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Literary Folk: Writing Popular Culture in Colonial Punjab, 1885-1905.

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In the wake of the annexation of the Punjab in 1849, the creep of colonial infrastructure facilitated the work of a diverse range of administrators, archaeologists, travellers and various kinds of amateur scholar, who sought to compile, categorise and understand this religiously and linguistically diverse region. The borders of Punjab would change dramatically throughout the colonial period, finally leading to partition in 1947 when the new national border between Indian and Pakistan was used to cut through diverse communities that had historically characterised the area. Recent scholarship on the broad idea of *Punjabiyyat* or ‘Punjabiness’ practices a historiography that reads past partition to understand the ways in which cultural practice, memory and identity persist post-partition. Although Punjabi is a language shared by a number of faiths and cultures, studies of the history of Punjabi language and its management have demonstrated how it has become increasingly synonymous with the Sikh faith (Ray, 2003; Mir, 2010). Faith, rather than language, acted as the axiom of difference when it came to constructing the basis of new national imaginaries. This chapter identifies some of the ways a Punjabi literary sphere was (mis)understood in the late-Victorian empire through the curation of a canon of Punjabi folk-culture by R.C. Temple (1850-1931), Flora Annie Steel (1847-1929) and C.F. Usborne (1874-1919), all of whom lived and worked in Punjab as an extension of colonial administration. Examples of a diverse and rich Punjabi literary culture were translated into English under the banner of ‘folklore’ which delegitimised the diversity of prose and verse in Punjabi with origins in religious, spiritual and genres of the epic derived from Persian. While this chapter does not aim to assess the literary merits of the translations against the originals (an impossible task due to

the fact that the originals existed as performed texts), it does question the ways in which Punjabi literary culture filtered in British writing. This literary culture was transmitted in print, but also in performances and through the work of performers and artists who would creatively adapt the orally-transmitted poetic epics, lyrics and ballads of the region.

Part of the premise of this argument relies on a broader understanding of early anthropological work and research as an important variety of literary activity in the late nineteenth-century. This is not a controversial point in itself: the work of James Clifford, Ruth Benedict and Clifford Geertz was part of a wave of revisionist thinking about how anthropology constructed and understood method, evidence and the production of knowledge, 'No longer a marginal, or occulted dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter' (Clifford and Marcus, 2007: 2). The influence of this work in literary studies has primarily been in the field of travel writing where the work of Clifford and Mary Louise Pratt on the relationship between the traveller and the people/cultures they describe, especially in 'exotic' contexts, has become part of the critical canon. However, the anthropological debate has offered a larger epistemological challenge which has failed fully to permeate branches of literary and historical colonial scholarship, partially due to the difficulty in labelling early amateur anthropologists and ethnographers. The writers under consideration here have been of minor interest within the fields of archaeology, South Asian studies and English literary fiction. At the fringes of different spheres of expertise, the accumulation of their knowledge about Punjab has been dispersed.

The past decade has offered more nuanced methodological approaches to understanding the relevancy of different kinds of discourse for South Asian literary research. Multi-disciplinary approaches based in literary studies have illuminated a series of networks

of influence and impact across the Empire.<sup>1</sup> However, the study of colonial Indian literary culture continues to be divided between disciplines including history, English-based literary studies and South Asian studies. In a recent special edition of *Victorian Literature and Culture* Mary Ellis Gibson summarised the problem with discussing English writing in the context of India: ‘which Victorian India? Whose Victorian India?’ (Gibson, 2014: 325). This line of questioning could be taken further in order to consider what counts as fictional writing, and how useful the term ‘literary’ is in this context. Sukanya Bannerjee’s *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* (2010) is a good example of this issue as it considers literary sources alongside governmental sources and historical material to offer a different kind of framing for literary culture that relies on Hayden White’s theorisations of narrative. The strength of this view is its approach to seeking similar levels of cultural value between a variety of discursive types; Patrick Brantlinger argues against sceptical reaction of historians to postcolonial literary studies: ‘a literary text is just as much fact as a government document [...] It may even be epistemologically more reliable than a government document’ (Brantlinger, 2009: 56). Gayatri Gopinath’s *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005) is another example of a recent critical study which weaves together colonial-era texts with Bollywood films and Caribbean texts to queer the understanding of race and sexuality by deliberately writing around existing historical genealogies. Part of the impact of transperipheral research has been to disrupt disciplinary conventions, especially in the literary and historical study of empire, alongside an interest in, ‘narratives that trace historical ruptures rather than teleological trajectories’ (Gibson, 2014: 325). The loose definition of narrative and discourse here offers an opportunity and problem: what are the new types of ring-fencing being put in place to make

