Adam, Mss Eur F109/88, OIOC, n.p.

<sup>43</sup> Richardson, *Household servants*, p. 176.

and a member of a different social order could be viewed as potentially threatening.<sup>44</sup> Elphinstone, at least, made his views on the status of the munshi as a dangerous interloper quite clear when he assured Lady Hood, in a personal letter, 'that no native of Asia can be admitted to table without his interrupting the comfort of the Company on which he is a spy & that above all no Persian servant of any rank can be allowed such a distinction without its tempting him to encroach.'<sup>45</sup> For Elphinstone, the munshi's background and his rank together marked him out as an outsider to be kept at a distance. John Briggs, in a letter of advice to a young man just entering the Company's civil service, similarly reminded his correspondents to be wary when setting up a household, for '[s]ervants in all countries have it greatly in their power to contribute to our comforts as well as to impose on us, and even sometimes to inflict on us positive distress,' but that 'this must be particularly the case in a strange land like this.'<sup>46</sup> Munshis were not domestic servants, but their association with the Resident was also close, perhaps troublingly so. John Malcolm warned his readers that an Indian employee's 'real or supposed influence will, under any circumstances that they are allowed frequent approach to an European officer in the exercise of authority, give them opportunities of abusing his confidence if they desire it,' contending that 'there is no science at which the more artful among the natives are greater adepts, than that of turning to account the real or supposed confidence of their superiors.'<sup>47</sup> It seems possible that the munshi's status as a non-European, in addition to his role as an employee with intimate access to the details of the Resident's professional life, might have combined to make him doubly threatening from the Resident's perspective.

The munshi's close association with the Resident, and his access to the Residency papers, did mean that it was possible for him to throw relations between the Company and the court into disarray. To some extent, the munshi's personal connection to the Resident allowed him to partake of the Resident's public authority. There are a few examples of munshis extorting money from courtly figures with promises of bringing their influence to bear on the Resident, but none perhaps is more extraordinary than the case of Muhammad Saddick Khan, or illustrates so well the extreme possibility that munshis could infiltrate the Residency and use its authority for their own purposes.<sup>48</sup> In the year 1809, the Governor-General received a mysterious letter from Shahamat Khan, second brother to the Nawab Vizier of Awadh Saadat Ali Khan, alluding vaguely to promises made to him by the recently deceased Resident John Collins. Further investigation by the newly appointed Resident John Baillie (Resident at Lucknow 1807-1816) unearthed a plot orchestrated by a deputy munshi in Collins's office. The munshi, it transpired, had forged letters purporting to be from John Collins and the Governor General, in which he promised to oust the current Nawab Vizier and to place Shahamat Khan on the throne in his place. The use of the Resident's official seal, combined with the munshi's status as representative of the Resident, appear to have convinced Shahamat Khan of the legitimacy of the plan, allowing the munshi to use the proposed coup d'état as a pretext for extorting large sums of money. The Resident's exposure of the plot, and Shahamat Khan's subsequent exile to Company-ruled Patna, marked the end of the

<sup>44</sup> Fairchild, *Domestic enemies*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>45</sup> Mountstuart Elphinstone to Lady Hood, 26 May 1813, Seaforth Papers, GD46/17/42, National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh, n.p.

<sup>46</sup> Briggs, *Letters*, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Malcolm, 'Notes of instruction', in Briggs, *Letters*, p. 203; 206-207.

<sup>48</sup> See extract political letter from Bengal, 9 May 1810, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/311/7620, OIOC, pp. 2-4 for example of 'Syud Ruzzee Khan,' dismissed for corrupt practises; for similar accusations against Elphinstone's agent at Poona see 5 Jan. 1817 and 8 Feb. 1817, Notes and intelligence of Mountstuart Elphinstone regarding the Peshawar and Trimbeckjee, Elphinstone Collection, Mss Eur F88/60, OIOC, np.

conspiracy.<sup>49</sup> This exceptional occurrence nevertheless illustrates the subversive potential of the munshi, perhaps explaining why the munshi was even more subject to doubt and suspicion than other Indians in the Resident's household. The very possibility of such a misappropriation of the Resident's authority would have been worrying, however baseless such anxieties might have been in practice given that these acts of corruption seem to have been a relative rarity, or at least were rarely exposed. The munshi's behaviour, after all, was believed to have implications for the Resident's credit at court; John Malcolm, for one, argued that the courtly elite were particularly 'apt to form an unfavourable opinion of his [the Resident's] disposition and character from any bad conduct of his native servants', especially if the munshi hailed from elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, Residents were anxious to ensure that, as Resident Archibald Seton phrased it, 'every public servant connected with me should be so pure and strict that not only, no kind of stain or suspicion, but not even the shadow of stain or suspicion could attach to him'.<sup>51</sup>

This brings us to perhaps the clearest source of British anxieties about the munshi, namely, his role as middleman and translator. Munshis were regularly responsible for reading out, translating and explaining communications of Company policy to the ruler and his ministers, thereby giving the munshi a role in shaping relationships and negotiations between the Indian state and the Company.<sup>52</sup> Given this position of influence, Residents and their superiors greatly feared being misled or misrepresented by munshis. This anxiety was not unique to Residents, but applied in more or less equal measure to most officials in Company employ. Throughout India, the Company was dependent on the mediation of clerks, money-changers, bankers and commercial middlemen.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, the problem of translation and interpretation, and the danger of misrepresentation, was at the forefront of every Company employee's consciousness. In his *East India Vade Mecum*, a popular guide for young men about to enter the Company's service, Thomas Williamson vehemently urged his readers to familiarize themselves with the Indian languages, for until they were able to dispense with an interpreter on ordinary occasions, 'no person can be deemed independent; far less, capable of acting in any civil, military, or commercial capacity, with effect.'<sup>54</sup> Munshis, then, were the subject of many of the same anxieties which have historically coalesced around the figure of the translator.<sup>55</sup> It was a fear which sprung from the munshi's relative power, as well as his perceived cultural and socioeconomic 'otherness'. What made the relationship particularly fraught was the disruption of clear lines of authority within the Residency; it was always possible that the munshi might act in the Resident's stead to pursue his own interests or inclinations, perhaps without the Resident even realizing it. Given the Resident's role as representative of the Company, his reliance on the munshi was particularly threatening given the implications it could have for the Company's diplomatic relations with their Indian allies.

<sup>49</sup> See extract political letter from Bengal, 2 Feb. 1808, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/248/5584, OIOC, pp. 1-22 for a description of this series of events.

<sup>50</sup> Malcolm, 'Notes of instruction', in Briggs, *Letters*, p. 227.

<sup>51</sup> Archibald Seton to 'Syud Ruzzee Khan', 19 Oct. 1809, OIOC, p. 44.

<sup>52</sup> For descriptions of *munshi's* role as translator and interpreter, see Thomas Sydenham to Earl of Minto, 30 Aug. 1809, Hyderabad Residency Records, box no. 2, vol. 38, National Archives of India, Delhi (hereafter NAI), p. 12, or Richard Jenkins to Marquess of Hastings, 17 Jul. 1814, in *Selections from the Nagpur Residency records*, 8 vols., (ed.) H. N. Sinha (Nagpur: Government Printing, Madhya Pradesh, 1950), vol. III, p. 487.

