

Killer Khilats, Part 1: Legends of Poisoned “Robes of Honour” in India

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Abstract

This article presents seven historical legends of death by Poison Dress that arose in early modern India. The tales revolve around fears of symbolic harm and real contamination aroused by the ancient Iranian-influenced customs of presenting robes of honour (*khilats*) to friends and enemies. From 1600 to the early twentieth century, Rajputs, Mughals, British, and other groups in India participated in the development of tales of deadly clothing. Many of the motifs and themes are analogous to Poison Dress legends found in the Bible, Greek myth and Arthurian legend, and to modern versions, but all seven tales display distinctively Indian characteristics. The historical settings reveal the cultural assumptions of the various groups who performed poison khilat legends in India and display the ambiguities embedded in the khilat system for all who performed these tales.

Introduction

We have gathered seven “Poison Dress” legends set in early modern India, which feature a poison *khilat* (Arabic, “robe of honour”). These “Killer Khilat” tales share plots, themes and motifs with the “Poison Dress” family of folklore, in which victims are killed by contaminated clothing. Because historical legends often crystallise around actual people and events, and reflect contemporary anxieties and the moral dilemmas of the tellers and their audiences, these stories have much to tell historians as well as folklorists. The poison khilat tales are intriguing examples of how recurrent narrative patterns emerge under cultural pressure to reveal fault lines within a given society’s accepted values and social practices.

The basic structure of a recurrent legend such as the Poison Dress tale “provides a ‘body’ to be ‘clothed’ in performance,” in the words of contemporary legend scholar, Paul Smith. “Each localised legend is ‘dressed’ in a way that provides an opportunity to discuss a relevant issue at some particular time and place, and similar plot structures may later appear ‘re clothed’ to express similar issues by another group elsewhere” (Smith 1995, 99). One hallmark of such legends is that the familiar becomes threatening: an ordinary scenario (here, a gift of special clothing) produces extraordinary results (the garment causes the death of the wearer). Realistic details, local place names, dates, and historical personages are common devices that enhance the plausibility of legend narratives.

The deadly clothing tales that arose in India have striking parallels to classical

Greek, ancient Hebrew, and modern European and American Poison Dress lore. These Indic versions caught the attention of early European travellers and later British imperialists, who recognised similarities to familiar Western folklore and who, coincidentally, harboured their own anxieties about costume, status and contagion in India. Keeping in mind that English-educated writers recorded all the legends examined here, we ask what these texts can tell us about the meaning of Poison Dress tales in India. In “Killer Khilats, Part 2: Imperial Collecting of Poison Dress Legends in India,” we will suggest how the context and cultural assumptions of their British and Indian English-language collectors affect the reading of these narratives.

Legends circulate as long as they address significant concerns in a given society. No poison clothing tales are listed in Stith Thompson and Warren Roberts, *Types of Indic Oral Tales* (1960) or Heda Jason’s 1989 supplement, nor do any poison garments appear in post-1930s compilations of newly collected Indian folklore, such as Brenda Beck’s *Folktales of India* (Beck *et al.* 1987). But *The Oral Tales of India* by Stith Thompson and Jonas Balys (1958) listed several motifs related to deadly garments from old Indian lore collected in the nineteenth century. For example, S111.6, “Murder by Poison Robe,” comes from our Tale 1 and Motif D1402.0.1.2, “Holy Man’s Cloak Burns Person Up,” is our Tale 6. How can we explain what made Poison Dress stories so resonant during the Mughal Empire (1526–1858) and the British presence in India (1600–1947)?

To answer these questions, we first need to understand why the medium of poisoning—a robe of honour or khilat—was so salient for Indians and Europeans. We begin with a brief summary of the standard Poison Dress scripts, themes, and motifs. Then, the seven tales themselves appear, and we establish the historical background of each narrative before analysing its meaning. In interpreting these narratives, of course, it is essential to avoid forcing English translations of South Asian lore into European folk genres (Islam 1982; Korom 1993, 235–6). In this article, we show how overlapping cross-cultural factors influenced the idea of a poisoned khilat among Indian peoples during the Mughal Empire, and draw several conclusions from our contextual-comparative approach. In “Killer Khilats, Part 2,” we will show how these factors resonated among contemporary and later British observers.

The Complex Meanings of Gifts of Special Clothing

Conventions about clothing transactions in India, including the potential of destructive clothing, provided an exceptionally powerful framework for legends about poisoned khilats. Gifts of clothing “attended every major life cycle ritual in preindustrial Indian society,” and “cloth transactions also took place during [Hindu] worship and in the creation ... of political alliances” among Hindu and, later, Muslim kings. C. A. Bayly suggested three basic uses of cloth in Hindu society (uses which in practice overlapped): “first, its use in symbolising status or in recording changes of status; second, its magical or ‘transformative’ use, in which the moral and physical being of the wearer/recipient was perceived to be actually changed by the innate qualities of the cloth or the spirit and substance it conveyed; third, its use as a pledge of future protection.” While the use of clothing for these purposes in India had parallels with other pre-industrial

societies, "the complexity of the [Hindu] social order [imparted] unusual variety to the symbolism of ... dress." An authoritative Hindu law book written down c. 100–200 AD stated that "a man receiving a wrong or inappropriate gift is 'reduced to ashes ... a garment [will destroy] *his skin*'" (Bayly 1986, 291 and 318 n. 20, citing *The Laws of Manu*, iv:189; italics in original). Thus, the moral ambiguities and physical dangers suffusing clothing transactions pre-dated the poison khilat legends in Mughal India by several centuries.

The word "khilat" derives from roots shared by ancient Iranian, Arabic, and Hebrew languages. It originally meant "something passed on," especially a "garment cast off" (Buckler 1922, 197; 1928, 240). In English, the concept appears in the phrases "to assume the mantle," "to vest power," and even "to give the shirt off one's back." The act of giving someone clothing from one's own body entails powerful and ambiguous meanings in worldwide folk belief and practice. A garment might simply be a token of friendship, gratitude, respect, or remembrance of some significant event. But bestowing clothing can also figuratively or literally transfer a condition (such as authority or disease). In Iranian-influenced cultures like Mughal India, fine garments given in political settings established a hierarchical relationship between the superior giver and the recipient, whose acceptance acknowledged submission. Among Hindus and Muslims in India, then, gifts of apparel might draw on one or all of these functions, and on those cited by Bayly (see earlier), or else the ideal intentions of a khilat might be inverted. One could never be sure of the "true" spirit or effect of a khilat. Our deadly khilat tales explore what can happen when these intertwined social expectations were accidentally or deliberately overturned.

Ancient Hebrew and Greek texts contain the earliest evidence of khilat customs in Asia Minor and the Middle East. As Buckler points out, the khilat's mystical and subtle hierarchical meanings have eluded Westerners since antiquity. Biblical examples were misunderstood by early Christian translators, who failed to grasp, for example, that in *Genesis* 41:41–2 it was the Egyptian Pharaoh's gift of fine raiment that made Joseph his second in command (c. 1500 BC). Greek sources show that robes of honour were customary in Iranian courts as early as the fifth century BC. Herodotus and Xenophon accurately described several khilat investitures and refusals among rival Iranian tyrants, but they misinterpreted the transactions because Greek egalitarian ideology rejected luxurious clothing and submission to monarchs. By the time of Alexander the Great's conquests in Iran (fourth century BC), however, some Greeks began to sense the symbolic meanings of Asian robes of honour (Buckler 1928, 242–7).

In ninth century Europe, Charlemagne naively accepted a khilat from his Muslim adversary, the Caliph, who rejected the cloaks Charlemagne offered in return. By the seventeenth century, the Venetian traveller Niccolao Manucci recognised khilat complexities: for instance, he noted that the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) declared the King of Balkh (northern Afghanistan) his subject by sending him nine robes, which the king accepted in ignorance (Manucci [c. 1708] 1907, 2:43–4; Buckler 1928, 242).