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<sup>1</sup> An excellent example of this has been *Making Britain: South Asian Visions of Home and Abroad, 1870-1950*.

manageable the sheer volume of material that falls under the category of narrative? And what are kinds of geo-historical specificities are effaced in transperipheral research?

Connecting narratives across geographical contexts has made a powerful impact on contemporary literary scholarship, but it does raise questions about the relevancy and importance of this medium in areas like Punjab which have had exceptionally low rates of literacy. Farina Mir has argued that oral performance allowed Punjabi literary cultures to develop outside the formal and informal apparatuses of colonial power (Mir, 2010), especially as Urdu persisted as the official language of colonial administration in the area. By analysing the transition from oral culture to print culture this chapter offers an overview of a partial and incomplete project to variously transcribe, translate, curate and analyse a version of ‘common’ Punjabi culture conventionally divorced from official literary contexts.

By bringing together three figures who formed an interface between English-language print culture and Punjabi vernacular culture in the decades after Punjab’s annexation, this chapter’s response to the ‘which Victorian India’ dilemma is to make an argument for more devolution in literary and cultural politics in order to examine literary formations in more focussed contexts. R.C. Temple, Flora Annie Steel and C.F. Usborne all relayed accounts of forms of popular ‘legends’, ‘ballads’, ‘fairy tales’ and ‘folktales’ that decontextualized Punjabi literary culture, especially in terms of genre and performance, through labelling a diverse set of practices as ‘folk’ and ‘folklore’. Important studies by Jennifer Schacker (2003) and Caroline Sumpter (2008) have discussed the ideological contexts for the classification of ‘folk’ in the Victorian period and its relationship to social movements based in racial origin theories or forms of nascent socialism. The loose interchange between these terms is an issue that was partially addressed as folklore studies professionalised in the latter part of the century through the establishment of the Folklore Society in 1878. A criterion which spanned the genres was a degree of ‘popular’ or ‘oral’ circulation that at times

translated into an interest in primitivism or antique survival. Debates about folklore's role in destroying its object of study is well-debated, as Sumpter points out: 'print's role in the supposed death of folklore has been lamented since (at least) the seventeenth century' (Sumpter, 2008: 9). Arjun Appadurai reminds us that, 'the idea of "folk" in South Asia creates an illusion not just of synchronic homogeneity but also of historical and geographical fixity' (Appadurai, 1991: 468-9). This chapter does not attempt to define who the 'folk' of Punjab were; rather, the focus remains on how 'folk' is constructed and transmitted by Temple, Steel and Usborne.

The distinction between folklore and literary studies becomes important for the context of Punjab precisely because Punjabi was positioned as the vernacular or 'folk' language of an area which had a rich history of oral and literary material in Punjabi, albeit published in a variety of local scripts including Shahmukhi and Gurmukhi. Through the instituting of Urdu as the official language of government, Punjabi was relegated from literary culture as its legitimacy as the most commonly spoken language in region was undermined. According to Farina Mir, this created a social space for Punjabi's print cultures and performed literary cultures to develop and circulate with relative autonomy from the kind of colonial influence and regulation seen in other South Asian languages: 'Punjabi literary culture offers, therefore, a particular instance of stability through a period usually marked for its ruptures, as people and institutions traversed the divide between precolonial and colonial rule' (Mir, 2010: 4). From Temple's use of local legends to understand the shrines and monuments of the Punjab, to the translation and adaptation of localised forms of lyric poetry into English fairy tales, this chapter offers a snapshot of how Punjabi literary culture was translated into a variety of North Indian folklore in British writing. This chapter seeks to understand this process in the first instance by tracing the interest in 'classical' Punjab and its survivals in the work of Punjab's first colonial archaeological survey, which also collected

anthropological and ethnographical material. It then looks at three different types of overlapping evidence of Punjabi literary culture in English through the ‘collecting’ of folklore, the adaptation and translation of children’s tales, and the curation and translation of Punjabi lyrics.

