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Historical Mistranslations: Identity, Slavery, and Genre in Eighteenth-Century India

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Abstract

Colonial and postcolonial historians writing in English relied upon an emancipated slave's eighteenth-century Persian text, Tahmās Nāma*, to construct the history of the Punjab in the same period. In this process, they have mistranslated the text and the genre. Rather than reading* Tahmās Nāma *as factual history or as a moral text of refinement, this article argues that if we return to the original account, in Persian, we see that the text is primarily auto/biographical. While this auto/biography does provide some insight into eighteenth-century political history of the Punjab and Mughal Hindustan, it—more importantly—sheds light on the ethnic, religious, social, economic and gendered lives of the author, Miskin, and the people whom he includes in his narrative. These intersecting and overlapping identities have been erased, flattened or misrepresented in translations of the text. Based on a re-reading of the auto/biography in its original language, this article considers how identity and slavery—conceptual categories of the present that are elided in the mistranslations—function in the text, and how those categories were understood, negotiated and leveraged during the eighteenth century.*

Keywords: Tahmās Nāma; an eighteenth-century slave's autobiography; mis-translations; *Kitāb-i Qiṣṣa-i Tahmās Miskīn*

In the 1740s, a soldier galloping through a small village in Turkey captured a young boy who was about five years old—effectively making him a war captive, who, like property, could be, and indeed was, owned, traded, gifted and inherited by multiple owners. In his earlier years of captivity, he had both kind and cruel masters; he had very little agency over his movement or treatment. Eventually, one of his masters, who had travelled with a large entourage from Iran to Multan, gifted him along with other young Turkish boys to the governor of Lahore, Nawab Muin al-Mulk (d. 1753). When Muin al-Mulk died mysteriously while on a hunting expedition, his widow Suraya Murad Begum, also known as Mughlani Begum (d. 1779), inherited her late husband's possessions, including his male slaves. One of the young slaves inherited by Begum Mughlani was this young boy, who called himself Muhkam al-Daula, Itiqad-i Jang, Tahmas Beg Khan Bahadur, hereafter referred to by his

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nom de plume Miskin. After he was later emancipated by Mughlani Begum, Miskin wrote *Kitāb-i Qiṣṣa-i Tahmās Miskīn,* also called, *Tahmās Nāma* (*Book of Tahmas Miskin's Story*, or the *Tahmas Treatise*). He completed recording his life and the historical events of his time, according to the date towards the end of the narrative, on 11 Jumadi al-Awwal, 1196 AH (24 April 1782), in the 24th *julūs* (regnal year) of Mubarak Shah Alam Badshah Ghazi, the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II (d. 1806).[1] Miskin died in 1802; the last two decades of his life are not recounted in his auto/biography.

Colonial and postcolonial historians have preserved and partially translated *Tahmās Nāma* in the hope of advancing factual history-writing, due to Miskin's inclusion of first-person eye-witness accounts of events in the Punjab and Delhi during the eighteenth century. To this end, the text was first abridged and translated by the well-read Bengali historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar (d. 1958) in 1934,[2] and then again by a Maharashtrian historian Pagdi Setu Madhava Rao (d. 1994) in 1967.[3] For Sarkar, this text became *the* account of the Punjab in the eighteenth century—in his second volume of *The Fall of the Mughal Empire* he quotes its content through almost verbatim summary translations to describe occurrences leading up to the downfall of the Mughals. Two decades later after the second translation by Rao, Muhammad Aslam critically edited the work and published it in its original language—Persian—based on two extant manuscripts, one held at the British Library and the other at Aligarh Muslim University. Historians who are interested in Miskin's auto/biography but who do not have access to the Persian language rely on Rao's English translation of the text.[4] Although Sarkar's abridged translation is rare and more difficult to consult, his passages translated verbatim from the text are perhaps more widely read because these are included in his analysis of the fall of the Mughal empire. Indeed, the question of how and why the Mughal empire 'declined' has inspired decades of scholarly output, and so scholars attempting to answer the question, especially those who cannot read Persian, have relied heavily Sarkar's reconstructed histories and translations.

This article argues against reading Miskin's *Tahmās Nāma* as factual history, as historians and translators have done since the colonial period. It proposes instead that if we return to the original account—in Persian—we find that the text is primarily auto/biographical. While this auto/biography does provide some insights on the eighteenth-century political history of the Punjab and Mughal Hindustan, it—more importantly, I would maintain—sheds light on the ethnic, religious, social, economic and gendered 'lives' of the author himself, and the people whom he includes in his narrative. In contrast, these intersecting and overlapping identities are erased, flattened or misrepresented in existing translations of the text; Sarkar, for example, refers to Miskin as a page, instead of a slave.[5]

[1]Tahmas Khan Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, (ed.) Muhammad Aslam (Lahore, 1986), p. 355. There are actually two dates of completion. The first, based on a chronogram, is 1780, the second is 1782. See below for a fuller discussion of this point.

[2]Jadunath Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, vol. ii, 1754–1771 (Calcutta, 1934).

[3]Pagdi Setu Madhava Rao, trans., *Tahmās Nāma, the Autobiography of a Slave* (Bombay, 1967).

[4]Persian-reading historians of Punjab, including Purnima Dhavan, Muzaffar Alam, and J. S. Grewal, read and cite the critical edition of the Persian text.

[5]Indrani Chatterjee, 'A Slave's Quest for Selfhood in Eighteenth-Century Hindustan', *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 37, 1 (2000), pp. 53–86; Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*.

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Rereading *Tahmās Nāma* in its original language challenges existing over-simplifications regarding the various identities that are captured within it. By identity, I mean both that which can be self-proclaimed and what is ascribed by others. Identities are layered, negotiated and leveraged. And yet, these are coherent in some fashion. For example, Miskin is a male, a Sufi, a Muslim, a captive, a slave, a soldier, a superintendent, a poet, a writer, a grammarian, a Turkish speaker, a Persian writer, of Anatolian origin, a husband, a father, a grandfather, an adopted son, a half-brother and a Turk. Some of these identities he acquires over time (poet, grammarian and writer); some are imposed on him (captive and slave); some he is born with (male), and some he actively affiliates with (Sufi, Muslim and Turk). These layered identities are privileged at some moments of his life, and they are downplayed at others.

Identities have the potential to link an individual to a collective. A poet, for example, would have associated and interacted socially with other poets. During the eighteenth century, poets met regularly and respected the etiquettes and norms of these gatherings. In Miskin's lifetime, these assemblies were not open to anyone; rather one had to achieve a certain level of mastery of the art of poetry. This was accomplished when someone with authority and respect within the poetry community recognised potential or poetic skills in another poet and invited him/her to participate. When this occurred, the newly inducted poet would follow existing customs and norms in order to maintain relations with other poets. The same was true for Sufi orders; one had to identify a spiritual guide, and then providing the guide was willing to initiate him/her into the order, the person would be able to access this Sufi community. Gatherings, based on identities, functioned as both religious and social spaces, and only those who were initiated were permitted to enter and occupy the space.