According to Indian historian Stewart Gordon, the "Arabic term *khilat* first appears in the eighth and ninth centuries, when the bestowal of garments became both common and institutionalised." The writings of Marco Polo and Ibn Batuta, the early fourteenth-century Berber traveller, illustrate the extensive

“world of robes of honour.” Presentations of robes were known in Muslim courts of northern India and in the Hindu courts of Rajasthan at least two centuries before the Mughal (“Mongol”) Empire was founded in 1526 AD by Babur, who used khilats to reward allies (Gordon 1996, 226 and 229).

The circulation of poisoned khilat legends flourished during the time of the “Great” Mughal emperors, from Akbar (r. 1556–1606) to Aurangzeb (d. 1707). By the reign of Humayun, who gained the throne in 1555 after spending years in the court of Safavid Iran, the “sheer numbers of robes given out increased dramatically” (Gordon 1996, 233). A memoir by Mirza Nathan, an Iranian noble who served in Mughal military campaigns, provides hundreds of examples of khilats used to cement political relationships in the early seventeenth century (*ibid.*, 234–5; Mirza Nathan cited in Borah 1936, 1:xix–xx, 21 and 70; 2:747; see also Lane-Poole 1908, 36).

Under the Iranian-influenced theory of kingship adopted by the Mughals in India, the monarch’s body incarnated divine authority, and his power could be transmitted by items that touched him, especially clothing. As Bernard Cohn points out, body coverings in the Indic world were not simply adornments or even metaphors for power, they were a “medium through which substances can be transferred ... In many contexts, clothes literally are authority,” which “can be transferred from person to person” to create a hierarchy and to ensure continuity of succession (Cohn 1996, 114–5; see also Bayly 1986; Fisher 1990, 426). One of the most powerful Mughal political ceremonies was thus the emperor’s prestation of a robe of honour, a khilat. (The term “prestation” indicates the inherent obligation and potential threat in gift exchange between unequals; see Raheja 1988.)

The typical Mughal khilat was a sumptuous set of clothes. The “core symbol was a cloak which was the outermost, most visible garment of courtly life” (Gordon 1996, 225), but the khilat could include a turban, long coat, gown, jacket, shawl, sash, trousers, shirt, and scarf (Sarkar 1961, 144; Sen 1998, 33). The investiture conferred titles, responsibilities, and rewards, but it also entailed obedience. Protocol demanded that one immediately don the khilat. A French physician at the Mughal court, Françoise Bernier (1620–88), described the ceremonies surrounding Emperor Aurangzeb’s reception of an ambassador from Iran, including Aurangzeb’s order that the ambassador “be clothed in his presence” in a robe of honour (cited in Lach and van Kley 1993, 711; Richards 1993, 49 and 108; Cohn 1996, 114). Acceptance of a robe indicated acquiescence to the giver’s authority. Refusal of clothing from a friend would be a grave insult, but rejection of a robe from a monarch could be treason.

By the 1600s, when the East India Company began to send representatives to India, British agents had to decide whether to accept costly costumes offered to them. Sir Thomas Roe, James I’s ambassador to the Mughal court in 1615, began to grasp the subtle meanings of prestations of fine dress after accepting a robe from Emperor Jahangir. However, Roe “indignantly rejected” a gold-embroidered shawl from the Governor of Surat, because Roe “would receive no obligation” (cited in Irwin 1973, 10, where British textile historian Irwin called it a “bribe”). Yet, other British agents actively sought robes of honour to seal trade agreements. Like the ancient Greeks mystified by Iranian khilat transactions, the British expected equal economic exchange in negotiations and often missed the

fine sociopolitical points of khilats (for elaboration of Roe's difficulties "in reading the political and cultural world in terms of his own *system of meanings*," see Singh 1996, 39, italics in original; Sen 1998, 65). After the Great Revolt of 1857–8 against the Company, the British Crown actually created its own khilat, the Star of India investiture. The blue and white silk and velvet mantle embroidered with gold and diamonds was rejected in turn by many Indian recipients (Cohn 1996, 112–33).

For Indians themselves, the perpetually shifting valences of robes of honour meant that a khilat was open to manipulation. Examples of robes used to dishonour, insult, trick and harm abound in early modern Indian history. A khilat could be a loyalty test or a contest of wills. Myriad ambiguities in the custom could be exploited; one could manoeuvre a rival into accepting a khilat that hid hypocrisy, treachery, even poison. We propose that popular legends about such subterfuges exposed the cracks in the khilat system.

During the Mughal era, when costly khilat exchanges were raised to a sophisticated art with very high stakes, rumours and legends about fatal investitures became especially resonant for Indians and foreigners alike. As a projection of a superior's body and will, a gift of secretly poisoned clothing embodied the hidden malice of the giver and poisoned the system's agreed-upon rules. It is no surprise that in hostile situations the robe of honour became a weapon to destroy enemies. The risk inherent in accepting a robe was compounded by the knowledge that cloth could actually carry contagion. As we shall see, the practice of giving contaminated clothing to outsiders was a traditional folk ritual to cope with the fevers and epidemics that raged in Mughal times.

Types of Poison Dress Lore

In the widespread body of lore about deliberately contaminated clothing in Western traditions, the earliest examples appear in the Old Testament and classical Greek myth; later variants appeared in early modern Europe and nineteenth- and twentieth-century USA (Mayor 1995; 1997). In the basic script of the Poison Dress legend, a victim receives special clothing as a gift from an Other (a stranger or enemy, usually of another race, ethnic group, status or gender). The garment burns up the victim or causes a fatal fever. Heat, water, perspiration and cremation are common motifs, and the place of death is frequently associated with healing hot springs. The tale plays on fears of contamination via an everyday item and the ethical ambiguities of gift-exchange, evoking controversy among the performers and audience, and among believers and doubters.

As a "second skin" that can protect the wearer, cloth can also literally endanger the body by flammability, poisons absorbed by the skin, and disease transmission. Poison Dress beliefs in India often specify cholera, malaria or smallpox. Cholera is water-borne and malaria insect-borne, but air- and dust-borne smallpox virus can infect cloth for years. Long before the germ theory of disease, experience taught that illness could be contagious, and that textiles and sealed containers could harbour disease. In India, the British folklorist William Crooke reported that children were "inoculated" by wrapping them in shrouds

of smallpox victims (Crooke 1926, 1:117–44; Mayor 1995, 73 note. 7–8; see also Mitra 1917, 13–21; Wujastyk 1989, 131–67).

Symbolic harm could also be transmitted through clothing; it could destroy the wearer's status, power or fortune. These physical and symbolic fears interacted dramatically when legends coalesced around historical events, creating scenarios in which an enemy used clothing as a secret weapon. Clothing from a suspect source, especially a khilat that cannot be refused, evoked anxiety not only about the givers' motives but also the cloth's purity.

Poison khilat legends share features with the following Poison Dress types.