### Excavating Cultures: Colonial Mythologies in Punjab

In 2013, sitting in the gardens of a retired military officer in Sirhind, Punjab, I was reliably informed that my surname ‘Mann’ (transliterated in a variety of forms into English) entered Punjab with Alexander the Great’s army. A less personalised version of this origin myth was repeated for me by a variety of local elders who regarded Alexander as one of many invaders including Jahangir and the British that northern India had been subject to. Alexander Cunningham also recorded hearing an origin story in his archaeological tour of this region of Punjab in 1863-4. Son of the Scottish poet Allan Cunningham, Alexander was a British Army engineer who in 1861 was appointed to organise archaeological reports across northern India thereby laying the foundations of the Archaeological Survey of India which is now part of the Ministry of Culture in India. In Cunningham’s first collation of reports, he prefaces his work with the minute by Charles John Canning, the then Governor General of India for whom, ‘It is impossible to pass through that part, – or indeed, so far as my experience goes, any part – of the British territories in India without being struck by the neglect with which the greater portion of the architectural remains, and of the traces of by-gone civilization have been treated’ (Cunningham, 1871: i). Although Canning was keen to highlight that the financial burden of conservation was beyond the reasonable expectation of the Indian government, the cataloguing of architectural remains generated the outline of a national and historical boundary line for what could be called heritage.

In the preface to his first collection of reports, Cunningham traces a lineage of Orientalists from William Jones through to James Prinsep and himself to establish a legacy of knowledge about remote periods of Indian history. The Greek influence in northern India is a particular point of interest because Bactrian, a middle-eastern language with a Greek-based script, had been spoken as far east as India. Cunningham identified himself with a move away from text-based studies of Indian civilizations to the study of architecture and other material culture. Dismissing the ‘lying gabble’ (Cunningham, 1871: xix) of Brahmin histories and traditions whose writings were consistently routed into Hindu mythology, archaeological observation opened a new field of evidence: ‘Facts now poured in rapidly, but though many in number, they were still bare and unconnected facts, mere fossil fragments of the great skeletons of Indian history’ (Cunningham, 1871: xix). The archaeological metaphor of the incomplete skeleton was common trope for describing areas dense with historical architectural evidence (Mahn, 2012). With the skeleton metaphor came a privileging of specific strata of the region’s history, a preference which was often ideologically-loaded. In the case of Cunningham, his routes to Punjab were through Greece:

In describing the ancient state of the Panjab [*sic*], the most interesting subject of enquiry is the identification of those famous peoples and cities, whose names have become familiar to the whole world through the expedition of Alexander the great. To find the descendants of those peoples and the ruined mounds of the present day, I propose, like Pliny, to follow the track of Alexander himself. (Cunningham, 1871:1)

Cunningham later compared this to following Pausanias in Greece; his tour through the Punjab was mirrored in the rhetoric of scholars and archaeologists in Greece who sought to look past the recent remains of the Ottoman Empire to see ancient survivals. The irony of attempting a navigation based on the account of an invading army is somewhat lost on Cunningham and his interest in Alexander desensitises him to some of the value and diversity



in the landscape he encounters. Historically, the region called Punjab in colonial India had been home to a range of civilizations, religions and tribes from Buddhists and Jains to Sufis, Sikhs and Muslims. While British historians of the Punjab used religion as a way of understanding historical architecture and cultural influence, what was lost was an understanding of how regional identities organised social relations beyond a narrower interpretation of faith-based communities. The linear view of history and lack of sensitivity to more intricate forms of syncretic religious practice led Cunningham to catalogue a Punjabi heritage that drew straight lines from ancient to modern and through communities along the lines of religion and tribe. In this view Sikh Jats could be categorised as Hindu and mausoleums could be sites of Islamic practices of memorialisation and religious worship.<sup>2</sup>

Cunningham's ordering of the strata of Punjabi history and culture undergirded the assumptions made by colonial administrators about the status, quality and importance of contemporary Punjabi culture. Its most intrinsic value lay in its antiquity, as its present displayed a few fragments from the past in corrupted and decayed form. The rest of this chapter turns to how this derivative view of contemporary Punjabi culture from its 'collection' by folklorists, to the (mis)understanding of its circulation (in print and performance) and its context (social and cultural).

