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Cosmopolitanism, millenarianism, and Sikhism in a Persianate India: Some motifs in recent historiography

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ABSTRACT

This article, divided into two parts, explores the ramifications of Eaton's *India in the Persianate Age* for salient topics in Sikh historiography. The first part defines Eaton's arguments and expands on facets of the Persianate dispensation, drawing out relevant features of his biography and previous works. Secularity and universality as well as the approaches adopted to break from reified notions of religious community are underscored. The second part focuses on violence, militancy, and millenarianism in moments of crisis in early Sikh history. The article develops the dialectic of social levels and, in doing so, invokes Clio, the muse of historians.

Part I: features of a Persianate dispensation

I. Biography and historiography

Rarely does the biography of a historian coincide so neatly with the narrative of his magnum opus. Richard Eaton began his career on the back of an Indian elephant at the age of four while on a family outing to the St. Louis Zoo. And the rest was history, or rather an unending entanglement with the fascinating thickets of medieval Indian archives for much of his life. The elephant lifted him above his Midwestern milieu and helped him see farther horizons. Dizzied and jostled by the majestic sauntering gait of the giant beast, he was untethered enough from his surroundings at that young age to be able to pursue an unusual course through distant lands. The weightless mirth of that ride seemed to have broken once and for all the chain of events that would have tied him to a lesser, more commonplace, American fate.[1] Coming into adulthood he already had associations with Persia, where his mother and father had been stationed for years as medical workers. They would later greet their son upon his arrival to the Shah's Iran in 1962 as a Peace Corps volunteer. The following summer he had his second, though equally uncanny, encounter with India. This time by rail from Iran: likely not much faster than that elephant ride, he now had ample opportunity to view the sights that befell him through the windows of the train car. From an Iranian angle, Mughal grandeur struck him as already familiar. The experiential foundations for his magnificent *India in the Persianate Age 1000–1765* were now in place, though it would take decades of ground clearing, scaffolding, and exploration of

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requisite materials before this daunting labor could be approached directly. Retrospectively all of his previous publications strike one as so many solid bricks, slabs, or pillars that would later – like the Qutb Minar itself – get refashioned with other existing scholarship into a completely distinct architectural complex. Previous major works such as *The Sufis of Bijapur* (1978), *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (1993), *A Social History of the Deccan* (2005), and *Power, Memory, Architecture* (2014) demonstrated an uncanny ability in weaving peripheries and centers into narratives that flipped scripts, broke stalemates, crushed clichés.[2]

II. Civilizational frontiers, fragmented regions, and microhistories

'What would not the prehistorian or the historian of India give to have a Herodotus at his disposal?' Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* [3]

Eaton is no stranger to the blank spaces and missing dates of the historical record. Where others may experience a quasi-vertiginous fall into the abyss of undifferentiated time presented by out-of-the-way places and clamber back to the footholds of geographical zones referenced by existing accounts of the past, Eaton seems to be undaunted by chronological gaps, fragmented, indeed, centerless regions, distant outposts, or uncivilized frontiers. Medieval Indian history, infamous for chronological lacunae, presents messy thickets of myth, legend, and inscription for the historian to disentangle. Disparate and seemingly disconnected polities dissimulate with their tendentious chronicles underlying historical logics of interconnected spatial and social reciprocities. The challenges in laying out an interconnected history of medieval and early modern India that uncovers a dense web of causal connections and overlapping historical tempos are manifold. Eaton describes the undertaking of *India in the Persianate Age* as 'the biggest challenge of my life.'[4] Yet in some ways he had been preparing for this arduous task from his very first days as a chronicler of the past. Roane County, West Virginia had just marked a century of its existence in 1965 when Eaton served as a young high school history teacher in its small township of Walton. The local newspaper the *Times Record* commissioned him to give an account of its past. His recollections of this experience draw attention to his sensitivity to the remnants of the distant past in his very midst – modest farm houses from the early colonial period, narrow roads winding through forests and fields harkening back to trails of indigenous communities – alongside whatever records he was able to track down in official archives. He would later take this direct experience with different sources of the past to his formal studies of history at the universities of Virginia and Wisconsin and then to out-of-the-way places in the subcontinent: Bijapur, Warangal, Sylhet, Pakpattan. Masterful shifts in scale from macro social histories of Islamic expansion into frontier zones of the subcontinent to microhistories of figures such as the Robin Hood-like Papadu of Telangana mean that even when he centers on regions replete with legend they seem unfamiliar and curious. Thus in *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, 'the perspective becomes increasingly local in nature, with the result that political figures and events familiar to students of early- or mid-eighteenth-century history – Murshid Quli Khan, Aliverdi Khan, the rise of the East India Company, the battle of Plassey, the 'Black Hole' of Calcutta, and so on – receive little or no mention at all.'[5] Instead attention is placed on the enduring institutions behind

