




RESEARCH ARTICLE

The many swords of Shivaji: Searching for a weapon, finding a nation

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(Received 20 September 2022; revised 6 October 2023; accepted 9 October 2023)

Abstract

Since at least the nineteenth century, the Maratha warrior-king Shivaji (r. 1674–80) has served as a central symbol in Indian politics. This article interrogates his legacy through the lens of his famous sword, the Bhavani Talvar. At least three swords have been identified as this weapon since the nineteenth century; by analysing each of these claims in turn, I consider how the discourse around Shivaji's sword(s) traces the evolving legacy of Shivaji himself. Interested less in the historical merits of these claims than in the socio-political work they perform, I seek to uncover why the last of these three, now in London, has become essentially synonymous with the Bhavani Talvar in the popular sphere. Ultimately, I attribute this preference to the object's political resonance: supposedly given to the Prince of Wales by a descendant of Shivaji in 1875, the object has been a rallying cry for Indian politicians of diverse ideological persuasions, who, in demanding its return, have sought to position themselves as the heirs to Shivaji and the healers of a nation still ailing from colonial wounds.

Keywords: Shivaji; sword; repatriation; gift-giving; imperialism; nationalism

... [T]he gates of India were beyond reach, yet the King's sword pointed the way to them.
Franz Kafka, 'Der neue Advokat'.¹

Introduction

A. R. Antulay could not have imagined better results in the by-election of November 1980. At the same time, he acutely understood that his victory was buoyed by the national mood and not by any power base of his own: the general elections earlier that year had been highly favourable for his party, the Indian National Congress (I),

¹F. Kafka, 'The new advocate', in *The complete short stories*, (trans) Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971), p. 454. The original German reads: 'Schon damals waren Indiens Tore unerreichbar, aber ihre Richtung war durch das Königsschwert bezeichnet.'

which had roared back to power under a resurgent Indira Gandhi.² It had been Gandhi herself who had first tapped Antulay to become chief minister of Maharashtra, a position that he had now secured electorally with an astonishing 87 per cent of the vote.³ Even so, as a Muslim leader in a mostly Hindu state where the Hindu Right was on the rise, Antulay knew that he would need to capitalize on the momentum to ingratiate himself with voters.

He soon hit upon an idea. Speaking to reporters during an impromptu trip to London a week later, he announced to the world his quixotic goal: to return to India a historic sword that now hung on a wall of Buckingham Palace. This sword, he maintained, was in all likelihood the Bhavani Talvar, the favourite weapon of the great warrior-king and Maharashtrian icon Shivaji (r. 1674–1680). ‘The sword belongs to the nation and it must come back to the nation’, he declared, promising that by Maharashtra Day (1 May) it would return to the land from which it had been unjustly taken.⁴ His political opponents were unpersuaded. Morarji Desai, whose coalition had four years earlier temporarily unseated Gandhi and installed him as prime minister, rhetorically asked reporters against whom exactly Antulay intended to use the sword.⁵ He would never have the chance to find out. Not only did the British government decline Antulay’s request, but a corruption scandal would lead to his resignation within a year. Antulay was out of office, and the sword was still outside India. And so, it seemed, the affair ended.

But by 2007, the sword had caught the attention of another chief minister—this time in neighbouring Gujarat. ‘I will bring back the “Bhawani” sword of Chhatrapati Shivaji from Britain’, Narendra Modi vowed, framing the task as a sequel to his successful efforts to return the ashes of the revolutionary lawyer and journalist Shyamji Krishna Varma from Geneva to his native Gujarat in 2003.⁶ A Hindu nationalist and vociferous Congress opponent, Modi embodies a very different kind of politics than does Antulay (though he has, like him, thus far failed to deliver on his promise, either

²The ‘I’ represents ‘Indira’, denoting an opposition faction within Congress formed in 1978 by Indira Gandhi and her allies after their electoral losses the previous year. By 1984, this branch would gain recognition as the legitimate Congress Party. For the formation of Congress (I), see Pupil Jayakar, *Indira Gandhi: A biography* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 181–183.

³His margins exceeded even the 82 per cent at which he had been polling, according to ‘Record of a Conversation between the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and Mr Antulay and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at 3.15 pm on 1 December’, in FCO 37/2331, the National Archives, Kew, London. This same source describes Antulay winning 89 per cent of the vote, but *The Times of India* reports him having won 72,897 out of 84,214 valid votes cast, or 86.6 per cent. As in most other parliamentary systems, Antulay was not contesting the position of chief minister directly, but rather his position in the state assembly. ‘Antulay scores record win: All rivals trounced’, *Times of India* (henceforth *TOI*), 24 November 1980.

⁴‘Antulay confident of getting the sword’, *Free Press Bulletin*, 3 December 1980.

⁵‘Why does Antulay need the sword?’, *Free Press Journal*, 6 December 1980.

⁶‘I’ll bring back Shivaji’s sword: Modi’, *TOI*, 11 September 2007. The media speculated that Modi was courting the state’s Marathi-speakers ahead of the legislative assemblies and, indeed, it was to a gathering of this community that he addressed his remarks in Surat. But at the same time, his appeal to Shivaji cannot be so neatly circumscribed. Modi must at some level have envisioned all of Gujarat as his audience and even looked ahead to the national spotlight into which he was no doubt considering an entrance. For more on Modi’s campaign to return Varma’s remains to Mandvi (Kutch district), see ‘PM Modi pays tributes to freedom fighter Shyamji Krishna Varma’, *The Hindu*, 30 March 2022.

as chief minister or in his current post as prime minister). We must ask, then, how two figures who share almost no ideological intersection came to regard a sword as a critical issue for both Maharashtra and the Indian nation as a whole. What, moreover, were they hoping to achieve by making it one?

This article is an answer to these questions. By moving chronologically from the time of Shivaji to the present, it locates Antulay and Modi's demands within a long line of attempts to locate and possess the Bhavani Talvar. These attempts, it argues further, seldom seek the actual sword so much as a means to steer, and ideally to claim, the legacy of its revered owner. But before examining this history, we must consider a tendency (exhibited by both Antulay and Modi) to privilege the Bhavani Talvar to the virtual exclusion of Shivaji's other swords.⁷ Though most of the individuals in this study accept that a military leader of Shivaji's stature would have had several swords, almost all have their sights on the Bhavani Talvar, presumably on the assumption that none of his other weapons could deliver such rich political returns. At the same time, many have been reticent even to acknowledge that his other swords might survive, as if their mere existence threatens the exclusivity of their claim to Shivaji himself.

In tracing the transition from Maharashtra to London and from multiple swords to the singular, this article lays particular emphasis on the late colonial and post-colonial periods. These years saw a sharp increase in the public's fascination with Shivaji in entertainment, literature, and politics, and with the objects and sites to which he was connected.⁸ It was within this context that three main contenders for the Bhavani Talvar rose to the fore. I present each of these as case studies, illustrating how contemporary discourses around Shivaji were transferred to his sword(s); at the same time, I underscore how and explain why the one in London has become essentially

⁷A recent tradition, articulated most prominently by Babasaheb Purandare, a writer, playwright, and popular historian, maintains that Shivaji owned three swords 'named Bhawani, Jagdamba and Tulja'. (See a reference in 'Desperately seeking Shivaji's sword', *TOI*, 2 July 2002.) Though these names have referred to Shivaji's sword(s) at various times, there has not been a consistent, one-to-one correspondence, and multiple names have often denoted the same object. The London sword, for instance, has been referred to as the 'Jagadamba Bhavani sword' by a British official (Geoffrey de Bellaigue to Amol Desai, St James's Palace, 11 April 1980, in FCO 37/2331) and the sword purportedly given to Shivaji by the Sawant clan—leaving aside whether it is the same one as the London sword—has been called the 'Tulja Bhawani' (N. S. Pande, 'The Bhawani Talvar: A sword and its mystique', *Nagpur Times*, 5 December 1980). Much of the confusion stems from the fact that these names each refer to the mother goddess and can be understood as aspects of the same deity. The goddess Jagdamba, for instance, is often equated with Bhavani, especially in Maharashtra, where the names Bhavani and Tulja can be used interchangeably or even in conjunction with one another (i.e. 'Tulja Bhavani'). For more on the veneration of Tulja Bhavani, see Kiran A. Shinde, 'Re-scripting the legends of Tuljā Bhavāni: Texts, performances, and new media in Maharashtra', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, December 2013, pp. 313–337.

⁸This interest in the material legacy of Shivaji manifested, as we will see, in the often state-sponsored upkeep of his various forts and in the increased attention given to his letters. Jadunath Sarkar was reticent to accept the legitimacy of these letters, arguing that, 'No piece of writing in his own hand is known to exist.' Referring to one possible instance, Sarkar argues that the document 'has not yet been critically examined by any expert or independent historian. These very recent "discoveries" in Maharashtra require corroboration before they can be accepted.' Jadunath Sarkar, *Shivaji and his times* (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar and Sons, 1919), p. 54. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of the importance of Shivaji's letters as objects of popular and scholarly interest during this time.

synonymous with the Bhavani Talvar, despite its dubious provenance and the no less plausible claims of its rivals. Ultimately, I suggest that the London sword has functioned more effectively than the other two as a metonym for the loss and potential recovery of the Indian nation, a quality that has maximized its champions' ability to orient Shivaji's legacy towards their goals. I should add that though I weigh in on the debates I explore, I have no interest in resolving them. The identification of Shivaji's true sword—or swords—is an important matter but not the concern of this article. Instead of analysing the merits of each case, I aim to interrogate the narratives that support them and the kind of work these perform, and to argue, in short, that a sword can be as effective a weapon in the public sphere as it is on the battlefield.

A goddess's gift: The legend of Bhavani and a tale of three swords

In the autumn of 1659, a leading general of Bijapur, Afzal Khan, prepared to lead his army in pursuit of the enemy. A decisive victory was essential: Bijapur, one of the great sultanates of the medieval and early modern Deccan, now faced two existential threats. The first was the southward ambitions of the Mughal empire, the most powerful of its long-standing rivals. The second was more recent but no less formidable. So rapidly had a certain Shivaji Bhonsale, the son of a regional military leader, expanded his territories that he was now the more pressing concern for the Bijapur court, and it was against him that Afzal Khan was marching. According to the *Śivabhārata*—a retelling of the lives of Shivaji, his father, and grandfather in the form and language of a classical Sanskrit epic—the Bijapuri general encountered several strange meteorological and astronomical phenomena as he embarked on his campaign. After engaging Shivaji in a series of cat-and-mouse skirmishes, Afzal Khan entered Tuljapur, a city closely associated with his adversary's family deity, Bhavani. It was here, the *Śivabhārata* continues, that Afzal Khan ordered an attack on Bhavani's temple, smashing its *mūrti*, or icon, and slaughtering a cow on its steps. Determined to arrest further destruction, the goddess herself appeared to Shivaji, whom she claimed to have met long ago:

'When you were Vāsudeva [Krishna], I went into the home of [Krishna's foster-father] Nanda.

I descended from the highest heaven to secure help for you.

'Now at this very moment, O Enemy of Demons, having risen up from Tuljāpur,

I have come, you should know, only to help you.

'Just as I was insulted by the foolish Kāṃsa

Long ago, so have I now again suffered his wickedness.

'Vidhi [Brahma] has willed that his [Afzal Khan's] death should be by your hands.

Therefore, Jewel of the Earth, I will reside in your sword'.

Speaking thus, Śarvānī [Bhavani] entered his sword.
Although he was awake, it seemed to him a dream.⁹

Probably written largely at the court of Shivaji himself, Paramānanda's *Śivabhārata* is a literary manifestation of Shivaji's far-reaching project to connect his rule with India's legendary past.¹⁰ These verses illustrate exactly this: building upon the text's contention that Shivaji is an avatar of Vishnu, Bhavani informs him of their

Tvaṃ yadā vāsudevo'bhūstadāhaṃ nandamandire |
tridivāttava sāhāyyavidhānārthamavātaram ||

Idānīmapi daityāre vimucya Tulajāpuram |
Upetāsmīti jānihi sāhāyyāyaiva te svayam ||

Yathājātena Kaṃsena yathāhamavamānitā |
pūrvaṃ tathādhunaitenāpyavaśātāsi pāpmanā ||

Vidhinā vihito'styasya mṛtyustvatpānināmunā |
atastiṣṭhāmi bhūtāvāhaṃ kṛpānī bhūmaṇe tava ||

Vyāharantīti Śarvānī tatkrāpāṇimavīśat |
asau jāgradavastho'pi tatsvapnamavamanyata ||

Kavindra Paramānanda, *Śrīśivabhārata*, (ed.) Sadāśiv Mahādev Divekar (Poona: Sekretāri Śrī Gaṇeś Printiṅg Varks, 1927 [1849]), pp. 193–194. The clever title of this text encourages us to read 'Bhārata' both as the vowel-strengthened (*vṛiddhi*) form of the mythological figure 'Bharata' and the land his clan would populate, i.e. India. The first reading evokes the title of the Mahabharata (the 'Great [epic of the] Bharata [Clan]') and positions Paramānanda's work in its shadow. The second—'the India of Shiva[ji]'—gestures towards Shivaji's territorial and political ambitions. James Laine has pointed out that some versions of the *Śivabhārata* include the title *Śuryavaṃśa Anupurāṇa*, which, as he states, nods both to Shivaji's claims to *kṣatriya* status and to another well-known *mahākāvya*, Kalidasa's *Raghuvamśa*. See James W. Laine and S. S. Bahulkar (trans. and ed.), *The epic of Shivaji: Kavindra Paramananda's Śivabhārata* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001), p. 9. The title may be a model for similarly named late Sanskrit epics written on Shivaji, notably Ambikādatta Vyāsa's *Śivarājajijaya* (*The Victory of King Shiva[ji]*) written during the latter part of the nineteenth century. For more on *Śivarājajijaya* and its social and political significance, see Andrew Halladay, "'India has utterly changed": Shivaji and modernity in a colonial Sanskrit novel', in *The life of contemporary Sanskrit: Dialogues between tradition and modernity, dialogues in South Asian traditions*. Vol. 9, (eds) Laurie Patton, Brian Black and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

¹⁰The composition history for the *Śivabhārata* is not entirely clear, in part because the text is almost certainly incomplete. James Laine, in introducing the translation he prepared with S. S. Bahulkar, argues that the sections of the text that recount Shivaji's exploits from 1677–1679 are in all likelihood the work of a later poet, probably at the court of Shivaji's son and immediate successor, Sambhaji, and that the text proper was composed during Shivaji's own lifetime and ends with a description of a military campaign in 1661. Laine and Bahulkar, *The Epic of Shivaji*, p. 10. A very similar episode to the one described in the *Śivabhārata* features in the *Sabhāsad Bakhar*, a Marathi text that is likely to have been contemporaneous with Shivaji himself. For an English translation of the relevant episode, see Kṛshṇāji Ananta Sabhāsada, *Śiva Chhatrapati, being a translation of Sabhāsad Bakhar, with extracts from Chitṅis and Śivadigvijaya*, (ed. and trans.) Surendranath Sen (Calcutta: The University of Calcutta, 1920), pp. 9–11. A significant difference is that here Bhavani only appears to Shivaji but does not enter his sword. In the episode in which Shivaji prepares to meet another adversary, Shaista Khan, the *Sabhāsad Bakhar* describes Bhavani herself as entering Shivaji's body. Sabhāsada, *Śiva Chhatrapati*, p. 42.

relationship during the time of one of Vishnu's earlier avatars, Krishna. Appearing then as a daughter of Krishna's foster-father, she had allowed herself to be confused with the infant Krishna and thereby thwart the evil Kamsa's attempt to murder him. This sacrifice allowed Krishna to live on and kill Kamsa himself. Bhavani tells Shivaji that this moment has come again, for Vishnu (now appearing as Shivaji) must once more destroy Kamsa (now appearing as Afzal Khan), who seeks another attempt on his life. Bhavani once more has a pivotal part to play: just as she had protected Krishna in the form of a child, she will now protect Shivaji in the form of a sword.¹¹ The verses that follow relate a version of a story familiar to every Maharashtrian schoolchild, in which Shivaji kills Afzal Khan just before Afzal Khan intended to strike him.¹²

Since today most retellings of this final encounter involve Shivaji using something akin to brass knuckles and his sword only secondarily (if at all),¹³ the sword itself is no longer immediately associated with the killing of Afzal Khan. Its link to Bhavani has nevertheless held firm, giving the weapon its name: the Bhavani sword, or the Bhavani Talvar.¹⁴ The story of the goddess's appearance to Shivaji would become a favourite topic of *bakhars* (a genre of early modern Marathi prose) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and of plays, films, and other media from the colonial period onwards. As with narratives about Afzal Khan, this constant retelling has produced numerous variations. Some of these downplay the Vaishnavite elements in the *Śivabhārata* and associate Shivaji and Bhavani with Shiva and Parvati,¹⁵ while others minimize or altogether omit Bhavani's theophany and assign the sword a more mundane origin. Emblematic of this kind of origin story is the *Śivadigvijaya*, a Marathi biography of Shivaji of uncertain date, which relates how Shivaji acquired the sword from the chief of a local clan, the Sawants. Some writers add further texture to this version, noting how the Sawants had taken the sword in 1510 as booty from a

¹¹As David R. Kinsley has observed, the worship of a goddess in the form of a sword has precedent in Hindu texts, particularly in the *Devībhāgavat Purāṇa*. See D. R. Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses: Visions of the divine feminine in the Hindu religious tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 109.

¹²Many versions of this encounter exist in historical sources. An old, but still highly valuable, cross-referencing of the various Persian and Marathi sources can be found in R. P. Karkaria, *Pratapgad Fort and the episode of Shivaji and Afzal Khan told from the original Mahratta chronicles* (Poona: Arya Bhushana Press, 1896).

¹³The weapon now more commonly associated with this episode is the *vāgh-nakh* (Marathi) or *bāgh-nakh* (Hindi-Urdu)—the 'tiger claw'—a metal device worn over the knuckles and concealed under a garment or within the palm. As the name suggests, the weapon's four or five blades resemble the claws of a large cat.

¹⁴Although Paramānanda does not use the name 'Bhavani' to refer to the sword, P. K. Gode cites its appearance (possibly the earliest on record) in a 1685 work of another poet, Hari Kavi, who praised the use of the sword by Shivaji's son Sambhaji. If the dating and reading of the text is accurate, then the symbolic importance of the Bhavani Talvar held traction even shortly after Shivaji's death. See P. K. Gode, 'Hari Kavi's contribution to the problem of the Bhavani sword of Shivaji the Great', *New Indian Antiquary*, June 1940, pp. 81–100, esp. 94–95.

¹⁵Bhavani is occasionally equated with a more local goddess, Shivai, the tutelary deity of Shivaji's family after whom he was probably named. Shivai—whose name suggests a feminine form of Shiva—is, like Bhavani, often regarded as an expression of Parvati. Despite her close association with Shivaji, however, only rarely is she venerated directly. The most prominent site associated with her specifically is a small temple in Shivneri Fort, near Junnar, the location of Shivaji's birthplace and the traditional site of her meeting with him. Less prominent temples to her also exist, such as the Siddhivinayak Temple in Siddhatek; for local legends regarding this second temple, see Lalitha Balasubramanian, 'Ashta Vinayak Yatra', in *Temples in Maharashtra: A travel guide* (Chennai: Notion Press, 2017).

Portuguese commander, Diego Fernandes, and later presented it to Shivaji upon his visit to the Saptakoteshwar Temple in Goa.¹⁶ Many also state that Shivaji paid the Sawants 300 *hons* (gold coins), though the *Śivadigvijaya* suggests it was given freely to Shivaji as a gift.¹⁷

Importantly, even versions that do not assign the sword a divine provenance tend to associate it with divinity. In the *Śivadigvijaya*, the sword itself speaks to Shivaji and the Sawant chief in a dream, and in almost all accounts Shivaji names it after Bhavani, stores it at her altar, and associates it with her presence. Sometimes the narrative crosses into the supernatural in a manner reminiscent of the legend of Excalibur and the Lady of the Lake.¹⁸ According to one tradition, Shivaji, upon visiting the temple of Bhavani in Tuljapur, places his newly acquired sword in one of the eight hands of the Bhavani statue. The goddess then appears to her devotee in a dream, returning the sword to him, now encrusted with rubies and diamonds.¹⁹ This version has been highly popular since at least the nineteenth century, and it is from here that we acquire the image of Shivaji kneeling before the goddess, his arms outstretched in receipt of

¹⁶Vasant Deshmukh cites 'the records of the Shilekhana of the Kolhapur Durbar' for this information. V. Deshmukh, "'Bhavani" sword', letter to the editor, *Indian Express*, 5 December 1980. The Kolhapur Archives have been unable to offer information on these documents. Kashiram Desai, a prominent advocate for the return of the London sword to India whom we will encounter later, suggests that the sword was given by the Portuguese general Alphonso de Albuquerque as friendly gesture to the Sawants, specifically to Desai's own ancestor Sawant Desai. For more on his claims, see 'Antulay bares his sword', *Current*, 6 December 1980. Anthony Mascarenhas relates a similar but much less harmonious version in which Sawant Desai ambushes Albuquerque and takes his sword. A. Mascarenhas, 'Why Mr Antulay is asking for the Queen', *Sunday Times*, 7 [?] December 1980.