- *Naaman's Khilats*. This Old Testament story is not only the earliest direct written reference to a khilat, but it is the earliest known poison khilat narrative. Set in Israel of the ninth century BC, the tale describes khilats that carry both political and physical danger. The Syrian commander, Naaman, visited the King of Israel's prophet/wonder-worker, Elisha (who had assumed the magic mantle of his teacher, Elijah). After Elisha cured Naaman's leprosy, Naaman tried to persuade him to accept ten fine robes. Elisha refused the khilats, but his servant, Gehazi, secretly accepted two of the robes and was infected by Naaman's leprosy. Shortly thereafter, having persuaded a citizen of Israel to accept a khilat, Syria acted to make the hierarchical relationship a reality by invading Israel (2 *Kings*:5–6; Buckler 1922, 197; 1928, 240–3).
- *Death of Heracles*. The Greek myth of the death of Heracles in a poisoned tunic is the classic Poison Dress tale. Deianeira daubed a ceremonial cloak with what she thought was a love charm (given to her by the centaur, Nessus) and sent it to her unfaithful husband, Heracles. When he donned the robe, he suddenly began to perspire and the garment burst into flame. The poison corroded his flesh, ate into his bones, and boiled his blood. He tried to rip away the cloth but it adhered to his skin as it burned. He sought relief by plunging into a stream, but the flames only burned more fiercely. He threw himself on to a pyre and was immolated. The scalding stream where Heracles sought relief was famed in antiquity, and the hot spring is still associated with healing today (Rose 1959, 209–29; Mayor 1997; the "Nessus shirt" tale was first recorded by Sophocles, *The Trachinian Women*, 440–20 BC).
- *Glauke's Gown*. In another Greek myth, the jealous Asian sorceress, Medea, poisoned a beautiful gown and sent it in a sealed casket to her rival, Glauke, who immediately tried it on. The gown burst into flames and melted the flesh from her bones. Glauke threw herself into a fountain, but the flames were unquenchable and she was incinerated by the clinging, burning dress. A statue of the goddess "Terror" was erected near Glauke's fountain to avert epidemic; the fountain became a major tourist site in antiquity and is still an archaeological attraction in Corinth (Rose 1959, 204; Mayor 1997; first recorded by Euripides, *Medea*, 431 BC).
- *Arthur's Mantle*. In medieval Arthurian legend, Arthur's arch-enemy, Morgan le Fay, sent him a mantle intended to burn him alive. But Arthur narrowly escaped the doom that Medea and Deianeira had brought upon Glauke and Heracles. Forewarned by the Lady of the Lake, Arthur ordered the maiden who brought him the cloak to put it on. She was immediately burnt to coals (Thompson 1928, 34–9, 89, 145 and 198–227).

- *Smallpox Blankets*. Historical legends with strong poison khilat overtones grew up around the smallpox-infected garments distributed to Native Americans by the Spanish, French, and English in the early colonial era. According to seventeenth-century Jesuit records, for example, a Canadian "tribe" was ravaged by smallpox transmitted by the French king's gift of a *cap à pie* ("head to toe" costume of royal finery, essentially a khilat). Fearing retaliation, the king refused the tribe's gift of a native costume. Another notorious incident occurred in 1763, when the English commander, Lord Jeffrey Amherst, ordered his men to give the leaders of the Delaware tribe blankets that he knew were infected with smallpox. Similar stories with different victims and perpetrators circulated in the Americas. The victims of these robes sought relief from burning fevers in rivers and sweat baths, but perished from virulent smallpox (Mayor 1995).

The British officials who came to India in the eighteenth century almost certainly knew of the use of smallpox blankets as secret weapons. Lord Amherst was lauded in England and his nephew was appointed governor-general in Bengal in 1823 (Peabody 1996, 209). Classical Greek and biblical education would have made the notion of poisoned robes familiar to the English, whose own hero, King Arthur, narrowly escaped murder by poison cloak. Numerous European court intrigues involving poisoned articles of clothing echoed the biblical, classical and Arthurian stories (Nass 1898; Crooke 1926, 1:195; Thompson 1928; Mayor 1995; the assassination of a lady-in-waiting by poison dress was depicted in the 1998 film *Elizabeth*). Allusions to Heracles, Glauke and Arthur permeated both popular and fine art and literature in England at the time when the poison khilat legends were collected by the British in India.

The Tales

In Tales 1–4, the goal is murder by means of a khilat that transmitted disease. The primary focus in Tale 6 is disease transference by means of a khilat, with death as a secondary effect; Tale 5 combines the two types. Tales 1–4 appear to be historical scenarios inspired by "disease riddance" folk beliefs as suggested in Tales 5, 6 and 7. The first four tales are set in the contemporary Indian states of Rajasthan (the geographical location of former "princely states" of Amber, Marwar, Mewar), Gujarat (Idar), Madhya Pradesh (Ganore, Bhopal), and Maharashtra. Tale 5 occurred in Awadh (Oudh), now in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Tales 6 and 7 are set respectively in Suket State, a minor Himalayan kingdom now in Himachal Pradesh, and in Nagaland, a small mountainous state in northeast India on the Myanmar (Burma) border. See Figure 1 for the location of all places mentioned in the text. Alternative versions of these seven tales are given in "Killer Khilats, Part 2."

Tale 1. Emperor Aurangzeb and Prithi Singh

Tale 1 concerns the powerful Rajput kingdom of Marwar, strategic to the Mughal emperors because it controlled north–south trade routes to their port, Surat. The Rajput Maharaja, Jaswant Singh Rathor (r. 1638–78), was the chief