the skein of events, 'institutions through which provincial Mughal officials deepened the roots of their authority in the countryside at a time when power in Delhi, the Mughal capital, was steadily diminishing.'[6] Regions such as the Deccan where there has been 'no enduring political or cultural center' and which thus lack 'a unified and coherent master narrative of the sort often told for north India, with its neat sequence of Delhi-based empires,'[7] are well served by this shift of scale to the micro-level, which is to say, the life-narrative. Through the chronological linkage of eight lives extending from 1300–1761 in *A Social History of the Deccan*, Eaton was able to indicate in subtle ways the social transformations behind the veneer of political vicissitudes. His knack for con-juring deeply embedded memories of society from the built environment – a skill he brings especially to architectural monuments in light of political history – illuminates the forms of power and processes of social change that defy persistent stereotypes, including those that govern contemporary views of the past. There is thus no cataclysmic Islamic conversion narrative – whether by the sword or the pen – supported by the his-torical record in places like eastern Bengal, but rather a slow process of what he calls 'seepage.'[8] So many erroneous notions, stereotypes, and methods based on reified reli-gious categories are undone along the way that a rather unusual and curiously new image of the Indian past comes to light in Eaton's works. This is one more compelling, realistic, and indeed curious than the one Herodotus produced for India with his fantas-tic tales of the desert ants there 'smaller than dogs but larger than foxes,' dredging up from the sandy underworld heaps of gold for their human overlords.[9]

III. How to destroy historiographical stereotypes

Thus, even with a Herodotus as an exemplar of historiographical virtue, it is no easy task to rid the Indian picture of the Orientalist hues that have saturated it for millennia. It is no help that contemporary Hindutva hegemony operates by perpetuating many of the stereotypes that previous potentates, the British especially, found so serviceable for secur-ing their specious claims of legitimacy. 'The British came to justify the Raj on the grounds that they had introduced India,' a land already configured in the Christian imagination with existing schemes of Satan, the devil, and heathens, 'to an enlightened era of sound and just government, a position logically requiring that rulers immediately preceding them to be construed as despotic and unjust.'[10] Unending Hindu-Muslim conflict born of religious bigotry bloodied the field of medieval India. To the parade of stereoty-pical motifs – ' of . . . intolerant measures, of idols mutilated, of temples razed, of forcible conversions and marriages, of proscriptions and confiscations, of murders and mas-sacres, and of sensuality and drunkenness of the tyrants who enjoined them,' to cite Sir Henry M. Elliot, are now added Prime Minister Modi's complaints of 1200 years of enslavement of Hindus by Muslim foreigners.[11] The paradigm of a premodernity wracked by religiously narrow worldviews is no easy thing to shake. Indeed, in some ways, it has become embedded in the tripartite scheme for writing Indian history since James Mill's *The History of British India* (1817): ancient Hindu, medieval Muslim, and modern British. How then does one undo this enduring structure?[12] For here historio-graphy, and not merely history, is 'a nightmare from which I am trying to awake' (Joyce). Though the challenges are made explicit, Eaton's answers remain embedded in tacit practice. It is thus instructive to see how he proceeds in slowly, methodically

dismantling the stereotypes that have structured historical memory for India for centuries. The fundamental challenge is an imminent critique of the stereotype, in this case, a historical analysis that reveals its genesis and political rationale within a wider compass of findings that displace it. By not relying on the admittedly tendentious accounts of this or the other language source (as Sir Eliot did with Persian), by thinking through the silent yet voluminous lessons offered by material artifacts within wider natural and social landscapes, by comparing one account with an opposing viewing, Eaton is able to mount nuance after nuance to displace the stereotypes imposed on the past from our fraught present. This interdisciplinary method allows him to work up and down the social scale, from the amorous dalliances of a stern sovereign (such as Aurangzeb) or military alliances of a poet-courtier (such as Amir Khusrau), to the socioeconomic logics of fiscal crises that end up impoverishing the peasantry. At no point does the stereotype serve any explanatory function. Instead, religion itself gets displaced and folded into a larger civilizational order signaled by language and the wide culture it mediates: Persian and the Persianate, as a counterpoint to Sanskrit and what Sheldon Pollock has famously termed the 'Sanskrit cosmopolis.'[13] Both Sanskrit and Persian in their heyday are characterized as cultural orders that transcend all particular localisms, furnish a medium for interconnecting people from disparate worlds for which no single geographical or political center is instituted, and defy any quick identification with a particular ethnic, linguistic, or regional base. Instead, these model languages constitute 'a network of shared idioms and styles that made similar claims about aesthetics, polity, kingly virtue, learning and the universality of dominion.'[14] Both Persian and Sanskrit produced in their different ways value structures and normative images of moral and social order worthy of emulation within local realms. By overlapping within the subcontinent, both Sanskrit and Persian came to translate each other into their respective worldviews, marking a new horizon of universality and cosmopolitan becoming by the early modern period. The tightly enclosed religious worldview of the zealot or bigot is not so much elided or denied existence in Eaton's account as provided with what they had in the first place: limited appeal.