Identities also mattered when it came to mobility and movement. Men had access to public spaces, but if they entered a city in which they did not reside, they were required to have the proper paperwork. For example, when Miskin needed to go to Delhi as a free man, he was stopped at Sirhind because he did not have the necessary documents to move on. Consequently, Miskin had to leave his possessions behind, go to Delhi to acquire this paperwork, which took him months, and then return to Sirhind with his documentation to collect his belongings. Sometimes movement and access to space, especially private spaces, required the leveraging of two or more identities. Miskin was permitted to enter the women's quarters in his master's household precisely because he was a slave and a pre-pubescent youth. Likewise, Miskin had access to his master during morning prayers because he was a slave, a Muslim and a male.

Miskin's Mughal identity was a similarly fluid category in his life. At the start of *Tahmās Nāma*, he writes that people inquired about his ethnic origins. Based on his looks, they guessed that he might be Armenian, or Kurdish or Khariji. Without settling the question at the outset, he tells his readers that he was living in a village near Bayazid when he was captured at the age of five.[6] But later in the text, he claims a Turkish identity. When recounting certain moments of his life, he uses the voices of the people about whom he writes in order to describe himself. For example, he mentions that Mughlani Begum referred

[6]Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, pp. 14, 26–27.

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to him as "*mughal-i haqīqī*"—a true/pure blood Turk, or someone from the house of *Gurkān*. Miskin was the epitome of fluid Mughal identity; his identity was not based on birth, rather, it depended on affiliation to others who might have a real or constructed genealogy that marked that lineage—in his case it was being Mughal. Moreover, an entire household could be considered part of the same group. Such was the Mughal household, which consisted of eunuchs, wives and concubines who came from different regions and even religious backgrounds. And yet, they would collectively be described as 'Mughal', or 'Turkish', because they were closely linked to the Mughal/Turkish emperor, whose lineage was a matter of fact and uncontested. Miskin also affiliated himself with the Uzbeks, as one of his masters who was kind to him was an Uzbek and had 'adopted him', calling him 'son'. When this master died, Miskin was taken by a few more Uzbeks before being given as a gift to the Mughal governor. Throughout *Tahmās Nāma*, Miskin mentions his relations with his Uzbek 'sister' (*hum-shīrī*), in whom he regularly confided.

Historians studying slavery, whether they specialise in the ancient Near East or the trans-Atlantic slave trade, have not yet reached a consensus regarding its definition. Most scholars do, however, agree that slavery represents an institutionalised form of oppression and is constituted by asymmetrical power relations.[7] Miskin's identity as a slave aligns with this very loose definition of slavery. The scholarly turn away from studies of legal or economic slave histories to focusing instead on domestic and household slavery—the type of slavery that Miskin experienced—is thus more helpful in understanding how slavery functioned in early-modern Hindustan. As a young boy he was captured and became a captive (*asīr*).[8] Miskin's status as a slave was not "social death" as per Orlando Patterson's definition;[9] there existed social hierarchies within the system of slavery that Miskin leveraged throughout his two decades as a slave. Indeed, scholars of slavery have argued that social mobility occurred within the slave system,[10] and this was true for Miskin. For example, Miskin managed to rise to the rank of a "*khan*" while he was still a slave in Mughlani Begum's household. After he was freed, he acquired another title, "*beg*", indicating he led or managed soldiers and horsemen. And yet, oppression and asymmetrical power relations existed: he was forcibly married, exploited, unlawfully imprisoned and almost put to death (multiple times) during his years in slavery.

Gender, in this article, refers to the way in which a person is identified as male, female, eunuch or child. Persons falling into these categories had certain obligations that they were required to perform, and they were permitted or denied access to certain spaces based on their gender. Males in *Tahmās Nāma*, for example, were expected to take part in congregational prayers if they were part of the household and a Muslim. Females of a certain socio-economic class, such as Mughlani Begum, were not permitted to abandon *purdā*—screen or

[7]Laura Culbertson (ed.), *Slaves and Households in the Near East* (Chicago, 2011), p. 2.

[8]Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, p. 12.

[9]Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 13. He defines slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons". In Miskin's case, he was not born a slave, and his position as a slave was not permanent, nor can one say that he was consistently dishonoured.

[10]Culbertson (ed.), *Slaves and Households in the Near East*, p. 9. "Enslaved persons in Near Eastern contexts could engage in social maneuvering and hierarchical ascension even within the confines of slavery and cannot be considered social dead or dispossessed".

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curtain that hid their bodies and faces from the public. Eunuchs could move in and between the male and female spaces that operated within the household. Pre-pubescent children were similarly free to move around as they wished within its walls. In Miskin's text, therefore, gender is closely connected to mobility and obligations regarding how someone should behave. For example, he rebukes a eunuch, who had fallen in love with a domestic slave woman, for running away with her, escaping to Delhi from Lahore.[11] He further blames the head of the household who, it was rumoured, accepted them both in his own household. Eunuchs, after all, were not allowed to leave without the permission of their master, and, according to Miskin, such transgressions were immoral and punishable.

Auto/biographies in Premodern Persianate India

Miskin in *Tahmās Nāma* refers to the text as variously "*ahwāl-i khūd*" (my affairs),[12] "*qiṣṣa*" (history, tale),[13] "*qiṣṣa-i khūd*" (my history, tale),[14] "*dāstān*" (history, story)[15] and "*rūdād*" (account).[16] First-person narration of one's own life, or the lives of those close to oneself, was not unique in the pre-modern context in North India, and especially within Persian literature.[17] Taymiya Zaman's definition of auto/biography is useful for our purposes and can be applied to Miskin's account:

> My use of the term "auto/biography" points to the overlap between writing one's life, composing a history of one's times (which often included biographies of eminent men of letters) and locating one's authorial self within social, political, familial, and literary circles.[18]

Zaman further explains the overlapping nature of genres, such as history and ethics, and that there was no distinct, bounded, category of the biography or autobiography genres. In the pre-modern period, the most well-known auto/biographies were composed or commissioned by members of the imperial elite. The founder of the Mughal empire, Zahir al-Din Muhammad, 'Babur' (d. 1530), wrote his auto/biography—*Baburnāma*—in Chagatai Turkish. His grandson and third Mughal emperor, Abu al-Fath Jalal al-Din Muhammad, 'Akbar' (d. 1605), commissioned a translation of this auto/biography into Persian, which was presented to him in Kabul, the city where his grandfather was buried. Women also contributed to this genre: Gulbadan Begum (d. 1603) famously wrote a biography of her brother, the second Mughal emperor, Nasir al-Din Muhammad, 'Humayun' (d. 1556), and included within it autobiographical accounts of her own life.[19]

[11]Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, p. 173.
[12]*Ibid.*, p. 7.
[13]*Ibid.*, p. 8.
[14]*Ibid.*, p. 15.
[15]*Ibid.*
[16]*Ibid.*, p. 83.
[17]Taymiya R. Zaman, 'Inscribing Empire: Sovereignty and Subjectivity in Mughal Memoirs' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 2007); Taymiya R. Zaman, 'Instructive Memory: An Analysis of Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 54, 5 (2011), pp. 677–700; Taymiya R. Zaman, 'Visions of Juliana: A Portuguese Woman at the Court of the Mughals', *Journal of World History* 23, 4 (2012), pp. 761–791.
[18]Zaman, 'Instructive Memory', p. 679.
[19]Zaman, 'Inscribing Empire'; and Zaman, 'Instructive Memory'.

