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**The Transportation of Narain Sing:
punishment, honour and identity from the Anglo-Sikh Wars to the Great Revolt¹**

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Abstract

This paper examines fragments from the life of Narain Sing as a means of exploring punishment, labour, society and social transformation in the aftermath of the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845-6, 1848-9). Narain Sing was a famous military general who the British convicted of treason and sentenced to transportation overseas after the annexation of the Panjab in 1849. He was shipped as a convict to one of the East India Company's penal settlements in Burma, where in 1861 he was appointed head police constable of Moulmein. Narain Sing's experiences of military service, conviction, transportation and penal work give us a unique insight into questions of loyalty, treachery, honour, masculinity and status. When his life history is placed within the broader context of continuing agitation against the expansion of British authority in

¹ I carried out the research for this paper as Sackler-Caird Senior Research Fellow at the National Maritime Museum. I would like to thank the Museum for its support of my work, and staff at the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (APAC) of the British Library; Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge (CSAS); and Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai (TNSA).

the Panjab, we also glimpse something of the changing nature of identity and the development of Anglo-Sikh relations more broadly between the wars of the 1840s and the Great Indian Revolt of 1857-8.

Introduction

On the afternoon of 23 June 1850, British magistrate of Patna (Bihar) E.H. Lushington wrote a somewhat breathless letter to the secretary to the government of Bengal. He described how the night before, Captain C.M. Cawley, commander of the steamer *Brahmapootra*, had arrived at his house in disarray, to tell a ‘desperate and fatal’ tale. His steamer had been towing a river flat called the *Kaleegunga*, which was carrying a chain gang of 39 convicts from Allahabad to Calcutta along the River Ganges. Like hundreds of men and women each year, the convicts on board were to be imprisoned in the huge jail at Alipur on the outskirts of Calcutta while they awaited their transportation overseas. Their destination was Moulmein in the Tenasserim Provinces, one of the East India Company’s penal settlements in Southeast Asia, and the place to which the British shipped all Indian transportation convicts that year. But this usually routine journey had erupted in violence and bloodshed. About 20 miles from Patna, a ‘notorious Sikh Sirdar’ called Narain Sing had, Lushington reported, broken off the convicts’ irons, raided the vessel’s weapon store, and having seen off the crew and passengers taken charge of the ship. Captain Cawley had run his ship ashore and ‘fled for his life’.

Lushington lost no time, mustering the Behar station guard and a ‘darogah of activity’, and marching overnight with his men to the riverbank in pursuit of the mutineers. He was especially concerned to secure the *gurdwara* (temple) in Patna

city, for it was an important place of Sikh pilgrimage that marked the birthplace of the ninth guru, Gobind Singh. Lushington wrote later of the ‘truly awful’ scene that greeted him when he boarded the ships: ‘The decks of both vessels were dyed with blood at one end lay a man with his stomach ripped open near him was a pool of Blood where it is said a man’s head had been severed from his body besides these there were 2 other corpses and 6 individuals more or less slightly wounded.’ There was no sign of the convict mutineers, and so Lushington sent several parties out in search of them while he began his investigation. It seemed at first that the mutiny began during the daily routine of washing and bathing. When the common chain that linked the leg irons of one half of the convict *challan* (chain gang) was opened, and the other half locked, the prisoners ‘rose simultaneously’, seizing 18 muskets that unaccountably had been left within armed reach of their quarters.² The outbreak was brutal and ruthless; the mutineers even threw overboard two wounded convicts to ensure that they were not alive to give evidence against them.³ In his later report of events, commander of the Behar station guard Captain H.M. Nation claimed that the convicts had taken advantage of a ‘few and careless’ guard, writing that little more could have been expected of such low paid men.⁴ Chief Mate John Chew added that the 16 guards on board – eight sepoy and eight specially hired *burkundazes* - ‘even

² APAC India Office Records (henceforth IOR) P/143/51 (Bengal Judicial 31 July 1850): E.H. Lushington, Magistrate of Patna, to J.P. Grant, Secretary to Government Bengal, 23 June 1850.

³ IOR P/SEC/IND/166 (India Secret 27 Sept. 1850): R. Lawther, Commissioner Fourth Division Allahabad, to R. Thornton, Officiating Secretary to Government NWP, 19 July 1850.

⁴ IOR P/143/51 (Bengal Judicial 31 July 1850): Captain H.M. Nation, Commanding Behar Station Guards, to Grant, 25 June 1850.

said that they were not going to risk their lives for 3 Rupees'.⁵ Like Lushington, Captain Nation had no doubt who had led the uprising: 'when I mention the name of "Narain Sing" a Sikh General and 4 of his subordinates as amongst the convicts,' he remarked, 'it will be sufficient answer to the success of the enterprise.'⁶

Narain Sing's identity needed no further elaboration at the time, for he was well known as a military leader who had fought against the British in the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845-6, 1848-9). In the aftermath of the annexation of the Panjab (1849), he was found guilty of treason and sentenced to transportation for life. His journey into exile began on the *Kaleegunga*. And yet it is intriguing that this extraordinary mid nineteenth-century military figure barely figures in histories of either colonial India or the Panjab. This paper will use archival remnants of Narain Sing's life as a means of opening up three related questions, and thus working through the historiographical meaning of his near-anonymity. The first centres on a consideration of the broader social meanings that we might attribute to the differential treatment of different types of convicts – 'ordinary' and 'political' – by the British during this period. The second is concerned with the relationship between such difference and the political economy of colonial labour regimes. Third, and perhaps most significantly, Narain Sing gives us important insights into society and social transformation during the 1840s-60s, most particularly with respect to enhancing our understanding of shifts in British-Sikh relations. Historians have established that ideas about Sikh cruelty and betrayal during the Anglo-Sikh Wars gave way to admiration for Sikh bravery and loyalty during the

⁵ IOR P/143/51 (Bengal Judicial 31 July 1850): Lushington to Grant, 10 July 1850, enc. Committee of Inquiry, 8 July 1850. The arrangements for the guard are detailed at: IOR P/144/5 (Bengal Judicial 23 July 1851): B.J. Colvin, Register Nizamat Adalat, to Grant, 10 July 1851, enc. F.J. Lougham, Sessions Judge Patna, to E.A. Samuells, Officiating Register Nizamat Adalat, n.d. Mar. 1851.

⁶ IOR P/143/51 (Bengal Judicial 31 July 1850): Nation to Grant, 25 June 1850.

Great Revolt of 1857-8.⁷ And yet we know little about the intervening years. A close reading of Narain Sing's transformation from military general to transportation convict allows us to explore the period 1849-57 in these respects in more depth. Moreover, his social biography is of broader significance to our understanding of the changes to and solidification of colonial identities in the period after the transition from East India Company to direct British rule in 1858.

Service, Salt and Status

During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, from his base in Lahore, the great Panjab ruler Ranjit Singh revived prosperity and extended state patronage to build an empire across the north west of the Indian subcontinent. With disciplined infantry and artillery at his disposal, and through the incorporation of Hindus and Muslims into a Sikh dominated ruling class, Ranjit Singh ejected a series of local leaders and established a vast military empire that, by the time he died in 1839, stretched from the river Sutlej in the south to the mountain ranges in the north - north west of the region. In the context of the expansion of British influence across India, Ranjit Singh's death marked the beginning of the end for local sovereignty. The East India Company took advantage of a series of power struggles that erupted in the nobility, coupled with the growing influence of the army in the region, to bring forward its ambitions for annexation. When the Lahore army crossed the Sutlej river at the end of 1845, the British claimed that it was an act of aggression and so declared war. During the

⁷ Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: culture in the making*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985; David Omissi, *The Sepoy and The Raj: the Indian army, 1860-1940*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1994.

military campaigns that followed, both sides suffered heavy losses, but eventually after a series of battles through the winter of 1845-6 and into 1848-9 (the First and Second Anglo-Sikh Wars respectively), the Company annexed the Panjab. In a single stroke, it extended its influence across north India: from Calcutta in the east to the North-West Frontier.⁸

At the time of annexation in March 1849, Narain Singh was an officer in the Sikh Irregular Horse under the command of the rebel governor of Multan, Mul Raj. During 1847, the British had chipped away at Mul Raj's authority and influence, eventually forcing him to resign his post. However, his troops stood to lose a great deal from this shift in power and in April 1848 they attacked and killed two British officers, Patrick Vans Agnew and William Anderson, thus manoeuvring Mul Raj into leading a revolt.⁹ During the second half of 1848 Narain Singh was active under Mul Raj's leadership in the districts between Multan and Lahore, but in the face of a series of decisive British victories, both men surrendered in January 1849. Narain Singh claimed later that he had been led to believe that he would be 'favourably received'.¹⁰ However, the British placed him in custody in Lahore jail, where Mul Raj joined him a few days later.

Mul Raj was found guilty of having been an accessory to the murders of Vans Agnew and Anderson, and was transferred as a state prisoner to a disused chapel in Fort William (Calcutta) with a view to his eventual transportation to the Company's

⁸ J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab (revised edition)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, ch. 6.

⁹ Grewal, *The Sikhs*, pp. 125-127.

