Killer Khilats, Part 2: Imperial Collecting of Poison Dress Legends in India

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Abstract
This article presents the English language collecting histories of seven legends of death by Poison Dress that were recorded in early modern India (set out in "Killer Khilats, Part 1"). The tales express fears of contamination, either symbolic or real, aroused by the ancient Persian-influenced customs of presenting robes of honour (khilats). Rajputs, Mughals, British, and other groups in India participated in the development of tales of deadly clothing from 1600 to the early twentieth century. The tales and their variants share motifs and themes with Poison Dress legends in the Bible, Greek myth, Arthurian legends, and modern American versions, but all seven tales display distinctively Indian characteristics. The historical settings and the contexts of collection demonstrate the cultural assumptions of the various groups who performed poison khilat legends in India.

Introduction
European adventurers, merchants associated with European mercantile enterprises, and members of the imperial British administration in India collected several tales set in early modern India which feature a poison khil‘at (Arabic: "robe of honour"). "Killer Khilat" tales share plots, themes, and motifs with Poison Dress legends, as we demonstrated in "Killer Khilats, Part 1: Legends of Poisoned ‘Robes of Honour’ in India" (hereafter referred to as "Killer Khilats"). Here, we will analyse the collection context for Indian tales of deadly clothing from 1600 to the early twentieth century, paying particular attention to the assumptions and backgrounds of the British collectors. From the seventeenth until the twentieth century, British merchants and administrators claimed the authority to create knowledge about India, claims which were most strident from 1858 until 1947, when colonial India was partitioned into the independent nations of India and Pakistan. The British were predisposed to find parallels to biblical and classical stories in India because they used these as tools to make sense of the cultures they encountered in the subcontinent (Trautmann 1998). Sir William Jones, a scholar-official whose deciphering of Sanskrit led to the discovery of the Indo-European language family in the late 1700s, considered Hinduism to be the "living cousin" of "ancient Greek and Roman texts" and he developed "a series of parallels among Greco-Roman gods and Hindu ones" (ibid., 37–61). Indeed, linguists like Jones and many later British administrators promoted the idea that Indian civilisation was essentially Hindu civilisation (Pandey 1990, 1–65).
Classical references loomed large in the memoirs of individual imperialists. Alexander the Great's conquest of north-west India was well known, and the British assumed a direct Grecian influence on Hindu culture. They found support for this in ancient texts, since both Plutarch and Dio Chrysostom had claimed that the ancient Indians knew Homer's epics (Jenkyns 1980, 331–46; Bowen 1989, 176). It is easy to see how British imperialists, knowledgeable about the European lore of poison robes and biased towards discovering "living" Greek myths in India, were primed to pay attention to familiar-seeming tales in India.

Problems of Interpretation

Poison Dress legends in India swirled around the equivocal custom of receiving a robe of honour from a friend or enemy. The first six narratives elaborate historical events that occurred between c. 1600 and 1752, while Tale 7 is a tribal myth collected in 1914. The evidence indicates that lore about contaminated garments had already developed in India by the time Europeans arrived. The European (and one British-educated Indian) collectors (1688–1931) cited natives, bards and storytellers, old manuscripts, epic poems, family annals, and temple chronicles as their sources. In later editions of the stories and in quotations of each other's publications, variations, asides and contradictions crept into the surviving versions of each of these tales, all in keeping with the characteristics of living folklore. These collectors saw themselves as faithful recorders of genuine Indian lore for an English-literate audience, but understanding the viewpoints of these later legend performers is crucial. Some collectors drew comparisons between the Indian tales and ancient Greek myths, and we can detect European strands interwoven into some khilat tales. The collectors interpreted the information they gleaned from indigenous records according to European paradigms of human evolution, history and religion, and they cast the Indian Poison Dress tales to conform to their preconceptions about Muslims and Hindus (Thapar 1994, 1–22). Yet, in all seven legends, the cultural details, situations, and historical characters remain firmly rooted in distinctive Indian milieux (see "Killer Khilats" Part 1, Figure 1, p. 30).

In interpreting these narratives, it is essential to keep in mind Frank Korom's cautions about making English translations of South Asian lore fit European folk genres. Bangladeshi scholar Mazharul Islam's critical history of South Asian folklore collection by foreigners is also valuable in avoiding this pitfall. Folklorist A. K. Ramanujan stresses the importance of context and uniquely Indian themes and motifs in comparing European parallels (Islam 1982; Ramanujan 1987, xi–xxi; Korom 1993, 235–6).

The changing contours of Western historiography over the last three centuries and the creation of a separate discipline of folklore studies in late nineteenth-century Europe determined how Poison Dress legends would be collected in English-language literature. British preconceptions about the use of poison in "Eastern" cultures led them to notice tales that conformed to stereotypes of "Oriental" duplicity and cowardice, notions that existed in ancient Greek literature. Lore about exotic Eastern poisons had circulated in the West since ancient
Greek times (Penzer 1952, 3–5, 8–10 and 12–29). Stories of deliberate poisoning
and poisonous individuals appeared by the seventh century AD in India, with
parallels to classical Greek legends about Mithradates, the ancient Persian
(Iranian) emperor who lived on poisons, and the poison damsels sent to infect
Alexander the Great in Asia. For example, European adventurers circulated
popular tales about the Turk Mahmud Shah I ("Begada"), "the Poison Sultan,"
who was ruler of Gujarat in 1458–1511 and the model for the English satirist
Samuel Butler’s seventeenth-century lines: "The Prince of Cambay’s daily food/
Is asp and basilisk and toad" (cited in Commissariat 1938, 1:231). William
Crooke noted in 1897 that early European travellers to India frequently wrote of
"the poisoning of princes," and he asserted that "secret poisoning" increased
during epidemics "which supply favourable chances of evading detection"
(Crooke 1972, 135). Dread of pernicious "miasmas" and tropical fevers in India
was another factor in the British preoccupation with infected clothing (Arnold
1993, 8, 32–9 and ch. 3; interestingly, the early Mughals believed that the air of
Bengal was "poisonous"—see Arnold 1998, 6 and 15). Early twentieth-century
Indian historians such as Sir Jadunath Sarkar, who wrote voluminously about
medieval India and completed a five-volume treatise on the reign of Emperor
Aurangzeb, and Zahiruddin Faruki, who wrote to counter Sarkar’s representa-
tion of Aurangzeb, generally followed the methodological paradigms of books
published by British contemporaries such as Stanley Lane-Poole and William
Irvine (see Lane-Poole 1908; Irvine 1971) All early twentieth-century historians of
India thus privileged the accounts of European travellers, which gave these
accounts, with their Eurocentric contexts and references, continual citations in
historical narratives (Philips 1961).