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Non-imperial persons likewise composed auto/biographical accounts in the early-modern period, but their accounts are less well-known to modern scholars, although this is changing. In the sixteenth century, the Afghan soldier Dattu Sarvani attached his auto/biography to a Sufi treatise, *Laṭā'if-i Quddusī*.[20] By the eighteenth century, Muhammad Ali Hazin (d. 1766), Abdul Karim Kashmiri (d. 1784), and Mir Taqi Mir (d. 1810) were producing auto/biographical travel accounts and anecdotes about their lives in the Persian language.[21] In these writings they set out out what they wished to preserve for posterity, included political and historical events that affected their lives, just as we find in Miskin's auto/biography. But whereas Hazin, Kashmiri and Mir were of the (near) scholarly class, born into families who held similar occupations or were trained to undertake such employment, Miskin did not belong to an elite or a scholarly family. Rather, as we have seen, Miskin was a slave—gifted to the governor or Lahore—who managed to free himself.[22] It is possible that he wished to be included in the scholarly class of people, and so recorded his life's story in Persian, in addition to composing poetry and a grammar for the Turkish language (his first language).[23] After all, in Muslim contexts, many emancipated slave-soldiers rose in rank to become part of the elite, especially in the eighteenth century.[24]

Compared to the accounts by Hazin, Kashmiri and Mir, Miskin's style of composition is unique: Miskin begins and ends each section with a reference to his present moment of writing, while the body of the sections concern his past. These beginnings and endings are omitted in existing English translations and summaries, but importantly they reveal the self-conscience act of writing down one's own narrative. On the other hand, like Hazin, Kashmiri and Mir, Miskin interweaves political history with his personal narrative in

[20]Simon Digby, 'Dreams and Reminiscences of Dattu Sarvani a Sixteenth Century Indo-Afghan Soldier', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 2, 1 (January 1965), pp. 52–80; Simon Digby, 'Dreams and Reminiscences of Dattu Sarvani a Sixteenth Century Indo-Afghan Soldier', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 2, 2 (April 1965), pp. 178–194.

[21]Muḥammad 'Alī Ḥazīn and F. C. Belfour, *The Life of Sheikh Mohammed Ali Hazin,* (London, 1830); Abdul Karim Kashmiri, *A Journey from Bengal to England, through the Northern Part of India, Kashmire, Afghanistan, and Persia, and into Russia, by the Caspian Sea.*, trans. George Forster (London, 1798); al-Kashmīrī 'Abd al-Karīm ibn 'Ākibat ibn Muḥammad Bulākī, *Bayān-i vāqi'*., (ed.) K. B. Nasīm (Lahore, 1970); Mīr Taqī Mīr, *Ẕikr-i Mīr: ya'nī ḥaẓrat Mīr Taqī Mīr kī khvud nivisht savāniḥ-i 'umrī*, ed. 'Abdulḥaq (Aurangābād, 1928); Mīr Taqī Mīr and C. M. Naim, *Zikr-i Mir: The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet, Mir Muhammad Taqi 'Mir', 1723–1810* (New Delhi and New York, 1999); Mana Kia, 'Accounting for Difference: A Comparative Look at the Autobiographical Travel Narratives of Hazin Lāhiji and ʿAbd al-Karim Kashmiri', *Journal of Persianate Studies* 2, 2 (2009), pp. 210–236; Zahra Sabri, 'Mir Taqi Mir's Ẕikr-i Mīr: An Account of the Poet or an Account by the Poet?', *The Medieval History Journal* 18, 2 (2015), pp. 214–249. Sabri argues that Mir's account was not autobiographical; rather, it should be read as *majmū'ah*, miscellaneous compilation. She further asserts, "There does not appear to be a strong case for the existence of an autobiographical mentality in the pre-modern greater Islamicate literary milieu, which includes the Turco-Mongol, Persian and Arabic spheres of literary production". I disagree with her assessment. Miskin's account clearly depicts "autobiographical mentality", and one would argue that the auto/biographical accounts listed above share the same.

[22]It was not unusual for slaves to become emancipated. See Scott C. Levi, 'Hindus beyond the Hindu Kush: Indians in the Central Asian Slave Trade', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 12, 3 (2002), p. 287; Mary Ann Fay, *Unveiling the Harem: Elite Women and the Paradox of Seclusion in Eighteenth-Century Cairo* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2012), pp. 70–71; Gabriel Piterberg, 'The Formation of an Ottoman Egyptian Elite in the 18th Century', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22, 3 (1990), pp. 275–289. Levi discusses how many slaves would become manumitted in Central Asia after the death of their master, or after they reached a specific age, usually 50 years old. Fay writes about female slaves and their emancipation, some of whom go on to be elite and landowning, evidenced through endowments (*awqāf*). This is not the case for Miskin; his manumission is discussed below.

[23]Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, p. 15.

[24]Piterberg, 'Formation'; Hagiographical accounts in South Asia included many entries of such men, who were slaves and then rose to an elite status, or whose descendants became famous scholars/poets.

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chronological order. He provides biographical detail of people with whom he comes into contact, and important political figures whom he does not personally meet, such as Nadir Shah Afshar (d. 1747), Ahmad Shah Abdali-Durrani (d. 1772), and various Mughal emperors. Miskin also shares anecdotes about non-elites, including eunuchs who serve Mughlani Begum, and the women with whom he works or has relations, such as his 'milk-sister' who (as mentioned above) is identified as Uzbek, and prostitutes.

From Auto/biography to History or Ethical Treatise

Rao's English abridged translation of *Tahmās Nāma* reads more like a chronicle than an auto/biography, and is organised into four chapters: 'Tahmas Nama'; 'Punjab: 1753–1758'; 'The Punjab Affairs: 1758–1763'; and 'Delhi Affairs: 1763–1782'. The 'Tahmas Nama' chapter describes Miskin's early childhood and his time as a captive. At the beginning of his abridged translation, Rao states:

> In the translation, I have not followed his distribution of chapters. I have indicated important events at suitable places in the narrative. The work, being rather bulky, did not admit of a detailed translation. I have abridged it without omitting any significant incident or event. Descriptions of events of which Tahmas Khan was not a witness or for which more authentic sources are available have been abridged. But where Tahmas Khan has personally witnessed events, I have faithfully translated his narrative. Tahmas Nama gives a graphic description of conditions in Punjab and Delhi during the invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali [Durrani]. As such it provides a [*sic*] very important source material for the study of Indian history.[25]

Rao does not seem interested in maintaining the integrity of the text, or the genre. Rather, he is keen to translate only what he feels can help further the study of Indian history. He also fails to mention that he supplies his own summaries for longer accounts (even those that are about Miskin's life or eye-witness accounts); he largely omits poetry, with the exception of a few couplets; and he inserts dates into the text that are not present in the original account.