IV. Wider cosmopolitanisms/alternative universalisms

Rather, what a variety of historical actors of numerous walks of life in India sought to emulate were the codes of cosmopolitan registers that had made their presence felt within southern Asia for several centuries. As mentioned, preceding and in many ways laying the groundwork for the Persianate order was the Sanskrit cosmopolis. In tracking the rise of the notion of a '*marga*' or translocal plane of Sanskrit literary culture (as opposed to the '*deshi*' or local sphere), Pollock was able to delineate a connection between language and an aesthetics of political power that emphasized the secular (or *laukika* realm as opposed to the merely religious) and a commitment to universality. This complex of culture and power, 'characterized by a largely homogeneous language of political poetry' opened outward and extended the possibilities of breaking with particularizations of ethnicity, locality, and religion, narrowly defined.[15] 'Constituted by no imperial state or church and consisting to a large degree in the communicative system itself and its political aesthetic,' Pollock claims, 'this order was characterized by a trans-regional consensus about the presuppositions, nature, and practices of a common

culture.'[16] Moreover, the kind of universalism that it sought to actualize was never pregiven or enforced, a trait which lent this model of cosmopolitan existence much appeal. For Eaton, Persian was not merely a language that was introduced to the subcontinent, but rather the medium for much more: 'an inclusivist political ideology' that signified an ethos of social mobility; a common culture comprising distinctive 'styles of architecture, dress, music, courtly comportment, cuisine and, especially, vocabulary.'[17] But more than this, the Persianate ideology that came to prevail over India was one that privileged a commitment to justice that connected economy, morality, and politics in compelling ways. The Persianate experience has indeed bequeathed several modern Indian languages with an enduring vocabulary of justice and the just ruler (for instance, 'adil, 'adalat, insaf, akhlaq, and so forth in Urdu) and perhaps secured the ideas of dignity and humanity with the prizing of akhlaq (ethics) and insaniyat (the human) as a new value that could help erode inherited and increasingly illegitimate hierarchies. Eaton points to the implications of Persianate secularity in a variety of subtle ways. There is, for instance, the remarkable experimentations within and away from religious traditions that marked the Indo-Islamic world from the era of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526) all the way to the waning of the Mughal empire by the end of the eighteenth century. While a tendency toward secular humanism did not characterize all of the social levels or traditional milieus in which such experimentations took hold, it is nonetheless noteworthy how disparate figures articulated a new focus on the extra-religious, whether in the form of Akbar's infamous din-i ilahi or in the emphasis on the here and now in the compositions of Kabir or Nanak.[18] We will explore later the secular dimensions of the break with Timurid millennial sovereignty that especially characterized for Eaton the reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1707), one of the most striking interpretations offered in *India in the Persianate Age*. But for the moment it is worth drawing out what emphases on secularity and universality amounted to in practice. The Persianate cosmopolis culminates in significant translation projects vis à vis the other major register, Sanskrit. This fact demonstrates all at once a recognition of the limits of one's own conceptions of the universal and a genuine cosmopolitan commitment to conversation with other such conceptions. The act of translation in this context is an implicit admission of one's inevitable particularity and an act to absolve oneself of it.

V. Lesser and grander narratives

As a work that was commissioned to follow upon *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* by Romila Thapar and present the conventional middle period of Indian history (in however unconventional of ways), Eaton's task was by nature paradigmatic. This is intrinsic to the genre of a textbook, which in many respects is what *India the Persianate Age* is. It thus establishes a standard interplay of interpretations by which other accounts can be judged or the minor case can be distinguished. We will have occasion to note how this is the case by examining recent historiography focused on Sikhs, one of the handful of 'emerging identities' that pattern this historical account. While the professional historian may note how it counters, fends off, or contextualizes older paradigms, for the lay audience Eaton's book merely offers a cogent narrative of major events and transformations. What then are these? In other words, what is the vast road map that Eaton gives us to make our way through the astoundingly diverse

