Looking for Interpreter Zero: Imperial Intermediaries II

The Schlagintweit brothers’ account of their expedition to the Indian subcontinent in the 1850s acknowledged the crucial role of their interpreters.

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During our travels in Tibet and Turkistán, and also in some parts of Sikkim, we had to engage different men, who knew Hindostáni as well as the languages of the countries we were traversing. Besides filling their office as interpreters, they occasionally gave us valuable geographic information about the countries bordering our line of route, and proved of great use in our linguistic enquiries about dialects and geographical names. [1]

In 1861, the Schlagintweit brothers, Hermann and Robert, published the first volume of *Results of a Scientific Mission to India and High Asia*, their account of the research carried out in India in 1854-7 with their brother Adolphe, at the behest of the East India Company with additional funding from the kings of Prussia and Bavaria. The survey was a complicated series of excursions across India and the Himalayan region involving all three, two or just one of the brothers in a variety of mapping, measuring and collecting activities. The original project of a magnetic survey expanded into a vast undertaking involving “large-scale data gathering through a vast array of modern precision instruments with numerous local observations on geology, meteorology, botany and zoology and also included an intensely cartographic and aesthetic orientation.” [2]

The Establishment

They made a point of listing of all those who had made up their ‘Establishment’ or staff at the beginning of that first volume, before providing their calculations of latitude and longitude and tables of magnetic observations. Their reviewer in 1861, The Athenaeum was surprised that they had taken the trouble to devote seven pages to listing non-European contributors to their work.

Equally entertaining is the Appendix about the Establishment, where there are actually biographical sketches, written in the most matter-of-fact style, of all the observers, interpreters, collectors and servants, filling seven quarto pages. Some of these sketches rather remind us of the contents of the dirty pieces of paper which on our arrival at the Indian ports natives force into our hands recommending their services as washermen, valets, or something worse. [3]

The same review article shows little patience with Germans undertaking research best left to the British: the racist comments about ‘natives’ complement territorial jibes against foreigners doing what the Empire could do for itself – without Germans or indeed natives. In fact, the brothers’
acknowledgement of the vital roles of “Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Turks, Jews, Pari, speakers of Hindustani, Bengali, Gujerati, Maharati, Punjabi, Kashmiri, Persian, Tibetan, Turkish and Portuguese” showed them to be exceptionally willing to acknowledge how much non-Europeans contributed to their work.[4]

While the language used to describe the ‘Establishment’ is unmistakably Victorian and condescending in places, the brothers recognised the key roles of their observers, collectors, interpreters and servants. The first group was responsible for meteorological and magnetic observations; the collectors gathered natural history specimens and the servants dealt with the practicalities of camp life: pitching the tents, getting in water supplies, caring for the horses and so on.

The interpreters

The account of their six interpreters reflects the fact that the brothers had come to know and respect them. Their biographical sketches show awareness of their backgrounds and languages as well as a recognition that some of these men were in a position to acquire new skills on the wide-ranging survey. The Schlagintweit's had every interest in showing that their Establishment was superior: if not, the survey itself would be called into question as it depended on the contributions of all of these ‘locals’.

The first interpreter named, Man Singh, known as Mani,

...the member of an influential and wealthy family from Johar, in northern Kamaon (Himalaya), was charged, during two summers, with the difficult arrangements of our travels in Tibet, during which he proved of the most essential, service to us by his excellent behaviour. He was the only one of our establishment whom we trusted sufficiently to take with us to Turkistan. Mani is also well known as a faithful servant to the British Government, who have made him the Patvari, or head man, of Johar, a district of Kamaon. [5]

Two of Mani’s cousins were also on the list: Dolpa Singh, who was Adolphe’s chief guide and interpreter in Balti, and Nain Singh,

...a well disposed and intelligent native, went with us (Hermann and Robert) to Ladak, in 1856. He took a great interest in our operations, and though at first unacquainted with instruments was soon taught their use, as he showed a very great desire to be able to read off the scales and write the readings in English numbers. He could also read and write Tibetan. [6]

Fourthly, we have Mohammad Amin “a rather aged Turkistani” who knew the region well as he had been involved in trade in the area between Tibet and the Russian border; he spoke Turkish, a little Tibetan and some Persian. The final last two were Makshut –, a Moslem from Delhi, who had been useful in Turkestan as he was the only one with both Turkish and Hindustani – and Oheji, was from Sikkim. He had been recruited as a plant collector but became Hermann’s interpreter in Bhuitia and Lepcha and accompanied him to Bhutan where he was most useful in an interview with the head Lama of Narigun. [7]

