

# Asian Travelers' Visions of Britain and Ireland in the Early Modern Period

By Michael H. Fisher

Much of world history, and even Asian history, often appears centered on Europe and on distinctions between Europeans and others. In particular, many prominent scholars have shown how European travelers' accounts contributed to the post-Enlightenment development of early "modernity" that valued the "discovery" of other peoples and places and that also led to European colonial rule over much of the globe.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, European imperialist incursions into Asia linked parts of the world asymmetrically into our contemporary world-system. But we should also consider the ways Asians traveled globally, crossing geographical, cultural, and social boundaries, forming part of the "connected history" of humankind we know today.<sup>2</sup> In addition to those Asians who had long traveled throughout Asia, a growing number ventured to Europe, especially from the sixteenth century onward. By the mid-nineteenth century, the most numerous group among these were the tens of thousands of South Asian men and women of all social classes who journeyed to Britain—the focus of this article.

The vast bulk of travel accounts about Europe by these Asians remained oral and therefore difficult for historians to access. From the late eighteenth century, however, a modest but rising number of Indian travelers began to write in their own words about themselves and Asia, as well as about their direct experiences of Europeans and Europe. Some wrote for European readers, others for Asian ones. Some settled in Europe, where their distinctive Asian identity separated but also distinguished them to varying degrees from Europeans, including European competitors. Yet, over time, their descendants merged into European society, largely losing the Asian identity that had marked their ancestors. Those Asian travelers who returned to Asia were often perforce subordinated by European colonialism there, losing the sometimes valued rarity that they enjoyed in Europe. Let us consider two Indian travelers, Sake Dean Mahomed (1759–1851) and Mirza Abu Talib Khan Isfahani (1752–1806), very similar in background but quite different in experiences—one a settler in Europe, the other a visitor there—placing them in the context of other South Asians in Europe during the early modern period.

## Traveling from India to Ireland

Travel creates opportunities, but also entails choices about how the traveler relates to the local society and culture. Dean Mahomed, orphaned at age eleven, left his home at Patna in north India to attach himself to the English East India Company's Bengal Army as a camp-follower.<sup>3</sup> Over the next fifteen years, he rose—under the patronage of Ensign Godfrey Baker, a teenaged Anglo-Irish offi-

cer—to the rank of *subedar* (lieutenant), the highest post then available to an Indian in that British-commanded army. As Dean Mahomed marched back and forth across north India, he discovered many peoples and cultures strikingly different from those of his home region and Shi'ite Muslim community; his relationships with these other Indians were shaped by his decision to join the conquering colonial army. While, by the time of his death, several hundred thousand other Indians had also voluntarily joined the East India Company armies, he was among the relatively few who traveled to Britain.

In 1782, Dean Mahomed (like Baker) resigned from the army and the next year sailed to Cork, Ireland, where Baker's father had been mayor and owned large estates. There, Dean Mahomet (who changed his name to Mahomed at the turn of the century) worked for the Bakers, perhaps as majordomo of their mansion. He also continued his education, converted to Anglican Christianity, and, in 1786, eloped with and married a young Anglo-Irish fellow student, Jane Daly.

After a decade in Ireland, he published his two-volume autobiographical travel narrative: *The Travels of Dean Mahomet, a Native of Patna in Bengal, Through Several Parts of India, While in the Service of the Honorable the East India Company Written by Himself, In a Series of Letters to a Friend* (Cork: J. Connor, 1794).<sup>4</sup> In this work, he described not only his own life and adventures in India but also India's various socio-cultural features that he felt would be attractive or curious for his British readers. His explicit self-identification as "a Native" Indian distinguished him from rival British authors of his day. Yet, in the portrait he included and in the European classical references and epistolary style he adopted for his work, he also showed himself to be highly Anglicized, and part of British society.<sup>5</sup>

While Dean Mahomed's book comprised an early work in the genre of autobiography and the first published book in English by an Indian, other non-white authors had preceded him. Among former African slaves, Olaudah Equiano (1745/50–97) was particularly well known, having recently published his own autobiography: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself* (London: The Author, 1789). Indeed, Equiano came to Cork in 1791, publicizing his book and abolitionist cause, possibly meeting Dean Mahomed there.