<sup>53</sup> Lakshmi Subramanian, 'Banias and the British: the role of indigenous credit in the process of imperial expansion in western India in the second half of the eighteenth century', *MAS*, 21:3 (1987): 473-510.

<sup>54</sup> Williamson, *East India Vade-Mecum*, vol. I, p. 172.

<sup>55</sup> For North American context see James H. Merrell, *Into the American woods: negotiators on the Pennsylvania frontier* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 32. For African context, see Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts (eds), *Intermediaries, interpreters, and clerks: African employees in the making of colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 11.

At the heart of these various stereotypes about munshis, then, were the Residents' anxieties about their own incapacity, and the fear that the munshi might take advantage of it. These fears had practical implications in terms of how the Resident employed the munshi in Residency business. The question, from the Company's perspective, was how the Resident could ensure that the munshi did not use this power to frustrate or impede the Residency's operations. As Kapil Raj has illustrated, this problem of intercultural trust was a primary concern for Company administrators reliant on the skill and expertise of Indian agents.<sup>56</sup> Under pressure from the Governor-General-in-Council in Calcutta, Residents accordingly devised strategies to manage the perceived risks represented by the munshi. As Henry Russell advised his brother, 'without searching for perfect Instruments, which are not to be found, we must be content to make the best use we can of those which Circumstances have placed within our reach.'<sup>57</sup> Yet, the question of what constituted 'the best use' for Residency munshis remained a conundrum, and most Residents found it difficult to displace the munshi from his position of influence, as the following section will illustrate.

### **The dialectic of control**

The clearest means of mitigating the munshi's power was by learning Indian languages. Even William Jones, perhaps the most famous Orientalist of the eighteenth century, was motivated to learn Sanskrit primarily as a means of more closely monitoring the Indian officials who assisted him in his work at the Supreme Court in Calcutta.<sup>58</sup> The Company's administration similarly sought to preclude a dependence on Indian interpreters by placing a deliberate emphasis on language skills. This prioritization of languages applied particularly to aspiring members of the political line, but to some extent British officials of all kinds were expected to be conversant in the Indian languages relevant to their posts. During the late eighteenth century Persian and Hindustani language instruction was gradually institutionalized in the form of grammars and dictionaries, treatises, translations, and class books directed to native English speakers. In the early nineteenth century the Company founded colleges at Fort William (in 1800) and Haileybury (in 1806) where students were also instructed in Arabic and Bengali.<sup>59</sup> By 1828, Company official John Briggs proclaimed proudly and in print that 'hardly an instance now exists of any European holding a civil situation of responsibility removed from the presidencies, who is ignorant of the language of the district in which he resides.'<sup>60</sup>

To be sure, Residents were hardly as well-versed in Indian languages as their munshis. Residents stationed at Maratha courts appear to have spoken little or no Marathi, notwithstanding that some of the Maratha rulers, notably the Rajah of Nagpur, were reticent about discussing politics in anything other than their native tongue.<sup>61</sup> Even at royal centres where the dominant languages were Persian and Hindustani, Residents were still discouraged from acting independently of their munshis in their dealings with the court. Significantly, even John Baillie, previously a professor of Persian at the Company's college in Calcutta, was scolded by Governor-General Marquess Hastings for assuming that he was sufficiently

<sup>56</sup> Raj, 'Refashioning civilities, engineering trust', pp. 175-209.

<sup>57</sup> Henry Russell to Charles Russell, 10 Jun. 1810, Russell Papers, MSS Eng. lett. D. 151, Bodl. Oxf., p. 119.

<sup>58</sup> Rosane Rocher, 'Weaving knowledge: Sir William Jones and Indian pundits', in *Objects of enquiry: the life contributions and influences of Sir William Jones (1746-1794)*, (eds) Garland Cannon and Kevin R. Brine (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 54.

<sup>59</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> Briggs, *Letters*, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> H. T. Colebrooke to Marquess Wellesley, 26 Mar. 1799, in H. N. Sinha (ed.), *Nagpur records*, vol. I, p. 108.

versed in Persian to dispense with a munshi in his meetings with the Nawab Vizier and his ministers. As Hastings put it, 'the reliance of Major Baillie on his correct possession of a polished idiom was likely to betray him beyond the exact line of established usage.'<sup>62</sup> However fluent the Residents were by European standards, their linguistic abilities were not expected to rival the eloquence and refinement of trained and experienced munshis. In a context where an individual's grasp of Persian was a point of personal prestige, minute idiomatic details mattered; as historian Muzaffar Alam phrased it, 'deficiency in elegant self-expression meant cultural failure'.<sup>63</sup>

Nevertheless, Residents were still proficient enough to intervene, to some extent, when they felt they were being misrepresented by their translators. While H. T. Colebrooke (Resident at Nagpur 1798-1801) was in the process of negotiating a treaty of defensive alliance with the Rajah of Nagpur through the mediation of his munshi, he noticed that the munshi had omitted the word 'quadruple' in his description of the proposed alliance, presenting it to the Rajah as an alliance between the two states exclusively rather than a joint alliance with the Company, the Peshwa of Poona, and the Nizam of Hyderabad; Colebrooke subsequently corrected the mistake.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, John Collins (Resident with Sindhia 1798-1804) carefully attended to the munshi Kaval Nain's translation of the Treaty of Bassein to the Maratha chieftain Daulat Rao Sindhia. In his papers, Collins noted that 'when the moonshee came to the 12<sup>th</sup> Article [...] he by no means gave that force to the words thereof which he ought to have done, I was, therefore, under the necessity of assisting him, & embraced the occasion of giving the clearest explanation of that important stipulation.'<sup>65</sup> Residents sought, as much as possible, to monitor and control the way in which Company policy was represented to Indian rulers and ministers via the channel of the munshi, even taking over entirely when the munshi was considered to have misspoken.

The problem, from the Residents' perspective, was that in order to achieve their political ends it was not enough to be linguistically competent. Indian courtly politics were governed by a larger Indo-Persian system of meanings, a dense web of moral, ethical and administrative ideals. The munshi was extensively trained in these Indo-Persian principles, and therefore better able to frame and present the Resident's demands or queries. These scribal elite were widely read from a young age in poetry, politics, ethics, history, and epistolography.<sup>66</sup> Contemporaries outside of the diplomatic line sometimes belittled this kind of expertise. Captain Thomas Williamson, a soldier, scoffed that 'a few volumes of tales, the lives of those great men who have either invaded, or ruled, the empire, some moral tracts, and the Koran [...] constitute the acquirements of this haughty class of servants.'<sup>67</sup> Those in the political departments, however, clearly recognized the munshi's worth.

To begin with, the munshi's skills and experience were crucial for the composition and interpretation of letters. The Persian insha tradition of belles lettres comprised a complex blend of formula and invention, producing documents with a poetic bent 'heavily imbued with rhymed prose, verse, figurative language, and rhetorical embellishment,' to quote

<sup>62</sup> Removal of Lieut. Col. Baillie from Lucknow, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/510/12267, OIOC, p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> Muzaffar Alam, 'The culture and politics of Persian in precolonial Hindustan', in *Literary cultures in history: reconstructions from South Asia*, (ed) Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 167.