geography of the subcontinent? What is the dense web of causal connections that span generations and give shape to cultures on various scales? What are the primary drivers of social transformation that gave rise to distinct periods, political or otherwise, over the era from 1000-1765? These questions lead to several complications all at once, requiring a visit from Clio, the muse of history. But we may distill a few notable narrative zones that distinguish Eaton's account: interactions on massive scales, whether of ecologies or civilizations; distinct innovations, whether of political forms, new identities, or economic powerhouses (such as the textile industry); and powerful dynamics of social crises and the hopes for social justice they generated. *Interactions*. Though already noted at the level of the overlap of two cosmopolitan traditions – Sanskrit and Persian – it is worth noting how much this theme grounds this account. For instance, the conquest of Babur, the first of the grand Mughals, 'represented an historic moment in the relations between two very different ecological worlds': that of Central Asia's semi-pastoral culture (with its wealth assessed 'largely in terms of movable assets: sheep, horses, goats, camels') and the Indian world Babur encountered ('one of ploughs and bullocks, a sedentary and agrarian society that understood wealth mainly in terms of fixed resources: harvested grain, manufactured goods, precious metals').[19] The dynamism this interaction generates is manifold. One can detect it in the displacement of the caliph (the center of Islamic sacral power) and the foregrounding instead of the secular ruler (*sultan*) in the making of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526), a move that establishes the grounds for later Mughal experiments in composite forms of sovereignty that veer away from both Islamic and Timurid forms, as we will see. In more general terms, the figure of Amir Khusrau (1253-1335) came to emblematize Indo-Islamic fusion for centuries to come. Born of a Turkish father and Hindu mother, Khusrau exalted mystical blending of different subjectivities and created a poetic language that would facilitate it. *Innovations*. Among the many innovations made possible by the overlapping of Indic and Islamic civilizations on the subcontinent, several were of a lasting character. The new mix served as a catalyst for the forging of new identities and actors on the Indian stage and helped establish India as a major economic powerhouse for textiles that would cloth populations around the world. Rajputs, Sikhs, Marathas, and Muslims in Punjab and Bengal established themselves as distinct populations over these centuries and their stories are interwoven into Eaton's narrative as markers of newness. While economic transformations were undoubtedly multifaceted and in turn gave rise to money economies and mercantile communities across the subcontinent, the voluminous expansion of textile manufacture was undergirded by vast irrigation and cultivation projects as well as integration into far flung markets of the Indian Ocean world. The European craze for Indian cotton goods would eventually lead to new political hegemonies on the subcontinent and the end of the era covered in this book. *Crises*. Apart from the succession struggles that rocked polities, especially the Mughal, nearly every generation, a variety of crises characterized each stage of socio-political development from the era of the Delhi Sultanate to the last days of Mughal hegemony. Some of the crises had at their core the question of the political form that would be espoused by the hegemons of state. For instance, in the Delhi Sultanate, the struggle that persisted was one over the very nature of governance: 'Would the throne of Delhi follow the Persian model of hereditary monarchy, in which a single royal family was sovereign, generation after generation? Or would it follow the early

Ghaznavid tradition, in which kingship devolved to a sovereign's slave, and then to the slave of that slave? And if the latter, then which of the master's slaves would inherit the master's patrimony?[20] In Mughal India, the Timurid inheritance of a messianic kingship proved equally uncertain by the time Aurangzeb assumed the throne and sought alternatives to the millennial ideology that placed the sovereign in conjunction with the infinite cosmos. We will turn next to the millenarianism that distinguished the era of late Mughal rule, but for the moment more immediate matters were preoccupying Aurangzeb and his successors than questions of political ideology. At the core of this crisis was the emperor's recognition that there was only 'one pomegranate to serve a hundred sick men,' or as Eaton elaborates, 'there was insufficient unclaimed land to meet the growing demand for *jagirs* owing to the recruitment of new nobles.'[21] Such terminal fiscal crises from within were matched by looming challenges from without. Eaton avoids the longstanding discourse of 'decline,' cultural or otherwise, in describing the onset of Mughal demise, emphasizing instead structural instabilities, the fracturing of authority in the imperial court, and the shift of power into other realms – conditions which surely invited assertions and challenges from all corners, far and wide.

VI. Millennial sovereignty and the question of justice

'The metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization.' Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology.*[22]

The curious course of the concept of the millennial sovereign is very much worth tracking in *India in the Persianate Age* and the more specialized historiography on the subcontinent during this period. The relationship of millenarianism to the wider discourses of social justice and ethical life cultivated in various arenas of the Indo-Islamic world has yet to be fully worked out, but there is no doubt that an intense messianism defined the age and fueled efforts far and wide to usher in a new epoch of universal justice. Indeed this 'messianic age', as Azfar Moin has referred to the high noon of Mughal rule, spilled beyond the boundaries of religion and in many ways extended into arenas that challenged Timurid hegemony.[23] The cataclysmic charge that millenarianism unleashed into the crisis-ridden world of the late Mughal era signified widespread impatience with impasses in the institutional realm and frustration with hegemons unable to deliver substantially on any semblance of social justice. It will be instructive to explore the ramifications that millenarian currents had in disparate milieus, such as those of the Sikhs in the early eighteenth century, and the institutional transformations they spurred with hopes of complete and radical change for the better in the likes of Guru Gobind Singh or Banda Bahadur and their minions. For the moment, let us simply trace the career of millennial sovereignty, its main coordinates as a concept, and the manner in which it gave scope to messianic movements for radical, lasting change beyond the sphere of the royal figure and his court. It is first of all a form of sacred kingship. While sharing with other such forms of medieval political theology the notion that the sovereign was an intermediary between divinity and humanity, conjoining auspicious planetary constellations in the heavens with the mundane world of everyday life, what