Another Asian travel writer was Joseph Emin (1726–1809), an Armenian Christian born in Hamadan, Iran, who had grown up in Calcutta. He worked his way as a seaman to London in 1751, strug-



Dean Mahomed. Frontispiece: Etching by J. Finlay from an original by Ghaywanimdy [?], [1794].

gled as a manual laborer, was befriended by the young Edmund Burke, rose to be a gentleman officer in the Royal English and Prussian armies, fought unsuccessfully for Armenian independence, and ended his remarkable career in the East India Company's Bengal Army. After retirement, he published a 640-page autobiography: *The Life and Adventures of Joseph Emin, An Armenian, Written in English by Himself* (London: The Author, 1792).<sup>6</sup> Although these three men differed in many ways, each represented himself in his book as a widely-traveled, improving individual who had adapted to British culture. All three converted to (or were born) Christian and used Europeanized names, dress, and demeanor. Two married British women and settled as respected British citizens.<sup>7</sup> Their "race" (as defined by most late eighteenth century Britons) distinguished them from Europeans, and each made his exotic origin one of his distinctively appealing features. Further, the very act of writing and publishing his book—each title noted "by Himself"—was meant to prove his cultural accomplishments to Britons. Thus, all related their books and themselves to European readers and society. Simultaneously, other Asian travelers also directly observed Europe (and other Asians there), but related more toward Asians.

### The Indian "Persian Prince" Travels in British High Society

Asian travelers to Europe had to decide how to present themselves there, including what to wear and with whom to interact; authors among them had to select what language to use and therefore which readers to address. While many Asians—especially settlers—adapted to British culture, others—especially temporary visitors—continued to wear their customary clothing and wrote in the language of their own literary circles. Prominent among the latter was Abu Talib, who spent three years in British high society (1799–1802).<sup>8</sup>

The son of Shi'ite Muslim immigrants to India from Iran, Abu Talib was born in 1752 at Lucknow, capital of the largest surviving north Indian kingdom. Imprisoned, then driven from his hometown by factional disputes, he found protection and occasional employment with British officials of the East India Company in Bengal. He wrote several books in Persian (the time-honored language of high culture and administration). At age 47, temporarily unemployed, he decided to sail to Britain and there establish a British government-sponsored Persian language academy.

On December 7, 1799, soon after landing in Ireland, he by chance met Dean Mahomed, as Abu Talib later described in his Persian travel account:

*Another person in the [Baker] house . . . is named Din Muhammad . . . Baker raised him from childhood as a member of the family. He brought him to Cork and sent him to a school where he learned to read and write English well. Din Muhammad, after studying, ran off to another city with the daughter, known to be fair and beautiful, of a family of rank of Cork who was studying in the school. He then married her and returned to Cork. He now has several beautiful children with her. He has a separate house and wealth and he wrote a book contain-*



Abu Talib. Etching by William [?] Ridley from portrait by Samuel Drummond.

*ing some account of himself and some about the customs of India.*<sup>9</sup>

Thus, not only were British and Indian histories becoming more connected, Indians in Britain were connecting, not yet as ongoing communities, but as individual travelers.

Abu Talib continued to Dublin. There, as did many Asians of this period, he encountered British naiveté about his exotic identity. He recounted:

*For some time after my arrival in Dublin, I was greatly incommoded by the common people crowding round me, whenever I went out. They were all very curious to see me, but had no intention of offending me. Some said I must be the Russian General, who had been for some time expected; others affirmed that I was either a German or Spanish nobleman; but the greater part agreed that I was a Persian Prince.*<sup>10</sup>

Accepting the misleading title, "Persian Prince," he enjoyed a celebrated visit to England.

Abu Talib later described how he reveled in British society—particularly in its women, and they in him. Soon after his arrival in London, his letters of introduction gained him entrée to King George III and Queen Charlotte, who received and conversed with him periodically. Following this royal precedent, elite British hostesses and hosts lavished hospitality and gifts on him. He proved the toast of three London seasons and repeatedly recorded his twin intoxications, European female beauty and wine, both of which he indulged (citing Persian poet Hafiz for justification).

