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Article

“There Is No Law for Me in England”: An Indian Grocer’s Struggle for Economic and Geographical Space, and Agency in Oxford (1888–1896)

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Abstract: *The Oxford Times* ran a headline in May 1896 that stated in bold capitals ‘STRANGE DEATH OF A HINDOO’, detailing the circumstances of the death of Baboo Mookhi Singh, who, it seems, was the first (known) Indian grocer in Oxford. While today, the pioneering research by Rozina Visram related to the presence of Asians in Britain, that of Antoinette Burton in the late-Victorian period, or Michael Fisher’s work on counterflows to colonialism, is not new, the majority of research regarding the presence of Indians in the British Isles is either scant for this period of time, or related to ayahs and lascars, or to poets, intellectuals, and aristocrats, with considerable research also related to the Indian military. The majority of times, that research has also focused solely on London. The originality of this research paper provides material heretofore undocumented related to an early settler in Oxford from India (1880s–1890s): Baboo Mookhi Singh (1867–1893), Oxford’s first grocer, and tea importer from India. He originated from Benaras (Varanasi) and arrived in Britain, where he set up a business in the centre of Oxford. However, what he encountered there was name-calling, verbal as well as physical harassment, and ultimately his death in strange circumstances. He seemingly came alone, although his import business, which boasted the best tea not only in Oxford, but in the whole country, was run by the ‘Singh Brothers’ (his brother remaining in India). While Singh most certainly travelled via the Suez Canal to Britain, the country to which he was travelling would have been both familiar and unfamiliar to him. However, due to the lack of resources available, all too often common people, such as Singh, have been neglected. In this article, newspaper reports and material from the numerous trials (mostly initiated by Singh against the local people and his immediate neighbours) are brought together, as well as the coroner’s reports, and the police notes to determine Singh’s struggle for recognition, and his attempt at resistance. This paper documents his struggle for cultural/geographic space, to redress the imbalance of power, and gain agency. Despite his attempts at resilience, he did, in the end, die. However, Singh was a pioneer in a struggle for power, a stand for resistance, and how the law perceived him, in his difference, changing the community around him, albeit on a small scale. It is a telling story that resurfaces an early Indian settler in Britain, his alterity in Victorian society, and the latter’s attitudes towards race. It steps outside of the traditional image of the empire at home, in Britain, in everyday life.

Keywords: subaltern; memory; colonialism; counterflow migration; early migration; India; Oxford; identity; memory; microhistory



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1. Introduction

The Oxford Times ran a headline in May 1896 that stated in bold capitals ‘STRANGE DEATH OF A HINDOO’ (*Oxford Times* 1896, p. 7), detailing the circumstances of the death of Baboo Mookhi Singh, who, it seems, was the first (known) Indian grocer in Oxford. One might well wonder whether or not such a microhistorical account is of any interest in the wider panel of historicity of the United Kingdom at all. The pioneering research by Rozina Visram (Visram [1986] 2015; Visram 2002) related to the presence of Asians in Britain, that of Antoinette Burton in the late-Victorian period (Burton 1998), or Michael Fisher’s (Fisher

2004) work on counterflows to colonialism, are not new. However, the majority of research regarding the presence of Indians in the British Isles is either scant for this period of time, or related to ayahs and lascars (Visram [1986] 2015; Chatterjee 2021; Datta 2023a, 2023b), or to poets, intellectuals, and aristocrats (Visram [1986] 2015; Visram 2002; Burton 1998; Mukherjee 2012; Boehmer 2015), with considerable research also in the field of the Indian military (Visram [1986] 2015; Visram 2002; Omissi 1994; Streets 2004; Stadtler 2012). The majority of times, that research has also focused solely on London. However, there are two elements of great interest in the story that involves Baboo Mookhi Singh in Oxford in the late nineteenth century. Firstly, historically, he is not part of those that are generally the subject of historical focus of interest, namely intellectuals, aristocrats, military personnel, or servants. This microhistory (Ginzburg 1980) of Baboo Mookhi Singh is an example of the circular relationships of high-to-low and low-to-high in British society of the Victorian period. In other words, Baboo Mookhi Singh had an influence on Oxford society, just as much as Oxford society had an influence on him when he emigrated there from his native Benares (now Varanasi).

Baboo Mookhi Singh was listed as a 'Tea Dealer' in 1891 on the British Census (TNA 1891a). The enumerator had subsequently modified this to simply 'Grocer', and he was aged 29, residing alone at 16 St. Ebbe's Street, Oxford. He was listed as Baboo Mookhi Singh, using the honorific Indian title of 'Baboo', similar to 'Mr.', or 'Esq.', which had seemingly become his first name. He was born in c. 1864, Benares, the sacred city of the Hindu religion, in Uttar Pradesh. Most of his neighbours were either from Saint Ebbe's, Oxford, or from the City of Oxford. Such presence of an Indian would have been both highly visible in the area, but also rather invisible, through both religious and cultural ignorance.

The presence of Baboo Mookhi Singh in the United Kingdom is revelatory of the importance of "reconstructing networks of relations in order to understand how meanings are forged and how power is distributed" (Trivellato 2015, p. 122). Through the unknown, rather obscure, perhaps, Indian tea dealer/grocer of the late nineteenth century, which might have been nothing more than a footnote somewhere in the wider ethnocentric story of the nation of the United Kingdom, this is more than just the history of the life of an ordinary individual. The seven trials in which he appeared between 1888 and 1896 in Oxford, coupled with the contemporary newspaper articles about him and his life, as well as the police or coroner's reports, are key to evoking the period of time in which he lived, the mentality of society, as a means to "explaining the culture" (Lepore 2001, p. 132). It is, however, not the uniqueness of the fact that Baboo Mookhi Singh was the only Indian grocer in Oxford at the time, but that his life is exemplary of the broader issues of the period.

It is perhaps not surprising that the story of Baboo Mookhi Singh should resurface today. This paper opens up with the end of the story of the life of the Indian tea dealer who had his profession changed on the census return, struck through by the enumerator, who decided to put his profession as simply 'grocer', despite the fact that evidence points to the contrary, and that the native of Benares was indeed a tea (and cigar) importer. The end of that story of this individual's life is his death, in strange circumstances. Baboo Mookhi Singh stood up against the name-calling, the harassment, and the vandalism, and even the accusation of paedophilia and child molestation, to which he was subjected in the late 1880s, over a period of nearly a decade. He stood up in the face of the colonising power, the society to which he had moved to settle and run his shop, and his tea import business, the nation from which he was excluded, because he was Indian, and not British. However, he used the law, and he used the courts to prove his case, and he systematically prosecuted every person who perpetrated those wrongs against him. In one of the trials, which took place in 1891, he noted that he was aware that he would be treated differently to anyone who was British-born and a native of Oxford. He stated, "there is no law for me in England", when he took it upon himself to post a sign in his shop window, on which had been written the obscenities that he had been called by his neighbours, and in which they were named. This suggests that he was not gaining redress or protection from the law, the police, and the magistrates. *The Oxford Times* of 5 September 1891 (Oxford Times 1891, p. 7)

noted that the “native of India, tea dealer of St. Ebbe’s” had posted the “obscene literature” on 28 August 1891. The reports do not mention the exact wording, but the newspaper indicates that the clerk of the court had read it out ([Oxford Times 1891](#), p. 7) and it was described as being of the “most obscene and filthy nature” ([Oxford Times 1891](#), p. 7), with his signature at the bottom of the page. Mookhi Singh had stated in his defence as to the reasons why he had posted the sign in his shop window: “[b]ecause there is no law for me in England, and I want the public to know what my neighbours say to me”. Apparently, a crowd of two to three hundred people, mostly youths and boys, had gathered around the shop window. The wording was described as “most disgraceful”, and “filthy obscene stuff”, noting that nothing “more filthy [*sic*] and abominable had [...] come before the Bench” ([Oxford Times 1891](#), p. 7). He was admonished for putting it in the window and attracting passers-by. As a result, the court felt it was bound to provide an extreme penalty, and he was sentenced to one month in prison, with hard labour. The Police Court Records for 1 September noted that Oswald Cole¹, Inspector of Oxford Police had been called to stand witness, and he stated that the sign was clearly visible from the road ([Police Court Records 1891a](#), pp. 116–17). Singh believed that there was no law for him in England, and that it was unfair that he should be punished and sentenced to prison. At the same time, his neighbours were not prosecuted or sentenced for their name-calling and harassment, in this case. However, this case was an exception amongst all the others. He did win all the other cases that he brought before the law, meaning that he was treated equally before the eyes of the law. Here, what seemed to be the issue in 1891 was that the sign was visible from the street, and that it was obscene, resulting in the congregating of so many people.