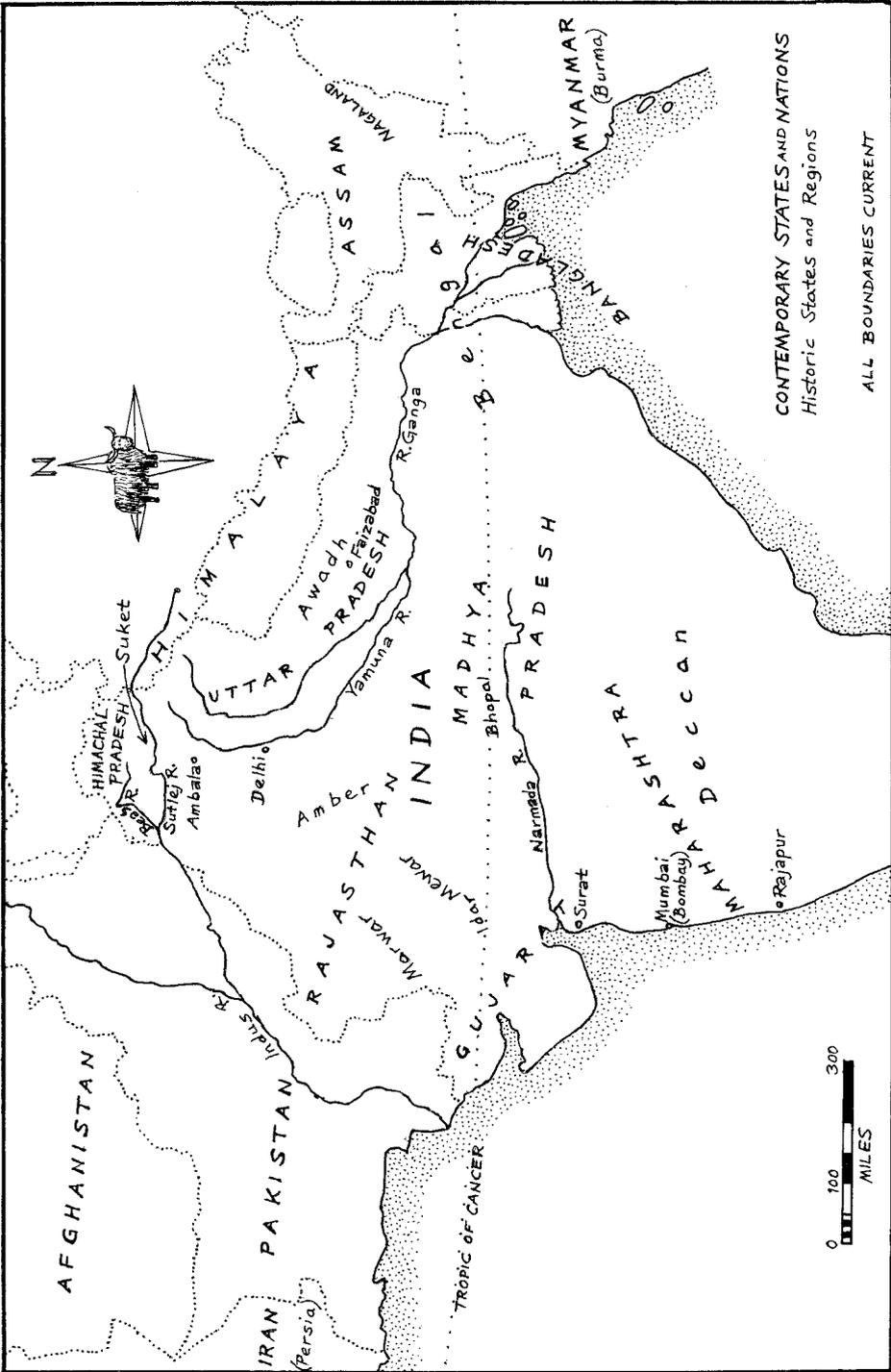


Figure 1 Geographical Location of "Killer Khilat" Tales

peer of Aurangzeb's court and was related to Aurangzeb by marriage, although the Maharaja had supported Aurangzeb's brother when they competed for the throne and so was a dubious ally (Hallissey 1977; Sharma 1977, chap. 3). Thus, the Emperor and the Maharaja were often in conflict despite their theoretically close relationships. Sent on a military mission to the northwest by Aurangzeb, Jaswant Singh died in 1678 (poison was rumoured) and Aurangzeb moved to seize his kingdom (Sarkar 1973, 214–7). This led to the Rajput Rebellion of 1679–81, when Aurangzeb's son, Prince Muhammad Akbar hereafter Prince Akbar, joined the rebels against his father (the subject of Tale 2, which follows). (See Appendices for background on Marwar and Aurangzeb.)

Our first "Killer Khilat" legend recounts the death of Maharaja Jaswant Singh's son, Prithi Singh (c. 1677). The modern Rajasthani historian, Rajvi Amar Singh, cited Tale 1 when he reported that Prince Prithi Singh "died of smallpox at Delhi" and was cremated there "after he had put on a poisoned dress presented by Aurangzeb" (Singh 1992, 1204–5, citing James Tod, see later). Smallpox and other epidemics did rage during and after Aurangzeb's reign. When the Rajput heir to the throne of Marwar, Prithi Singh, succumbed to smallpox, popular legend claimed that he had been murdered by a contaminated robe. Tale 1 was recounted by British military agent Lt-Col. James Tod (1782–1835) in the *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han*, his collection of genealogies and stories of Rajput clans, which was published in London in three volumes from 1829 to 1832.

"The wily tyrant" Aurangzeb, sent Jaswant Singh to war in Afghanistan in about 1670. Then he "commanded" his rival's son, Prithi Singh, to attend his court; the Emperor "received him with the most specious courtesy." During the interview, Aurangzeb suddenly grabbed the prince's hands and threatened him. The prince's defiant response convinced Aurangzeb to present him with a poisoned robe of honour. Pretending friendship, he gave him "a splendid dress," which, "as customary," Prithi Singh immediately "put on, and having made obeisance, left the presence" confident of the Emperor's favour. "That day was his last!—he was taken ill soon after reaching his quarters, and expired in great torture, and to this hour [1820s] his death is attributed to the poisoned robe of honour presented by the king. This mode of being rid of enemies is firmly believed by the Rajputs, and several other instances of it are recorded. Of course, it [death] must be by porous absorption; and in a hot climate, where only a thin tunic is worn next to the skin, much mischief might be done, though it is difficult to understand how death could be accomplished ... That the belief is of ancient date we have only to recall the story of Hercules put in doggerel by [Alexander] Pope: 'He whom Dejanire/Wrapp'd in th' envenom'd shirt, and set on fire'" (Tod 1832, 2:52–3).

In this tale, the theme of an uneasy alliance between enemies is prominent: a shrewd king pretends to honour a naive young prince. As soon as the victim puts on the robe, insidious poison causes agonising death, and he is cremated near a river, a sequence that conforms to the classic Poison Dress script, especially the Greek myths of Heracles and Glauke. Prithi Singh's death calls to mind the Hindu *Laws of Manu* about a maliciously bestowed garment reducing one to ashes (cited earlier). The shocking death of the Rajput heir was controversial in its time and context. The allegedly poisoned raiment that Aurangzeb gave to an "ally" subverted the expected meaning of a robe of honour in friendship and diplomacy and raised questions about the rules of war.

Distinctive Indian elements are deeply embedded in the legend. The rhetoric

of the khilat relationship—*obligation, etiquette, obeisance, summoned, commanded, respect, honour*—is unique to Iranian-influenced cultures. Just as Naaman’s leprous khilats presaged the Syrian military attack in the Old Testament khilat story, and the smallpox blankets foreshadowed Amherst’s defeat of the Delaware in America, Aurangzeb’s poison khilat preceded his conquest of Marwar. Indian poison khilats typically infect with fatal fevers, echoing the biblical and smallpox blanket tales, and they often end with cremation, bringing to mind the heat, fire and cremation in the classical, Arthurian, and modern tales (see Mayor [1995] for Greek fever-fire metaphors; on linguistic links between fever and fire, ashes and cremation in India, see Crooke 1926, 1:118–26). We will analyse the relevant Eurocentric concerns of the English-language versions of this tale in “Killer Khilats, Part 2.”

Tale 2. Aurangzeb and His Son, Prince Akbar

Scottish adventurer-merchant Captain Alexander Hamilton published this tale of Aurangzeb and his son, Prince Muhammed Akbar (Hamilton ed Foster 1930). The narrative describes Aurangzeb’s thwarted attempt to murder his traitorous son (b. 1658) with a poisoned khilat. Prince Akbar led his father’s army in Rajasthan when it annexed Marwar upon the death of Maharaja Jaswant Singh in 1678, and Akbar defeated several Rajput rebels in his father’s name. Perhaps because of his military success or perhaps because he was persuaded by leading Rajputs, Akbar then decided to challenge his father and, with the promise of Rajput support, declared himself emperor in 1681. But he was no match for Aurangzeb. His rebellion collapsed and Akbar fled to the Iranian court. He died there in 1704 (Haq 1975, 288–93; Hallissey 1977, 74). (See Appendix B for the historical narrative within India that underlay Hamilton’s tale.)

“About the Year 1685,” writes Hamilton, “when Aurengzeb’s Army was in Decan,” he wanted “to bring Sevajee Rajah [Raja Sivaji] to submission.” A “Son of Aurengzeb, called Sheek Eckbar [Prince Akbar], had contracted a Friendship with the Rajah. His Father having Notice of it, dissembled his Resentment, till he had, by fair Promises, entic’d the Sevajee to come to his Camp,” intending to capture and kill him. But his son Akbar warned the Rajah, who departed secretly “in the Night, without taking a formal Leave, which Aurengzeb imputed to his Son’s Advice to the Rajah.” Aurangzeb intended to kill his son in revenge, by a “Stratagem; wherefore, pretending more Kindness than ordinary to his Son, he sent him ... a Vest, which was very rich and beautiful, but poisoned by a perfumed Powder. His Son, with great Acknowledgments, received the Present, but, being too well acquainted with his Father’s Subtilty, put not the Vest on, but deferred it to another Time, that he might put it on with more Solemnity.” Then he “ordered it to be put on a Slave, who died a Day or two after he put it on. On which Sheek Eckbar fled to Rajahpore,” from whence he escaped with the help of “two English gentlemen,” Bendal and Stephens, who “provided a Vessel to carry him to Persia.” Rajapur [south of the contemporary Indian city, Mumbai (Bombay)] was renowned for its “natural hot Bath ... reckoned very medicinal” (Hamilton 1930, 1:138–9, with William Foster’s commentary 245–6).

This story of the conflict between Aurangzeb and his son fairly crackles with moral ambiguity. In a cascade of betrayals, the son’s rejection of his father’s poisoned gift reveals the treachery of both men. The poison corrupts the khilat’s ideal meaning of honour and obedience, and Prince Akbar only survives by

weaselling out of the expected khilat etiquette. Akbar "tests" the garment on a slave, recalling King Arthur's ruse of forcing the messenger to don the suspect mantle sent by his arch-enemy. The theme of a garment refused because of its semiotics of hierarchy and potential danger recapitulates the legendary incidents in the Old Testament narrative of Naaman's Khilats (see earlier) and that of Jand Pir (Tale 6, to follow), and it also recalls historical examples such as the French king's rejection of the Canadian tribe's dress and the Caliph's refusal of Charlemagne's cloaks (see earlier).