Indrani Chatterjee's article on Miskin's account has challenged the translations by Sarkar and Rao, and the problems of eliding the autobiographical genre. Her main argument is that Sarkar neglected the need to acknowledge Miskin as a slave, and she reads Miskin's account as a moral guide—an articulation of his piety, or *adab*, defining *adab* as "the whole system of injunctions, prescriptions and valuations, a moral repertoire, that enables the techniques of 'memory' and assembling of a 'self' as the bearer of ethics".[26] Chatterjee reasons that Sarkar's inability to call Miskin a slave and to understand him as such in his own writing has "had a seriously debilitating impact on the historiography of slavery".[27] Moreover, Chatterjee demonstrates how the text can allow its author to gain authority through "codes of

[25]Rao, *Tahmās Nāma, the Autobiography of a Slave*, pp. viii–ix.

[26]Chatterjee, 'A Slave's Quest for Selfhood in Eighteenth-Century Hindustan', p. 58 fn 15.

[27]*Ibid.*, p. 60. Slavery in Islamicate societies has been wrongly labelled 'benign' because within Islamic law there are many ways in which a slave can gain his/her freedom and even become part of the ruling class. Moreover, within Islamic customs, slavery was not hereditary. Nonetheless, while Miskin's experience of slavery might not have been as brutal as the stories of slavery in the Americas, systems of oppression exist and require serious consideration.

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behavior and values as well as of methods of personal formation".[28] One cultivates *adab* through discipline and training, and the memoir serves as evidence of fruits borne from the rigours of self-cultivation.

These nuances, however, are lost in Rao's attempt to make the text appealing to historians. For example, Rao changes the narrative style by adding dates within the story that are not present in the Persian text. For Rao, dates are necessary—they are the markers required by historians to cross-reference what Miskin reports, cite him as a credible source, and/or corroborate dates/events inter-textually. But though Miskin does not report dates, he is very aware of time, even if perhaps not in the way that a historian would want. So, while he does not provide precise dates for the events that occur and the ones in which he participates throughout the text, he does provide two dates. In the poetry at the very beginning of *Tahmās Nāma*, he includes a chronogram that adds up to 1194 AH (31 August 1780),[29] writing that he began his narrative during the first day of Ramadan and that it took him nine months to complete the work.[30] Miskin includes the second date towards the end of the narrative, namely the date on which he completed this "*kitāb-i qissa-i Tahmās Miskīn*"[31]: 11 Jumādā al-Awwal, 1196 AH (24 April 1782), in the 24th *julūs* (regnal year) of Mubarak Shah Alam Badshah Ghazi.[32] Between the date provided by his chronogram at the beginning of the work and the date he supplies in the prose itself, there is a lapse of one year and eight months. There is clearly a discrepancy here; either he did not actually write the work in nine months as stated at the end of the composition, or he failed to compose the chronogram correctly, or he inserted an already-composed poem into his narrative without fixing the chronogram. Regardless of this inconsistency, however, dates are present in the text; so, though Miskin chooses not to include precise dates throughout his narrative, he is, I would suggest, aware of them.

For Chatterjee, the absence of precise dates privileges *Tahmās Nāma* as a moral guide, a "timeless" truth that furthers her preference to read the memoir in the context of self-cultivation (*adab*).[33] But since time is not actually absent in this text, how does Miskin, then, think of time and how does this relate to his narrative? There are few ways in which Miskin makes use of time. One is how he measures the days. When describing the routine of those whom he admires, such as Muin al-Mulk, or the routine of his own life, such as his new one when he became a *khān* (title and access given by local courts), he marks the time of the day by referring to *pahar*[34] or prayer times.[35] It is possible to read this as an elaboration of how one practices discipline and training in order to become a more refined and cultivated individual. And yet, it could be viewed as a commentary on the social lives of governors, noble men and even slaves.

[28]Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley CA., 1984), p. 2.
[29]Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, p. 8.
[30]*Ibid.*, p. 355.
[31]*Ibid.*
[32]*Ibid.* This is Mughal emperor Shah Alam II (d. 1806).
[33]Chatterjee, 'A Slave's Quest for Selfhood in Eighteenth-Century Hindustan', pp. 57–58.
[34]A *pahar* is a unit of three hours; there are eight units throughout the day.
[35]Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, pp. 18, 19, 27.

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In a non-*adab* sense, Miskin references days, weeks, months and years in relation to his own life. He does this by first giving a referential, and then adds or subtracts the amount of time since that event occurred. For example, he comments that after Ahmad Shah Durrani, Timur Shah Durrani[36] ruled for one year and two months; or similarly that three years prior to writing his auto/biography, he saw and helped Mughlani Begum in Shahjahanabad (Delhi).[37] Additionally, he measures time with a reference to his own age when a significant event occurs. After all, this is the story of *his* life—not a history of the Punjab or Delhi, as previous historians have chosen to read it. For example, Miskin tells us that he was merely 15 when he advised and helped Qasim Khan, an important figure appearing throughout the narrative.[38] When he was 20, he decided to seek initiation in a Sufi *tarīqa* (order, lit. interpretation or path). He was 26 when he travelled to Sialkot on behalf of Mughlani Begum. He was nearly 50 when he composed his auto/biography. The centre of this narrative is always Miskin, rather than the political ups and downs of the eighteenth century. This is a stylistic choice; Miskin could have easily inserted dates (day, month, year), he was clearly aware of them, but seemingly chose not to do so. *Tahmās Nāma*, therefore, can be read as both timeless—serving as a moral guide for present and future readers of the account—and as a more precise and personal account of Miskin's own life.

While dates are added to the English translations and summaries, religion in stark contrast is largely absent. By religion, I mean both invocations to it, such as when Miskin invokes God or the Prophet, and examples of religiosity or piety. For Miskin, a person's morality or piety is closely tied to religion. Miskin's own identity as a religious man, who became a Sufi, is completely marginalised, even erased, in the English translations. To understand Miskin, and, therefore, the world in which he lives, it is important to consider his views on religion, how it informs his larger worldview, and how it impacts his movements, even in the very act of writing itself. For example, he often documents the time of writing through such references: "Oh Miskin! The late afternoon prayer (*'asr*) time has arrived, continue this story tomorrow".[39] And yet, we must also take care not to read religion into the text where it is not required. Religion is an important identity for our author, but it is not the only identity that Miskin cultivates, negotiates or leverages during his life.

Rao's 'translation' of the text from an auto/biography to an historical account omits some very important elements of the auto/biographical genre, authorial voice and content. The first two full folios of the manuscript (or first eight pages of the published text), which is exclusively poetry, are missing, nor are they summarised. This is important because the poetry at the beginning of *Tahmās Nāma* outlines why Miskin felt compelled to write this narrative, and why he chose to write it in the medium of prose rather than poetry. He explains that because God has ordained it, he must compose his life story rather than sit in silence (*khwāstam khāmush nashīnam*), drawing attention to the self-seclusion (*'uẓlat*) that would have been his preference had he had the choice. He writes, "although I want to sit quietly in the corner of seclusion, I changed my opinion because it is impossible to

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 354.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 233.