Throughout his visit, Abu Talib engaged in extensive banter with a wide range of European women, including aristocrats, gentry women, shopkeepers, and streetwalkers. Overall, he essentialized European women as possessing "beauty and elegance," by which he meant sensual attractiveness to men and skills displayed in public. Their physical features, "beauteous lips, fair complexion, and black eyes," inspired him to poetry.<sup>11</sup> Such female characterizations were highly conventional for the abstract, unnamed "beloved" in Persian literature; his portrayals did not vary much from European woman to woman. What was highly unconventional in Persian literature was his explicit description of specific named women, either married or unmarried, with whom he socialized. He even presented graphic verses and witticisms celebrating their bodily charms to the women themselves and their families. For example, when Lady Metcalfe remarked to Abu Talib on the unusually tall tree under which she, her husband (Major Sir Thomas Theophilus Metcalfe, an East India Company Director), and their ward, Miss Hosea, lounged, Abu Talib brought the company to laughter with his bon mot: the continual company of Miss Hosea would animate him to grow tall as well.<sup>12</sup> Rather than appearing insulting to the woman's or her family's honor, such depictions made him ever more popular among his European hosts because he flattered in exotic ways.

Among others, the King's brother, the Duke of Gloucester, teased aristocratic women about their falling in love with Abu Talib. In British high society, he found, a nubile woman's skill in flirtation added to her social prowess, rather than stigmatizing her as immoral. Since Abu Talib was at this time married with a family, nearly fifty,

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and exotically outside the conventional marriage considerations of the women with whom he jested, his relationships with most were apparently not taken as serious by either side. At least one London “beauty,” however, attracted him to the extent of “love.” He abruptly ended one of his convivial visits to the country home of former Governor-General Warren Hastings with a dash back to London, writing: “my desire was aroused by a fair beloved in London, so I could not be detained.”<sup>13</sup> While no permanent attachment eventuated, his interest in British women was apparently not always purely sociological.

Beneath this apparently comfortable heterosexual banter, however, Abu Talib perceived an immorality that he would never expect nor tolerate from Asian women of his class. The sordid morals of some aristocrats among whom he moved were notorious in their own society, not for mere flirtation, but for adultery. For example, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire were among his most socially prominent and frequent hosts. At parties, the Duchess entrusted Abu Talib to her husband’s current mistress and future wife (already the mother of three of the Duke’s illegitimate children), Lady Elizabeth Foster, who had abandoned her own abusive husband. Abu Talib described strolling one evening with Lady Foster “according to the custom of the women of London, arm linked in arm” through the flowering gardens of Devonshire’s estate.<sup>14</sup> He reported that even the Prince of Wales (later King George IV, a bigamist and philanderer) deferred to her beauty by stepping back to allow Abu Talib and Lady Foster to precede him. Abu Talib regarded such incidents as indicative of the priority English royalty paid to their women’s physical beauty, rather than to their morality.

Abu Talib also expatiated extensively on the pervasive licentiousness among the English generally. He described many unmarried but cohabiting couples. He repeatedly noted the numerous European prostitutes whom he encountered, but apparently did not employ; just in the parish of London where he resided, Marylebone, he reported hearing that there were 60,000 prostitutes.<sup>15</sup> Thus, he evidently regarded the lifestyles and status of European women as often overly associated with sexuality which, while personally attractive to him as a male, indicated the moral inferiority of British culture.

Just before leaving Britain, Abu Talib wrote an essay entitled “Vindication of the Liberties of Asiatic Women” (composed in Persian but translated into English under his supervision), which demonstrated that “Asiatic” women (by which he meant elite Indian Muslim women) received more respect and had more freedom than did British women.<sup>16</sup> Compared to European commentators, he wrote as an expert on both European women, with whom he was familiar, and also women of his own class, whom he knew but to whom European men would never have access. After he returned to India, European editors republished his commentary for European consumption in at least ten English, Dutch, German, and French journals and books between 1801 and 1819. Into the 1840s, his

“Vindication” remained the benchmark used by European editors to judge Asian critiques of European society.<sup>17</sup>

After his return home, however, Abu Talib—like various other Indian travelers who made this same journey—found his prominence in Britain had made him appear unemployable to British officials in India. Despite multiple assurances of advancement given him in London, he discovered that his “race” excluded him from high appointments in the colonial administration, while his raised expectations made lower posts unattractive. He died in relative poverty in 1806, just months before an invitation reached him from London inviting him back as a Professor of Persian at the East India Company’s civil service college (newly opened near Hertford). Thus, in Britain, Abu Talib was distinguished in the highest circles, but, in colonial India, this distinction disqualified him.