According to the Venetian, Manucci, who claimed to write about the period 1653–1708, Aurangzeb's grandfather established a pharmacy of deadly poisons, including ointments for treating cloth, poisons that would have been available for Aurangzeb's use (Tod 1920, 2:728, note 1; for Persian/Arab drugs and poisons brought by Muslims to India, see Gaitonde 1983, chap. 8, esp. 103). The vest in Tale 1 was suffused with a "powder" from Aurangzeb's store of poisons. The story brings to mind trade cloth deliberately infected with smallpox dust (compare to the aforementioned smallpox blankets). Within days, Akbar's slave died and Akbar fled to a place known for medicinal hot springs, a familiar Poison Dress motif (see Crooke 1926, 1:66–7 on the association in India of hot springs with disease; and Temple 1977, 419 on the purifying power of water, springs and pools in Indian folk belief).

Tale 3. The Princess of Idar, Ishwar Singh Kachhawa, and Bakht Singh Rathor

An early English-language version of the legend of Maharaja Bakht Singh Rathor's death in 1752 appeared in the first volume of Tod's *Annals* (1829). The extremely tangled dynastic histories of the Rajasthani kingdoms of Marwar and Amber provided a ripe setting for Killer Khilat tales (see Appendix A). Bakht Singh (1706–52) was the second son of Maharaja Ajit Singh of Marwar (Jaswant Singh's posthumous son, born in 1678, shortly after Prithi Singh's death). In 1724, Bakht Singh murdered his father, Ajit Singh, while the older man was sleeping. A variety of reasons have been offered for the murder (Irvine 1971, 2:116–7; Sarkar 1984, 196; Mehta and Mehta 1985, 258). According to William Irvine's translation of Persian chronicles, eighty-four wives and concubines "sacrificed" themselves on Ajit Singh's funeral pyre (Irvine 1971, 2:115). Within these kingdoms, a Rajput wife gained great respect and religious merit by immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre, after which she became *sati* (see later).

The Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah (d. 1748) placed Bakht Singh's oldest brother, Abhai Singh, on the throne of Marwar after Ajit Singh's murder. As their overlords, the Mughal emperors insisted on the right to confirm or deny claimants to the Rajasthani thrones. In this case, civil war ensued as Bakht and other younger brothers rebelled against their older brother and the Mughals and took refuge in Idar. When Abhai Singh died in 1749, his younger brother Bakht Singh (r. 1751–52) claimed the Marwar throne and received the support of the Mughal emperor. However, Ishwar Singh Kachhawa, ruler of the neighbouring Rajput kingdom of Amber, backed Abhai's son rather than Bakht Singh (who became the emperor's choice). Ishwar Singh's wife, Princess of Idar, was close kin of both claimants to the Marwar throne, as she was the niece of Bakht Singh

and the sister of Abhai's son. Bakht Singh died in 1752, of cholera according to Iranian records, but Rajasthani sources claimed he died of poison administered by his niece, the Princess of Idar (Tikkiwal 1974, 95–107; Sarkar 1984, 198–201 and esp. 202).

In 1832, Tod related that the "Queen (the Rhatorni) wife of Eesuri Sing [Ishwar Singh], Prince of Jeipur [Jaipur, that is Amber]" helped him kill a rival, Raja Bakht Singh of Marwar. They gave Bakht a poisoned robe and he soon developed a fever. The physician could do nothing; the vedyā (vaidya, a seer) confirmed that he was dying. Bakht prepared a pyre and recalled an old curse that he would be consumed in a foreign land. After his cremation a "cenotaph was erected and is still called *Booro Dewul*, the 'shrine of evil' " (Tod 1832, 1:751–2).

This local legend and monument elaborated on the turbulent struggle among Rajput clans and the Mughal emperors after the death of Aurangzeb. Assassinations, family betrayals, the poison/cholera controversy, tension over contradictory khilat prestations, constantly shifting Mughal support, all this created a fertile ground for folklore. The seer summoned to Bakht Singh's tent, the body burned on the spot, the commemorative shrine, all lend an India-specific shape to a typical Poison Dress that inflicts fever followed by cremation. The "Shrine of Evil" cenotaph echoes the "statue of Terror" erected at Glauke's fountain in the classical Greek tale (described earlier).

Tale 4. The Queen of Ganore and the Khan

In the preceding three legends, the primary narrative concerned male leaders of Hindu Rajput clans who struggled among themselves and with Muslim rivals for control of their kingdoms. "To the Rajput, it was a[n] indignity worse than death to surrender either his land or his daughter; not only his livelihood but his honour, his manhood was at stake" (Misra 1982, 205). According to Lindsey Harlan, Rajput men still cite Tod's renditions of tales featuring "chivalry, honor, fondness for opium, and weakness for women" to exemplify the inherited traits of Rajput character (Harlan 1992, 2–3). Rajput men also keep alive a tradition of self-sacrifice in battle to the death (*saka*) (ibid., 122). Thus, death before dishonour was expected from male Rajputs, and tales abound of Rajput women who also chose self-sacrifice. For example, Rajput women left behind when their kinsmen rode out to the *saka* were expected to perform *jauhar*, "self-immolation to avoid capture by enemy forces" (ibid., 239). In addition, women retained an ideal of *sati*, which means both "a good woman" and "a woman who dies on her husband's funeral pyre" (ibid., 242). Historical tales suggested that a woman attained both the power to give a curse (*shrap*) and to confer a blessing in the period between her vow of *sati* and her death (ibid., 138). Alternate versions of Tale 3 attribute Bakht Singh's death to a curse pronounced by Ajit Singh's wives when they became *sati* (see "Killer Khilats, Part 2"). Tale 4 hinges on the behaviour of a Hindu queen who preferred death to the dishonour of marriage to a Muslim conqueror.

The deterioration of Mughal control in western and central India allowed regional military leaders to create new states such as Bhopal. Sardar Dost Muhammad Khan (d. c. 1726), the Afghan adventurer who founded the Muslim dynasty that ruled Bhopal until 1947, arrived in India in about 1707–12. He

defeated local Rajputs and gradually expanded his territory. In 1723, the Khan had "taken refuge" in "his fort of Bhopalgarh" and was forced to submit to a Mughal army, but regained considerable independence after the army left to deal with other rebellious local leaders (Irvine 1971, 2:130–1; Ali 1981, 22).

James Tod began his recounting of the legend by comparing the Queen of Ganore to Lucretia, the famous virgin of ancient Rome who saved her honour by suicide. "Having defended five fortresses against the Muslims, the queen of Ganore retreated to her last stronghold on the Nerbudda [Narmada]" river. But the fortress "was soon in the possession of the foe, the founder of the family now ruling in Bhopal [Dost Muhammad Khan]. The beauty of the queen of Ganore was an allurements only secondary to his desire for her country, and he invited her to reign over it and him. Denial would have been useless, and would have subjected her to instant coercion, for the Khan awaited her reply in the hall below; she therefore sent a message of assent." She complimented the victor on "his gallant conduct and determination in pursuit, adding that he merited her hand for his bravery." She told him to "prepare for the nuptials" to be "celebrated on the terrace of the palace [and] demanded two hours for unmolested preparation, that she might appear in appropriate attire, with the distinction her own and his rank demanded ... At length the Khan was summoned to the terrace. Robed in the marriage garb presented to him by the queen, ... he hastened to obey the mandate." The queen requested that he be seated at her side, and as the Khan gazed at her beauty they conversed for some hours. "But presently his countenance fell—he complained of heat." Fans and water "availed him not, and he began to tear the bridal garments" from his body. Then "the queen said, 'Know, Khan, that your last hour is come; our wedding and our death shall be sealed together. The vestments which cover you are poisoned; you left me no other expedient to escape pollution.' While all were horror-struck by this declaration, she sprung from the battlements" into the river below. The Khan "died in extreme torture, and was buried on the road to Bhopal [and] strange to say, a visit to his grave has the reputation of curing tertian [fever]" (Tod 1829, 1:626).

Heat and water motifs are recurrent in Poison Dress narratives: in Tale 4, water is no help to the victim and it is the poisoner who takes a watery plunge. And like the scalding stream of Heracles, Prince Akbar's flight to a hot springs (Tale 2), and Jand Pir's cave near the river (Tale 6, to follow), the Khan's place of death was traditionally believed to dispel fever.

Despite Tod's evocation of romantic European medieval chivalry, the distinctive Indian *khilat* terminology is pervasive: *obligation, honour, obey, reign over, mandate, demand, command*. The legend elaborates on what is known of the history of Ganore in Bhopal and anticipates modern assessments of the Khan's mixed motives, intrigue and violence. The ambivalent relationship between the vulnerable Rani and the rapacious but love-struck Khan radiates tension. Who is really in control, whose power will prevail? The poisoned robe of honour is the perfect conduit for their contestation of hierarchy and for duplicitous gestures of submission.

Tale 5. The Emperor of Delhi and Safdar Jang

Between 1739 and 1754, Safdar Jang was the governor of Awadh and became *wazir* (first minister, theoretically second in command to the emperor) of the Mughal Empire from 1748 until 1753 (Barnett 1980, 20–41 and 254; Mazumdar 1977, 7–42 and 113–8). Safdar Jang's uncle, who preceded him as governor, was

an Iranian immigrant who had set himself up as a virtually independent monarch in the political factionalism that riddled the late Mughal Empire. After his uncle betrayed the Mughal emperor and finally poisoned himself in 1739, Safdar Jang exceeded his uncle's imperial position. Mughal Emperor Ahmad Shah appointed Safdar Jang wazir of the empire in 1748, although the emperor and his wazir spent the next five years in deadly intrigues that led to civil war in 1753. Safdar Jang then retired to Awadh, where he died in 1754. As wazir, Safdar Jang diverted imperial funds for his own use, so much so that he was accused of impoverishing the Mughal court (Barnett 1980, 39). One destination for the money was the embellishment of his capital city, Faizabad (Bayly 1983, 116).

A grim story is told of Safdar Jang, Nawab of Oudh [Awadh] between 1739 and 1754, who, when he was building the town of Faizabad, received a robe of honour from the Emperor of Delhi. When he opened the box he found an image of Mari Bhavani (the godling of cholera or plague), and became so alarmed that they abandoned the site (Crooke 1926, 1:125).

This terse reference to what was once a fully developed oral tale appeared in Crooke's enumeration of a wide range of "disease riddance" customs in pre-modern Indian villages. These folk practices are crucial to our understanding of poison khilat tales that circulated in Mughal India, because they show that it was widely known that contagion could be deliberately passed along to others through textiles. Crooke described this symbolic spell for infecting an enemy: "To transfer his malady to another," one "gets hold of the latter's cloth," and draws on it secret images in lampblack—"when the owner puts on his cloth he contracts the malady." In Crooke's other examples, smoke from the pyres of smallpox and leprosy victims was considered contagious and ashes from cremated smallpox patients were thrown at enemies; Punjabi babies were "inoculated" by placing them on shrouds from graves of smallpox victims; people saved smallpox scabs in a cloth worn around the waist; and infected clothing, bedding, and shrouds were given to strangers or lower castes. Images of disease goddesses (such as Mari Bhavani) or corked containers of disease were also relayed from village to village in an effort to banish epidemics (Crooke 1896, 1:164–5; Crooke 1926, 1:117–44; see also Mitra 1917, 13–21; on harmful prestations to lower castes, see Raheja 1988). This kind of sympathetic magic is at work in the warning to Safdar Jang.

The primary concern in these folk rituals was usually to get rid of disease, but infecting outsiders was a direct and expected result. "In Northern India during epidemics," notes Crooke, rags were used to "pass on" disease. Villagers afflicted by smallpox placed scabs and infected cloth at a crossroads in the hope that someone else would contract the disease and take it away. This was morally acceptable, Crooke was told, because it passed the illness onto strangers on a public road, but it must never be done with "malice or pretense" to any known person (1926, 1:139–40). This folk prohibition expresses the kind of ethical controversy and ambivalence about deliberate infection that informs the poison khilat narratives.

The story of Safdar Jang is an interesting meta-killer khilat tale. By the mid-1700s, the shocking tales about Aurangzeb and Prithi Singh and Prince Akbar, Bakht Singh, the Queen of Ganore, and probably others, were already in

popular circulation. As the Mughal Empire became more Byzantine and corrupt, the traditional emblem of honour and investiture, a khilat, took on ominous meanings, reflected in the legends that questioned the purity of the khilat as a medium of power. The unnamed Mughal Emperor in Delhi, angry over the depletion of his imperial funds, designed a gift to express his displeasure to his subordinate. A robe of honour folded around an image of disease sent a powerful shorthand message, neatly combining the long-standing folk method of transmitting a dread disease with a strong allusion to the by-then notorious method of murder by poison khilat.

Tale 6. Jand Pir and Raja Shyam Sen

This legend, published in English by B. R. Beotra in 1931, concerns the gifting of a dangerous robe by a *pir* ("faqir," or "fakir," a Sufi saint or religious teacher able to guide disciples on the mystical way) to a raja. It takes place in Suket State, a small principality between the Sutlej and Beas rivers in contemporary Himachal Pradesh. The ruling families preserved their own histories as genealogies and "annals" describing their frequent local wars. H. A. Rose, an early twentieth-century ethnographer of the region, described a "close connection between the peoples of [the Suket area] and Rajputana." This connection was expressed in their religious behaviour, in the pattern of closely related families fighting over territory, and in their disease riddance customs (Rose 1970, 1:327 and 350–6).

Jand Pir was a *faqir* and was a great friend of Raja Shyam Sen of Suket. The Raja went to him every day to play chess. One day when the Raja was shivering with fever, the *faqir* covered him with his [own] cloak. He then removed it and placed it on the ground. The Raja was cured but the cloak began to shiver instead. The *faqir* presented the coat to the Raja but the latter thought it below his dignity to accept such a humble present and gave it away to his groom. As soon as the groom touched it he was burnt to ashes. Immediately the ground gave way and the *faqir* who took the insult very seriously was buried beneath it. The Raja realised his mistake and built a temple there [the Temple of Jand Pir, in Banaik near Bhojpur] to commemorate his friend's memory (Beotra 1931, 173–4).

Beotra's narrative listed several Suket shrines associated with smallpox, and the tale of Jand Pir follows another legend of a man who was burned to ashes after touching a *pir*'s cloak in a cave near the Sutlej River, a site then associated with cures. Notably, there are medicinal hot springs in this region; this is a recurrent motif in Poison Dress lore (*Punjab States Gazetteers* 1984, 262). Beotra stresses a friendship between potentially hostile Others: the powerful Raja and the poor holy man are chess partners. Beotra's narrative describes a fever cured by magical transference to the *pir*'s cloak. Jand Pir offers his own cloak as a true khilat in the commemorative sense, as a token of friendship and memento of healing (see Buckler [1922] on cloaks that both transmit and cure disease; and Buckler [1928] on khilats as "remembrances"). The Raja foolishly rejects the valuable, powerful khilat as a lowly gift from an inferior, carelessly passing it on to his groom, who is immediately burned up, and the Raja's grievous insult destroyed the *pir*. In Beotra's tale, the Raja founded a temple to atone for his insult.