distinguished the Timurid legacy was a particular capaciousness, combinational potential, and flexibility with regard to cultural milieu – all of which lent it incredible salience within a culturally diverse Persianate India. By the time it descended into the subcontinent in the wake of Timur's invasion of northern India at the end of the fourteenth century, the idea of the millennial sovereign already included linkages to Mongol paganism and Islamic messianism, with various Shi'a inflections in particular.[24] But it also shared the conceptual underpinnings of a wider Abrahamic genealogy such as Christian understandings of the historical process as 'universal, providential, apocalyptic, and periodized,' as R.G. Collingwood concisely put it.[25] As the Christian millennium had passed and the Islamic was looming, Eaton writes, 'People in both faith traditions had been looking expectantly for signs of the apocalypse, or even claiming to be personally heralding a new age of justice that would follow the present age of injustice and chaos.'[26] In this era, Akbar and later his grandson Shah Jahan each invoked the Timurid title of the Lord of the Conjunction and fashioned themselves as millennial sovereigns par excellence. The symbolism at play 'could expand and change color to match the social situation and audience,' Moin establishes. 'A conjunction could signify a lucky general, a fortunate king, a world conqueror with a lasting dispensation, a prophet with a law, a messiah, or all of the above rolled into one.'[27] But fundamentally it signified an impending epochal shift with the sudden negation of the status quo and its replacement with a socio-political dispensation prefigured but unactualized in previous eras. What lent these millenarian ideas so much potency in the late Mughal period was not merely their immanent potential for criticizing the failures of existing institutions to deliver on the ethics and justice that various actors sought to secure. Rather, it was their elasticity and adaptability. To see how this was the case within a milieu that radically broke with and opposed the Mughal order and yet had internalized many of its norms, we will turn in the next part to developments in Sikhism.

Part II: translations and transformations in the Sikh sphere

'The shaped times of the diverse areas overshadow the uniform flow of time.' Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last*.[28]

VII. Punjabi mediations of the Persianate

With its winning prose, Eaton's account will serve the paradigmatic function of a history textbook for decades to come. In an interview with members of Karwaan: The Heritage Exploration Initiative, a public platform established by undergraduate history students of Delhi University to counter the fascistic usurpation of collective memory in contemporary India, Eaton remarks that his effort was not meant to be argumentative or polemical.[29] Despite the subtle details and multilevel framings adding up to the arguments already detailed above, as a textbook, Eaton says, the primary purpose was to establish a basic narrative of events and developments for the period in question. As with so many other geographies, from Vijayanagara in the South to Arakan in the East, the region of Punjab is cogently interwoven into the broad fabric of *India in the Persianate Age*'s narrative, with the vibrant emergence of Sikhism and the profile of figures like Guru

Gobind decisively setting a course of events into motion. Indeed, the book raises the question of Sikh-Mughal relations in ways that prognosticate the breakdown of the historiographical conventions and other artifices that keep these entities apart and on separate tracks. This is all the more peculiar given the fact that the fates of the Mughal empire and the Sikh community were intertwined from Nanak's eye witnessing of the wreckage of Babur's invasion of Punjab in the 1520s to the assertion of Sikh autonomy against the remnants of Mughal power in the late eighteenth century. Moreover, Eaton notes, the Sikh tradition absorbed from Persian such 'key lexical items as *hukm* ('the grace of God'), *langar* ('communal meal'), *Khalsa* ('community of sworn initiates') and the term by which Guru Nanak referred to himself – *tabl-i baz*, or 'herald.'[30] By shifting scales from the broad contours of the Persian cosmopolis to the manner in which it is mediated by one region – Punjab – and the inflections wrought upon it by one increasingly distinctive spiritual and political order – Sikhism – we can see how the paradigms established in Eaton's account serve to bring into focus macro–micro dialectics of social spheres. That is, this standard account invites explorations in what Kracauer called 'the law of levels' – an insight arrived at from the discrepancies in what is perceptible between macro and micro scales and the fact of local ambivalences toward and reworkings of dominant structures. What is needed is nuance and detail to match the acknowledgment of historical reality as ultimately multifaceted, heterogeneous, discontinuous, and uneven, with temporal movements occurring at different speeds and directions. Clio, the muse of history, must alight upon many levels of reality at once in order to produce her sparks.

VIII. Questions of violence, justice, and sovereignty

A variety of fundamental questions arise in thinking through the relations between early Sikhism and the Mughal reconfiguration of Indian society after Babur. Nanak's *Babur-vani* ('Utterances on Babur'), a handful of verses collected in the Guru Granth Sahib reflecting the devastation wrought by the first Mughal emperor's invasions of Punjab, bring up the question of violence and its relationship to sovereignty.[31] Do certain historical situations draw together as if inevitably political violence and righteous devotion, and if so, how does the connection get articulated? Did violence appear in Sikhism from its earliest moments, or did it enter into the picture only as a function of the faith's turn to political sovereignty in the wake of the fifth guru's martyrdom under Jahangir in 1605? Is there a connection between the violent symbolism that constituted the Khalsa in 1699 and the earliest formulation of principles of community in Sikhism, or do these latter developments stem from completely different sources? How did Persianate culture and Mughal politics mediate the articulations of religion and violence within Sikhism? These are broad, challenging questions that cannot be fully addressed here. They alone demonstrate how mutually imbricated these two cultures were – how much, in other words, to find answers for one cultural arena one must situate it in relation to the other. This point will prove equally true with respect to other themes discussed in this essay – such as the questions relating to cosmopolitanism, secularity, and the human – but for the purposes of space, we will concentrate on questions of violence, militancy, and millenarianism, all rearticulated in a distinctly Sikh idiom.