Taken against the backdrop of the contemporary period of time of the 1880s/1890s in Oxford, Baboo Mookhi Singh had arrived in Great Britain, had set up shop, and was one of the few Indians in the city, in particular, in the poor working-class area of St. Ebbe’s. This paper will detail his attempt to be treated fairly, to exercise equal agency as others who were native-born British people, and how he faced the sense of identity that brought about conflictual relations between that Indian and his immediate neighbours over a period of nearly a decade. However, the past is not solely about the past, but is always related to the present. This story about Mookhi Singh, therefore, is one also set in the present against the backdrop of rising extremisms in the western world, on both the far left-wing and the far right-wing, one in which nationalism is reaching a fever pitch and a crossroads as to what direction democracy may be taken in the future years. It also stands in conjunction with recent Black Lives Matter, anti-racism movements, and relatively recent developments in post-colonial studies. This is the story of an individual that is set against the rising universalism of history, one in which mentalities can be perceived of the times, of both the then of Singh, and the now of the 21st century. It will be an attempt to reveal elements that have not previously been observed, of a marginal individual, who ordinarily would have been dismissed as insignificant. Yet, Singh bears witness to the changing times of the latter part of the nineteenth century, one in which there was increasingly greater contact in the British Isles between British born individuals, and those arriving in counter-colonial fashion from the colonies of the British Empire. This (hi-)story will show the social affiliations of the time, the beliefs and the values, the systems of representation, and the agency of those people in an intensive study of the intricacies of the life of an Indian, which is rarely documented in such a manner. The aim will be to draw a more varied picture of the past, examine how race was perceived, and how (counter) colonialism affected the lives of the British and those who settled in Britain. They contribute to changing the grand narratives, the mega-histories that are usually meted out politically for the nation to inter-generationally reproduce as part of their national identity. Mookhi Singh is not an average individual, but he is an “outlier”, a “normal exception” ([Magnússon 2003](#), p. 709), seen through the lens of the “exceptional typical” ([Peltonen 2001](#), p. 347). The events that he lived through brought about local change. He is, therefore, a prime example of the counter-colonial inflow of those from the colonies into the British Isles, as well as a microhistorical account going against the grain of the traditional historical narratives usually presented.

The fact that he resurfaced in the archives of the British newspapers and civil registration or census returns, as well as court case and police records, is due to advances in technology allowing for searches to be made of considerable quantities of archival data in recent years.

2. Counter-Colonialism and Reversed Flows of Migration from the Empire

2.1. *Strange Death of a Hindoo*

For two decades now, some scholars have brought into question the belief in the general single-direction flow of power and the perception of historical recounting of domination, or the chosen narrative (Fisher 2004; Visram [1986] 2015) of national identity, with dominant Britain, and an ethnically pure group of people, rather than a multi-racial one of the United Kingdom. However, already in the middle of the nineteenth century there were individuals who were writing about and working with people of a diversity of origins and identities, in particular those who had come from the colonies, and somehow ended up, perhaps not by choice or design, in the British Isles. One such person was Joseph Salter (1822–1899). Salter was a Christian Missionary, and he worked at the Strangers' Home for Asiatics, Africans and South Sea Islanders (1857–1937), on the West India Dock Road, Limehouse, attempting to deal with the lascars that had no money to return to their home country, individuals who were on the receiving end of ill-treatment, insults and racism at the time. Salter wrote in 1873 in *The Asiatic in England: Sketches of Sixteen Years' Works Among Orientals*: "Strange it seems that men can be found who seem to think that the coloured part of mankind exists only to be used like brute beasts, and to have the most insulting names language can supply heaped upon them" (Salter 1873, p. 150). There were a number of Indians living in London.

A quick search in British census returns can bring up a number of them. In this particular case, of Baboo Mookhi Singh, it was his surname that enabled him to be found relatively easily. The surname Singh is mostly associated with the Sikh religion. Nevertheless, it is a popular misconception that all those who have the surname 'Singh' are Sikhs. As Singh Kalsi, Bahr and Marty note "a significant number of Hindus in India belong to the Kashatriya (warrior and princely) caste and bear the surname 'Singh'" (Singh Kalsi et al. 2005, p. 3). While it is likely, therefore, that a Singh is a Sikh, it is not always the case. Therefore, while researching the name Singh in historical national and local archive records, the present author stumbled upon the surname Singh in a surprisingly high number of newspaper reports of the late nineteenth century, all with reference to one man, Mookhi Singh, also referred to as Baboo Mookhi Singh.

'Babu', or 'Baboo', is an honorific title of respect that precedes the name of a male in the Indian sub-continent. Baboos were usually Western-educated middle class Indians, although they were often ridiculed during the colonial period. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Chatterjee [1894] 1954, pp. 10–13) notes that for the British, Baboos were considered as clerks, that they may have had some financial resources and been of relative middle-class status, with servants, possibly. Thus, for Baboo Mookhi Singh it would have been largely misunderstood as to what the honorific title might mean in Great Britain, but it hints at two elements. Firstly, the Indian tea dealer/grocer was somewhat educated, but the title would have gone beyond the scope of understanding those living in St. Ebbe's, as a relatively poor area of Oxford at that time. It also shows that a Baboo would have straddled both sides of an identity: one in which he would have been considered inferior by the British, as a clerk; and yet one who may have had servants, and therefore, been above others, higher in the status and hierarchy stakes. That complexity of identity is interesting in understanding the agency and the supposed position that Baboo Mookhi Singh believed that he might have in Oxford.

Rozina Visram notes, "the presence in Britain of people from the Indian sub-continent did not begin in the 1950s when the post-war labour demands of the British economy encouraged their arrival, but stretches back to the founding of the East India Company in 1600" (Visram 2002, p. 354). Singh's life story recorded in the judicial archives and the newspaper reports is a telling example of an ordinary Indian in Victorian Britain, in which

there was a struggle for power, an attempt to rebalance and shift the dichotomy of the coloniser and the colonised, in Britain. As Max Weber noted in 1925 on the notion of power, it is “the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action against resistance of others who are participating in the action” (Weber 2020, p. 167). The events that concern Mookhi Singh in Victorian Britain are an act of resistance against those in his immediate community, a desire by one individual to stand up and to realise his own will, and to be treated by the law as the British were treated. Resistance implies conflict in an attempt to rebalance inequalities, but that resistance does not necessarily imply violence. When non-violent resistance is carried out by ethnic minorities, it is perceived through the lens, however, of prevalent negativity and stereotypes, meaning that it is always considered as being violent (Manekin and Mitts 2021, p. 3). However, ultimately, Mookhi Singh failed to resist from the constant harassment that occurred over nearly ten years, mostly from his immediate neighbours. In 1896, an announcement of death appeared in the *Bicester Herald* on 29 May. The death announcement read as follows: “SINGH—May 16, at 16 St. Ebbe Street, Oxford, Mookhi Singh, aged 32 years” (*The Bicester Herald* 1896, p. 8). The same announcement had also been published a few days earlier in the *Oxford Chronicle* (*Oxford Chronicle* 1896, p. 1), and next-of-kin were being actively sought. Bicester is located 11 miles (18km) northeast of Oxford, and Singh had no apparent connection with the two, but authorities were attempting, it would seem, to widen the catchment area and to locate someone who might know of him. The Police Occurrence Book (*Police Occurrence Book* 1896, POL1/1/A1/31) noted that P.C. John Cross had locked the premises of the house and kept the keys “so as to visit them if necessary”, and the “funeral arrangements were organised by the undertaker, Mr. Simmonds of Church Street”, with the “Rent, Rates and Taxes” being “paid out of the property of the shop” (*Police Occurrence Book* 1896, POL1/1/A1/31). Perhaps, also the money from the sale of the property in the shop contributed to the paying of the announcements in the newspapers.

Mookhi Singh had been found dead in his private rooms at 16 St. Ebbe’s Street, Oxford. The headline ran “Strange Death of a Hindoo” (*Oxford Times* 1896, p. 7), in capital letters. It referred to the shop and premises at 16 St. Ebbe’s Street, “having been in the occupation of a Hindoo, calling himself -Baboo Mookhi Singh”. It went on to state that Singh was “of eccentric habits and lived entirely alone”. The article stated that Singh “carried on the business of a grocer, but of late very little trade seems to have been done”. The shop had been closed since Wednesday of the previous week, 13 May 1896, and nothing had been heard or seen of Mookhi Singh since that date. The Coroner’s Officer, P.C. Cross, was informed on Monday 18 May and he gained access to the property. The body was said to have been found “in a very emaciated condition, the bones almost protruding through the skin” (*Oxford Times* 1896, p. 7). The article noted that “the deceased was said to have subsisted almost entirely on rice, plums, etc., and there was nothing to show that death resulted from other than natural causes” (*Oxford Times* 1896, p. 7). The inquest was held on Tuesday at Gloucester Green, in the presence of the Coroner, H. F. Galpin. The Coroners’ Index covers 1896 for Oxford, but Singh’s name does not appear in it. However, in the Police Occurrence Book (*Police Occurrence Book* 1896), the inquest is noted and that P.C. 22 John Cross reported “attending the inquest held at the Settling Room, Gloucester Green, at 4 pm, Tuesday the 19th”, on the “body of Baboo Mookhi Singh, grocer who was found dead at his home”. The verdict that was returned by the inquest was “Death from natural causes, viz. exhaustion arising from insufficient nourishment, and disease of the heart and lungs” (*Police Occurrence Book* 1896, POL1/1/A1/31).

The Jury viewed the body, and it was identified by George Messenger who resided at 15 St. Ebbe’s Street, a publican, living at and running the Three Tuns pub. Messenger stated that the shop had been closed for a few days and that he had alerted the police. He declared that it was not the first time that he had been to the police since the same had occurred once previously. It can be read that “[t]wo constables came down and when they went to the window, he spoke and said ‘Allright’” (*Oxford Times* 1896, p. 7). When Messenger asked him why he had not answered him, he had replied on that occasion “Me

allright". Messenger stated that he had seen him a week before and he had said to him that he looked very ill. Singh had, according to Messenger, replied "Me very well", and returned immediately inside. One of the jurymen stated that he lived opposite Singh and had noticed he looked very bad. He stated that the shop had been closed at 6.45pm on the Wednesday of 13 May.

The coroner's policeman, P.C. J. Owen Cross, arrived on site at 16 St. Ebbe's Street at 11am. He entered through the adjoining building, the Three Tuns pub, after getting no answer when he knocked at Singh's door. He opened the back windows of the first floor with a knife, entered the house, and lit a candle. Singh was found lying at the back door on the ground floor of the living room, by the door that led to the backyard. He was "quite dead and lying on his right side, his right hand supporting his head. His overcoat was on the ground underneath him" (*Oxford Times 1896*, p. 7). It was noted that the coroner's police officer called for a police ambulance and the body was taken to the mortuary. The article stated that there were 6 shillings in silver on Singh, as well as two letters and two Post Office memoranda. The house was also searched, and it was recorded that money to the value of two pence was found, as well as a one-franc piece, and a little food. The article noted that "the place was very dirty, and smelt strongly" (*Oxford Times 1896*, p. 7), typically aligning inferior status and odour, attributed to those who were colonised (Tabili 1993). There were Post Office Savings receipts in the desk. The details provided attempted to rule out the possibility of anything untoward and for there to have been nothing suspicious in the death, since there was still money in the house.

The letters found on Singh were handed to Deep Narayan Singh, a law student at the Middle Temple, residing at 155 Walton Street. Mookhi Singh had also resided at 29 Walton Street, at least until 1890. However, there is nothing to prove that they were acquainted with each other. One of the letters was translated by Deep Narayan Singh from "Hindi, a language spoken by Hindoos" (*Oxford Times 1896*, p. 7). It should be remembered that in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries, the term 'Hindoo' was often used indiscriminately for 'Indian'. It was stated that "neither of the letters threw any light on the death", and that Mookhi Singh, must have been a Hindoo from his name". It was noted previously that the name Singh is more associated, but not exclusively, with Sikhs. It should also be noted that not all Sikhs speak Panjabi, either, and indeed some speak Hindi (in particular, those from Delhi, for example). The newspaper report went on to add that "his religion would not have necessitated his fasting at this time of year" (*Oxford Times 1896*, p. 7). However, if he had been a Hindu, then he would probably have fasted on a regular weekly basis, and not simply at specific seasonal times of the year. Sikhs never fast. The newspaper article ends with the reproduction of the letter translated by Deep Narayan Singh and it read as follows:

From Surij Singh, etc., to Mookhi Singh—Greetings. We are all well here and hope you are the same. We received a letter from you and noted its contents. You say that you will send us some money if we give you all our particulars. I don't understand what you mean by 'particulars'. I have written all I could, if you cannot understand how can I help it. You ought to think of your home now your father, uncle and brother are all dead, and you ought to come here for a short time. We look up to you as the head of our family and I consider you as my father—elder brother. Pray write and say what you are doing there. Please send some money if you can. If you haven't any, write and tell us so plainly. Write and tell us your address. Please date your letters in Hindi. Your last letter reached us on the 12th March. Written from 13th March, Monday.

The letter is intriguing since it provided a name and details as to the life of Mookhi Singh. The letter appears to be from a family member. While the first name 'Surij' does not exist, it was perhaps mis-transcribed by the journalist and should read 'Suraj', a boy's name, meaning that this person was the younger brother of Mookhi Singh. It would appear that Mookhi Singh was the eldest brother and that there were no other males in the family to look after everyone who was left. It seems surprising that they do not know of the

address of Mookhi Singh in Oxford, since he had been living there for the past 8 years, at 16 St. Ebbe's Street, at least, since 1891, and at Walton Street since 1888. However, the letter does not have a year, and it may well be a letter that Mookhi Singh had carried around with him for a number of years. It stated in the letter that it was written on "13 March, Monday". There were two times that the date of 13 March fell on a Monday at the period of time: one in 1887, and the second in 1893. Singh first started appearing in the newspaper reports in 1888. So, either he had received the letter upon his arrival, and had not yet sent word of where he was staying; or he had received it a few years before his death. The former seems more probably. At any rate, it represents the link between the two places, Oxford and India, the tangible representation of the symbolic divide of Mookhi Singh, both Indian, and a British subject, yet, excluded from British society. If he had kept the letter on him, then it must have had some importance to him. It is the proof of connection between his country of origin, and this new place of settlement in Oxford. It is a link between the two geographic spaces and periods of time, the past and the present. To some extent, it is not wholly surprising that Mookhi Singh might have left his native India to go to work in Britain, perhaps with the intention of finding better opportunities, or access to greater wealth to support his family members. Claude Markovits notes that it is a "puzzling fact that [Indian merchants] never attracted the same amount of scholarly attention as did other dispersed communities of traders" (Markovits 2000, p. 19) such as the Chinese, Lebanese, Armenian, or Jewish. Markovits estimates that the number of Indian merchants dispersed across the world grew rapidly between the start of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, reaching a quarter of a million people by the 1930s, with 60% of them somewhere in the British colonies (Markovits 2000, p. 16). Baboo Mookhi Singh was one of those merchants who had travelled outside of India, as a shopkeeper, and small business merchant who set up in Oxford. However, because such Indian merchants have received very little scholarly attention, they are, therefore, excluded from colonial discourse, and from the manner in which history is perceived, or narrated, today. However, if the past is to be understood, and looked at entirely, and truthfully, then stories such as that of Singh are highly important to be recounted. His story does not appear to be part of migratory networks that have become to be considered traditional. He does not seem to have had family with him, but lived, and worked, alone. He was not, therefore, preceded by someone, nor apparently followed by anyone. He was always listed as being alone on the census data.

Perhaps the letter that Singh had on him when he was found dead is also representative of the ties with his town of origin, and his immediate family. The eldest member of the family was usually responsible for the safety, well-being, and financial resources of the others in the family. That eldest family member was also "responsible for the family business" and would traditionally "set up a family business with his brothers or sons", with the understanding that when the eldest died, an experienced younger brother would take the management" (Kanda 2019, p. 116). If Singh was a Sikh, then this would have been in line with the principles of *sewa* (the disinterested voluntary work for the others in one's family and community), as well as *kirat karna* (the obligation in Sikh ethics to work for oneself and make money, rather than benefiting from someone else's work through exploitation and selfishness). Sikhs, therefore, practice a precept of inter-community assistance through kinship (Milne 2022). If Singh was a Hindu, then it would also have been in line with the notion of *dharma* (the customs and laws which govern principles of duties and rights related to family, society, nature, and even the universe).

Commercial directories of the period note that there were two addresses that were used by Baboo Mookhi Singh in Oxford. The first was 29 Walton Street, St. Ebbe's. The second was 16 St. Ebbe's Street. The first court case dates from 1888, yet Kelly's Directory for 1889 does not yet list Singh at the address. Instead, there is a Mr. Eastbury, a confectioner (Kelly 1889, p. 90). But, in the following year, Singh is noted as "Singh B, Mookhi, grocer" (Kelly 1890, p. 183), at 29 Walton Street. By 1894, he had moved to 16 St. Ebbe's Street, where this time he is (incorrectly) listed as "Singh Mooklin, grocer" (Kelly 1894, p. 193).