During British rule, the Rajputs and their British supporters consistently
portrayed themselves as past defenders of Hindu tradition during foreign
Muslim invasions and rule. Rajput bardic literature and oral lore recounted how
their ancestors were forced by the Turkish Muslims to the poorer lands around
modern Rajasthan, where these "uprooted royal clans" preserved "age old
traditions" of the last Hindu kings of north central India (Ganguli 1983, 96 and
89). The British colonial-era interpretation of Turkish invasions and Rajput
displacements developed within the complex power politics of the weakened
Mughal Empire and aggressive British commercialism of the late eighteenth and
early nineteenth centuries. The collectors interpreted the information they
 gleaned from indigenous records according to the European paradigms of
human evolution, history and religion, and they cast the Indian Poison Dress
 tales to conform to their preconceptions about Muslims and Hindus (Pandey

Controversies about poison khilats also reflect the way some collectors evalu-
ated the written and oral materials that claimed to represent the Indian past.
Historians—both Europeans and Western-educated Indians—who wrote during
the British Raj tended to accept Turkish and Persian court chronicles as valid
sources for Indian history and to dismiss pre-existing Hindu sources as ahistor-
ical. Hindu history expressed through khyats (historical chronicles) in regional
languages was a mode of "embedded history" in which "historical conscious-
ness has to be prised out," and this escaped many Raj historians (Thapar 1994,
137–9). More recently, however, the "historical anecdotes" of khyats are seen as
authentic description[s] of contemporary events" (Kathuria 1987, 206–8; see also Ziegler 1976, 219–50).

Meanwhile, amateur folklorists and imperial ethnographers "produced knowledge" about living Indian peoples (Islam 1982, 17–18 and 31). The history of Indian folklore collection from the early nineteenth century, when travellers "typically published a few legends, myths or tales," to the mid- to late-nineteenth-century work of British officers, missionaries, and their Indian translators, who collected folktale and beliefs, is traced by Mazharul Islam and A. K. Ramanujan. After 1878, when the Folk-Lore Society was established in Britain, "a new scholarship" of annotation, footnotes, and motif indexes determined the methods of collecting Indian folklore (Islam 1982, 30; also Ramanujan 1987).

The disciplinary boundaries between folklore and history, separated during the professionalisation of the social sciences in nineteenth-century Europe, are today melded through interdisciplinary "cultural studies." Thus, the Rajasthani legends collected by James Tod and others (see later), including those featuring poisoned robes of honour, now prove to be an important primary source for both historians and folklorists (Srivastava 1994, 589–614; Peabody 1996).

The Tales

During British rule, the Rajputs and their British supporters consistently claimed that Rajputs were the historical defenders of indigenous Hindu tradition when it was challenged by foreign Muslim invasions and rule. Rajput bardic lore recounted how their ancestors were forced by Turkish Muslims from richer farmlands to the poorer lands around modern Rajasthan, where these "uprooted royal clans" preserved "age-old traditions of the last Hindu kings of north central India" (Ganguli 1983, 96 and 89). The British colonial-era interpretation of several centuries of Turkish invasions and Rajput displacements developed within the complex power politics of the weakened Mughal Empire and aggressive British commercialism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In "Killer Khilats, Part 1," we presented the chief variant of each of the seven tales within its historical context. Here we will suggest how to read multiple versions of the tales in light of the preconceptions of their British and Indian English-language collectors.

Tale 1. Emperor Aurangzeb and Prithi Singh

Variant A: collected by Lt.-Col. James Tod (1782–1835)

"The wily tyrant" Aurangzeb [r. 1658–1707], sent Jaswant Singh [r. 1638–78] 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 that he should 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 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; 1920, 2:984–5).

**Variant B: collected by Norman Chevers (1870)**

In 1870, Chevers included this and two other poison khilat examples in his medical law
manual. “It is believed that the son of Jeswunt [Jaswant Singh], the formidable Rathore
prince, was done to death by a robe of honour presented to him by Aurangzeb.” Chevers
attributed the cause of Prithi Singh’s death to powerful vesicants (skin irritants) impregnating
very thin fabric and entering pores exposed by perspiration (Chevers 1870, 298).

**Variant C: collected by Richard Carnac Temple (1850–1931)**

Temple relates that “Aurangzeb sent for Prithivi Singh and received him with much
courtesy, giving him a khila’t or robe of honour, which by etiquette he was obliged to wear
on leaving the court. On reaching his house he died suddenly in great pain that same
evening, and from that day to this [c. 1880] his death has been attributed to the poison in the
robe. There is, however, of course no evidence to show that the robe was poisoned and how
it came to affect his health so rapidly.” Temple reproduces the bard’s 83-line poem, followed
by his translation. Lines 32–49 relate Aurangzeb’s dismay after Prithi Singh killed his lion in
a contest. “Today he hath slain my lion, to-morrow he will ruin me! ... I will give Priti Singh
a golden robe.” “The foolish prince knew not the robe he wore,/And the poison of it entered
him, as drunkenness encompasses the drunkard,/And all the body of the young Rajput fell
down.” Prithi Singh’s body was burned on a sandalwood pyre on the banks of the Jamna
River. Line 78 says he “died and was burnt in the fort at Delhi” (Temple 1977, 3:252–60;
shorter version in Temple 1977, 3:252 and 258; see also Penzer 1952, 9).

We know that smallpox and other epidemics did occur during and after
Aurangzeb’s reign. When the Rajput heir to Marwar, Prithi Singh, died of
smallpox, popular legend claimed that he had been murdered by a contaminated
khilat. It was a plausible notion considering the tales circulating about Au-
rangzeb. One story tells how Aurangzeb became rich by summoning fākirs
(Muslim holy men thought to have magical powers) to his palace and forcing
them to accept fine khilats. He then confiscated their old rags and shook out the
diamonds and gold hidden in the folds (Hamilton 1930, 1:100–3; also see
Lane-Poole 1908:157–8 for yet another example of a duplicitous khilat and a false
gesture of alliance between Mughals and Rajputs). For many nineteenth-century
British authors, including Tod and William Crooke, Aurangzeb was a man of
paranoid cunning and treachery, and it was reported that his subjects considered
him a fakir or wizard (Lane-Poole 1908, 65).

British military agent, Tod, first published this legend in his collection of
genealogies and stories of the Rajput clans in 1829–32. He had joined the East
India Company in 1798, and in 1806 he joined a diplomatic mission to Mewar.
From then until he left India in 1823, Tod collected antiquarian materials on
Rajput history. Indeed, when Tod sailed back to England, he brought forty boxes
of artefacts, inscriptions and manuscripts with him, as source materials for *The
Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (the manuscripts were donated to the Royal
Asiatic Society; see Crooke’s “Introduction” to Tod 1920, 1:xvii–xliv).
Well versed in classical Greek myths, Tod held the then current British theory that the Rajputs were racially related to the ancient Greeks and shared the same Indo-European traditions. He actually proposed that the first Greeks were Indian colonists called the “Hericula,” suggesting a link to Heracles. Tod considered the Annals to be a “sacred obligation to the races amongst whom I have passed the better portion of my life”; his goal was “to awaken a sympathy for the ... interesting people of Rajputana.” The Annals were thus “a copious collection of [primary ethnographic] materials for the future historian” rather than a work “in the severe style of history, which would have excluded many details.” Tod’s sources in the Annals were “native works”: the Puranas (lit. “ancient tales”); “genealogical legends of the princes”; “heroic poems” (Tod also referred to these as “raesas or poetical legends of princes”); living bards (“the primitive historians of mankind”); “accounts given by the Brahmins of the endowments of the temples”; Jain records; and inscriptions, coins and “copper-plate grants” (see “Author’s Introduction to the Second Volume of the Original Edition,” in Tod 1920, 1:lxi; and “Author’s Introduction to the First Volume of the Original Edition,” in Tod 1920, 1:lviii–lxi and lxv for “severe style of history.” For a modern analysis of all of these sources, see Ziegler 1976, 219–50. See also Rudolph et al. 2000, 13–15, 46 note 27).

According to William Crooke, who edited the 1920 edition of the Annals, Tod “was notoriously a partisan of the Rajput princes, particularly those of Mewar and Marwar.” Crooke praised Tod’s work, but pointed out that he “was not a trained philologist” and “many of his mistakes [were] due to his rashness in following [the] guidance” of his Jain “guru” and “Brahman Pandits” who helped him interpret his materials. Moreover, Tod “reposed undue confidence in the epics and ballads composed by ... tribal bards,” and his “elaborate attempt to extract history and a trustworthy scheme of chronology from the Puranas must be pronounced a failure” (Crooke’s Introduction to Tod’s Annals 1920, xxvii, xxviii–xxix, xxx and xl). In other words, Crooke criticised Tod for taking seriously the Rajputs’ own oral and written traditions. (For more recent evaluations of Tod’s work, see Misra 1982, 15; Ganguli 1983, 91–143; Peabody 1996.)

Norman Chevers’s Manual of Medical Jurisprudence for India (1870) included many bizarre crimes and legendary homicides involving poisons native to India. He quoted educated and lay British and Indian informants (c. 1800–70) and was widely read in Indian crime annals. In his variants of Poison Khilat Tales 1, 3, and 4, Chevers focused on scientific explanations for poison khilats.

Richard Carnac Temple, who spent his administrative career in Punjab and north India, was an enthusiastic collector of folklore. He translated a ballad (Variant C of Tale 1) about Prithi Singh’s death recited by a “bard” at Ambala, a Punjabi city north of Delhi. Temple noted that Prithi Singh “died in so sudden and startling a manner in 1680 [actually 1677] ... that his death has caused a deep impression in the native mind of having been” due to the “treachery of the Emperor Aurangzeb, a monarch” with a “reputation for unscrupulous guile” (Temple 1977, 3:253; also see Tod 1920, 2:985). Temple thought the legend was a “distortion of the tale of the tragic death of Prithivi [sic] Singh ... As usual the bard has managed to confuse the history he has undertaken to preserve” (Temple 1977, 3:253). Christopher Shackle, an authority on the Punjabi language,
recently noted that it was "ironic, that [Temple's] enthusiasm for the authenticity supposedly conferred by the oral tradition encouraged [him] to record muddled bardic versions of stories which readers in England might more profitably have read in translations made directly from [contemporary books of poetry]" (Shackle 1995, 168). For Temple, however, the story itself was less important than the comparison between the folktales and the "bard's poem," which "[was] the elder and the more valuable." Temple's collection of legends followed the "latest development of scientific approaches" of his day by transcribing the bard's recitation "exactly as [it] was taken down from the lips of the narrators, with translation" and by using annotations, appendices, and so on (Islam 1982, 52). Temple pointed out that the image in the ballad of Prithi Singh seizing the forepaws of Aurangzeb's lion (line 29) seems to be a poetic revision of the last interview between Aurangzeb and the prince described by Tod.

Controversy over the meaning of the legend continued as the British performers Tod and Temple voiced doubts about the legend's historical truth. Like Chevers, they insert their own scientific speculations into the Indian tale. Tod remarks on the peril of wearing "a thin tunic next to the skin in a hot climate," allowing absorption of harmful substances through the pores. Tod also may have had in mind the detail of Heracles's profuse perspiration in the burning cloak (see "Killer Khilats, Part 1"). Chevers assumes that severe chemical burns were facilitated by body heat and perspiration, rather than fever. Their comments on the dangers of sweating through the filmy garments favoured by the Indians reveal a British obsession with pernicious clothing in India. To allay anxiety about deleterious perspiration and open pores in the miasmatic tropics, the British insisted on wearing thick flannel next to the skin (Cohn 1996, 152–6). Notably, the smallpox blanket tales, modern US poison dress legends, and the classical myths also focus on perspiration, body heat, and absorption of toxins through skin pores (Mayor 1995).

Rumours about Emperor Aurangzeb as a master at manipulating khilat investitures were crucial for the circulation of Tale 1. During his rule, many stories recounted khilats used to insult, trick and harm enemies. During Aurangzeb's struggle for the Mughal throne, for example, his brother Dara Shukoh had received a jewel-encrusted khilat from their father. Aurangzeb captured Dara, stripped him of his fine raiment, and forced him to don dishonourable clothing. "The captive heir to the richest throne in the world" was paraded through Delhi "clad in travel-tainted dress of the coarsest cloth, with a dark, dingy-coloured turban, such as only the poorest wear" (Sarkar 1962, 78; for "robe of dishonour," see Temple 1977, 3:242). A few years later, in 1686, Aurangzeb conquered the Deccan kingdom of Bijapur. Sultan Sikandar of Bijapur had entered a shaky vassalship with Aurangzeb and gave up territory in exchange for several robes of honour, just before he was deposed; more than half of the population of his city were swept away by a "terrible [bubonic] plague" in 1688 (Sarkar 1962, 246–53 and 469). In 1687, Abdul Hasan, King of Golconda in the Deccan, cleverly used a khilat to insult Aurangzeb's general, the Turk Firuz Jang. A "pariah dog" barked at a Mughal attempt to sneak into the Golconda fort while a Mughal army had it under siege. As the dog warned the fort's defenders in time to repulse the Mughals, Abdul Hasan rewarded the "unclean animal" with a khilat—gold chain, jewel-studded collar, and gold-
embroidered coat—and bestowed titles on the dog, mocking the ones Aurangzeb had given his general, Firuz Jang. Aurangzeb’s siege still succeeded in overcoming the fort within seven months (Sarkar 1962, 264–5 and 469).

Aurangzeb was not always able to manipulate the khilat ceremony to obtain his own ends, as illustrated by his treatment of his old enemy Raja Shivaji Bhonsale (1620–80). In 1666, Shivaji was compelled to attend Aurangzeb’s court, but he felt insulted and left before receiving a robe of honour. The historian Jadunath Sarkar related that Shivaji “turned his back to the throne and rudely walked away,” although some nobles attempted to make peace between Shivaji and Aurangzeb by reporting that he had left because of the “heat of the audience room” (Sarkar 1973, 143–4). Stewart Gordon says he “made a scene, refused the honorary robes offered to him, and stalked out of the audience hall” (Gordon 1993, 77–8). Aurangzeb had him taken prisoner, but Shivaji escaped by feigning illness (Sarkar 1962, 210–13). The sequence of insult, khilat, heat and illness seems to presage the motifs that developed into poison robe tales, such as Tale 1. (For the historical context of tales about Shivaji, see “Killer Khilats, Part 1,” Appendix B.)

**Tale 2. Aurangzeb and His Son, Prince Akbar**

“About the Year 1685 [actually 1681],” writes Hamilton, “when Aurengzeb’s Army was in Decan,” he wanted “to bring Sevaje 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 Eckbar 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 [sic], 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 Mumbai (Bombay)] was renowned for its “natural hot Bath ... reckoned very medicinal” (Hamilton 1930, 1:138–9, with Sir William Foster’s commentary 245–6; see also Penzer 1952, 9–10).

This tale of Aurangzeb and Prince Akbar was published in 1727 by the Scottish adventurer-merchant, Captain Alexander Hamilton. He traded in the East Indies in 1688–1723, arriving the year after Prince Akbar’s flight to Persia. His memoirs are chiefly concerned with the shipping trade, local histories, and gossip about royal intrigues, based on his detailed merchant seaman’s journals and memories. Hamilton reported what he learned from “Natives”—he says he knew some of their “vernacular Languages.” Before becoming an independent trader, Hamilton commanded East India Company naval forces in skirmishes against Rajputs and pirates. At some point, he heard about, or met, two English sea captains who claimed to have arranged Akbar’s escape to Persia in 1687. In 1908, Hamilton’s biographer praised his “honesty and truthfulness,” but cautioned
that his work relied on memory and brief notes (Dictionary of National Biography 1908; Downing 1924, 14-25; Hamilton 1930, 1:3-4; see also Smithies 1997, introduction).

Hamilton relates several other anecdotes in which Aurangzeb manipulated robes of honour to steal other men’s wives and swell his treasury by “many millions” (Hamilton 1930, 1:100-3). Yet, he does not mention Aurangzeb’s notorious murder of Prithi Singh with a poison robe in 1670-80, which would have occurred just before Akbar’s failed rebellion of 1681. His silence suggests that the legend about the Rajput prince cited by Tod in 1829 and in Temple’s ballad of 1884 must have become current after 1723, some years after Aurangzeb’s death. Moreover, the fact that Tod and Temple omit Hamilton’s anecdote in their list of poison khilats implies that this early rumour of attempted murder circulated during the Rajput rebellion and was later assimilated into the more famous legend of Aurangzeb and Prithi Singh (Tale 1).

Hamilton reported as a “genuine” event the rumour, rich with historical evidence and raw legend material, that he had heard during Aurangzeb’s reign. He connects Prince Akbar’s secret alliance with Raja Shivaji to the latter’s abrupt escape from Aurangzeb’s camp (mentioned earlier), perhaps aided by Prince Akbar. And he suggests that Englishmen were involved with the Rajput rebellion. “Bendal” was probably Ephraim Bendall, an agent for the British Crown and the East India Company until 1711 (Downing 1924, 33-4 and 64). The vest meant for Prince Akbar was sprinkled with a “powder” from Aurangzeb’s storehouse of poisons, bringing to mind cloth deliberately infected with smallpox dust (compare the smallpox blanket tales in “Killer Khilats, Part 1”). Akbar’s slave died within days and Akbar fled to a place famed for its curative hot springs. Hamilton thereby concludes with 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, and Bakht Singh

Variant A: collected by James Tod

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 vediya [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).

Variant B: in William Crooke’s edition of Tod’s Annals

In the 1920 edition of Tod’s work, Crooke added additional material on the legend. Ishwar Singh persuaded the Dowager Queen, the Princess of Idar, that “she alone could rescue him from his perils.” She proposed a plan to kill the Raja Bakht Singh, her uncle, to avenge the murder of Ajit Singh. “To lull all suspicion,” the queen visited Bakht Singh in his camp on the “frontier of Mewar, Marwar, and Amber” and presented him with a poisoned robe of honour as the “medium of revenge.” “Soon after the arrival of his niece,” Bakht Singh was “declared in a fever; the physician was summoned” to his tent. But “the Vaidya [healer-seer]
declared he was beyond the reach of medicine.” The “intrepid Raja” prepared a pyre for himself, made his chiefs promise to defend his son’s rights, and summoned the “ministers of religion” to receive his “last gifts to the church.” But his dying thoughts were of the curse that haunted him: “May your corpse be consumed in a foreign land!” The curse, now fulfilled by his death on the border, had been uttered by his father’s wives as they mounted his cremation pyre to become *suttee* [sati, “virtuous,” one who has immolated herself]; women he had, in effect, caused to die (Tod 1920, 2:866–7; see also Chevers 1870, 298–9; Penzer 1952, 9).

**Variant C: collected by Markand N. Mehta and Manu N. Mehta, Hind Rajastan**

What appears to be a much earlier version of this legend, centred on Idar and set during the reign of Emperor Akbar (d. 1606), appeared in the *Hind Rajasthan,* or The Annals of the Native States of India, compiled in 1896 from a miscellany of mostly British sources, including Tod. According to the *Hind Rajasthan,* Viram Dev was the son of the chief of Idar, who had rebelled against the Mughal Government, was defeated in 1573, and escaped to the nearby hills, leaving his capital in Mughal hands. Both father and son obeyed Emperor Akbar’s summons to appear at Delhi (n.d.). When Viram Dev demonstrated unusual bravery in an episode with a tiger, the delighted Emperor gave Viram Dev back his hereditary state of Idar. Viram Dev turned out to be “as cruel and tyrannical as he was brave and daring.” ordering the murder of his brother and attacking neighbouring chiefs. He visited Amber, where his half-sister was married to the ruler. Viram Dev “was apprehensive that she would poison him to take revenge for her [other] brother’s [murder]; therefore he used every precaution in regard to what he ate or drank. At the time of taking leave, a very valuable dress of honour was presented to [him], which, however, was poisoned.” Viram Dev returned to Idar, “forgot his fears, and put on the dress. He was immediately seized with excruciating pains, and within an hour became a corpse” (Mehta and Mehta 1985, 430–2).

Tod cited inscriptions on the Rajput battlefields and at the mausoleum of Bakht Singh where a “simple record of name, clan, and *sakha* of him whose ashes repose beneath, with the date” was inscribed “in rude characters. Of these monumental records I had copies made of about a score; they furnish fresh evidence of the singular character of the Rajput.” Tod called Bakht Singh’s patricide “a foul stain” that turned the Rajputs against an otherwise excellent prince (Tod 1920, 2:866–7).

The Indian historian, Sarkar, rejects poison as the cause of Bakht Singh’s death and ridicules Tod’s reliance on the “bardic gossip” of “Rathor fabricators” and “opium eaters” that surrounded these events up through the twentieth century. Sarkar attributes Tod’s errors to Tod’s own careless notes or else his clerks’ mistranslations of *khyats* [historical chronicles] (Sarkar 1984, 196, 202, and 204 note 7; but note that Sarkar’s history was commissioned by the rulers of Jaipur to rebut the Rathor bards’ false accusations about Kachhawas. Sir Jadunath Sarkar, an early-twentieth-century Hindu historian who wrote voluminously about medieval India and completed a five-volume biography of Emperor Aurangzeb, generally followed the methodology of contemporary British historians, men like Stanley Lane-Poole and William Irvine, who had privileged Persian chronicles to narrate medieval Indian history. Sarkar contrasted “Persian histories” as reliable sources to the “popular gossip (*khyat*)” of Rajput traditions.)

In a recent history of Rajasthan, however, R. A. Singh supports Tod’s version, as corroborated by the *khyats* of Ram Singh (Ishwar’s son-in-law) and Bakht Singh. R. A. Singh maintains that “the Rathore Rani, the dowager queen of Isri
[Ishwar] Singh, Ajan Kanwar of Idar, presented a poisoned robe to Bakht Singh in 1752. He identifies the seer-doctor who attended the dying Raja Bakht Singh as “the Vaidya Suraj Mal” and gives the place of death as Sonoli, Jaipur (Amber) (Singh 1992, 1248–9).

Croke added several European concepts of his own (“last gifts to the church”) to this local Rajput legend and monument elaborating upon the turbulent struggle among Rajput clans and the Mughals after the death of Aurangzeb. Assassinations, family betrayals, the poison/cholera controversy, tension over contradictory khilat prestation, constantly shifting Mughal support, the curse of the murdered man’s wives—all this created a fertile ground for folklore. Croke also added the details of the wives’ curse. In the legend, the burden of hierarchical corruption is carried by the anathema hurled by the wives immolating themselves, and it culminates in a fatal robe of honour. These devices, along with the seer summoned to the Raja’s tent, the body “burnt on the spot,” the commemorative shrine, lend an India-specific shape to a typical Poison Dress that inflicts fever followed by cremation. Note that the “Shrine of Evil” cenotaph echoes the “statue of Terror” erected at Glaube’s fountain in the classical Greek tale.