<sup>64</sup> H. T. Colebrooke to Marquess Wellesley, 19 Apr. 1799, Wellesley Papers, Add MS 13589, British Library, London, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> John Collins to Marquess Wellesley, 29 May 1803, Copies of Letters and Dispatches of Col. John Collins, Papers of Maj-Gen William Kirkpatrick, Mss Eur F228/77, OIOC, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'The making of a munshi', p. 63; Chatterjee, 'Scribal elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal', p. 462.

<sup>67</sup> Williamson, *East India Vade-Mecum*, pp. 192-193.

historian Colin Mitchell.<sup>68</sup> The Resident's working knowledge of Persian hardly sufficed for the composition of the highly stylized prose requisite for corresponding officially with the Indian elite, meaning that the munshi often had to write letters in his stead.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the munshi's intimate familiarity with epistolary format, seals, signatures, and superscriptions meant that he was well-equipped to distinguish forgeries from authentic documents. Residents were thus heavily reliant on munshis in their primary duty as Company intelligencers and information-gatherers, which entailed sifting through intercepted correspondence and separating out legitimate and illegitimate information.<sup>70</sup>

There was also courtly etiquette to consider. Ceremonial and questions of precedence were taken very seriously as reflections of the status and prestige of those concerned.<sup>71</sup> A munshi could be an invaluable resource in this regard, as even the most grudging Residents were ultimately forced to acknowledge.<sup>72</sup> The munshi was of vital assistance in determining questions of protocol when arranging meetings between the Resident and other figures of political importance, avoiding offence or indignity on either side.<sup>73</sup> The Resident could also use the munshi as a means of introducing difficult or sensitive topics of discussion, giving the ruler time to reflect and prepare himself for a confrontation with the Resident.<sup>74</sup> In brief, the munshi possessed the cultural capital so crucial to the success of the Resident's diplomatic endeavours. It was a particular kind of know-how which, having been painstakingly acquired over the course of the munshi's lifetime, was not easily transmitted to British officials.<sup>75</sup>

As a result of this *savoir-faire*, the munshi was often better equipped than the Resident to negotiate sensitive diplomatic situations. Indian rulers and their ministers were sometimes willing to extend a degree of trust to the munshi which they withheld from the Resident, and this trust could be taken advantage of by the Resident if he was willing to use a munshi as his agent. When Richard Strachey (then Resident at Lucknow) was having trouble reaching an agreement with the Vizier, he dispatched his munshi to initiate a second round of negotiations. The Vizier expressed his willingness to draft a written engagement, and asked the munshi to assist in formulating that treaty. The munshi reported this conversation to Strachey, at which point Strachey himself drafted a treaty, which 'was submitted to the Vizier by the moonshee as if from himself.'<sup>76</sup> In this case, Strachey clearly felt that, by presenting the draft as the munshi's own work, the Vizier would be more likely to accept the treaty as a reflection of his own best interests. The most effective munshis were often individuals who were able to elicit the Indian ruler's trust in this way, creating the sense that they were serving both parties at the same time. Azizullah, for instance, was said (according to a letter penned by the first minister of the Nizam of Hyderabad) to have shown 'sincere attachment

<sup>68</sup> Colin Mitchell, 'Safavid imperial *tarassul* and the Persian *insha* tradition', *Studia Iranica*, 26:2 (1997): 182; for the importance of poetry in the *insha* tradition, see pp. 200-201.

<sup>69</sup> Fisher, *Indirect rule in India*, p. 319.

<sup>70</sup> See for example William Palmer to Marquess Wellesley, 21 Apr. 1800, Correspondence of William Palmer, Home Miscellaneous, IOR/H/576, OIOC, p. 66.

<sup>71</sup> Kooiman, 'Meeting at the threshold, at the edge of the carpet or somewhere in between? questions of ceremonial in princely India', *IESHR*, 40:3 (2003): 311-333.

<sup>72</sup> Mountstuart Elphinstone to John Adam, 3 May 1804, Papers of John Adam, Mss Eur F109/88, OIOC, n.p.

<sup>73</sup> For example, see description of a *munshi* arranging the first meeting between the new Resident at Nagpur and the Rajah in Mountstuart Elphinstone to Marquess Wellesley, 1 Jan. 1804, in H. N. Sinha (ed.), *Nagpur records*, vol. 1, p. 17.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Jenkins to Marquess of Hastings, 11 Dec. 1814, Correspondence Regarding the Pindaris, Home Miscellaneous, IOR/H/599, OIOC, p. 458.

<sup>75</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'The forms of capital', in *Readings in economic sociology*, (ed.) Nicole Woolsey (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. 283.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Strachey to John Adam, 29 Apr. 1816, Richard Strachey Papers, Mss Eur D514/3, OIOC, p. 116.

to the Interests of both States,’ and to have acted always ‘with due regard and consideration towards the ministers of his Highness.’<sup>77</sup>

Although Residents could profit by employing munshis in this fashion, this intermediary role also clearly invested the munshi with precisely the kind of influence which the Resident sought to monopolize for himself. Accordingly, some Residents vacillated when it came to relying on the munshi in this way. Early on in his career at Poona, Mountstuart Elphinstone (Resident at Poona 1811-1818) found that the intercession of a munshi could help smooth over disputes; as Elphinstone put it, ‘when transacting business with me on such occasions, they [the ruler and his ministers] are so intent on resisting my proposals and on guarding against committing themselves, that a great deal of the effect of all arguments and explanations is lost.’ Rather than attending on the minister himself, then, Elphinstone preferred to send his munshi.<sup>78</sup> Later, however, Elphinstone appears to have second-guessed his inclination to confide in the munshi so readily. In a letter of 1814, Elphinstone reported that though Cursetji Sait had proved very useful in past negotiations with the Peshwa, he (Elphinstone) no longer thought it expedient to use Cursetji Sait as a channel for communication with the court. As Elphinstone put it, the Peshwa’s favour as well as Cursetji Sait’s position as agent of the British Residency had ‘given the natives an exaggerated idea of his consequence.’ This led Elphinstone to ‘discontinue employing him to the extent which had been usual.’ Once again, the spectre of undue influence made the Resident unwilling to place too much trust in an individual whom he nevertheless continued to recognize as ‘zealous and useful’.<sup>79</sup>

Still, by sidestepping his munshi Elphinstone might have imperiled his own professional agenda, at least according to Gangadhar Shastri, emissary of the Gaikwar (a rival Maratha power). In 1814 Elphinstone was in the process of mediating between the Gaikwar and the Peshwa on the subject of an expired lease. In May of that year, with no end to the negotiations in sight, the Shastri approached Elphinstone with a suggestion, namely, that the Residency’s head servant Cursetji should be more closely involved in the mediation process. According to Elphinstone’s account of the conversation, the Shastri ‘said he observed that the Sait was not in my confidence, that a disaffected servant was worse than an enemy.’ When asked to elaborate further, the Shastri replied ‘that the Sait possessed great influence with the Peshwa, and would be tempted to employ it in thwarting our views.’<sup>80</sup> Though ultimately the Shastri’s suggestions do not seem to have shaken Elphinstone’s determination to sideline the Sait, they nevertheless imply the potential dangers of bypassing a munshi. Not only was the Resident perhaps needlessly prolonging negotiations, he might even have been actively though unintentionally sabotaging his own plans by sowing resentments.

Circumventing a munshi might have had its risks, but many Residents certainly shared Elphinstone’s desire to discharge the munshi entirely. Given the demands of Residency business, however, these aspirations rarely translated into practice. Barry Close (Resident at Poona 1801-1810) and Thomas Sydenham (Resident at Hyderabad 1805-1810) both began their Residencies by vowing to meet directly with the minister on all points of material interest. Close argued that this observance would ‘prevent misconceptions and give precision to the delivery of our sentiments,’ while Sydenham averred that ‘at present it is often very uncertain whether the representations made to the Minister by the British Resident be faithfully conveyed to the Peshwa, and that uncertainty would be increased by the

<sup>77</sup> Mir Alam to Thomas Sydenham, 8 Jan. 1806, Foreign Secret Department Records, file no. 66-8, NAI, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Mountstuart Elphinstone to Earl of Minto, 7 Jul. 1812, in *English records of Maratha history Poona Residency correspondence*, 14 vols., (ed.) G. S. Sardesai (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1940), vol. XII, p. 183.

<sup>79</sup> Mountstuart Elphinstone to John Adam, 7 May 1814, in *Ibid.*, p. 323.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

mediation of another agent between His Highness and the Resident.<sup>81</sup> With time, however, their resolve weakened. Henry Russell, who worked under both Thomas Sydenham and Barry Close as Assistant Resident and Acting Resident, respectively, remarked that neither man successfully made their ambitions a reality. According to Russell, 'they both of them began their Administrations with a decided Resolution to conduct their Business without the Agency of a moonshy: and yet, perhaps, there never was a Time at which more was done by natives, or more entrusted to them, than there was then at Hyderabad under Captain Sydenham, and at Poona under Colonel Close.' This led Russell to conclude, when it came time for him to take up the mantle of Resident at Hyderabad in 1811, that 'a native servant must be employed [...] call him what you will, but such a man must be had, must very frequently be employed and trusted.'<sup>82</sup> The munshi's social and cultural capital, added to the sheer volume of Residency business, meant that the Resident could hardly afford to dispense with the help.

Despite the language of malfeasance and mistrust with which so many Residents spoke about them, then, munshis were nevertheless integral to the workings of the Residency. In consequence, Residents were apt to do anything in their power to keep a skilled and hard-working munshi in their employ. Munshi Azizullah, for one, had to petition several times for a pension enabling him to retire; his first effort earned him only an increased salary, with, as Resident James Achilles Kirkpatrick (Resident at Hyderabad 1798-1805) noted sarcastically, 'the pleasing prospect of being a drudge in office for nearly the remainder of his days, for it is not reasonable to suppose that Government will dispense with the services of so useful a man, as long as they think they can have any service out of him.'<sup>83</sup> Though Residents sometimes spoke of munshis as a group with suspicion, in many cases these partnerships lasted decades, often surviving the Resident's professional peregrinations throughout the subcontinent. To take just one example, Pearee Lall served under Archibald Seton (Resident at Delhi 1806-1811) for 24 years in Bengal, Behar, Bareilly, and, finally, at the Residency at Delhi; Seton described Pearee Lall as 'able and zealous,' declaring that 'he has served me with credit to himself & with the utmost fidelity.'<sup>84</sup> It is worth observing that in this case Seton was writing a character reference in support of Pearee Lall's application for a pension; these kinds of reference letters constitute the main instances in which Residents openly expressed their gratitude to their munshis, and they typically did so in very generic terms.<sup>85</sup> Still, the fact of the Resident's support for his munshi, added to the longevity of the relationship, would appear to substantiate affirmations of the munshi's diligence and utility, and of the Resident's own feelings of attachment.

In addition to these written expressions of appreciation, the degree of respect conferred on the munshi was made manifest in the customary practice of endowing them with ceremonial robes. The khilat was granted to the munshi as, in the words of Resident Richard

<sup>81</sup> Barry Close to Marquess Wellesley, 21 Dec. 1801, in G. S. Sardesai (ed), *Poona records*, vol. VII, p. 6; Thomas Sydenham to Arthur Wellesley, 29 Jan. 1805, in *Ibid.*, pp. 188.

<sup>82</sup> Henry Russell to Charles Russell, 14 Jun. 1810, Russell Papers, MSS Eng. lett. D. 151, Bodl. Oxf., pp. 119-120.

<sup>83</sup> J. A. Kirkpatrick to William Kirkpatrick, 14 Nov. 1800, Papers of Maj-Gen William Kirkpatrick, Mss Eur F228/12, OIOC, p. 259

<sup>84</sup> Archibald Seton to Governor-General-in-Council, 26 Jul. 1811, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/371/9244, OIOC, p. 12. Other examples of long-serving *munshis* include Ali Naqi Khan, John Baillie's *munshi* for thirty years, as described in John Baillie to Governor-General-in-Council, 15 Mar. 1811, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/372/9249, OIOC, p. 11; Cursetji Sait who served at Poona for thirty years, and Gholam Mahomed who served with Richard Jenkins for eight years, as described in Richard Jenkins to the Governor-General-in-Council, 12 Feb. 1816, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/1473/5782, OIOC, p. 10.

<sup>85</sup> Letters of recommendation were a recognized and highly coded genre. See Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of letters: letter manuals and transatlantic correspondence, 1688-1820* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2005), pp. 61-62.



Strachey, 'a public acknowledgement of his services.'<sup>86</sup> This ceremony was a self-conscious appropriation of Mughal court ritual. Khilats were given as a means of establishing and proclaiming an almost organic bond between an authority figure and a subordinate, symbolically incorporating the recipient into the body of the giver.<sup>87</sup> Residents like Strachey thus sought purposefully to take on the role of Indian patrons, and to behave to their subordinates in what they perceived to be a manner that would be intelligible to munshis and their peers.<sup>88</sup> This was a form of 'position-taking.'<sup>89</sup> Through this public performance, the Resident actively affirmed and advertised his vertical relationship with the munshi, thereby visibly establishing his own authority while at the same time clearly co-opting the social capital of the munshi.

These vertical relationships could yield practical benefits. The experiences of munshi Muhammad Hanif exemplify the favours a munshi could secure through the intercession of his British patrons over the course of his life. To begin with, Colonel Barry Close, formerly Resident at Poona, wrote to Henry Russell, the newly appointed Resident, recommending Muhammad Hanif for the position of head munshi; Muhammad Hanif, the Colonel claimed, 'writes Mahratta as well as the Persian Language and is well acquainted with characters and affairs in the Deccan.'<sup>90</sup> Later, when Muhammad Hanif was ready to retire, Close interposed to secure him a land grant and the command of a body of horse at Hyderabad, ensuring him an income that would see him through his remaining years. When financial reforms in Hyderabad put Muhammad Hanif's tax collection rights in peril, Resident Mountstuart Ephinstone, who had known the munshi at Poona, intervened to get Muhammad Hanif a substitute land grant in Company territory in the Deccan.<sup>91</sup> Throughout his life, Muhammad Hanif appears to have been able to call on the aid of Company officials to pursue his own ends, demonstrating how munshis could put their personal connections with their British employers to practical use.