¹⁷For a partial translation of the *Śivadigvijaya*, including the relevant section, see Sen (trans.), *Śiva Chhatrapati*, pp. 181–182. This source gives its value as 200 *hons* and relates that the Sawant chief had a dream advising him to secure Shivaji as an ally and thereby fortify his kingdom. For a version of the story in which Shivaji buys the sword from the Sawants for 300 *hons*, see, for one oft-cited example, Govind Sakharam Sardesai, *New history of the Marathas. Vol. 1: Shivaji and his line* (Bombay: Karnatak Printing Press, 1946), p. 122.

¹⁸The two legends share interesting parallels in both their evolution and their content. First, neither ascribes a miraculous origin to the sword in its earliest iterations: Shivaji does not acquire a new weapon in the *Śivabhārata*, and according to Geoffrey of Monmouth in 1136, Arthur 'girds himself with a sword called Excalibur, made, so they say, with remarkable skill on the island of Avalon' (*accinctusque gladio nomine Caleburno, in insula Avallonis, ut aiunt, mira arte fabricato*); see in Jacob Hammer (ed.), *Historia regum Britanniae* (Cambridge, MA: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951), Book IX, Chapter II, p. 228. Magical associations with Avalon would appear only in later stages of Arthurian myth, such as in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, where a new sword (also called Excalibur) is given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake in much the same way that a new, supernatural sword is given to Shivaji by Bhavani in later tellings of their encounter. Reminiscent of Bhavani, the Lady of the Lake—in all versions in which she appears—offers the sword on the condition that the hero kill a man who has dishonoured her. In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, this figure is not the evil Modred (as in later versions) but rather Sir Balin, who had killed her brother (vol. I:I, p. xxiii). That promise goes unfulfilled (vol. I:II, p. iii).

¹⁹Versions in which Bhavani gives the sword to Shivaji, and the role of the Sawants is minimized or altogether omitted, are now so standard that they appear in reputable guidebooks like George Michell, *Southern India* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2012), but are notably absent in older guides like M. S. Mate, *Temples and legends of Maharashtra* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962). The story itself nevertheless enjoyed wide currency by Mate's time, appearing, for instance, in K. M. Munshi and R. R. Diwakar (eds), *Pageant of great lives* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964). That Bhavani is now defined by this narrative even in academic references like Patricia Monaghan, *Encyclopedia of goddesses and heroines. Vol. I: Africa, Eastern Mediterranean, Asia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010), p. 163, further illustrates the episode's enduring appeal.

a divine gift, that appears in paintings and statues across and beyond Maharashtra (see Figures 1 and 2).²⁰

The existence of these variants matters much more than their particulars and shows how stories about the sword—much like the sword itself, as we shall soon see—tend towards multiplicity. Still, two important assumptions cut across these variations. The first is that the sword serves as a symbol of Shivaji's power and a force behind his underdog victories. Even the less explicitly theological versions—such as those that represent Bhavani as an abstracted rather than an overtly supernatural entity—assign qualities to Shivaji that exceed those of ordinary human capacity and are in some way linked to his sword. Second, and running in some ways against the first, is an insistence that the sword is a physical object that exists in the world and can be located within it. The tension between these two assumptions—the one holding that it is transcendental and the other that it is tangible—has been central to the sword's enduring appeal, inspiring generations of observers and political actors to locate a sword that, though real, has something decidedly otherworldly about it.

Such attempts began in earnest during the colonial period, when fascination with Shivaji rose in tandem with archaeological and historical methods supporting the study of his life. For many Indians during these years, the appeal of Shivaji reflected a yearning for the recuperation of his perceived national—or, for his acolytes in the twentieth century, nationalist—vision, which they maintained British rule had interrupted. Importantly, this was not the kind of nostalgia whereby preoccupation with the past impedes its recovery (as in Freud) nor whereby that past, once revisited, disappoints (as in Kant).²¹ Rather, the gravitation towards Shivaji was productive and largely forward-looking: though built from the shards of an idealized past, it was oriented towards new political horizons that it would, with the gradual rise of Hindu nationalism, ultimately draw near. I want to locate the sword within this milieu, a milieu in which it seemed that the physical sword, like the political spirit of the figure to whom it pertained, could be recovered, possessed, and—within political and social discourse, at least—wielded.

From the colonial period to the present, the search for Shivaji's sword has drawn rather little from the early historical record, since there is, to my knowledge, no Marathi or Persian source contemporaneous with Shivaji's death that clearly specifies the fate of the sword described in the *Śivabhārata*. The most prominent candidates

²⁰It is interesting to note the ease with which these various accounts can coexist comfortably, as they do in a colourful article by a British-Dutch journalist, H. George Franks, in which he imagines conducting an interview with the ghost of Shivaji. In response to Frank's question about him receiving the sword from Bhavani, Shivaji tells the more prosaic tale of how he acquired it from the Sawants; see H. George Franks, 'Shivaji, the human king: A journalist's interpretation of India's greatest character', in *Shivaji souvenir*, (ed.) G. S. Sardesai (Bombay: Keshav Bhikaji Dhawale, 1927), pp. 93–99. This capacious and malleable narrative tradition is especially notable in the context of the first decades of the twentieth century, a time when many aspects of the Shivaji legend became ossified in the public sphere.

²¹In the case of Freud, I am referring to his characterization of melancholia (Melancholie) in his essay, Sigmund Freud, 'Trauer und Melancholie', in *Studienausgabe, Bd. III: Psychologie des Unbewussten* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1975 [1917]), pp. 194–212; my understanding of nostalgia and Kant comes from his discussion of 'the homesickness of the Swiss' (Das Heimweh der Schweizer) in Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, with a foreword by J. F. Herbart (Leipzig: Immanuel Müller, 1833), pp. 84–85.



Figure 1. Image of Shivaji receiving his blessed sword from the goddess Bhavani. Calendar art from the Oriental Calendar Manufacturing Company, Calcutta, circa 1940s. Source: Author's own collection.

have accordingly been those that can be conceivably linked, whether through their physical features or ownership histories, to places and figures associated with Shivaji. Among the first writers to identify a specific sword as Shivaji's was the historian and civil servant James Grant Duff, who in 1826 located it in the princely state of Satara, where he himself served as Resident, or the British representative at



Figure 2. Presumed cast by V. P. Karmarkar for a panel on the pedestal of an equestrian statue of Shivaji in Pune. Source: H. George Franks, 'Shivaji, the human king', in *Shivaji souvenir: Tercentenary celebration Bombay*, (ed.) Govind Sakharam Sardesai (Bombay: Bombay Vaibhav Press, 1927), pp. 98–99.

court.²² Relying on local sources and lore available to him in that capacity, Grant Duff claims in his *History of the Mahrattas* that Shivaji's sword first fell to his elder son, Sambhaji (r. 1680–1689), in whose possession, he writes, it 'could not have been better wielded'.²³ In describing Sambhaji's imprisonment and execution by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, Grant Duff weaves together several episodes from Persian and Maratha chronicles, which he also follows in recounting Aurangzeb's imprisonment of Sambhaji's own son, Shahu. He departs from the best-known sources, however, by adding that Aurangzeb took custody not only of Sambhaji's son but also of Sambhaji's sword. The fate of the two would intersect, he writes further, at Shahu's wedding:²⁴

On this occasion, Aurungzebe, amongst other presents to Shao, gave him a sword he had himself frequently worn, and restored two swords which Shao's attendants had always urged him, if possible, to recover; the one, was the famous Bhowanee of Sivajee; and the other, the sword of Afzool Khan, the murdered general of Beejapoor, both taken at Raigurh.²⁵

Entrusting weapons to his rival's son—who was still his captive—is not as strange as it might seem, for Aurangzeb may have been grooming a vassal to help him bring Shivaji's former territories under Mughal control. In any event, the animosity he felt towards Sambhaji (and Shivaji) appears not to have extended to Shahu, whom he granted the title of raja and a *mansab* rank of 7,000—two gradations above what he had supposedly offered Shivaji at their infamous attempt at de-escalation in 1666.²⁶ Shahu would remain in Aurangzeb's custody until the latter's death in 1707, after which he travelled to and was crowned at Satara Fort, taking with him, Grant Duff claims, the Bhavani Talvar, which would henceforth remain in the fort of his ancestors and the care of his descendants.²⁷

²²For more on Grant Duff and his relationship to Maratha history and the princely state of Satara, see A. R. Kulkarni, *James Cuninghame Grant Duff: Administrator-historian of the Marathas* (Kolkata: K. P. Bagchi and Co., 2006).

²³James Grant Duff, *A history of the Mahrattas*, 3 vols (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, Paternoster-Row, 1826), vol. 1, p. 316.

²⁴Neither Khafi Khan nor Chitnis, two likely sources for Grant Duff, include events that closely follow those that Grant Duff describes. For the section in Chitnis pertaining to Shahu's wedding, see Malhār Rāmrao Chitnis, *Thorale Śāhū Mahārāja Yāmcem Caritra*, (ed.) Kāśināth Nārāyaṇ Sāne (Pune: Dnānprakāś Press, 1893–1894 [Shaka year 1815]), pp. 4–5. For an English summary of the section, see Indrani Chatterjee and Sumit Guha, 'Slave-queen, waif-prince: Slavery and social capital in eighteenth-century India', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1999, p. 172.

²⁵Grant Duff, *A history of the Mahrattas*, vol. 1, p. 415.

²⁶Adjusted several times over the course of the empire, the *mansabdārī* system was an elaborate institution through which government officials were ranked, duties were assigned, and services were remunerated. For more on Aurangzeb's treatment of Shahu, see Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From sultanat to the Mughals. Part Two: Mughal empire (1526–1748)* (Delhi: Har Anand Publications, 2005), esp. pp. 346–347, whose main source appears to be Khafi Khan. For the tensions that led Shivaji to reject Aurangzeb's offer of government service, precipitating his legendary escape from Mughal captivity, see *ibid.*, pp. 322–324.

²⁷Just as his milder treatment of Shahu served Aurangzeb's political ends, the release of Shahu after his death was probably an attempt to stir instability among Maratha leaders, a point noted by C. C. Davies,

As with many topics in Maratha history, the identification of Shivaji's sword is complicated by a dispute over succession. Shahu's long imprisonment under Aurangzeb left ample time for a rival to emerge, which it did in the form of his four-year-old cousin, Shivaji II (r. 1700–1707)—or, more accurately, in the form of Tarabai, Shahu's aunt, who served as her son's regent.²⁸ The fascinating political theatre that follows must not distract us here, except to note that after a brief civil war, two dynasties would coalesce and by 1731 tepidly acknowledge the legitimacy of the other: Shahu I (r. 1707–1749) and his successors in Satara, and Shivaji II (r. 1710–1714) and his successors in Kolhapur.²⁹ The former would serve as figureheads of the Maratha empire, a polity that would dominate eighteenth-century South Asia before falling to the British East India Company in 1818.³⁰ Both to appropriate the bureaucratic structures of the defunct empire and to court favour with the Marathas, who continued to hold Shivaji's heirs in high esteem, the British thereupon established Satara and Kolhapur as distinct princely states, a status that granted them autonomy from British India while still subjecting them to its oversight.³¹

These details matter because by the end of the nineteenth century Kolhapur would become associated with a rival sword that its proponents claimed had been in that city since some time shortly after Shivaji's death.³² It would enjoy a strong, though by no means uncontested, claim to be the true Bhavani Talvar well into the modern political era, where it has become the object much fetishized by politicians like Antulay and Modi. That both swords bear a close connection to Maratha princely states distinguishes them from a third contender that appeared during the early decades of the twentieth century, whose owner, Bomonjee Pudumjee, claimed to have won it at an auction with no knowledge of its earlier history.

The swords themselves constitute remarkable objects. Those of Satara and Kolhapur are in appearance much alike: typically regarded as being of European manufacture, their long, straight, single-edged blades stem from elaborate hilts that are padded to protect the bearer's knuckles and attach to a long, thin, curved pommel. The main difference between the two is their size, since the blade of the Satara sword

'Rivalries in India', in *The new Cambridge modern history. Vol. VII: The old regime, 1713–63*, (ed.) J. O. Lindsay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 547.

²⁸The second son of Shivaji, Rajaram I (r. 1689–1700), had been reigning as the successor of his half-brother, Sambhaji. Rajaram's wife Tarabai assumed power after his death in the name of their son, Shivaji II, and was keen to retain it even after Shahu's release from captivity.

²⁹Although styled Shivaji II in his capacity as ruler of the Maratha empire, he is typically referred to as Shivaji I of Kolhapur. Here and elsewhere in the Kolhapur line, however, the numbering of rulers is inconsistent; we shall see that Shivaji VI (r. 1871–1883), for instance, is often referred to in British correspondence as Shivaji IV.

³⁰Shahu and his descendants stood at the head of the Maratha empire, but de facto power lay with the peshwas, a line of Brahmin rulers that began with Balaji Vishwanath Bhat (r. 1713–1720).

³¹For more on the establishment of Satara as a princely state—a project undertaken by a powerful administrator (and erstwhile governor) of the Bombay presidency, Mountstuart Elphinstone—see Sumitra Kulkarni, *The Satara Raj, 1818–1848: A study in history, administration, and culture* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1995).

³²D. B. Parasnis writes in or shortly before 1920 that 'it is generally believed in Satara that the original Bhavāni was taken to Kolhapur by Tārabai ... and was there preserved for many years'. I have been unable to find textual evidence supporting this claim. As quoted in S. M. Edwardes, 'Shivaji's sword, "Bhavāni"', *The Indian Antiquary*, no. 53, January 1924, p. 19.

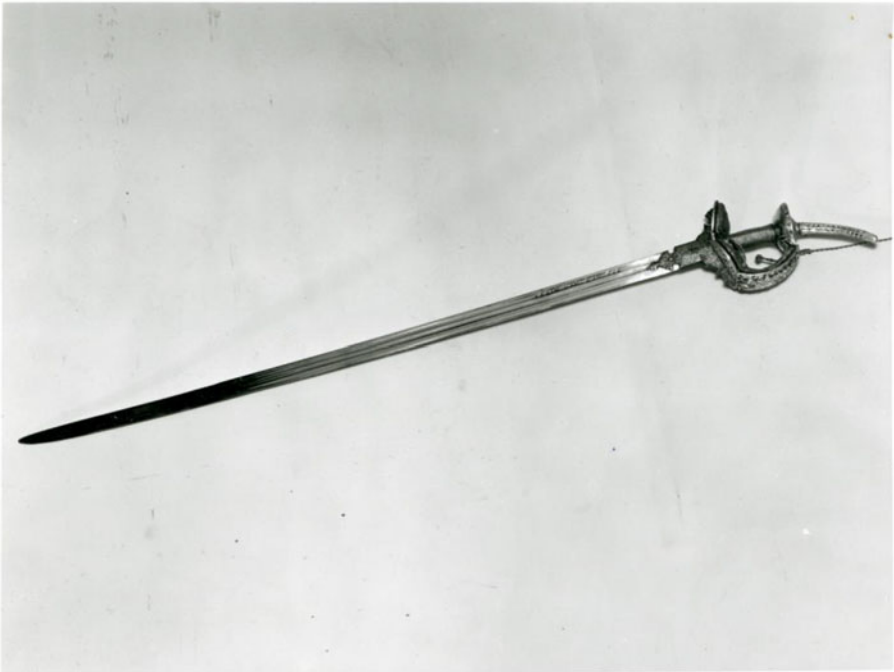


Figure 3. Undated photograph of the London sword. Source: The National Archives, Kew, ref. FCO37/2331.

is longer (114 cm) than that of Kolhapur (98 cm). The hilt of the latter, together with its corresponding sheaths, is richly encrusted with rubies, diamonds, and emeralds. Pudumjee's sword is similarly exquisite, though his lacks gems; shorter than the other two in length (72 cm), the blade is of Maghrebi rather than European provenance and is the only one of the three that is slightly curved. Its sheath appears not to have survived. All swords bear an inscription, with those on the Satara and Pudumjee blades apparently referring to previous owners.³³

³³Since the Satara and Kolhapur swords are not available for public view and the whereabouts of the Pudumjee sword is unclear, I have not been able to view them personally. The dimensions and description of the Satara sword I present here rely on the first-hand account of D. B. Parasnis, *Satara: Brief notes* (Bombay: Tukaram Javaji, 1909), p. 38; and a grainy photograph in S. L. Sharma (ed.), *300th anniversary of coronation [sic] of Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj souvenir* (New Delhi: The Foreign Window Publishing, 1974), p. 15 (see [Figure 10](#)). The features of the Kolhapur sword draw from several photographs included in British government records: 'Photos of sword', Francis Tell, Cultural Relations Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in FCO 37/2331 (see [Figure 3](#)); a photograph in Samuel Bourne, *Prince of Wales Tour of India 1875-6. Vol. 5* (Calcutta: Bourne and Shepherd, 1876), see 'Sword hilt' (see [Figure 4](#)); and a description and photograph in C. Purdon Clarke (ed.), *Catalogue of the collection of Indian arms and objects of art presented by the princes and nobles of India to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales* (London: India Office, 1898), no. 201 (see [Figure 9](#)). I have been unable to find an official source stating a precise length of the Kolhapur blade. S. Almaula writes that it is 'a little more than 3 feet', though she is summarizing an article in *The Maharashtra Times*; see S. Almaula, 8 December 1980, in FCO 37/2331. A more precise measurement of 38.5 inches appears in Shailendra Ghorpade, 'The elusive Bhavani's [sic] sword', *Mid-Day*, 4 December 1980,



Figure 4. Photograph from Samuel Bourne, *Prince of Wales Tour of India 1875–6. Vol. 5* (Calcutta: Bourne and Shepherd, 1876), see 'Sword hilt'. Source: Royal Collection Trust/© His Majesty King Charles III 2023.

but does not cite a source. The descriptions and measurements of that sword come primarily from H. George Franks, 'Shivaji and his swords', *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, April 1929, and a grainy photograph included in Bomonjee D. Pudumjee, *Notes on the subject of Shivaji's sword* (Bombay: Charni Road, 1929), p. 3 (see [Figures 5 and 6](#)).

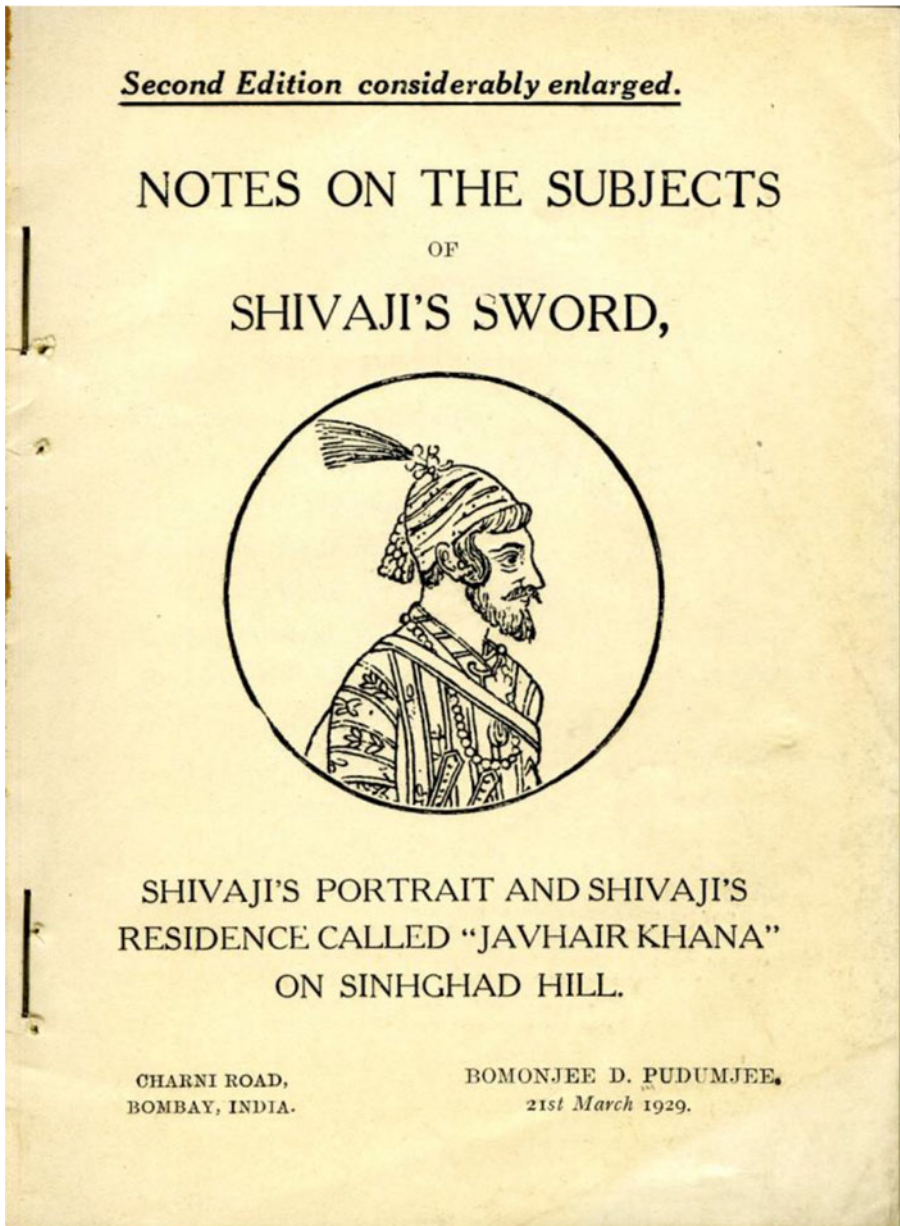


Figure 5. Cover of Bomonjee D. Pudumjee, *Notes on the subject of Shivaji's sword* (Bombay: Charni Road, 1929). Source: Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA, United States.

Since these designs and markings have played a part in the various public identifications of the Bhavani Talvar, we should keep them in mind as we examine the histories of each. At the same time, we will see that these features are invoked principally to

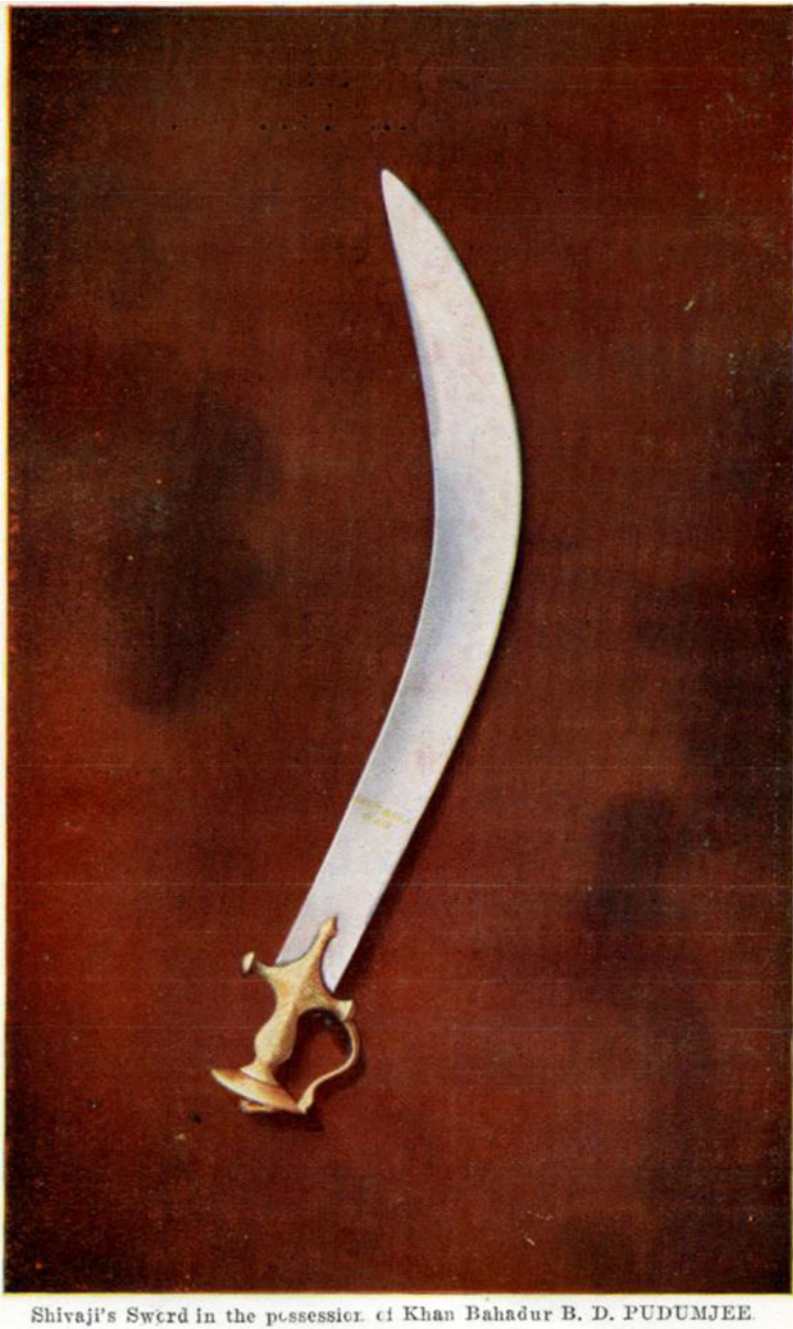


Figure 6. Low-quality photograph of the sword acquired by Bomonjee D. Pudumjee, in Pudumjee, *Notes on the subject of Shivaji's sword*, p. 3. Source: Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA, United States.

reinforce or illustrate a case and seldom form the basis of an (effective) argument on their own. Rather than its features, it is the politics and persons with which a sword is associated that have determined whether it gains traction within the public sphere, with links to Shivaji's celebrated heirs enjoying a particular power.

The fall of the House of Satara: The senior Maratha line and its 'fine Ferrara blade'

Even after the nominal end of the Maratha empire in 1818, Shivaji's descendants in Satara continued to enjoy wide public popularity,³⁴ such that the sword in their possession was virtually synonymous with the Bhavani Talvar until the middle of the nineteenth century. We have seen that the earliest record of this weapon probably comes from Grant Duff, who had access to documents and anecdotal knowledge difficult to obtain elsewhere. He cites 'the hereditary historian of the family' to support his claim that the sword had remained in Satara since Shahu's death, adding that it was 'still preserved by the Raja ... with the utmost veneration, and has all the honours of an idol paid to it'.³⁵ Grant Duff does not offer measurements of the sword but describes it as 'an excellent Genoa blade',³⁶ a designation that later writers—in all likelihood having

³⁴The defeat of the peshwas who headed the Maratha empire meant several, potentially contradictory, things for the royal family of Satara. On the one hand, the relationship between the peshwas and Satara had deteriorated so much that the defeat of a political rival could signal a political opportunity. It would be reductive, however, to suggest—as many colonial sources do—that the defeat of the peshwas meant straightforward liberation for Satara, whose rulers were after all now answerable to their new British overlords. It is also important to note that the East India Company attacked Satara during this time, though some sources aligned with the British military reinterpret this campaign as further proof of liberation. Consider the version of events as related by Major B. D. Basu, *Story of Satara* (Calcutta: Modern Review Office, Calcutta), p. 19:

So when they went to Satara, the British force under the command of General Lionel Smith made a show of conquering the place by firing a few shells at the fort which were of course never returned; and then hoisting the British flag for some time afterwards replacing it by that of the Satara Raja. Thus the British made it appear that they had conquered Satara, but that they were so generous as to have made a free gift of it to the Raja of Satara!

³⁵Grant Duff, *A history of the Mahrattas*, vol. 1, p. 298. Though elsewhere Grant Duff repeats his assertion that the sword is in the raja's possession (*ibid.*, p. 415), it is interesting that he also alludes to another, now marginalized, tradition concerning its whereabouts. In Raigarh, he writes, 'The Brahmins in charge ... have an effigy [of Shivaji], and the real sword of Sivajee, whose body, by their account, lies buried there.' *Ibid.*, p. 298.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 298, n. 334. In some contexts the term seems to refer either to a Genoese knife (a kind of dagger) or to a Genoese naval boarding sword, both of which were in use during Shivaji's time and afterwards. The modest size and limited utility of the former makes it an unlikely option for Shivaji to wield or for his descendants to associate with him. The latter is more plausible but does not align with Grant Duff's description of the object: whereas a typical boarding sword of this type extends about 60 cm and is double-edged, the current specimen is single-edged and nearly twice that length. Grant Duff may be referring to some other style of sword but it is more likely that he is simply reproducing local lore regarding the blade's origin. For more on the Genoese knife, see Jacopo Gelli, *Guida del raccoglitore e dell'amatore di armi antiche* (Milan: Librai della Real Casa, 1900), pp. 160–161; and Roberto Laura, *Das Schwert des Volkes: Geschichte, Kultur und Methodik des traditionellen, italienischen Messerkampfes* (Hamburg: tredition GmbH, 2015), p. '10.2.1 Genua'.

read his aforementioned *History*—would repeat without clarifying its significance (and, in some cases, without having seen the sword).³⁷ The records of the hereditary historian to which Grant Duff refers would surely shed more light on his meaning, but since these are not readily available—if indeed they still exist³⁸—Grant Duff's own musings may be our best window into a tradition that, whatever its particulars, seemed content and even proud to associate Shivaji with a foreign blade. Grant Duff's narrative is also critical for understanding subsequent generations' attitudes towards the Bhavani Talvar, since his views would be disseminated widely through his *History*, a text that enjoyed a central place in Indian classrooms, particularly in a state-sponsored Marathi translation,³⁹ well into the twentieth century. It remains a classic in Maratha history today.

The Satara royal family, together with the Satara sword itself, would have none of Grant Duff's good fortune. After one raja, Shahaji (r. 1839–1848), died without issue, the newly appointed governor-general of India, the Earl (soon-to-be-Marquess) of Dalhousie, James Broun-Ramsay, refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the raja's adopted son and folded the state directly into British India.⁴⁰ Some years later, in 1876, the erstwhile princely state was visited by Katharine Blanche Guthrie, who gives us a fuller description of the sword, noting that it enjoyed pride of place at the foot of a temple to Bhavani and was a 'fine Ferrara blade, four feet in length, with a spike upon the hilt to thrust with'.⁴¹ Since Guthrie's remarks draw heavily on her conversations with local interlocutors, her description would seem to substantiate the existence of a local belief that the blade was European, a tradition that would be consistent, moreover, with the demand for so-called firangi swords in early modern India in general and

³⁷See Richard Temple, 'On the geography of the birthplace and cradle of the Mahratta empire', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, vol. 4, no. 8, August 1882, p. 460; Richard Francis Burton, *The book of the sword* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1884), p. 8, where he writes that it is 'a Genoa blade of great length and fine temper'; and George Cameron Stone, *A glossary of the construction, decoration, and use of arms and armor in all countries and in all times* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999 [reprint of Portland, Maine: The Southworth Press, 1934]), p. 112.

³⁸Representatives of the Shri Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Museum, Satara, India, were very kind and encouraging but could not clarify the existence of these records.

³⁹Kyāpṭan Grāṇṭ Daff [Cpt. James Grant Duff], *Marāthayāncī Bakhar*, (trans.) Kyāpṭan Ḍeviḍ Kepan [Cpt. David Capon] (Bombay: Government Press, 1830).

⁴⁰For more on the termination of the Satara princely state, see R. C. Majumdar, H. C. Raychaudhuri and Kalikinkar Datta, *An advanced history of India* (Madras: Macmillan India Limited, 1981), pp. 757–764, esp. 760–761; and Sandra Emme Kayser, 'The annexation of Satara and the doctrine of lapse', PhD thesis, The University of Maryland, 1970. For Grant Duff's doubts on the merits of the government's actions, see A. R. Kulkarni, 'Grant Duff and the Satara case', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, no. 30, 1968, pp. 246–251.

⁴¹Katharine Blanche Guthrie, *My year in an Indian fort* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1877), pp. 125 and 127–128. 'Ferrara' refers to Andrea de Ferrara, possibly an Italian swordsmith, who, as Andrew Ferrara, moved to Scotland during the sixteenth century in order 'to instruct the Scots in the manufacture of sword-blades'. Sir Walter Scott, *Introductions, and notes and illustrations, to the novels, tales, and romances, of the author of Waverley* (Edinburgh: R. Cadell, 1833), p. 116. Importantly, by Guthrie's time the term had ceased to refer to Ferrara specifically and had 'become the common name for the glyamore [Claymore] or Highland broad-sword'. Francis Grose, *A classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue* (London: S. Hooper, 1785), p. 62.

in Maharashtra in particular.⁴² That Satara still attracted travellers like Guthrie—who gives much space and prominence to the city in her travelogue—attests to its enduring allure nearly three decades after it had disappeared from the map as a princely state. But things were clearly not as they had once been. ‘No fort in Máhratta,’ Guthrie declares, ‘has been more connected with the historical events of many centuries’,⁴³ but it was now ‘ruined, the English having effected in an hour what neither time nor the enemy could accomplish’—a reference to the destruction of its outer defences, which were ‘blown into fragments by gunpowder’ after the 1857 Mutiny.⁴⁴ The damage would soon penetrate (what was left of) these outer walls and extend to the palace itself: Jadunath Sarkar asserts that, facing hardship, the royal family opted to siphon off its treasures, many of which ‘found a refuge in Satara palace, but began to be dispersed in the last two decades of the nineteenth century’.⁴⁵ If the palace served as a kind of holding ground for valuable objects before they entered the market, then it is noteworthy that the sword recorded by Guthrie—which was directly in the line of fire and presumably a highly valuable financial asset—would remain.

Soon, the once-grand princely state seemed for many little more than a tragic footnote in the transition from Maratha to British rule. The waning political fortunes of Satara would ultimately damage public perceptions of its sword. If we look ahead to 1929, for example, we read how Bomonjee Pudumjee (about whom much more shortly) and the Maratha historian H. G. Rawlinson drew attention to the Devanagari inscription on its blade, ‘*sarkār rājā śāhū chatrapati kadīm avval*’ (The lord King Chhatrapati Sahu, foremost of leaders).⁴⁶ This inscription led both observers to conclude that the

⁴²For more on the popularity of firangi blades in medieval and early modern Indian courts, see Robert Elgood, *Hindu arms and ritual: Arms and armour from India 1400–1865* (Delft: Eburon Publishers, 2004), p. 40. He notes that European blades were very common among Mughal and Maratha leaders, though the hilts of the Maratha type are almost invariably of local design and make.

⁴³Guthrie, *My year in an Indian fort*, p. 118.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴⁵Jadunath Sarkar, *House of Shivaji. Studies and documents on Maratha history: Royal period* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978), p. 276. Many objects were acquired by Seth Purushottam Mavji (also commonly referred to as Purshotam Vishram Mawjee), who initially displayed them in his home before their purchase by the Prince of Wales Museum in 1915. This museum—since renamed, interestingly, after Shivaji—ultimately acquired many of the pieces and still houses them. See ‘Mumbai’s “Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya” steps into its centenary year’, Press Information Bureau, Mumbai, 10 January 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=1788923>, [accessed 17 October 2023]. An inventory of Mavji’s collection includes several items from Satara, but none matching Grant Duff’s description. See *A catalogue of Purshotam Vishram Mawjee Museum* [sic] (Bombay: n.p., 1911), esp. p. 28, for Satara metalwork.

⁴⁶The inscription is rather peculiar. Some accounts describe its final part as so unclear as to be illegible. This is the stance of Pudumjee, whose claims rely on a 1918 study by Pandurang Martand Chandorker and maintains that only its first letters, ‘*kād*’, are visible. D. B. Parasnis does not mention the deterioration of the inscription and reproduces it in full, although he reads the first vowel in the troublesome word as short. The transcription I reproduce in the main text comes from Parasnis. (See Pudumjee, *Notes on the subject of Shivaji’s sword*, p. 19.) Assuming Parasnis is correct, the phrase ‘*kadīm avval*’ is still odd. While the Persian word *qadīm* typically refers to something old or ancient, it can also signify something without end. A more likely reading than either might be *qiddīm*, another term denoting a ruler, the Devanagari spelling of which could also begin to explain Chandorker’s and Parasnis’s divergent readings of the vowel. The word *avval*, too, offers its own complications: typically signifying ‘first’, such a reading is tempting given that Shahu would be subsequently known as Shahu I, though this would suggest a later addition,

weapon may have been Shahu's but not Shivaji's. That Shahu would have engraved his own name onto the blade of his grandfather's weapon was for Rawlinson 'a piece of vandalism of which he was scarcely likely to have been guilty'.⁴⁷ He argues further that Aurangzeb would never have willingly handed over such a powerful object to Shahu.

Such assumptions are hardly airtight. We might ask why, if Shahu sought to attach himself to Shivaji's legacy—as he surely did—he would not inscribe his name on an object that so readily evoked it. Even in the thaumaturgic world of early modern India, after all, a sword was an instrument of war rather than of magic, and it seems unlikely that Aurangzeb would have believed that putting it into Shahu's hands would reinvigorate the spirit of his meddling grandfather. My point here is not to defend the legitimacy of this sword—which there are good reasons to doubt—so much as it is to illustrate that these studies assume a reader who needs minimal persuasion to dismiss it as Shivaji's. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in other words, a rather deflated view of Satara must be factored into negative assessments of its sword, including that of one antiquarian who in 1934 deemed it not 'of good enough quality to have belonged to Shivaji'.⁴⁸ Directed towards the same object that Guthrie had once so richly praised, such dismissiveness suggests a change not in the sword itself but in the prestige of the polity to which it pertained.

The sword of princes: The junior Maratha line and 'the Palladium of their house'

Running parallel to the declining fortunes of Satara was the rising visibility of its junior rival. Kolhapur's social and political ascent was a slow, negotiated process between the Indian public and the colonial state: the former had long held Shivaji's junior line through his grandson Shivaji II in high esteem—especially in and around the Bombay presidency—but it was only after Satara's princely status was rescinded that Kolhapur's real political relevance emerged.⁴⁹ The colonial state recognized as much and established so-called minority administrations over multiple child rajahs in the latter half of the nineteenth century, effectively giving it control over Kolhapur's government until each came of age. This, together with British insistence that one of these was mad and therefore incapable of autonomous rule even as an adult, provoked a strong counter-reaction by an Indian (and especially a Marathi) press eager to defend this last vestige of Maratha glory.⁵⁰ As the Kolhapuri royal family became a site over

since Shahu did not style himself this way. The intended sense of the word might therefore be 'great', or 'excellent', or (with slightly different vowelings) 'good governance' or 'administration'. Finally, though I have been inclined to read *sarkār* and *rājā* as near synonyms, Sumit Guha kindly pointed out to me that the sense of *sarkār* may simply be that of 'government', thus marking the object as property of Shahu's government. These numerous complexities, needless to say, make a smooth translation effectively impossible. Moreover, as stated in note 33, I have been unable to examine the sword personally.

⁴⁷H. G. Rawlinson, 'Jai Bhavani: The mystery of Shivaji's sword', *TOI*, 17 September 1929.

⁴⁸Stone, *A glossary*, p. 112.

⁴⁹For one influential take on the legacy of the Marathas in the formation of Indian nationalisms, see M. G. Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha power* (Bombay: Punalekar and Co., 1900). C. A. Bayly considers the use of the Maratha past as 'paradigmatic' of wider efforts to articulate nationalist claims in India. C. A. Bayly, *Origins of nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and ethical government in the making of modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 21–26.

⁵⁰For one of the only English-language studies on the (overwhelmingly negative) responses to these accusations in the Marathi public sphere, see Avanish Patil, 'Public opinion in colonial India:

which the legacy of Maratha rule and the limits of British authority were worked out, the colonial state gradually assigned it further symbolic importance, a process that is actually quantifiable: in the middle of the nineteenth century, its raja was afforded an honorary salute of 17 guns, a number that rose to 19 during the reign of Rajaram II (r. 1866–1870). The most prominent of Kolhapur's rulers, Shahu IV (r. 1894–1922), was given a full 21-gun salute 'as a personal honour, in recognition of His Highness' loyalty to the British Throne',⁵¹ thus positioning him at the highest echelon of Indian princes.

Like the family with which it was associated, the sword to which we now turn rose to prominence only slowly, evolving in popular discourse from a sword of Kolhapur, to a sword of Shivaji, to the Bhavani Talvar itself. A now-familiar narrative, and one that holds critical significance for the rest of this article, maintains that Shivaji VI (r. 1871–1883)—the same raja whom British officials would later declare mad—met Albert Edward, Prince of Wales (and the future Edward VII) in 1875 during the latter's tour of India. As a gesture of loyalty, the narrative continues, the raja presented the prince with the Bhavani Talvar, which had apparently been in his family's possession all along.⁵² While it is certain that the two royals met and that Shivaji gave Albert Edward gifts—including, in all likelihood, a sword or swords—there is little evidence to suggest that any of these once pertained to the young raja's ancestor.⁵³ Some who argue otherwise have drawn attention to documents from the Kolhapur Durbar, which they claim mention such a sword having been in the armoury in February of that year.⁵⁴ Leaving aside doubts about the whereabouts of these documents, such a reference obviously cannot illuminate what transpired when Albert Edward and Shivaji met some seven months later.

The two would actually meet twice: first at Albert Edward's lodgings on 9 November 1875 and again at Shivaji's Bombay residence the following day.⁵⁵ It was probably

The "Kesari" and the Kolhapuri Affair, 1881–1883', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, no. 67, 2006–2007, pp. 711–724. For the politics of sexual morality that the colonial government weaponized in these claims, see Shruti Kapila, 'Masculinity and madness: Princely personhood and colonial sciences of the mind in western India 1871–1940', *Past and Present*, no. 187, May 2005, pp. 121–156.

⁵¹Purshotam Vishram Mawjee, *The imperial durbar album of the Indian princes, chiefs, and zamindars*, 2 vols (Bombay: Lakshmi Art Printing works, 1911), vol. 1, p. 23B.

⁵²As mentioned in note 29, Shivaji VI is sometimes referred to as Shivaji IV, especially in British sources. Some accounts state that the sword was given not by the raja himself but by the Divan of Kolhapur, Rao Bahadur Madhav Rao Barve, on his behalf. See, for instance, D. B. Parasnis's account given to S. M. Edwardes in Edwardes, 'Shivaji's sword', p. 19.

⁵³The politics surrounding gift giving was complicated, and not only because of the relationship between the Prince of Wales and Indian princes. Before the tour, some British officials had expressed concern that the gifts Albert Edward would receive would surpass the value of those he would give, thereby causing embarrassment to the Crown. Some agreed afterwards that this had indeed been the case. For more on this concern, see Christopher Hibbert, 'The Prince of Wales in India, 1875–6', *History Today*, vol. 25, no. 9, 1 September 1975, p. 620.

⁵⁴For an example of this kind of argument, see Deshmukh, "'Bhavani" sword'. But detractors of this claim are far from few; consider D. V. Gokhale, 'assistant editor of the "Maharashtra Times" and an ardent student of Maratha history', who argues that, 'There is no mention of the sword in historical references and correspondence of the period'. Ghorpade, 'The elusive Bhavani's [sic] sword'. As stated in note 16, the Kolhapur Archives have been unable to clarify the existence of the documents Deshmukh mentions.

⁵⁵William Howard Russell, *A diary in India: With some account of the visits of His Royal Highness to the Courts of Greece, Egypt, Spain, and Portugal* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1877), pp. 130–134 and 154–156; and 'Return visit by His Highness the Prince of Wales: Visit of his ...', *TOI*, 10 November 1875. Albert Edward visited only a few Indian princes at their Bombay residences, and that the raja of Kolhapur was among these attests to the significance that many British observers gave to his royal line; one British

during the second meeting that the sword in question was given away.⁵⁶ The earliest evidence for this comes from the journalist William Howard Russell, who, after offering a lukewarm assessment of most of the gifts given by Indian princes to the Prince of Wales ('On the whole the offerings were good without being too fine'),⁵⁷ notes in his diary of the prince's tour that

The Raja of Kolhapoor, in addition to an ancient jewelled sword and dagger, estimated to be worth 6000 rupees, has assigned a sum of no less than 20,000*l.* for the admirable purpose of founding a hospital, to be called after the Prince of Wales.⁵⁸

Albert Edward would receive numerous swords in India,⁵⁹ and Russell signals out Kolhapur's for its artistry and value, not for any association with Shivaji, whom he mentions in several other contexts but not in this one. Indeed, I know of no contemporary account that supports the sword's having been Shivaji's; on the contrary, at least one eyewitness, Dighton Probyn, who served as an equerry of Prince Albert Edward during his visit, would insist years later that he 'would certainly have remembered, had the celebrated sword in question been given to His Majesty'.⁶⁰ Probyn's long-standing connections to India would have made him knowledgeable about both Shivaji and the many Indian royals who met the prince in Bombay, among

paper went so far as to call the raja of Kolhapur 'the chief, as far as pedigree is concerned, of all Mahrattas' and likened his meeting Albert Edward in Bombay to 'the arrival of a Pope in Venice to welcome a Crown Prince of Germany'. 'The Prince of Wales at Bombay', *The Spectator*, 13 November 1875.

⁵⁶While this interview was proceeding, the presents were being laid out in an adjoining room.' Russell, *A diary in India*, p. 156.

⁵⁷Indian princes typically had their gifts delivered to Albert Edward after their first (and usually only) meeting, and many of these were apparently selected beforehand through consultation with British authorities. 'Presents offered by the Chiefs, and accepted by the Prince, are already pouring in to Parel in great quantities The Political Agents had informed the Government of Bombay what presents would be made and what would be the value of them; in some instances apparently directing, or at least advising, what the presents should be.' Ibid., p. 164.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 183.

⁵⁹There are clear records of bejewelled swords having been given, for instance, by princes from Jaipur (Russell, *A diary in India*, p. 460); Benares (ibid., p. 616); Patiala (George Wheeler, *India in 1875-6: The visit of the Prince of Wales, a chronicle of His Royal Highness's journeyings in India, Ceylon, Spain, and Portugal* [London: Chapman and Hall, 1867], p. 186); Jodhpur (ibid., p. 300); Indore (ibid., p. 340); Hyderabad (ibid., p. 346); and Arcot (Sir J. Fayerer, *Notes of the visits to India of their Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and Duke of Edinburgh, 1870-1875-6* [London: Kerby and Endean, 1879], p. 237). So plentiful were these royal swords that during Albert Edward's return journey his ship apparently struggled to stow them all safely. Their precariousness made a rather literal impression on the prince's doctor, who would recall one eventful night: 'when I was asleep, one of two native tulwars (swords) fell from where it was hung on the bulkhead, on my forehead, and made a deep cut'. Fayerer, *Notes of the visits to India*, p. 139.

⁶⁰As quoted by S. M. Edwardes, to whom Probyn had written personally. Edwardes, 'Shivaji's sword', p. 19, and a parallel reference in Grant Duff, *A history of the Marathas*, vol. 1, p. 230. Russell specifically mentions that Probyn was present during the first meeting between Albert Edward and Shivaji. Russell, *A diary in India*, pp. 131-132. W. F. Sinclair, a civil servant who had been stationed in the Bombay presidency during the prince's visit was warmer to the possibility that such a sword was given. But it is not clear that he was present at the meeting and prefaces his remarks with the important qualification, 'if I remember right'. W. F. Sinclair, 'The cult of Shivaji', letter to the editor, *Westminster Gazette*, 12 August 1897.

whom the raja of Kolhapur would in any case have grabbed his attention as the first royal presented to Albert Edward. As a 12-year-old boy whose neck and turban were covered in jewels, moreover, Shivaji VI would presumably have made quite an entrance—to say nothing of his show-stopping exit.⁶¹

The Kolapore Rajah went off as he came, in great state, in a grand carriage drawn by four horses, with servants in beautiful liveries of blue and silver, and a magnificent fan-bearer behind wielding a blazing machine to keep the sun away.⁶²

The earliest assertion that the sword the young prince gave to Albert Edward belonged to Shivaji occurs only after Albert Edward returned to the United Kingdom, when the objects he received from Indian royals were sent to the India Museum (housed within the South Kensington Museum) for public display. Among these, a court circular stated, were

family or national heirlooms, which nothing but a sentiment of loyalty could have moved their owners to give up: objects so prized as the sword of Sivajee—not *Bhowanee, the deified weapon at Sattara*, but the sword which has been sacredly guarded for the last 200 years at Kolapoor by the junior branch of Bonslas [emphasis added]. These symbols of the latent hopes and aspirations, or of the despair of nations and once Sovereign families, have been forced on the Prince's acceptance in a spontaneous transport of loyalty, and their surrender may be fairly interpreted as meaning nothing less than that the people and Princes of India are beginning to give up their vain regrets for the past—and ... desire to centre their hopes of the future in the good faith, the wisdom, and power of the British Government.

These words would appear across British papers in June 1876, usually with minor but sometimes more significant variations, especially the omission of the phrase specifying that the object is not the Bhavani Talvar (see [Figure 3](#)).⁶³ Valuing these royal gifts less for their splendour than for their importance to Indian royalty,⁶⁴ the report

⁶¹Admittedly, three other major western Indian princes—the Nizam of Hyderabad, the maharaja of Mysore, and the Gaikwar of Baroda—were all, as one journalist noted, 'mere boys'. Each was also granted a full 21-gun salute, one gradation above Kolhapur's 19. Even so, the elaborate retinue brought by (and the preferential meeting afforded to) the young Kolhapur occupies a prominent place in most, though not all, accounts. The most important prince at the event should have been the Nizam, who opted instead to send a representative, a choice that raised eyebrows among some British commentators. Consider Wheeler, *India in 1875-6*, p. 44.

⁶²'The Prince of Wales', *Londonderry Sentinel*, 9 December 1875.

⁶³A court circular functions like a press release and 'is the official record of past royal engagements'. 'Court circular', The Royal Household, <https://www.royal.uk/court-circular>, [accessed 17 October 2023]. The extract here is from 'The Prince's Indian collection', *The Times*, 22 June 1876, which was, to my knowledge, the first to publish it. For a version omitting the reference to the Bhavani Talvar, see 'The Prince of Wales' Indian presents', *Belfast News-Letter*, 26 June 1876.

⁶⁴The circular elsewhere downplays the monetary value of the gifts more explicitly: 'costly as particular presents are, the total value of those received by the Prince does not exceed the value of those presented by his Royal Highness [the Prince of Wales]'. 'The Prince's Indian collection', *The Times*.

equates their bestowal with a kind of submission demanding not just acquiescence to British rule but obsolescence of the pre-British past. Shivaji's sword illustrates this process: with its utility as a tool of empire exhausted, the sword now derived its value because it lay in the hands of the British monarchy, who in accepting it had agreed to protect the Maratha people as the sword itself once did.

The details that the court circular includes about the sword's provenance, though certainly possible, cannot be readily ascertained. Despite the assertion that it had 'been sacredly guarded for the last 200 years', there is no record of the family's earlier relationship with the weapon, no Grant Duff-like testimony asserting that it was once held in a place of veneration.⁶⁵ Even so, these claims aroused little suspicion at the time, and the sword (together with many other objects Albert Edward received during his tour) travelled frequently over the next six years, such that some two million people may have seen it at various places across the United Kingdom (see Figure 4).⁶⁶ The collection notably travelled to Paris for the 1878 Exposition Universelle, at the time the largest instantiation yet of the World's Fair. In a handbook accompanying the British delegation to that event,⁶⁷ George Birdwood—who had been the head curator of the collection since Albert Edward's return from India—identifies the arms as its most impressive objects, among which the 'most interesting of all is the sword ... of Sivaji, the founder of the Mahratta dominion in India'.⁶⁸ He considers Shivaji's career in some detail before discussing the object in language nearly identical to the court circular, of which he (as the chief publicist for the collection) had very likely been an author. It is interesting that Birdwood readily concedes that it is not the Bhavani Talvar, noting (as in the circular) that, 'The sword in the Prince's collection is not this deified weapon.'⁶⁹ We will shortly consider how the space for such an interpretation was soon to narrow, but first we should interrogate Birdwood's reasons for connecting the sword to Shivaji at all. Having concluded his service in India about a decade earlier on account of 'broken health',⁷⁰ he was not a personal witness to Albert Edward's meeting with Shivaji VI. It is unclear, then, whether Birdwood is recording anecdotal information or simply assigning the object the best story he can. Simply put, did the rajas of Kolhapur really regard the sword as 'the palladium of their house and race'?

⁶⁵I have been unable to substantiate the scattered references to the sword that exist, though many seem merely to reproduce the claim that the sword lay in the armory, not that it was given by Shivaji to Albert Edward. For instance, an assertion from the journalist Deepak Neogi that '[t]he sword also been mentioned [sic] in the records of the former Kolhapur princely state' (D. Neogi, 'It's Shivaji's sword: CM', *Free Press Journal*, 25 December 1980) seems to refer to earlier claims about records in the Kolhapur Durbar.

⁶⁶George Birdwood would later summarize the movement of Albert Edward's gifts, noting that they 'were publicly exhibited in 1876 [at South Kensington]; and in 1877 at Bethnal Green, and in 1878 at Paris; and then, successively at Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Aberdeen; and finally, in 1881, at York'. G. Birdwood, 'Indian art in Marlborough House', in *Catalogue of the collection of Indian arms*. See also a summary of the travelling exhibitions in Kajal Meghani, *Splendours of the subcontinent: A Prince's tour of India, 1875–6* (London: Royal Collection Trust, 2017), pp. 9–10 and 27–31.

⁶⁷The delegation was in fact headed by the Prince of Wales himself. George C. M. Birdwood, *Handbook to the British Indian section* (London: Office of the Royal Commission, 1878), p. 55.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷⁰'The life and work of Sir George C. M. Birdwood, C. S. I.', *Journal of Indian Art*, vol. 8, no. 61–69, January 1900, p. 45.

That Birdwood wanted to tell a good story is not in dispute. His text is not—as its rather prosaic title, *Handbook to the British Indian Section*, might suggest—a mere inventory of the Indian pieces included in the British exhibition; it is a sprawling history of India that begins with such grandiose sections as ‘The Settlement of the Old World by the Human Race’ and culminates with the rise of the British empire.⁷¹ Utilizing the pieces in the British exhibition, it argues that India combines the grandeur of a classical heritage with the promise (through British rule) of a modern resurgence. Since Shivaji stands at the crossroads of early modern and colonial India, and since the surrender of a sword typically signifies the deference of the giver to the receiver, it is little wonder that Birdwood would assign such prominence to a sword bequeathed by the heir of Shivaji to the heir of the British empire. What really matters, in other words, is not whether it is the ‘deified’ sword of Shivaji but that it is the one through which his legacy was transferred to British stewardship.⁷²

We should also recognize that the attribution of the sword to Shivaji—unless it stems from some now-lost earlier source—may have been merely a mistake. After all, the sword did belong to a Shivaji, and Birdwood or someone else could easily have misconstrued an object catalogued as the former property of Shivaji VI as being that of his iconic namesake. Still, some measure of wishful thinking was at play, since Shivaji VI gave Albert Edward two other swords that never became associated with Shivaji himself.⁷³ We can presume that the sheer ornateness of the ‘sword of Sivajee’ might have attracted Birdwood, just as it had Russell (assuming, of course, that Russell was referring to the same object). The two other swords are also remarkable, but with fewer jewels and lesser detail, neither so readily evokes the richness of the tradition that Birdwood believed Kolhapur had lost and Britain had inherited.

Whatever the sword’s connection to Shivaji, the whirlwind tour that had taken it from Paris to Aberdeen died down in an apparent reflection of flagging European interest.⁷⁴ In India, by contrast, the sword continued to garner attention in newspapers

⁷¹Birdwood, *Handbook to the British Indian section*, pp. 1–4.

⁷²Birdwood saw imperialist significance in all the weapons in the collection, which were for him ‘the symbols of the latent hopes and aspirations of nations and once sovereign families ... literally forced on the Prince’s acceptance in a spontaneous transport of loyalty’, in return for which the prince would offer ‘the good faith, and wisdom, and power of the British government’. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷³Both swords were installed as part of The Indian Collection at Sandringham House. A 1910 inventory of that collection lists both as having been given by Shivaji VI to Albert Edward. While it describes both as a ‘European 17th century steel blade’—making them contemporaneous with Shivaji—it links neither to him. C. Purdon Clarke, *Arms and armour at Sandringham: The Indian Collection presented by the princes, chiefs and nobles of India to His Majesty King Edward VII ...* (London: W. Griggs and Sons, Ltd., 1910), p. 5. See also the current inventories: ‘Sword (firangi)’, Royal Collection Trust, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/9/collection/38022/sword-firangi> and ‘Sword and scabbard (firangi)’, Royal Collection Trust, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/38023/sword-and-scabbard-firangi>, [both accessed 17 October 2023].

⁷⁴This may reflect diminishing attendance at the South Kensington Museum around this time. A government report from 1879, for instance, notes that visitor numbers were lower that year than in the previous two, although it optimistically adds that this was ‘owing probably in some degree to the unfavourable weather which prevailed during a great part of the year’. Sir Philip Cunliffe Owen, ‘Report on the South Kensington Museum and the Branch Museum at Bethnal Green’, *Twenty-seventh report of the Science and Art Department of the Committee of Council on Education, with appendices* (London: George E. Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1880), p. 529.

and public life, but there, too, an important shift was underway. Although Birdwood and other observers in Britain had explicitly differentiated the sword given by Kolhapur from its counterpart in Satara, the two were to become increasingly indistinguishable in India. A notable example in this regard are the scattered references to the sword in the 1897 sedition trial of the Indian nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak. In recounting Tilak's use of Shivaji as a political symbol, the advocate-general (representing the state) locates Shivaji's sword in Satara even as *The Times of India*—in reporting on his remarks—maintains that, 'The sword referred to by the prosecution was preserved for a long time at Satara, but it was now in the possession of H. R. H. the Prince of Wales, who was presented with it at the time of his visit to India.'⁷⁵ What both the prosecution and the press share is the notion of a single weapon, a single weapon that, interestingly, has no connection to the raja of Kolhapur.⁷⁶ The omission of Shivaji VI from the narrative around the sword is noteworthy not just because of his once-strong association with the object, but also because Tilak had prominently defended him amid the government's insistence that he was insane and required a regent. So ardent was Tilak's defence of the troubled raja that he had been imprisoned for slander against the state in 1882, an episode surely not forgotten by lawyers eager to put Tilak back behind bars, nor by journalists for whom the raja's highly irregular death in 1883 had offered media gold.⁷⁷ Whatever the reason that the young Shivaji's connection to the sword was excised from discussions in and about the courtroom, then, it cannot be because he was anything less than an eminently familiar public figure. It seems instead that the narrative then circulating about Shivaji (the Great) and his sword had simply become

⁷⁵The trial was a closely watched media event and is accordingly well documented. References to the sword are scattered throughout the deliberations and largely relate to Bhavani herself, whom the advocate-general interpreted as a goddess of destruction. The advocate-general's logic ran that Tilak's interest in Shivaji, his sword, and Bhavani confirmed his intention to destroy British rule itself. For the details of this argument and the quotation in the main text, see 'The Trial of the Hon. B. G. Tilak: Close of the case for the prosecution', *TOI*, 13 September 1897; for quotations from the advocate-general regarding Bhavani, see 'The Poona press prosecution: Trial of Messrs. Tilak and Bal. Scene in the High Court', *TOI*, 9 September 1897. What might have drawn the prosecution's attention to the sword was that Tilak had appended the 'mark of the Bhawani sword' to an article he had written in Shivaji's voice in *Kesari*. For a contemporary translation of the piece, see 'The incriminating articles', *TOI*, 30 July 1897. Two decades later, Tilak would explain his use of the sword as a signature during his civil suit against the British journalist Valentine Chirol, in which he insisted the practice was consistent with Shivaji's own, reflecting his (Shivaji's) illiteracy. See the transcription of the relevant phase of the trial in D. V. Athalye, *The life of Lokamanya Tilak*, foreword by C. R. Das (Pune: Jagadhithecchu Press, 1921), p. 283.

⁷⁶The best textual evidence I can find for a (reasonably) direct Satara-London connection is a letter written by Brigadier-General Lionel Smith to James Grant Duff in 1820. D. B. Parasnis had come into possession of the document and shared it in 1920 with S. M. Edwardes, who discusses its contents in Edwardes, 'Shivaji's sword', p. 19. The letter states that a sword, which Parasnis presumes was the Bhavani Talvar, had been given by Pratap Singh, the raja of Satara, to Lionel Smith in 1818 upon the latter's victory in the Battle of Ashti. For more on this claim—which seems to me improbable—see note 121.

⁷⁷For more details on the young 'Shivaji's tragic death', see Manohar Malgonkar, *Chatrapatis of Kolhapur* (Bombay, 1960), pp. 562–587. One detail that emerges is the extent to which the young prince imagined a connection between himself and the Prince of Wales. As his psychological condition worsened, he would occasionally believe that he was himself Albert Edward and would 'write the most extraordinary letters in English' (p. 563).

condensed: what had been two swords had now melded into one, becoming just the sword of Shivaji, or the Bhavani Talvar.⁷⁸

This streamlining seems to me to have been the result of two factors. The first was Shivaji VI's successor, Shahu IV (r. 1894–1922), a flamboyant reformer whose immense popularity may have guarded against the idea that his house could have parted with an heirloom of national significance.⁷⁹ Still more decisive was probably the fate of the Kolhapur sword itself. Despite its starring role in the 1878 Exposition Universelle, the 'most interesting of all' its objects was—to the public at least—simply nowhere to be found by the end of the nineteenth century. With the whereabouts of the sword unknown, determining its location became more pressing than determining its origins. The cachet of Kolhapur may have brought Shivaji's sword to prominence, but it was the sudden loss of the object itself that sustained interest in, even as it blurred, important details of its history.

After the collections of the India Museum were dispersed in 1879 and exhibitions of its objects gradually petered out, many assumed that the sword had been moved to the British Museum.⁸⁰ Its curators sought to assure the public this was not the case, telling

⁷⁸In much the same way that multiple swords and Indian princes became condensed into a simplified narrative, Edward VII would much later become confused with his son and successor, George V. An article written after Antulay's return from London cites both Babasaheb Bhosale (Antulay's successor as chief minister) and Kensington Museum authorities as stating that the London sword had been given to George by the maharaja of Kolhapur in 1889. Since we know that a sword associated with Shivaji is recorded in London more than a decade before this, events here have clearly become muddled. But for us this is a useful muddling since it reveals that the specific identities of the two main actors in the narrative—the Indian prince and the future British king—do not much matter. See "'Bhavani" issue raised again', *Free Press Journal*, 23 April 1982.

⁷⁹Shahu was adopted by the widow of Shivaji VI and subject to direct British oversight until he came of age in 1894. Six years later, in 1900, Shahu became the first ruler of Kolhapur to receive the designation 'maharaja', an honour given to him on Queen Victoria's eighty-first birthday. See A. B. Latthe, *Memoirs of His Highness Shri Shahu Chhatrapati, Maharaja of Kolhapur*, 2 vols (Bombay: The Times Press, 1924), vol. 1, p. 185. Shahu enjoyed a reputation for generosity and lent weapons, costumes, and other royal artefacts to filmmakers. But even allowing for his somewhat eccentric love of the entertainment industry, the distribution of these items feels somehow consistent with his predecessor's seemingly bewildering surrender of an item of great worth. For more on Shahu and his relationship to the film industry, see Pramod Kale, 'Ideas, ideals and the market: A study of Marathi films', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 14, no. 35, 1 September 1979, p. 1513.

⁸⁰The intricate history of the India Museum has been skilfully synthesized in Robert Skelton, 'The Indian collections: 1798 to 1978', *The Burlington Magazine*, special issue devoted to the Victoria and Albert Museum, vol. 120, no. 902, May 1978, pp. 296–305. Though the India Museum had been housed at the South Kensington Museum since 1875, it was not until 1879 that the collection would be formally annexed by it. For more on the arrangement in 1875, see Ray Desmond, *The India Museum, 1801–1879* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1982), p. 151; for the formal consolidation in 1879, see Cunliffe Owen, 'Report on the South Kensington Museum', p. 527. Confusing matters further is that the South Kensington Museum did not maintain all items, with some objects (although not arms) going to other public museums, as detailed by Skelton, 'The Indian collections', p. 301. A fire also affected the collection a few years later, as recounted in 'Fire at the India Museum', *The Journal of Indian Art*, vol. 1, no. 7, July 1885, p. 56. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we should consider how the annexation of the India Museum by the South Kensington Museum was a last-minute arrangement secured by the personal intervention of Albert Edward, since, as Skelton, 'The Indian Collections', p. 301, notes, the 'decidedly complicated' negotiations among various government bodies had first ended with a decision to give the collection to the British Museum. The original plan points to a common-sense expectation that was clearly shared by the public and likely to

a series of Maharashtra visitors beginning in 1908 that one weapon was 'not the real Bhawani sword' and that objects claimed by some to have been Shivaji's were 'not the genuine articles'.⁸¹ By 1915, the museum clarified its position by stating that it did not possess the Bhavani Talvar and, implicitly, any other sword of Shivaji. S. M. Edwardes, a historian and British civil servant, took the museum at its word and broadened the search. Finding nothing at Windsor Castle, Sandringham House, or Buckingham Palace, he concluded in 1920 that he was 'quite certain that the famous Sword is *not* in England [emphasis original]' and went so far as to doubt whether the Prince of Wales had ever received such an item.⁸² By 1924, he was content to return the search to India. 'The question still remains "where is now the original Sword Bhavānī?"', he wondered, speculating whether it might 'have been taken to Benares', a reference to the exile of Satara's last raja to that city.⁸³

If statements like those from the British Museum and Edwardes had hoped to deflect further inquiries, they did not. So incessant were Indian visitors' demands to examine objects at the British Museum that in 1925, John Marshall, the director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India, rather grumpily mused in the margins of yet another request to contact the museum's curators that, 'In 1915 the British Museum denied the existence of the sword in their collection, and we may presume that it has not found its way there since.'⁸⁴

The citizen's sword: Bomonjee Pudumjee and the democratization of Shivaji

The saga of the London sword was far from over, but for the moment, at least, it certainly seemed to be. Many in India naturally held out hope for its rediscovery, a prospect made all the more exciting by the tercentenary celebrations of Shivaji's birth in 1927.⁸⁵ Mindful, perhaps, that fascination with Shivaji was reaching a fever pitch

have been enhanced by the problems affecting the India Museum. It is for this reason, perhaps, that so many looked to the British Museum for the sword, and erroneous statements like '[i]t is well known that the sword of the famous Shivaji Maharaj called "Bhawani" is now in the British Museum' would persist as late as 1927. See G. J. K., 'Shivaji's sword', letter to the editor, *TOI*, 29 June 1927. The last enquiry to the museum about the sword that I have traced was in 1930: 'Play not with sentiments', *Maharashtra Times*, 29 November 1980.

⁸¹D. N. Apte, letter to the editor, 'Shivaji's sword Bhawani: Where is it?', *TOI*, 13 July 1927. Apte's letter is interesting in that it presents a rather garbled version of an essay by Manikrao (see note 108) to claim that the sword had been given not by Shivaji VI but by Shahu IV, who he claims presented it to Albert Edward in 1902 upon his coronation as Edward VII. I have not seen this substantiated by any reputable source, though the account bears similarities with the one outlined in note 78.

⁸²S. M. Edwardes to C. V. Joga, 4 October 1921, as quoted in C. V. Joga, letter to the editor, 'Bhawani sword', *TOI*, 22 July 1927.

⁸³Edwardes, 'Shivaji's sword', p. 20. Initially receptive to an idea, suggested by Parasnis (see note 32), that the sword may have travelled from Satara to Kolhapur and then to London, Edwardes here retreats from this position and speculates that the sword remained in the Satara royal family. Although representative of the discourse around the sword insofar it assumes a single surviving weapon, Edwardes' reference to Benares appears in no other source of which I am aware.

⁸⁴John Hubert Marshall, 8 May 1925, Department of Education, Health and Land, Nos 271-72, the National Archives of India, New Delhi.

⁸⁵A prominent feature of these celebrations was the planned unveiling of an equestrian statue of Shivaji in Pune. For the political debates around the project and the involvement of Edward, Prince of Wales,

and that the public's appetite for the sword was not yet satiated, a Parsi businessman issued a self-published pamphlet in 1929 proclaiming an important discovery. The Bhavani Talvar, Bomonjee Pudumjee claimed, was not in London because it had never left India. It was not in Satara Fort, moreover, nor in Benares, but in his own collection. We have already encountered Pudumjee in the context of his remarks on the sword in Satara, remarks that were undoubtedly aimed at bolstering the case for his own specimen. But before considering the details of his argument, we should pause to consider the man himself.

The various commercial ventures of the Pudumjee family—including an ice factory, a bank, and a paper mill that still operates in Pune today—are well known.⁸⁶ Our Pudumjee maintained a connection to the ice factory but in general sought to make his mark outside the family business.⁸⁷ In 1901, he was serving as bullion keeper, or cashier, of the imperial mint in Bombay and had received a patent for a lamp used in moving vehicles.⁸⁸ Scattered references to large charitable donations, an invitation to a governor's soirée, and memberships in musical, sports, and historical associations suggest that he rubbed shoulders with the upper echelon of Bombay and Pune society.⁸⁹ His use of the title Khan Bahadur, which he inherited from an ancestor who had received it from the colonial government,⁹⁰ may have enhanced his status in such circles and suggests pride in his family's contributions to state and society. His interest in history and antiquarianism seems oriented towards similar goals, since his writing represents collecting not as an act of self-indulgence but as one of historical preservation aimed at the public good. Taken together, Pudumjee's diverse interests and activities reveal a social sphere that valued innovation and civic engagement as markers of the ideal citizen subject. In this respect, the turn in the discourse on Shivaji's sword towards Pudumjee highlights the burgeoning role for such individuals in conversations about Indian history and even in shaping the legacy of one of its most enduring icons (see Figures 5 and 6).⁹¹

see Andrew Halladay, 'A distant throne: The British sovereign in the mirror of Indian nationalism, 1919–36', PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2023, Chapters 2 and 3.

⁸⁶The Reay Paper Mill was initially founded by Nowrojee Pudumjee in 1887 before its re-establishment as Pudumjee Paper Products, Ltd. in 1964. See 'The Rey Paper Mill', *TOI*, 7 October 1887; and 'Pudumjee Paper Products Ltd.', *Pudumjee*, 2015, <https://www.pudumjee.com>. The website appears defunct as of 10 September 2023.

⁸⁷Arnold Wright, *The Bombay presidency, the United Provinces, the Punjab, etc.* (Bombay: Foreign and Colonial Compiling and Publishing Company, 1920), p. 335.

⁸⁸United States Patent Office, *Annual report of the Commissioner of Patents for the year 1901* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1902), p. 342; and Patrick Doyle (ed.), *Indian engineering*, no. 27, January–June 1900, p. 415.

⁸⁹For his interest in Indian classical music, see 'St. Isabel's Association', *TOI*, 7 January 1908; for his rifling experience, see 'The Indian Rifle Association', *The Pioneer*, 6 March 1895. His role as a 'native' invitee appears in 'H. E. The governor's levée', *The Bombay Gazette*, 20 December 1900.

⁹⁰The title was granted to Sorabjee Pudumjee sometime in the early nineteenth century for his successful execution of a government mail contract. For more on the Pudumjee family, see *The cyclopaedia of India*, 3 vols (Calcutta: Cyclopaedia Publishing Company, 1907), vol. 1, pp. 369–372.

⁹¹In 'Notes and news', *Indian history for the year 1928* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1928), p. 183, Pudumjee may be referred to as 'one of the members of our Society', although the referent is unclear.

Pudumjee claimed to have acquired his prized object at an auction in Pune in an unspecified year, without any knowledge of its original owner, and to have sent it for restoration to an Indian arms expert in Bombay in 1912.⁹² In cleaning the blade, the expert, M. D. Moos, discovered a Devanagari inscription inlaid in gold: *chatrapati mahārājā śivājī* [sic]. There are several reasons to doubt this fairy tale-like account, namely, the peculiar letter that Moos supposedly wrote to Pudumjee (and that Pudumjee in turn reproduced in his pamphlet) in which Moos matter-of-factly informs his client that his item is both ready for pick-up and the former property of Shivaji the Great. Its odd tone notwithstanding, the letter carries the authority of its author—who was at the time of the pamphlet's publication known for his consulting work for the Wallace Collection in London—and is thus a clear attempt to capture his opinion in writing.⁹³ Even so, the likelihood that the letter is staged does not render its narrative impossible nor, certainly, its opinion inauthentic. And its description of the engraving does indeed suggest that the markings may have been centuries-old, or at any rate much older than the recent fascination with Shivaji that might have inspired a more unscrupulous collector to add them to the blade.⁹⁴

A closer examination of this engraving nevertheless exposes problems for Pudumjee. We might note, first, that the initial vowel in 'Shivaji' is long—rendering *Śivājī* as opposed to the standard *Śivājī*—a quirk that on its own would be easy to excuse as a variant or error. But reflecting on this irregularity leads us to consider a more serious issue in the inscription: the reference to Shivaji as *chatrapati*. That Shivaji adopted this title is not in dispute, but—as Pudumjee's contemporary V. S. Bendrey would emphasize in his analysis of Pudumjee's claims—he only did so after he was crowned in 1674, six years before his death.⁹⁵ That Shivaji might have added the inscription after that date does not strike me as implausible, and it is interesting that Bendrey does not so much as entertain the possibility. More interesting still is that he does not consider that Shivaji might have acquired the sword during or after his coronation, which on its own would be enough to prove that it is not the legendary Bhavani Talvar. Perhaps Bendrey does not want to entertain the existence of another of Shivaji's swords or perhaps the thought simply does not occur to him; either way, we have further evidence that a discourse around a single surviving sword, the Bhavani Talvar, was solidifying.

Just as the engraving that Pudumjee regards as his smoking gun actually exposes some of the sword's deficiencies, so, too, do the symbols on the opposite side of the blade to which he draws special attention. In interpreting these as the phases of the moon ('marks of the whole, $\frac{3}{4}$ and half circles'),⁹⁶ Pudumjee may be correct

⁹²Pudumjee, *Notes on the subject of Shivaji's sword*, pp. 3–4.

⁹³*Ibid.*, pp. 5 and 15.

⁹⁴The strongest evidence supporting this claim came from the Sanskritist Shripad Krishna Belvalkar, who noted that the appearance of the letter ष was consistent with manuscripts 'about 150 or 200 years old', a period that would have intersected with Shahu's reign (1707–1749). See the discussion in 'Shivaji's sword', editorial, *The Indian National Herald*, 15 January 1929; and Belvalkar's own statement in Pudumjee, *Notes on the subject of Shivaji's sword*, p. 13.

⁹⁵V. S. Bendrey, 'The Bhavani sword of Shivaji the Great', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 86, no. 4482, October 1938, p. 1143. Bendrey supposes that the 'inscription more appropriately fits Shivaji II' of Kolhapur (r. 1691–1723).

⁹⁶Pudumjee, *Notes on the subject of Shivaji's sword*, p. 8.

in noting that they allude to verses on Shivaji's seal,⁹⁷ but this need not imply, as Pudumjee insists that it does, that 'the sword cannot but be Shivaji's'.⁹⁸ Not only were later Maratha figures eager to evoke their heroic forebear, but lunar imagery enjoyed a wide resonance across early modern India (and beyond). Alas, if we adopt Pudumjee's own 'process of exclusion'—by which he questions the authenticity of rival swords to single out the Bhavani Talvar⁹⁹—then the case for his own is no stronger than those he rejects.

Again, my goal is not to debunk the identification of an object I have not seen. What I want to show, rather, is how Pudumjee's defence of his sword—and, especially, his ability to force the public to contend with that defence—illustrates the new kinds of engagement with the past that were emerging in the colonial public sphere. I am thinking here of Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of the 'cloistered' and 'public' lives of history in early twentieth-century India, albeit in a slightly different manner from how he employs these terms. Like him, I am interested in how 'discussions in the public domain actually come to shape the fundamental categories and practices of the discipline's "cloistered" or academic life'.¹⁰⁰ But whereas Chakrabarty's focus is on the public discussions of career historians, mine lies nearer the margins, where an educated, engaged, but decidedly lay historian aspired to engage in, and even reorient, a major historical discussion. Admittedly, Pudumjee's interest in these discussions reflected not only historical interest but also, and perhaps especially, his business acumen. That he chose to enclose a copy of his *Notes on the Subject of Shivaji's Sword* in his letter to the noted Sanskritist W. Norman Brown, for instance, was presumably to encourage Brown to read on about his 'very valuable oil painting of Shivaji' and 'a superb collection of old China' that he hoped to sell to Brown or his acquaintances (see Figures 7–8).¹⁰¹ The public life of history was thus for Pudumjee at once a domain to which engaged citizens such as himself were expected to aspire and a platform from which he could forward his business interests. Either way, his sword was his ticket in.

By entering the discourse around Shivaji, Pudumjee not only participated in one of the most animated historical dialogues of his time but also exposes directions

⁹⁷The verses on Shivaji's seal read:

Pratipaccandralekhya vardhiṣṇurviśvavanditā	Like the new moon, waxing and extolled by the world,
Śāhasūnoḥ Śivasyaiṣā mudrā bhadrāya rājate.	This seal of Shivaji, son of Shahaji, shines with benevolence.

I am grateful to Sumit Guha for pointing to an alternative meaning of the last word that is reflected in my translation.

⁹⁸Pudumjee, *Notes on the subject of Shivaji's sword*, p. 8.

⁹⁹We have seen Pudumjee do this, for instance, in his assessment of the Satara sword. For his 'process of exclusion', see *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The calling of history* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 6.

¹⁰¹B. D. Pudumjee to Professor W. Norman Brown, 24 November 1928, Bombay, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Misc. Mss Box 2, Folder 41, the University of Pennsylvania, United States of America. Brown would later go on to found the South Asia Studies Department at the University of Pennsylvania, the first of its kind in North America. For more on the establishment of the department, see 'Department History', *South Asian Studies*, <https://www.southasia.upenn.edu/about/department-history>, [accessed 17 October 2023]. For the geopolitical relevance of such programmes within the context of the Cold War, see Thongchai Winichakul, 'Asian Studies across academies', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 73, no. 4, November 2014, pp. 879–897.

Compound of Kemp & Co
 Dispensary
 Opposite Alhambra Bang
 Charni Road
 Bombay 24 Nov.
 1928

Professor W. Norman Brown
 Colaba

Dear Sir,

As I hear that you
 and your party of American
 friends are interested in old
 India's historical relics
 I am sending herewith for

you please a copy of
 my "Notes on the Subject
 of Shivaji's Sword". I may
 also mention that I
 possess also a very valuable
 oil painting of Shivaji
 the famous founder of
 the Maratha Empire in
 India and Soldier-King
 of the Maharathas
 I have also for

sale a superb collection
 of old China. If you
 or any of your friends
 wish to inspect the
 same I shall be glad
 to show you the same
 on your calling here
 any time between 9 & 10^{AM}
~~for~~ between 2 & 5 PM.

Yours truly
 B. D. Pudumjee

Figures 7–8. Letter from Bomonjee D. Pudumjee to W. Norman Brown, 24 November 1928, Bombay. Source: Kislak Center for Special Collections, Misc. Mss Box 2, Folder 41, the University of Pennsylvania, United States.

they might have taken. The colonial state had grown increasingly weary of Shivaji by the end of the 1920s, associating his admirers with communalism and the Hindu Right. That Pudumjee, a Parsi whose allegiance to the colonial state was clear, believed

he could mould Shivaji's legacy—or, at a less lofty level, simply benefit from it—suggests that the public discourse around Shivaji was still open to interpretation and negotiation. Moreover, in staking his claim to the Bhavani Talvar in particular, Pudumjee emerges as not just another voice in discussions, for if (as all parties seemed to agree) the transference of Shivaji's sword marked the transference of Shivaji's authority—whether to the raja of Kolhapur, the maharaja of Satara, or even the Prince of Wales—then that authority now seemed to reside quite literally in the hands of a public citizen.

Or did it? Reflecting on Pudumjee's sword some 50 years later, a journalist for the *Nagpur Times* rather cuttingly remarked that it 'was never accepted by anybody as the real Bhawani'.¹⁰² This characterization is a bit unfair, since Pudumjee's case was built on the statements of what he considered a dream team of antiquarians and Maratha history experts.¹⁰³ Additionally, his claims garnered enough attention to prompt curators of the British Museum to consider (and, admittedly, reject) them.¹⁰⁴ But the journalist has a point insofar as Pudumjee's sword never captured the popular imagination in the manner of its rivals. Ultimately, Pudumjee would sell his beloved sword, which in time found its way to another enthusiastic owner who penned a pamphlet of his own.¹⁰⁵ The sword and the second volume on it have since languished in obscurity.¹⁰⁶

Pudumjee's case thus illustrates an important contradiction. It at once reveals the ease with which citizens could stake plausible claims to Shivaji's legacy within the public sphere and the reticence of the public to accept them. We must remember that although the provenance Pudumjee supposed for his sword now appears doubtful, it did not necessarily seem that way at the time; indeed, his failure to persuade the public cannot be attributed to any dearth of expert opinions nor, surely, to the doubts expressed by the curators of the British Museum, whose disavowal of the Kolhapur sword in its collection did nothing to blunt the enthusiasm of the public. Pudumjee's failure, though it was assuredly disappointing for him, is thus eminently useful for us, offering as it does an example of how the democratization of Shivaji that was

¹⁰²Pande, 'The Bhawani Talwar'.

¹⁰³Pudumjee's list of experts included prominent voices from both the media and academic circles. Among the former was H. George Franks (whose writing on Shivaji we encountered in note 20), the Sanskrit Shripad Krishna Belvalkar, and the prominent Maratha historian Govind Sakharam Sardesai. See Franks, 'Shivaji and his swords'; S. K. Belvalkar, 'Shivaji's sword: At present in the custody of Mr. B. D. Pudumji', *The Indian Daily Mail*, 10 January 1929; G. S. Sardesai to Khan Bahadur B. D. Padamji, Poona Alienation Office, 17 July 1929. Pudumjee enthusiastically includes these references in his *Notes on the subject of Shivaji's sword* (on pp. 21–22, 13, and 36, respectively) and quotes from them at length. Even so, these individuals express varying degrees of certainty about Pudumjee's claims, with some stating the sword is very likely Shivaji's (although not necessarily the Bhavani Talvar) and others taking something of a wait-and-see approach.

¹⁰⁴See, for instance, a much later report: 'Pawar flays Antulay's mission', *The Sunday Standard*, 30 November 1980.

¹⁰⁵'Play not with sentiments', *Maharashtra Times*.

¹⁰⁶At some point Pudumjee sold the sword to a certain Dr Kurtakoty, who in turn sold it to Captain Bahadur Mody—presumably Khan Bahadur Captain Sorab Rustomji Mody, for whom there are scattered references. I have been unable to trace the book on the sword he is said to have written in 'Play not with sentiments', *Maharashtra Times*. Pudumjee had other offers for the sword, such as we see in Ghulam Mohiuddin Master to B. D. Pudamjee, Bombay, 12 August 1928, reproduced in Pudumjee, *Notes on the subject of Shivaji's sword*, p. 16.

then developing was also becoming circumscribed. I see this in at least two important respects. First, the notion that Shivaji was a shared historical and national treasure may have been growing, but his legacy could not attach to just anyone, even if that someone could make a decent case that he possessed the legendary sword. Rather, that legacy—together with the sword that represented it—had to attach to someone connected to the familiar narratives around Shivaji's legacy; these figures were typically royal—especially Shivaji's descendants or the British royal family—or, as Antulay and Modi demonstrate in the post-colonial context, political. Second, and more important for our purposes, is that there was the emerging sense that Shivaji's vision had been—and would for some time continue to be—unrealized. For this critical element in Shivaji's mythos to be preserved, his sword, which served as the physical manifestation of that mythos, had likewise to be just out of reach.

Three hundred years a king: A Satara interlude

For many in India, it was London that seemed just out of reach. Decades of denials by British officials had done little to quash the idea that Shivaji's sword might still be in the city; such tenacity owed much to the appeal of the narrative, for decidedly more alluring than the prospect of Shivaji's sword appearing at a Pune auction was that it had been whisked away to the nation that had dashed Shivaji's dreams of a united, sovereign India.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, the fixation with London was no mere flight of fancy. Whispers that the sword brought back by Albert Edward remained there continued, appearing most prominently in a 1927 Marathi article by Gajanan Manikrao, who mentions 'the Shri Bhavani placed in a golden cupboard in Buckingham Palace'.¹⁰⁸ Although he does not include sources, it seems that Manikrao had access to (or at least knowledge of) an 1898 catalogue of objects 'in the Indian Room at Marlborough House'.¹⁰⁹ Like the collections itself, this catalogue does not appear to have been accessible to the public, thus explaining why even a well-placed civil servant and historian like S. M. Edwardes (whom we left having exhausted leads in London) apparently had no knowledge of it. Marlborough House had been Albert Edward's primary residence while Prince of Wales, and the catalogue makes clear that it was here, and not in the British Museum, that many objects he had collected in India 'were definitively installed' sometime after their public exhibition ceased in 1881.¹¹⁰ Together with a description, the text includes an early photograph of the sword, which rests with

¹⁰⁷It is interesting to note that the version told by Pudumjee himself would in later decades transmogrify into a still more romantic account in which Pudumjee 'bought the Bhavani sword as junk from a Bombay shop'. See 'Antulay bares his sword', *Current*.

¹⁰⁸'बकीगहेंम राजवाड्यामधील सुवर्ण कपाटांत ठेवलेली श्रीभवानी'. Rajratna Professor [Gajanan] Manikrao, 'काही ऐतिहासिक हत्यारें' [Some historical weapons], in *Shivaji souvenir*, (ed.) G. S. Sardesai (Bombay: Keshav Bhikaji Dhawale, 1927), p. 150.

¹⁰⁹This is the *Catalogue of the collection of Indian arms*, the citation for which appears in note 33.

¹¹⁰Birdwood, 'Indian art in Marlborough House'. It is unclear when precisely these objects were in place in Marlborough House: though the main travelling exhibitions had concluded by 1881, a subset of the prince's gifts continued to tour until 1883, travelling as far as Copenhagen. See Meghani, *Splendours of the subcontinent*, p. 30.

its scabbard in a display case among other Indian arms (see Figure 9).¹¹¹ Whether Manikrao conflated Marlborough House with nearby Buckingham Palace or whether he presumed that Albert Edward took the sword there with him upon his ascension in 1901 remains unclear.¹¹²

The prominence of Manikrao's article appears to have done much to reorient the search away from the British Museum and towards Buckingham Palace. So intense was public interest in the new location that the Maratha historian V. S. Bendrey somewhat begrudgingly agreed to investigate the rumours during a research stint in London in 1937. Though he characterized the association between Shivaji and 'a sword in Buckingham Palace' as 'nothing but unverified tradition',¹¹³ he nevertheless issued a formal viewing request to the royal comptroller. The comptroller confirmed the existence of such a weapon, bringing the whereabouts of the Kolhapur sword fully into the public eye for the first time in decades. But in doing so, he described an almost comically unattainable object, which hung in the inner chambers of a royal residence (it is not clear which) 'in a special anti-burglar electric alarm case'.¹¹⁴ Frustrating though this arrangement undoubtedly was for the historian, it only enhanced the sword's mythical status among the public, satiating a need to locate the sword without actually attaining it and thereby spoiling the chase.

And, indeed, the chase continued, even after independence. By 1971, the sword was, for the first time, visited by a high-ranking Indian official, the high commissioner to the United Kingdom. 'The moment I set eyes on it I felt deeply impressed by and attracted towards it,' the commissioner, Apa Pant, would later recall. 'It has some kind of great power which one feels immediately.'¹¹⁵ Such remarks are not unexpected from Pant, who was a scion of a Maratha vassal state and, despite forging a career in

¹¹¹The picture in the catalogue is labelled 'Case J', which is out of view in the accompanying photographs of the Indian Room. These oaken display cases were 'relieved with gold ... [and] the contents illumined by means of electric light'. Arthur Henry Beavan, *Marlborough House and its occupants: Present and past* (London: F. V. White and Co., 1896), p. 32. The earliest photograph seems to be the image included in Bourne, *Prince of Wales Tour of India* (see Figure 4).

¹¹²Meghani writes that Albert Edward's Indian treasures moved with him to Buckingham Palace in 1902, shortly after his ascension. This would make eminent sense, though I have not seen this documented, and no source is cited in Meghani, *Splendours of the subcontinent*, p. 32.

¹¹³Bendrey, 'The Bhavani sword of Shivaji the Great', p. 1143.

¹¹⁴As quoted in 'Sword in U.K. not Shivaji's: Scholars', *TOI*, 9 December 1980. The article also clarifies that Bendrey's research in London was at the behest of the Bharat Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal.

¹¹⁵As quoted in 'Antulay airs doubts on Bhavani sword', *Indian Express*, 25 December 1980. Pant claimed he saw the weapon at St James's Palace, not at Buckingham Palace itself. Although British correspondence occasionally locates the sword at Buckingham Palace (the 'sword at present in the Royal Collection at Buckingham Palace ...'), these remarks may be reproducing the discourse used by Antulay and others, since no eyewitness testimony after Pant locates the sword there. See G[raham] R Archer to [Peter] Blaker, 'Brief for Meeting with Mr Antulay, Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Monday, 1 December, 3 PM', 28 November 1980, in FCO 37/2331. Since the two palaces are only about half a kilometre apart, it seems that Buckingham Palace could have been shorthand for the entire royal complex—a shorthand that would also double as an evocative metonym for British royalty. Pant has in any case left us with a decent description: 'The blade of the sword is straight and has obviously seen action in battle. The most interesting aspect of the hilt is that the grip is only two-and-a-half inches in width, obviously for a person of short stature and very small hands' (as quoted in 'Antulay airs doubts', *Indian Express*). Shivaji's small stature is something of a trope and was picked up on by Katharine Guthrie who writes that, 'It is a matter of surprise that so small a man as Sevaji is said to have ... wielded such a weapon'. See Guthrie, *My year in an Indian fort*, p.

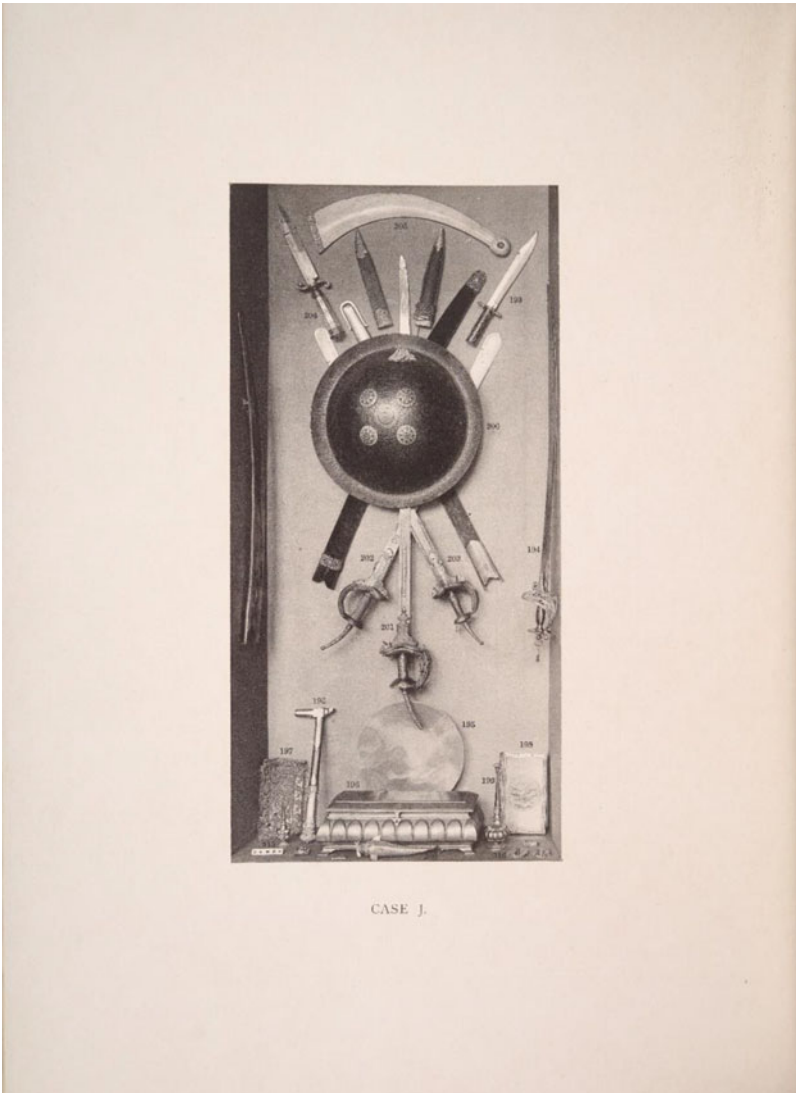


Figure 9. Photograph from the *Catalogue of the collection of Indian arms and objects of art presented by the princes and nobles of India to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales ... on the occasion of his visit to India in 1875–1876 ...*, Case J. Source: © British Library Board, General Reference Collection K.T.C.41.b.18. Asia, Pacific and Africa X 408.

127. Putting aside the historicity of such statements, Shivaji's shorter stature only enhances his underdog status and invites obvious comparisons with Napoleon. For a contemporary discussion of Shivaji's relationship to historical military leaders, including Napoleon, see the translator's preface to Lala Lajpat Rai, *Shivaji the great patriot*, (trans.) R. C. Puri (Delhi: Metropolitan, 1980), p. ix. In Puri's estimation, Shivaji ranks with Ranjit Singh and, somewhat surprisingly, Lord Clive, owing to what Puri considers their commitment to nationalist struggles. This quality distinguishes them from, and sets them above, figures like

the minutiae of diplomacy and bureaucracy, of a strong mystical and philosophical bent.¹¹⁶ Even so, his words are representative of the intense feelings that the broader Indian public now had towards the sword, which (and in this respect Pant's visit was the exception) remained inaccessible. The following year, Kashiram Sawant Desai—the name 'Sawant' signalling his descent from the same clan that had supposedly first given Shivaji the sword—embarked on a less successful campaign to secure 'unrestricted permission to reproduce photographs of the Sword of the Shivaji the Great'. The response to his formal request comprised little more than a snide letter and red tape.¹¹⁷

It was at this time, when all eyes were fixed on London, that they reverted, rather suddenly, back to India. In much the same way that the tricentenary of Shivaji's birth had heightened the public's attachment to him in 1927, the 300th anniversary of his coronation stoked new interest in his legacy in 1974.¹¹⁸ This was no insignificant milestone: in adopting the title *chhatrapati* in 1674, Shivaji had, his supporters claimed, revived a tradition of ancient Hindu kingship that centuries of Muslim rule had obfuscated. The epicentre of festivities was Bombay, whose Shivaji Park—acquiring that name, appropriately, during the celebrations in 1927—featured an elaborate exhibition celebrating his life. Attendees included a who's who of Hindu nationalism, including the Shiv Sena founder Bal Thackeray, who held a rally at the foot of the park's Shivaji statue.¹¹⁹ But the real star was not an individual. The sword from Satara, which had played a peripheral part in the discourse around Shivaji's sword for over a century, now, for the first time in its recorded history, left Satara Fort and came to Bombay. It arrived in style: amid shouts of 'Shivaji Maharaj ki jai!' (Long live Maharaja Shivaji!), a truck designed to look like a royal elephant approached Shivaji Park, bearing the sword and flanked by men dressed in traditional Maratha battle attire (see Figure 10).¹²⁰ Though the exhibition would remain in Shivaji Park for over a month, the sword was on public display for only five days, during which it was visited by about half a million people. It would return to Satara after 45 days of fanfare.¹²¹

Napoleon, Mahmud of Ghazni, Akbar, and Babur, whose greatness Puri attributes to their being 'chivalrous and sagacious'.

¹¹⁶His works include such texts as *A moment in time* (1974) and *Mandala: An awakening* (1978), which consider his political experiences through a philosophical lens, and *Surya Namaskar* (1975), which recounts yoga practices he learnt from his father.

¹¹⁷John Titman to Kashiram Desai, Lord Chamberlain's Office, St James's Palace, London, 20 July 1972. The letter is reproduced in 'Antulay bares his sword', *Current*.

¹¹⁸The Government of Maharashtra marked the event by granting amnesty to prisoners, a policy that bears striking similarities to one that the colonial government had employed on royal occasions like jubilees and coronations. For more on the particulars of the policy in 1974, see A. M. Bhatia, 'Grant of Amnesty to Prisoners—Tricentenary [sic] Celebrations of Coronation of Shivaji', Government of Maharashtra, in File No. 3/22/74-GPA-II, the National Archives of India, New Delhi.

¹¹⁹'Shivaji's sword', *TOI*.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*

¹²¹'Shivaji sword sent back to Satara', *TOI*, 17 June 1974. Its journey was in some respects a happier re-enactment of that taken by other heirlooms sold by the Satara royal family to Seth Purushottam Mavji, as discussed in note 45. The current location of the Satara sword is not entirely clear, though a representative with whom I spoke at the Shri Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Museum, Satara, insisted that it is not in the museum's collection. In 1876 Guthrie places it in Satara's Old Palace (Junhā Rājvāḍā), though in 1909 D. B. Paransnis locates it in the nearby Jalmandir Palace. Paransnis, *Satara*, p. 38. By 1920, however, Paransnis would



Figure 10. Photograph of Babasaheb Purandare with the Satara sword in S. L. Sharma (ed.), *300th anniversary of coronation [sic] of Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj souvenir* (New Delhi: The Foreign Window Publishing, 1974), p. 15.

suggest to S. M. Edwardes (in Edwardes, 'Shivaji's sword', p. 20) that Pratap Singh, the raja of Satara, may have given the sword to General Lionel Smith. In an 1820 letter to Grant Duff (in Parasnis's possession) Smith mentions that he (Smith) is to receive a sword from the raja that, in Smith's words, 'had been possessed so many years by his illustrious family' in recognition of his defeat of Pratap Singh's rival, the Peshwa Baji Rao, in 1818. That this was the sword associated with Shivaji, as Parasnis argues, seems unlikely, first, since we would struggle to explain why Grant Duff still locates the Bhavani Talvar in Satara six years after receiving the Smith's letter. There is, moreover, nothing in the sources I have examined pertaining to Satara to suggest that this sword, if it was given, was the one linked to Shivaji. Instead, there is strong evidence that the promise of a sword was part of the political discourse between the East India Company and the Satara court and that this promise was not always kept. In 1835, for instance, General John Briggs recalled that the Government of Bombay 'passed a resolution ... that a jewelled sword should be purchased ... and should be sent to His Highness, accompanied by a letter from the Court' but that 'neither sword nor letter was ever delivered'. (For the quotation, see Major Evans Bell, *Memoir: General John Briggs, of the Madras Army* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1885], pp. 92–93; and for more on the episode in general, see Basu, *Story of Satara*, pp. 47–59). Accordingly, we might conclude that Pratap Singh's promise of a sword—whichever one it was—was a similar kind of political gesture and that it was in any case unlikely—as Edwardes puts it—'that the Raja, no matter how grateful and how generous he may have been, would have given away to a European military officer the real Bhavani of Sivaji'. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the sword that travelled from Satara to Bombay in 1974 (assuming that it is the same weapon) may still be in Jalmandir Palace where Parasnis had first located it, though my attempts to contact Udayanrae Bhonsle, who claims descent from Shivaji and calls the palace home, have been unsuccessful. See, among many other sources attesting to its current whereabouts, Mansi Kshirsagar, 'शिवरायांच्या तीन तलवारी आता आहेत तरी कुठे? शोध तुळजा, भवानी अन् जगदंबा तलवारींचा!', *Maharashtra Times*, 11 November 2022.

The spectacle was over almost as soon as it began. Its ephemeral nature, occupying only a few days of the sword's centuries-long history, paralleled the transience of the tercentenary itself. Though cultural critics like Walter Benjamin and Karl Marx have interpreted ephemerality as a function of modernity,¹²² we might associate the public display of the Satara sword more specifically with post-coloniality. As the celebrations of 1927 demonstrate, there had been many earlier occasions to parade this sword around Maharashtra, but only now did its sudden arrival (and, I should emphasize, prompt departure) resonate. Following a decade in which ephemerality was, according to Reiko Tomii, a 'defining issue', the appearance of the sword spoke to the tantalizing proximity of Shivaji's legacy.¹²³ To his admirers on the Hindu Right, it seemed his dream of an independent India had been achieved but its contours not yet fully realized—an anxiety that the sword's fleeting presence could approximate. When it was returned to Satara, however, the mirage of Shivaji's dream no longer attached to a stationary and accessible object. The ever-elusive vision of Shivaji's India needed an ever-elusive sword, and so the public's attention turned once again to London.

Some had never looked away. In April 1980, Kashiram Desai was continuing the fight he had begun in 1972, though now he had largely passed his standard to his seven-year-old grandson, Amol. Unsatisfied with simple photography rights, Amol Desai upped the ante and requested that the London sword be sent to Maharashtra as a gesture of goodwill during the International Children's Year. In rejecting the younger Desai's request, the Surveyor of the Queen's Works of Art offered what he hoped was a nugget of good news: 'I am, however, commanded to send you photographs of the sword which I hope will convey to you an idea of its quality and which at the same time, in the absence of the actual sword, will go some way towards allaying your disappointment.'¹²⁴ The fact that the letter was reprinted in full in an Indian newspaper does not on its own tell us much about the boy's response; assuming he played a part in delivering the letter to the paper, the act could imply a kind of a public shaming of the surveyor or, conversely, a measure of pride in having received a response at all.¹²⁵ Whatever his intention, Amol was not alone in his efforts, for his was only one of many letters written by Maharashtrian schoolchildren to the Lord Chamberlain's office around this time.¹²⁶

Interest in the London sword was also heating up in the political sphere. A member of the Legislative Council at Bombay, Manmohan Tripathi, wrote directly to Queen Elizabeth to request its return.¹²⁷ Though his petition was batted down, presumably before the Queen ever saw it, it marks what may be the first attempt by an elected

¹²²For an interpretation of the nexus between modernity and ephemerality in Benjamin, see Robert A. Davis, 'Down sudden vistas: Walter Benjamin and the waning of modernity', *Counterpoints*, no. 168, 2003, pp. 36–53; for a study of their relationship in Marx, see Marshall Berman, *All that is solid melts into air: The experience of modernity* (London: Penguin, 1988), esp. pp. 87–98.

¹²³Although it addresses Japan, Tomii's assessment of the decade—which she also associates with 'the body and performance, collectivism, regionalism, the public sphere, and the relationship between art and mass media'—feels apropos. See Reiko Tomii, 'Art outside the box' in 1960s Japan: An introduction and commentary', *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, no. 17, December 2005, pp. 1–2.

¹²⁴Geoffrey de Bellaigue to Amol Desai, 11 April 1980.

¹²⁵See the reproduction in 'Antulay bares his sword', *Current*.

¹²⁶See Archer to Blaker, 'Brief for meeting with Mr Antulay'.

¹²⁷G. G. Wetherell to C. H. Imray, British High Commission, New Delhi, 2 December 1980, in FCO37/2331.

Indian official to regain the sword. All the cause needed now was a more audacious figure with the political wind at his back. It was in this context that A. R. Antulay, the chief minister of Maharashtra whose recent election victory opened this article, made a vow to go to London.

'Bravo Barrister Antulay': A sword unsheathed

A political cartoon that ran in *Blitz*, a Bombay newspaper, painted a predictably satirical image of the indefatigable chief minister (see [Figure 11](#)).¹²⁸ Wearing what appears to be a Chitralli topi (a skull cap associated with the Pakhtun regions of Pakistan), Antulay rides a white horse named 'By-Election Success'. His traditionally Muslim attire is belied by his Hindu battle cry ('Har Har Mahadeo!') as well as his sword: the Bhavani Talvar.¹²⁹ Evocative of his rivals' claim that his cause célèbre was directed at no one in particular, Antulay's nameless antagonist stands somewhere outside the frame. Looking on in the background, disgruntled and perhaps a bit tired, are two members of the Maratha lobby. 'Is the sword genuine or not ...?' asks one. 'Forget that!' replies the other, 'My grief is how **we** couldn't think of this gimmick!' [emphasis in original]. Gyan Prakash has identified *Blitz's* signature as 'its muckraking, over-the-top stories calculated to provoke and enrage', a generalization that easily applies to political cartoons like this one.¹³⁰ But beyond poking fun at the political class, this piece and the accompanying article make an important point: that a Muslim politician whom the Maratha lobby 'had branded ... as Afzal Khan' had become an unlikely crusader for Shivaji, the favourite icon of the Hindu Right.¹³¹ And his critics knew it.

This was not Antulay's first attempt to prove his admiration for Shivaji: his earlier efforts included founding something called the Shivaji Maharaj Secular Aspect Committee and renaming Maharashtra's Colaba district 'Raigad' after Shivaji's eponymous fort.¹³² Though his shotgun journey to London was simply another attempt to use Shivaji to his political advantage, the opposition he now faced was unprecedented. His Muslimness was a particular target for some, including Sharad Pawar, the previous chief minister of Maharashtra, who accused Antulay of wanting to appear secular ahead of the pilgrimage he had promised to make to Mecca after his electoral victory.¹³³ Others emphasized the sheer opportunism of it all, including Narayan Ganesh Gore,

¹²⁸Shresh, 'Mystery of Antulay's airdash abroad', *Blitz*, 13 December 1980.

¹²⁹The image of Antulay charging on a horse enjoyed some currency at the time. Consider, for instance, a rather flippant account in *The Times of India*: 'He [Antulay] is of course hardly a sabre-rattler, though he relishes combat and is figuratively fond of cut and thrust. Mr. Antulay astride a proud steed and flourishing the sword of Shivaji will make an imposing spectacle. But chief ministers, unless of course they are film stars or matinee idols, do not ride horses, though some of them may ride roughshod over certain people or certain principles.' R. G. K., 'Acute and obtuse: Mr. Antulay and the sword', *TOI*, 12 December 1980. Antulay's cry, more commonly transliterated, 'Har Har Mahadev', praises the Great God (*mahādev*) Har (Shiva). As a battle cry, the phrase is associated with several Hindu heroes, including with Shivaji.

¹³⁰Gyan Prakash, 'Blitz's Bombay', *Seminar (Web-Edition)*, no. 528, August 2003, <https://www.india-seminar.com/2003/528/528%20gyan%20prakash.htm>, [accessed 17 October 2023].

¹³¹Afzal Khan, the reader will recall, is the Bijapuri general against whom the goddess Bhavani sought to protect Shivaji.

¹³²Ramesh Gune, 'Much ado about Shivaji sword', *Indian Express*, 4 December 1980.

¹³³'Sword: Pawar flays Antulay's mission', *The Sunday Standard*, 11 November 1980.



Figure 11. Political cartoon by Shresh, 'Mystery of Antulay's airdash abroad', *Blitz*, 13 December 1980. Source: The National Archives, Kew, ref. FCO37/2331.

a prominent socialist leader and a former high commissioner to the United Kingdom, who quipped that, 'Even Mr. Antulay should realise that there is a limit to the common man's gullibility.'¹³⁴

Cutting across and reinforcing such criticisms was the matter of timing, since Antulay's trip coincided not only with his pilgrimage and the recent election but also with the journey of another prominent individual headed the other way. For as Antulay sat down to make his case before London authorities, Charles, Prince of Wales, was touring Bombay. Antulay's political opponents charged that the chief minister's 'very untimely visit' proved that he was not serious about returning the sword, a goal that he might actually have drawn nearer had he stayed in Bombay to welcome the man who would inherit it.¹³⁵ Antulay attempted to turn these accusations on their head during his audience with British officials, noting, as paraphrased in the minutes, that 'it was perhaps appropriate that while the Prince of Wales was in Bombay, he should be in London making representations for [the sword's] return'.¹³⁶

¹³⁴Goray: Bhavani sword not in UK', *Indian Express*, 25 November 1980.

¹³⁵See remarks from Sharad Pawar in 'Antulay trip to London against all norms of protocol: Pawar', *Poona Herald*, 30 November 1980.

¹³⁶'Record of a Conversation between the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and Mr Antulay', in FCO 37/2331. Prince Charles's visit to Maharashtra was successful, 'drawing large crowds', as I. D. Singh noted during discussions with British authorities. Prince Charles weighed in on the controversy himself, albeit in an off-the-cuff manner. When introduced to a portrait of Shivaji during his tour of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (the former Prince of Wales Museum, as discussed in note 45), Charles noted that the sword in the painting was not the same as the one in Buckingham Palace. S. Almaula, 8 December 1980, in FCO 37/2331.

British officials, for their part, adopted a double-pronged approach in the meeting. Their first tack was to repeat doubts about the sword's authenticity. At the same time, the Minister of Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Peter Blaker, maintained that there was simply no precedent for returning a royal gift. Antulay coolly retorted that Indo-British relations had seen many events without precedent, including independence.¹³⁷ Despite the occasional zinger, however, Antulay's tone with British officials was more subdued than the one he used with the Indian press. He apparently accepted 'that the sword was H[er] M[ajesty]'s personal property', even as he 'hoped that she could be persuaded to return it'.¹³⁸ Blaker and the Lord Chamberlain assured Antulay that they would take up the matter with the Queen but noted that he would still need to make his request through formal channels. The entire meeting—including briefer discussions of more conventional matters—lasted less than half an hour.¹³⁹

Returning to India empty-handed, Antulay insisted that he had never intended to secure the sword's return during what he now (not entirely truthfully) referred to as an 'exploratory' trip.¹⁴⁰ The media pilloried him for what it perceived as a failure even as it underscored doubts about the sword, publishing a unanimous declaration from the politically influential Bharat Itihas Samshodhan Mandal that it was not the Bhavani Talvar, while also resurrecting a statement on the topic from Govind Sakharam Sardesai, who—though he had died two decades earlier—remained a respected voice in historical circles and the wider public sphere.¹⁴¹ Cornered by these criticisms, Antulay finally admitted that he could not prove that the sword was the Bhavani Talvar. But he emphatically maintained that it was Shivaji's. In a characteristic pivot, he insisted that the only way to determine definitively whether it was the Bhavani Talvar was to bring it back to India.¹⁴²

Antulay had wobbled before reporters and historians, going so far as to consider, if only briefly, the existence of multiple surviving swords. His political critics, who, as we have seen, included socialists and members of both the left-of-centre Congress (U) Party and right-of-centre Janata Party,¹⁴³ were likewise unimpressed by his antics in

¹³⁷'Record of a Conversation', in FCO 37/2331.

¹³⁸*Ibid.* Although some newspapers report that Antulay had suggested that the sword could 'at least [be] returned on loan to be exhibited in Maharashtra', no such request appears in the official minutes in the National Archives in Kew. Compare *ibid.* with, for instance, 'Hand over sword, CM tells UK minister', *Free Press Journal*, 3 December 1980.

¹³⁹These other topics—including opportunities for Indian investment and Indian reliance on Iranian and Iraqi oil—were sidelined by the discussion of the Bhavani Talvar. See Archer to Blaker, 'Brief for meeting with Mr Antulay'. In anticipation of receiving the real sword, Antulay presented the Lord Chamberlain with a silver replica in an act that recalls, even as it inverts, the exchange through which the United Kingdom first acquired the sword. 'The "Bhavani" controversy', *Indian Express*, 12 December 1980.

¹⁴⁰Neogi, 'It's Shivaji's sword: CM'.

¹⁴¹Consider the use of Sardesai in the debate in 'Antulay bares his sword', *Current*. Another prominent historian who had been active during the early period of the Bharat Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal—and was in this case still living—was Ganesh Hari Khare, who denied the existence of the Bhavani Talvar. 'Not only that,' he said, 'but no sword of Shivaji's period is available today.' The remark is curious and possibly a misquotation since many seventeenth-century swords are extant. See 'What "Bhavani" was Antulay after?', *Blitz*, 13 December 1980.

¹⁴²'Antulay airs doubts', *Indian Express*.

¹⁴³As in the case of 'I' (Indira) in note 2, the 'U' here refers to Devaraj Urs, then chief minister of Karnataka, who formed another faction within the Congress. In 1981, the faction would be rebranded

London. Mindful, perhaps, that these groups had formed a hodgepodge alliance with the journalists and experts eager to debunk Antulay's claims, Antulay and his supporters sought to make their arguments outside and even in deliberate opposition to these spaces.¹⁴⁴ British experts offered particularly useful fodder: when a parliamentary session descended into squabbling after a Congress (U) member cast doubt on the sword's authenticity, likening the object to a 'political slogan', a member of Antulay's own Congress (I) Party lambasted his colleague for daring 'to give a controversial touch to the matter on the basis of reports of curators of Albert [sic] or Buckingham Palace museums'.¹⁴⁵

Although these defensive remarks did not meaningfully dent the vigorous opposition he now faced, Antulay surely took heart knowing that his rivals were only energized because his cause was widely popular. Indeed, in reaching the public, even his sharpest critics conceded, he had played a shrewd political game. P. V. Ranade, a professor of history at Marathwada University, in a column dripping with sarcasm, imagined what Antulay might tell his constituents next:

If Antulay engages some enterprising historian to dig up the modern archives, he is sure to come across a prophecy made by Lokmanya Tilak in 1908 that the next incarnation of Shivaji will take place in a Muslim family A still more enterprising historian from Maharashtra would confirm that Lokmanya Tilak had Antulay in his view when he made this prophecy while delivering his address on the occasion of the Shivaji Festival in Calcutta in 1908.

Bravo Barister Antulay [sic].¹⁴⁶

Ranade, who in 1974 had briefly lost his teaching position after writing an article deemed critical of Shivaji,¹⁴⁷ understood the emotions that the figure could instil. *The*

'Congress (Socialist)' with Sharad Pawar as its president. For more on the transition from Congress (U) to Congress (S), see Walter K. Andersen, 'India in 1981: Stronger political authority and social tension', *Asian Survey*, vol. 22, no. 2, 'A survey of Asia in 1981: Part II', February 1982, pp. 119–135, esp. p. 127.

¹⁴⁴Indira Gandhi's apparent commitment to Antulay's crusade caused considerable consternation in Whitehall. G. G. Wetherell to D[avid] C W Revolta, British High Commission, Delhi, 12 December 1980, in FCO 37/2331, for instance, mentions that, 'We shall look out for any corroboration of Antulay's claim that he had Mrs. Gandhi's support', and officials considered whether the British High Commission should 'have a quiet word with Mrs Gandhi' to make the matter go away. (M. K. Ewans to Graham Archer, 'The sword of Shivaji', 17 March 1981, in FCO 37/2511.) Antulay himself recognized Gandhi's political value and called upon her to contact Margaret Thatcher. See 'Antulay bares his sword', *Current*. Thatcher's political significance for Antulay was amplified owing to her forthcoming visit to Bombay, an occasion he deemed ideal for the return of the sword. [Martin] Ewans to [Graham] Archer, 'Sword of Shivaji', 17 March 1981, in FCO 37/2511.

¹⁴⁵'The "Bhavani" controversy', *Indian Express*, 6 December 1980.

¹⁴⁶As reproduced in 'Antulay bares his sword', *Current*. Although Ranade's remarks are clearly mocking, the 'prophecy' he refers to seems to be a (deliberately) warped version of a statement Tilak had written in 1906: 'It was only in conformity with the political circumstances of the country at the time that Shivaji was born in Maharashtra. But a future leader may be born anywhere in India and who knows, may even be a Mahomedan.' The essay 'Is Shivaji not a national hero?' was originally published in *The Mahratta*, 24 June 1906. The translation here is taken from *Bal Gangadhar Tilak: His writings and speeches*, foreword by Aurobindo Ghose (Madras: Ganesh and Co., 1919), pp. 50–51.

¹⁴⁷For details on this episode, see Majid Hayat Siddiqi, 'History-writing in India', *History Workshop*, no. 10, Autumn 1980, pp. 186–187.

Maharashtra Times made this point more explicitly: 'When it comes to Shivaji Maharaj the moment anyone starts to say or write anything about him, Maharashtrais lose their senses and it does not occur to anyone to check what is being said.'¹⁴⁸ While Ranade and *The Maharashtra Times* were correct insofar as Shivaji could and did produce strong reactions, the case of Pudumjee demonstrates that even Shivaji's sword was not a sure-fire way to capture the public's attention. What, then, made Antulay's cause resonate?

The success of his narrative owes much to the fact that what critics saw as two of its biggest flaws proved in the end to be its greatest hooks. The first was the insistence by British officials and Indian academics and journalists that the sword in London was European, and specifically Portuguese, a claim based on the inscription 'I.H.S.' stamped three times in a groove on its blade. Most Indian commentators correctly took these letters to denote 'Iesus Hominum Salvator' (Jesus, Saviour of Humanity), a popular Christogram associated with the Franciscan order. Though some made erroneous readings, including Antulay himself,¹⁴⁹ they usually arrived at the same conclusion: that the sword was probably of Catholic provenance and Goa—a Portuguese colony with a strong Franciscan tradition—was its most likely place of origin.¹⁵⁰ For British authorities, a European manufacture and even a European inscription were not inconsistent with accepted knowledge about Indian swords, but the distinctly Christological significance of the markings gave them pause.¹⁵¹ Blaker had made this a central talking point during his conversation with Antulay: he argued that the sword 'was in fact of a date later than the 17th Century, and it bore Christian monograms'. I. D. Singh,

¹⁴⁸'Play not with sentiments', *Maharashtra Times*.

¹⁴⁹Antulay claimed that these letters were an abbreviation of 'thou shalt conquer' in Portuguese, but no Portuguese formulation of this phrase can be reasonably mapped onto these letters. For Antulay's claim, see 'Sword in UK belonged to Shivaji: CM', *TOI*, 25 December 1980. Bendrey had interpreted these letters correctly when he brought attention to them in 1938, though one fastidious reader was quick to point out, correctly, that the Latin reading was itself a backronym taken from reading the first letters of the Greek spelling of 'Jesus' (ΙΗΣΟΥΣ) as their Latin lookalikes. Bendrey, 'The Bhavani sword of Shivaji the Great', p. 1144; and Chas. E. Lee, 'The Bhavani sword of Shivaji the Great', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 86, no. 4484, 28 October 1938, pp. 1182–1183.

¹⁵⁰Some recent discussions connect the Bhavani Talvar to Spain, although these interpretations are generally associated with the Satara sword and its proponents, namely L. K. Advani and Babasaheb Purandare. Advani claimed to have acquired these details during a trip to Spain in 2002, when, as home minister, he sought to finalize an extradition treaty. 'Desperately seeking Shivaji's sword', *TOI*. Pant noted that the blade appeared 'Damascene, Portuguese or Spanish' during his visit in 1971. As quoted in I. D. Singh, 'Rare sword of Shivaji in UK palace', *TOI*, 14 November 1971.

¹⁵¹For an example of the discourse in Britain surrounding European swords in India, consider a passage written about the India Room in Marlborough House: 'We are not surprised, therefore, to learn that the blade of many a celebrated Indian sword came from the West ... Nor is it to be wondered that the weapons of European taken from England by the Prince for presentation in India, were much appreciated by native rulers and tributaries.' Beavan, *Marlborough House and its occupants*, p. 32. The question of inscriptions is more complex. One of the leading authorities on Indian weapons in the early twentieth century, Wilbraham Egerton (whom Pudumjee cites), writes that most swords from the Mughal and Maratha periods lacked inscriptions, except perhaps the maker's name, a Quranic verse, or the name of an owner 'if he be of distinguished birth'. Wilbraham Egerton, *Indian and Oriental arms and armour* (Devon: Dover Publications, 2002), p. 53. Since Shivaji and his descendants clearly regarded themselves as being 'of distinguished birth', inscriptions are common on royal Maratha swords. For more, see note 42 and Elgodd, *Hindu arms and ritual*, p. 40.

an Indian weapons expert accompanying Antulay, correctly noted that ‘there was a long history of Christianity in India, going back well before the 17th century’, but in doing so he seems to have missed Blaker’s point.¹⁵² His contention was not that it was more recent because it bore Christian insignia, but that it was both more recent and bore Christian insignia, two claims, Blaker believed, that together proved that a Hindu ruler from the seventeenth century could not have a Christian sword from a later century.¹⁵³ Confusion regarding Antulay and Singh’s acceptance, even embrace, of the sword’s Christian markings continued in Whitehall until a second demand for the sword arrived from an Indian MP. In reviewing the request, a certain Mr Bhalla advised the British government not to mention the insignia in its response, noting that it would substantiate the narrative that Shivaji had acquired the sword from the Sawant family who had won it from the Portuguese. ‘[A] Christian monogram might go some way in confirming its authenticity, rather than the converse,’ he explained.¹⁵⁴

The second obstacle-turned-boon for Antulay was that it had been only six years since Maharashtra had celebrated the journey of the Bhavani Talvar from Satara to Bombay. Sharad Pawar drew particular attention to this point: ‘The real Bhavani Sword was accepted by me in the presence of Bal Thackeray in 1974 on behalf of the State Government. How could I subscribe to Antulay’s theory that there is yet another Bhavani Sword?’¹⁵⁵ Curiously, Pawar was one of the few individuals prominently featured in those events to come out publicly against Antulay’s crusade. Sumitraraje Bhosle, the Rajmata (queen mother) of Satara and a powerful figure in Maharashtrian politics, presumably had many reasons to defend the exclusivity of her family’s most cherished heirloom; instead, she was receptive to the idea that there might be another sword, so much so, according to Antulay, that she offered to go with him to London to collect it when and if the Queen agreed. (‘This only shows what the Rajmata feels about [the matter];’ he told the press.)¹⁵⁶ The public historian and writer Babasaheb Purandare, whose historical fiction involving Shivaji has played a key role in shaping his legacy in contemporary Maharashtra, offers a similarly peculiar case. Though he had been the chief architect of the exhibition of the Satara sword in Shivaji Park in 1974, he remained, as *The Indian Express* put it, ‘tight-lipped over the controversy’ in 1980.¹⁵⁷

The receptiveness of figures like the Rajmata to the authenticity of the London sword, together with the public’s eager acceptance of its European origins, helps bring critical aspects of the object’s appeal into sharper relief. Presumably the Rajmata and Purandare, whatever their private feelings, chose not to challenge the sword’s legitimacy because it encouraged interest in Shivaji’s legacy, which in turn bolstered their own aims.¹⁵⁸ The sword’s European connections were part of this same discourse.

¹⁵² ‘Record of a Conversation’, in FCO 37/2331.

¹⁵³ Nearly identical language appears in C. A. K. Cullimore to Shri A. G. Kulkarni, 16 December 1980, in FCO 37/2331, suggesting the line was recommended for use with Indian citizens requesting the sword’s return.

¹⁵⁴ As described by M. K. Ewans, ‘Sword of Shivaji’, in FCO 37/2331.

¹⁵⁵ ‘Antulay bares his sword’, *Current*.

¹⁵⁶ As quoted in ‘Sword in UK belonged to Shivaji’, *TOI*.

¹⁵⁷ As quoted in Gune, ‘Much ado about Shivaji sword’.

¹⁵⁸ These goals reflected not just ideologies but also political allegiances. The scion of the Satara line, Abhaysingh Raje Bhonsle, was a minister in Antulay’s cabinet and, as one paper noted, did not ‘raise even

Though Bhalla was correct that a Portuguese origin had significance for those steeped in the sword's lore, we must recall that the story involving the Sawants was not widely known; the blade's purported Portuguese manufacture, then, must have offered the public something more than evidence of a lesser-known historical claim. And in this regard its specifically Portuguese origin appears critical. Naturally the Satara blade, too, has been linked to Europe in the earliest attestations we have about it, but the value there seems to lie in the craftsmanship. Simply put, it appears that Genoa, or even a generically European origin, could not wield the same political charge as Portugal, the first colonial power to establish a foothold in the subcontinent. I want to suggest, then, that the importance of the sword being made and marked by European imperialists runs parallel to, and is mutually reinforcing with, the importance of its being taken away by them. We have already seen how the image of Shivaji's sword held in the colonizers' capital encapsulated both the potential and the loss of Shivaji's vision, giving the object a narrative advantage over its counterpart in Satara through the promise of its eventual return. The idea that the sword's origins also lay with colonizers bolsters this narrative by affixing to it the reminder that the object was won from a colonial power once before. All that was required now was a leader, or, better yet, a nation, powerful enough to repeat the act.

Epilogue: The stuff that dreams are made of

Reflecting on his meeting with British officials in London, Antulay told the Indian press that the Lord Chamberlain had asked him why the people of Maharashtra had awakened "so suddenly" to demand the return of the sword'.¹⁵⁹ He said he had assured the Lord Chamberlain that his position was nothing new and cited a 1918 poem calling for its return. Written by the Marathi literary giant Ram Ganesh Gadkari on the occasion of Tilak's journey to London, the poem considers what the nationalist leader should demand in the metropole:

Not wealth, not prosperity, not even the Koh-i-Noor,
 Not Swadesh, not Swarajya—may all these turn to dust.
 There's one thing to say, one thing to demand, and do it a thousand times:
 'I demand to take the Bhavani Sword of Shivaji—
 The jewel of Swadesh, the mother of Swarajya—for all must be
 shown it ...'¹⁶⁰

a flutter of protest against' Antulay's campaign. Ghorpade, 'The Elusive Bhavani's [sic] sword'. Antulay had also already developed a relationship with the Rajmata when he sought to become a trustee of the Shivmudra Pratishthan, an organization committed to building a statue of Shivaji and headed by the Rajmata herself. Gune, 'Much ado about Shivaji sword'.

¹⁵⁹ As quoted in 'Bhavani sword back by Maharashtra day?', *Indian Express*, 6 December 1980.

¹⁶⁰

न लगे दौलत, न लगे बरकत, नको कोहिनूर ॥
 स्वदेश न लगे स्वराज्य न लगे ह्ये सर्वहि चूर ॥
 एक सांगणें एक मागणें तेंच लाखवार ॥
 'मागुनि च्यावी श्रीशिवबांची भवानी तलवार ॥
 स्वदेशभूषा, स्वराज्यजननी सकाळें दाखवावी ॥
 ...' ॥

Ram Ganesh Gadkari, 'Lokmānyāns Bhāratavarṣācā Āśīrvād', *Sampūrṇa Gaḍkarī*, 2 vols (Pune: Saritā Prakāśan, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 970–972.

Even allowing for poetic licence, the vigorousness with which these lines dismiss Swadesh (homeland) and Swarajya (self-rule)—key tenets of Indian nationalism and of Tilak’s variant in particular—are arresting. But we quickly learn that this repudiation is a ruse, since the poem looks beyond these ideals to their source: the Bhavani Talvar. In bringing that object home, the logic runs, Indians will have regained not only the greatest treasure Britain took from India (surpassing even the Koh-i-Noor, the literal jewel in the imperial crown) but also the sword that, in Shivaji’s hand, created a nation founded on Swadesh and Swarajya in the first place.

This reading aligns with Antulay’s remarks but is belied by the context of the poem’s composition. Tilak, his health failing, had by this time already been twice sentenced (and three times tried) for sedition and was in no position to extract a major concession from the Crown. More importantly, even though Gadkari, Tilak, and countless others would certainly have welcomed the sword back to India, most recognized the demand as a political nonstarter. Rather than the physical sword, then, the poem seeks to rekindle the spirit it symbolizes, a spirit that could restore the nation Shivaji once built.¹⁶¹ Antulay is therefore incorrect in citing the poem as a literal call for the Bhavani Talvar; he is correct, however, in that it captures the impulse of his own project, a project that, like Gadkari’s, derived its power from imagining rather than actually securing the sword’s return.

Unlike Gadkari, Antulay spoke not from the colony to the metropole but from one nation to another, yet even on this side of 1947, his demand remained very much the stuff of dreams. As examples such as the Elgin Marbles, the Rosetta Stone, and countless other vestiges of Britain’s imperial past attest, the international recognition afforded to a nation-state cannot guarantee the return of its treasures.¹⁶² In the confidential sources pertaining to the Antulay case, British officials drew a harder line than they voiced in public, going so far as to disparage the ‘so-called principle

¹⁶¹Gadkari’s poem points less to a concrete political demand than it does to a contemporary literary trend in which Shivaji’s patriotism served to inspire the Indian public. A good example in this regard is Tagore’s ‘Śibāji’ (1904), in which Shivaji’s commitment to unifying India is used to rally Tagore’s fellow Bengalis to political action.

¹⁶²For an examination of the Elgin Marbles controversy from a legal perspective, see John Henry Merryman, *Thinking about the Elgin Marbles: Critical essays on cultural property, art and law* (Boston: Kluwer Law International, 2000). For the question of the repatriation of objects to the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean, see Ann E. Killebrew and Sandra A. Scham, ‘Artifacts out of context: Their curation, ownership, and repatriation’, *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archeology and Heritage Studies*, Forum, vol. 5, no. 1, 2017; for objects from Southeast Asia, see Louise Tythacott and Panggah Ardiyansyah (eds), *Returning Southeast Asia’s past: Objects, museums, and restitution* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2021). As the controversy around the Elgin Marbles was gaining more traction—in part through exposure during the 2000 Athens Olympics—18 major museums from the United States and Europe issued a ‘Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums’, which, among other things, argued against repatriating objects acquired during colonial times. For a summary of and critical engagement with this event, see Martin Bailey, ‘Shifting the blame’, *The Art Newspaper*, 21 January 2003; for an ethical-theory perspective, see Karin Edvardsson Björnberg, ‘Historic injustices and the moral case for cultural repatriation’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2015, pp. 461–474. The arguments for and against repatriation bear obvious similarities with the London sword, though the argument that international museums offer a space for ‘the people of every nation’ to view such objects can scarcely apply to an object not available for public viewing.

of restitution' at its core.¹⁶³ Babsaheb Bhosale, who would succeed Antulay as chief minister in January 1982, publicly accepted the British position, noting that 'they have told us that they do not return any gifts in the royal collection'.¹⁶⁴

At some level, then, it seems likely that Antulay himself understood that his post-colonial demand carried little more weight than its precolonial antecedent. His campaign for the sword was thus about something more than the object or even its recovery: what mattered was propounding a narrative, through which he, like Gadkari before him, could construct a history about the decline and potential resurgence of Indian power. Indexing both national greatness (under Shivaji) and humiliating submission (under Shivaji VI), the sword had for Gadkari symbolized redemption under Tilak, whom he regarded as the standard-bearer of a new, brighter chapter of Indian history. Antulay reassigned this role to himself, equating his promised reacquisition of the sword with the promised resurgence of the nation. This resurgence was for him something surpassing Swarajya and Swadesh, now long since attained: it was the arrival of an Indian nation that could command respect abroad (even from its former colonizer) and that could so utterly realize its secular ethos at home that it could anoint him, a Muslim, as the heir of one of its most cherished heroes. Moving the sword into the spotlight, if not back to India, was the key to both ends.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³Carrington to Certain Missions, 'The return of cultural property to its country of origin', 9 March 1981, in FCO 37/2511. Even today, the Kolhapur sword remains a highly sensitive topic among many institutions in the United Kingdom. While conducting research for this article, I sought permission from the Royal Collection Trust (the British charity that manages the art collection of King Charles III) to reproduce images in the collection pertaining to the sword. My request for one of these images—Figure 4—was thankfully granted due to its historical nature, though the other—the only high-quality colour photograph of the sword I have encountered—was denied, culminating in the categorical response: 'Permission has not been granted for you to reproduce the sword'. Although no reasons were given, the refusal presumably has much to do with persistent demands for restitution and the generally charged nature of the object. Though it is not my purpose here to adjudicate the various stances on the issue, I do question whether this militant gatekeeping of an image of the sword—to say nothing of the sword itself—is likely to do anything other than inflame sentiments further. Readers looking to view the image should see Abhinay Deshpande, 'Shivaji's ceremonial sword "Jagdamba" may travel to India from the U.K. for a year', *The Hindu*, 11 April 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/shivajis-ceremonial-sword-jagdamba-may-travel-to-india-from-the-uk-for-a-year/article66724448.ece>, [accessed 17 October 2023].

¹⁶⁴'Antulay's pledge over Bhawani ridiculed', *The Free Press*, 22 April 1982. The shift in position between Antulay and Bhosale was naturally political but also reflects a more gradual change in the public attitude in India around this time. Martin Raven, an official in the British High Commission in Delhi, noted in January 1981—two months after Antulay's visit to London—that 'Press coverage of the story seems to have died down considerably'. M[artin] C Raven to D C W Revolta, 'Sword of Shivaji', 27 January 1981, in FCO 37/2511. Interest did not entirely evaporate, however, since a month later an official in the South Asian Department lamented the 'continuing SAD interest in this matter'. D[avid] C W Revolta to Mr May, 26 February 1981, in FCO 37/2511. Anxiety seemed to stem mainly from the idea that the Indian High Commission intended to take up the issue directly with the British government, though Raven insisted that, 'We have heard nothing officially at this end.' M[artin] C Raven to G[raham] R Archer, 'Sword of Shivaji', 3 February 1981, in FCO 37/2511.

¹⁶⁵Antulay had emphasized the purported secularism of Shivaji long before he served as chief minister. See, for instance, his remarks on the occasion of the tricentenary of Shivaji's coronation in 1974: 'The reign of Shivaji Maharaj is also distinctly commendable for ... the spirit of broadmindedness and tolerance with which he treated people of different castes and religions. The life of Shivaji Maharaj contains abundant evidence of his secular approach as far back as three centuries ago and it is approach [sic] which brought

The London sword is not unique in this respect, since each of the objects considered in this article has been used to forward some goal beyond itself; we saw this, for instance, in the way the Satara royal family attached its waning legacy to its greatest heirloom or in the way that Pudumjee sought to enter elite conversations through his chance discovery.¹⁶⁶ Even so, I have argued that among the three swords most associated with Shivaji, the one in London holds a particular power in India, despite—or, as I want to emphasize here, precisely because—it has long been absent from it. As the Antulay episode illustrates, the distance between India and the sword paradoxically fosters a sense of proximity between its legendary owner and its would-be champions. Locked in a palace half a world away, it evokes the kind of herculean tasks through which Shivaji made his name and to which his heirs must surely aspire. The loss of the sword, in other words, has only bolstered its power.

If the raja of Kolhapur's surrender of the sword to the Prince of Wales functions as a microcosm of the colonial encounter, then the sword itself brings Shivaji, his heirs, and his nation into a single object. Accordingly, the sword—even leaving aside its connection to Bhavani—has a touch of the eternal to it, resting as it once did in the hand of the man whose influence is as strong today as it was in his own time. To aspire to recover Shivaji's sword is thus to brandish, almost literally, Shivaji's legacy. Years after he failed in his attempt to secure the object, Antulay would argue this very point, noting that unlike his successor as chief minister, Babasaheb Bhosale (who claimed descent from Shivaji), or his political rivals in the Shiv Sena (who claimed him in their party name), his attempt to return Shivaji's sword had made him Shivaji's true successor.¹⁶⁷

It was in part to forge such a link with Shivaji that Narendra Modi announced his intention to retrieve the sword in 2007. His efforts have not borne any more fruit,¹⁶⁸ but they have cemented a more enduring connection in the public eye between him and Shivaji, one that (rather like the one Antulay hoped for himself) seems at times to surpass that enjoyed by Shivaji's descendants or namesake institutions. Though Modi has gradually distanced himself from demanding the sword's return, many continue to regard him as its champion. In October 2021, one Maharashtrian reminded him of his obligations by sending the prime minister a letter written in his own blood,¹⁶⁹ at the time this practice was closely associated with 2020–2021 Indian farmers' protest—a

about a sense of unity and complete harmony amongst all his subjects.' Sharma (ed.), *300th anniversary of coronation [sic] of Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj souvenir*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁶It is worth noting that another sword has been anecdotally linked to Shivaji in recent years. For more on this sword—associated with the Kolhapur royal family and housed in a temple in Sindhudurg Fort (on the coast of Maharashtra)—see, for instance, Kshirsagar, 'शिवरायांच्या तीन तलवारी', *Maharashtra Times*; and Mohsin Mulla, 'Shivaji's iconic sword back in Sindhudurg Fort', *DNA*, 16 February 2011.

¹⁶⁷As related to the journalist Sujata Anandan and quoted by her in 'Why Shivaji was an incomparable king', *Hindustan Times*, 15 January 2020.

¹⁶⁸Since the election of Rishi Sunak, a British politician of Indian descent, to lead the Conservative Party and thereby serve as prime minister, the government of Maharashtra has revived efforts to secure the return of the sword. Coinciding with the 350th anniversary of Shivaji's coronation in 2024, the request appears to be for a year-long loan as opposed to restitution. See Deshpande, 'Shivaji's ceremonial sword', *The Hindu*.

¹⁶⁹'Devotee writes a letter with his blood to Pm Modi; demands to get back Jagdamb sword of Chatrapati Shivaji from England', *Marathi Newj*, 19 October 2021, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x84y9hg>, [accessed 17 October 2023]. Some may find the video unsettling.



Figure 12. Narendra Modi performing *jal puja* on the site of the proposed Shivaji Memorial off the coast of Mumbai. Source: © Press Information Bureau on behalf of Prime Minister's Office, Government of India under the ID 95141 and CNR 91763.

movement inflected by high incidences of malnutrition and suicides—which suggests that for this individual, at least, the sword seemed a matter of life and death.¹⁷⁰

Both mindful of these demands and now more aware of the political realities confounding them, Modi has addressed the sword's return in creative ways. Most significant in this regard is his vehement support for a new mega-statue of Shivaji, the construction of which was once due to be completed by October 2022. To be built on a 40-acre artificial island off the coast of South Mumbai (formerly Bombay)—accessible only by ferry, helicopter, and a possible metro extension¹⁷¹—the project was officially consecrated in December 2016 when Modi performed *jal puja*, or a ceremonial consecration of the water, around the site (see Figure 12).¹⁷² The projected cost of the so-called Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Smarak, a staggering ₹3,600 crore,¹⁷³ has long been controversial, with public figures like Raj Thackeray (the nephew of Bal Thackeray) arguing that it would be better allocated to the upkeep of Shivaji's historical forts.¹⁷⁴ Such criticisms have driven down this sum, necessitating a reduction in the statue's projected size. What these cost-saving measures have not sacrificed is the height of the statue's sword, which has instead been enlarged beyond its original

¹⁷⁰See, for instance, Munish Chandra Pandey, 'Farmers write letters to PM Modi using their blood, demand repeal of farm laws', *India Today*, 22 December 2020.

¹⁷¹'Five things you need to know about Shivaji Memorial off Mumbai coast', *Hindustan Times*, 20 December 2016. The metro extension seems to be a comparatively recent idea; see 'Undersea rail mooted to reach site of Shivaji Memorial during rains', *The Indian Express*, 15 August 2022.

¹⁷²'PM Modi performs Jal Puja for Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Memorial', *TOI*, 24 December 2016.

¹⁷³The cost of the project has constantly fluctuated; this is an estimate that excludes an additional ₹1,500 crore for the possible metro extension. 'Undersea rail mooted to reach site', *The Indian Express*.

¹⁷⁴'Use Shivaji Memorial funds for repairing his forts: Raj Thackeray', *Hindustan Times*, 27 December 2016.

dimensions to account for more than a third of the statue's 123 metres.¹⁷⁵ Soon, Shivaji's sword—like the Hindu nation Modi equates it with—will be literally on the horizon, and Modi will, in a sense, have delivered on his promise: towering above the blue waters off the coast of Mumbai, the Bhavani Talvar will have come back to Maharashtra in a remarkable display of its enduring political power.¹⁷⁶

Acknowledgements. I extend my deepest thanks to Manav Kapur, Akshara Ravishankar, Sanjukta Poddar, and, especially, Ünver Rüstem, for reading earlier versions of this article and offering comments that have much improved the final product. I am also very grateful to Sumit Guha and an anonymous reviewer of this journal for their insightful remarks and to Ulrike Stark for her guidance as I sought out a journal for this piece. Sarah Heim of the Kislak Center for Special Collections, David Faust of the Ames Library of South Asia, and Stephen Summerfield of Loughborough University all went above and beyond in giving me access to important visual materials. I am also indebted to Lael Ensor-Bennett for her excellent work digitizing several of the high-quality images that appear here. Finally, I thank Sue Allerton for her constant assistance and remarkable patience during the publication process.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

¹⁷⁵'Shivaji Memorial: Maharashtra govt now plans shorter statue, longer sword', *TOI*, 17 July 2018. These measurements do not include the 89-metre pedestal. For comparison, the Statue of Liberty in New York has a height of 46 metres (with a pedestal of approximately the same height) and that of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro is 30 metres (with an 8-metre pedestal). The world's tallest statue, of Vallabhbhai Patel in Gujarat, is 182 metres with a 58-metre base.

¹⁷⁶The project was stalled following a Supreme Court stay in January 2019, although for a time it appeared to have been enlivened again after the Public Works Department granted an extension to the contractor, Larsen and Toubro. Vishwas Waghmode, 'Shivaji Memorial contract: Firm gets one-year extension', *The Indian Express*, 18 October 2021. As this article goes to press, the project appears stalled again, with one Maratha activist issuing an ultimatum to the government to remove delays or else give the people of Maharashtra the right to complete the project through donations. 'Shivaji Memorial in Arabian Sea', *The Free Press Journal*, 11 May 2023.

Cite this article: Halladay, Andrew. 2024. 'The many swords of Shivaji: Searching for a weapon, finding a nation'. *Modern Asian Studies* 58(1), pp. 244–294. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X23000379>