

**TRANSACTIONS OF THE
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MATERIAL TURNS IN BRITISH HISTORY:

II. CORRUPTION: IMPERIAL POWER, PRINCELY POLITICS

AND GIFTS GONE ROGUE

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ABSTRACT: This address examines the ‘Old Corruption’ of Georgian Britain from the perspective of diplomacy and material culture in Delhi in the era of the East India Company. Its focus is the scandal that surrounded the sacking of Sir Edward Colebrooke, the Delhi Resident, and his wife during the reign of the penultimate Mughal emperor, Akbar II. Exploring the gendered, highly sexualised material politics of Company diplomacy in North India reveals narratives of agency, negotiation and commensurability that interpretations focused on liberal, Anglicist ideologies obscure. Dynastic politics were integral to both British and Indian elites in the nineteenth century. The Colebrooke scandal illuminates both the tenacity and the dynamic evolution of the family as a base of power in the context of nineteenth-century British imperialism.

In December 1828, a twenty-one year old East India Company civil servant, Charles Trevelyan, wrote from Delhi to his mother in England. Trevelyan’s letter detailed the steps he had taken to source a pair of Kashmiri shawls intended to serve as gifts back home in Britain. ‘When my order for the black shawls ... reached Col[onel] Skinner’s agents in Cashmere he forwarded at once to Delhi some shawls of that description which he happened to have by him and as I should have had to wait at least eight months for a fresh supply which after all might not have been handsomer than these are, I have chosen out the two best for yourself & Mrs Halliday & shall send them to you without delay’, he explained. ‘Both the shawls are of the handsomest description procurable in this country & indeed such costly ones are seldom made ... except they are expressly ordered’, Trevelyan reported with

evident satisfaction.¹ His estimate of the time taken to produce Kashmiri shawls was optimistic: woven painstakingly by hand, these material luxuries typically took well over a year to complete.² In precolonial and colonial Mughal princely courts, gifted shawls played vital roles in the production of hierarchical power relations.³ Shawls were, unsurprisingly, in high demand in Britain among the families of the East India Company, where they circulated as gifts in a complex British patronage market from the later eighteenth century to the early Victorian era.⁴ Strategic gifting of Indian luxury goods by the mothers of East India Company civil servants to women who owned Company stock (or were married to influential Company men) was a well-established political and material practice by the 1820s.⁵ The fourth of nine children born to genteel but impecunious parents, Charles Trevelyan had connections to East Indian wealth through his mother, Harriet—a daughter of the London merchant, Caribbean plantation and slave-owner and governor of the Bank of England, Sir Richard Neave.⁶ With needy younger brothers in England eager for appointment to the Company service, Trevelyan repeatedly urged his mother to cultivate his ‘interest’ on their behalves, promising to despatch Indian shawls and ‘curiosities’ from Delhi as gifts to advance this collective goal.⁷

Charles Trevelyan’s letters to his mother from 1828 to 1830 underscored the quality of the items he was sending home, highlighting his immersion in connoisseurial networks that gave him privileged access to the finest Indian luxury goods. The Colonel Skinner from whom Trevelyan had

¹ Charles Trevelyan to Harriet Trevelyan, 18 December 1828, Newcastle University Special Collections (henceforth NUSC), CET 3/12.

² A fine example dating from the early nineteenth century is preserved in the Victoria & Albert Museum (IS.766A-1883) and can be viewed at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O77019/shawl-unknown/>. The accompanying description notes that weaving a large shawl took ‘anything from eighteen months to three years to complete’.

³ Frank Ames, *Woven Masterpieces of Sikh Heritage: The Stylistic Development of the Kashmir Shawl under Maharaja Ranjit Singh 1780–1839* (2010) underscores the shawls’ role in royal politics in this era; see more broadly Steven Cohen, Rosemary Crill, Monique Lévi-Strauss and Jeffrey B. Spurr, *Kashmir Shawls: The Tapi Collection* (Surat, 2012).

⁴ Michelle Maskiell, ‘Consuming Kashmir: Shawls and Empires, 1500–2000’, *Journal of World History*, 13 (2002), 35–40; Chitrakha Zutshi, ‘“Designed for eternity”: Kashmiri Shawls, Empire, and Cultures of Production and Consumption in Mid-Victorian Britain’, *Journal of British Studies*, 48 (2009), esp. 422–24.

⁵ Margot C. Finn, ‘Colonial Gifts: Family Politics and the Exchange of Goods in British India, c. 1780–1820’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 40 (2006), esp. 204–6, 222.

⁶ For the Trevelyans, see Laura Trevelyan, *A Very British Family: The Trevelyans and their World* (2006). Neave’s East India Company connections are noted by Katherine Prior, Lance Brennan and Robin Haines, ‘Bad Language: The Role of English, Persian and Other Esoteric Tongues in the Dismissal of Sir Edward Colebrooke as Resident of Delhi in 1829’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 35 (2001), 77.

⁷ See for example Charles Trevelyan to Harriet Trevelyan, 20 September 1828, NUSC, CET 3/8; Charles Trevelyan to Harriet Trevelyan, 18 December 1828, NUSC, CET 3/12.

obtained his shawls was James Skinner, a famed military strategist of dual Scottish and Rajput heritage who was also a noted patron of North Indian artists and Persian scholarship.⁸ At Delhi, Trevelyan and Skinner moved in a trans-imperial world in which warfare, diplomacy, patronage, sociability and the exchange of material objects operated in concert.⁹ Vibrant and cross-cultural, imperial politics in late Mughal Delhi and its hinterland linked Indian elites to propertied British families on the subcontinent and in Europe through warfare, courtly politics and material culture. Imbued with emotion, power and artistry, gifted goods operated at multiple social and political levels in this dynamic context—marking hierarchies, eliciting actions and sealing agreements. However, both the contentious imperial context in which these gift exchanges took place and their complexity of function fostered opacity, misunderstanding and mutual recrimination. We scent a whiff of the difficulties that entangled gifted Indian material goods from a later letter Trevelyan, in some embarrassment, dispatched to his mother about his Kashmiri shawls. Eighteen months after his original correspondence, he reported that he had sent her new shawls on the ship, the *Lord Amherst*, having come to understand that his initial gifts were insufficiently fine. ‘The pair of shawls I have now sent you are really handsome and worthy of you and of the affections I bear for you’, he explained. Specially commissioned from Kashmir, they must replace the inferior previous pair, items he now judged were better suited for his mother’s housekeeper, ‘poor Harrison’ as he called her.¹⁰

Although he did not mention it in this letter, the two new shawls were not the only cargo carried by the *Lord Amherst* from Bengal to Britain at Trevelyan’s behest. For among this vessel’s passengers were Sir Edward and Lady Colebrooke, sailing home to England against their will. At Trevelyan’s instigation in July 1829, the Governor General of India, Lord William Bentinck, had suspended Sir Edward from his office as the Resident, or East India Company diplomatic agent, at the

⁸ For Skinner’s military expertise, see Seema Alavi, ‘The Makings of Company Power: James Skinner and the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, 1802–1840’, in *Warfare and Weaponry in South Asia 1000–1800*, ed. Jos Gommans and D.H.A. Kolff (New Delhi, 2001), 275–308. His entanglement in North Indian artistic and manuscript cultures is detailed in *Princes and Painters in Mughal Delhi, 1707–1857*, ed. William Dalrymple and Yuthika Sharma (New Haven, CT, 2012), esp. 35–8, 43–6.

⁹ Mildred Archer and Toby Falk, *India Revealed: Art and Adventures of James and William Fraser, 1815–26* (1989); *Princes and Painters*, ed. Dalrymple and Sharma; Susan Stronge, *Made for Mughal Emperors: Royal Treasures from Hindustan* (2010).