The interaction between Resident and munshi, in short, illustrates what Anthony Giddens termed 'the dialectic of control.' In Giddens's view, even when relationships are deeply asymmetrical, they nevertheless retain a degree of complementarity; the superior figure might have greater resources at his command, but he depends on his subordinate to undertake certain tasks. The dialectic of control, as sociologist Ira J. Cohen interpreted it, 'refers to this universal presence of imbalanced degrees of autonomy and dependence that constitute power relations in systems and reproduction circuits of all kinds.'<sup>92</sup> Even though Residents sought to limit the munshi's field of autonomy, munshis were nevertheless able to secure certain advantages through the provision of services which were indispensable to the Residency, belying the disparaging stereotypes which were so prevalent within the political line. At the same time, although this relationship with the Resident created opportunities for the munshi, it also produced frictions. A munshi's relationship with the Resident seems to have been complicated by the fact that the Resident, too, was an intermediary; the Resident's place within the Company, as well as his pre-eminent position at court, meant that the munshi

<sup>86</sup> Richard Strachey to J. W. Sherer, 14 Mar. 1812, Richard Strachey Papers, Mss Eur D514/1, OIOC, p. 85.

<sup>87</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing authority in Victorian India', in *The invention of tradition*, (eds) Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1983), pp. 168-169.

<sup>88</sup> For examples of Residents dispensing khilats to munshis see memorandum enclosed in G. Moore, Civil Auditor, to Arthur Henry Cole, 24 Nov. 1815, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/527/12633, OIOC, pp. 8-9; Richard Jenkins to John Adam, 12 Feb. 1816, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/1473/5782, OIOC, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> Ira J. Cohen, *Structuration theory: Anthony Giddens and the constitution of social life* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 210.

<sup>90</sup> Barry Close to Henry Russell, 24 Jun. 1810, Sir Barry Close Papers, Mss Eur D1053, OIOC, n.p.

<sup>91</sup> Extract political letter from Bombay, 2 Mar. 1822, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/762/20696, OIOC, pp. 1-3.

<sup>92</sup> Cohen, *Structuration theory*, p. 151.

was doubly exposed to the caprices of Company and courtly politics. To properly evaluate the munshi's position, his relationship with the Resident needs to be situated within this wider fabric of social relations of which it was a part. In so doing, it becomes clearer how disparate lines of personal and professional affiliation could come into conflict, often to the munshi's disadvantage, as the following section will show.

### **Broadening the scope of analysis**

The Resident was a representative figure who derived his power and authority from his position in the Company; it was this corporate connection which made him valuable as a patron. For one thing, the Company could bring significant economic resources to bear because of its access to British credit. It has been convincingly argued that the Company's army provided more reliable salaries, pensions, and other kinds of benefits for its soldiers, which in turn allowed the Company to monopolize the Indian military market; the same might be said, to some extent, of its Residencies.<sup>93</sup> Although the provision of pensions was only properly institutionalized in the 1830s, from an early period many Residency munshis were provided with life-long salaries or grants of land to reward them for their services, and after their deaths it was not unusual for the Company to continue to support their wives and families.<sup>94</sup> Some munshis were certainly left in dire financial straits, but their petitions to the Company suggest that they had had reasonable expectations of provision for their old age on the basis of these kinds of precedents.<sup>95</sup> Bhugwunt Rao, munshi at the court of Daulat Rao Sindhia, reproached the Governor-General that 'having long served the British Government with fidelity and zeal I am now reduced to great want and ready to expire.' Bhugwunt Rao pointed bitterly to the example of his predecessor in office munshi Kaval Nain, who had been awarded a jagir just a few years previously, arguing that 'I who have been a faithful servant of the British Government for a period of 30 years am better entitled than him to the favour of the honorable Company.'<sup>96</sup> Bhugwunt Rao had been betrayed by the system, but his allusions to the favours to which he felt entitled suggest the financial motivations he might have had for associating himself with the Company in the first place. Enam Allah, a former munshi of the Resident John Collins who also found himself in a dismal financial situation following Collins's death, similarly appealed to 'the established practice of the British Government which abandons none of its servants or dependants to wander abroad in search of bread,' thereby securing for himself a pension of 200 rupees per month.<sup>97</sup>

Perhaps just as enticing was access to the patronage of other Company officials, indeed, to a whole institutional network upon which the munshi could draw for support and assistance. Residents regularly manipulated the munshi's ties to serve their own ends, using the munshi's acquaintance with literati at other courts as a channel for political information.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Randolph G. S. Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha campaigns and the contest for India: the struggle for control of the South Asian military economy* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003), p. 311.

<sup>94</sup> Fisher, *Indirect rule in India*, p. 332. For examples of these arrangements, see John Adam to Richard Jenkins, 17 Aug. 1816, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/1473/57822, OIOC, p. 13; Extract Political Letter from Bombay, 2 Mar. 1822, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/762/20696, OIOC, pp. 1-3.

<sup>95</sup> Mir Ibn Alli to N. B. Edmonstone, 7 Oct. 1810, In-letters 1810 July-Dec, Persian Correspondence, Minto Papers, MS 11583, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, pp. 174-175.

<sup>96</sup> Bhugwunt Rao to Earl of Minto, 13 Jul. 1810, In-letters 1810 July-Dec, Persian Correspondence, Minto Papers, MS 11583, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, pp. 24-25.

<sup>97</sup> Enam Allah to Earl of Minto, received 28 Aug. 1808, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/297/6840, OIOC, p. 6.

<sup>98</sup> Fisher, *Indirect rule in India*, p. 326. For example William Palmer to Marquess Wellesley, 8 Apr. 1799, in G. S. Sardesai (ed.), *Poona records*, vol. VI, pp. 388-90; before war with Tipu, William Palmer's munshi passed on information he'd received from a friend in the service of a rival power that the Peshwa and Sindhia were conspiring to attack the Nizam and form an alliance with Tipu Sultan.

Munshis, however, also cashed in on the Resident's social capital. Given the geographical spread of the Company as an institution, it made sense for munshis to cultivate good relationships with British officials who could help forge connections with patrons in other parts of India. Munshis fully exploited this perk of the job; the correspondence of the Residents is rife with examples of letters written to colleagues on behalf of Indian secretaries. Often it was in pursuit of legal aid, usually respecting the munshi's landholdings or investments in distant parts of the subcontinent. The Resident at Nagpur Richard Jenkins, for instance, appealed to John Baillie, Resident at Lucknow, seeking legal aid for his former munshi, Mir Ghulam, who complained that a person named Saddick Ali was building on a piece of his property in Fyzabad. Jenkins asked Baillie, on behalf of Mir Ghulam, to ensure that the affair would be properly adjudicated.<sup>99</sup> Through access to the Resident's personal and professional network the munshi was also able to enjoy a range of employment opportunities. To take just one example, Mir Kazim Hussain, initially employed by Mountstuart Elphinstone as second in the Persian Department on Elphinstone's mission to Afghanistan, was able, once the mission was over, to acquire a position under Elphinstone's close friend Richard Strachey at Sindhia's camp in 1811.<sup>100</sup> A connection with the Company therefore opened up lines of communication and aid to the munshi which might otherwise have been closed to him. The Resident's position in the Company bureaucracy put him at the center of a network of relationships; this administrative machinery could be set in motion to the munshi's advantage.