In 1895, the same address shows “Singh Brothers, grocers” (Kelly 1895, p. 204). At some point, therefore, the business had become a family affair between brothers. The commercial directory for 1896 (Kelly 1896, p. 207) shows that the address is unoccupied. However, Singh had perhaps the intention of at least staying and making the business viable, since between (at least) 28 June 1890 and 20 September 1890, he took out twelve adverts (*Oxford Chronicle* 1890a, 1890b, 1890c, 1890d, 1890e, 1890f, 1890g; *Oxford Times* 1890a, 1890b, 1890c, 1890d, 1890e) in either the *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, or *The Oxford Times* (sometimes in both newspapers on the same dates). The advertisement (Figure 1) read usually along the same lines, and as follows:



Figure 1. Advert (*Oxford Chronicle* 1890f) that appeared in the *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* for Saturday 28 June 1890 (content provided by THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)). Adapted with permission from The British Newspaper Archive (1890). Copyright 1890 The British Newspaper Archive.

His advertising pitch stated that he was the “Cheapest House for TEAS and INDIAN and ARABIAN CIGARS in the City of Oxford, or in England”. He was not only commercialising, therefore, with the intention of selling grocery items, but tea, and cigars, also. He was advertising, and certainly had some knowledge about commercialisation of products and how to attract the customers. This too shows, to some extent, his education, and his status as a ‘Baboo’. Despite the Marketing Mix only being developed by Neil Borden (1950s), and Philip Kotler (1960s and 1970s) much later, Singh was clearly responding in the adverts to the principles of product, promotion, place and price. He even provided free delivery to anywhere. There must have been considerable competition for the adverts to be taken out. At 23 (and later 24 and 25) St. Ebbe’s Street, Francis Twining (relative of Robert Twining the tea merchant) had a grocer’s shop in the 1880s (TNA 1881). The cost of taking a single advert out in the *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* was noted as being 1 shilling for 16 words, and 2 shillings for 32 words. There are just under 60 words in Singh’s advert every time.

Singh was apparently importing the tea and cigars directly from India. It was, indeed, a family affair, in line with what was noted above, Perhaps the letter from the family member that was translated after his death was part of Singh Brothers import business. The business premises for 16 St. Ebbe’s Street had been advertised already in the *Oxford Chronicle* on Saturday 13 October 1888 (*Oxford Chronicle* 1888), and it noted that it was “suitable for a grocer or other business”, with a moderate rent to let, naming Mr. R. Buckell as the Auctioneer and Estate Agent of 2 Broad Street, Oxford, as the person to contact. The address no longer exists, however. As for the shop and premises at 29 Walton Street, the *Oxford Chronicle* (*Oxford Chronicle* 1916) ran an advertisement in 1916 stating that there was a house and a side shop and the premises were semi-detached, containing eight rooms at a very moderate rent.

Surij Singh had received the letter from Mookhi Singh on 12 March and had written back immediately the next day to him. Mookhi Singh was somewhat admonished in the letter by Surij for remaining silent for some time. Success and economic prosperity would

have been important for those family members who had been left behind, in particular, in such a family-run business activity. It is uncertain what Singh's intentions regarding migration were, but Markovits notes (Markovits 2000, p. 4) that "[t]emporary migration accounted for 90 per cent of departures from India in the 1830–1950 period". Singh was in Oxford for at least 8 years, between 1888 and 1896. It can only be deduced if that type of migratory trajectory for Singh was intended to be temporary, or not.

The translator of the letter, Deep Narayan Singh had a more prosperous life than Mookhi Singh, insofar as he emigrated to the United States in 1920 with his wife. He was named on the List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States Immigration Officer (List or Manifest of Alien Passengers 1920) as being the Raja of Dighapatia, Calcutta, and he spoke both English and Spanish. His wife, Lila, was a 'homewife'. They landed at Ellis Island on 26 May 1920, and then went to Honolulu, Hawaii. He was described as being a student of law in the report detailing Mookhi Singh's death. However, he had already matriculated from Trinity College, Cambridge in Michaelmas 1893 (Venn 1922–1954). He had been born in 1874 to Tel Narayan, and had attended Bhagalpur School, St. Xavier's College, Calcutta. He was called to the Bar of the Middle Temple in London on 26 January 1898.

A post-mortem was carried out (although the archives no longer exist) on Mookhi Singh's body and it was said to be "extremely emaciated, and there was extensive disease to the lungs and heart" (Oxford Times 1896, p. 7). The cause of death was reported to have been of natural causes, "exhaustion arising from taking insufficient nourishment acting on a diseased constitution". The date of death was declared to have been Saturday 16 May 1896. The jury was said to have "returned a verdict in accordance with the medical evidence", as was usually the case (Oxford Times 1896, p. 7).

Mookhi Singh's death certificate (GRO 1896) was certified by Henry F. Galpin at the inquest held on 19 May 1896. The cause of death on the certificate indicated it to be, as per the recommendation, from "exhaustion arising from insufficient nourishment and disease of the heart and lungs". Mookhi Singh was said to be 32 years of age, and his profession was listed as "Tobacconist and Dealer".

However, despite the decision to register the death as being one of natural causes, with knowledge of the number of events that led up to that death, one can see the death of Baboo Mookhi Singh in perhaps a different light, revealing of the times. Singh was harassed over a number of years by the local community.

2.2. Harassment by the Local Community

2.2.1. Assaulting a Man of Colour

At least over a period of 8 years leading up to his death, Mookhi Singh was harassed regularly by those in his immediate vicinity. The coroner stated that there was no reason to believe that he had died of any wrongful doing, and he was considered to have died a natural death. Yet, the events that preceded his death, must have had a toll on his well-being, his possible integration into the community, and how he identified with those around him.

The first recorded assault on him was reported in February 1888, in the *Greenwich and Deptford Observer* (Greenwich 1888, p. 2). The same article also appeared on the same day in the *Woolwich Gazette* (Woolwich Gazette 1888). The article was headlined 'Assaulting a Man of Colour', and Singh was referred to as a "black man", but at no time an Indian. Catherine Hall notes that little is known about "migrants' reception unless their presence provoked comment" (Hall and Rose 2006, p. 55). Singh's presence in Oxford did provoke local and legal reactions since it went against the grain of the popular belief of a homogenised society. It is notable that from the mid-nineteenth century, British attitudes towards people who were not white, were ambivalent. Marika Sherwood notes that "political and commercial development—the building of an empire and the containment of labour troubles at home, as well as the necessity of providing appropriately lucrative employment for the new middle classes and the younger sons of the nobility—required the institutionalising of an earlier myth of the superior Englishman, now with a civilizing mission" (Sherwood 2001, p. 1). The inferior status attributed to racial groups, therefore, became part and parcel of British

society, in particular, with the advent of post-1870 Forster Act of compulsory education. Through bringing Anglo-Saxonism back to the forefront of society and re-erecting racial superiority, meant that all classes of native-born English could benefit from the idea of superior status, since those from the colonies were considered to be racially inferior to them all.

The newspaper article notes that Henry Nicholls “a young man” ([Greenwich 1888](#), p. 2) of Tanner’s Hill, Deptford, had knocked a box of rhubarb from Singh’s hands, and that he had torn his clothes, assaulted him, and that Singh had been “subject to a good deal of annoyance”, the police told the Court. Nothing has been found as to how or when the harassment of Mookhi Singh began, but it would appear from the wording that it was consequential. It is also interesting to note that the police provided the judge with this information. Mr. Williams, the presiding magistrate, noted that “[b]ecause the complainant was a black man, men like the defendant thought they could do as they liked with him”. This shows to what extent, in rather a modern, avantgarde comment, perhaps, for the Victorian period, that before the eyes of the law, Singh, a “man of colour”, was indeed afforded rights and protection. Henry Nicholls was sentenced to 14 days’ hard labour. The Police Court Record does not exist for this case, however. The details can only be relied upon in the newspaper articles. The court records and the police records do not show this case in the archives.

While Mookhi Singh was the only person in St. Ebbe’s Street that was not from Oxford, there were already Indians arriving at Oxford University to study law there. It cannot be forgotten that Cornelia Sorabji (1866–1954) was the first female to study law at Oxford University (Sommerville College), and the first Indian, also. She had studied at Bombay University, came top in her results, and was granted a scholarship to study at Oxford. However, when the administrators realised that she was a woman, the scholarship was withdrawn. The Principal of Sommerville raised the money for her to be admitted. She arrived in 1889, just one year after Mookhi Singh had first been reported in the *Greenwich and Deptford Observer*. Therefore, Singh was not the only Indian in Oxford, for certain. Antoinette Burton notes that the British Isles were just as much a “contact zone” ([Burton and Ray 1999](#), p. 1) between imperial power and the colonised. She notes that the experiences of those colonised ‘natives’ in Great Britain were “evidence of how imperial power was staged at home and how it was contested by colonial ‘natives’ at the heart of the empire itself” ([Burton and Ray 1999](#), p. 1). It is only recently that Britain has been seen to be the place in which imperial policies were also played out, and how they were challenged by domestic-settled imperial subjects, such as Mookhi Singh, albeit in a small way. It was often thought erroneously that those coming from the British colonies started arriving in the post-1945 period, meaning that those who came before were largely ignored, or deemed to be single examples. It should not be forgotten that people like Mookhi Singh questioned and legally challenged the barriers and the ill-treatment that was meted out to them in courts, before judges, using democracy, rather than either accepting the treatment, or acting outside of the law. This clearly brings into question the notion of what it meant to be British in nineteenth century Britain. Rozina Visram has already shown that by the time Mookhi Singh was running his tea dealer’s shop/grocer’s, Indians had already been present in Britain for more than one hundred and fifty years, at least, or possibly even since the early seventeenth century ([Visram \[1986\] 2015](#)). However, there were few of them. Mookhi Singh’s arrival in Oxford was met with apparent hostility.

2.2.2. 1889, Two Male Youths Throwing Stones at Singh’s Shop

The next incidence of hostility took place on Saturday 2 November 1889, a year and a half after the event involving Nicholls, when an article appeared, headlined ‘Troublesome Boys’ in the *Oxford Times* ([Oxford Times 1889](#), p. 3). William Simms and William Musto damaged the shop window of Mookhi Singh by throwing stones at it. They were summoned for “committing wilful damage to the extent of one shilling”. This time, Mookhi Singh was referred to as “B. Mookhi Singh”, and the “complainant, a man of colour” ([Oxford](#)

[Times 1889](#), p. 3). This implies perhaps that the magistrate was aware of the honorific title of 'Baboo', similar to 'Mister', and therefore, used it in the abbreviated fashion. It was claimed by Singh that Musto had thrown several stones at the shop door, and when confronted by Singh the boys "used bad language". The report notes that he "had been daily annoyed by these lads for some time". Simms stated that he was on the opposite side of the road, at the time, and both denied what they were accused of. The parents stated that they would "bring up the lads for judgement when called upon to do so", but neither was prosecuted. The Magistrate, Mr. Lowe, told them that "if they were brought up again under such circumstances they would be sent to goal without the chance of a fine". As Douglas Hay notes, local magistrates were often paternalistic in attitude ([Hay 1980](#), p. 52), and this seems also to be the case here. There was no further reference found in the newspaper searches of these two boys. Perhaps the magistrate's warning was enough to stop them appearing before him again. However, it did not discourage others from harassing Singh in the following years. There is no record of their having been fined, nor of Mookhi Singh being reimbursed for the shop door, the window or the cakes that were damaged and the lamp inside the grocer's shop. It is not known from the newspaper report how old the two youths were. But the William Musto involved was said to have been residing at 54 Charles Street, Iffley Road, which is a 25-min walk from St. Ebbe's Street and the shop. In 1891 ([TNA 1891b](#)), he was residing in Charles Street, aged, 16 and was a printer. Therefore, at the time that he committed the damage on Singh's shop, he would have been around 14 years old. William Musto was with his parents George Mustoe [sic.] and Elizabeth, aged 43 and 46, respectively. The father, George Mustoe, was a joiner. After the 1888 attack on Singh's person by Henry Nicholls, there were no more adults who would attack or harass him, or his property. All other attacks were carried out by children, or youths, and they were all male.

The Police Court Records ([Police Court Records 1889](#), p. 410) noted that the incident had occurred on Thursday 24 October 1889, and the boys had been summoned on Tuesday 29 October. Singh made a sworn statement and noted the following "I carry on business 29 Walton Street as grocer. On Thursday 25th inst. Saw two boys outside my shop. I had little girls and boys in the shop (8.45 a.m.). I saw W. Musto at the shop. He threw stones at the shop door. I saw him throw an onion, and one or two stones. W. Simms was with him at the time. The damage was [blank] I caught Musto and put him in the [illegible] and brought P.C. The cakes were broken and a lamp. I have been annoyed 3 or 4 days by the boys. I have had the shop nine weeks" ([Oxford Times 1889](#), p. 3). He added "I saw you throw the stones". The parents were fined the sum of £5. Surprisingly, a J. Bell was also sworn as to the truthfulness of the statement by Singh. Visibly, therefore, Mookhi Singh opened his shop and started renting it approximately around the 24 August 1889. Consequently, this was the first incident after having opened the shop premises. The previous incident with Nicholls had occurred, in 1888, before opening the shop. Sherwood notes that school textbooks of the period abounded with racial stereotyping in which India, in particular, appeared as having no history before the arrival of the British. She notes that "Indians [were depicted as] invariably cruel [...] and savage, while their leaders are despotic, weak, effeminate and treacherous, and unfitted to rule themselves" ([Sherwood 2001](#), p. 12). The English, on the contrary, were portrayed as honest, strong, courageous and civilising. This type of belief was commonplace in the nineteenth century in school textbooks, and it was also encouraged by the outrage felt by the British after the 1857 revolt in the Indian Army against the British, known as the Indian Rebellion, or the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Christine Bolt notes that many explained this mutiny through the neglecting of Christianity in the Indian sub-continent, and there was a "mistaken belief that this was the easiest way to ensure loyalty in the native" ([Bolt 1971](#), p. 158). Arunima Datta also notes that "colonized men were frequently associated with unruliness and immorality; seen as dangerous potential threats to social order" ([Datta 2021](#), p. 96). It is precisely this which lay before Baboo Mookhi Singh in the following incident that was recorded in 1890, when he was accused of indecent assault and his morality was brought into question.

2.2.3. 1890. Singh Accused of Committing Indecent Assault on a Boy

The *Oxford Journal* reported one year later on Saturday 15 November 1890 that Mookhi Singh had been involved in committing assault on a 13-year-old youth named Walter Watts. The headline read 'Horrible Charge Against an Indian' (*Oxford Journal* 1890, p. 8), and Mookhi Singh was stated this time to be "a native of India, who has for some time past carried on the business of a grocer at 29, Walton Street". Watts was reported to have been in the employment of Mookhi Singh for under a month, since 6 October 1890, as an errand boy. On 6 November, Singh is said to have taken him "on his knee. He [the judge] then described the nature of the prisoner's conduct, which was of the most disgusting character" (*Oxford Journal* 1890, p. 8). The report goes on to state that "this filthy behaviour was repeated on Saturday, the details being, of course, utterly unfit for publication". As Daniel Grey notes, from the 1830s, newspapers were "liable to skim over the reporting of sex offences as 'unfit for publication'" (Grey 2020, p. 189). Beyond the sensationalism of the press, with the headline, and the events described, there must have been societal consequences on Mookhi Singh's reputation, not only as an Indian, standing out in Oxford city centre, but also as a shopkeeper and grocer, and the consequences for his business. Weiner and Freedheim have already noted that regardless of whether an accusation of child abuse is true or false, there will always be social stigma attached to it and while there exist support and lobby groups today to assist victims of false accusations (ranging from anywhere between 6% to 35% of cases), the general public seems to believe that the accused is guilty regardless of whether this is true, or not (Weiner and Freedheim 2003, p. 438). The same might well have happened to Mookhi Singh, except there were no support groups to assist him, and he was living on his own, unmarried, and without apparent assistance. Given the constant harassment suffered by Mookhi Singh in St. Ebbe's in previous years, it is not surprising that there was an escalation in the accusations, moving from name-calling to harassment, breaking of property and then an accusation of child molestation.

Mookhi Singh accused Walter Watts of having stolen money from him and that (*Oxford Journal* 1890, p. 8) he had seen him take it from the till and put it in his pocket. He said that he had searched the boy for the coins. The mother, Lydia Watts, was also reported to have stated that she had noticed that her son's "eyes looked red" when he returned home on "Saturday afternoon". Mookhi Singh was accused of having taken Watts on his knee on Thursday 6 November 1890, and molested him, and then it was repeated on Saturday 8 November 1890. The Police Charge Books noted this information also when a warrant was granted for his arrest on 10 November at 6.30pm (*Police Charge Book* 1890, p. 109). William Prior was sent to arrest him at the shop premises. Singh had £8 in gold and silver on him, along with three keys and pencils, as well as memos. It was noted that he was committed to the assizes for trial, and he was handed over to the prison at 3 pm on the 11 November 1890. The result of the trial is noted as having been discharged at the Autumn Assizes on 14 November 1890 in Oxford. The police noted that he was aged 26 years, meaning that he had been born in 1864. He was noted as being 5ft 7in (170 cm). His hair was black, his eyes brown, and his complexion dark. He was deemed to have had an 'imperfect' level of education, and his character was noted as P.G., or presumed good. Under the column 'Particular Marks' was written 'Calcutta', which appears to be some form of distinguishing mark for him. Perhaps the origin of the place from which he had left India. At any rate, a city had been transformed into a distinguishable feature of his own identity. Another prisoner is noted as having the ends of two fingers on his left hand missing, for example. Noting down 'Calcutta' would point to the fact that it was some highly visible and distinguishable feature amongst the inhabitants of Oxford, therefore. But this was not in line with Benares, noted on the census return for 1891, however (*TNA* 1891a), which was provided as his place of birth. However, it is not unusual for people to provide differing places of birth in the nineteenth century, at different times in their life, or for different reasons. Perhaps, however, as shall be seen later Singh had boarded a steam ship that would have left from Calcutta to travel through the Suez Canal to reach Britain.