IX. Violence and the first guru

'Power needs no justification, being inherent in the very existence of political communities; what it does need is legitimacy.' Hannah Arendt, *On Violence.*[32]

From the very first brush between the descendants of Timur and the community emerging under the tutelage of Nanak a distinct dialectic unfolded. 'In many ways, the nature of Guru Nanak's encounter with the first Mughal emperor Babur defined the tenor of future relationships between the respective successors of Nanak and Babur and whether that relationship was dominated by peace or conflict, violence or nonviolence.'[33] These lines from Arvind-pal Mandair's *Violence and the Sikhs* indicate a new orientation to the tradition carved out by Nanak and the dialectic of conservation and innovation that it unfolded over succeeding centuries under disparate socio-political conditions. This orientation differs significantly from the longstanding standard line established by Orientalists such as W.H. McLeod who construct an initial pacifist devotionalism as the core of Nanak's teachings and assert that the turn to militancy and conflict among the latter gurus 'represents a fundamental deviation from Guru Nanak's teaching.'[34] The problematic that Mandair engages with is one that aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of violence with the many gradations between its real and symbolic manifestations as well as internal and external modalities. The question of violence in all of its manifestations has far-reaching implications, extending from Nanak's assessment of society in the wake of Babur's invasions as 'Kaliyuga' to quandaries relating to which life path, that of the householder or the renunciant, would be valorized, or whether both proved inadequate and had to be overcome.[35] It is becoming increasingly clear through Mandair's careful interventions that Nanak's approach to the question of political power set up a lasting counterpoint to the license that Babur gave to physical potency. Most telling in this instance is the fact that Nanak departed from his more quiescent and less politically inclined *bhakti* counterparts and established lasting institutions whose inner workings were at a recognizable distance from those of both Hindu and Muslim persuasions. This is a point that Eaton makes, following on the insights of the historian J.S. Grewal's analyses distinguishing Nanak explicitly from predecessors such as Kabir and, implicitly, contemporaries such as Chaitanya. What may be inferred from the mobilizing and institution-building efforts of Nanak is threefold. First, the spiritual community he created in Kartarpur in 1519 on the right bank of the Ravi River was ipso facto an emerging power base and thus a site in which the question of violence had to be addressed. Babur's assault on Sayyidpur just a year later provided the occasion for making explicit the underlying legitimacy of this new community. Second, the form of legitimacy that undergirded this new community overcame perforce the longstanding Indic binary of householder and renunciant, as neither the status quoist pragmatism of the householder nor the resigned otherworldliness of the renunciant were adequate for securing the ethical and political grounding of the new community. And, third, the immediacy of Babur's physical violence and evident disregard for his victims' dignity required a distinct modality for harnessing violence internally and directing it in ways that could serve as a counterpoint to Mughal state power in lasting ways. 'Guru Nanak exercised power through an interior violence derived not from *hukumat* (state power)' as was the case with Babur, 'but from a submission to

hukam – an interior violence in which one dies to the self – a violence that is absolutely excessive (in the sense that *hukam* infinitely exceeds *hukumat*) and cannot be captured or contained by state power.'[36] Mandair is suggesting that in the Kaliyuga, where justice in the external world is as uncertain as the throw of dice, the inner self had to be cultivated as a bedrock for a practical ethics from which an alternative political dispensation could eventually be secured.

X. Sovereignty, millenarianism, and Sikh militancy

Mandair's compelling complications and reinterpretations of Nanak's dialogue with the late Lodi and early Mughal dispensations have ramifications that extend inevitably to later key moments in Sikh history. Among those that now demand careful reconsideration are not merely the theme of *halemi raj* (mild rule) of Guru Arjan, but also the immediately political acts of the sixth guru, Hargobind Singh, the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, and the founding of the Khalsa in 1699. Simultaneously, Eaton's equally compelling reassessments of figures such as Aurangzeb, the sixth Mughal emperor 'Alamgir, especially with regard to the Timurid inheritance of the notion of millennial sovereignty, are no less impactful on our understandings of the general picture. Thus, one set of interpretations within one field inevitably affect those of the other. In the mix are key motifs of the recent historiography: cosmopolitan humanism (something given vernacular expression in Nanak's legendary travels beyond his native Punjab into other regions of the world), engagement with Persian and Persianate political and ethical discourses in the drafting of key texts such as Guru Gobind's *Zafarnama* (Epistle of Victory),[37] and especially the capture and democratic reorientation of millennial sovereignty and millenarianism more generally. A very dynamic dialogism shaped Sikh and Mughal societies, and nowhere was this more noticeable than at the level of political form. Eaton, Mandair, Syan, Fenech and other historians have covered in concurring ways the events that led to the making of explicitly political institutions such as the Akal Takht in 1609 and the mobilization of forces that culminated in the founding of the Khalsa by the end of the century. Less analyzed are the interrelations between the waning commitment to millennial sovereignty within the Mughal court of 'Alamgir and the concurrent rise of millenarianism within enemy subaltern ranks, such as those of Banda Bahadur, who before his brutal execution along with 700 of his followers by Mughal authorities in 1716 had, as Eaton notes, begun 'minting his own coins – a sign of independent sovereignty – and establishing his own calendar, vaguely projecting the rebel as a millennial figure.'[38] These developments suggest the instability, if not volatility, of the concept of millennial sovereignty in this era of terminal crisis. Who was or were to be the embodiment of this form of sovereignty? The shifting logic, mobility, and even fugitive nature of the millennial complex are all in keeping with the malleability of its inhering mix of messianism, revolutionary temporality, and the notion of the sovereign as quasi-divine purveyor of social justice. Within the Mughal sphere, the career of this concept was complex, vicissitudinous, and even controversial at times. But, as Eaton makes clear in the striking formulations regarding modernity in the ultimate section of his conclusion, the Timurid legacy was tied up willy-nilly with certain drives toward reason, secularism, and what we today call 'modernity.' This is also the case, I will note, within the field of early modern Sikh experiments with models of sovereignty