At the same time, the nature of the Company as a bureaucratic institution, and the Resident's place as a subordinate within that wider hierarchy, posed problems for the munshi. In particular, there was no guarantee of how long a Resident might remain at court. It could be dangerous for a munshi to rely too heavily on an individual who might well be stationed elsewhere and in any case would likely return permanently to Britain at some point. To some extent, the munshi could expect to benefit from the networks of the Resident or those of the Company more generally to furnish him with employment or other kinds of financial support upon the Resident's departure from court. As previously mentioned, Enam Allah Kah, who declared himself 'dependent on Colonel Collins' and who on Collins death was 'exposed [...] to alarm and distress,' was subsequently able to secure a Company pension.<sup>101</sup> Still, depending upon the circumstances of the Resident's withdrawal, the munshi might be left with nothing. Ibn Ali, for instance, seems to have had a good thing going as Thomas Sydenham's head munshi at Hyderabad. According to Henry Russell, Sydenham's assistant, 'Ibn i Ally has exercised more Authority than ever Uzeez Oolah [his predecessor] did in the very zenith of his Power.' This power had made Ibn Ali an important patron in his own right; Russell referred bitterly to 'the Swarm of Locusts that he has invited from the Countries of the north.' In 1810, however, Thomas Sydenham was disgraced as a result of his imbrication in an army uprising, and consequently forced to return to Britain. Following Sydenham's departure, Ibn Ali was left without protection, and Henry Russell's first act on taking up the Residency was to send him away.<sup>102</sup> Ibn Ali's reversal of fortunes highlights the insecurity of the munshi's position given that the Resident was often his single, unstable link to the Company and its resources. More specifically, it suggests the dangers of acquiring too much power within the Residency; the appearance of influence could alienate the munshi from

<sup>99</sup> Richard Jenkins to John Baillie, 21 Jul. 1811, Letter books of Sir Richard Jenkins, Mss Eur E111, OIOC, pp. 148-149.

<sup>100</sup> Richard Strachey to C. A. Molony, 4 Jan. 1817, Richard Strachey Papers, Mss Eur D514/3, OIOC, p. 225.

<sup>101</sup> Enam Allah Khan to Earl of Minto, received 28 Aug. 1808, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/297/6840, OIOC, p. 5.

<sup>102</sup> Henry Russell to Charles Russell, 31 May 1810, Russell Papers, MSS Eng. lett. D. 151, Bodl. Oxf., p. 93.

other employees of the Company who might, ultimately, replace the Resident upon whose complicity the munshi, to some degree, depended.

It is worth noting that allegations of impropriety, and the appearance of undue influence on the part of a munshi, was also perceived to reflect back on the morals and character of the Resident in question. To return to the previous example, though Henry Russell determined to replace Ibn Ali as head munshi at Hyderabad, he also decided, as he put it, to let the munshi go 'quietly, and without any digging into his past Conduct.' In so doing, Russell was explicitly motivated by 'Delicacy towards Sydenham,' who would be implicated in any misdeeds which Russell might unearth.<sup>103</sup> Bhavani Raman has argued that, in the context of the local revenue office, Company officers often portrayed their Indian subordinates as corrupt in order to deflect these allegations from themselves.<sup>104</sup> In the political line, however, it seems that it was less easy for Residents to dissociate themselves from their munshis. This intimate connection was the subject of scrutiny and suspicion, given broader reformist trends within the Company and Britain at large, whereby accountability and transparency in the civil service were increasingly emphasized.<sup>105</sup> The problem was that in practice the close working relationship between Residents and munshis made questions of responsibility difficult to resolve conclusively; it was hard to determine who to blame when things went wrong, particularly given the Residency's geographical isolation from the Company's administrative centres. The fates of Residents and Residency munshis were thus, to some extent, intertwined; the one was liable to suffer from the misfortunes of the other.

The example of John Baillie and munshi Ali Naqi Khan illustrates this entanglement. Baillie and Ali Naqi Khan had traversed the subcontinent together filling various Company posts over the course of several years before finally settling at the Lucknow Residency. When the munshi faced the potential loss of some landholdings, primarily because of a disputed will, Baillie tried to use his influence with the Nawab Vizier to restore Ali Naqi Khan's property. When his exhortations to the Nawab Vizier proved unsuccessful, Baillie brought the munshi's petition before the government, arguing that the munshi's long service to the Company entitled him to the Governor-General's support. At that time, the then-Governor-General Lord Minto interpreted the munshi's difficulties, and the Vizier's unwillingness to intercede in his favour, as symptomatic of the Vizier's opposition to the Company. Accordingly, Minto pressured the Vizier to restore Ali Naqi Khan's property.<sup>106</sup> A few years later, however, when Marquess Hastings took office as Governor-General, he saw the entire affair in a different light. Hastings viewed the supposed restoration of Ali Naqi Khan's property, a transaction that had taken place without any due investigation into competing claims, as clear proof that Baillie was using the Company's power, and his status as Company representative, for private purposes. In Hastings's mind, Baillie had developed extensive patronage networks which were beginning to spiral out of control, impeding Baillie's foremost responsibility to conciliate the reigning monarch. As Hastings put it, because Baillie's Indian agents were 'essentially recognised depositories of his Power,' Baillie 'could not sacrifice those dependents to His Excellency's indignation without giving up all hope of keeping together a Party,' and was therefore 'constrained to uphold them in confessed opposition to their Sovereign.'<sup>107</sup> In line with this interpretation of the relationship

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: writings and scribes in early colonial south India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 26.

<sup>105</sup> Philip Harling, *The waning of 'Old Corruption': the politics of economical reform in Britain, 1798-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 22.

<sup>106</sup> Extract political letter from Bengal, 24 Jul. 1811, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/372/9249, OIOC, p. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Removal of Lieut. Col. Baillie from Lucknow, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/510/12267, OIOC, p. 114.

between Resident and munshi, the property that had been reclaimed by Ali Naqi Khan was restored to his rivals, and a commission was created to investigate the dispute; John Baillie was removed from Lucknow shortly thereafter.<sup>108</sup> In this case, the personal fortunes of Ali Naqi Khan and John Baillie were subject to shifts in Company personnel and policy, in light of which their relationship came to seem suspicious; in the end, their interests were determined to be dangerously linked.

Figures at court and the surrounding area were equally apt to bracket Residents and munshis together, often to the munshi's disadvantage. To revert to the previous example, when asked to explain the reasons for his conflict with the Resident John Baillie the Vizier blamed the tensions between them on a misunderstanding generated by Baillie's munshi Ali Naqi Khan, claiming 'that Col. Baillie was a good man but that he had been misled by the moonshee.'<sup>109</sup> Similarly, when a petition was presented to the government of Fort St George on behalf of some inhabitants of Travancore, accusing the Resident John Munro of tyranny and corruption, most of the accusations actually centered on the activities of Munro's munshi. Reddy Rao was accused of accepting bribes, and of conferring titles upon the Rani as a pretext for taking gifts from her. Reddy Rao was even blamed for causing a three-month-long famine by ordering merchants not to sell their stores of rice. Colonel Munro was implicated in these crimes only because, as the petition stipulated, 'Colonel Munro reposing all his confidence on his said Dewan Reddee Royer behaves himself pursuant to the said Reddee Royers evil persuasions. So that they seem to have one Soul in two bodies and consequently their conduct is arbitrary and tyrannical.'<sup>110</sup> Conditions in Travancore were thus attributed to Reddy Rao's evil influence rather than to the Resident himself, who was portrayed rather as Reddy Rao's willing puppet. Passages like these are difficult to interpret. It is entirely possible that these munshis did exert a potent influence over the Residents, just as they were accused of doing, but it is also possible that these accusations were made strategically, based on the assumption that the munshi was a more amenable target for criticism than the Resident himself. Generally speaking the influence of munshis is difficult to ascertain, since Residents were unlikely to describe themselves as being under the thumb of their secretaries, though onlookers might describe the relationship in precisely these terms.

Whatever the basis for these accusations might have been, there is no doubt that the munshi's relationship with the Resident placed him in a position of visibility at court which made him susceptible to these kinds of allegations. Indeed, the munshi's association with the Resident seems to have made him an object of antagonism in his own right. This, at least, is what is suggested to us by a petition written by Rajah Kaval Nain, the appointed mediator between the Resident and the Maharajah Daulat Rao Sindhia. Kaval Nain presented himself as an adherent of both parties; as he put it, 'the attachment and loyalty which I have from first to last evinced in my conduct towards the two states is well known and has been often proved.' Sindhia's first minister, however, apparently used Kaval Nain's affiliation with the Company against him in an attempt to reduce the munshi's influence with Sindhia by arguing that Kaval Nain's first loyalty was to the British. Indeed, according to Kaval Nain, the minister 'treated me in a bad and improper manner, in order that no one for the future might exert himself to support the friendship between the states.'<sup>111</sup> Though Kaval Nain claimed never to have lost Sindia's ear, and to be continually advising him to ally with the English (thereby trying, no doubt, to emphasize his own continuing utility to the Company), the first

<sup>108</sup> John Adam to John Baillie, 1 Jul. 1815, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/510/12266, OIOC, p. 40.

<sup>109</sup> Richard Strachey to John Adam, 8 Dec. 1815, Richard Strachey Papers, Mss Eur D514/3, OIOC, p. 18; 19.

<sup>110</sup> Petition of Soobba Royer and Sanagara Lingum Pillary, Extract Fort St. George Political Consultations, 14 October 1813, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/445/10674, OIOC, p. 15.

<sup>111</sup> Kavel Nyne to John Malcolm, 23 Jun. 1805, Home Miscellaneous, IOR/H/625, OIOC, p. 155.

minister nevertheless succeeded in confiscating Kaval Nain's property and expropriating a large sum of the munshi's money, the reacquisition of which was the motive for Kaval Nain's petition to the Governor-General. Kaval Nain certainly had practical reasons for framing events in this way; by presenting his loyalty to the Company as the chief source of his problems at court, he thereby had some justification for holding the Company accountable for his loss. Still, incidents at other courts would appear to support the idea that a munshi's association with the Company could be a liability. Gopal Rao, the Peshwa's agent at the Poona Residency, was also accused of being 'an adherent of the Company,' and consequently was 'much alarmed for his own safety', according to the Resident William Palmer.<sup>112</sup> In the words of Thomas Sydenham, who briefly substituted for Palmer at Poona, 'every person who is at all supported by us, becomes an object of persecution to the Minister.'<sup>113</sup> Not only was the munshi vulnerable to the vagaries of Company policy, but his association with it also made him a target for the jealousies and resentments of the courtly elite.

The antagonism of the court was all the more threatening because the Resident was not a reliable ally against them. From the Resident's perspective, the joint demands of fulfilling his official duties and conciliating the local monarch generally took precedence over his accountability to his Indian staff. The strict lines of authority within the Company sometimes competed with, and in these instances tended to outweigh, links of personal loyalty and dependence. In consequence, the Resident was often prepared to abandon his munshi by the wayside if circumstances seemed to demand it. A single case study will suffice to illustrate this point. In 1801 Resident William Palmer (Resident at Poona 1798-1801) learned that his munshi Mir Fukhir al Din was rumoured to be involved in a conspiracy to depose the current ruler of Poona. One of the conspirators had been arrested, and charges were now being brought against the munshi. The munshi solemnly denied that he had played any part in the scheme. Indeed, Palmer himself recalled the munshi mentioning certain ambiguous advances that had been made to him in the past by some of the conspirators, though neither Palmer nor the mir had then realized the full extent of the plot. Palmer was thus forced to conclude that 'if a mere knowledge of the Intrigue to this extent only is criminal towards the Peshwah, I am as culpable as Meer Fukir ul Dien.' Although Palmer explained away his own silence by claiming that it was not his responsibility to inform the Poona government of any plots against it, he nevertheless felt that circumstances required that he dismiss Mir Fukir al Din from his service, whether the Mir was guilty of the accusations of conspiracy or not. As Palmer put it,

though I know that I not only have a right, but it is my Duty as a public Minister to protect my Servants, until their conduct is proved to be unjustifiable, I will wave these Considerations rather than expose the public Business to interruption or afford the Peshwah a pretext for asserting that I countenance intrigue against his Person and Government.<sup>114</sup>

In short, Palmer sacrificed his munshi to the interests of the Company at the court of Poona, concealing his knowledge of events which might have exculpated the mir. Palmer did not escape from this predicament entirely unscathed; his reputation does seem to have been vaguely tarnished by Mir Fukhir al Din's reputed activities. Henry Russell, for one, blamed Palmer for munshi Mir Fukhir al Din's alleged misconduct; Russell observed that 'under the Ascendancy of Sir Charles's [Malet] Talents and Dignity, he [Mir Fukhir al Din] was honest

<sup>112</sup> William Palmer to Marquess Wellesley, 16 May 1800, Home Miscellaneous, IOR/H/576, OIOC, p. 126. Also William Palmer to Marquess Wellesley, 20 Mar. 1801, Correspondence of William Palmer, Home Miscellaneous, IOR/H/576, p. 631-632.

<sup>113</sup> Thomas Sydenham to Barry Close, 17 Jun. 1805, in G. S. Sardesai (ed.), *Poona records*, vol. X, p. 259.

<sup>114</sup> William Palmer to J. A. Kirkpatrick, 18 Jul. 1801, Private Letters from his Brother James Achilles Kirkpatrick, Papers of Maj-Gen William Kirkpatrick, Mss Eur F228/13, OIOC, pp. 106-109.

and useful; but the weakness and good nature of Colonel Palmer encouraged and permitted him to be a Rogue.’<sup>115</sup> Still, the fact of the matter was that Palmer kept his job and Mir Fakhir al Din lost his; Palmer, given his association with the Company and his status as Resident, was too prestigious to become collateral damage to courtly intrigues.

The Resident would occasionally intercede in the munshi’s favour, but only when personal obligations and public responsibilities were in alignment. For instance, in 1817 Richard Strachey, newly appointed to the position of Political Resident at Lucknow, refused to dismiss Ali Naqi Khan when the Nawab Vizier of Awadh demanded it; Strachey declared that he ‘could not admit the propriety of his [the Vizier’s] interference [...] regarding the members of my household.’<sup>116</sup> Significantly, Richard Strachey described the munshi Ali Naqi Khan as a member of his household, a concept widely current in eighteenth-century Britain and defined in terms of spheres of authority and household management.<sup>117</sup> By attempting to abrogate the Resident’s power within his own household, the monarch was infringing on the Resident’s domestic authority. The Company’s authority was implicated as well on such an occasion; to surrender one of its employees would be tantamount to suggesting that the Company was incapable of looking out for its own. In instances such as these, the Company’s reputation for good faith was perceived to be at stake, and, in the words of John Malcolm in his ‘Notes of instruction’, ‘whenever that is concerned, the tone of our feeling should be very high.’<sup>118</sup> When the Resident at Poona intervened to protect the munshi Byajee Naik against the Peshwa’s first minister, the Resident explicitly justified his intervention on the grounds that it would act as ‘a wholesome check upon the Minister,’ showing him that the Company were prepared to use their influence over the Peshwa when necessary. An association with the Company could, it seems, occasionally counteract the disfavour of notable figures at court; it could not, however, be trusted implicitly in a context when personal and professional affiliations were not infrequently in conflict.

