

COVER STORY: A nation's fugue state

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Seth Naomul Hotchand, C.S.I. (1804-1878) dictated his memoirs, titled *Memoirs of Seth Naomul Hotchand of Karachi*, in 1872, to his grandson. In 1915, after being translated from Sindhi into English, it was published with a strange proviso by its editor, Sir Evan M. James, which stated that the publication be restricted to “Seth Naomul’s own descendants and relations, to officers connected with Sind, and to personal friends.”

A text meant only for some is now one of our primary sources on a pivotal series of events in South Asian history — the 1843 annexation of Sindh by the East India Company.

It was also a text which was swept up in a maelstrom of colonial and nationalist historiography as it detailed the mechanics of British involvement with the Mirs of Talpur — the ruling family over princely Sindh — as well as a picture of Sindh’s religious landscape which predated the annexation.

The memoirs detail Hotchand's various activities — as a supplier of assets or merchandise, or information and intelligence, from Afghanistan to Persia and beyond. As the head of one of the most successful merchant houses of Sindh, he had direct access to a vast personal and familial network among the class of knowledge brokers (munshi, amil and vakil) who served the various courts as scribes, financiers, advocates, and accountants.

This was a network through which both information and materials flowed. The British relied in some parts on him and his connections for dispatches to and from the ruling Mirs as well as the neighboring principalities in Punjab, Kalat and Afghanistan. And, in 1867, he was given the Companion of the Star of India [C.S.I.] for services provided during the 1857 uprising.

But, there are more stories contained in the memoirs. As Frederic Goldsmid, a prominent colonial administrator (he oversaw the laying of the Telegraph line across Sindh and Balochistan) and biographer, noted in 1881, "Seth Nao Mull's history would in itself have furnished the materials for an Oriental romance. His father had been a compulsory convert to Mohamedanism, and the son had long wished for an opportunity to assist the English, to whom he looked for the chance of avenging the wrongs of the

Hindoos upon their Mahomedan oppressors.”

This event of the “conversion” provided much ex post facto justification for the British annexation and is touted by most of the British officers involved in the 1843 decision. In turn, Hotchand’s involvement with the British provided much later justification for anti-Hindu invective. Seth Hotchand became, in the post-independence Sindh, a traitor of his people and his land. His “treachery” — the act of collaboration with the British — was also the prism in which he was seen in the nationalist appraisal. Except on the national scale, where it was his “Hindu-ness” which was highlighted.

Two eminent historians of Sindh, Hamida Khuhro and Mubarak Ali, have written brief assessments of Hotchand. Khuhro found him “an opportunist” who “judged against the principles of patriotism... will remain the unrepentant traitor.” Ali was more forgiving and sought to contextualise his actions as one among a community of responses. Yet, it remains the case that there is little wiggle room in the binaries inscribed onto nationalism or colonialism by current historiography: one resists or perishes; one is either a hero or a traitor.

Such binaries are, however, historically inept and socio-culturally corrosive. Hotchand was a node in a vast network, which operated in conjunction with the colonial

and the princely networks — *ot khatib*, *munshi* and *vakil* — who made possible the legal and diplomatic work of daily governance. In Sindh alone, he was only one among a vast array of Persian and Anglo-phone knowledge brokers (both Hindu and Muslim) who received distinctions for their services to the Company.

Mirza Ali Akbar was in the employ of General Charles Napier, who annexed Sindh for the East India Company in 1843. Akbar also received many laurels and honors for his service to the Company — which included translating key documents and acting as an interpreter.

Mirza Lutfullah was an employee of Political Agent Major Eastwick, who was given the task to negotiate major treaties with Sindh by the Company.

There were many others — some who left behind memoirs and notes and others whose names linger only in Company registers and official documents. Yet, the fact is that from among his peers, Hotchand is the only one whose memory lingers as a “traitor” in present day Pakistan.

Hotchand was “a man of middle stature, spare habit, and brilliant keen eyes,” as described in the memoirs. His ancestors, part of the vibrant finance network that connected the littoral Indian Ocean ports to cities scattered across continents, settled in the port village of Karachi in the late 18th century, just as it was changing hands from the Khan of Kalat to the Mirs

hands from the Khan of Kalat to the Mirs of Talpur.