Abu Talib and three other late eighteenth century Indian travelers to Britain chose to write in Persian, the language of elite high culture in India.<sup>18</sup> They remained Muslim and proud of their religion’s morality compared to Christianity, particularly with regard to gender relations. While admiring British technology, as the colonized, they did not express the sense of inferiority that British imperialism later asserted. But each circulated his original travel narrative only in limited ways in India, typically in manuscript among members of his own high-literary circle.<sup>19</sup> In most cases, Asian travelers who followed had no awareness of these earlier explorations. Thus, while individual Asians explored Europe, their hard-earned knowledge and discoveries did not widely inform Asian society about Europe’s globally expanding influences: cultural, economic, military, or political.

In contrast, European editors, translators, publishers, and other “Orientalists” circulated the works of Abu Talib and other Asians in European languages for consumption by Europeans.<sup>20</sup> Even more influentially, travel accounts by Europeans about Asia had long accumulated in archives and libraries in Europe, thus informing European policy makers and the general reading public and forming a basis for Orientalism and colonialism.<sup>21</sup> Many Orientalists even suppressed memories of their exchanges with these early Asians in Europe, through what Tavakoli-Targhi calls an act of “genesis amnesia.”<sup>22</sup> By rereading today in their own terms the eighteenth-century works of Abu Talib Khan, Dean Mahomed, and other Asian travelers, we can come to understand their perspectives on the early years of the connected histories of Asia and Europe.

#### **Indian Travelers in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain**

As the British Empire continued to expand across South Asia, conquering a million square miles from 1757 to 1857 and bringing India’s remaining half-million square miles under British indirect rule, ever larger numbers of Indians traveled to Britain. By the mid-nineteenth century, 30,000 to 40,000 Indians had ventured to Britain; most returned home after a few months or years there, but hundreds

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Dean Mahomed's baths in Brighton, England, c. 1826. S.D. Mahomed *Shampooing* (Brighton: The Author, 1826).

settled. In Britain, their scope for adaptation to the local society varied by their class, gender, and religious and regional background, as well as by the current condition of British society and colonialism.

During the early nineteenth century, fifteen more male Indian travelers wrote books about their experiences in Britain, selecting English, Urdu, or Nepali according to their intended readership. Over this period, their overall attitude toward Britain—while by no means uniform—increasingly reflected their status as the colonized. Most recognized British worldwide military, technological, and commercial supremacy. Nevertheless, most also enjoyed their gendered superiority over British women of their class or lower. Further, many made trenchant critiques of British cultural, economic, and political immorality.

Of the hundreds of Asians who settled in Britain during this period, most sought to combine their distinctive origins with social roles that accommodated British expectations. Almost all settlers, both men and women, adopted British clothing, Anglicized their names, converted to Christianity, married Britons, and thus gained access to British society. Yet, some claimed the prestige of exclusive access to the culture and science of Asia.

Among settlers, Dean Mahomed made himself one of the most prominent, using his Indian identity to rise above his British rivals. In his late forties, he traveled to London with his growing British-born family. In 1810, he created there a restaurant he named the “Hindustanee Coffee House”—also famous as the “Hooka Club.” Unique among London’s thousands of competing eating-houses, his provided what he called authentic Indian cuisine and ambiance.<sup>23</sup> Later, he moved to the burgeoning seaside spa of Brighton. There, he made famous a medical practice he called “shampooing”: full-body therapeutic massage (from the Indian

*champi*). To broadcast his expertise, he published many hyperbolic newspaper advertisements and self-promoting books including: *Cases Cured by Sake Deen Mahomed, Shampooing Surgeon, and Inventor of the Indian Medicated Vapour and Sea-Water Baths* (Brighton: The Author, 1820) and *Shampooing* (Brighton: The Author, 1822, 1826, 1838).

Kings George IV and William IV submitted their bodies to his ministrations, as did many European aristocrats and gentry. For two decades, Dean Mahomed made himself and his baths the epitome of fashion. He opened branch bathhouses in London and negotiated with British backers for franchises in other resorts. His success inspired British rivals to imitate his “Indian” treatment. In the heated public exchanges and competing advertisements that followed, Dean Mahomed repeatedly trumpeted his unique authenticity as an actual Indian: “The herbs and essential oils with which my Baths are impregnated, are brought expressly from India, and undergo a certain process known only to myself . . .”<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, he made the terms “shampooing” and “Indian bath” widespread, consequently losing proprietary control over them. His British-born children found it impossible to sustain his enterprise since they could not as persuasively claim to be “Indian” with exclusive access to Indian medical science. Thus, the entrepreneurial opportunities that had made Dean Mahomed so prominent as “the Indian Shampooing Surgeon” lost value in British eyes; after his death, shampooing became mere hair-wash and the steambath became “Turkish.”