and political form, especially in the making of the Khalsa. These latter experiments also, in other words, beckoned a new social order, putting into parallel lanes a motion away from a singular figure as sovereign toward one where a wider demotic force could assume such a role. Within the Mughal sphere Eaton traces a break from millennial sovereignty in the trends stemming initially from Akbar's 'attempt to impose an ethos of rational order on the world,' his 'determined effort to standardize and impose the most minute regulations over nearly everything,' and a general commitment to discipline, control, and efficiency. Despite Akbar's assumption of the role of millennial sovereign par excellence at the heights of his reign, he simultaneously actualized 'a new sort of secularism' in which human agency replaced divine machinations.[39] These tendencies culminated in Aurangzeb's attempts to break from the Timurid legacy and impose instead a rationally grounded, uniform, and impersonal legal code across the empire. 'Instead of a state that pivoted on a charismatic, sacred emperor, he tried to establish an impersonal polity governed by the rule of law.'[40] Within the Sikh camp, on the other hand, the grappling with millenarianism was no less dramatic or radical. With the founding of the Khalsa, millenarian currents broke from Mughal authoritarianism and opened instead toward experiments with collective authority and legitimacy. The spectacular events that brought the Khalsa into existence on a fateful Baisakhi day in 1699 need only to be alluded to here.[41] They consisted of a drama, as Mandair has put it, made up of three separate acts: Guru Gobind's call for volunteers ready to sacrifice their heads, initiation of five self-sacrificing volunteers (*panj piyare*) by a double-edged sword, and the symbolic act of immolation of the God-King that transferred the authority of guru from Gobind to the newly formed band of initiates, intended to bring an end to the cycle of divisive succession disputes. The Khalsa emerged thus as an autonomous political body that had symbolically absorbed and made immanent the spiritual transcendence associated with the previous ten gurus. The democratizing and egalitarian dynamics unleashed by the Khalsa were pronounced in a variety of ways: the disavowal of previous caste identities, the universal adoption of the prestigious title of 'Singh' (lion), and the donning of distinctive identity-markers (the five k's). But perhaps most importantly for the dissemination of this new spirit of armed commitment within the wider Punjab was the fact that any group of five Singhs could initiate others into the new order. This manner of capturing and redeploying millenarian energies at large reaffirmed the rational-civil-theological bases of early Sikhism and gave great momentum to mobilizations against Mughal tyranny and for social justice in eighteenth century Punjab.[42]

XI. Clio in India

'The dialectical image can be defined as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity.' Walter Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'[43]

Clio, the muse of history in the Greek tradition, is born of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the personification of memory. While memory may take on many forms in the classical Greek imagination, it is the role of Clio in particular, with her scroll of recorded deeds in hand, that has the potential to break one free of the false accounts and erroneous framings that have accrued and obscured the past. Clio's inspiration may also be

generative. Thus it is to her that Eaton dedicated *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* for she had visited him at 2pm on the 15th of November in 1978 and spurred the questions that led to the research and writing of that book. 'For me, Clio had always represented a personification of the unique kind of insight – even epiphany – that historians might experience only when they suddenly grasp how best to formulate an historical question or hypothesis.'[44] Aiding the pursuit of these questions, indeed guiding them to their answers, is the fact that 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history' – that is, to Clio – and that history affirms itself through these investigations to be the discipline for which nothing human is alien.[45] But we sense that Clio's self-unveiling and epiphanic granting of her powers occurs neither at the level of grey generality nor at the level of mere local color, but rather departs from both at once into the realm of the dialectical image in which a redeemed humanity is reflected. This effort at constellating some motifs in recent historiography – cosmopolitanism, messianic kingship, and the Sikh capture of millenarianism – has been meant to reanimate historical inquiry through an analysis of disparate levels of past experience, indeed, through the flicker that might be generated from following them to the point of their mutual collision. Clio's chronology bridges the various moments of macro and micro histories while sending sparks between them in ways that should illuminate pathways forward in places where memory of Clio is waning and horizons are quickly darkening.