According to the Memoir, it was their particular role in facilitating a bloodless transfer of power that gave them an early access to the newly assertive mirs. The Hotchands were rewarded with various lands and grants and special rights to business transactions. Their privileged status is reflected in Hotchand's description of the family house in Karachi, which had a stable for 40 horses, a household expenditure of 40,000 rupees per annum. They also controlled business firms in over 500 locations.

In 1821, after the death of Hotchand's great-grandfather, Seth Bhojoomal, the property and business were divided equally among four brothers.

Only Hotchand's grandfather, Seth Lalmandas, took to the trade while the others "gave themselves up to pleasure and luxury, leaving their affairs to be managed by their agents." After having squandered their fortune, the brothers decided to contest the division of property with Seth Lalmandas, claiming he had kept three extra pitchers filled with gold and silver.

This dispute was ultimately referred to the royal Mirs and Seth Lalmandas and his retinue set out for Hyderabad with "six camel loads of daftars (account papers)." The suit took many years and was resolved only after Hotchand paid his cousins a rich sum for the rights. He

seems to have felt that the Mirs were not as helpful as they could have been.

It was soon after, in 1832, that a distressed Hindu child sought shelter from his parents at a mosque in Nasarpur. From this innocuous act erupted a religious maelstrom that consumed most of lower Sindh — resulting in the kidnapping (for ransom or for conversion) of Hotchand's father. He was eventually freed after 10 days in captivity but rumors circulated that he had been forced to convert to Islam. Hotchand does not comment directly on the matter of conversion — though he notes that his father immediately left on a pilgrimage to specific temples, and that the Mirs of Talpur had not done enough to rescue his father. Both the colonial commentators and the Pakistani nationalist narratives read this event as a pivot on which Hotchand switched his allegiance. Though there is no evidence, in the memoir, that this was the case.

The direct correlation between the abduction of Hotchand's father and Hotchand's collaboration with the East India Company comes to us from the records of the Company itself (such as James Burnes, Richard Burton, James Evans or, the infamous Charles Napier, speaking about the "evil" practices of the Mirs of Talpur) which carefully delineate a strict division between the Muslim rulers and the Hindu population in Sindh — caused entirely by the ruling Mirs of Talpur.

The construction of nationalist identity in Pakistan, since 1971, has relied exclusively on a communal reading of South Asian histories — positing Hindu and Muslims as inchoate categories. Such reductive narratives may suit the purpose of nationalist discourses but they do not represent history. I have decided to tell the story of Seth Naomul Hotchand as a story of a broker between regimes of power, as a local negotiator of globally written politics. In my telling, Hotchand is a symbol, not of treason or collaboration, but of the fugue state that cripples the modern nation-state, which forgets pasts just as easily as it invents new ones to fill the gaps.

Since 1830, the East India Company had sought to build up British influence in Central Asia, keep the Russians and the French at bay, and monopolise the opium-cotton trade triangle between the United States, China and Britain. The imagined Russian danger precipitated the first Anglo-Afghan war from 1838-42.

Harried by their Great Game, the Company ratified a new treaty with the Mirs of Sindh in 1839. This placed some English troops in the region, abrogated all of the Mirs' foreign affairs in favour of the British, put an annual subsidy on the Mirs and gave the British the authority to mint coins in Sindh. In the meantime, Admiral Maitland captured the port of Karachi on the pretense that someone had fired a

cannon shot at a British frigate in the harbour. The capture of Karachi was a severe blow to the Mirs as it was a major port of commerce. The Company desperately needed to control the point of egress for Malwa and Bengal opium to China, both for the purposes of tax revenue and for supply.

Seth Naomul Hotchand cannot be a traitor, largely because on his shoulders did not rest the fate of any great conflict. He was a merchant, a trader, a broker, a participant in the “information order,” and as such, while his life intertwines with events that loom large as sites of colonial or local power, he did not determine their outcome.

Mirza Ali Akbar’s name, however, is not written in school textbooks as a traitor to the Muslim cause. Where Hotchand is vilified, Mirza Ali Akbar is simply forgotten. Where Charles Napier is honored with an arterial Napier Road in Karachi, Seth Hotchand Road is renamed Shah Waliullah Road.

Where Hindus can exist only as caricatured boogey-men, reducing Seth Naomul Hotchand’s memory to that of a traitor is a violence doubly rendered.

The writer specialises in history of Islam in South Asia and is the author of Where the Wild Frontiers Are: Pakistan and the American Imagination

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