

The provenance of a historic Koran Artefact as participant in the events of the Indian Mutiny of 1857

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Provenance is one of the experiential differences of encounter between a physical object and its photographic or digital image. Both provide content but physical objects do more. They also provide context. A physical object has shared in events that took place around it and its owner. It is a witness.

Sometimes this witness is also a veteran. Such is the case of an 18th century leather-bound vellum Koran recently catalogued for the Baillieu Library's Special Collections by the Arabic language and manuscripts cataloguer, Mahboubeh Kamalpour.

This is a single volume parchment Koran, 29.0 cm in height, with a handsome leather cover. The manuscript is very clear and the writing beautifully executed. The first two pages are in colourful frames of blue, red and yellow. The script part is framed in blue and red and consists of 11 lines per page. The Koran bears the bookplate of the George McArthur Bequest of 1903, and the signature of Leigh Scott, the University Librarian, dated 4 October 1948.

An inscription on the front cover verso reads:

Koran picked up in the rebel camp at Seekur [i.e., Sikar] Shikawathee country camp under Tantiu Tope,



Rau Sahib and Feroze Shah surprised by Colonel Holmes' column on the 21st Jan 1859 5 a.m.

[signed] *George G. Beazley Lt.
HM 83rd Rgt.*

Taty Tope¹ was one of the rebel leaders of the Indian Mutiny who held out until 1859. January 21, 1859 was the day of a surprise British attack on his camp (when this Koran was seized at 5.00 a.m.). Lieutenant George Gant Beazley who wrote the inscription later received a medal for

his participation in the suppression of the Indian Mutiny.

The uprising known as the Indian Mutiny was frightening, bloody and cruel, with massacres perpetrated by both sides.² It replaced the rule of both the British East India Company and the Mughal Empire in India with direct rule by the British government (British Raj) for the next 90 years, until independence in 1947.

Many underlying causes festered towards rebellion: political, economic, military, religious and social. The old aristocracy resented its power being eroded under British control. Some Indians perceived British policies and practices as westernisation without regard for Indian tradition or culture—such as the outlawing of *sati* (widow burning) and child marriage—and the ban on some religious practices also suggested a drive towards an imposed Christianisation. The justice system was considered to be unfair to Indians. Land reorganisation and trade policies were skewed in favour of the economy of the British, not that of India and the Indians.

The immediate trigger however for the uprising in 1857 was the controversy over the new Pattern 1853 Enfield rifle. To load the new rifle, the soldiers (sepoys) had to bite the cartridge open. A rumour gained

currency: that the cartridges issued with the rifle were greased with lard (pork fat) which was regarded as unclean by Muslims, or tallow (beef fat) from cows, regarded as sacred to Hindus. In the minds of these soldiers, many of whom were high caste Hindus and sons of wealthy Muslims, this was an outrage; Hindus would lose caste by such contamination while Muslims would have transgressed a Koranic proscription.

British military authorities became concerned about the rumour and ordered that cartridges issued from depots were to be free from grease and that soldiers could grease them themselves using whatever mixture they preferred (beeswax or vegetable oil for example). This edict however merely confirmed the soldiers' suspicions that the rumours had been true and their fears justified.

Several months of increasing tension and inflammatory incidents preceded the actual rebellion. Barrack buildings (especially those occupied by soldiers who had used the Enfield cartridges) and European officers' bungalows were set on fire; at various military cantonments soldiers refused to obey their British officers. Not long after, in April, actual rebellion broke out and British soldiers and civilians were attacked.



Soon the rebellion spread beyond the armed forces. However, it did not become India-wide. On the Indian side there were many diverging and conflicting interests among those who aspired to reclaim dynastic rule or grasp new opportunities. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were not only not united in a common cause but also had various separate agendas, some of which involved payback for prior conflicts or perceived collaboration with British authorities in past disputes. Conflict was centered mainly on the northern and central

areas of India and was by and large confined to the Bengal army.³

At first, the Indians made headway against the shocked and undermanned British. But as the British received reinforcements and counter-attacked it became clear that the Indian side suffered from a lack of effective central command. Leadership fractured among the rajas, princes and nobles. Whoever could seize the leadership initiative and muster some troops around himself became a contender for power in the struggle. One such was Taty Tope.



Tope was the only son of Pandurang Rao Tope, a noble at the court of the Peshwa Baji Rao II. After Baji Rao was exiled to Bithoor, Pandurang Rao and his family also shifted there. Tatyā Tope became the most intimate friend of the Peshwa's adopted son, Nana Dhondū Pant (known as Nana Sahib). Tope turned totally against the British when Nana Sahib was deprived of his father's pension by Lord Dalhousie in 1851. As the rebellion grew, in May 1857 Tope won over the Indian troops of the East India Company at Kanpur (Cawnpore), established Nana Sahib's authority and became the commander of his forces.

Tope became feared and hated by the British after the massacre of boatloads of British refugees (mostly women and children) at the Satichaura Ghat on the Ganges, in spite of having been promised safe passage to Allahabad by Nana Sahib. The exact order of events and who first fired on whom has become historically controversial, but Tope's persona became firmly associated with this event.

Tope eventually moved his headquarters from around Kanpur to Kalpi and joined with the famous female rebellion leader Rani Lakshmi Bai (also known as the Rani of Jhansi) and continued to lead the revolt. He

was routed at Betwa (where he managed to field almost 20,000 men), and at Koonch and Kalpi, but managed to reach Gwalior. There he proclaimed Nana Sahib as Peshwa. However, before he could consolidate his gain, Sir Hugh Henry Rose defeated him in a battle which saw the end of the Rani of Jhansi. She was killed leading her forces against the British assault, on 17 June 1858.