Notes

1. Following the poet Hölderlin, Walter Benjamin writes: 'happiness is . . . what releases the fortunate man from the embroilment of the Fates and from the net of his own fate.' See 'Fate and Character' in Michael W. Jennings et al (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996) 203. Benjamin is likely making reference to Hölderlin's 'Hyperions Schiksaalslied' where 'Fateless the Heavenly breathe / Like an unweaned infant asleep' (Shiksaallos, wie der schlafende / Säugling, athmen die Himmlischen). Friedrich Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Penguin, 1998) 26-27.
2. Richard M. Eaton, *The Sufis of Bijapur, 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufi's in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016 [1978]; Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Richard M. Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300-1761: Eight Indian Lives* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Richard M. Eaton and Phillip B. Wagoner, *Power, Memory, Architecture: Contested Sites on India's Deccan Plateau, 1300–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); for an analysis of Qutb Minar, see Catherine Asher, *Delhi's Qutb Complex, the Minar, Mosque and Mehrauli* (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2017).
3. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Knopf, 1953) 61. The original French reads: 'Que le préhistorien – quel historien de l'Inde – ne donnerait-il pas pour disposer d'un Hérodote?' Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l''histoire ou Métier d'historien* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1974) 60.
4. Voyages into the Past, 'Richard Eaton: How I Became an Historian.' *YouTube*, 14 January, 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkzjjLo7RT4
5. *Islam and Bengal Frontier* xxv.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Social History of the Deccan* 1-2.
8. *Islam and Bengal Frontier* 310, passim.

9. Herodotus, *The Histories*, ed. Walter Blanco (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 2013) 3.102.

10. Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age 1000–1765* (London: Penguin, 2019) 6. On India in the imagination of Christendom, see Bernard Cohn, 'The Transformation of Objects into Artifacts, Antiquities, and Art in Nineteenth-Century India' in his *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 76-105.

11. Elliot as cited by Eaton *Persianate Age* 6-7.

12. James Mill, *The History of British India* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1817); For general cultural and political contexts, see Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's* The History of British India *and Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

13. Sheldon Pollock, 'The Cosmopolitan Vernacular.' *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (February 1998): 6-37.

14. Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 11.

15. Pollock *Language of Gods* 19.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Eaton *Persianate Age* 16, 17.

18. See the special issue of *Modern Asian Studies* on 'Sulh-i Kull as an Oath of Peace: Mughal Political Theology in History, Theory, and Comparison' (Vol. 56, special issue 3, May 2022). For Kabir, see Purushottam Agarwal, *Akath Kahani Prem Ki: Kabir ki Kavita aur unka Samay* [An Ineffable Tale of Love: Kabir's Poetry and his Times] (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2010).

19. Eaton *Persianate Age* 197.

20. *Ibid.* 45.

21. *Ibid.* 326.

22. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006 [1922]) 46. 'Das metaphysische Bild, das sich ein bestimmtes Zeitalter von der Welt macht, hat dieselbe Struktur wie das, was ihr als Form ihrer politischen Organisation ohne weiteres einleuchtet.' (Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* [Munich: Duncker and Humblot, 1934] 59-60.)

23. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 28.

24. See Shazad Bashir, *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The Nurbakshiya Between Medieval and Modern Islam* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

25. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946) 49.

26. Eaton *Persianate Age* 236.

27. Moin *Millennial Sovereign* 31.

28. Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995 [1969]) 147.

29. Karwaan, 'Prof. Richard Eaton – India in the Persianate Age.' YouTube, 13 November, 2020. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z92n2nhA_po&t=444s

30. Eaton *Persianate Age* 385

31. See Pashaura Singh, 'Speaking Truth to Power: Exploring Guru Nanak's *Babar-vani* in Light of the *Baburnama*' *Religions* 11.328 (2020): 1-19.

32. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harvest Book, 1969) 52.

33. Arvind-pal Mandair, *Violence and the Sikhs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) 34.

34. *Ibid.* 4.

35. Hardip Singh Syan, *Sikh Militancy in the Seventeenth Century: Religious Violence in Mughal and Early Modern India* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

36. Mandair *Violence* 36.

37. See Louis Fenech, *The Sikh Zafar-namah of Guru Gobind Singh: A Discursive Blade in the Heart of the Mughal Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
38. Eaton *Persianate Age* 360.
39. *Ibid.* 394-395.
40. *Ibid.* 396.
41. The scholarship on the key events is fairly extensive, but the most focused accounts can be found in Arvind-pal Singh Mandair, Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 47-74; Louis Fenech, The Cherished Five in Sikh History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); and J.S. Grewal, The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
42. G.S. Sahota, 'Guru Nanak and Rational Civil Theology', *Sikh Formations*, 7:2 (2011): 131-143.
43. Walter Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'' in Jennings et al, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Belknap, 2006) 403.
44. Richard M. Eaton, *The Lotus and The Lion: Essays on India's Sanskritic and Persianate Worlds* (Delhi: Primus, 2022) ix.
45. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 390.

Disclosure statement