¹⁰ Charles Trevelyan to Harriet Trevelyan, 16 June 1830, NUSC, CET 3/14.

court of the King of Delhi. In the ensuing weeks and months, two senior civil servants examined tens of witnesses and pored over thousands of pages of evidence in Delhi. Their task was to determine whether Sir Edward Colebrooke—aided and abetted by Lady Colebrooke, his illegitimate son Edward and his Indian servants—had embezzled vast sums from the Company, conducted illicit diplomatic negotiations with nearby Indian states, borrowed money from litigants in a court over which he presided, profited from the private sale of public property and exchanged a plenitude of luxury goods with local Indian princes. In December 1829, following a damning report by the investigators, Bentinck had sacked Colebrooke for corruption.¹¹

Aged sixty-seven and with forty years in the Company's service to his credit, Colebrooke was the scion of family with deep links to empire. His father had been both a substantial owner of East India Company stock and an influential chairman of its board of Directors; over twenty of Sir Edward's uncles, cousins and nephews had or were later to serve as officers in the Company's armies or in its civil service.¹² His younger brother, H.T. Colebrooke, boasted a distinguished career in the Bengal civil service and retains his reputation as a premier scholar of Oriental law and Sanskrit literature.¹³ A bust of H.T. Colebrooke, now guards the entrance to the East India Company archive at the British Library; another is prominently displayed at the Royal Asiatic Society, of which he was the founding Director. Nested securely within the familial patronage networks that made empire in India both feasible and functional, Sir Edward Colebrooke was nonetheless ousted swiftly and unceremoniously from the Delhi Residency in 1829, at the instance of a twenty-two year old upstart with scant administrative experience, abrasive manners and few influential connections in India.¹⁴ In this lecture, I ask what the evidence thrown up by the investigation of Colebrooke for corruption can tell us about the play of imperial power and princely politics as British rule extended from Calcutta,

¹¹ The most comprehensive analysis of this scandal is Prior, Brennan and Haines, 'Bad Language'.

¹² Malcolm Sutherland, *Sola Bona Quae Honesta: The Colebrooke Family 1650–1950* (Maidstone, 1998), 23–7, 31–3, 35–48.

¹³ Ludo Rocher and Rosane Rocher, *The Making of Western Indology: Henry Thomas Colebrooke and the East India Company* (2012).

¹⁴ His close friend and future brother-in-law, Thomas Babington Macaulay, commented of Trevelyan: 'He is rash and uncompromising in public matters.... His manners are odd,--blunt almost to roughness at times, and at other times awkward even to sheepishness'. Macaulay to Mrs Edward Cropper, 7 December 1834, in *The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay: Volume III January 1834–August 1841*, ed. Thomas Pinney (Cambridge, 1976), 101.

Madras and Bombay to North India. In keeping with the rubric of my four presidential addresses, ‘Material Turns in British History’, I do so by exploring the narratives that emerge if we attend not only to the world of words, texts and ideologies but also to the material objects that animated cross-cultural diplomacy and imperial rule both in Europe and in Asia. The dominant interpretations of East India Company power in this period focus on discourses of British individualism and Western difference. Inserting ‘things’ into interpretative traditions hitherto dominated by language instead reveals common material ground that united (some) British and Indian governing elites. In doing so, it illuminates a contested but shared cultural domain rooted in dynastic forms of politics too often discounted in accounts of empire framed by the concept of ‘liberal imperialism’.¹⁵

I

The Colebrooke saga lends itself readily to two established traditions within British historiography, each of which highlights the triumph of liberal ideologies in imperial contexts. First, we can easily narrate Sir Edward’s fall from grace at Delhi by integrating his story into received histories of the rise and fall of political corruption in Georgian Britain. His sacking occurred on the cusp of the 1830s, the decade that historians conventionally see marking a turning point away from so-called ‘Old Corruption’, the agglomeration of aristocratic privileges identified by radicals and reformers since the 1770s as a fundamental threat to Britain’s historic birthright of liberty. Predicated on denunciation of the undemocratic parliamentary franchise, the critique of Old Corruption also attacked the government’s ability to purchase supporters and to gain the acquiescence of political

¹⁵ Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999) offers the most comprehensive analysis of liberal imperialism in the Company era. For a critique of liberal imperialism as an explanatory framework, see Andrew Sartori, ‘The British Empire and Its Liberal Mission’, *Journal of Modern History*, 78 (2006), 623–42. Sartori suggests the need ‘to embed the conceptual structure of liberal thought in the sociohistorical contexts of its articulation’ (624), an approach adopted here by focusing on material histories.

adversaries by distributing patronage and pensions.¹⁶ Fiscal and administrative reforms inaugurated by William Pitt in the 1790s, together with legislation that culminated in the expanded franchise of 1832, many historians argue, effectively defanged Old Corruption as a focus of political critique in Britain in the 1830s even as it secured ‘the persistence of élite political power well into the Victorian era’.¹⁷ Located within this interpretative paradigm, Colebrooke’s removal from Delhi marks a broader nineteenth-century liberal transition away from aristocratic corruption toward a new landscape of democratic and meritocratic politics—a ‘revolution in government’ of which Charles Trevelyan was to become both a key instigator and a key icon.¹⁸

Empire was an essential dimension of the nexus of Old Corruption in Britain. From the 1770s, domestic criticism of the British state and its governing elites escalated as imperial wars placed new burdens on un-enfranchised consumers and taxpayers.¹⁹ That the East India Company’s political structures and economic relations were fundamentally corrupt was a commonplace of eighteenth-century British politics. ‘Scandal was the crucible in which both imperial and capitalist expansion was forged’, Nicholas Dirks has observed.²⁰ Gift-giving by and to Indian princely elites was a vital cog in the wheels of this scandalously corrupt system. The emergence of the British as king-makers in India as the hegemony of the Mughal empire waned rested both on military victory and on the widespread exchange of diplomatic gifts, douceurs and bribes. Robert Clive’s installation of Mir Jafar as Nawab of Bengal after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 was accomplished by this Indian prince’s distribution of

¹⁶ W.D. Rubinstein, ‘The End of “Old Corruption” in Britain 1780–1860’, *Past & Present*, 101 (1983), 55–86, and Philip Harling, ‘Rethinking “Old Corruption”’, *Past & Present*, 147 (1995), 127–58 anatomise the operation of Old Corruption in Georgian Britain.

¹⁷ Philip Harling, *The Waning of ‘Old Corruption’: The Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (Oxford, 1996), 5. For the wider context of this transformation, see *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780–1850*, ed. Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes (Cambridge, 2003).

¹⁸ In the 1840s Trevelyan was to administer famine relief in Ireland on the increasingly ascendant principles of liberal laissez-faire; in the 1850s, he instigated and oversaw reform of the British civil service, inaugurating competitive examinations designed to displace established aristocratic elites. For the former, see Robin Haines, *Charles Trevelyan and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 2004); for the latter, Oliver MacDonagh, ‘The Nineteenth-century Revolution in Government: A Reappraisal’, *Historical Journal*, 1 (1958), esp. 53, 63–5 and *Studies in the Growth of Nineteenth-century Government*, ed. Gillian Sutherland (1972).

¹⁹ Paul Seaward, ‘Sleaze, Old Corruption and Parliamentary Reform: An Historical Perspective on the Current Crisis’, *The Political Quarterly*, 81 (2010), 42–3.

²⁰ Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 8. Anna Clark and Aaron Windel trace the halting transition from this corrupt patronage system to liberal imperialism in their ‘The Early Roots of Liberal Imperialism: “The science of a legislator” in Eighteenth-century India’, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 14 (2013).

presents reputedly valued at over £1.2 million (perhaps £123 million in present-day purchasing power). The notoriety of Clive's subsequent acceptance of a *jaghir* or land grant from the Nawab worth £27,000 per annum (roughly £ 2.8 million a year today) and Clive's aggressive investment of this Indian fortune in securing votes in both East India Company and parliamentary elections ensured that by the second half of the eighteenth century, gifts from Indian princes to East India Company officials epitomised the endemic corruption of politics on the subcontinent and its threat to British liberties at home.²¹ In British caricatures, plays, works of fiction and parliamentary debates, Orientalised visions of Old Corruption clothed in the fabrics of India signalled both an empire and a gift regime notoriously run rogue.²² Parliamentary legislation sought to clamp down on this abuse in 1773 and 1784.²³ Within this domestic British political context, Sir Edward Colebrooke's sacking acquires an air of seeming inevitability, standing as the last gasp of an anachronistic system of trans-imperial privilege and corruption destined to give way to modern liberal bureaucracy.

A second historiographical tradition instead interprets the scandal of empire in late Mughal Delhi as a generational shift between so-called 'Orientalist' and 'Anglicist' British governing elites in India. In this analysis, Colebrooke again figures as an anachronism, out of step with the march of liberal modernity, not only because of his association with Old Corruption at home but because his education in India had made him sympathetic to 'Oriental' languages, cultures and princely despotism. Colebrooke was heir to a bankrupt baronet with landed estates in England, Scotland, the Caribbean and North America; his patrimony included sinecures awarded to his male relations for loyal government service, family control of a Tory rotten borough in Surrey and the direct patronage of Warren Hastings—the East India Company governor most notorious for corruption after Clive.²⁴ Having left school for the subcontinent aged fifteen, Colebrooke studied Indian languages and

²¹ Dirks, *Scandal*, 43–7; H.V. Bowen, 'Clive, Robert, First Baron Clive of Plassey (1725–1774)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); Bruce Lenman and Philip Lawson, 'Robert Clive, the "Black Jagir", and British Politics', *Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), 801–29, esp. 812. Monetary conversions calculated by comparing 1760 to 2017: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/>.

²² Finbarr Barry Flood, 'Correct Delineations and Promiscuous Outlines: Envisioning India at the Trial of Warren Hastings', *Art History*, 21 (2006), 47–78; Tillman Nechtman, 'A Jewel in the Crown? Indian Wealth in Domestic Britain in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 41 (2007), 71–86, and idem., *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 2010).

²³ H.V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1765–1833* (Cambridge, 2005), chap. 3.

²⁴ Sutherland, *Sola Bona Quae Honesta*, 20, 24–31.

imbibed Persianate political cultures, acquiring his diplomatic expertise in negotiations with wealthy princes and magnates at the imperial coalface of Bengal revenue and judicial administration. His antagonist, Charles Trevelyan, had City connections with Colebrooke's family through his mother's family; both men's mothers had brought their husbands Caribbean estates on marriage.²⁵ In socio-economic background, the two adversaries arguably shared much in common. But Trevelyan's intellectual formation was of a very different order, reflecting the early nineteenth-century turn from Orientalist to Anglicist sympathies within the East India Company's governing elite. Trevelyan's schooling took him from Charterhouse to the Company's administrative college, Haileybury, where Thomas Malthus inspired a new generation of Indian civil servants during his tenure as Professor of history and political economy.²⁶ A Whig by disposition, Trevelyan adopted a hard line in debates that saw younger civil servants in India argue for the Anglicisation, and eventual democratisation, of British rule. Among his pet schemes was a plan not only to replace Persian with English as the language of British statecraft in India, but also to Anglicise regional Indian languages by converting their scripts to Roman characters.²⁷ It was with pamphlets devoted to schemes such as these that Trevelyan wooed and wed Hannah Macaulay—the sister of the Whig historian Thomas Babington Macaulay—in Calcutta early in the 1830s.²⁸ Viewed against this backdrop, Sir Edward Colebrooke's disgrace by Charles Trevelyan figures as a logical consequence of the Anglicist triumph over Orientalists within the East India Company's governing elite—a path-determined outcome predicated on discourse that was predestined by the changing intellectual tides of British imperial thought.²⁹

My focus on material culture affords a third vantage point for interpreting Colebrooke and Trevelyan's contest. Without rejecting the significance of either the waning of Old Corruption in

²⁵ Prior, Brennan and Haines, 'Bad Language', 77–8; Sutherland, *Sola Bona Quae Honesta*, 33.

²⁶ Trevelyan, *A Very British Family*, 25.

²⁷ Charles Trevelyan, J. Prinsep, A. D. Tytler and H. T. Prinsep, *The Application of the Roman Alphabet to All the Oriental Languages, Contained in a Series of Papers* ([Calcutta], 1834); *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781–1843*, ed. Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir (Richmond, 1999).

²⁸ Thomas Babington Macaulay to Mrs Edward Cropper, 7 December 1834, in *Letters*, ed. Pinney, 102. The marriage afforded social cement for Macaulay and Trevelyan's intellectual and political commitment to the Anglicist camp. See esp. Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven, 2012), chap. 3.

²⁹ As Prior, Brennan and Haines, 'Bad Language', 105 argue, the scandal's 'elements of generational conflict were ... stark—virtually a parody of the coming battle between the young Anglicists and the old Orientalists'.

Britain or the rise of Anglicist administrative ideologies in India, I suggest that we also attend more carefully to the political histories of material goods deployed in cross-cultural diplomatic contexts. As Mark Knights has argued, the chronology of Old Corruption's decline at home in Britain diverged significantly from its colonial trajectory: 'corruption in the imperial sphere persisted, and indeed arguably increased in the nineteenth century, with colonialism itself a form of state-sponsored corruption that systematically exploited imperial assets'.³⁰ Diplomatic gifting was a vital crucible in which colonial 'corruption' persisted and developed. By surfacing, tracing and contextualising narratives of corrupt gifted and purchased shawls, jewels, ceremonial robes, bedsteads and elephants, we can discern new voices within this underlying continuity. Object stories capture the intransigence and agency of interlocutors lost to us when we focus only on dominant British political and intellectual traditions. For the traffic in material goods that formed a central part of Trevelyan's charge of corruption against Colebrooke can only be understood if we take cognizance of the beliefs and behaviours of Indian princes—both male and female—and of the problematic presence on the subcontinent in the late Georgian era of East India Company women. I focus here on only two of the many available strands of material culture politics woven into these histories. First is the exchange of robes of honour at the court of the King of Delhi, and second, Lady Colebrooke's elaboration of a material style of diplomacy—including, but also stretching far beyond, gifted robes of honour—newly accessible to Company women. Neither activity sits entirely comfortably within the narrative of the demise of Old Corruption or the rise of Anglicisation because neither was predicated on 'liberal' tenets. Instead, the material politics of Colebrooke's downfall suggest the tenacity of dynastic, family-focused political conflict in the face of liberal imperialism—not least among zealous liberal reformers themselves.

II

³⁰ Mark Knights, 'Anticorruption in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-century Britain', in *Anticorruption in History: From Antiquity to the Modern Era*, ed. Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória and G. Geltner (Oxford, 2018), 182.

Depicted in countless Mughal era *darbar* paintings, Indian royal courts were prime sites of diplomatic gift exchange.³¹ A precolonial practice with ancient and medieval roots extending across Eurasia from China to Iceland, the gifting of garments conferred at investiture ceremonies (to mark changes of status and to incorporate new diplomatic allies) bound princely donors to subordinate recipients through both the human body and material goods. Given by the prince's hand, taken from the prince's person, placed on or around the head, neck, shoulders, torso, arms and legs of the supplicant, robes of honour simultaneously constrained, distinguished and hierarchically ordered donor and recipient.³² In the Mughal empire's iteration of this pervasive, cross-cultural gifting protocol, the simplest version of the robe of honour or *khil'at* (pl. *khila*) consisted of three items of clothing: a *dastar* (turban), a *jama* (long coat) and a *kamarband* (long scarf). Five- and seven-item ensembles for higher-status recipients included additional items such as turban ornaments, trousers, shawls and girdles. The use of Chinese silks, velvets, brocades, gold-threaded fabrics and textiles embellished with jewels registered increasingly higher levels of status, which could be further augmented by gifts of jewellery, swords, horses, harnesses, howdahs and elephants.³³ In return for receiving ceremonial robes and their associated honour, the supplicant gave the prince a *nazr*, a financial offering in the coin of the ruler's realm. *Peshkash*, valuables that included fine textiles, precious stones, horses or elephants, often accompanied *nazr* payments to princes.³⁴ The conferring of *khila* by the Mughal emperor represented the apex of a pervasive system of honorific exchange that was replicated, with regional distinctions, throughout the Maratha, Rajput, Sikh and Deccani successor states that established an uneasy and partial independence from Delhi—seat of the royal family—in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Colonialism complicated the presentation of *khila*. In Bernard Cohn's influential analysis, the first half of the nineteenth century was marked by a conflict between an 'indigenous theory of

³¹ *Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving in Islamic Courts*, ed. Linda Komaroff (Los Angeles, 2011).

³² *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-colonial and Colonial India*, ed. Stewart Gordon (Oxford, 2003), and *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York, 2001).

³³ Balkrishan Shivram, 'From Court Dress to the Symbol of Authority: Robing and "Robes of Honour" in Pre-colonial India', 6: <http://ias.ac.in/sites/default/files/article/Balkrishan%20Shivram.pdf>.

³⁴ Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E.J. Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger (Cambridge, 2012), 168.

rulership in India' and British ideologies of rule based instead on contract, which equated princely gifting with corruption.³⁵ Yet we should be wary of 'indigeneity' as a concept. As Balkrishan Shivram has observed, South Asian robing ceremonies were the product of centuries of syncretic cross-cultural fusion. In pre-colonial India, Mughal ceremonial 'reflected an amalgam of Persian, Turkish, Central Asian, Indian, and specifically dynastic traditions'.³⁶ Already hybrid, 'indigenous' Indian diplomatic gifting was, moreover, integrated into wider circuits of exchange between South Asian and European princes, states and diplomatic representatives that dated from the sixteenth century. Working at the intersection between material culture studies and the 'new diplomatic history', Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello have argued that early modern gifts exchanged between Asian and European princes and states 'were key agents of social cohesion and transcultural systems of value in the emergence of a global political community'.³⁷ Serving as 'social glue' in an 'open-ended, fast-evolving system' of war, invasion and trade, they argue, these 'global gifts afford us a glimpse into the "commensurability" of shared diplomatic practices across large parts of Eurasia'.³⁸

As the East India Company's military treaties with the Mughal emperor and with lesser rajjas, sultans and nawabs proliferated, their attendance at royal courts or *darbars* became increasingly visible. Ornate, conspicuous and conferred in public, gifts received from Indian princes were material signs at once of British subservience and of Company corruption. Efforts to bar Company men from accepting gifts from Indians date from the same period as British reformers' attempts to bring Old Corruption to heel at home. The Regulating Act of 1773 prohibited Company employees from accepting gifts from Indian princes of the sort made notorious by Robert Clive; Pitt's India Act of 1784, extended these prohibitions further.³⁹ From the time of Marquess Cornwallis's Governorship of 1786–93, both Company servants and their dependents, whilst allowed to accept Indian gifts at public princely ceremonies, were required to deposit them immediately thereafter in the Company's local

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁶ Shivram, 'From Court Dress', 4–5.

³⁷ Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, 'Introduction: Global Gifts and the Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia', in *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, ed. Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (Cambridge, 2018), 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁹ Prior, Brennan and Haines, 'Bad Language', 80; Natasha Eaton, 'Between Mimesis and Alterity: Art, Gift, and Diplomacy in Colonial India, 1770–1800', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46 (2004), 819–20.

toshkhana (or treasury). Here they were available for individuals to purchase at a price set by an auctioneer, cleansed of their taint of corruption through a market transaction, whilst conveniently swelling the Company's coffers.⁴⁰

Diplomatic gifting thus straddled a labile and opaque boundary between licit and illicit exchange. Formally prohibited from retaining or profiting privately from gifts offered to them by 'native' princes, Company men were nonetheless repeatedly seen, heard and recorded publicly accepting these gifts at the hands of Indian elites. As the British extended their territorial control from Bengal to South India, the Deccan and (in 1803) Delhi and its hinterland, moreover, they initiated their own gift-giving rituals to strengthen their fragile military grip with symbolic power. The Company's highest officials—the Governor General, the Commander-in-Chief and the Residents or diplomatic agents at princely courts such as Delhi—now took to conferring *khila* on Indian rulers and notables, as a visual and material statement of waxing British power on the subcontinent.⁴¹ By the 1800s, high-ranking British officials were thus both givers and receivers of *nazr*, both donors and recipients of *khila*. Running directly counter to the intentions of the Regulating Act, Pitt's India Act and Cornwallis's reforms (which had sought to contain and ultimately suppress gifting regimes), the increasing prominence of Company officials as givers of Indian princely presents caused mounting disquiet in the upper reaches of the Company administration.

North India in the early nineteenth century was a hotbed of political intrigue, not only between the East India Company and the Mughal emperor (who the British insisted on denominating merely the King of Delhi), but also within the royal family, between the emperor and the princes who ruled over the sixty-ish successor states in Delhi's political ambit and between the Company and these many rulers.⁴² Akbar II (r. 1806–1837), the penultimate Mughal emperor, is conventionally described as a political cipher. 'The Mughal emperor, recognised by the British as the King of Delhi, retained nominal power, but he was in actuality a British pensioner, eking out a tawdry, tinselled existence in the diminished splendour of the Red Fort', Katherine Prior, Lance Brennan and Robin Haines (for

⁴⁰ Cohn, 'Representing Authority', 172.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 171–2.

⁴² K.N. Panikkar, *British Diplomacy in North India: A Study in the Delhi Residency, 1803–57* (Delhi, 1968).

example) argue.⁴³ William Dalrymple and Yuthika Sharma have however modified this overwhelmingly pessimistic assessment, highlighting the emperor's continued symbolic power, and the use by successive 'kings' of Delhi of artistic patronage to shore up their ceremonial status.⁴⁴

Scrutiny of the Company's diplomatic correspondence and gift-giving practices in the decades immediately before Sir Edward Colebrooke's appointment as the Delhi Resident further reinforces this image of Akbar II as a man of considerable political ambition and *nous*. For, notwithstanding their insistent belittlement of him, the acts and claims of the King of Delhi necessarily mattered to the British. As Akbar insistently reminded them, the Company's territorial presence, revenue functions and judicial legitimacy in India ultimately derived from Clive's treaty of 1765 with his ancestor, emperor Shah Allam II (r. 1760–1806). In return for the right to administer Bengal, the Company had agreed to pay Shah Allam twenty-six lacs of rupees per annum. It suspended this payment in 1772, after the emperor, in the words of one Company memo, had 'thrown himself into the hands of the Mahrattas', and thereby 'withdrawn himself from the Company's protection, and abandoned the Countries assigned to him'.⁴⁵ British victories in the Second Anglo-Maratha War had however brought the emperor back into the British fold in 1803, with Sir David Ochterlony appointed as the first of the Company's diplomatic Residents at Delhi. In heritage, sociability, cultural attributes and political behaviour, Ochterlony embodied trans-imperial hybridity. English and Welsh on his mother's side, a Scot by his paternal line, he was born in Boston, Massachusetts and served in the Bengal army from 1777. Rumoured to have multiple Indian *bibis* or concubines, he took as his favourite companion or wife a Hindu dancing girl known to the British (after her conversion to Islam) as Mubaruck ul Nissa Begum.⁴⁶ Their country house, north of Delhi, was Mubaruck Bagh (or 'happy garden').⁴⁷ Here and in Delhi at the official Residency, Ochterlony

⁴³ Prior, Brennan and Haines, 'Bad Language', 78.

⁴⁴ *Princes and Painters*, ed. Dalrymple and Sharma; Yuthika Sharma, 'Mughal Delhi on My Lapel: The Charmed Life of the Painted Ivory Miniature in Delhi, 1827–1880', in *Commodities and Culture in the Colonial World*, ed. Supriya Chaudhuri, Josephine McDonagh, Brian H. Murray and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2017), 15–31.

⁴⁵ Chairman to Mr Grant, 24 October 1831, British Library (henceforth BL) IOR/H/708/Part 1, f. 50.

⁴⁶ A.P. Coleman, 'Ochterlony, Sir David, First Baronet (1758–1825)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

⁴⁷ For an image and brief history of this country house, see

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/addorimss/t/019addor0005475u00067vrb.html> .

laid the groundwork for diplomatic conventions and gifting regimes that his successors would elaborate—in dialogue and collusion with, as well as in opposition to—the successive Kings of Delhi and rulers of lesser princely states.

The return of the Mughal emperor to British protection saw the Company, the King of Delhi and the plethora of princes who ruled over North Indian successor states elaborate a congeries of mutual but unequal diplomatic ceremonies. The arrival in Delhi of a new Resident or of the British Commander-in-Chief was, for most of Akbar II's reign, marked by the conferral of a *khil'at* to the senior British officer—and to many of his subordinates—by the king, seated on the Peacock Throne at his durbar. In return, British military officers and civil officials offered multiple *nazrs* and *peshkash* to the Mughal potentate. This ceremony was followed, typically on the next day, by counter-visits from the King and/or his sons to the British Residency. Ochterlony spent lavishly on the palatial structure and furnishing of the Residency, where the Resident in turn conferred gifts upon the male representatives of the royal family.⁴⁸ These episodic rituals were augmented throughout the year by visits to the Red Fort on seven annual Muslim festival days, on which the Resident by agreement again presented *nazr* to the King. Vast processions through the streets of Delhi accompanied these ceremonies. Many rulers of north Indian successor states attended these royal durbars or sent their diplomatic envoys to them; in their own courts, they too elaborated reciprocal ceremonials that enmeshed the British in elaborate gift-giving.⁴⁹

The rich visual and material record of these events conveys their scale, splendour and importance, and reflects the time, money and strategic thinking Akbar II expended on projecting his image as a powerful emperor. Elephants and their appurtenances loomed large in these ceremonies, fulfilling multiple symbolic and pragmatic functions.⁵⁰ As Sujit Sivasundaram has argued, British understandings of the meaning and use of elephants rested on centuries of Indian precedent. In the Hindu *Vedas*, elephant 'anthropomorphism worked alongside religious adoration', while Mughal royal literature both invested elephants with 'mystic and divine qualities' and interpreted the

⁴⁸ David Ochterlony to Charles Metcalfe, 2 April 1820, BL, IOR/H/Misc/738, f. 773.

⁴⁹ *Princes and Painters*, ed. Dalrymple and Sharma, provides the most detailed analysis of these visits and their visual and material culture.

⁵⁰ See for example the 'Panorama of a Durbar Procession of Akbar II', c. 1815, BL, Add. Or.888.

emperor's control over wild elephants 'as a sign of his ability to bring order to his kingdom and also as proof of divine rule'.⁵¹ Elephants were highly valued by the Mughals for their use in warfare, and emperors often exacted by them as annual tribute.⁵² By the later eighteenth century, themselves now mired in Indian warfare, the British too had come to understand the elephant's importance.⁵³ Replete with meaning and utility, the elephant was the perfect gift.⁵⁴ The evolution of diplomatic ceremonial in north India heightened their strategic and symbolic value. At festivals and investiture ceremonies, riding atop these magnificently caparisoned beasts ensured that power was visually manifest on a vertical hierarchical axis. Propinquity to the ruler was also coveted as a sign of high status, projecting this power grid onto a horizontal plane. Convention moreover decreed that the procession's senior potentate would be joined in his ornate howdah by subordinate princes or Company officials.⁵⁵ At the Mughal court, this process entailed a further show of subordination to the King as the lesser visitor dismounted his own elephant and ascended to join his superior in the latter's howdah. A shortage of howdah ladders not infrequently resulted in an unseemly scrambling at the feet of the monarch's elephant.⁵⁶

The indignity of scrambling up onto princely elephants in public, offering *nazrs*, accepting a *khil'at* (which was conferred by the King's hand and worn over their European dress) and being subjected to a seemingly endless flow of suspect gifts irked reform-minded Company officials. Akbar II exacerbated this hostility by using these opportunities to insist upon his superior status, to bargain for an increased pension, and to assert his claim to choose his own successor. In royal letters, and through diplomatic envoys and royal ceremonial, he repeatedly proclaimed his paramount power to a succession of increasingly exasperated Governor Generals, condescendingly denominating them 'my son' and conferring titles upon them and their subordinate officers that implied or explicitly asserted a

⁵¹ Sujit Sivasundaram, 'Trading Knowledge: The East India Company's Elephants in India and Britain', *Historical Journal*, 48 (2005), 47, 48.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 32, 33, 37

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 32–6.

⁵⁴ As Sivasundaram observes, 'This made the elephant a perfect present. Under Mughal rule...the exchange of elephants served as both a symbol of friendship and subservience'. *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁵ See for example Major Archer, *Tours in Upper India, and in the Parts of the Himalaya Mountains: With an Account of the Courts of the Native Princes, &c.* (2 vols, 1833), 1: 4, 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 14, 16.

relation of feudal vassalage. Already in 1807 (a year after his succession), engaged in bitter disputes with the Governor General on these subjects, the King had flexed his muscles by informing the Company that he would confer *khila* not only on all the princes in Delhi's hinterland but also upon the British, including the Governor General himself. The British clearly understood what was at stake in this assertion: the *khil'at* for the Governor General was 'a public acknowledgement of vassalage and submission to the throne of Delhi' and must be refused.⁵⁷ The following years saw ongoing hostilities between the King and his Company captors along these lines. The British exiled his favoured third son to Allahabad, infuriated by Akbar's refusal to honour British rules of primogeniture by naming his eldest son as his natural heir.⁵⁸ In 1819, this rumbling dispute came to a head. Buoyed up by his victories in the Third Anglo-Maratha War, Governor General Hastings refused to honour longstanding British diplomatic epistolary forms. The royal seal with which Akbar II signed diplomatic letters to him, Hastings expostulated, had 'inscribed on it the humiliating designation of Favee Acber Shah or vassal of the King Acbar'. So offended was Hastings by this received formulation of sovereignty, that he cut off all official communication between the Governor General and the King, a relationship that would be resumed at this level only in 1826, by Lord Amherst.⁵⁹

Amherst's negotiations to resume diplomatic relations with the King of Delhi in 1826 provide an essential context for Colebrooke's diplomatic behaviour from 1827 to 1829. Planning a tour of the Upper Provinces of North India, Amherst was cognisant of Akbar II's desire to restore official communications with the Governor General. Suffering from sharply diminished Company confidence in the aftermath of a disastrous war in Burma, he now took steps to restore communication with the King. Sir Charles Metcalfe, the Delhi Resident, had written to Amherst underlining the King's discontent at the break in diplomatic relations: 'the King complained lately of the neglect with which he has been treated, particularly in not receiving any communication for the Governor General's intended journey', he observed. Himself keen to effect a reconciliation, Metcalfe was nonetheless

⁵⁷ 'Memorandum respecting the claims of the King of Delhi', [1831], BL, IOR/H/708/Part 1, ff. 76–7, 90.

⁵⁸ The harem and dynastic politics of Akbar's reign are detailed in Major General George Cunningham to Mr Ellis, 24 September 1831, BL, IOR/H/708/Part 1, ff. 13–36.

⁵⁹ Memorandum Concerning the Claims of the King of Delhi, [1831], BL, IOR/H/708/Part 1, ff. 141–2. See also Sharma, 'Mughal Delhi', 17–19.

adamant that ‘any thing derogatory’ to British power must be avoided. ‘Any Nuzzur on the part of His Lordship, I suppose to be out of the question’, he advised.⁶⁰ A month later, indeed, Metcalfe urged Amherst to insist on his political parity with the King if any visit were agreed, and proposed informing Akbar II ‘that the Governor General did not intend to visit Delhi, as he could only meet the King on a footing of equality, which might not be agreeable to his Majesty’. Negotiations broke down when the King indeed insisted on inducing ‘some acknowledgement of [his] superiority’ to Amherst.⁶¹ When talks resumed a few weeks later, however, both sides made concessions. The King proposed ten points of etiquette for Amherst’s visit. Among them, he agreed to forgo payment of *nazr* by the Governor General, to accept a salaam from him ‘in the English fashion by taking off the Hat’, and to permit Amherst to be seated on a chair. In return, he stipulated, Amherst must accept a gift of ‘whatever may be deemed proper...from the Royal neck, some article of Jewellery’, must receive *paan* from the King—‘to be given by the Royal Hand’—and must subsequently invite the King to visit him at the Delhi Residency. Here Akbar expected to receive ‘a suitable Peshkush and reception: not the same as that given by his Majesty to the Governor General’.⁶²

Two weeks later, Amherst made major concessions to these demands, accepting the King’s restoration of rank, to a status higher than that of the Governor General of India. He was now, his secretary reported, ‘fully prepared to admit a superiority of rank on the part of the King of Delhi, as the titular representative of a long established and renowned Dynasty of Emperors; whose accession to the Throne and dignities of his ancestors, has been formally recognized, during many years by the British Government’.⁶³ Accepting that ‘At Delhi in his own dominions, the King must rank above all others, and in that sense his Majesty’s superiority to his visitor, was admitted beyond questions’, Amherst still refused to accept a *khil’at* or to offer a *nazr*. But he laid essential groundwork for the later Colebrooke scandal by agreeing that the Delhi Resident could accept a *khil’at* without detracting from the important message that ‘the relation of a sovereign and vassal has ceased to exist, even in

⁶⁰ Metcalfe to Stirling, 17 September 1826, BL, IOR/F/4/1179/30741, ff. 14–15.

⁶¹ Metcalfe to Stirling, 12 November 1826, *ibid.*, 15–17.

⁶² Metcalfe to Stirling, 17 November 1826, *ibid.*, ff. 18–19.

⁶³ Stirling to Metcalfe, 6 December 1826, *ibid.*, ff. 23–4.

name, between his Majesty and the head of the British Government in India'.⁶⁴ Having conceded this major point, Amherst then negotiated hard to ensure that he would be carried in a tonjon, not forced to walk, from his elephant to the King's presence, and that the chair on which he would sit would be his own chair of state.⁶⁵ Its height, he acknowledged, 'is scarcely greater than that of a common chair, but as its appearance is rich and handsome...its admission should...be urged.'⁶⁶ This uneasy ceasefire saw vassalage displaced from the Governor General to the Resident, but left Amherst's body caught between two competing regimes of material politics. In one, the King's hand would drape the Governor General's neck with Indian jewellery, signalling political hierarchy through received conventions of royal touch and royal gifting. In the other, Amherst—sitting in European dress on his own 'throne chair', of Indian manufacture but British design—would project the hybrid rule of Indian and British elites on the North Indian frontier of Company power. It proved a fragile reconciliation. Before Amherst left Delhi, the King had sent him 'a paper of demands', reasserted his authority to confer *khila* and receive *nazzr* and *peshkash* from all subordinates and insisted that the Company had 'violated its engagements with the royal family'. By February 1829, rejecting established diplomatic protocols, he had bypassed the new Governor General, Lord Bentinck, and dispatched a letter directly to the King of Great Britain.⁶⁷ Bentinck, a proponent of reform and Anglicisation, responded to this challenge by issuing orders to his subordinates prohibiting all exchanges of gifts with Indian princes.⁶⁸

III

It was in this context of resumed but fractious royal relations and diplomatic gifting regimes that the Colebrookes arrived in Delhi in 1827, and enthusiastically threw themselves into the material politics of Mughal diplomacy. Lady Colebrooke, like her husband—who was her first cousin once removed—

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, ff. 25–6.

⁶⁵ Crafted in Lucknow and now in the Victorian & Albert Museum (IS.6-1991), Amherst's 'throne chair' can be viewed at <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O39550/throne-chair/>.

⁶⁶ Stirling to Metcalfe, 6 December 1826, BL, IOR/F/4/1179/30741, ff. 29–30, 32–3.

⁶⁷ Memorandum Concerning the Claims, BL, IOR/H/708/Part I, ff. 142, 144–5, 146.

⁶⁸ Archer, *Tours of Upper India*, 1: 7–10. Notwithstanding this directive, Archer—like the Commander-in-Chief—continued to accept gifts at state ceremonies. See for example *ibid.*, 109–115.

had lived most of her life in India, having been born (out of wedlock) to a Colebrooke military officer in Madras. Sir Edward's son Edward, twenty when the couple arrived in Delhi, had been born to one of the Resident's pre-marital Indian concubines.⁶⁹ Neither his illegitimacy nor his mixed-heritage marked him out in Delhi's hybrid European community: James Skinner's mother was Rajput, and William Fraser (who presided over Delhi's criminal court) had several children by his Indian companion, Amiban.⁷⁰ Like the Residents at other princely courts, Colebrooke daily entertained both his nuclear kin and an extended 'family' or household of Company men at his table, enjoying an official allowance of 5,000 rupees per month to do so. His young revenue assistant, Samuel Sneade Brown, having excitedly reported his acceptance of a *khil'at* from the King of Deli in May 1828, wrote home to his mother in June to commend Colebrooke's hospitality. 'I find it rather a pleasant change to dine with Sir Edward every evening after business is over; he is a frank and pleasant old gentleman; I like him much.' His opinion of Lady Colebrooke was less sanguine. 'We call his lady the *Bore Constrictor*' he commented, without elaboration.⁷¹

Also dining together with the Colebrookes at the Residency table but in mounting distress was Charles Trevelyan, whose sensibilities were outraged by the Colebrooke family's acquisitive behaviours, and by Lady Colebrooke in particular. Among the twenty-nine main charges and seventy-six sub-charges of corruption Trevelyan levelled against Sir Edward in the summer of 1829 were myriad accusations of gifts accepted from Indian princes or their agents, and reputedly retained by the Colebrookes for private profit.⁷² The new Resident, Trevelyan claimed in his first charge, had accepted 'various sums of money in nuzzurs from every native above the lowest rank who has been introduced to him with hardly any exception, none of which he has brought to the public account'.⁷³ By denominating these accepted gifts *nazrs*, Trevelyan effectively named Colebrooke as an Indian prince, corrupt by nature, despotic by culture. His next charges enumerated the Resident's acceptance

⁶⁹ Sutherland, *Sola Bona Quae Honesta*, 38–40.

⁷⁰ *Princes and Painters*, ed. Dalrymple and Sharma, 126–9.

⁷¹ Samuel Sneade Brown, *Home Letters, Written from India between the Years 1828 and 1841* (Printed for private circulation, 1878), 8, 11.

⁷² For the enumeration of charges, see [Sir Edward Colebrooke], *Papers Relative to the Case at Issue between Sir Edward Colebrooke, Bt., and the Bengal Government* (1833), 18.

⁷³ [Charles Trevelyan], *Papers Transmitted from India by C.E. Trevelyan, Esq.* (1830), 108.

of (for example) a horse and trappings gifted illicitly by the Raja of Bikaner, Colebrooke's subsequent presentation to the Raja of three unauthorised *khila*, his receipt of an elephant from the Raja of Ulwur and his presentation to another prince of 'a large bed on which [his predecessor as Resident] Sir C. Metcalfe used to sleep'.⁷⁴ With Metcalfe's bed, Trevelyan signalled the familial and dynastic character of the Colebrookes' corruption: rooted in the domestic objects of their official home, their material diplomacy refused to register the proper, gendered demarcation between private and public spheres.

Many of the charges Trevelyan laid against Lady Colebrooke highlighted her refusal to remain within a private sphere and her insistence on participating in Sir Edward's diplomatic dealings with Indian princes. At stake was not simply her venality but also her familiarity with and propinquity to material objects—*khila*, elephants and shawls, for example—endowed with royal meanings and princely power. Lady Colebrooke's collusive diplomatic acts were especially objectionable to Trevelyan: in exercising political power she had adopted and adapted the insistent, material diplomacy that so frustrated British liberal reformers. Again and again Trevelyan described the corrupt payments Lady Colebrooke accepted from Indian rulers as *nazrs* and specified that they were paid—as were all *nazrs*—in gold *mohurs*.⁷⁵ Not content to accept these monetary tokens of submission to her, Lady Colebrooke had arrogated to herself the power to confer not only gifts—the double-barrelled gun, for example, she gave to the Raja of Patiala—but also *khila* to North Indian princes.⁷⁶ Adding insult to injury, her meetings with Indian rulers in the Delhi Residency were known as *darbars*—it was with this term that not only Trevelyan but also the senior officials in Calcutta (to whom his streams of accusations flowed) described them.⁷⁷ The very elephant upon which one Raja had ridden to the Residency on a visit, he claimed, had been extracted from under this dignitary by Lady Colebrooke, as a coerced gift.⁷⁸ To Trevelyan, the elephant represented an obvious invasion of the masculine world of diplomacy by a woman who belonged in the private home. Colebrooke's

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 116, 117, 119; BL, IOR/F/4/1200/30914A, f. 274.

⁷⁵ [Trevelyan], *Papers Transmitted*, 129, 132.

⁷⁶ For the gun, BL, IOR/F/4/1200/30914A, f. 261, 265, 272–4, 279.

⁷⁷ For example, [Colebrooke], *Papers Relative*, 79.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 26–7.

defence of his wife, in sharp contrast, highlighted her right to engage in market transactions in the public sphere. The elephant was in fact a ‘purchase’, not a gift, from the Raja, he insisted. Moreover, Lady Colebrooke had ‘never once mounted it; and it was therefore sent among the rest of the public elephants in the public Feel Khana [Company elephant enclosure], where it has been ever since’.⁷⁹

The histrionic tone of Trevelyan’s charges against Lady Colebrooke was highly sexualised. His accusations dwelt at length upon the ‘native gentlemen’ who gained access to her private chambers and there laid hands on her material goods.⁸⁰ Elite Indian men, Trevelyan fumed, were ‘in daily attendance at the residency, and ... admitted to the most familiar intercourse with Lady Colebrooke’.⁸¹ These claims suggest that her violation of the increasingly rigid sexual norms of late Georgian domestic ideology was an essential component of his case against her husband.⁸²

Trevelyan’s sexualised focus on Lady Colebrooke enraged her husband. Jealousy, coloured by sexual deprivation, had driven the claims of his upstart assistant, Colebrooke suggested. ‘Mr. Trevelyan, who, like the Turk, can bear no brother near the throne ... became jealous of Lady Colebrooke’, he asserted.⁸³ As a bachelor whose relations with women were confined to illicit sex coerced from natives, Colebrooke claimed, Trevelyan was poorly placed to interpret Lady Colebrooke’s behaviour as the Resident’s wife.⁸⁴ In sharp contrast, he (as a married man of the world) trusted his wife not only with European men at the Residency but with Indian princes and their subordinates. ‘My permission to the native gentlemen, to visit Lady Colebooke, in her private apartment, is the origin of the rancour, hatred, and malice, which are driving this man to seek the gratification of his revenge by every violence and outrage, by every disgraceful and underhand means, which a fiend could devise, and a scoundrel put in practice’, he argued.⁸⁵ Lady Colebrooke herself vigorously defended her right to inhabit the public sphere, both in her home and in those of the Indian men she visited, and—like her

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ In examining witnesses to Lady Colebrooke’s sale of a necklace to a *nawab* for use in his investiture ceremony, Trevelyan made a point of confirming that she gave the necklace ‘with her own hand’. ‘Deposition of Khaja Qasim’, 5 November 1829, BL, IOR/F/4/1203/30914E, f. 1699.

⁸¹ [Trevelyan], *Papers Transmitted*, 14.

⁸² For the broader parameters of British moral reform in this period, see M.J.D. Roberts, *Making English Morals: Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787–1886* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁸³ [Colebrooke], *Papers Relative*, 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 93–4, 188.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

husband, projected sexual dishonour back on her antagonist. When Trevelyan's accusations began to circulate in Delhi, she issued a circular 'appealing to the public' in which she observed 'that *liar* and *villain* are the mildest terms which can be applied to such an act of depravity in so young a man'.⁸⁶

Antagonism to elite British women's unbridled behaviour—at once politically and sexually corrupt—in the public sphere was well established in British reformers' critiques of Old Corruption.⁸⁷ But it is also essential to recognize the extent to which the regional dynamics of princely politics in north India shaped both Lady Colebrooke's actions and the character and force of Trevelyan's invective. Like Trevelyan, Indian princes clearly recognised that Lady Colebrooke's gifts were freighted with political potential. They accordingly actively incorporated this European woman into their diplomatic dealings. When she sent the Nawab of Tonk gifts to mark the birth of a grandchild, the nawab specified that the items be brought to him 'in state' so that 'high and low' would learn of their conferral. According to this princely state's newsletter, dancing girls and music accompanied the presentation of Lady Colebrooke's gift.⁸⁸

Reading the sources thrown up by the Colebrooke case provides abundant evidence not only that Lady Colebrooke acted as an unabashed political agent in Delhi, but also that her gender allowed her and Sir Edward to recognise (and take advantage of) the political agency of Indian princely women behind the purdah curtain. Among the elite women in their circle was Farzana, 'Begum Sombre', well known for her active, visible roles in north Indian diplomacy and warfare.⁸⁹ But the archives of the Colebrooke controversy identify many more Mughal, Maratha and Rajput princely women with whom Sir Edward and his wife engaged in the business of politics. Preeminent among them was the Rani and ex-Regent of Bharatpur, a Rajput princely state. Bharatpur had gained iconic status in the Company imagination in an infamous siege of 1805, when its impregnable fort failed to fall to the otherwise victorious British forces at the end of the Second Anglo-Maratha War. Between 1825 and 1826, a succession crisis afforded the British an opportunity to rectify this anomaly; in

⁸⁶ [Trevelyan], *Papers Transmitted*, 13.

⁸⁷ See esp. Anna Clark, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution* (Princeton, 2004).

⁸⁸ 'Proceedings Relating to the Removal of Sir Edward Colebrooke', BL, IOR/F/4/1200/30914B, ff., 338–9.

⁸⁹ Michael H. Fisher, *The Inordinately Strange Life of Dyce Sombre: Victorian Anglo-Indian MP and Chancery 'Lunatic'* (2010), chaps 1–3.

victory, they razed the fort and installed a council of Regency to rule for the infant raja.⁹⁰ Lord Amherst's son was among the military officers who sent looted objects from the Bharatpur palace to the Governor General's family in Calcutta in 1826.⁹¹ Among Trevelyan's charges in 1829 was the accusation that, on a visit together with her husband to Bharatpur in that year, Lady Colebrooke had gifted a watch to Imrut Koar, the widowed rani ousted in 1828 as the Regent—a status she was determined to renegotiate. For Trevelyan, the illicit gift of a watch encapsulated a much wider field of corruption. Lady Colebrooke had also presented the rani's *vakil* (or diplomatic agent) with two Indian shawls and the *vakil* had prepared a formal petition addressed to Lady Colebrooke for restitution of her lost rights as Regent.⁹² To Trevelyan, Lady Colebrooke's gifting was of a piece with the statement (he alleged) she had repeatedly made at the Residency table, that in return for Indian gifts she would influence her husband on the behalf of Indian princes.⁹³ Colebrooke flatly rejected these claims, dismissing the status of the rani's *vakil* to that of a mere 'messenger' and pointedly underlining that unlike the 'Hindoostanee kept mistresses' with whom he accused Trevelyan of cohabiting, British wives must be considered as 'entitled to partake of the privileges attached to the stations of their husbands'.⁹⁴

British wives, sisters and daughters of senior Company men were increasingly conspicuous on the subcontinent in this period, residing with them in European settlements and accompanying them on tours of newly conquered territories.⁹⁵ Governor General Amherst's wife was at the forefront of this trend in Delhi, entering actively into her husband's plans to restore diplomatic relations with the King in 1827. She visited the King's senior wife and the spouse of his presumed heir in February of that year, presenting them with necklaces and earrings from the Company *toshkhana*, and receiving jewels in return 'which were all placed in the Public Stores'.⁹⁶ Lady Colebrooke's dealings extended

⁹⁰ Hiralal Gupta, 'British Policy towards Successions in Bharatpur State, 1823–1826, and Its Repercussions', *Itihas: Journal of the Andhra Pradesh Archives*, 14 (1988), 65–75.

⁹¹ The looted items included 'the magnificent State Palanquin & five hunting Tygers' as well as 'some curiosities from the Palace' for Lady and Miss Amherst. Combermere to Amherst, 19 December 1825, BL, MSS EUR F140/80(a), f. 19.

⁹² [Trevelyan], *Papers Transmitted*, 126.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁹⁴ [Colebrooke], *Papers Relative*, 35–36 [N 32].

⁹⁵ Joan Mickelson Gaughan, *The 'Incumberances': British Women in India, 1615–1856* (Oxford, 2013), chaps 12–16.

⁹⁶ A. Stirling to G. Swinton, 3 March 1827, BL, IOR/F/4/1179/30741, ff. 47–48.

far beyond Lady Amherst's 'public' gifts, forcing open discussion of the problematic status of diplomatic wives' transactions. As a woman, Lady Colebrooke had no formal place in the Company's service. For Trevelyan, her ability to be 'in constant communication with every official character about the residency' was on a par with Colebrooke's subversion of authority by depending unduly on his Hindu man of business.⁹⁷ Legally, her only binding contract in Delhi was her marriage to her husband. Under the common law principle of coverture, the gifts and money she obtained from Indian princes were not her own, but (if indeed they were licit private property) her husband's. Her lack of standing notwithstanding, Lady Colebrooke had allegedly entered into negotiations with independent Indian states—an action that, even had she been a man and the Resident—was prohibited by Company regulations. In the context of the King of Delhi's refusal to acknowledge British paramount power, Lady Colebrooke's rogue behaviour represented a new political threat to an already unstable, corrupt imperial regime.

IV

What can we conclude from the Colebrooke corruption case if we read it from the perspective of material culture? Taken as a whole, Trevelyan's accusations smack of hysteria: of his twenty-nine main charges against Colebrooke, only twelve were taken seriously by the investigators, and many of even these they dismissed.⁹⁸ Trevelyan was avowedly a 'liberal' reformer who rejected the corrupt practices of the Company's Orientalist camp. But his one request to Bentinck—as a reward for the success of his campaign against Colebrooke—was patronage to promote his brother within the Company's ranks—their mother's influence at home having exceeded the family's needs.⁹⁹ The Governor General, citing Trevelyan's 'manly conduct' in rescuing 'your Country' from Colebrooke's 'foul deeds', happily complied with this request, appointing Trevelyan's brother assistant at Ajmer.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ [Trevelyan], *Papers Transmitted*, 84.

⁹⁸ One of the two principal investigators, moreover, had an obvious vested interest in finding Colebrooke guilty, having been engaged since 1823 in a protracted attack of 'the Delhi system' of revenue and government. See 'Embezzlement at Delhi', IOR/F/4/1279/51299.

⁹⁹ Charles Trevelyan to Harriet Trevelyan, 30 December 1829, NUSC, CET/3.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Trevelyan to Harriet Trevelyan, 1 December 1832, NUSC, CET21/11.

The gender politics of this scandal are also vitally important, for in scrutinising the record of the Colebrookes' gifting we see both the assertion and the denial of female agency exercised by British and Indian women. Lady Colebrooke's active collusion with Indian ranis and rajas who offered her gifts is evident throughout the records of her husband's prosecution. Charles Trevelyan recognised these gifts as acts of political corruption. This was, however, a charge that her husband and the Company's most senior officials were desperate to deny. Acknowledging that her husband 'permitted Lady Colebrooke to receive the agents of many ... independent states', the investigations concluded that 'a corrupt understanding with any of them is not established'. Refusing to intrude on 'the private conversations of Sir Edward's family' even when they took place at his public table, they insisted that 'such conversations, if proved, could establish no corrupt act'.¹⁰¹ To accept that Lady Colebrooke was a political agent was to fly in the face of her status as a British wife, a female whose gender and marital condition subsumed her person under her husband's legal aegis and consigned her to a private sphere outside Company politics. The public role of British women in India in the 1820s—their presence at Company dinners attended by Indian men, their willingness to speak out, their proclivity for drink—all came under increasing scrutiny in this period. 'Asiatic notions of female delicacy and decorum are so vitally assailed in the very public manner in which European ladies display themselves at these parties, that if they knew ... that contempt is the least offensive feeling their presence excites, they would refrain from going into the company of natives', Major Archer, ADC to Lord Bentinck's Commander-in-Chief, expostulated in his memoirs.¹⁰² This assessment conveniently effaced the evidence that punctuated his own autobiographical account of North Indian politics in the late 1820s: his memoir records dinners with (and hosted by) Begum Sombre as well as occasions on which ranis insisted on articulating their claims to Company officials from behind purdah screens.¹⁰³ Recovering these lost female voices is enabled if we attend to records that trace their entanglement in the exchange of material things.

¹⁰¹ [Trevelyan], *Papers Transmitted*, 110–11.

¹⁰² Archer, *Tours in Upper India*, 2: 90.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 1: 136–44, 2: 44, 50.

Gender was not however, the only elephant in the room—or rather, in the Residency stables—in late Mughal Delhi. Viewed from the vantage point of material diplomacy, the Colebrookes’ conspicuous and undoubted venality appears not simply as one episode in the extended history of Old Corruption nor as an example of anachronistic, entrenched Orientalist convictions succumbing to the Anglicist challenge. To be sure, both Old Corruption and Anglicising ideology left deep marks on this controversy. But it is also essential to locate the Colebrookes’ behaviours and their reception within specific places, cultures and temporalities on the subcontinent, and thereby to recognise the diplomatic levers being pulled in late Mughal Delhi by Indian princes (including princely women). From his accession in 1806 until his death in 1837, Akbar II fought against British interpretations of his status as merely the King of Delhi, deploying not only artwork but furniture, jewels, elephants, *khila* and a cornucopia of other Indian goods to assert and reinforce his claims to paramount power. Lesser princes in North India echoed and elaborated these forms of resistance. Diplomacy exercised on the fragile border between licit and illicit gifting established by Company regulations was fraught with many temptations, and with many opportunities for British and Indian agents to develop new diplomatic practices, expectations and norms. The narrative arc traced by Parliamentary and Company regulations against gifting by and to Indian princes from the Regulating Act of 1773 to Bentinck’s orders of 1828 marked a trajectory away from material culture politics and toward a monetised bureaucratic order. But the grand narrative of Indian power relations under British rule repeatedly failed to adhere to this teleological arc.¹⁰⁴ Bentinck’s successors were to enter enthusiastically into gifting regimes in north India, sealing their relations with Ranjit Singh’s Sikh kingdom in the 1830s, for example, through the exchange of elaborate gifts and counter-gifts at his court in Lahore.¹⁰⁵ In the aftermath of the Indian Uprising of 1857, it was to this ceremonial regime of *darbar* politics that the Crown increasingly turned to stabilise its regime.¹⁰⁶ Far from fading away with the demise of the Company state in 1858, princely politics of this ilk was shored up and reanimated. Scholars such as Ranajit Guha and James C. Scott remind us of the power of the wily

¹⁰⁴ See esp. Jonathan Saha, *Law, Disorder and the Colonial State: Corruption in Burma c.1900* (Basingstoke, 2013).

¹⁰⁵ Emily Eden, “*Up the Country*”: *Letters Written to Her Sister from the Upper Provinces* (1867).

¹⁰⁶ Miles Taylor, *Empress: Queen Victoria and India* (New Haven, 2018).

forms of resistances exercised by peasant populations under imperial rule.¹⁰⁷ The Colebrooke corruption case reminds us that these so-called weapons of the weak had their counterparts among imperialised elites. In India, the persistent refusal of ranis, rajas, nawabs and the Mughal emperor himself to adhere to British diplomatic forms made this resistance palpably evident through material objects to the British.

In the twenty-first century, it is easy to dismiss Georgian-era princely politics as an atavistic form of power, incompatible with modern states and their diplomacy. We do so at our peril. Resilient, adaptable, effective and yes—like democracies—vulnerable to corruption, the family- and clan-based politics of the princely state are a postcolonial, no less than a colonial, a Western, no less than an Eastern, problem for contemporary politics and global order.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Ranajit Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi, 1983); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

¹⁰⁸ For the earlier period, see Jeroen Duindam, *Dynasties: A Global History* (Cambridge, 2016); for contemporary regimes, Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (New York, 2009) and Vicky Ward, *Kushner, Inc.: Greed. Ambition. Corruption. The Extraordinary Story of Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump* (New York, 2019).