The lives and works of Dean Mahomed, Abu Talib, and other Asians in Europe have hitherto largely remained “homeless texts.”<sup>25</sup> With the rise of Britain as the dominant empire worldwide, British attitudes became less accepting of Asia and Asians, including of

Asian travelers in Europe. Their lives and their accounts of Britain and Britons have largely dropped out of British history. Nor do the accounts of these Asians abroad fit into the national narratives of the new nations of Asia. Yet, their books reveal Asian perspectives; the lives of their authors demonstrate that Asians also traveled globally and could cross some social and cultural boundaries, albeit to different degrees over time, forming a distinctive element of today's emerging world history. ■

## NOTES

1. Among others see: Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Bodies in Contact* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern, eds., *Empire and Others* (London: UCL Press, 1999); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* (London: Routledge, 1992); Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) and *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).
2. See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).
3. For his biography, see Michael H. Fisher, *First Indian Author in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).
4. Reprinted in *Travels of Dean Mahomet*, ed. Michael H. Fisher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
5. Frontispiece: Etching by J. Finlay from an original by Ghaywanimdy [?], [1794].
6. Reprinted and edited by A. Apcar (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1918).
7. For example, Dean Mahomed voted for Parliament. "Brighton Poll Book" (1847), Institute for Historical Research, London.
8. Etching by William [?] Ridley from portrait by Samuel Drummond, *European Magazine, and London Review*, 40 (September 1801), 163–65.
9. Abu Talib Khan, *Masir Talibi fi Bilad Afranji*, Persian ADD 8145, ff. 97–98, British Library [hereinafter B. L.].
10. Abu Talib Khan, *Masir Talibi fi Bilad Afranji*, ed. Hosein Khadive-Jam (Tehran: Hosein Khadive-Jam, 1983), 64.
11. *Ibid.*, 109–10.
12. *Ibid.*, 133.
13. *Ibid.*, 124, 139; Abu Talib, *Poems*, tr. George Swinton (London: George Swinton, 1807); Warren Hastings Papers, ADD 39885, B. L.
14. Khan, *Masir*, 253–54.
15. *Ibid.*, 272.
16. For the text, see *Westward Bound*, ed. Mushirul Hasan (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 297–304. For analysis see Michael H. Fisher, "Representing 'His' Women," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 37, 2 (2000), 215–37. See also Gulfishan Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions of the West* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
17. E.g., *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 54, 338 (December 1843), 762.
18. Mir Muhammad Husain wrote first in Arabic but then quickly rewrote in Persian: "Risalah-i Ahwal-i Mulk-i Farang," Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh.
19. *Ibid.*; Munshi Ismail's "Tarikh-i Jadid" is in Simon Digby's private manuscript collection, discussed by him in "An Eighteenth Century Narrative" in Christopher Shackle, ed., *Urdu and Muslim South Asia* (London: SOAS, 1989), 49–65.
20. Abu Taleb Khan, *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*, 2 vols, tr. Charles Stewart (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1810; 1814). Similarly, Itisam al-Din, "Shigrif Nama-i Wilayat," MSS OR 200, B. L., was partly translated by James Edward Alexander and Munshi Shamsher Khan, *Shigurf Namah-i Velaet* (London: Parbury, Allen, 1827).
21. See Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism*, and Bernard S. Cohn's influential *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
22. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).
23. See: Anonymous, *Epicure's Almanack* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1815), 123–24; *London Times* 27/3/1811; Khan, *Travels*, tr. Stewart (1814), vol. 1, 124n.
24. Mahomed, *Shampooing* (Brighton: The Author, 1826), viii, 17.
25. Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*.

**MICHAEL H. FISHER**, Robert S. Danforth Professor of History at Oberlin College in Ohio, teaches and writes about the early history of relations between Asians and Britons in Britain and Asia. His most recent books include: *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004; Paperback edition, 2006); *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth Century Journey through India* (edited) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and *Visions of Mughal India: An Anthology of European Travel Writing* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, forthcoming).



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