### Varieties of Punjabi Literature in R.C. Temple's *Legends of the Punjab*

Born in Allahabad and educated at Harrow and Cambridge, Temple was an army officer and colonial administrator who became an important part of the folklore and Indian antiquary movement in India, as well as Britain. He joined the Folklore Society in 1885 and was editor

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<sup>2</sup> The recent work of South Asian scholars such as Hussain Ahmed Khan (2015) and Anne Murphy (2012) have highlighted the ways in which colonialism facilitated religious sectarianism, aggravating existing underlying tensions.

of *The Indian Antiquary* from 1872 until 1918, as well as being the founding editor of *Punjab Notes and Queries* in 1883. During his lifetime he worked to produce systematic records of folklore and archaeological evidence from a variety of regions in northern India, while encouraging the work of a range of writers including Flora Annie Steel and C.F. Usborne. As a member of the Royal Asiatic Society, the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and the Anthropological Institute, he was connected to some of the leading societies concerned with South Asia at the time. Temple was keen to distinguish folklore studies from branches of comparative mythology or religious studies and to establish a Punjabi folk canon. His three volume *The Legends of the Punjab* was partially derived from the work of other scholars in the field, including the Sikh historian Max Macauliffe, as well as hired local artists who were asked to perform for payment. While this broad range of sources and formats for collection illustrate a diversity in methods, Temple was confident that his collection would prove to be encyclopaedic.

What, exactly, could be counted as folklore was a tricky question which he addressed head-on in a contribution to the Folklore Society: *'Folk-lore, then, is in the first place, popular learning, the embodiment, that is of the popular ideas on all matters connected with man and his surroundings [...]* A superstition as being an unreasonable and excessive belief, is a fact of Folk-lore so is a legend as unfounded history' (Temple, 1906: 2). Temple takes a view which includes the majority of popular narratives in the Punjab that were not part of official religious scriptures or classical, recorded history. The relegation of Punjab as an official language, alongside the disregard of local practices of historiography and the imposition of Eurocentric models for categorising heritage and culture, bracketed the diversity of Punjabi literary output under the singular heading of 'folklore'.

In 'The Folklore and Legends of the Panjab', Temple categories the subjects of Punjabi folklore, drawing distinctions along the lines of gender and elements of religious

culture deemed to be ‘superstitious’. In relaying the legend of Dhruva, Temple comments on themes of daughter sacrifice or death:

A desire so universal, so strong, so important to the peasantry necessarily finds not only frequent expression in their stories and legends, but also in the acts of daily life, sometimes of a very serious nature. Women have over and over again been guilty of murder and incendiarism due to wild superstitious attempts to gratify it, I can recall a case in which the ignorant low-class mother of daughters only has, with the assistance of her elder daughter, killed a little girl belonging to a neighbour by way of human sacrifice. (Temple, 1906: 78)

Colonial commentary on daughter sacrifice, wife immolation and son-preference in nineteenth-century South Asia has been widely covered in scholarship from Gayatri Spivak’s famous analysis of sati to Navtej K Purewal’s recent work in the operation of son-preference in the colonial to postcolonial periods of India (Purewal, 2010). Purewal in particular highlights how the role and voice of women continued to be effaced in the debate around female infanticide. This view works to affirm Temple’s own beliefs that folklore is a common kind of story or narrative used to underwrite local order and customs. However, it also relies on the apparent inability of the ‘low-class’ to correctly interpret the allegorical world of the folktale. Temple takes this observation further by marking the imaginative slippage between religion, folklore and superstition:

the average villager one meets in the Panjab and Northern India is neither a Muhammadan, nor a Hindu, nor a Sikh, nor any other Religion, as such is understood by its orthodox – or to speak more correctly authorized – exponents, but that his ‘Religion’ is a confused unthinking worship of things held to be holy, whether men or places. (Temple, 1885: xxi)