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hide God's strength".[40] He attributes his success to God, saying that God helped the wretched (our author), and raised him to such a level that Miskin could not repay the rewards bestowed upon him or effectively articulate his gratitude. He writes poetically that he wished to describe his life in "verses strung like pearls", to "turn [his] experiences into pearls and scatter them as beautiful poetry".[41] But, as he explains, he cannot compose his life in verse for two reasons: the first is that "there are few people of understanding and many who understand little", and the second is because he is not a master in poetry (this, of course, is a trope that many writers employ in this period, to display humility).[42] Accordingly, Miskin narrates his story in prose with a sense of urgency, with poetry interspersed for ornamentation or emphasis.[43] The poetry at the beginning is replete with Persianate linguistic allusions (those references to pearls, for example) and Islamic religious conventions, which form the foundation of the text. Before the chronogram at the end of the poetry, Miskin states, "He who reads this treatise / will scatter flowers of praise on its leaves. In this manner, it will be preserved in memory / May God always keep it flourishing". The last couplet of the poetry, in reference to the famous Persian poet Hafiz, includes the chronogram which adds up to 1094 AH, or 1780 CE: "Like pearls are pierced, [for the sake of making necklaces] the pen is struck, for the sake of his history / Fate said: this is a well-balance text".[44]

After the poetry, Miskin turns to prose to write about the creation of Adam and his spouse, Bibi Hawa,[45] and how all humans descended from them, through Noah. He positions himself as a believing Muslim who accepts Quranic narratives about the creation of life and humankind, stating that the Prophet Muhammad preached that all believers were brothers, and hence one was not better or worse than the other, for in truth they were all one. Deploying this logic, Miskin hopes that his treatise will help others refrain from making transgressions, and that, for himself, it will be an opportunity to reflect on his life, including moments when he was ignorant and lost, or miserable; and yet because it was God's will, his "beautiful life was not full of sin".[46]

For the body of the auto/biography, Miskin starts and ends each section with a reference to the present moment of writing—as mentioned above, these are omitted in the English translations. At the beginning of some sections, he boasts, "it is a new day and like the sun lights the earth, my pen lights the pages on which I write", or that the "pen of the horse is ready to run". At the end of sections, in usually one or two lines, he mentions why he must stop at this point in the narrative: "Oh Miskin! The time for evening prayers has arrived, stop this story here",[47] or "the horse of writing has exhausted itself", or "that (a specific account) is complete, so I can stop". Sometimes, the reader gains a sense of emotion in these beginnings and endings. For example, in the section where he describes Muin

[40]*Ibid.*, p. 7.
[41]*Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.
[42]*Ibid.*, p. 8.
[43]*Ibid.*
[44]*Ibid.*
[45]Miskin does not write that Bibi Hawa (Eve in the Biblical tradition) was created from Adam's rib. He writes that God created her in the female form in the same manner as he created Adam, but in the male form.
[46]Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, p. 10.
[47]*Ibid.*, p. 106.

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al-Mulk's death and the events that follow this, he writes: "Oh Miskin! Stop this unpleasant [*nā marzī*] story at this place, now".[48] It is possible that the recollection of his master's passing is too emotionally unbearable for him to continue the narrative. Or perhaps it is his way of indicating his proximity to the late governor and he wants the listener/reader to know that he continued to be in great deference to him. With the omission of these references, the reader misses who Miskin was, what made him human, why he wanted to share his life story for posterity, and how precisely he wished to be remembered. There is no doubt that his eye-witness accounts shed light on the political volatility and events of the eighteenth century—and one would not want to ignore the value of Rao's translation to that end. Nonetheless, omitting the human aspects, the religious and moral underpinnings, the writing and remembering process replete with self-reflection, and Miskin's very clear intention of desiring to preserve an account of his life, collectively flatten the author's narrative and the overall value of the text.

Miskin's Life and Identities

According to his auto/biography, Miskin was kidnapped by an Uzbek soldier in Nadir Shah's (d. 1747) army. He describes that he lived in a small village called Arzat, a short distance from the city of Bayazid in Turkey. When Nadir Shah's army entered the village, its soldiers plundered, committed violent acts of terror, and burned whatever they could. When he, his elder brother and mother came out of their home to witness the commotion, a soldier on a horse grabbed Miskin from his brother's arms. His mother and brother attempted to run after the soldier, but another man on horseback struck Miskin's brother, and his mother went to his brother's assistance. This was the last time that Miskin would see his mother, brother and village.[49] Khuranji Beg, an Uzbek chief in charge of a large faction in Nadir Shah's army, took Miskin from his brother and raised him as a son. Miskin relates that Khuranji Beg cared for him and at the time of Khuranji Beg's wedding, he had Miskin circumcised—marking him a Muslim (it is unclear if Miskin came from a Muslim family, or if he becomes Muslim after being adopted by Khuranji Beg). Two years passed in Khuranji Beg's care, and when some Qizilbash soldiers assassinated Nadir Shah on 2 June 1747, they did not spare Khuranji Beg and other Uzbeks, who were killed soon after. Qizilbash soldiers captured Miskin and treated him harshly, but he managed to escape them, and return to the Uzbeks. Khuranji Beg's adopted brother, Hasan Beg, then took Miskin under his care.[50] Hasan Beg decided to go to Balochistan with other Uzbeks with Miskin in tow. The journey was hard and unpleasant, Miskin writes. Some of the Uzbek contingent decided to move on to Lahore, but as Hasan Beg had lost many horses and men along the journey, he had no choice but to give up Miskin (it is unclear if Miskin was sold or simply given to his new master). Miskin describes his new master as the opposite of Khuranji Beg: this man was unkind, beat him often, and forced him to walk long distances. Eventually, it

[48] *Ibid*., pp. 104–105.
[49] *Ibid*., p. 27.
[50] Rao, *Tahmās Nāma, the Autobiography of a Slave*, p. 38.

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was this cruel master who gave Miskin and other Turk boys as a gift to the governor of Lahore, Muin al-Mulk.[51]

Under Muin al-Mulk's supervision and insistence, Miskin and the other slave-boys were taught Arabic, Persian, religious scripture and martial arts. In his account, Miskin notes the rigour with which he approached his studies: he memorised the Quran and became a skilled soldier.[52] Following the death of Muin al-Mulk, his widow, Mughlani Begum inherited Miskin. As her slave, Miskin proved to be a worthy and loyal soldier and servant, and eventually he was entrusted with more senior responsibilities. In due course, Mughlani Begum freed Miskin and his wife after a very traumatic experience (as described below).[53] Nonetheless, Miskin continued to work in her service, until she plotted to have him killed.[54] He then fled from her household and worked for Rohilla Afghans, Zabita Khan (d. 1785) and his father Najib Khan (d. 1770), the Iranian Najaf Khan (d. 1782), and eventually the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II (d. 1806). At the time when he composed his narrative in 1780 or 1782, around the age of fifty (he writes fifty, but it is likely he was in his forties), he had eight surviving children: four sons and three daughters from his first wife (five children having died) and one son from his second wife (another son having also died). He writes that he owned plots of land and was able to distribute land, money and horses to his children, and to arrange marriages for them all. Miskin died on the outskirts of Delhi in 1802.