¹⁰ IOR F/4/2527: Petition of Sikh prisoner Narain Singh, 12 Dec. 1851; IOR P/205/44 (Foreign Judicial Dec. 1863): petition of Narain Singh, Moulmein, 31 July 1863, enc. Statement of Seik Prisoner Sirdar Narain Singh, n.d. Events were widely reported; see for instance *The Times*, 24 May 1849.

penal settlement at Singapore. At the time his health was so poor that Governor-General Dalhousie believed that he would not survive the journey. Dalhousie alluded to the cultural fear of shipboard voyages shared by people of rank from all religious communities when faced with the prospect of close physical proximity to their social inferiors – shared fetters, latrines, water pumps, and cooking pots - and their common strategy of preventing cultural diminution by eating only uncooked rations. He wrote: ‘I believe that the distress on religious grounds, the agitation, the want of ordinary food, and the sea, would kill him’. Nervous that his death would arouse widespread sympathy - in Dalhousie’s words ‘would give for him the pity and admiration which attach to martyrdom of any kind’ - he decided to keep him in Calcutta over the summer before making a decision on his fate.¹¹ However, Mul Raj’s health declined further, and he died shortly after the British ordered his transfer to Fort Chunar near Benares for a ‘change of air’.¹²

In October 1849, the British Board of Administration at Lahore put Narain Sing on trial on a charge of treason. It found him guilty and sentenced him to transportation for life. Central to understanding his sentence was the claim that he had been made ‘an especial exception among the prisoners who surrendered during the war’. This was in large part because of his ‘many cruelties’, including cutting off the hands of a man who had fallen as a supplicant at his feet. He was, it was said, ‘a most dangerous

¹¹ Note on the file in the Governor’s office, regarding Mool Raj and Bhaee Maharaj Singh, 23 Mar. 1850, cited in Nahar Singh, ed., *Documents relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh, with an introduction by M.L. Ahluwalia*, Gurdwara Karamsar, Ludhiana, Sikh History Source Material Association, 1968 (henceforth *Documents relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh*), 142-143.

¹² Hugo James, *A Volunteer’s Scramble Through Scinde, the Punjab, Hindostan, and the Himalayah Mountains*, London, W. Thacker and Co., 1854, 170-171.

man, clever and cruel'.¹³ The first part of Narain Sing's penal journey was a march to Agra with 13 other state prisoners under the guard of the 17th Native Infantry. The commissioner of Lahore warned that Narain Sing had 'considerable influence', and should be well secured.¹⁴ From Agra, Narain Sing went on to Allahabad, where he was transferred to the *Kaleegunga* for the journey up the Ganges to the holding jail for transportation convicts at Alipur, just outside Calcutta. Amongst the *Kaleegunga* convicts was another state prisoner called Golaub Sing, who had been convicted of treason in Lahore three months before Narain Sing.¹⁵

It is clear from this brief account that Narain Sing was no ordinary prisoner, but rather a man of 'political importance'.¹⁶ Indeed, when he began his journey into transportation, officials in the Northwest Provinces were keenly aware of his social and political status. Narain Sing himself later claimed that when he was taken from Lahore to Agra: 'I was treated and ranked as a Sirdar'. He complained that on arrival in the city his belongings – an unusually large quantity for a convict, including clothing, cloth and blankets, a range of iron and brass cooking pots and pans, and

¹³ IOR P/205/44 (Foreign Judicial Dec. 1863): Officiating Secretary to Government Panjab to Secretary to Government of India, 29 Sept. 1863.

¹⁴ IOR F/4/2482: R. Montgomery, Commissioner and Superintendent Lahore, to P. Melvill, Secretary to Board of Administration, 11 Jan. 1850.

¹⁵ IOR P/144/12: List of 58 convicts for Moulmein *per Fire Queen*, 9 Dec. 1851. This was not Rajah Gulab Singh of Jammu and Kashmir.

¹⁶ IOR P/SEC/IND/166 (India Secret 27 Sept. 1850): Minute of Governor-General Dalhousie, 19 July 1850. See also: IOR P/233/16 (NWP Judicial Oct. 1850): H.M. Elliott, Secretary to Government of India, to Thornton, 25 July 1850.

even a mirror¹⁷ - and servants were taken away. He was, he opined, 'in no respect better than the felon and murderer in the Jail'.¹⁸ This sudden reduction in his social standing perhaps explains some further particulars added to his descriptive roll by a clerk. On admission to prison he was 'turbulent abusive to jail officers', and took off his handcuffs 'like a pair of gloves', throwing them at the *mohurir* 'with some insulting remarks'.¹⁹

Inspector of Prisons W.H. Woodcock reported that when Narain Sing was made over to him in Agra, he had been warned that he was 'a desperate character ... who would probably abuse his influence'. He requested a party of sepoy to escort him on to Allahabad. Nine of his fellow convicts were to be imprisoned in the jail there, and five, including Narain Sing, were to be forwarded to Alipur.²⁰ But it seems that though Woodcock's warnings were heeded for part of the journey, no special measures were taken for the men's river transfer out of Allahabad.²¹ The commander of the *Kaleegunga*, John Stout, stated later that he had been given no details of the convicts 'beyond that of their being life prisoners'.²² According to the officiating magistrate in Patna, it was the 'gross carelessness and neglect' in this respect that

¹⁷ IOR P/144/5 (Bengal Judicial 23 July 1851): List of prisoners sentenced to transportation beyond seas – despatched from the Agra jail to the Superintendent of Allipore [Alipur], 10 Apr. 1850 (no. 6 'Narayan Singh').

¹⁸ IOR P/205/44 (Foreign Judicial Dec. 1863): petition of Narain Sing, Moulmein, 31 July 1863, enc. Statement of Seik Prisoner Sirdar Narain Sing, n.d. (Sirdar = person of high rank).

¹⁹ IOR P/144/12: List of 58 convicts for Moulmein *per Fire Queen*, 9 Dec. 1851.

²⁰ IOR P/233/10 (NWP Judicial Feb. 1850): W.H. Woodcock, Inspector of Prisons NWP, to Thornton, 19 Feb. 1850.

²¹ IOR P/233/16 (NWP Judicial Oct. 1850): Thornton to Elliott, 14 Aug. 1850.

²² IOR P/143/51 (Bengal Judicial 31 July 1850): Lushington to Grant, 10 July 1850, enc. Committee of Inquiry, 8 July 1850.

caused the outbreak.²³ Further, it emerged later on that at times the guard had been armed with bayonets only, because most of the muskets were unserviceable and there was little ammunition.²⁴

This failure in communication reflected a broader ambivalence on the part of the British about the appropriate treatment of Narain Sing and the other military prisoners. The superintendent of police in the Lower Provinces, W. Dampier, believed that the outbreak on the *Kaleegunga* was the result of ‘uncalled for degradation’. He wrote: ‘I consider that the sending down [of] Narain Sing and the other Sikh Sirdars, certainly men of some rank and Soldiers ... chained up with Thugs and Murderers of all castes and descriptions to have been a considerable aggravation of their sentence’. To Dampier, that he had been convicted of high treason was immaterial.²⁵ The governor general disagreed, pointing out that although convicted ‘mainly’ of treason, Narain Sing was also found guilty of robbery, cruelty, and ‘every ruffainly crime’.²⁶ Nevertheless, as we will see, dissenting sentiments like those of Dampier continued when Narain Sing faced trial for a second time, for offences connected with the *Kaleegunga* mutiny.

Engendering Mutiny

²³ IOR P/SEC/IND/166 (India Secret 27 Sept. 1850): G.D. Turnbull, Officiating Magistrate Allahabad, to R. Sawther, Commissioner Fourth Division Allahabad, 29 June 1850.

²⁴ IOR P/144/5 (Bengal Judicial 23 July 1851): Colvin to Grant, 10 July 1851, enc. Lougham to Samuells, n.d. Mar. 1851.

²⁵ IOR F/4/2484: Extract letter W. Dampier, Superintendent of Police Lower Provinces, to Grant, 20 Sept. 1850.

²⁶ IOR F/4/2484: Extract letter Under Secretary to Government of India to Under Secretary to Government Bengal, 29 Oct. 1850.

By the end of July, all the escaped *Kaleegunga* convicts who had survived the outbreak (24 in total) had been captured.²⁷ Narain Sing made a statement that was corroborated by some of the guards and thus deemed ‘worthy of some dependence’.²⁸ According to his account a convict had hidden a file and used it to cut one of the two long chains fettering the convicts together. On the day of the uprising, at some time between 4.00 and 4.30 pm, when it was time for the daily routine of going on deck to perform ablutions, the convicts on this side of the chain said that they did not want to go. The guards therefore unlocked the convicts on the other side, including Narain Sing. They went to the side of the ship – where as was normal practice convicts urinated, voided their bowels or threw overboard rag-bound packets of solid waste – and Narain Sing gave a shout, the agreed signal for mutiny. The convicts on the other (cut) chain got free, and together the men overcame their guards. It had been well organized; small groups of four or five convicts went for each guard, stealing their muskets and forcing them overboard. Another group of convicts took the spare muskets and ammunition belts. They stayed on board for a couple of hours, plundered some cloth and money, and then got into another boat, crossed the river, and fled.²⁹

²⁷ IOR P/SEC/IND/166 (India Secret 27 Sept. 1850): Melville to Elliot, 26 July 1850.