The ‘confused’ and ‘unthinking’ assumes an unsophisticated and indiscriminate system of worship in Punjab. For Temple, part of the importance of restoring order to the world of folk and religion was part of an international enterprise to make transparent the operations of different social cultures, as well as offering colonial administrators a better way of understanding the population under their control. At an address delivered at the University of Cambridge in 1904, R.C. Temple, after decades of work in the field, argued for the international value of anthropology as an area of study: ‘Lifelong neighbours among Hindus and Muhammadans living chock-a-block in the same street usually know nothing of each other’s ways. Again, every Indian talks of ‘caste,’ but there is nothing more difficult that to get information of practical value from an Indian about any caste, except his own (Temple, 1904: 2). Temple was consistent in reading Punjabi cultural practices as confused and based in ignorance, a reading that inevitably coloured his own appreciation and understanding of the material he collected under the term folklore. Farina Mir has argued that this view was, ‘ultimately, was one of colonial assimilation: colonial in its insistence on the prevalence – indeed, singularity – of a European epistemological framework’ (Mir, 2010: 103). Unwittingly, and precisely because of his prejudice, what Temple actually accomplished was the collection and translation of a range of Punjabi literary forms.

Temple’s three-volume *Legends of the Punjab* brought together texts that were mostly circulated through performance, but were also appearing in Punjabi print. The ‘legend’ of Puran Bhagat, ‘As Sung by Some Jatts from the Patiala State’ (Temple, 1886: 375) is presented as the conflation of two legends with heroes who are interchanged at the bard’s pleasure. The legend is transliterated from Punjabi into roman characters alongside a full translation. The legend is a *qisse*, a type of epic poetry that evolved a regional sub-branch in Punjab through the introduction of the form from Iran and Afghanistan. The *qisse* is based in performance, with musicians becoming associated with particular types of *qisse* in different

regions. As a form closely connected to Sufism, it developed with a strong philosophical basis which often wove together historical fact with local legends, and regionalised practices of faith and worship. Due to their length in performance, *qisse* often take an epic form with rhyming couplets and repeated refrains or motifs and would be understood by their audience as quite distinct from simple localised ballads or children's songs. Farina Mir and Anshu Malhorta sketch out the difficulty is understanding the *qisse* in the context of literary history: 'As historical texts or sources, *qisse* are entirely enigmatic. They are clearly fictional narratives, sometimes even fantastical. We know little about those who composed them, even less about those who performed the tales orally, and almost nothing about audience reception' (Mir and Malhorta, 2012: 223).

One of the few popular folk ballads in the collection, 'The Ballad of Chuhar Singh' ironically comes into Temple's possession through a Gurmukhi manuscript rather than a local performer or bard. Relating the immolation of Chuhar and Dal Singh in 1793, Temple's descriptive notes focus on the important role of the Jatts in the Punjab. Despite Urdu being the official language of the Punjab, a market for Punjabi literature was emerging in the nineteenth-century, from the *qisse*, to religious and popular poetic forms. Temple's undifferentiated volume reveals his own limited framework for understanding the literary environment of the Punjab but it nevertheless continues to offer a valuable snapshot of the contact between Punjabi poetic forms and English during the nineteenth-century.

#### Translating Punjabi Folk in Flora Annie Steel's *Tales of the Punjab*

Although greatly assisted by Temple in terms of research and access to local networks in the Punjab, Flora Annie Steel offered her own version of the popular tales of Punjab. Flora Annie Steel was the daughter of George Webster, a Scottish Parliamentary Agent and later the

Sheriff-Clerk of Forfarshire, and Isabella MacCallum, an heiress to a Jamaican plantation. In 1867 she married Henry William Steel and followed him to Punjab where he undertook a number of positions for the Indian Civil Service, primarily in Punjab. Her literary output was prolific and included an Indian Mutiny novel, popular histories of India, non-fiction writing on women's suffrage, as well as cookery handbooks. Based on stories she had heard or collected, Steel published *Wide-Awake Stories* (1884), which was later published as *Tales of the Punjab* (1894) and *From the Five Rivers* (1893), both collections of local stories from her time in Punjab, accompanied by illustrations by John Lockwood Kipling. She accompanied her husband through many of his tours and assisted with the medical and educational needs of local populations, taking a keen interest in women's education. She also took an interest in Punjabi handicraft, especially *phulkari*, and later, through her interest in female education, became the Inspectress of Schools in Punjab. A number of critics have noted her as a woman in Punjab interested in enhancing and understanding the lives of women, a quality that distinguished her from a number of other British officials and their wives (Crane and Johnston, 2007; Patwardhan, 1963). However, ultimately, her views sat comfortably in a conservative colonial model, as Nancy Paxton points out: 'To her credit, Steel's affection for individual Indian women may have helped her overcome some of her racism when she supported limited franchise for Indian as well as English women' (Paxton, 1990: 338b).