The boy who accused Singh of indecent assault, William Watts, was residing at 20 Church Street according to the Census returns for 1891 (5 April) (TNA 1891c). He was aged 13, at that time. His father, William Watts, was a 35-year-old railway shunter, and Lydia Watts, his mother was 39, and a needlewoman. Surprisingly, for 1891, William Watts is noted to be “house boy on holiday”, and yet that he was “in employment” (TNA 1891c).

When Lydia Watts saw that her son’s eyes were red, she stated she had decided to remove him from the employment of Mookhi Singh. Singh went to the house of Walter Watts in Church Street, St. Ebbe’s, on the evening of Sunday 9 November 1890, and asked the mother why the boy had not been to work that day. She pointed out that he would not be coming back as he had to “go back to school for a little while longer” (Oxford Journal 1890, p. 8). She then added that she would let Singh know if her son was going to return to his job on the following day, the Monday after. She stated also that she did not tell Singh the real reason for keeping her son away, and she said Singh had made no mention of the stolen money. The police sergeant (P.S. Prior), in plain clothes, went to the shop to arrest Singh on Monday evening with a warrant, as per the Police Charge Book. Singh refused to go and “became very excited” (Oxford Journal 1890, p. 8). A constable in uniform (P.C. Dickenson) was called for, and Singh was taken to the police station, but only after Prior had jumped over the counter and threatened to use force. Singh was said to have been “charged at the station and made no reply”. The newspaper reports that “Tea chests were arranged to such a height in the windows and on the counter that no one could be seen behind them” (Oxford Journal 1890, p. 8). Seemingly, these two elements (the non-denial of Singh, and the supposed arrangement of tea chests in order to carry out the “unfit acts”), were reason enough to condemn him, or at least, make the reader think that. Singh was said also to have “broken English”, adding that he “did not do nothing”. Singh in his defence stated that he had searched the boy for coins and found them, and added “if you do like that [,] I will be bankrupt”. The boy alleged that he stated that he would tell the police of his conduct, and Singh responded that he had told him not to return the following week.

More details can be gleaned from the article published on 15 November in the *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* (Oxford Chronicle 1890h, p. 3) This newspaper article notes the charge as “unlawfully and indecently assaulting” Walter Watts. The reporter stated that Watts was in the employment of Singh from 29 October, which is in contradiction to the date provide in the *Oxford Journal*. It is learnt that on Thursday 6 November, with the further precision of it being at 3pm, Singh asked Watts to sit on his knee. Watts went to him and Singh “behaved indecently towards him” (Oxford Chronicle 1890h, p. 3), adding “the lad also described the revolting manner in which he alleged that the accused acted towards him on Saturday”. It is reported that Watts stated that he managed to pull himself away. It is also added that the second assault took place on Saturday at 11 in the morning and the boy remained there until 1pm, when he returned home for dinner. However, in the *Oxford Journal*, Watts is said to have returned home in the afternoon (Oxford Journal 1890, p. 8). According to the *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, Watts returned to the shop at 2pm, and that he had made no complaint to his mother. Singh was also accused of not having spoken to the boy when he returned. It was on Saturday night that it is reported Watts’ mother “took him away from Singh’s service”. During the cross-examination, it was reported that Singh did not find any money in his pockets on Thursday. On Saturday, it was reported that Singh had given Watts half a sovereign to change for him. He did not change it and returned it to Singh. Lydia Watts stated that her son returned home on Saturday at 5pm for tea, and that she noticed his eyes were red. Watts “made a communication to her” and she removed him from the employment of Singh after 11pm. It is reported that Singh came on Sunday night to the Watts’ house and asked, “Why has Walter not been to-day?”. He asked if the boy was at home and tried to look “through the crack of the door”. The report attempts to show that Singh is, if not guilty, at least, uncivilised, prying through the crack of the door. It was “at the accused’s request” that the mother promised she would inform him whether or not her son was to return on the following day. Then, Prior went to arrest him. This report noted that “Singh said when he saw Prior go in he thought he was a

customer, he being in plain clothes—(laughter)—but when he saw a constable in uniform he agreed to go with him". Again, the article noted that the boxes and tea chests had been "arranged" in such a manner as to obscure anything from either inside or outside the shop, indirectly claiming the guilt of Singh and premeditation. Singh stated that he saw Watts steal the money from the drawer. Watts denied this and so he called him and opened his coat and searched his trousers. After finding money in his trousers, he asked him if he was wearing a second pair of trousers underneath and to open them. He stated, "I did not believe him, and I opened his trousers and found he had no other trousers underneath". This may seem questionable today given current attitudes towards consent and children's rights. However, it should not be forgotten in the context of the time that pickpockets and thieves often wore multiple layers of clothing to dissimulate what they were stealing ([Hitchin 1718](#), p. 12).

Singh also stated that he had told the boy that if he were to act like this, then he would be bankrupt on the Thursday when he stole the coins, and they were found in his pocket. On Saturday, he stated the same when he found the boy with the half-sovereign in his hand. From this second report, it would seem, therefore, that on Thursday 6 November, Watts had stolen some coins, Singh had searched him, undone his trousers to see if he was hiding anything more, and that he had told him he would go bankrupt if he continued. On Saturday 8 November, the boy was found with a half-a-sovereign in his hand, and Singh said the same thing, telling him not to return to work the following week (according to Singh). This certainly does not corroborate with the fact that Singh is said to have gone on Sunday evening to ask why the boy had not been to work on that day and whether he was returning on the Monday, according to Lydia Watts.

The trial at the Oxford Assizes took place on 13 November 1890, and the offence was noted as being for 'Indecent assault on a male'. Mookhi Singh was the last case to be tried on that day. Other offences were that day: an arson attack by John Brown, for example, and Indecent assault by William Griffin. William Jones was convicted of 'an attempt of carnal knowledge on a 13–16-year-old girl', also. All were imprisoned and whipped. Eunice Walton was accused of manslaughter but was discharged "on recognisances to appear and receive judgement when called upon". Mookhi Singh was acquitted and found "not guilty" of the charges against him of committing indecent assault on a young male youth ([TNA 1890a](#)). Singh was the only one that day who was found not guilty and discharged by acquittal. The Police Court Records also note for 11 November 1890 "Case Withdrawn" ([Police Court Records 1890](#), p. 289). However, that would suggest that Watts had withdrawn his accusations. Perhaps this is connected with the fact that in the 1891 census Watts was noted as being "houseboy on holiday" ([TNA 1891c](#)), but employed. Perhaps a financial transaction had been agreed upon. The Calendar of Prisoners (1868–1929) has an entry for Mookhi Singh, noting that he was admitted to bail on 12 November 1890, that he was aged 26 years, and that he had an "imperfect" degree of instruction ([TNA 1890b](#)). This was one of the most serious cases in which Singh was involved. The others continued to involve male youths but were more concerned with breaking and damaging the property of Singh.

2.2.4. Two Youths Damage Singh's Shop Window by Throwing Mud

The *Oxford Chronicle* of 7 February 1891 published the police proceedings related to the events that concerned two youths: 15-year-old George Harris and 13-year-old Harry Clifford, both of Victor Street, Oxford. They were noted as "troublesome boys" ([Oxford Chronicle 1891](#), p. 2), which seems rather euphemistic, given the extent that Mookhi Singh had already appeared before the Mayor, Alderman Buckell, and his Deputy, Alderman Hughes, in previous cases. It would seem that Mookhi Singh had prosecuted the boys and wanted them to fulfil their duties as his apprentices, and also to pay costs. It has not been possible to prove that he had hired them as apprentices in his shop. However, the court case leads one to believe that this was the case. It would seem, therefore, that he was employing people from the local community of St. Ebbe's, but they were harassing him while doing so. The boys were fined 6d, had to pay the same sum in damages, and

then Harris was ordered to pay 5d for legal costs and Clifford 4d for the same. If they did not, they would be sentenced to seven days' imprisonment. They had thrown mud and cracked the window of the shop and broken two glass globes, despite pleading not guilty. Mookhi Singh, under oath, swore that they had first thrown stones (not mentioned in the newspaper article), and the legal records ([Police Court Records 1891b](#), p. 374–5) note that the globes cost 10s. Singh swore that the window was not broken before they threw the mud, which they then smeared all over the glass. John Tay, a glazier of 67 Cardigan Street stated under oath that he had been called by Clifford to go to the shop premises of Mookhi Singh to measure for some glass that had been broken. Tay noted that it was at the top and had not been broken by a stone. He also noted that another pane of glass in the door had been cracked, by something falling from inside the shop against the door. Singh had already stated that the shop door was open and that was how the glass globes got broken, when the boys threw the stones inside. Tay stated that it was Singh who had said that something had fallen against the door and cracked the glass by accident, and he added that no stone could crack a window such as had supposedly happened. He also stated that it had been broken before the date that Harris and Clifford had been accused of committing the vandalism. He mentioned that he had seen it two or three times. Singh denied this and repeated his statement. Ultimately, despite the attempts to the contrary, the case was found in favour of Singh, showing, to some extent, that despite his difference, he was given justful treatment before the law, again.