Indrani Chatterjee argues that one aspect of being a slave is being kinless.[55] This is true of our author, Miskin, in the sense that he had been uprooted from his birth parents, but not in the sense that his wife or children were taken from him. Chatterjee goes on to say that "having no *asabiya* [*sic*][56], or group feeling of their own, they were expected to adopt the *asabiya* [*sic*] of their master".[57] Moreover, because they had to depend on their master's family, "slaves alone could provide allegiance to the ruler that his natal kin did not owe him. It was because they 'owed' their lives to the ruler that they could be employed to guard him from the assaults of the enemies within".[58] To an extent this is true with Miskin. In *Tahmās Nāma*, he refers to himself (in the words of others) as "*mughal-i haqiqi*", meaning true blood Mughal, which is the same ethnic identity as Muin al-Mulk and his wife, Mughlani Begum. While Miskin does not remember his birth parents, he does, however, fondly remember his adopted Uzbek family headed by Khuranji Beg and continues to associate with them (and Uzbeks in general) even once he comes to Hindustan.[59] Indeed, Khuranji Beg, his adopted father, played a foundational role in Miskin's early childhood, he was a

[51]*Ibid*., p. 44. Slaves were often given as gifts throughout west, central, and south Asia. See Levi, 'Hindus beyond the Hindu Kush', p. 280.

[52]He was taught how to ride horses and elephants for war, see Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, p. 70.

[53]*Ibid*., p. 194.

[54]*Ibid*., pp. 247–248.

[55]Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery, and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1999), p. 43.

[56]*'aṣabīya* can mean love of kindred or country. Chatterjee likely means love of kindred in this context, although she does not provide a definition.

[57]Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery, and Law in Colonial India*, p. 43.

[58]*Ibid*.

[59]Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, p. 29. He describes his adopted father as someone who was young and warm, who told our author when he was young that if God gave him another son, he hoped that he would be like Miskin. Miskin describes his time with his adopted family as a time of happiness and generosity.

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positive role model as he was devout in his religious duties—a characteristic to which Miskin aspired throughout his own life; it is Khuranji Beg, who, as mentioned above, had him circumcised, according to Islamic ritual.[60] Therefore, while it is true that Miskin did not have any blood relatives in Hindustan, he did have an adopted family with which he continued to associate, namely a 'sister' of Uzbek ethnic identity, *hum-shīr* (milk-sibling, i.e. children who share the same wet-nurse or breastmilk). Of course, one cannot necessarily take this in the literal sense. Miskin would have been too old by the time that he was adopted by the head of the Uzbeks to share a wet nurse, but it is the closest way of forging an association, even a genealogical one, that makes sense in this period. Miskin, thus, did not solely rely on the '*asabīya* of Muin al-Mulk, or Mughlani Begum once she had been widowed; rather, he possessed a deep bond of love with and support for Uzbeks, who were external to his slave relationship.

We see this reflected in Mughlani Begum's instructions to Miskin to live with his 'sister' when Mughlani Begum was herself imprisoned in her mother's home. While Mughlani Begum was confined (*nazr bandī-i khūd*) there, she wrote a letter to Imad al-Mulk Ghazi al-Din, the newly-instituted vizier who had removed Ahmad Shah Bahadur from the Mughal throne and replaced him Alamgir II.[61] Mughlani Begum wrote to him, secretly, as he was betrothed to Mughlani Begum's daughter, and implored him to come to her aid. She informed him that Ahmad Shah Durrani had sent help for her from Qandahar, and now that his (Ghazi al-Din) name was associated with her daughter's, it would only be appropriate that he assist her.[62] The vizier responded positively and made his way to Sirhind. Adina Beg Khan, who had been appointed by Mughlani Begum as the *faujdār* (administrator) of the *do-āb* (alluvial plains between two rivers), however, wrote to Ghazi al-Din asking him to remain in Sirhind and to send a eunuch with two or three thousand troops to assist him in recovering Lahore. Ghazi al-Din duly sent a eunuch named Nasim Khan with troops and instructions to follow Adina Beg's orders. This large force went to Lahore, visited Mughlani Begum, and proceeded to visit Khwaja Abd Allah Khan. He received them well and bestowed honours and robes. Adina Beg knew that his days as governor were going to end in a few days, so he decided to flee to Jammu. The next morning, Mughlani Begum entered the palace with the "drum of victory", and the entire city lit up with sounds of triumph and happiness.[63]

For one month, Mughlani Begum undertook preparations for her daughter's marriage to Ghazi al-Din. During this period, Miskin attempted to see her, to remind her what she had promised him: namely, that if he went to his adopted sister's home, she would give him a diamond when she was re-instated as governor. Eventually, he was granted an audience, and she asked him if her late husband had planned to send him as part of his daughter's wedding dowry. Miskin told her that Muin al-Mulk had chosen four other boys, one had died, and three fled during the recent strife. Mughlani Begum asked her eunuchs which of the boys

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[61] *Ibid.*, p. 125. Miskin notes the battle between Imad al-Mulk Ghazi al-Din and Mansur Ali Khan Safdar Jang, which is not in the English translation. He further mentions Muin al-Mulk's brother, a man named Khankhanan, who was also the maternal uncle of Ghazi al-Din.
[62] *Ibid.*, pp. 127–128.
[63] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

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had fought to protect them and to whom had she promised diamonds. They pointed to Miskin, and she inquired whether he preferred diamonds or pearls. Miskin, to everyone's surprise, answered that he preferred pearls, because diamonds required fancier clothing and other jewellery.[64] Miskin writes that his reflective response pleased Mughlani Begum, and she decided that he should be married to a slave girl, named Moti, who had also served her well—Mughlani Begum had instructed Moti to go to her parents' house during the time of Khwaja Mirza Khan's revolt, but Moti refused to leave Mughlani Begum's side, and consequently her mistress promised to find her a suitable husband.[65] Mughlani Begum stated that until she heard Miskin speak, no other suitable boy had pleased her enough to be allowed to marry Moti.[66]

Miskin continues the narrative about his marriage in the following section. There he writes that Mughlani Begum rebuked him for earning a bad reputation throughout the city (*badnāmī wa ruswā*), and it would only be proper that he marry.[67] To reiterate the importance of returning to the text itself, a quick comparison of Rao's version of these events with a new translation is provided for the reader. According to Rao's abridged text, Miskin faltered after Muin al-Mulk's death in this way:

> Others fell on evil ways. They indulged in debauchery. I resisted their advice for some time. But it was of no use. I had to yield. I too visited the houses of dancing girls. I fell in love with a girl named Moti. In a few days, I lost all that I possessed.[68]

My translation:

> And slowly, we fell into debauchery and deviated from right. In short, in the end, a prostitute named Allah Datti arrested my heart like a knot in hair. Within a few days of being in her presence, I was devastated in love, and that delightful heart-allurer would sit next to me, alone, drawing my heart into her trap and instigating baser desires (i.e. sexual intercourse), but out of shame that overcame me, I did not touch her. And after a while, that silver-bodied one, pulled my neck and shoulder close to her with her own hands. I freed myself from her grip and standing up, I left. But, in the end, my heart had fallen in the command of another; and we both became disgraced. May God, most high, forgive me, out of benevolence and kindness, on the Day of Judgement.[69]

Rao's translation clearly misrepresents Miskin. If we consider the complete anecdote, Miskin did not simply blindly follow the other boys and fall into debauchery. Rather, as Miskin explains, they (we, *māyān*) slowly fell into evil ways and debauchery. He could have easily transgressed sexual norms with Allah Datti (not Moti as Rao states), with whom he spent a lot of time, but he resisted. The person who eventually won over his heart and with whom he had sexual relations remains anonymous. It may be possible that his telling of the story points to the trope of sleeping with a young boy, although this

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] *Ibid.* At this point in the narrative, Miskin writes that it is time for the evening prayers, so he must stop here. This resembles a cliff-hanger, for, as the reader, I was curious to see how Miskin felt about this marriage proposal, but he stopped and did not disclose it, until the next section!
[67] *Ibid.*, p. 132.
[68] Rao, *Tahmās Nāma, the Autobiography of a Slave*, p. 25.
[69] Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, pp. 114–115.

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can only be speculative: after all, Miskin reveals Allah Datti's name, but not the person with whom he had sexual relations. Perhaps public persons, like prostitutes or elite women like Mughlani Begum, could be identified and named in writing, while others could not.

The quote given above provides a gauge for the author's credibility and a sense of his ethical worldview. Miskin could have chosen to omit this moment of his life where he deemed himself as having been impious; yet, he narrates it, while illustrating how he tried to resist, but, in the end, succumbed to his desires. The nuance he gives here is noteworthy. It allows the reader to trust the author about other aspects of his personal and professional life. Miskin is arguably his own worst critic, as can be gleaned from his self-reflection. His sense of morality, of course, may be different from ours today. But this is precisely why a more nuanced translation may help us discern from the text what it would have meant for Miskin to have engaged in pre-marital intercourse. This example provides more intimate (in the sense of personal actions, but also his relation to God) access to the author, and the feel for what is contained within *Tahmās Nāma* is not as sterile as provided in previous English translations.

Miskin informed Mughlani Begum that he did not wish be married to a Hindustani woman. Though the eunuchs told him that it was not proper to go against Mughlani Begum's wishes, he remained firm in his opposition. Mughlani Begum chided him and said that she would use force force (*ba-zūr*) to make this happen. Along with Miskin, she arranged the marriages of five boys—Muhammad Quli, Darab Beg, Muqim Beg, Faiz Allah Beg and Muhammadi Beg—because they were "blossoming young men" and had reached the state of "mature youth".[70] Still, Miskin remained opposed and sought refuge at his adopted sister's home. His Uzbek milk-sister, however, advised him to accede to Mughlani Begum's wishes. Miskin finally agreed and as soon as he returned to his quarters, a man came to take him to the palace, where Mughlani Begum ordered that all six boys should remain confined until their weddings. Mughlani Begum brought them gifts—a shawl and coins for each groom—and following her command that they should be made ready, henna was applied to their hands and feet, in Mughlani Begum's presence.[71]

The next day the boys, dressed in costly robes, visited Sufi shrines in the city to pay their respects, before the religious wedding ritual was performed. Mughlani Begum paid for all the ceremonies, clothes and wedding gifts. Miskin calculates the amount to be close to twelve thousand rupees per groom, and he additionally received pearl earrings.[72] In her presence, each couple was given their own separate quarters (*khwābghāh-hāī 'alīhudah*). Mughlani Begum addressed Miskin and said that it was because of him that she was able to fulfill her promise to honour the occasion of her daughter's wedding by arranging their marriages. Miskin describes both the dowry and the people who would leave with Mughlani Begum's daughter, and here he provides her name, Umda Begum.[73] Two months after the wedding, Miskin received a land grant (*mansab*) of 100 rupees a month.[74]

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 132.
[71] *Ibid.*, p. 133.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 134.
[73] *Ibid.*
[74] *Ibid.*

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With respect to social mobility, Miskin rose to the rank of a *khān* while he was still a slave.[75] This occurred after he successfully resolved an argument between Mughlani Begum and Timur Shah Durrani's vizier, Jahan Khan. Mughlani Begum had lost territories that Ahmad Shah Durrani had initially given to her, but which he later handed over instead to his son, Timur Shah. As compensation, Ahmad Shah promised her 30,000 rupees a year, but she was too proud to ask for this promised amount to be paid to her. Miskin, therefore, concocted a plan to bring the vizier into her presence so that the matter could be resolved. With the help of his "adopted father"[76] named Yusuf Khan (this was another Afghan and one of Timur Shah's close advisors with the rank of *dārogha-i dīwānkhāna* [superintendent of the treasury]), he persuaded Jahan Khan to meet with Mughlani Begum, after which she was received her compensations. The astute vizier, having realised that the attempt at reconciliation was actually Miskin's idea[77] and after spending more time with him, requested Timur Shah to confer upon him the title of *khān*.[78] As a *khān*, Miskin had access to more intimate spaces within the court—those reserved for nobles, from which commoners were excluded)—and could even partake in meals with other nobles.

Later during Timur Shah's reign in Lahore, Mughlani Begum supported Adina Beg, who had previously removed her from the governorship. In response to this treachery, Timur Shah's vizier Jahan Khan robbed her of her possessions and physically assaulted her for interfering in the politics of the Punjab.[79] When Jahan Khan then summoned her, she refused to comply. According to Miskin, she was so terrified that she told him that the vizier could take her daughter, but should leave her alone, because her life was dearer than her daughter's life (*dukhtar az jān-i man ziyāda 'azīz nīst*).[80] Miskin, however, managed to take them safely back to Delhi, and it was at this traumatic moment that she freed him from bondage.[81]

Miskin chose to continue to serve Mughlani Begum and her household, even once he had become a free man. When the Begum obtained land and land revenue in Sialkot, Miskin travelled there to manage her affairs, while she resided in Jammu. While his identity as a newly freed slave did raise his status at particular moments, it could not overcome all existing barriers to upward mobility. For example, after Miskin had successfully secured the Sialkot land revenues for Mughlani Begum (by threatening physical harm to the previous revenue holders), she 'rewarded' him by removing him from his position.[82] Historically, this position had been held by members of noble families, and so while he was away the family that had previously supervised revenue collection in Sialkot persuaded Mughlani Begum to reinstate them. As this incident underlines, Miskin's Mughal identity and social status were not as strong as that of this family. Their genealogy was stronger, perhaps even verified, and consequently they outranked Miskin.

[75]*Ibid.*, p. 171. Before he acquires this title, he mentions that he had been frequenting the tomb of Muin al-Mulk, and he has a dream that Muin al-Mulk bestows on him a robe of honour.
[76]*Ibid.*, p. 170.
[77]*Ibid.*, p. 169. "The vizier Jahan Khan was happy and said, laughing, that I know it is you who is training the Begum on this subject."
[78]*Ibid.*, p. 172.
[79]*Ibid.*, p. 187.
[80]*Ibid.*, p. 192.
[81]*Ibid.*, p. 194.
[82]*Ibid.*, pp. 235–236.

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Miskin's occupations varied from slave, soldier, messenger, *dārogha* (superintendent), revenue collector, and advisor. He strategically placed himself in positions of power that promised upward mobility. But this did not always work for him; as we have seen, he was imprisoned a few times by Mughlani Begum,[83] both while he was a slave and when he was free. His peers also occasionally chided him for showing them up, and for promising to undertake tasks that they deemed too risky, such as running a message for Mughlani Begum to Ahmad Shah Durrani during Jat and Sikh uprisings. At times, his hubris caused him to be injured and even captured. But his courage, initiative and persistence seem to provide him with opportunities that others in his position did not obtain. His military successes combined with his leadership skills earned both the trust of those whom he served and the envy of his peers. For example, when asked he was able to recruit soldiers, and he also managed to secure employment after fleeing Mughlani Begum's household. When he was in the employ of Afghan Zabita Khan, he had 200 horsemen under his supervision. Indeed, according to Gommans' definitions of military terms,[84] Miskin would have been considered a *beg*, and he acquired this title precisely because he was "able to mobilise a following consisting of kith and kin [*biradaran-u-khweshan*] and retainers [*naukaran*]".[85]

There can be no doubt that Miskin faced a great deal of volatility during his life. As high as he rose in rank and status, he also fell into destitution, even lost all hope, and came close to death on multiple occasions. There was no certainty, no sense of stability. It would be easy to say that this volatility mirrored the political environment of the time. But we must remember that if political competition for power had not existed, Miskin would not have had a source of income. His financial future would have been dire, for he was not trained in anything lucrative other than being a soldier. Each time that the Afghans tried to gain territory or fight off Jats and Marathas, Miskin was gainfully employed.

By using 'Afghan', 'Uzbek', 'Qizilbash' or 'Mughal/Turk/Turki/Turkman' in this article, I am referring to a collective of people who affiliated themselves with a shared real, fabricated, or imagined genealogies. These affiliations were coherent in the eighteenth century, and were accompanied with certain ways of being, including stereotypes that may or may not have been accurate. Land and language were also loosely associated with the collective group, but as many of these groups of people were constantly moving and campaigning and invoking homelands that may not have been their birth places, we cannot assume that a certain affiliation necessarily rendered a shared place or language. Certainly, within each such group, there were multiple genealogical affiliations. Along with such classifications came hierarchies within and outside each affiliation, and these could be disputed. Mughals, for example, had long claimed that Afghans were beneath them. Mughal historiography characterised Afghans as uncivilised, barbaric, nomadic and lacking any sense of governance or state-building.[86] Afghans, in turn, wrote maliciously about the Mughals and Qizilbash, who were enemies of the Uzbeks. It should not surprise us that such phenomena existed

[83]*Ibid*., pp. 198, 212, 240.

[84]Jos J. Gommans, *Mughal Warfare Indian Frontiers and Highroads to Empire, 1500–1700* (London and New York, 2003), pp. 43–44. The military hierarchy that he outlines is as follows: *yikitlar* (individual trooper), *ichkilar* (household trooper), *beglar* (chiefs), and *beg* (someone able to recruit and maintain troops).

[85]*Ibid*.

[86]Raziuddin Aquil, *Sufism, Culture, and Politics: Afghans and Islam in medieval North India* (New Delhi, 2007).

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in the early modern period, but what is perhaps most notable is how these groups defined themselves in relation to other groups in the period under scrutiny here.

For our author, Miskin, being 'Mughal', meaning that he was a 'Turk', provided him with employment opportunities under the Mughals, but when Afghans came to power, then his Turkish identity, at times, turned into a liability. It is in relation to Afghan identities that Miskin articulates what it means for him to be Mughal or Turk. Looking at *Tahmās Nāma*, there is no doubt that there was a shared understanding of these identities, and what they represented. Mughlani Begum and others refer to Miskin and the other slave boys as "*mughal-i haqīqī*", true-bred Mughals. The Rohilla Afghans also refer to him as 'Mughal', and Miskin highlights the sense of distrust about Turks that Afghans possessed. For example, when Najib Khan, who at first was hesitant to keep Mughals on his payroll and within his retinue, was finally convinced that Miskin and his companions might make good soldiers, he offered them work as soldiers in the army of his son Zabita Khan.[87] While they managed to work for Zabita Khan, it is telling that at a key moment, when losing on the battlefield, Zabita Khan refused to trust that Miskin and his Mughal companions would protect him and take him to safety.[88] Miskin writes that Zabita Khan feared them, and, as a consequence, they parted ways. Following this, Miskin's companions suggested that since they were no longer employed, they should loot the bazaar. Miskin, however, rebuked them fiercely:

> Oh friends! For the sake of God, the Mughal troops, when Mansur Ali Khan was at war, did this thing, they plundered the treasury and military equipment, and earned a bad reputation. Similarly, out of lack of foresight, the Mughals plundered the treasury of Nawab Shuja al-Daula at the battle of Buxar. Till today, their cruelty is on the lips of the whole world. Especially the Afghans, who are inherently against us [the Mughals], will nurture this hatred, and they will never trust us again.[89]

Miskin, clearly aware of the Mughal reputation among Afghans, was able to persuade his companions against reinforcing it further. A shared religious identity—both Muslims and champions of Sunni interpretations—did not provide the necessary common ground for trust between the Mughals and Afghans.

From Miskin's *Tahmās Nāma*, we can piece together a clearer understanding of social relations, including ethnic and gendered relations, in eighteenth-century Punjab. It is telling how Miskin describes and interacts with people whom he sees as equal or below him, versus those whom he greatly admires and respects. Furthermore, noting the moments where Miskin is silent provides social and cultural insights into contemporary gender relations. For example, he rarely speaks about his wives, his marital relationships, or his daughters. He writes about when he marries his wives (the first one being that forced marriage arranged by Mughlani Begum, while the second, of his own choosing and when he is free, was with a Mughal woman from Kabul), when his wives give birth, when his first wife is robbed, and when he strategically moves his family. Other than this, he does not disclose anything else, not even what they are called, whereas we do learn the names of his sons. It is likely that

[87]Miskin, *Tahmās Nāma*, p. 271.
[88]*Ibid.*, p. 289.
[89]*Ibid.*, pp. 288–289.

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Miskin did not think it proper to reveal women's names especially if he anticipated that his narrative would one day be available to the public.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *Tahmās Nāma* needs to be read as an auto/biographical narrative, rather than as a factual history or a moral guide. By drawing on the content of Miskin's auto/biography in its original language, it layers his multiple identities to demonstrate the fluidity of identity and status, how identities operated in relation to others, and finally how these identities were linked to larger communities or groups. Moreover, through re-reading of Miskin's narrative, we gain more nuanced understandings of slavery in eighteenth-century South Asia, kinship ties and *'aṣabīya*. *Tahmās Nāma*, when read as an auto/biography rather than a history, thus opens a new window onto the social and gender history of Miskin's time.

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