²⁸ IOR P/143/51 (Bengal Judicial 31 July 1850): Lushington to Grant, 10 July 1850. For a reconstruction of events see also: IOR P/144/5 (Bengal Judicial 23 July 1851): Colvin to Grant, 10 July 1851, enc. Lougham to Samuells, n.d. Mar. 1851.

²⁹ IOR P/143/51 (Bengal Judicial 31 July 1850): Lushington to Grant, 10 July 1850, enc. Committee of Inquiry, 8 July 1850; IOR P/SEC/IND/166 (India Secret 27 Sept. 1850): Lushington to Grant, 5 Aug. 1850; IOR P/144/5 (Bengal Judicial 23 July 1851): Colvin to Grant, 10 July 1851, enc. Lougham to Samuells, n.d. Mar. 1851.

Despite their initial success, it was not long before the British had captured the escaped men and moved swiftly to set up a formal committee of inquiry.³⁰ It decided that the convicts involved would face trial in Patna, on charges of escaping from punishment and murdering three and seriously wounding one of their guards. The trial took place over 11 days in February and March 1851.³¹ The judges of the court sentenced three of the convicts - Narain Sing, Nutha, and Janna - to death, though recommended their pardon. This reflected their more general concern that it was impossible to establish that all the convicts had participated actively in the outbreak, as opposed to having been present when it took place. During the trial only Narain Sing was identified positively, and only then by the commander and first mate. Other witnesses failed to single him out during identity parades. This was hardly surprising given the pandemonium that had prevailed on the mutinous *Kaleegunga*; difficulties in positive identification were a common feature of mutiny investigations and trials during the first half of the nineteenth century.³² But the judges' recommendation for mercy went deeper than this, for it reflected disagreements between them about the implications of the sharply differentiated social status of the convicts on board.

Sessions Judge F.J. Lougham hinted that Captain Cawley had been unwilling to name Narain Sing individually, most likely because he knew that if he were convicted he would be sentenced to death. Thus Cawley's testimony had shifted radically.

³⁰ IOR P/143/51 (Bengal Judicial 31 July 1850): Lushington to Grant, 10 July 1850, enc. Committee of Inquiry, 8 July 1850.

³¹ Unless indicated otherwise, the material on the trial is taken from IOR P/144/5 (Bengal Judicial 23 July 1851): Colvin to Grant, 10 July 1851, enc. Lougham to Samuells, n.d. Mar. 1851.

³² Clare Anderson (2005), 'The Feringees are Flying - the ship is ours!': the convict middle passage in colonial South and Southeast Asia, 1790-1860, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, **41,3**: 143-186.

Initially, he said that he had seen Narain Sing with a musket and, later, that Narain Sing had not participated in the uprising and that he could not remember if he had been armed. We need to think about Captain Cawley's changing claim in the context of his respect for Narain Sing's rank and status. When he was arrested, Narain Sing stated that he had been driven to escape by the hardship of altered treatment since his initial capture in the Panjab. His daily allowance had been reduced from 100 rupees to three pice per day, and he had been 'chained with out castes'. Sessions Judge Lougham's opinion is worth citing at length, for it reveals something of contemporary beliefs about the social meaning of equality before the law:

[H]e was a Molitar Officer of some rank and of importance under the Dewan and as such, and particularly as a man of caste, the ignominy of being treated as a common felon chained with the lowest criminals such as Thugs, Dacoits, and Murderers, and with sweepers by caste, to all [of] which he was subjected must have been to him, as he himself states less supportable than death ... In the present age of advanced civilization offenders against the state of any rank and consideration in society if not deemed worthy of death are not usually in the British Dominions at least treated with the degree of severity used towards this Prisoner in their confinement ... It would not be dispensing equal justice, if while the felons with whom he was associated on their way to undergo a sentence of transportation for life who had almost all be convicted of Murder coupled with Thuggee, Gang Robbery, Burglary &c had been sentenced only to transportation. This prisoner for aiding and abetting in murder under circumstances of far less atrocity and as a means of escaping should be adjudged to suffer death.

Lougham disagreed with the court's recommendation that the two other convicts found guilty, Natha and Janna, should be recommended for pardon along with Narain Sing. They were 'hardened offenders', he argued, transported for 'murder by thuggee'. Accordingly, he advised their execution.

Also significant in the debate about the appropriate punishment of Narain Sing was his conduct during the outbreak, which was in itself represented through the lens of colonial expectations attached to a man of his military standing. Narain Sing drew attention to his *subkut o joweer nurdee*, or 'successful bravery'.³³ Despite earlier representations of his ruthlessness and cruelty, near-romantic accounts of his honourable and gentlemanly conduct on the *Kaleegunga* emerged. The passengers on board included Sergeant Michael Cunningham, his wife Mary, and their two children, one a babe in arms. Though there were discrepancies in their account of the mutiny – Mary spoke in court a year afterwards of how she had tried to forget about it – it seems that Narain Sing intervened against the wishes of the other convicts on board to save her life. This is what she said:

[The convicts] took my husband who had my eldest child in his arms on deck. I was following with my youngest child when they ordered me to remain where I was afore ... shortly after that a number of them that is the prisoners came to the door of the cabin and asked me if I could set the steamer going and work the engines I said no. They then called me whether I know where the treasure chest was, I said I did not. They then asked me to point the Lahar Mistree [carpenter] to take their irons off, when I said I did not know, nor where any thing on board the steamer was [one or

³³ Description of Narain Sing's petition dated 2 July 1850 but not included in Lougham's account of the trial proceedings (IOR P/144/5 Bengal Judicial 23 July 1851).

more of the convicts said] kill her, she is a Feeringhee [foreigner], when one of the gang who was in a stooping position said as she has got two young children spare her. He then turned to me and said you are my mothers and fathers³⁴ it is not to take your life that we are doing this it is to get away with our own lives.

Though she could not be certain – even when the judges made him say a few words before her so that she could hear his voice – the implication was that her saviour was Narain Sing. Indeed, one of his co-defendants, convict Nutha, stated that he had seen Narain Sing prevent a third man from killing Mary Cunningham. ‘I am already involved in one trouble and now another trouble will come upon me’, he claimed he had had said to the man. ‘Do not kill the Saheb and the Maam, run away.’ Mary’s husband Michael appeared in a much less favourable light. He testified that he had jumped overboard, leaving his wife and children to an uncertain fate. As Captain Nation put it later on, the disgrace Narain Sing’s actions cast on the character of Europeans ‘is not to be contemplated without regret’.³⁵

Narain Sing sought to distance himself from the mutiny altogether, stating in court that he had told the *havildar* of the guard of the planned uprising, and had only escaped because he feared that due to his rank and standing he would be held accountable. Furthermore, he claimed, he had prevented the convicts from plundering the treasure on board and from setting fire to the ships, as well as having saved the life

³⁴ In all probability ‘mothers and fathers’ is a translation of *mabap* – a common term for colonial officers - in the original Hindustani.

³⁵ IOR P/143/51 (Bengal Judicial 31 July 1850): Nation to Under Secretary to Government Bengal, 25 June 1850.

of Mary Cunningham and her children.³⁶ These were to be recurrent themes in his letters to government over the coming years. ‘All the convicts then got enraged with me saying that you have connived at the Saheb’s escape; now we will ill treat the lady and kill her ... I told them so long as I am here, no one in my presence will be allowed to kill her – first they must kill me then [they] can approach the lady’, he wrote in one petition of 1851.³⁷

Narain Sing’s alignment with the British vis-à-vis gendered honourable conduct went further still, as he criticized Company sepoy’s actions during the Anglo-Sikh Wars. He lamented the treatment of the women of his household by British troops during their military campaigns in the Panjab. He complained that his wife, daughter, and female slaves had been treated in ‘a most disgraceful manner, which is a very shameful thing, such treatment is never allowed by any sovereign to a person faithful to his master.’ And, moreover, he claimed that on learning of this the ‘enraged’ General Whish (who had led the 1848-9 siege of Multan) ordered the women’s return. His account of events substantively anticipated the colonial response to actual or threatened violence against European women by mutineer-rebels during 1857-8, and thus reveals something of shared expectations around the protection of women in wartime. But it also drew on associated discourses and practices associated with military service. Narain Sing wrote of his bafflement at being punished: ‘when a person renders service to another nation that nation supports and maintains that person’, and: ‘I have not eaten salt belonging to the Company I have eaten [Mul

³⁶ Description of Narain Sing’s petition dated 2 July 1850 but not included in Lougham’s account of the trial proceedings (IOR P/144/5 Bengal Judicial 23 July 1851).

³⁷ IOR F/4/2527: Translation of the Petition of Narain Singh, 12 Dec. 1851.