The theme of an innocent victim burned by the cloak intended for another in Tale 6 recalls the warning in the *Laws of Manu* (cited earlier) about inappropriate gifts reducing recipients to ash. It also recalls the biblical “fakir” Elisha’s magic-mantle cure of Naaman’s disease, followed by the infection of the servant who wore the khilat refused by Elisha (see earlier). The pir’s magical cloak both heals and protects, reflecting Bayly’s second and third functions of clothing gifts in Hindu and Muslim society (discussed earlier). It also recalls the mantle rejected by King Arthur that burned a servant to ashes and the khilat that burned Prince Akbar’s slave (Tale 2). That a deadly cloak must go to its designated recipient is a recurring theme in Poison Dress lore (compare Deianeira and Medea’s careful instructions in the classical Greek myths). The pir’s cloak, having absorbed fever, posed no danger to the Raja, but destroys the groom. This irony stresses the Raja’s misinterpretation of the gift.

The legend of Jand Pir is a parable about the shifting meanings of khilats exchanged by unequals and the powerful ambiguities of deliberate disease transference, two cultural practices uniquely intertwined in Mughal India. This early legend, set in c. 1640s, warns about the magical and literal dangers lurking in gifts of clothing exchanged by “friendly” Others in tense situations, playing on fears that would evolve into the sophisticated, and more literary, murder plots later attributed to Aurangzeb and other historical personages of the declining Mughal Empire.

Tale 7. The Double-Skinned People and the Nagas

British administrator-ethnographer John Henry Hutton collected the following tale from a storyteller of the Angami Naga “tribe” in about 1914. The Nagas live in mountainous northeastern India on the Myanmar (Burma) border, far removed from the locales of the preceding legends; the Indian Government created a separate state named “Nagaland” in 1963 (Dasgupta 1997, 347–9 and 357–8). “Naga” was adopted as a group self-identity by these diverse peoples, first to organise resistance against the British and later to resist the independent Indian and Burmese states (van Schendel 1995, 422 note 63).

The [Nagas] tell also of a tribe of men whose skin is double; these men were aforetime of the Naga race, but separated ... because of a quarrel ... And after the quarrel the double-skinned tribe fled away to another place [where they were nearly invincible]. And they say that two Angamis travelled by this country and were well and hospitably entreated, and when they would return to their own village the double-skinned gave them a pipe of hollow bamboo, telling them not to open it on the road, but when they should reach their home; and they also offered them their double skin [clothing], but the travellers would take it not, lest there were some bad thing in it, and after that they had returned, they opened the bamboo, and the double-skinned had put Cholera therein, and it came forth and destroyed many men of that village (Hutton 1914, 484–5)

Tale 7, an etiological myth related by a Naga storyteller, serves as a “control,” since it is starkly distant in terms of culture, language, geography, and sophistication from the first five Mughal/Rajput court intrigues and the related tale of Jand Pir. The myth explains how cholera originated among the Naga by claiming that they were once upon a time victims of deliberate infection by

enemies (who were once "brothers"). The Naga tale demonstrates the protean nature of recurrent legends and helps explain how Poison Dress patterns might arise in varied cultural contexts. Note that the khilat themes of honour are mirrored in the superior tribe's "hospitality" and "entreaty" to accept the prestation of clothing (and a sealed vessel). The victims refuse the gift of clothing, "double skin," from the enemy, fearing contamination. Their refusal recalls previously discussed incidents of gift khilats rejected to avoid contagion and dominance.

This tale explaining the origin of a dreaded epidemic disease among "tribal" people gives us a sense of how patterns of belief about fatal gifts of clothing as secret biological weapons may have evolved. After all, the sumptuous but deadly khilats exchanged by arch enemies in the Mughal court are just sophisticated versions of the exotic, ominous "double-skins" refused by the Nagas.

Conclusion: The Creation and Perpetuation of Indian Poison Dress Tales

A unique combination of factors contributed to the development of Poison Dress legends among the Rajputs and Mughals and then helped perpetuate versions of those tales among the British in India. The Rajputs, Mughals, British, and even the Nagas, all participated in the custom of ritually presented clothing in diplomacy and all experienced anxieties about the status conferred by costume and feared the potential for contagion in clothing. Different cultural perspectives shaped these intersecting sets of beliefs and fears, traditions and "realities," of course, but their complementary character meant that Poison Dress tales in India were bound to attract the notice of the British. We find that the following parameters influenced the development of the Poison Dress tales of India.

First, in India, poisoning was an ancient theme in history and folklore. Norman Penzer has traced biological warfare techniques back to ancient Sanskrit epics, and folklore about poisonous individuals appeared by the seventh century AD in India (Penzer 1952, 8–10, 12–29 and 31–5). Moreover, long-standing folk beliefs linked gifts of clothing and disease or misfortune. Efforts to banish smallpox, fatal fevers, cholera, and other epidemics that raged in pre-modern India led to ritual practices of giving infected cloth to others, rituals that depended on popular understanding of contagion. Such practices could arouse negative judgement, as seen in the riots that arose to protest the magical transfer of the "cholera demon" and the notion that only strangers should be infected (Crooke 1926, 1:129 and 1:140).

Second, in Iranian-influenced cultures, a robe of honour was never a mere gift. The complex and ancient custom lent itself to "worst-case" scenarios, giving rise to legends in which fine clothing could be used as a weapon to destroy an enemy either literally or figuratively. The khilat's unique potential for symbolic and physical harm came to the fore in Mughal times, especially under Aurangzeb, who manipulated numerous investitures for political ends. The folklore of poison dresses challenges the ideal that a khilat could ever be a transparent conduit of power.

When the British came to India, they experienced anxiety about status, power dynamics, hidden meanings, and motives, anxieties that were intensified in the hyper complex khilat ritual. Nuances of power relationships and metaphorical

exchange embodied in robes of honour were confusing to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Westerners. Both for Indians themselves and for foreigners, the meaning of the khilat depended on the giver's motives. Khilats generated anxiety among the English, as will be explored further in "Killer Khilats, Part 2: Imperial Collecting of Poison Dress Legends in India."

What can folklorists and historians glean from these tales? The plots tell us something about the dynamics of power, status and hierarchy in India and the control by Mughals and Rajputs of their allies and enemies, through the system of khilat exchange and through poisoned khilat exchange. By demonstrating the logical extremes of subtle khilat relationships, these shocking tales enrich our understanding of the robe of honour system. The tales circulated as "true" historical incidents, but the truth of Poison Dress tales is moot; their retelling and variations in this time period demonstrate the unresolved tension, among Indians and British, about the status, health and honour conferred by khilats. The similarities of the Indian narratives to other Poison Dress tales show how old storylines can reappear reclothed in cultural concerns of the day. Similar tensions evoke similar patterns as people try to impose meaning on events and anxieties tied to body coverings. The differences in these Indian examples reveal significant cultural assumptions and controversies. The ways in which the khilat relationship was open to subversion and fears about contagion hidden in a gift that one cannot refuse (obligation and prestation) manifest distinctive Indian features.

Finally, the legends show how widespread paranoia aroused by the idea of accepting gifts of clothing was expressed in early modern India. Fear was intensified where textiles were believed to (and actually did) transmit disease. The custom of presenting fine garments as special marks of honour and friendship evoked suspicion about the true motives of the giver and the purity of the gift itself. As this article shows, Killer Khilat legends persisted in India as long as the events they described could pack a visceral punch and provoke ethical controversy.

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Appendix A: The Houses of Marwar (also known by its capital city, Jodhpur) and Amber (also known by its capital city, Jaipur)

All of the names in this appendix appear as they were spelled in colonial era English-language texts, and the contemporary spellings of Rajasthani clan names given within brackets are from Harlan 1992, 239–42. See Figure 1 for geographical locations.