The munshi was therefore often forced to respond to circumstances not of his making, without even being able to place entire reliance on his patron. His position at the intersection of court and Company, though it opened up certain opportunities, also required him to be highly adaptive. The multiple contingencies to which the munshi was subject made the future difficult to judge, requiring him to be acutely attuned to changing circumstances in the present.<sup>119</sup> Though the munshi played a crucial part in the operations of the Residency, he could never quite enjoy the luxury of resting on his laurels and looking with confidence into the future. Like so many cultural brokers in similar situations around the world, maintaining his precarious position required the munshi to be constantly on the alert as he navigated the turbulent waters at the confluence of the local and the global.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationships between Residents and munshis, though in many respects mutually beneficial, were also a recurring source of anxiety and practical difficulty during the early years of the Residency system. The Resident’s attitude towards his munshi was inflected by negative stereotypes of Indian political culture as well as, it would appear, the conventional distrust of a master towards his servant. This relationship was equally coloured by the Resident’s fear of being misled or misrepresented in a context where his grasp of the dominant language and ruling political norms was weak; in this context, the usual lines of

<sup>115</sup> Henry to Charles Russell, 14 Jun. 1810, Russell Papers, MSS Eng. lett. d. 151, Bodl. Oxf., p. 120.

<sup>116</sup> Richard Strachey to John Adam, 5 Dec. 1815, Richard Strachey Papers, Mss Eur D514/3, OIOC, p. 19.

<sup>117</sup> Tadmor, *Family and friends*, p. 20; 24.

<sup>118</sup> Malcolm, ‘Notes of instruction’, in Briggs, *Letters*, p. 218

<sup>119</sup> Emirbayer and Mische, ‘What is agency?’, p. 994.

authority structuring the relationships between master and servant were jeopardized. For Residency munshis, an association with the British Resident had definite practical benefits; the Resident was not only an attractive source of patronage in his own right, but could provide access to a broader patronage network which spanned the subcontinent. Still, the Resident could be unreliable; while in some instances the Resident could protect his munshi from the disfavour of the monarch, his willingness to do so was entirely dependent on circumstances largely outside the munshi's control. Ultimately the Resident prioritized his own interests and those of the Company above the interests of his staff, privileging professional over personal responsibilities. Indeed, because of his intermediary status and his prominent place within the Company and at court, an association with the Resident actually doubled the potential problems from the munshi's perspective by exposing the munshi to scrutiny and suspicion from both British and Indian onlookers.

From the Resident's perspective, too, the munshi posed something of a dilemma. On the one hand, it was feared that Residents who relied too heavily on their munshis were liable to exploitation or suspicions of malversation; from an outsider's perspective, their agency could become indistinguishable from that of the munshi, over whom they feared they could never enjoy complete control. On the other hand, Residents who dispensed with a munshi's services risked committing damaging social and political faux-pas, thereby critically undermining their primary responsibility to conciliate the Indian courtly elite to the Company's interests. To most Residents it seemed clear that there was a balance to be struck somewhere between the two, but where that middle ground was to be found remained a problem. Henry Russell was certain that a munshi was requisite at the Residency, but nevertheless remarked that the particular nature of that employment depended upon 'circumstances casual and fluctuating.' It was up to the Resident to determine, in his words, 'what Business is to be transacted verbally, and what in writing; upon which occasion the Resident is to appear himself, where he is to employ his Assistants, and where he is to confide in a native servant.'<sup>120</sup> The Residents were beginning to acquire greater influence and authority at Indian royal courts, but how this influence could best be expressed and maintained remained unclear at this stage in the history of the Residency system. This lack of definition sometimes created the space and flexibility for the munshi to acquire a position of recognized influence and authority within the Residency, but it was equally likely to make the munshi a target of resentment and distrust.

Circumstances changed as the nineteenth century wore on and the Residency system matured. By the 1830s, the relationship between the Residents and the Residency munshis was increasingly subject to the oversight of the Governor-General-in-Council, who became more and more involved in processes of appointment, promotion, dismissal, and the provision of pensions. At first glance, one might suppose that these trends provided munshis with greater security. Whereas previously the munshi had been vulnerable to the whims of the Resident, with little guarantee of security or right of appeal and little consistency in terms of the award of pensions, by the nineteenth century the institution of formal rules furnished the munshi with clear expectations and solid grounds for making claims against the Company.<sup>121</sup>

Nevertheless, it is also possible that something was lost in the process. As Max Weber observed, 'bureaucracy succeeds the more it is dehumanized – the more it eliminates from official business all feelings of love, hatred, all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation.'<sup>122</sup> The impersonal regulatory apparatus often comes at the cost of older structures of sympathy and obligation. What the munshi might have gained

<sup>120</sup> Henry Russell to Charles Russell, 14 Jun. 1810, Russell Papers, MSS Eng. lett. d. 151, Bodl. Oxf., p. 119.

<sup>121</sup> Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India*, p. 331.

<sup>122</sup> Max Weber, 'Bureaucracy', in *The anthropology of the state: a reader*, (eds) Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), p. 58.



in terms of the acquisition of clearly-defined rights, he may well have lost in terms of his ability to exploit the Residents' social capital and feelings of personal duty. After all, the interference of the Company had the potential to break up partnerships which had previously spanned decades. This process of bureaucratization, rather than eliminating the risks to which the munshi was vulnerable, merely transformed them. Instead of being subject to the whims of the Resident, over whom the munshi could exercise some leverage, he was now increasingly exposed to the vagaries and changing policy of the Company, over which he had far less control. At the same time, as this article has shown, the munshi had long been subject to the impersonal, bureaucratic forces at work in the Company hierarchy. Sometimes the munshi had succeeded in using personal connections to put the Company's formal organizational structures to good use, but the Resident's position within a wider hierarchy meant that to some extent the relationship between the two had always been shaped, at times shattered, by shifts in the Company's higher echelons.

In any event, the working relationship between Company officials and Indian experts had been, and would continue to be, central to the operation of the Company's empire, particularly with regards to the Company's political influence at Indian courts. Some Residents in the latter half of the century did attempt to abolish the position of mir munshi, but Indians continued to play an important part in Residency business.<sup>123</sup> In most contexts around the world imperial administrators found it difficult to avoid drawing on the social and cultural capital of their imperial subjects. In all such cases, these interactions involved a dialectic of control, where the respective parties negotiated, with varying degrees of freedom, their relative positions of autonomy and dependence.<sup>124</sup> Imperial subjects in subordinate positions thus actively sought to improve their circumstances, but under conditions of inequality that made that struggle very difficult indeed. Some imperial intermediaries were able to creatively deploy their skills and expertise to create advantageous relationships of mutual obligation, but one should not underestimate the strength and unpredictability of the forces that operated against them.

<sup>123</sup> Fisher, *Indirect rule in India*, p. 328.

<sup>124</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in world history: power and the politics of difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 14.