To Chevers, who included the legend in his 1870 medical law manual, Bakht Singh’s death demonstrated once again the perils of Indian apparel and climate (see Arnold 1993). C. J. S. Thompson, curator of London’s Royal College of Surgeons Museum who wrote (1899–1931) on the “romance” of sensational poisoning crimes, conflated the Princess of Idar with the Queen of Ganore (the heroine of Tale 4, following). He cited the story as an example of the stereotype female Oriental poisoner (Thompson 1928, 201; Penzer 1952, 7–8).

**Tale 4. The Queen of Ganore and the Khan**

When the Begum of Bhopal wrote the history of her state in the mid-1870s, she related a tale describing the conquest of Ganore by Dost Muhammad Khan, the founder of the dynasty. After the Great Revolt of 1857–8, most of the heads of the so-called “native states,” those kingdoms that had not been conquered outright by the British, allied with the Raj in exchange for semi-independence. Both the Begum of Bhopal and her British aides were committed to confirming the Begum’s family’s territorial claims. As Sumit Guha has trenchantly observed, legends of conquest such as that of the Queen of Ganore and the Khan “were grist to the mill of the speculative Victorian ethnographer-historians [like Temple and Croke], who read them naively as depictions of the past instead of as claims in the present” (Guha 1998, 430).

In the Begum’s version, the Gond chief, Nizam Shah, was “poisoned by his relative.” His widow, Rani Kumlapati, the “Queen of Ganore,” was living in the “famous fortress of the Gonds” when she heard “of the valour of Dost Muhammad Khan [and invited] him secretly to avenge the death of Nizam Shah.” The Khan then “became manager for the Rani Kumlapati. When she died [sometime before 1726], he seized upon the fortress of Gunnur [Ganore] also, put to death those Gonds who rebelled, and, bestowing grants ... upon the rest, earned their gratitude” (Shahjahan 1876). In his retelling of the legend in 1981, S. Ashfaq Ali concluded that the Khan “combined art and violence to gain possession of”
Ganore (Ali 1981, 10–22; on Gonds, see Bates 1995, 118; Guha 1998, 429–30). The Khan’s fabled love for the Rani and the land of Ganore, along with his historical pardon of the rebels, may account for his sympathetic portrayal in the Begum’s version of the legend.

**Variant A: collected by James Tod**

Tod begins 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 Nerudda” 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 allurement 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 sprang 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 1829–32, 1:626; 1920, 2:727–8).

**Variant B: collected by Chevers**

“Colonel Tod’s [sic] work contains ample evidence of the existence in Rajputana of the idea that the deaths of several historical personages in India were caused by Poisoned Robes.” Chevers retells Tod’s variant, then remarks, “Anyone who has noticed how freely a robust person in India perspires through a thin garment, can understand that if the cloth were thoroughly impregnated with the cantharidine of that very powerful vesicant, the Telini [probably the blister beetle, or Spanish fly], the result would be as dangerous as that of an extensive burn” (Chevers 1870, 298–9).

**Variant C: William Crooke**

“One of the Rajput heroines is the beautiful Rani of Ganor, who, when captured in her fort by a Musalmian, to save her honour invited him to a banquet. She invested him in a poisoned robe of honour and plunged into the river from the battle of her fort.” Crooke adds that “she is worshipped as a local godling, and as the flesh of her conqueror was burnt from his bones it is only natural that a visit to his tomb cures tertian ague [malaria]” (Crooke 1926, 1:160–1).

James Tod actively sought Rajput legends with Greek and Roman parallels; his comparison with the tragic heroine Lucretia reveals his belief in the common origins of Indian and classical cultures and myths. He was also aware that in the
Greek myth, Deianeira killed herself after poisoning Heracles with a robe (see "Killer Khilats, Part 1"). Did Tod insert other details, such as the image of the Khan tearing away the burning robe, finding no relief in water, and his death in "extreme torture," to enhance the similarity to the myths of Heracles and Glauke? He included Tale 4, the story of a brave Rajput queen who resisted the Muslim Khan's conquest of both her body and her territory, with other examples of "female loyalty" and self-sacrifice among the Rajputs, which he compared to the Roman Lucretia (Tod 1920, 2:714; see also Harlan 1992). The martyr/heroine exists in many other India-specific folk motifs, such as K1227.4.1. "Girl prepares fatal acid bath for would-be seducer" and K1227.1. "Would-be seducer put off as girl completes toilet, allowing her escape" (Thompson 1958).

In Crooke's research on Rajput "saints" and ancestor cults, he found records stressing the Rani's local divinity and the curative powers of the Khan's grave. His 1926 version omitted Tod's vivid fairy tale details, romantic dialogue, and suspense, but Crooke himself inserted new elements from the myth of Heracles: he says that the Khan's flesh was "burnt from his bones" and compares the poison to the "ointment made from the blood of Nessus." Crooke remarks that "our best authorities" have "kindly investigated the question of death by poisoned robe," among them Norman Chevers (note in Tod 1920, 2:728). Chevers saw the Khan's death as proof that native Indian costume endangered one's health. Flowing, transparent silks and flimsy cottons made the skin pores vulnerable to "breathing in" pernicious tropical poisons. Such garments were to be assiduously avoided by the English in their search for "safe" clothing in India.

**Tale 5. The Emperor of Delhi and Safdar Jang**

"A grim story is told of Safdar Jang, Nawab of Oudh 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).