Although Steel claims to be fluent in Punjabi in her autobiography, what remains unclear is what kind of dialect she spoke, and the nature of her opinions about the relationship between Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu in the region. Punjabi in this case becomes an imaginary geography or colonial territorial area rather than a language with its own complex rhythms and forms. Her preface to *Tales of the Punjab* was co-written with R.C. Temple who assisted with the notes and appendices:

Many of the tales in this collection appeared either in the *Indian Antiquary*, the *Calcutta Review*, or the *Legends of the Punjab*. They were then in the form of literal translations, in many cases uncouth or even unpresentable to ears polite, in all scarcely intelligible to the untravelled English reader; for it must be remembered that, with the exception of the Adventures of Raja Rasâlu, all these stories are strictly folktales passing current among a people who can neither read nor write, and whose diction is full of colloquialisms, and, if we choose to call them so, vulgarisms. It would be manifestly unfair, for instance, to compare the literary standard of such tales with that of the *Arabian Nights*, the *Tales of a Parrot*, or similar works. (Steel, *Tales of the Punjab*)

Apart from the *qisse* of Raja Rasalu, what differentiates this collection from Temple's is a more deliberate attempt to collect more fantastical stories that do not have the kind of historical, political or philosophical resonances of the work collected in *Legends of Punjab*. In her discussion of colonial British collectors of folklore, Sadhana Naithani identifies a common tripartite structure of 'India', the folklore collector, and the lore itself (Naithani 2001). In the case of Steel, India becomes associated with the 'uncouth' 'vulgarisms' of what we assume to be colloquial Punjabi. While this helps to authenticate her own understanding of local languages and access to everyday life and tales, her volume is ultimately framed by Temple's work and research. Her own take on more minor forms of Punjabi culture ensure that her work is definitively relegated from the literary to the popular. While Temple obtains his sources from hired bards and performers and local scholars, Steel claims to obtain her material from children: 'some child begins a story, others correct the details, emulation conquers shyness, and finally the story-teller is brought to the front with acclamations: for there is always a story-teller *par excellence* in every village – generally a boy' (Steel, *Tales*). Steel's canon of folktales is largely divided between two types of output: stories and songs

that can be performed by children, and the inclusion of selected *qisse*, some of which come from local manuscripts. In stark contrast to Temple, Steel attempts to fashion herself as an observer of semi-organic performance rather than a professional collector who would elicit work for his archive. She is aware that her presence may produce a temporary reluctance, but the apparent inevitability of organic performance prevails. In her translations she experimented with a variety of forms from epic ballad to conventional nursery stories and fairy tales. Despite her literary intervention Steel styles herself as a collector rather than translator of the tales:

That is neither a transliteration—which would have needed a whole dictionary to be intelligible—nor a version orientalised to suit English tastes. It is an attempt to translate one colloquialism by another, and thus to preserve the aroma of rough ready wit existing side by side with that perfume of pure poesy which every now and again contrasts so strangely with the other. Nothing would have been easier than to alter the style; but to do so would, in the collector's opinion, have robbed the stories of all human value. (Steel, *Tales*)

Steel uses a variety of strategies to authenticate her translations. She begins by self-consciously identifying herself against orientalism: her desire is not to play on the exotic, but to draw her readers into a closer identification with the tales and naturalise them for English tastes. In maintaining the 'rough ready wit' she attempts to reaffirm the unsophisticated quality of expression, although she does credit some elementary level of poetic value. She rules out a straight translation, which is something Temple attempted to do in his own *Legends of Punjab*. This results in a very different kind of output:

Once upon a time a soldier died, leaving a widow and one son. They were dreadfully poor, and at last matters became so bad that they had nothing left in the house to eat.