The next event to take place was In September 1891 ([Oxford Times 1891](#), p. 7) when it was reported that Mookhi Singh was prosecuted for the “Obscene Literature”, previously dealt with at the start of this paper, and for which he was sentenced to one month in prison at Oxford with hard labour, according to the *Oxford Times* report. A search of the prison records, however, did not reveal that he actually went to prison, although they may be missing from the archives. It is not revealed either whether, or not, he was prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. Technically, Singh had not published anything and was not selling anything, which was the remit of the law that governed obscenity in Great Britain. However, he was posting something in his shop window which was being referred to as “obscene literature”. It is possible that under the Hicklin test ([Regina v. Hicklin 1868](#)), the result of the poster in the window of the shop was sufficient to deprave and corrupt public morals of the 200 or 300 youths who had gathered around the shop. Lord Chief Justice Alexander Cockburn noted on the matter in the Hicklin case: “I think the test of obscenity is this, whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave or corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall.” ([Regina v. Hicklin 1868](#), p. 371). The original intention of the Obscene Publications Act had been to stop young people of Victorian Britain being corrupted by pornographic literature. It was the youth who were the object of the 1857 law.

At any rate, the newspaper reports a harsh sentence revealing Victorian attitudes towards what was considered as obscenity. The Obscene Publications Act of 1857 was the first of its kind and allowed for the seizing of any materials that were obscene in nature, or pornographic.

From this moment on, it would always be two male youths (always different) who acted together to damage the property of Singh, rather than acting alone.

2.2.5. Singh's Shop Damaged by Two Youths and Then Repeat the Offence

In the *Oxfordshire Weekly News* and also the *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* that appeared on 16 October 1892, George Boswell and John Parker were reported as having damaged the glass door of the shop belonging to Mookhi Singh ([Oxfordshire Weekly News 1892](#), p. 7; [Oxford Chronicle 1892](#), p. 6). Boswell and Parker had thrown stones at the window, and they were said to have wilfully damaged it. They did not appear in court when they were called to do so on Friday 21 October, and so the case was adjourned until the following week, on Monday 25 October 1892. The Police Court Records ([Police Court](#)

[Records 1892](#), p. 65–6) noted that the incident had been set at a value of 7s and 6d. This time they both pleaded guilty, and the mother of Boswell pleaded in their favour.

Singh had stated that he had seen Parker throw the stone. He had apparently stated that he did not want to hurt the boys, and that they should recognize that they had broken the window. Singh had dictated a letter to them to that effect, and they had agreed to pay the money. This is interesting since it suggests that Singh was also aware of the fact that he needed proof in writing. The case was dismissed, with Boswell's mother stating that "the complainant had previously agreed that the case should not be proceeded with on the undertaking to pay 5s each last Saturday" ([Oxfordshire Weekly News 1892](#), p. 7). Singh denied this, but the mother repeated her statement, and the judges decided to dismiss the case "as Mr. Singh had taken the case out of their hands" ([Oxfordshire Weekly News 1892](#), p. 7).

In the Census returns for 1891, George Boswell ([TNA 1891d](#)) was living at 22 Friars Street, and John Parker was at 18 Friars Street ([TNA 1891e](#)), St. Ebbe's, a ten-minute walk from Singh's shop. Boswell was 13 at the time of the census, and Parker was 11. The events took place in 1892, so Boswell would have been 14 and Parker aged 12 years. Boswell's mother had no profession, his father was in the Navy, and his sister was a "sempstress". Parker's father was a farm labourer, and his mother was a charwoman, representative of the working-class people living in St. Ebbe's. The next incident escalated in severity, however, from breaking property, to breaking and entering the property.

2.2.6. Three Youths Break into Singh's Shop

The *Oxfordshire Weekly News* ran a headline which read 'JUVENILE HOUSEBREAKERS', in block capitals, on 27 September 1893 ([Oxfordshire Weekly News 1893](#), p. 3). George Maltby, aged 16, Charles Peedell, aged 15, and Ernest Collins, aged 17, all of no occupation were "charged with breaking and entering the shop of N^o. 16, St. Ebbe-street, between 8 and 9 p.m., on Tuesday" ([Oxfordshire Weekly News 1893](#), p. 3). They stole two boxes of cigars (£1 12s), from the shop owner Baboo Mookhi Singh, who is reported to have locked the shop up at 8.30pm, but who returned by 9.40 p.m. to the premises to find that they had been broken into. The newspaper report states that he said that there were three boxes that had been stolen, and not two. Two boxes were produced in court, and he recognised them as his property. This was thanks to Gilbert Bennet, a ticket collector at the Great Western Railway station. He reported to the police that he had seen three boys standing near the gas yard, as he was walking home to have breakfast. When he returned to the yard, he saw two boxes of cigars and some cigars on the ground. It was P.C. Castle who arrested the youths. The report notes that they received a fine, despite Maltby being arrested first and denying any involvement. Bennett and Collins were each fined 10s and had to pay 8s in costs, or they would receive 14 days' hard labour. The Court records and the police records show no trace of the incident. However, it provides a small glimpse of the fact that even if Gilbert Bennett may not have been aware of who the cigars originally belonged to, he was prepared to report it to the police. The judge also upheld the case in favour of Mookhi Singh, and seemingly, justice was provided for him. However, it does show that youths had broken into the shop of Singh, and the dangers that he was being exposed to in the community, by some.

2.2.7. 1895. Two Youths Break Singh's Shop Window

There was an interruption of events that appear in the Oxford press between the last event recorded related to the housebreaking event of 1893, and the event that took place in July 1895. Perhaps things had died down and Mookhi Singh was free from harassment by the local youth or the neighbours, or the articles linked to him have not been located yet (despite searches), or the press lost interest, or had other things to report on.

The case in 1895 involved Albert Moger, and the article was entitled "Alleged Wilful Damage", on 31 July 1895, in the *Oxfordshire Weekly News* ([Oxfordshire Weekly News 1895](#),

p. 6). The case was adjourned for one week for the “production of further evidence”. However, there is no trace of the outcome of the events.

Moger lived at 3 Littlegate Street (TNA 1891f), St. Ebbe’s, with his father, who was the licensed victualler of the Black Drummer public house. Albert Moger was aged 8, at the time of the Census in 1891, and, therefore, must have been approximately 12 at the time of the events, in 1895. Although, he was said to be 14 in the newspaper report. The Mogers had moved in to run the pub in 1895 (they were from Southampton, Hampshire), and the father was not only a licenced victualler, but also a plasterer, suggesting that he needed two jobs to live. The pub remained in the family’s management until 1901.

Mookhi Singh was described as a grocer, and in the afternoon of 12 July, he was in his private rooms, at about 3pm. The boy entered the shop. It is said that Moger “had a bill in his hand and witness told him to put it on the counter” (Oxfordshire Weekly News 1895, p. 6). After, Moger left the shop and picked up a stone and threw it at the window. Moger, in his defence, called a witness, Aubrey Allam, who stated that they were both together delivering bread in Grandpont, south Oxford. They had met, and Moger was distributing bills there. It was stated that they were together and went to Hinksey, where they stayed from 2.30 p.m. until 4.30 p.m. It is not known why the case was dismissed on 30 July 1895 (Police Court Records 1895b, p. 43). The case had first been heard on 23 July 1895 (Police Court Records 1895a, p. 32), where Moger pleaded not guilty, and the case had been adjourned for more evidence to be brought before the court. Perhaps Singh was unable to provide further proof or to find a witness to defend his case.

It was, however, the last time that he is recorded as having gone to court before his death in strange circumstances and the discovery of his body lying on the ground of his lodgings, in May 1896, just under a year later.

3. Conclusions

Fisher notes, “interactions in Britain between people from India and Britons were never equal, but nor were they dichotomous” (Fisher 2004, p. 211). Mookhi Singh was harassed and badly treated throughout the period covered here, from 1888–1896. However, he used the law to defend himself, showed relative resilience and perseverance in his attempt to prove that a legal system did exist, even if he doubted his equal footing with other British people. The law did protect him in the majority of cases he brought before Oxford courtrooms. The treatment of Mookhi Singh and the relations between the locals in St. Ebbe’s and this Indian living amongst them, were not as dichotomous as might be believed. His microhistory can thus shed light on re-evaluating the presence of early Indian settlers in the British Isles.