British administrator/author, William Crooke (b. 1848), came across this rumour about a poison khilat event coeval with the deaths of Maharaja Bakht Singh and the Queen of Ganore during his research on deliberate disease transference rituals in India (for these various folk methods, see "Killer Khilats, Part 1"). Although Crooke did not attach a date to this unique legend of a khilat that was clearly labelled as contaminated with a dread epidemic disease, we believe that it arose during the vicious infighting that led to civil war between Safdar Jang and the Mughal court at Delhi in 1753. Crooke's inclusion of what must have been a much fuller historical legend in his collection of folk rituals for transferring disease to others reminds us how preoccupied the British were with the issues of contagion and proper clothing in India.

**Tale 6. Jand Pir and Raja Shyam Sen**

Raja Shyam Sen of Suket State (c. 1620) was the descendant of a lineage that had migrated from Bengal to the Himachal hills before the seventeenth century
(Hutchison and Vogel 1982, 340–1). Alexander Cunningham publicised the Vansavali ("chronicle of rulers") of Raja Shyam Sen's family in 1879, and various British administrators thereafter pieced together the political history of the hill states through genealogies and annals. As with Tod's translation of similar sources in Rajasthan, the legends encased in these materials were given a fresh, if pedantic, performance in written English with referential footnotes through the many editions of state gazetteers.

According to the Suket annals, Emperor Aurangzeb rewarded Raja Shyam Sen with a khilat and other honours. But another ambitious raja plotted to take over Suket State and arranged for Raja Shyam Sen's imprisonment in Delhi. According to the annals, Shyam Sen's fortunes and those of Suket State began a rapid decline after he "parted with a special chola or coat given him by a yogi [the yogi Chand Piri, or Jand Pir] to wear in battle" (Hutchison and Vogel 1982, 354 and 356).

Variant A: collected by B. L. Beotra (1931)

"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).

Variant B: collected by J. Hutchison and J. Vogel (1982)

Shyam Sen's and Suket State's fortunes began a rapid decline, "ascribed to the fact that he parted with a special chola or coat given him by a yogi ... The story goes that ... a yogi named Chand Piri came to Suket, and took up his abode in a cave near the village of Pateri, close to the capital. The Raja was very kind and indulgent to such people, and one day in gratitude the yogi gave him" a coat that would ensure victory in battle. "The coat was thoughtlessly made over to his groom, and on putting it on, the latter was reduced to ashes. On this the yogi was angry, and cursed the Raja and died soon afterwards in his cave. Shyam Sen did everything in his power to avert the curse; he built a temple to the yogi, and endowed it ..." (Hutchison and Vogel 1982, 356; compare with the short version in Punjab States Gazetteers 1984, 270).

This story was published by Indian scholar B. R. Beotra in 1931, based on sources also used by the authors of the local government gazetteers of 1904–8 (Punjab States Gazetteers 1984, 261–77). Beotra was closely following the work of nineteenth-century Indians who had helped British administrators collect antiquarian lore and published their own findings in venues like the Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Beotra himself, however, did not indicate the sources for his "wonderful stories" about gods and temples (Beotra 1931, 166).

Beotra's telling of the legend differed from Variant B published at the same time by Hutchison and Vogel in 1933, but neither version manifests detectable European influence. They each appear to reflect popular local beliefs about
magic cloaks and disease transference during an earlier time marked by epidemics and Mughal military pressure. The number of shrines commemorating smallpox cures in Suket indicates that the epidemic raged there in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In fact, Beotra’s version appears in the context of a listing of several other Suket shrines associated with smallpox, and the story follows another tale of a man who was burned to ashes after touching a fakir’s cloak. These tales are set in an area that does have medicinal hot springs, a recurrent motif in Poison Dress lore (see “Killer Khilats, Part 1”).

Folk rituals for ridding individuals or villages of smallpox and other epidemics entailed magically or literally transferring contagion to cloth and passing it along to a stranger, underling, or enemy (Mitra 1917; Crooke 1926, 1:117–65). Ethical questions and fears of deliberate infection accompanied these practices, expressed in folklore about deadly garments received as gifts. The powerful Raja and the poor holy man are friends (Variant B mentions their “tolerance” of each other). Beotra describes a fever cured by magical transference to the fakir’s cloak. Jand Pir offers his own cloak as a token of friendship and memento of healing (see Buckler 1922 and 1928). The second version omits the idea of disease, describing a magic khilat that protects in battle, offered by the holy man in gratitude. Both versions agree that the fakir was destroyed because the Raja foolishly rejected the holy man’s khilat as an unworthy gift and gave it to his servant, who was immediately consumed by fire. Beotra’s Raja founded a temple to atone for his insult; in the second version, the Raja built the temple to avert the fakir’s curse, a localised motif unique to Indian poison khilat tales.

Tale 7. The Double-Skinned People and the Nagas

In about 1914, British administrator-ethnographer, John Henry Hutton, collected the following tale from a storyteller of the Angami Naga “tribe.” “Naga,” which like “Gond” was coined for the convenience of outsiders, refers to groups of “wild folk” “representing a complex variety of language, culture, [and] tradition” (Dasgupta 1997, 367 note 24). The Nagas lived in mountainous north-east India on the Myanmar (Burmese) border. Nagaland, a separate state “carved out of Assam in 1963,” was an early focus of Christian missionaries (Dasgupta 1997, 347–9 and 357–8). The missionaries were divided as “to whether or not Indian Christians should adopt European dress, an ambivalence reflected in the sarcastic saying that the spread of Christianity had become ‘a matter of trousers’ at the turn of the twentieth century” (Tarlo 1996, 39).

The Double-Skinned (and the Origin of Cholera). The [Nagas] tell also of a tribe of men whose skin is double; these men were afoetime 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 are nearly invincible]. And they say that two Angamis travelled by this country and were well and hospitably entertained, 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 1921, 263; substantially the same as Hutton 1914, 484–5).
This etiological myth related by a Naga storyteller is far removed in terms of culture, language, geography and sophistication from the preceding tales. The typical themes of honour and the pressure to accept the gifts from superiors are evident. Fearing contamination, the victims refuse the enemy’s gift of “double skin,” an act that recalls rejections of khilats for fear of contagion and dominance.