'Mother,' said the son, 'give me four shillings, and I will go and seek my fortune in the wide world.'

'Alas!' answered the mother, 'and where am I, who haven't a farthing wherewith to buy bread, to find four shillings?'

'There is that old coat of my father's,' returned the lad; 'look in the pocket – perchance there is something there.' (Steel, *Tales*)

The tales that Steel hears are adapted for the British nursery. Shillings, farthings, and coat-pockets make up some of the small details that help to bridge the context of Punjab and Britain. Without the benefit of the transliteration into roman characters and with some key identifiers missing, it is difficult to ascertain the origin of the tales, the manner of their circulation, and the context of their performance, leaving them to slot easily into Temple's systems of classification. Ralph Crane and Anna Johnston argue that Steel's, 'life and writing sit uncomfortably on the boundaries of Empire, revealing the complex personal and textual negotiations that occur at the margins of anthropology' (Crane and Johnston, 2007: 92). It may be that part of the reason Steel has been relatively neglected in English literary studies is because of her pseudo-anthropological work and collaboration. However, her work with Temple and her reading of what she called local, vernacular Punjabi tales, effaced some of the political, social and economic specificities of the region to sanitise and universalise her material for an English-speaking colonial audience. Indian women and children, supposed repositories of these tales, become reduced to vehicles for a translatable and consumable heritage. Shampa Roy has discussed Steel's efforts to give Indian women a voice in her short fiction, 'this concern and the irony that it produces – the staple and great alibi of bourgeois liberal politics – also steps short of identifying concrete and meaningful directions with actually liberating and empowering possibilities for these women which might even entail

more radical questionings of prevalent social and political structures' (Roy, 2010: 73). Steel's contribution to the circulation of Punjabi literary culture is important: she collected, translated and adapted material from her time in Punjab which then went on to circulate in India, Britain and beyond. While she may have used some sleight of hand with her abilities in Punjabi and the context of the performances she encountered, she still offers an important contrast to Temple's indiscriminate reading of popular Punjabi forms in the context of folklore studies through creative adaptation.

#### C.F. Usborne's *Hir and Ranjha* and *Punjabi Proverbs and Lyrics*

A graduate of Bailliol College, Charles Frederick Usborne joined the Indian Civil Service in 1898, serving at a variety of stations and eventually becoming the Deputy Commissioner of Hissar. He was trained to communicate in Punjabi shortly after arriving in India which facilitated an enduring interest in Punjabi-language literature. One of his best-known publications is a translation of Waris Shah's *Hir and Ranjha* (1766) published in 1901, and the collection *Punjabi Lyrics and Proverbs* published in 1905. Like Steel, Usborne benefitted from Temple's knowledge of Punjabi culture, but his departure from Temple was through an interest in what he defined as literary culture:

Captain R.C. Temple, who was for some time Cantonment Magistrate at Ambala, has written several articles on Panjab ballads and folklore in the *Calcutta Review* and *Indian Notes and Queries*; but the author is more interested in folklore than in literature, and the few lyrics he has collected are not of much value. [...] Mr. Swnnerton and Mrs. Steel have both translated fairy tales and stories current in the Panjab, but they have not collected many examples of lyric poetry, and it was mainly lyric poetry which I have been trying to discover. (Usborne, 1905: i).

Usborne further evidences some of the ways in which British models of literary taste and culture were being used to partition a complex Punjabi literary sphere that developed alongside classical forms of Persian and Sanskrit writing that Usborne identifies as acceptable literary forms among the Punjabi elite. What Usborne does not do is identify or discuss the ethno-religious and linguistic dispositions of the educated Punjabis that he meets. Usborne appears to be aware of language prejudice without fully outlining or comprehending its socio-political implications:

What the poets of the cultivated few admire and what their readers expect is an elegant and rather far-fetched ode in Persian or Sanskrit [...] Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that if a Panjabi Burns, Beranger or Mistral were to arise tomorrow he would get very little encouragement from the educated native of the Panjab. (Usborne, 1905: ii)