Raj's] salt.'³⁸ His words were echoed by fellow Panjabi state prisoner Ram Sing, who had served under Mul Raj and wrote in a petition seeking remission of sentence: it was a servant's 'duty to do as he is told'.³⁹

Government took into consideration Narain Sing's 'position and conduct' and decided to follow the judges' recommendation of a commutation of the death sentence. That he was 'a Sikh officer of rank' sentenced for treason, and yet had been fettered with thugs and dacoits and 'made to associate with sweepers', informed its clemency. But of enormous relevance to its decision also was the 'humanity' he had shown in saving European lives. In rescuing Mary Cunningham from the convict mob, Narain Sing had demonstrated honour and courage - in stark contrast to her husband Michael, whose cowardly behaviour in the face of danger so disgraced the British. Government ordered the commutation of the other two convicts' capital sentences too, in their case because there was no direct evidence against them.⁴⁰ It ordered the transportation of all three men 'with due care and precaution as regards the character and caste of the prisoners'.⁴¹

As they awaited their transportation, the *Kaleegunga* convicts were kept separate from other inmates in Patna's Mithapur jail, fettered in double leg irons and handcuffs, and chained together and padlocked to a window bar at night. Narain Sing was kept in solitary confinement under a strong guard. The convicts' spirit of

³⁸ IOR F/4/2527: Translation of the Petition of Narain Singh, 12 Dec. 1851.

³⁹ IOR P/201/62 (India Foreign 25 July 1856): J.C. Haughton, Magistrate in charge of Moulmein jail, to A. Bogle, Commissioner Tenasserim and Martaban Provinces, 10 May 1856, enc. petition of Ram Sing, formerly ex-wuzeer of Noorpoor and now a life convict in the jail at Moulmein.

⁴⁰ IOR F/4/2484: Minute of Messrs Colvin and Dumbar, case of Narayan Singh and others; Grant to Register Sudder Court, 23 July 1851.

⁴¹ IOR P.144.12: List of 58 convicts for Moulmein *per Fire Queen*, 9 Dec. 1851.

resistance remained intact; an escape attempt was foiled only through the quick thinking of the turnkey, who had noticed two convicts free from irons, and so raised the alarm. It seems that the convicts had concealed files in the prison ward, and had started to knock a hole through the brickwork of the privy wall.⁴² Magistrate Lushington reported a few months later that they continued openly to make escape plans. Thus the convicts were divided into two batches, and taken on to Calcutta separately. Lushington was especially keen to avoid complaints of ill treatment on the part of Narain Sing.⁴³

The politics of punishment in Southeast Asia

As late as 1848, 20 years after the British annexed Burma, there were only 150 locally convicted prisoners in the Tenasserim Provinces. The remainder were all convicts from the Indian mainland, transported by the East India Company to clear land and build roads. They worked in labour gangs during the day, and were kept in the flimsy wooden bungalows that served as jails at night.⁴⁴ Their numbers grew exponentially, and more permanent prison buildings were constructed. In 1856 there were 236 convicts in Mergui jail and 1460 in Moulmein; by 1858, the average daily jail population in the provinces was 2,421.⁴⁵

⁴² IOR P/144/5 (Bengal Judicial 23 July 1851): Lushington to Grant, 29 Apr. 1851.

⁴³ IOR P/144/6 (Bengal Judicial 20 Aug. 1851): Lushington to Grant, 8 Aug. 1851; J.W. Dalrymple, Under Secretary to Government Bengal, to Lushington, 19 Aug. 1851.

⁴⁴ John Furnivall (1939), The Fashioning of Leviathan, *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, **29,1**: (1939), 36-37, 43.

⁴⁵ IOR P/144/45 (Bengal Judicial 7 Aug. 1856): Return shewing space available for convicts in the Moulmain Jail, 30 June 1856.

As we will see, Narain Sing's experience of penal transportation was in many ways radically different to that of the convict mass. And yet he was also imbricated in a common experience, for colonial encounters like those played out in the Panjab during the 1840s and in Burma in the 1850s and 60s became bound up with British efforts to seek social alignments with Indians of rank and status, and to punish and to reform supposedly undesirable elements of Indian society. The process of punishment and reformation was effected simultaneously through huge jail building and outdoor penal labour programmes in Bengal and the Northwest Provinces from the 1830s on, through the East India Company's continuation of pre-colonial forms of confinement in military forts and other secure locations, and through the use of penal settlements and colonies across Southeast Asia (Andaman Islands, Straits Settlements and Burma) and the Indian Ocean (Aden, Mauritius). It was connected also to broader associations between penal sanction, penal labour, and the political economy of East India Company expansion: or, to put it simply, to the tangled histories of the geographies of confinement and colonization. But also significant is what Narain Sing's transportation reveals about the social alignments that the colonial administration made with its subjects with respect to shared assumptions about the nature and meaning of, and the expectations attached to, military rank, social status, and most significantly masculinity and honour. I have already touched upon these in my discussion of Narain Sing's conduct during the *Kaleegunga* mutiny. However, they also informed some of the unintended outcomes of transportation – not as the practice of social rupture, social levelling, and shame intended by the judicial authorities in India, but as a hierarchical space within and through which new culturally and otherwise ambitious identities could emerge in distant overseas locations.

The movement of prisoners and transportation convicts across the Indian mainland and around the Bay of Bengal connected Company settlements together geographically and created new social networks and routes for the flow of information. It is tempting to imply that convict mobility constituted a sort of borderless penal cosmopolitanism in this respect. But, as we will see, an analysis of Narain Sing's transportation reveals something of the multiple fractures within oft-times competing discourses around convictism in and across South and Southeast Asia, and challenges the temptation to represent Indian prisons and penal settlements collectively or commonly as a discrete colonial space. Indeed, unlike Indian jails – at least officially - Company penal settlements overseas incorporated multiple layers of social differentiation, mainly around time served and individual compliance with labour demands. Convicts could climb the rungs of the penal ladder to achieve positions of relative authority, overseeing the work of their fellow convicts. This was much to the disgust of a steady stream of colonial commentators who felt that for Indians this prospect rendered transportation preferable to incarceration on the mainland, if not easier than other forms of labour service or bondage, or even the insecurities of paid work.

Narain Sing's transportation highlights a second form of social differentiation in the penal settlements too, that produced not out of penal service but out of the status and position of individuals prior to trial and conviction. On occasion, favourable treatment such as exemption from labour or fetters was written explicitly into sentences of transportation. But it was also created out of the limited resources of Company officials in managing convicts, and their daily encounters with the felons under their charge. The differential experience of transportation convicts in this respect had much in common with the informal practices associated with the management of prisoners

in Indian jails,⁴⁶ and so reveals something of the tensions of transportation as both a cosmopolitan and an intensely local penal practice.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the overwhelming majority of transportation convicts from India were found guilty of civil offences, usually involving violence against the person or murder, but sometimes burglary, robbery and gang robbery, or forgery. Narain Sing, however, was part of a small minority of convicts who were transported within the context of violent collective resistance to the expansion of the East India Company's territorial control, or the specifically political offences of rebellion or treason. For example: at the turn of the nineteenth century, among transported convict offenders were Chuar rebels from the tribal areas of Midnapur in the Bengal Presidency, in rebellion against the British.⁴⁷ In the south, in 1802 the Company shipped Poligar rebels overseas from Tirunelveli District to Penang.⁴⁸ The British also shipped Konds from central Orissa to Moulmein, after military campaigns in 1835.⁴⁹ It transported Santals to Akyab in Arakan (Burma) in the aftermath of the 1855 *hul* (rebellion).⁵⁰ Of further regional significance was the shipment of Kandyan rebels from Ceylon to Mauritius after the Great Rebellion of

⁴⁶ David Arnold, 'The Contested Prison: India 1790-1945', in Frank Dikötter and Ian Brown, eds, *Cultures of Confinement: A History of the Prison in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, London, Hurst, 147-184.

⁴⁷ Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815-53*, 31-32.

⁴⁸ TNSA Madras Judicial Vol. 188A: J. Munro, Magistrate Tirunelveli, to J.M. Macleod, Secretary to Government Madras, 22 July 1825.

⁴⁹ TNSA Madras Judicial, Vol. 304B: H.G.A. Taylor, Commander Northern Division, to H. Chamier, Secretary to Government Madras, 26 Jan. 1836.

⁵⁰ Clare Anderson (2008), 'The Wisdom of the Barbarian': rebellion, incarceration and the Santal body politic', *South Asia: journal of South Asian studies*, **31,2**: 223-240.

1817-18, which though a colonial rather than a Company settlement was also a place of transportation for Indian convicts at the time.⁵¹ This was the start of a close penal relationship between India and Ceylon, and Ceylon sent convicts to Company settlements into the 1840s and beyond.

When dealing with ‘political’ offenders, the British used transportation overseas alongside mainland banishment and exile. These were sanctions that dated from pre-colonial penal regimes. Simultaneous to the removal of political enemies to penal settlements across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean was the imprisonment of offenders in forts, or prohibition against their return to natal villages and towns. Thus whilst some faced transportation other Poligar rebels were banished from their home districts of Coimbatore and Madura during the early 1800s.⁵² Santals were removed from the Santal Parganas and incarcerated in jails across the Bengal Presidency after 1855.⁵³ Wajid Ali Shah, the deposed King of Awadh, was detained in Garden Reach in Calcutta from 1856 to 1859, after the British took the opportunity to arrest him when he fell ill in the city on the way to London to plead the case against British annexation of the state. Sentences of transportation and banishment were often viewed as more appropriate than capital punishment because they ruptured networks of political ‘intrigue’ without risking the elevation of rebels to heroic status or martyrdom. At the same time, they were one element of a colonial propaganda of merciful and benevolent government in the years before the Great Revolt of 1857-8.

⁵¹ Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean*, p. 44.