Rajput clan leaders established regional states in the area of contemporary Rajasthan between the seventh and early thirteenth centuries. Tales 1–6 feature loosely connected Rajput kingdoms renowned for fierce independence and military prowess. Rajput clan leaders fought each other for territorial hegemony, alternately resisting and collaborating with non-Rajput states until the end of the Mughal Empire in the nineteenth century (Sachdeva 1993, 14–5; 1994, 151–73 and 235–40; 1966, 1:281; Chattopadhyaya 1994). At the same time, they resisted the territorial ambitions of Muslim adventurers from Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Iran. The legend of Maharaja Bakht (Bakhta, Bakhat, Bukht, Vakhat) Singh Rathor's (Rathaur's) death in 1752 is entangled in Rajput clan rivalries and Mughal claims of overlordship in the region. Bakht Singh (1706–52) was the second son of Maharaja Ajit Singh Rathor (Jaswant Singh's posthumous son, born 1678, shortly after Prithi Singh's death). Ajit Singh fought both the Mughals and neighbouring Rajput clans for the Marwar throne, which he won only after Aurangzeb's death in 1707. He received crucial aid from Maharana Jai Singh II Kachhawa (Kachvaha) (d. 1743), a leading noble at the Mughal court and ruler of the state of Amber. During his reign (1710–24), Ajit Singh tried to gain political and economic advantages from the Mughals even as he exploited the weaknesses of Aurangzeb's successors, and he habitually encroached on his Rajput neighbours as well. In 1724, Ajit Singh was murdered in his sleep by his second son, Bakht Singh. A variety of reasons have been offered for the murder, from a plot masterminded by Abhai Singh (1703–49), Ajit Singh's eldest son and Bakht Singh's brother, to the claim that Ajit Singh had seduced Bakht Singh's wife and "was guilty of incestuous intercourse" (Faruqi 1972, 245; for plot, Mehta and Mehta 1985, 258; see also Sarkar 1984, 196).

Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah (d. 1748) immediately confirmed Abhai Singh's succession to the Marwar throne, and he reigned from 1724 until 1749. Three of Abhai's younger brothers rebelled against him and took refuge in the Rathor principality of Idar. In the ensuing civil war, Abhai's brother Bakht, who had murdered their father, finally re-established his loyalty to his own clan, the Rathors, and Marwar. In 1743, when Jai Singh II of Amber died, Emperor Muhammad Shah confirmed Jai Singh's second son, Ishwar (Iswar, Ishwari, Isari, Isri) Singh Kachhawa to the Amber throne. When Abhai Singh died in 1749, Bakht Singh claimed the Marwar throne over Abhai's son, Ram Singh, and Bakht obtained the Mughal Emperor's support in 1751. However, Ishwar Singh backed Ram Singh, and, to strengthen his ties to Ram Singh, married his daughter to him. The ruling houses of Marwar and Amber had often intermarried; Bakht Singh was the uncle of Ishwar Singh's wife, a Princess of Idar, who was also Ram Singh's sister. The throne of Marwar passed to Bakht Singh (1751–52) who died in 1752, of cholera according to Persian records, of poison administered by his niece, the Princess of Idar, according to some Rajasthani sources. The throne of Marwar then passed to Bakht Singh's son, Vijaya Singh, but Ram Singh, although exiled in Jaipur city, did not give up his military efforts to win it for himself.

The early twentieth-century Indian historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar dismissed poison as the cause of Bakht Singh's death. He ridiculed Tod's reliance on the "bardic gossip" of "Rathor fabricators" and "opium eaters" as historical sources (Sarkar 1984, 196). He attributed Tod's errors to Tod's own careless notes or else to his clerks' mistranslations of Rajasthani sources (*ibid.*, 202 and 204 note 7; but it is important to consider that the leader of a rival Rajput clan, the Kachhawa, commissioned Sarkar to write this book as a refutation of Tod's allegedly pro-Rathor text). Sarkar cited "the Vir Vinod, written in the late nineteenth century, [as ascribing Bakht Singh's death] to poison, given by Jai Singh's son [of Amber]" rather than a princess of Idar (*ibid.*, 198–201 and especially 202). In a recent history of Rajasthan, Rajvi Amar Singh privileges Tod's version, and claims that Tod's account is corroborated by the *khyats* (historical chronicles) of Ram Singh

(Ishwar's son-in-law) and Bakht Singh. R. A. Singh identified the seer-doctor who attended the dying Bakht Singh and gave the place of death as Sonoli, Jaipur (Singh 1992, 1248–9). For a nostalgically pro-Rathor perspective of these events, see Dhananaja Singh (1994).

There are clearly several levels of political concerns that need to be considered in interpreting these tales. First, the eighteenth-century politics within Rajasthan influenced the events themselves, and, second, nineteenth-century politics influenced both Rajasthani and English-language recountings of the tales. Third, early twentieth-century Indian historiography had both British and Indian nationalist schools in which historians made their selections among historical sources based on their contemporary opinions of reliability and political agendas. Finally, our own political views, that the tales themselves are worthy of study and have value for historians as well as folklorists, are part of our recounting of these "Killer Khilat" legends.

Appendix B: Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb and Raja Shivaji Bhonsle

Shivaji (1630–80) was an "extraordinarily capable and charismatic leader" of the Marathas, a martial Hindu group that challenged the Mughal emperors from their territorial base around the contemporary Indian city of Pune (Gordon 1993, 59). Shivaji established his reputation as a leader in 1659 when he killed the general of a rival state in hand-to-hand combat, a story that has become one of the most frequently repeated in Maharashtra. When Aurangzeb finally defeated his own brothers and took the Mughal throne in 1659, he sent an army to Shivaji's home districts to force him to submit to Mughal rule. This army neither intimidated Shivaji nor prevented him from sacking the Mughal port of Surat a few years later. Aurangzeb then sent a larger army that eventually trapped Shivaji and forced him to come to terms in 1665. Maharana Jai Singh of Amber was the experienced Mughal general who negotiated with Shivaji, and who suggested that he be forced to meet with Aurangzeb at Agra in 1666. The audience was a disaster; Shivaji felt that he was insulted, "made a scene, refused the honorary robes offered to him, and stalked out of the audience hall" (78). Shivaji's opinion of his own political position was far superior to Aurangzeb's view that he "was only a relatively successful rebel" (78). After escaping from Agra, Shivaji returned home, and made peace with the Mughals for three years. Once peace broke down in 1669, he remained at war until his death in 1680.

Aurangzeb's son, Prince Muhammad Akbar, openly rebelled against his father in 1680, the year of Shivaji's death and more than a decade after Shivaji's escape from Agra. Akbar obtained the initial support of some Rajput chiefs, who, like the Marathas, were restive under Aurangzeb's increasingly orthodox Muslim policies (such as a special tax on non-Muslims that Aurangzeb reimposed in 1679). When Akbar was defeated in Rajasthan in 1681, he requested and received asylum from Shivaji's son, Sambhaji. Akbar remained with the Marathas until he escaped to Iran in 1687 (*ibid.*, 92). Hamilton's version of Tale 2, several decades after the events, conflated Shivaji's rebellious behaviour in the 1660s with Akbar's rebellious behaviour and alliance with Shivaji's son at the beginning of the 1680s. Aurangzeb was able to capture and kill Shivaji's son, but the emperor died in 1707 without defeating the Marathas (*ibid.*, 103).

Sir Jadunath Sarkar's early twentieth-century historical portrayal of Shivaji provided historiographical backing for his place as one of the premier Hindu heroes of early modern India. According to Sarkar, Shivaji "had an inborn repugnance in bending his head before a Muslim" as he had "imbibed the orthodox Hindu spirit from his mother and his tutor, from the comrades of his boyhood, and the saints whom he adored" (Sarkar 1961, 134). As Stewart Gordon summed it up, Shivaji and his family provided "the stirring stories of courage and heroism which form the basis for the self-image of Maharashtra" today (Gordon 1993, 195). British-era retelling of tales featuring Hindu heroes against Muslim "invaders" have often been appropriated by nationalists using the Hindu religion for political organising in both the past and the present.