The difficulty in understanding exactly what Usborne classifies as a literary lyric, albeit one in vernacular form, proves as confusing to Punjabi poets as it does to him. When he launched a competition in one of the 'leading native newspapers of the Punjab (Usborne, 1905: ii) for a compilation of Punjabi lyrics, he did not receive any entries. When he eventually began to arrange his own anthology, he found difficulty in forming a consensus about what 'good' poetry may be: 'None of the natives could understand exactly what I wanted. Poems they thought good I thought intolerable. What I thought worth copying and translating, they usually thought childish' (Usborne, 1905: iii). Farina Mir's work has demonstrated a thriving Punjabi-language print culture in the period; Usborne's difficulty in putting together a collection was not because of a lack of material, but a disconnection between the understanding of literary value in English and Punjabi writing.

Usborne's apparently full translation of Waris Shah's *Hir and Ranjha* presented one of Punjab's most famous *qisse* with some basic explanatory notes, although this translation been criticised for being poor and filled with errors and misinterpretations (Shackle and Snell, 262). The narrative broadly follows the tragic lives of Hir and Ranjha who fall in love despite Hir subsequently being married to another man. *Hir and Ranjha* had been 'collected' by R.C. Temple but Usborne's interest in the literary vernacular culture demonstrates the difficulty in identifying an adequate approach to interpreting the work. For Mir and Malhorta, the difficulty in defining the form is tied up with the difficulty in understanding the formation of Punjabi-ness in the period:

In terms of genre, it blends Perso-Islamic and local aestherics into a coherent and recognizable regional genre. In their representations of devotional practice, Punjabi *qisse* emphasize a kind of piety that was shared across religious traditions as opposed to one affiliated to a single religion. In both realms of genre and devotional practice, Punjabi *qisse* represent ideas that do not fit comfortably within existing categories or taxonomies whether literary/aesthetic or religious. (Mir and Malhorta, 2012: 226).

Mir and Malhorta point out that while the broad form of the epic-length verse romance persisted from a Persian tradition, what regionalised the *qisse* was the use of indigenous forms of poetic meter (Mir and Malhorta, 2012: 232). Usborne's translation of Shah is in prose, but an extract of a lyrical rendition in *Punjabi Lyrics* does utilise rhyming couplets although the *qisse* is adapted into stanzas. The relaying of some of these formal qualities allows features of the performed verisons of *Hir and Ranjha* to filter into English. However, without the context of the performance and without the context of devotional practices in the Punjab, the reading of *Hir and Ranjha* falls into the model of a romance and fails to resonate as a variety of popular literary, print and oral narrative which transcended the

conventional borders of devotional practice, faith and genre imposed by figures such as Temple.

### Conclusion

The political and polemical potential of elevating ‘folk’ to the realms of the literary was not lost on Indian writers. Lal Behari Day and Rabindranath Tagore both turned to collections of Bengali folklore as a way of understanding the relationship between ‘folk’ and nationalism (Crane and Johnston, 2007: 89). In different ways, Temple, Steel and Usborne incorporated a range of genres and forms of Punjabi in their work which through the labels of folk, vernacular and popular lost their relation to each other as part of a complex literary world based on performance and making increasing inroads into Punjabi-language print. The distinction that Sudipta Kaviraj draws between a ‘fuzzy’ and an ‘enumerated’ community has become an important model for understanding South Asian social formations: ‘Communities were fuzzy in two senses. Rarely, if ever, would people belong to a community which would claim to represent or exhaust all the layers of their complex selfhood [...] On the appropriate occasion, every individual would use his cognitive apparatus to classify any single person he interacted with and place him quite exactly’ (Kaviraj, 2010). The difficulty of pulling apart the folk, vernacular and the popular rests in the difficulty of establishing stable boundaries of genre and value without a fuller understanding of the context of performance and circulation. This difficulty and contradiction was translated by Temple as native confusion and ignorance, entirely side-stepped by Steel through a focus on children’s writing, and met with puzzlement by an Usborne unable to identify traditions of poetry he could understand. Beginning the project of considering their work in English literary studies opens a route into understanding

one of the most important strategic areas of the British Empire as site of vibrant creative practice that failed to be fully ‘enumerated’ by British interests.

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