The adult male that first assaulted Singh was sent to prison. The youths that harassed him, broke his property, and damaged his shop were told that they would be fined or punished if they appeared again before the magistrates. None of them was prosecuted by Mookhi Singh a second time, perhaps indicating that they had learnt their lesson and taken heed of the warnings they were given. Nevertheless, the continuation of the court cases and the fact that the harassment itself continued to show that the process of change and the re-balancing of power through non-violence was a lengthy process. Mookhi Singh may have believed that there was no law for him in England or that he was not treated adequately, but he did have knowledge of how it functioned and how to use the legal system. He was acquitted of the accusations of molestation and assault on Walter Watts, and the only time he was sent to prison was for the public display of obscene language. However, the stance of the legal system in Victorian Britain with regard to Mookhi Singh shows that there was a change in the face of identities in Britain at the time. A shift was taking place and Mookhi Singh was an actor in that, albeit on a local and individual scale. Davenport, McDermott, and Armstrong note that the “narratives that emerge from contentious events can profoundly influence future notions of what is acceptable and what is not, as well as of who should be held accountable for what transgressions and how” (Davenport et al. 2018, p. 168). This is precisely what Mookhi Singh contributed to. The everyday events

that Mookhi Singh experienced might seem trivial against the backdrop of greater and seemingly more important issues of everyday Victorian Britain, in the coloniser–colonised dichotomy, but neighbour disputes are revealing of ordinary affairs and social identities (Troyna and Hatcher 1992, p. 12), in particular with regard to racism and children or youths.

The harassment and the ill-treatment by the neighbours were carried out exclusively in these cases by males. In all but one case, it is by young males. Troyna and Hatcher note that name-calling establishes a particular form of male identity, and acts as a means to assert (male) domination in a framework of social structure (Troyna and Hatcher 1992, p. 12). Name-calling could be considered to be an attempt to also encourage others in and around the immediate neighbourhood of Mookhi Singh to perceive him in the same way, acting therefore as a form of collective power and domination. This must have had an effect on the self-esteem and well-being of Singh, since he was being attacked in terms of his identity; and it must have acted as a violation of his dignity as an individual, reducing him to limited significance as a biological characteristic, excluding him from the social collectiveness of Oxford society in the late-Victorian period. This is of the utmost importance today given the events of recent years (Black Lives Matter and anti-racism movements, for example), and developments in post-colonial studies. As stated in the introduction, the story of the events in the life of Baboo Mookhi Singh are not just about the nineteenth century, but they are also about the present and what is taking place today.

Baboo Mookhi Singh is the first Indian (known) grocer in Oxford. He is at least unique in his life story and what remains in the archives of it. The expansion of the British Empire had allowed for movement to take place not only to other colonised countries in the Empire, but also in the opposite direction to the British Isles (Burton 1998; Datta 2023a, 2023b; Fisher 2004; Sharafi 2010), albeit on a much smaller scale. While there is consequential documentation of a valuable nature related to Indians in London and in Oxford (Chatterjee 2021; Ranasinha 2012; Visram 2002), little has been said of ordinary Indians in Oxford, precisely because they are so rare. The majority of the focus has been upon the military, the elite, and the political activists. The presence of Mookhi Singh in Oxford, working as a grocer, raises questions of what it meant to be British. However, with regard to citizenship, it was not a category that had been codified by the law and would not be clearly done so until the mid-twentieth century (Young 1995, p. 23). Therefore, for the period when Mookhi Singh was present in Oxford, the issue he was dealing with was not one related to citizenship, but one related to status, civilisation, and race. His deviance and his difference were perceived according to the level of what was considered as normality by those in Britain. That difference became associated with sexual perversity, and thus the accusations of molestation meted out to Singh. At any rate, even if Singh was not treated by his local community as being part of the community of British people, he was very much exercising his claim to being a British subject, along equal lines with them. It is interesting that, at more or less the same time, such questions were the subject of official circles, where discussions and debates were taking place as to what it meant to be British. Notably, the nationalist founder of the Indian National Association, Surendranath Banerjea, stated the following: “We are not Englishmen or men of English race or extraction, but we are British subjects, the citizens of a great and free empire; we live under the protecting shadows of one of the noblest constitutions the world has ever seen. The rights of the Englishmen are ours, their privileges are ours, their constitution is ours. But we are excluded from them” (Banerjea 1893, p. 1). Baboo Mookhi Singh was partly aware of this already, since he too was demanding to be treated equally before the eyes of the law. Generally speaking, this was the case, and the legal system did defend his rights as an Indian subject, contrary to his belief perhaps that there was no law for him in England. It does not seem that Singh was excluded from one of the “noblest constitutions”, from those “protecting shadows” of which Banerjea spoke. However, it was perhaps the understanding of those who were making decisions on legal cases that they heard, but not of the local population yet, at this time. Decades before, the *Proclamation, by the Queen in Council, to the Princes, Chiefs, and People of India* by Queen Victoria in the wake of the 1857 revolt, it was noted that “all

shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the law" ([Proclamation 1858](#), p. 1) whatever their race or creed, as the civil service became open to all Indians, also. Baboo Mookhi Singh was putting these words to the test in real life. Singh was claiming his right as a British subject through his status in India. He was claiming the right to equal and fair treatment, and identified, perhaps, as an Indian, but certainly also as a British subject.

It was perhaps due to this, and advances in technology, that he travelled to the British Isles. As Banerjea noted, Indians "are children of that mother, and they claim their birthright" ([Banerjea 1893](#), p. 1). Singh was claiming his right to travel to the country that had afforded him the right to settle there through virtue of that proclamation, albeit through colonisation. It should, thus, come to be understood that British identity was being shaped in a small way, in that local community by the mere presence of Mookhi Singh in Oxford and the exercising of his rights. The local community in Oxford were seeing changes whereby the law upheld the rights of an Indian above their own, and they were not able to enact or act out the theatre of domination, as school textbooks may have allowed them to believe. The events in the life of Singh serve as an example, through their microhistorical narrative, as a means to bring into question the traditional belief that colonisation was one-directional. Those coming from the colonies were far smaller in numbers, but they represent a form of counter-colonialism that has not been looked at (in particular, beyond the circles of those either living in London or studying in Oxford). Elleke Boehmer notes that Indians were "relatively few and far between [...]—mostly men, but also a small number of women—were rarely at large in public spaces, and did not freely mingle with Britons. They tended to inhabit the relatively closed environments of college quads and designated hostels and dormitories, and congregated for mutual support" ([Boehmer 2015](#), p. 9). Singh's story, therefore, is clearly a rare one and casts some light on what it was like for an Indian of his status living in the very heart of a community in Oxford. He was in no quad and was not in a dormitory or a hotel. He did not congregate with his fellow Indians for mutual support.

It is not known how Baboo Mookhi Singh arrived in Britain or the exact date (despite searches being carried out in archives). He could possibly have arrived via the Suez Canal, after it had been opened in 1869. Possibly, he might have boarded a ship in (and hence the reference to Calcutta from the prison records, as mentioned above: *Police Charge Book 1890*, p. 109). M. K. Gandhi travelled via the Suez Canal in 1888, approximately at the same time as Singh. Growing numbers of Indians, from the 1870s onwards, were travelling to London, for a number of reasons, including the opening of civil service examinations (held in London), the belief that education opportunities afforded by British universities would be better, as well as reduced restrictions due to caste status with regard to travelling across waters ([Boehmer 2015](#), p. 40)².

Baboo Mookhi Singh's level of English may have been judged to be imperfect, but his knowledge of the cogwheels of the judicial system seems to have been adequate enough to provide him with the necessary tools to contribute to the shifts that would one day, much later, in the twentieth century, bring about greater equality and the development of race relations in the United Kingdom. It is for this reason that the story of the life events related to Mookhi Singh in Oxford should be resurfaced from the forgotten archives, despite it being a microhistory, or rather perhaps precisely because it is, making the events important. They are particularly all the more important today since we are witnessing a rise in nationalism and an attempt to return to the nostalgic past of the hegemony of Britain, the supposedly homogenised society and community over all others. It is this that makes the story of the life events related to this Indian, yet British subject, important today. Mookhi Singh is a single individual, but with great impact on the way that society acted in his immediate surroundings, and as such, rather than being forgotten in some newspaper archive, his story should be part of history and serve as a means to challenge universal narratives of the past and collective identity.

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Notes

- ¹ Oxford City Police Force had been formed on 1 January 1869. Oswald Cole was Chief Constable there from 1897 until 1924, when he is reported to have died while sitting at his desk at the Police Station (Rose 1979, p. 9).
- ² For a comprehensive discussion of the Suez Canal, the advantages of travelling via this route, and how it modified migration from India to Britain, see (Boehmer 2015).

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