The Naga term “double-skinned” refers to outsiders distinguished by more elaborate clothing (compare English “second skin”). The collection context of the tale reveals as much about British concepts of “civilised” clothing as it does about the Nagas. Hutton followed “the methods of investigation proposed in Notes and Queries, the Royal Anthropological Institute’s handbook and guide to ethnographic fieldwork questions” for summarising “Appearance, Dress, Ornaments” (Barnes 1997, 29–31). The loincloth-wearing Nagas were referred to as “the naked Nagas” both by the earlier imperial Muslim regimes and by Hutton and others. C. Furuer-Haimendorf even entitled his ethnography The Naked Nagas (1939). Ironically, Ruth Barnes recently noted that “close to two-thirds” of the more than 4,000 cultural artifacts from Nagaland donated by Hutton to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford consisted of “costume, in the widest sense” (1997, 31).

The general British official and ethnographic emphasis on the “nakedness” of the Nagas reflected their desire to keep a sharp “sartorial distance” between themselves and their Indian subjects. The ruling British tried “to control developments in Indian dress” and “ridiculed what they considered ‘inappropriate dressing’” (Tarlo 1996, 25 and 33–42). And yet, some speculated that European clothing could be a vector for disease transmission. Writing about the “depopulation of primitive communities” through “the introduction of new diseases,” for example, Hutton claimed that the wearing of European clothes by Nagas led to “lung diseases ... dysentery, itch and yaws.” He commented that the “appearance of consumption ... in the Naga Hills where it was unknown before” could “probably” be linked to “the foolish habit of wearing English clothes quite unsuited to the temperament and environment of the wearers.” According to Hutton, the “Naga has been distinguished from his neighbours for his nakedness for at least two thousand years,” and he blamed missionaries and traders for the introduction of unwholesome European clothing (Hutton 1922, 221–4). Here, Hutton confirms the Naga fears of the dangers of gifts of clothing: it is the “double-skin” of the American missionaries when worn by the Nagas that brings them consumption and death (Hutton also noted that Naga “ancients” had evidence to believe that missionaries introduced measles and influenza into villages they visited, [ibid., 222]).

In his 1926 book, Crooke included Hutton’s tale as an example of disease riddance by passing a sealed container of contagion; he omitted the Naga storyteller’s passing reference to the gift of clothing (Crooke 1926, 1:129). One of the many methods of disease transference collected by Crooke and Mitra was to seal either the spirit of disease or the actual contagion into “corked bamboo cylinders” and give these as gifts to unsuspecting strangers to be uncorked in their home villages (Mitra 1917; Crooke 1896, 1:164–5; 1926: 121–55). The practice raised ethical problems. Crooke notes that in Bengal, villagers rioted when a “wise man, by the power of his magic, enticed the cholera demon into an earthenen pot and tried to pass it on to the next village, but the plot was detected”
(Crooke 1926, 1:129, 132–3; such Pandora’s box tales of deliberate infection are widespread and ancient; see examples in Mayor 1995).

**Conclusion: British Fears Confirmed by Deadly Khilat Traditions**

Poison Dress legends had circulated among the Rajputs and Mughals long before the British helped perpetuate versions of those tales among themselves in India. As we have seen, Rajputs, Mughals, British, and unsophisticated Nagas all participated in the custom of ritually exchanging gifts of clothing, and those customs aroused anxieties about status and hidden contagion in garments. As shown in “Killer Khilats, Part 1,” traditional lore and beliefs overlapped among the various groups who heard and retold tales of dangerous robes of honour.

Their knowledge of biblical, ancient Greco-Roman, and European legends of poisoning by gift cloaks, plus their expectation of finding Indo-European equivalents in India, also led British imperialists like Tod, Temple and Crooke to take special notice of poisoned khilat tales in India. Indeed, similarities to European versions may well have been foregrounded in their collection, a possibility acknowledged by Crooke (see Islam 1982, 79). The British imperialists were also aware of smallpox-infected blankets presented to Native Americans in the New World. Any narratives that linked cloth and fever were especially resonant for the British because of their own fears about costume and health in India.

Safe clothing obsessed the British in India, who were nervous about tropical disease, absorption of toxins through pores, and dangers of cloth touching the skin. Their concerns about the barrier/transmitter functions of clothing paralleled Indian popular beliefs about the protective/harmful attributes of special garments. For the British, the “combination of alien customs and climate induced a fear of the unknown, and clothes provided an important means of physical as well as psychological protection” (Tarlo 1996, 38). Elaborate theories about “insensible” perspiration, hot baths, fevers and body heat, “cholera” belts/sashes, the search for fabrics impervious to poisons, and the avoidance of “killer clothing” are remarkably evocative of the distinctive motifs of Poison Dress tales from classical times to the present (Cohn 1996, 151–9).

Sara Suleri has pointed out that fears of deadly clothing was one of several “subcontinental threats” described in the memoirs of British women in India during the Raj. For example, Harriet Tytler, the daughter and wife of British military officers, recounted the story “of the death of a poor little English baby” in her memoirs of c. 1858. When an ayah (nurse) tried to comfort the crying child, she inadvertently caused the scorpion hidden in its nightdress to sting repeatedly until the baby died. Suleri concludes that “the tale ... [serves] as a parable for the extreme vulnerability of Anglo-India, in which each home [and even baby clothes] can be infested with deadliness” (Suleri 1992, 99).

In the early contact and colonial period in India, then, complementary and long-standing belief patterns about physical and symbolic perils lurking in costume interacted in dramatic fashion. Indian oral or written tales that associated clothing with fever, misfortune and murder confirmed the expectations and anxieties of the British colonials, who selected such historical tales for publication in English. The interwoven anxieties among the various groups in India meant that Killer Khilat tales resonated with each group’s crucial need to
decipher the overt and hidden hierarchies controlled by khilat exchange. Everyone, from emperors to colonials, wanted to avoid potentially lethal gifts of clothing.

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**Biographical Notes**

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