⁵² TNSA Madras Judicial Vol. 152A: W. Ormsby, Superintendent of Police Madras, to D. Hill, Secretary to Government Madras, 25 Sept. 1820; Hill to Ormsby, 27 Oct. 1820.

⁵³ Anderson, ‘The Wisdom of the Barbarian’.

In the aftermath of the Anglo-Sikh Wars, the Company employed this sort of mixed penal economy - exile, banishment, and transportation - to remove its military opponents from the Panjab. It detained some important leaders in Fort William including, as we have seen, Mul Raj, and confined others in Allahabad and Fort Chunar, near Benares.⁵⁴ It transported more to Southeast Asia, including Narain Sing and his shipmate Golaub Sing.⁵⁵ Preceding both men was Ram Sing, ex-wuzer (prime minister) of Nurpur, a rebel from across the Jhelum River north of Multan. He had been sentenced not to transportation *per se*, but to 'life banishment across seas', effectively the same sentence, in October 1849.⁵⁶

Transportation overseas offered the potential for radical changes in identity, for it presented an opportunity for individuals and communities to reposition themselves according to new hierarchies, opportunities and constraints. Despite perceptions of the dangerousness and rebelliousness in India, both convicted thugs and Santals, for instance, became desirable convicts in the Burmese penal settlements. In 1839, Commissioner A. Bogle wrote that he had agreed to receive thug convicts in Arakan after his counterpart in Tenasserim had persuaded him that they were quiet and well

⁵⁴ *Documents relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh*, xxxi; IOR F/4/2527: H.P. Burn, Town Major Calcutta, to C. Allen, Officiating Secretary to Government of India, 16 May 1853; Minute of the Governor General of India, 4 July 1853. The 'Sikh sirdars' confined in Calcutta and Benares were named in this correspondence as Chuttar Sing, Shere Sing, Ootar Sing, Hakim Bal, Kishn Kano, Korjun Sing, Lal Sing, Mushtah Sing, Oomed Sing and Juggut Chund.

⁵⁵ IOR P/144/12: List of 58 convicts for Moulmein *per Fire Queen*, 9 Dec. 1851.

⁵⁶ IOR P/143/45 (Bengal Judicial 24 April 1850): List of convicts embarked *per Enterprize*, 10 Apr. 1850.

behaved.⁵⁷ By 1848, there were 133 thugs in the Convict Police, and they were employed as overseers, orderlies and hospital attendants.⁵⁸ Though the privilege was initially denied to them, it was not long before the Company agreed to grant thug requests to live at large after serving sixteen years, like other convicts in Burma.⁵⁹ Perhaps this transformation lay in the practice of thuggee as a form of criminality bound up with military practice and thus in thugs' acceptance of a social hierarchy that was palatable to incorporative techniques of penal (as in military) management.⁶⁰ It might also have reflected something of ordinary convicts' views of thugs as hardened offenders not to be crossed. Santal transformations took a quite different form. This tribal community (the largest in India) became feted for its lack of caste strictures, and its associated willingness to eat all types of food and to perform all types of labour. Santals possessed what the colonial authorities referred to at the time as 'the wisdom of the barbarian'.⁶¹

Just as Narain Sing's experience of criminal trial and incarceration in India was atypical, his experience of transportation was quite different to that of an ordinary chain gang convict. He arrived in Moulmein in December 1851, and does not seem to have been put to outdoor labour as was the norm. He was transferred to the more southerly penal establishment at Mergui just over a year later, where he appears to

⁵⁷ IOR P/141/39 (Bengal Judicial 12 Sept. 1839): A. Bogle, Commissioner Arakan, to F.J. Halliday, Secretary to Government Bengal, 26 July 1839.

⁵⁸ IOR P/143/17 (Bengal Judicial 12 Apr. 1848): Nominal Roll of Thugs on the Establishment of Convict Police in the Provincial Jail of Moulmein, 10 Mar. 1848.

⁵⁹ IOR P/143/29 (Bengal Judicial 7 Feb. 1849): Colvin to Grant, 3 Jan. 1849.

⁶⁰ Kim A. Wagner, *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2007.

⁶¹ Anderson, 'The Wisdom of the Barbarian'.

have impressed the colonial establishment with his stoicism. A range of officers produced testimonials on his behalf. J. Stevenson, the officer in charge of the jail, wrote that although his lot was painful, he did not complain or show discontent. Rather, he stayed away from the other convicts, and complied with the jail rules and the orders of the jailer. D. Nicolson, who succeeded Stevenson, noted that when government refused his petition (*urzee*) to return to India in 1856, 'he bore it as became a man in his position.'⁶² Fellow Panjabi prisoner Ram Sing's health declined rapidly. He too presented a petition to government in 1856, seeking permission to live at large in Moulmein. 'Nothing but skin and bone and breath now remain to me', he wrote.⁶³ But government refused to grant his request too, and he remained in jail, where he died a few months later.

Narain Sing wrote another *urzee* in May 1858. Describing 'the gloom and hardships of a Prison being indeed unendurable', and his weakening constitution and health, he asked that his 'former circumstances, situation in Life, and manner of living' be taken into consideration and that he be given permission to live outside the jail on parole. He added to the earlier official testimonials letters of support from E.M. Ryan,

⁶² IOR P/205/44 (Foreign Judicial Dec. 1863): Testimonials of J.I.T. Stevenson, 9 Oct. 1856, and D.G. Nicolson, 26 Dec. 1856. See also IOR P/201/62 (Foreign 25 July 1856): J. Stevenson, in charge of Mergui jail, to Bogle, 20 May 1856, enc. The humble petition of Narain Sing prisoner in the Mergui jail, 20 May 1856. Narain Sing presented a first Hindustani *urzee* to Bogle personally when he visited Mergui in April 1856. He told Stevenson that this second English petition was almost identical: IOR P/201/62 (Foreign Judicial 25 July 1856): Stevenson to Bogle, 20 May 1856.

⁶³ IOR P/201/62 (India Foreign 25 July 1856): Haughton to Bogle, 10 May 1856, enc. Petition of Ram Sing formerly ex Wuzeer of Noorpoor [Nurpur] and now a life convict in the jail at Moulmein.

officiating deputy commissioner of the provinces, and R.C. Burn, the magistrate.⁶⁴ There was a precedent for Narain Sing's request, for some years earlier the Panjab state prisoners confined in Fort William and Chunar had been permitted to live at large in Calcutta and Benares.⁶⁵ However, despite Stevenson's support for Narain Sing, in mid-1858 the government of India turned his request down. By his own admission, Stevenson knew 'very little' of Narain Sing's 'character and deeds in Hindoostan', and could promise only limited surveillance over him, especially when he was out in the districts.⁶⁶

At about the same time as Narain Sing was transported to Burma, two other Panjab rebels were sent into transportation – to Singapore - 'Saint soldier' Bhai Maharaj Singh and his disciple Khurruck Sing. These two men are unquestionably the best-known Indian convicts transported overseas in the years before 1857, and in popular memory today Maharaj Singh in particular is remembered as both a spiritual leader and hero of Sikh nationalism. Maharaj Sing and Khurruck Sing had led anti-British forces in the Panjab in the months after annexation in March 1849⁶⁷ and, from their base in Lahore, they attracted wide support. Deputy Commissioner of Jalandhar H.

⁶⁴ IOR P/202/57 (Foreign Judicial 23 July 1858): H. Hopkinson, Officiating Commissioner Tenasserim and Martaban Provinces, to C. Beadon, Secretary to Government of India, 9 June 1858, enc. The humble petition of Narain Singh, 1 May 1858, enc. testimonials of Officiating Deputy Commissioner Tenasserim and Martaban Provinces, E.M. Ryan, 29 Nov. 1857 and Magistrate R.C. Burn, 28 Feb. 1857.

⁶⁵ IOR F/4/2527: Minute of the Governor General of India, 4 July 1853.

⁶⁶ IOR P/202/57 (Foreign Judicial 23 July 1858): Stevenson to Hopkinson, 10 May 1858; G.F. Edmonstone, Secretary to Government of India, to Hopkinson, 9 July 1858.

⁶⁷ *Documents relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh*, viii.

Vansittart wrote of the moment when Maharaj Singh had been arrested and taken into jail:

[S]ome of the Seikh Guard bowed themselves down. During the whole day numbers of Hindoos had been gathering, round the Jail with the view of casting their eyes on the building in which he was confined, and I until now popular with the Hindoo inhabitants, am at this moment detested ... seldom a day passed that hundreds of devotees did not worship him ... The Gooroo is not an ordinary man. He is to the Natives what Jesus Christ is to the most zealous of Christians. His miracles were seen by tens of thousands, and are more implicitly relied on, than those worked by the ancient prophets ... This man who was a God, is in our hands.⁶⁸

Vansittart was dismayed to find that he could not treat him as an ordinary prisoner, writing: 'I cannot contend against the religious fanaticism of a whole country'.⁶⁹ The government was anxious about the risks involved in putting him on trial, not to mention the 'excitement' such a trial would cause, and so it decided to transport him overseas summarily as a 'rebel in arms'. Maharaj Singh threatened briefly to disrupt the government's plans, refusing all food and drink for a few days. Vansittart was worried that if he starved to death, he would be 'cherished by all posterity', precisely the effect that he hoped safe captivity would avoid.⁷⁰ Maharaj Sing gave up his

⁶⁸ H. Vansittart, Deputy Commissioner Jalandhar, to D.F. McLeod, Commissioner and Superintendent Jalandhar, 30 Dec. 1849, cited in *Documents relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh*, 91-2.

⁶⁹ Vansittart to McLeod, 30 Dec. 1849, cited in *Documents relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh*, 93.

⁷⁰ Vansittart to McLeod, 30 Dec. 1849, cited in *Documents relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh*, 93.

hunger strike, and in May 1850 he was transported to Singapore with Khurruck Sing on the ship *Mahomed Shaw*.⁷¹

On arrival, the men were lodged in Singapore jail, and government confiscated their personal effects, including bangles, a *kirpan* (dagger), and ring, as well as a conch shell, which were used by Sikhs commonly in religious ceremonies.⁷² A few years later in 1853, Khurruck Sing expressed a desire to convert to Christianity. Despite his interest in reading and discussing the Bible, his request was dismissed as a shallow attempt at liberation, most particularly because he drew parallels between Jesus Christ and the ‘Great Seikh Gooroo’. Moreover, as Governor-General Dalhousie put it, it was hardly surprising that he could speak of Jesus - and other Old Testament figures like Moses - for any Muslim would be able to do the same. The government of India advised that Khurruck Sing be told that religious conversion would not secure his release: ‘Christian or Seikh he would equally remain in the Singapore Gaol’.⁷³ Meanwhile, government remained suspicious of the men, eventually prohibiting them from sending letters home.⁷⁴

Suffering from ill health and nearly blind, Maharaj Sing – known as the Guru among convicts⁷⁵ - died in July 1856.⁷⁶ Khurruck Sing was then allowed to take walks

⁷¹ Foreign Dept Fort William to G. Warren, Town Major, 9 May 1850, cited in *Documents relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh*, 93.

⁷² These items now form part of the India Office collections of APAC, British Library.

⁷³ IOR F/4/2570: S. Garling, Assistant Resident Singapore, to R. Church, Secretary to Governor Straits Settlements, 21 Aug. 1853; Extract Fort William Foreign letter, 13 May 1854; Minute of Governor-General Dalhousie, 14 Oct. 1853.

⁷⁴ IOR F/4/2570: Extract Fort William Foreign letter, 13 May 1854.

⁷⁵ IOR P/202/35 (India Political and Foreign 2 Oct. 1857): Blundell to Edmonstone, 25 Aug. 1857, enc. Statement of Samuel Burnett, constable of the convict lines.

outside the jail compound,⁷⁷ and shortly afterwards to live at large under police surveillance. He moved in with a man he described as an old Parsi friend called Cursetjee Muncherjee, who had been a merchant and spice planter in Bencoolen. When news of the Indian Revolt reached Singapore in the middle of 1857, the port was in a fever. By the month of August rumours of an uprising organized by the 3,000 or so convicts then in the Straits Settlements were circulating, and the merchant community was nervous that Indian troops and the Chinese community would join them in mutiny. It found little reassurance in Governor Blundell's refusal to ban the convicts' usual Mohurrum celebrations in the streets outside their barracks. It was in this context that Khurruck Sing – by now called the Seikh by Europeans and the Rajah by free Indians and convicts - came under especial scrutiny. Two convicts, Dimshun Jamsetjee (a Parsi) and Budoo, claimed during an interview with the Resident Councillor that Khurruck Sing intended to attack the Europeans in the settlement while they were in church, though it was far from clear that there was an organized plot. A search of his house revealed nothing. 'Khurruck Sing is a great sensualist,' Governor Blundell wrote. 'The consequence is that he is frequently drunk and in that state he may have given utterance to abuse and have imagined scenes where the power has changed from our hands into his.' The port's merchants were less restrained, viewing him as 'a desperate and dangerous intriguer, bent on exciting insurrection and bloodshed.' Khurruck Sing, meanwhile, petitioned the governor, rejecting the accusations against him and asking to join the British army: 'He has now been maintained by Government, and whose salt he has been eating for the last seven

⁷⁶ *Documents relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh*, viii.

⁷⁷ J. Cowper, Assistant Surgeon Singapore, to Church, 1 July 1856; Blundell to Secretary of State for India, 12 July 1856, cited in *Documents relating to Bhai Maharaj Singh*, 200-202.

years, and for whose service he is willing to lay down his life.’ The governor recommended Khurruck Sing’s petition, but in order to reassure the European community he transferred him to the neighbouring island of Penang, site of an associated convict settlement. The government of India, however, thought it ‘most unwise’ to accept the services of a man ‘thus tainted’.⁷⁸

Things were no more tranquil in neighbouring Burma. According to local commissioner A. Fytche, the Indian convicts in Moulmein were ‘extremely agitated’ about the mainland uprising. The European community fell into a panic, seeking refuge on ships in the harbour and stockpiling arms and ammunition. In July 1857 50 Indian convicts arrived in the settlement. Though they had not been convicted of mutiny offences, they brought with them what Fytche described as exaggerated stories about events in the North-West Provinces. Like the European population of Singapore, he was worried about the prospect of an incendiary combination between convicts, jail guards, town police, and the free Muslim community of the town. With no European infantry and only a small military force from Madras at his disposal, Fytche ordered the return of the convicts to the jail at Alipur.⁷⁹

In the context of widespread military and civil revolt in India and fears about its spread into Southeast Asia, it is hardly surprising that Narain Sing’s 1857-8 petitions for liberation fell on deaf ears. However, in early 1860 when calm had been restored

⁷⁸ IOR P/202/35 (India Political and Foreign 2 Oct. 1857): Blundell to Edmonstone, 25 Aug. 1857, enc. Humble Petition of Kurruck Sing, 6 Aug. 1857; Edmonstone to Blundell, 2 Oct. 1857; IOR P/188/47 (India Political 2 Oct. 1857): Petition of M.F. Davidson, C. Spottiswoode, and 11 others, 4 Aug. 1857.

⁷⁹ IOR P/146/12D (Bengal Judicial 28 Jan. 1858): A. Fytche, Officiating Commissioner Tenasserim and Martaban Provinces, to Lushington, 22 July 1857. For a more detailed account of the impact of the Great Revolt in Southeast Asia, see Clare Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857-8: prisons, prisoners and rebellion*, London, Anthem, 107-117.

and the transfer of power from East India Company to British Crown effected, the Officiating Commissioner of Tenasserim and Martaban Provinces, Henry Hopkinson, recommended that Narain Sing be allowed to live outside the jail under police surveillance. He would be issued with four annas per day, the same as he was then receiving in jail. The government of India sanctioned his request. Six months later, after Narain Sing complained about the high cost of food and wages for his barber and *dhobi* (laundryman) in Mergui, his allowance was doubled.⁸⁰ It was not long before Narain Sing tried once more for permission to return to India but, again, government refused his petition.

After the passing of the Indian Police Act in 1861, Commissioner of Tenasserim A. Fytche requested Narain Sing's employment in the newly reorganized establishment of Tenasserim and Martaban Provinces. The Indian authorities agreed to his request, and Narain Sing was appointed head constable, with a massive increase in salary: 65 rupees per month. By the end of 1863, 12 years after his reception in Moulmein Jail as a convict, he was in charge of the prison guards.⁸¹ This represented an extraordinary transformation in status – from Panjabi military general to state prisoner and transportation convict, and finally police constable. This social shift was possible

⁸⁰ IOR P/205/44 (Foreign Judicial Dec. 1863): Fytche to H. Nelson Davies, Secretary to Chief Commissioner of British Burma, 10 Nov. 1863. See also IOR P/204/13 (Foreign 24 Feb. 1860): Hopkinson to W. Grey, Officiating Secretary to Government of India, 7 Jan. 1860, enc. the humble petition of Narrain Sing, 30 Dec. 1859; IOR P.203.55 (Foreign 24 June 1859): Hopkinson to Beadon, 28 May 1859, and IOR P/203/60 (Foreign 5 Aug. 1859): Hopkinson to R. Simson, Under Secretary to Government of India, 14 July 1858; Simson to Hopkinson, 3 Aug. 1859.

⁸¹ IOR P/205/44 (India Foreign Dec. 1863): Fytche to Nelson Davies, 10 Nov. 1863. See also IOR P/203/55 (India Foreign 24 June 1859): Hopkinson to Beadon, 28 May 1859, and IOR P/203/60 (Foreign 5 Aug. 1859): Hopkinson to Simson, 14 July 1858; Simson to Hopkinson, 3 Aug. 1859.

because Narain Sing was a man who shared with the British social and military rank and privilege, and associated expectations of honourable conduct and forbearance. He was not alone amongst men of status. Clementina Benthall, in a diary of her visit to Moulmein jail with her magistrate husband Edward, had written ten years earlier that many convicts became jail wardens: ‘the system has answered well – these being some of the best Policemen and settlers’.⁸² But his transformation was also enabled by the opportunities presented through broader social changes associated with the Great Revolt of 1857-8. It is to a discussion of those shifts that we will now turn.

Transformations in identity

The transportation of Narain Sing provides a window into the punishment of ‘political’ offences during the first half of the nineteenth century, on the layered nature of penal settlements, and on shared assumptions about honourable or gentlemanly conduct between men of rank. It also offers insights into broader shifts around social identity as the British expanded into the northwest of the Indian subcontinent. Historians have shown incontrovertibly how the British drew on the Panjab during their military campaigns of 1857-8. In the aftermath of Revolt, they used Panjabi Sikhs especially to staff the ranks of both the Bengal Army and the expanding Indian police force in Southeast Asia and East Africa.⁸³ By the 1880s, the British viewed Panjabis favourably, representing their loyalty through a broader religious and caste-based framework that produced them in contrast to other

⁸² CSAS, Box XXX, part i: Diaries kept by Mrs Clementina Benthall, 22 Feb. 1849.

⁸³ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007, ch. 4.

supposedly weak and effeminate Indians – especially the somewhat ill defined category ‘Bengalis’ - as a ‘martial race’. But we know rather less about the roots of this shift in representation – from treacherous to loyal - in the decade between war and rebellion (c. 1845-57), when British and Indians alike made the first systematic contact with Panjabi communities. I would like to argue that jails, convict ships and convict barracks were crucial sites for this peculiarly colonial encounter. They were spaces in which men and women from a range of geographical, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds were crammed together, and forced to share the iron and brassware, gourd shells and pottery associated with the intimate bodily practices of drinking and eating. Liquid and solid waste also mingled with the fluids of sickness - vomit, sweat, blood, and tears – producing confinement as one of the most intimate spaces of colonization.⁸⁴

During the 1840s and into the 1850s British and Indians alike stood in awe of Panjabi military prowess and continuing resistance to British annexation. Their perceptions were grounded in the fierce military battles of the Anglo-Sikh Wars, and alleged Sikh ‘cruelty’, but later events were significant too. Little known historically is what even the British described at the time as a ‘massacre’ in Agra jail in April 1850, a bloody and scandalous affair that followed the incarceration in the city of a substantial body of Panjabi prisoners - over 250 - convicted in the wake of the Anglo-Sikh wars. This is what happened. A few days after the prisoners arrived in Agra, allegedly a small group of them ‘murmured’ to the jail guard about the quantity and quality of their food. The incident quickly escalated; a guard struck a prisoner, the Panjabis retaliated, and guards killed or wounded 75 prisoners, many after they had

⁸⁴ Viz. David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993.

sought refuge in their cells. The investigating judge was furious about their brutal response, describing a scene of the prisoners ‘crying aloud for mercy, and cowering together, in the extremity of mortal terror, in such nooks of the ward as promised the best shelter from the murderous fire poured upon them.’⁸⁵ The lieutenant governor accused Inspector of Prisons Woodcock of downplaying the seriousness of the event and in effect of attempting a cover up.⁸⁶ Together with the high profile nature of Narain Sing’s escape from the *Kaleegunga* and tales of the ‘disquiet’ aroused by the ‘Sikh prisoners’ in Allahabad fort at about the same time, by September 1850 reports of events in Agra had even made it to the pages of *The Times* in London.⁸⁷ Government was concerned that the public would form the impression that ‘Sikh prisoners are so formidable as to defy the power of the Civil Officers to keep them in custody and in due subjection.’⁸⁸ Moreover, echoing some of the debates around Narain Sing’s conduct during the *Kaleegunga* mutiny, that the ‘daring of a free booter as rebel’ would be ‘exalted into gallantry’.⁸⁹

In August 1850, Inspector of Prisons Woodcock requested an increased guard to cope with the growing number of Panjabi prisoners imprisoned in the North West Provinces. ‘These men are muscular in their make, and bold in the learning,’ the lieutenant governor of the Panjab reported at the time. ‘They are unaccustomed to strict discipline, and carry with them a certain prestige, resulting from the events of

⁸⁵ IOR P/233/12 (NWP Judicial 13 Apr. 1850): Woodcock to Thornton, 6 Apr. 1850; C.B. Denison, Officiating Magistrate Agra, to W.H. Tyler, Commissioner Agra, 6 Apr. 1850; H.W. Deane, Officiating Judge NWP, to Thornton, 27 Apr. 1850 (quote).

⁸⁶ IOR P/233/13 (NWP Judicial July 1850): Thornton to Woodcock, 29 June 1850.

⁸⁷ *The Times*, 2 Sept. 1850.

⁸⁸ IOR P/SEC/IND/166 (India Secret 27 Sept. 1850): Elliot to Thornton, 7 Aug. 1850.

⁸⁹ IOR P/SEC/IND/166 (India Secret 27 Sept. 1850): Melvill to Elliot, 19 July 1850.

the late campaigns, which cannot be at once dispelled.’⁹⁰ He went on to describe them as an ‘independent and warlike race’, wholly unaccustomed to British understandings of criminality. The jail guards ‘look upon them as something new and strange, and over rate their daring and their strength.’ Once the Sikhs understood the extent of British power, and the prison guards saw them as ordinary prisoners, he predicted, ‘all this will soon wear off’.⁹¹ In the meantime, Panjabi prisoners took full advantage of their fears, mounting an almost successful escape attempt from Agra jail at the end of the year.⁹²

Of significance too in the development of views of Panjabis by colonial officials and north Indians was a ship mutiny led by convicts voyaging to the penal settlement in Malacca in 1854 on board a ship called the *Clarissa*. Overcrowding and a shortage of water may have provoked the uprising, though as several convicts later testified it had been planned at least a week beforehand.⁹³ Led by convicts from the Panjab, it was extremely violent. The convicts murdered the captain, chief and second mates (all Englishmen) and over half of the crew and guards: 31 men in total. They ransacked the ship, destroying the convicts’ descriptive rolls and log book, ran the ship aground, and landed between Rangoon and Tavoy in the mistaken belief that the region was outside British control. The mutiny quickly took on the characteristics of a military campaign. Convict Soor Singh put on the captain’s coat and boots, and the gold

⁹⁰ IOR P/233/14 (NWP Judicial Aug. 1850): Thornton to Elliot, 27 Aug. 1850.

⁹¹ IOR P/233/16 (NWP Judicial Oct. 1850): Thornton to Elliot, 14 Aug. 1850.

⁹² IOR P/233/21 (NWP Judicial Jan. – Feb. 1851): Murray, in charge of Agra Jail, to Woodcock, 17 Dec. 1850.

⁹³ IOR P/145/18 (Bengal Judicial 13 Sept. 1855): deposition of Chatoo, son of Lahoree, convict no. 36, 27 June 1854; depositions of Boor Singh son of Humeer Singh no. 115, and Mullaga Sing, son of Phudah Sing, convict no. 119, 6 July 1854. See also Anderson, “‘The Feringees are Flying’”.

necklace, sword and sash belonging to the *subadar* of the guard. He armed six other convicts, calling them ‘his sepoy’s’.⁹⁴ The mutinous party made its way to the ‘Burma Rajah’ with the intention of offering him their services against the British. According to convict-turned-informer Kurrim Singh:

They all went into the Rajah’s Cutcherry. The Rajah salaamed and gave Soor Singh a chair to sit on, there were several interpreters there. The Rajah asked Soor Singh where he had come from and where he was going to. Soor Singh said he was a sikh from Lahore and had come with 175 men to help the Burma Rajah. They had some conversation and the Rajah wishing, as he said, to call all the rest of Soor Singh’s men, Soor Singh gave him one of his party to shew [sic] where they were and the Rajah sent 25 armed Burmese with him. Scarcely had the man gone out, when Soor Singh’s eyes alighted on a written piece of paper with a Court[?]s [East India Company] seal impressed on it which was stuck against the wall. He instantly took the alarm, jumped to his feet and rushed out of the House with his 5 men.⁹⁵

Soor Singh was killed and, over the next few days, the authorities captured most of the remaining mutineers.⁹⁶

The British returned the survivors (129 in total) to Calcutta to face trial in the supreme court (admiralty side), with Chief Judge Sir J. Colville declaring it the most

⁹⁴ Many of the witnesses testified to this military display. For example: IOR P/145/18 (Bengal Judicial 13 Sept 1855): deposition of Edoe Serang, 13 June 1854.

⁹⁵ IOR P/145/18 (Bengal Judicial 13 Sept. 1855): deposition of Kurrim Singh, son of Hennath Singh, convict no. 1, 8 June 1854.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*: Bogle to W. Grey, Secretary to Government Bengal, 22 July 1854.

serious case that he had ever tried.⁹⁷ The court ordered that most of the defendants be transported to serve out their original sentence, but unlike other convicts in the Straits Settlements they would not be eligible to earn remission of sentence and would remain in the fifth class, kept at hard labour for life. Four convicts were sentenced to death.⁹⁸ During the trial, the divisions between the convicts emerged. A minority of convicts who referred to themselves either as Bengalis, ‘Deswalees’, or Hindustanis claimed that they had nothing to do with the mutiny, and that it was largely the work of men they called ‘Sikhs’. Moreover, they said that the ‘Sikhs’ had imprisoned them below deck after the outbreak⁹⁹ and, when the ship ran aground, they had made them carry their luggage.¹⁰⁰

The complexity of social manoeuvring on board the *Clarissa* ran deeper still, for I suspect that the opportunity for mutiny was created out of a fatal misjudgement on the part of the captain. One of the guards testified that he had employed one of the convicts to clean his swords and muskets. The *subadar* had complained, but the captain had told him ‘to hold his tongue’.¹⁰¹ This was a dreadful mistake on his part, for he had chosen a man described on his descriptive indent as a ‘desperate character’ and requiring a special guard.¹⁰² The captain’s miscalculation was almost certainly based on a sense that he had more in common with him than the usual convict

⁹⁷ *Bengal Hurkaru*, 12 Aug. 1854. For further reports of the Supreme Court trial, see *Bengal Hurkaru*, 14, 16-19 Aug. 1854.

⁹⁸ *Bengal Hurkaru*, 19 Aug. 1854.

⁹⁹ IOR P/145/18 (Bengal Judicial 13 Sept. 1855): deposition Queen v. life convicts on the *Clarissa*; convict depositions nos 21, 27-8, 30 June, 3-7, 12 July 1854.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*: deposition of Casee Barah, son of Indee Narain, convict no. 49, 28 June 1854.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*: deposition of Sheikh Ramran, son of Russub Alla, sepoy Alipur Militia, 17 June 1854.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*: deposition of Sheikh Joomur son of Sheikh Talib, sepoy Alipur Militia, 17 June 1854.

shipments of ordinary Indians in their threadbare cotton dhotis and turbans. After all, he was a military man of high rank and status, dressed like his compatriots in pantaloons and a smart red jacket, or in the words of one of the sepoy on board one of several ‘fine-looking fellows’.¹⁰³ In May 1856, after the surviving *Clarissa* convicts were sent on to the Straits Settlements, Resident Councillor of Malacca H. Man reported the ‘strong clannish feeling’ and disproportionate influence of the ‘stout powerful’ ‘Lahore men’ under his charge. The presence of the *Clarissa* convicts – according to him ‘notoriously desperate characters’ – did not ease matters.¹⁰⁴ He had already transferred three of them to Singapore – Khan Moolla (from Peshwar), Utter Sing (Lahore), and Mahtub (Multan), claiming that had ‘a pernicious influence over those of their own nation’.¹⁰⁵

The Panjabis’ fearsome reputation had important implications with respect to colonial management strategies in the decades that followed. As well as employing Panjabis in the Bengal Army in large numbers, from the 1870s the British recruited them for service as policemen across the Empire. Thomas Metcalf has drawn attention to the widespread British view of the police in Southeast Asia as physically intimidating, arrogant, and overbearing, traits that according to him in no small measure assured their success. British Resident at Pahang Hugh Clifford wrote that Sikhs were ‘possessed of as absolute a conviction of his own superiority to the men of any other race – Europeans alone excepted – as is the White Man himself. He is quite frank about this opinion, and he is accustomed to act upon it at all times.’ And: ‘To

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*: deposition of Sheikh Akhbur son of Sheikh Ruhum, sepoy Alipur Militia, 17 June 1854.

¹⁰⁴ IOR P/145/42 (Bengal Judicial 19 June 1856): H. Man, Resident Councillor Malacca, to Blundell, 30 May 1856.

¹⁰⁵ IOR P/145/42 (Bengal Judicial 26 June 1856): Man to Blundell, 21 Apr. 1856.

other Asiatics he is as arrogant and overbearing as can well be conceived, and he displays none of the tact which helps to make a European less hated for his airs of superiority than he might be'.¹⁰⁶

Of particular interest is Metcalf's invocation of the changing meaning of the category of 'Sikh'. He argues that in colonial settlements across the Indian Ocean it became a marker of particular social characteristics, most especially some degree of shared cultural values with and loyalty to the British colonial regime. As such, it had the potential to become a remarkably wide descriptive tag. This is hugely relevant to our social understanding of Narain Sing, for convict and jail records reveal that upon his conviction he had not described himself as a Sikh, but as a Hindu Brahmin, 'in service'.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, as we have seen colonial administrators and north Indians described indiscriminately *all* Panjabi prisoners and convicts as 'Sikhs' during the 1850s, as evidenced during their recollections of the mutinies and prison unrest described above. At this time, the appellation marked a deep sense of nervousness and unease; only later on did it have more positive connotations, at least as far as the British were concerned.

High-caste Narain Sing's employment as a soldier in the 1840s Panjab was typical of the socially incorporative military regime of Ranjit Singh, in a context where religious identities were fluid. In the steady stream of petitions that he presented to government, however, markedly after the 1857 Revolt, he always described himself as a Sikh (or 'Seik'). I see this as a deliberate and careful alignment on his part with

¹⁰⁶ Metcalf, T.R. (2007), *Imperial Connections*, pp. 108, 111.

¹⁰⁷ IOR P/144/12: List of 58 convicts for Moulmein *per Fire Queen*, 9 Dec. 1851; IOR P/205/44 (Foreign Judicial 1863): Extract from the Jail Register of Prisoner Narain Sing's Sentence, &c. Jail Office Mergui, 23 July 1861.

shifting British views. In the 1860s the colonial administration viewed Sikhs as loyal colonial subjects, part of a larger discursive transformation that was effected through their role in assisting British troops during 1857-8. The British no longer saw Sikhs (all Panjabi communities collapsed into a single category) as treacherous and cruel, but as trustworthy and faithful. Narain Sing was surely aware of this when he told the officiating commissioner of Tenasserim that he had received a letter from one of his sisters, describing her marriage to the rajah of Jheend, who had supported the British in 1857. No doubt this was part of a broader effort to provide the government with assurance of his loyalty.¹⁰⁸

‘My Lord,’ Narain Sing wrote later in 1863, ‘the Seiks, my countrymen, served the British in their greatest strait, nor is it for your Petitioner to say what the result might have been had Delhi been assaulted without their aid, or had they, like the faithless soldiery of Bengal, also turned against the British.’ He went on:

Should your Lordship permit the Petitioner to return to his native land, he will take the Oath of Allegiance to the British ... Such words may appear ludicrous to your Lordship, but your Petitioner must not throw away a single argument, and he is aware that timid and short-sighted politicians dread the release of prisoners like himself; those who reason thus know not the Seik character: my Lord, the Seik is as open to the dictates of gratitude as even the Briton.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ IOR P/202/57 (India Foreign July 1858): Hopkinson to Beadon, 9 June 1858.

¹⁰⁹ IOR P/205/4 (Foreign Judicial 1863): Petition of NARAIN SING, formerly a Seik Sirdar of Rungudnungul, near Umrisingir, to the RIGHT HON’BLE EARL OF ELGIN AND KINCARDINE, KT. and G.C.B., Viceroy and Governor General of India, &c., &c., &c., - (dated Moulmein, 31 July 1863).

The broad social transformation to which he appealed is evidenced also in the colonial administration's treatment of his relatives in India. Though it declined their first 1856 petition for relief, in the aftermath of the Great Revolt the government issued Narain Sing's father and wife with a joint allowance of five rupees per month. It based its calculation on what it viewed as their relatively humble circumstances at the time of the Anglo-Sikh Wars.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

In concluding this piece I would like to return to the issue of Narain Sing's near anonymity in post-colonial historiography, for it seems related to continuing resistance to the British after the annexation of the Panjab in 1849 as well the politics of his shifting identity. Narratives of colonial India have most usually stressed the incorporation of the Panjab into the British state in the aftermath of annexation, and its loyalty to the British in 1857. Continued Panjabi hostility to colonial governance and penal confinement in the intervening years interrupts the idea that this was a smooth transition. Moreover, Narain Sing's strategic use of a 'Sikh' identity hints at the broader processes at work during the 1850s and 1860s with respect to British relations with the Panjab. Perhaps because his identity was not specifically religious, unlike his fellow transportees Bhai Maharaj Singh and Khurruck Singh, Narain Sing has not been anchored to a Sikh nationalist perspective in any meaningful way either.

However, despite these historiographical elisions, Narain Sing's elevation to head constable in Moulmein had other long-term consequences. In Singapore, the convict

¹¹⁰ IOR P/203/49 (Foreign 13 May 1859): R. Temple, Chief Commissioner Panjab, to R.B. Chapman, Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, 8 Sept. 1858.

warder system that was established when the port incorporated a penal settlement continued through a pattern of mainland Indian employment in the prison service into the 1970s.¹¹¹ Speculatively, extrapolating from Narain Sing's experience of penal labour and employment and Benthall's description of the transformation of convicts into jail warders, the same continuities can be found in colonial Burma. The British recruited Indians for police and jail service well after the demise of its penal settlements in the 1860s. Men from the United Provinces, speaking 'military Hindi', dominated the Burmese prison service into the twentieth century and, by the mid-1920s, there were over one thousand Indians employed as jail wardens there.¹¹² The roots of their employment can be found in the Burmese penal settlements, when the British employed convicts of status as warders and policemen. Perhaps this might be viewed as Narain Singh's principal legacy.

¹¹¹ Rajesh Rai (2004), Sepoys, convicts and the 'bazaar' contingent: the emergence and exclusion of 'Hindustani' pioneers at the Singapore frontier, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, **35,1**: 1-19.

¹¹² Ian Brown, 'South East Asia: Reform and the Colonial Prison', in F. Dikötter and I. Brown, eds, *Cultures of Confinement* (2007), 242-248.