Saul David notes that contemporary British sources concur that Rani's death 'caused the greatest consternation among the rebel troops'.⁴ Tatyā Tope and Rao Sahib (also mentioned in our inscription, nephew of Nana Sahib) fled into Rajputana with just over 5,000 troops and ten guns. Tope nevertheless continued his guerrilla warfare against the British for several months. Several British columns were sent in pursuit and marched over thousands of miles in stifling heat to catch him. Tope and his army stood and fought the British at Rajgarh in September 1858. Tope lost the battle and all his guns but he still managed to escape. With a hard core of supporters including Rao Sahib, Tope headed south to Nagpur, hoping to incite an uprising there. In the opinion of some, a successful uprising here in the earlier period of the mutiny would have been very dangerous to British rule, but by late

1858 the British had regained their hold and Tope was more of a fugitive than a seriously threatening foe.

Nothing came of stirring up Nagpur into rebellion, so Tope moved on. So did more British forces sent to trap him. At Indragarh in Rajputana in January 1859, Tope linked up with Prince Firoz Shah (also mentioned in our inscription, nephew of the King of Delhi and leader of an earlier rebellion at Mandesar where the green flag of Muslim revolt was raised).⁵ But the British were more successful this time.

It was the fateful day—21 January 1859—the date of our inscription. Colonel Holmes' column, comprising Her Majesty's 83rd and 12th Native Infantry and four guns, marched 54 miles through sandy desert in just over 24 hours and succeeded in surrounding Tope's force near Sikar, defeating it in a surprise attack at dawn.⁶ Our Koran was seized—at 5.00 a.m. according to Lieutenant Beazley—during this very attack!

Was it seized from a saddle bag? From the hands of a terrified, fleeing Muslim supporter of Firoz Shah? Or, even more tantalisingly, was it a personal copy owned by the prince himself? To whomever it belonged (Tope and Sahib were Hindus so it could not have belonged to them), this Koran witnessed historic events

and would have travelled the same thousands of miles that its owner did while taking part in attempts at insurrection and then escaping from British pursuers.

Several British contemporaries were impressed by the sheer amount of territory the guerrilla leader covered in his fight with and then flight from them. Colonel Malleon notes that during a nine month period after Tope's defeat at Jaura Alipur until his capture, 'Tantia Tope had baffled all the attempts of the British. During that period he had more than once or twice made the tour of Rajputana and Malwa, two countries possessing jointly an area of a hundred and sixty-one thousand seven hundred square miles.'⁷ *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* reported: 'The whole distance for which they were pursued, between the 20th January 1858 and 1st March 1859 [when Tope was finally captured] was more than 3,000 miles. General Michel marched 1,700, Parke 2,000 miles. Captain Clowe's troop, 8th Hussars, was with Parke all the time and had marched 400 miles under General Roberts before joining him.'⁸

So what became of the three men in our inscription? All three managed to escape the ambush of 21 January but they were finished as guerillas.

Tatya Tope was finally captured in the jungles of Narwar through betrayal by his friend Man Singh, one of the Gwalior rebels who was lured into this act by a British promise of amnesty. Tope was charged with rebellion, tried by a military court and hanged on 18 April 1859. At his trial, Tope apparently stated that he 'had nothing to do with the murder of any European men, women or children' (presumably referring to the Satichaura Ghat massacre).⁹ His lack of ultimate success notwithstanding, Tope is commemorated by a statue at the site of his execution in the town of Shivpuri in Madhya Pradesh. Nor was this the end of his memory. In 2007, when India celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Indian Mutiny, the government announced that it would provide 1 lakh rupees of financial aid, as well as assistance in securing jobs and education, to Tope's descendants, who live in Kanpur.¹⁰

Rao Sahib was not caught until 1862 but then he too was snared by betrayal, tried, and hanged on 20 August 1862. Firoz Shah managed to escape the British. He left India disguised as a pilgrim and died in poverty in Mecca in 1877.¹¹

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Notes

- 1 The spelling of the Indian names varies from source to source. I have followed the spelling used in Saul David, *The Indian Mutiny*, London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- 2 The rebellion is known by a number of different names including the First War of Indian Independence, Indian Mutiny, Sepoy Mutiny and Sepoy Rebellion.
- 3 The East India Company had divided its Indian areas into three 'presidencies' (Bengal, Bombay and Madras), each of which had its own army. The army of Bengal was the largest.
- 4 David, *The Indian Mutiny*, p. 368, quoting Sir Robert Hamilton (Sir Hugh Rose's political advisor).
- 5 David, *The Indian Mutiny*, p. 369. Firuz Shah, also Feroz Shah, Feroz Saha and other variants.
- 6 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 88, no. 538, August 1860, p. 191; Colonel Malleon (ed.), *Kaye's and Malleon's history of the Indian Mutiny of 1857-9*, new edition, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1897, vol. 5, p. 256.
- 7 Malleon (ed.), *Kaye's and Malleon's history*, p. 266.
- 8 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, p. 193.
- 9 David, *The Indian Mutiny*, p. 369.
- 10 'Centre to help Tanya Tope's heirs', *Rediff India Abroad*, 19 June 2007, <http://ia.rediff.com/news/2007/jun/19tope.htm>, accessed 29 January 2008.
- 11 Malleon (ed.), *Kaye's and Malleon's history*, p. 258.