The comment about Makshut speaking both Hindustani and Turkish — unlike Mohammad Amin, say — brings us to an interesting point about this multilingual expedition. Hindustani appears to have been the lingua-franca. There is little said about which languages were used where and when but later in their account of their mission, the brothers say:
We are not Oriental scholars ourselves, but had acquired a sufficient knowledge of Hindostani to converse with the natives—such an amount of acquaintance with the language being in itself indispensable, both in India, to facilitate intercourse with followers and servants, and in the territories beyond English influence, which are generally inaccessible to Europeans, to enable the traveller to assume disguise with more chance of success. Though we could never have hoped to pass as natives in a country where Hindostani was the native language, the difficulty was far less in Tibet or Turkistan, where the chief requisite in speaking with our interpreters was fluency, and not correctness. [8]

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**Invaluable help**

*The Schlagintweits may well have managed to convey simple messages to their Establishment in Hindustani* and pretend to be Indian when in disguise outside British India, but their complicated and ambitious survey was heavily dependent on their interpreters for news, information and supplies as well as research into local names for landmarks and plants. These men played a key role when the expedition ventured outside British India [9].

Mani Singh was of invaluable help when Robert and Adolphe ventured into Tibet in July 1855: he got them out of custody when they were arrested after crossing the Tibetan border and then negotiated a treaty with an official who granted them the right to travel as far as the Sutlej River for a three-day period. His name does not appear,

...(y)et, the exclusive mention of the name of the Tibetan official and the brothers’ signatures on the treaty belie the actual genesis of the document, which could not have been concluded without the crucial diplomatic and linguistic intercession of Mani Singh. [10]

He then went on to find them a middleman who could play a similar role in Chinese Turkestan, which is how Mohammad Amin came into their lives. The two brothers knew how risky it was to try to explore the region marked by the clashing ambitions of the Chinese, Russian and British empires.
Perhaps in the light of their Tibetan misadventures they tried to ensure that Amin, their new middleman, would be a faithful guide by holding a ceremony which involved a Koran, a purse full of gold and a six-barrelled revolver. Amin swore on the Koran that he would never let them down; the brothers swore that he would get the gold if he kept his word and be shot like a dog if he didn’t. This dramatic mise-en-scène did not alter the fact that they were putting their lives into their interpreter’s hands. As it turned out, they were more than satisfied with Amin, though they had to make sure Makshut was available when they wanted to talk to him:

Even making the arrangements with Amin was in itself challenging, as the brothers had to find the right linguistic mediator for their establishment to avoid a ‘double translation’ in conversations with their own principal guide. [11]
A fateful excursion

Mohammad Amin joined Adolphe on what turned out to be a fateful excursion to Turkestan across Karakoram and Kunlun mountain chains to Yarkand, which ended up in Kashgar, a trading post that was disputed between the Chinese military and Moslem clans in the region. In the summer of 1857, it was held by the Moslems who were most suspicious of the travellers.

Adolphe was summarily executed as a spy and Amin was imprisoned for over a month, hid out in the region for eight further months and then made his way to British India where he was instrumental in the recovery of Adolphe’s sketches and papers. He remained an imperial intermediary as he became a “station agent” in the Punjab; his reports to on the north-western Indian provinces and neighbouring countries in central Asia proved invaluable to the British authorities.

A loyal accomplice

Nain Singh is probably the best known of the Schlagintweit interpreters. He was well-regarded by the brothers and became involved in some of their operations as he learned how to read instruments and make maps. He provided them with information about Tibet and even became their ‘subject’ when he agreed to have a cast taken of his head as a contribution to their ethnographic research. The head has survived; it is more significant as an early portrait of Nain Singh than as an example of the traits of a typical “hill man” for classification purposes.[12]

The brothers invited Singh to travel to Europe with them to help out on the philological side of their survey report but he turned them down – not because like all “hill men” he was too attached to his homeland (which was their theory) – but out of family loyalty: Mani Singh resented his cousin’s proposed promotion and threatened to disown him [13]. Nain Singh stayed behind and transferred his skills to the Great Trigonometric Survey where his invaluable work was acknowledged by the Royal Geographical Society’s award of a Gold Medal in 1877.

The Everest Expedition

Nain Singh worked for the same Survey that discovered Mount Everest and inspired the Everest Expedition that recruited Karma Paul, another interpreter for explorers who relied on intermediaries. The Schlagintweits had their own reasons for naming their Establishment but their decision to do serves modern interests too.

By acknowledging their staff, they underlined the human complexities of their endeavours, something that The Athenaeum simply denied. Nain Singh and his fellow interpreters broaden our understanding of the compromises and opportunities afforded by imperialism in general and by the mid-nineteenth-century British Raj in particular.
View of Mount Everest, from the Atlas of Panoramas and Views (Heidelberg Historic Literature)

Special thanks to Simon J. Schaffer, professor of the history and philosophy of science at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge.

You can find all chapters of Looking for Interpreter Zero here.

Notes


[10] Ibid. p. 173


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Recommended citation format: