Stratification and Role of the Elite Muslim Women in the State of Awadh, 1742-1857

This paper focuses on stratification and role of the elite Muslim Women in the State of Awadh during second-half of eighteenth and first-half of nineteenth century India. It evaluates the categorization of women, associated with the court and division of political and domestic power among them. It also seeks their economic resources and their contribution in fields of art and architecture. The study finds that first category of royal women of Awadh, including queen mother and chief wives, enjoyed a powerful position in the state-matters unlike many other states of the time in India. Besides high cadre of royal ladies, three more cadres of royal women existed in Awadh’s court with multiple ratio of power and economic resources. Elite women’s input and backing to various genres of art, language and culture resulted in growth of Urdu poetry, prose, drama and music in addition to religious architecture. The paper has been produced on the basis of primary and secondary sources. It includes the historical accounts, written by contemporary historians as well as cultural writings, produced by poets and literary figures of the time besides letters and other writings of the rulers of Awadh. It gives another dimension in form of the writings produced by the British travelers and others.

Introduction

The study of Muslim women of Awadh, like women of all other areas of India during 18th and 19th century is a marginalized theme of study in historiography of India. It never meant that women were inactive or not performing well on national, state or other levels. They had been doing an excellent job on many echelons and now this is time to explore their services, their role in politics and other fields of life. This paper is an attempt to find out stratification of Awadh’s Muslim women, associated with the court specifically. It seeks what role they were playing in politics of the state of Awadh directly or indirectly, what was their contribution in fields of art, architecture and literature and what role had they played in War of Independence against the British East India Company (BEIC)? This paper negates the idea of Knighten, author of The Eastern King that the royal ladies regard men as a superior order of being, listen to their views as the child listen to those of its parents, adopt their views and embrace their opinions with unhesitating confidence that bespeaks child-like simplicity and implicit faith.1 This paper finds that all Royal women of Awadh were not dependent on the males and many of them were not only independent in their decisions but also were there to guide the male counterparts of the royal family; even the Kings and Nawabs. In some cases, they were more sensible and wise than the Nawabs and Kings. There were many high-spirited royal ladies, who were exceedingly ambitious and self-willed including Sadr un Nisa Begum, Bahu Begum, Badshah Begum, Kishwar Sultana and Hazarat Mahal etc. Besides politics, the

1Muhammad Taqi Ahmad, Tarikh Badshah Begam (History of Badshah Begum) (Allahabad: K. Mitra, 1938), iii.
elite section of Awadh’s women was equally literate and had interest in cultural activities.

Awadh known as Avadh, Oude or Oudh is located in north-eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, which is heart of the Indo-Gangetic plain. The origin of its name is traced back to Ayodhya, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kosala. Muslims occupied the region in the twelfth century and it became part of the Mughal Empire in the 16th century A.D. The majority of the population of the region was Hindu and Muslims always remained in minority even till the annexation of the state by BEIC. The state of Awadh was established by Mir Muhammad Amin, an Iranian Shia. He was appointed as governor of Awadh on 15 September 1722 by the Mughal emperor, where he established an independent dynasty gradually under Mughal sovereignty and adopted the title of Sada’at Khan Bahadur. He established capital of his state in Faizabad, but later capital was shifted to Lucknow in 1775. He was succeeded by his nephew and son in law Mirza Muhammad Muqeem entitled as Safdar Jang in 1740. Shuja-ad-Daulah succeeded Safdar Jang in 1754. Asaf ud Daula took over in January 1775 and ruled till September 1797. Wazir Ali could rule for a year only and was replaced by Sa’adat Ali Khan and was recognized by the BEIC also. Early Nawabs of the state were capable rulers and resisted against BEIC. However, last five rulers of the Dynasty including Ghazi al-Din Hydar (r. 1814-1827), Nasir al-Din Hydar (r. 1827-1837), Mohammad Ali Shah (1837-1842), Amjad Ali Shah (1842-1847) and Wajid Ali Shah (r. 1847-1856) were benevolent and humane, though were powerless due to increasing economic and political encroachment of the Company’s officials. Finally, the Company annexed the State in 1856 whereas Wajid Ali Shah was retired with stipend. He lived in Calcutta and spent last many years of his life there. During War of Independence 1857, freedom fighters appointed one of the sons of Wajid Ali Shah, only 10 years old, under supervision of Hazrat Mahal, as king of Awadh and started rebellion. This situation continued for almost seven months. The British forces diverted back to Awadh in 1858 and defeated the disorganized, disunited force of Awadh within two or three days.

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7Dr. Mohammad Baqir ed., *Tariikh-i-Mumtaz (History of Mumtaz)* (Lahore: Urdu Markaz, nd), 3-4. He wrote many letters to his wife from there in which he had written about his hardships.
8Abdul Haleem Sharar, *Hindustan Mein Mashriqi Tamadun Ka Akhri Namona (The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture in India)* (Lahore: Merkantil Press, nd), 58-60.
Stratification of Women, Affiliated with the Court

The influential women, affiliated with the Court and the royal family can be categorized into four sections. The most dynamic and vibrant section consisted of the Queen-mother, grand-mother or the Chief Wives of the Kings. This group was in a position of directly interfering with the state-affairs and ruled both directly and indirectly. Sadr un Nisa Begum, Bahu Begum, Badshah Begum, Kishwar Sultana and Hazarat Mahal are few examples in this regard.

The second category of such women consisted of the most favourite courtesans of not only Kings but also of the prime Minister or Ministers, in some cases. This group’s emergence in the state of Awadh was observed since the days of Shuja ud Daula and in most of the cases, they had influenced the affairs of the state indirectly. Jalalu, Surfraz Mahal and Beeba Jan are few representatives of this section of women.

There was another less powerful but active or radical segment of royal woman; the sisters of the king or some daughters of the Nawabs who altogether negated the institution of marriage and preferred to spend lives alone. They were prone to be dependent on males and wanted to live as they liked. They adopted different methods to convince the Kings to increase their monthly stipend. Daughters of Nawab Shuja ud Daula are major representatives of this section of royal women. They initiated women activism in the society of Awadh for the rights of women. This section of royal women includes less influential or common wives of the Nawab or King also. The fourth category of women whose rise was observed only during the last years of the state was of employees of the royal house-hold especially kitchen and the affiliated departments. Some of them were Barati Khanum, Jugna Khanum and Naurozi Begum.

Politics and the Muslim Women

Generally, the perception had been developed by orientalists that Muslim women of Indo-Pak sub-continent were confined to four boundaries and restricted to purdah which was hindrance in the way of their political and social activism. But the royal women of Awadh in 18th and 19th centuries, representing multiple groups had proved this kind of assessment wrong. All four categories of royal women of Awadh were performing active, even more dynamic role than males, but with different ratio of power and wisdom. In some cases, they were more effective and vigorous than some Nawabs and Kings of the state. Most of the royal women observed purdah but it was their strength, not weakness.
Prominent Begums of Awadh

The most dominant part was played by powerful begums of the royal family. Nawab Begum Sadar un Nisa- the imperious daughter of one Nawab (Sada’at Khan Bahadur), wife of another (Safdar Jang), mother of the third (Nawab Shuja-ad-Daulah) and grandmother of the fourth (Asaf ud Daula) was the first conspicuous lady of the Muslim royal family of Awadh. She was talented, wise, illustrious, chaste and virtuous lady.9 Safdar Jung, the second Nawab of Awadh, married with the only wife, Sadar un Nisa and had great affection with her.10 Begum Sadr un Nisa accompanied her husband to deal with the rebellious faction when horror and disorder spread in Awadh after death of Sada’at Khan,11 the first Nawab of the State. Being daughter of the first Nawab, her company to her husband in dealing with the opponents proved to be fruitful and peace was restored with the great speed. She encouraged Safdar Jung to deal with the issues in that difficult times.12 In September 1750, Safdar Jung faced a defeat against Pathans. The news spread like a wild fire that Safdar Jung had been died while fighting. The conspirators raised Imtiaz ud Daula to Wizarat. Begum Sadr un Nisa kept her senses in control and raised an army of 10000 soldiers, appointed her son as commander of the forces and supervised the force to defend the city of Faizabad. The opposition forces were silenced for the time being and decided to wait for the confirmation of the news of Safdar Jung’s death.13 Safdar Jung returned back safely after few days. Safdar was again in trouble to fight second Afghan War and was facing problem of less finances. At that time, her wife came up with the whole of her property including Rs. 1,10,000 and 4000 gold coins. With that he recollected himself and had gathered his forces.14 Later, he was successful. She remained a source of not only encouragement and wisdom but also had come up with the material help and accompanied her husband physically and practically in restoring order, dealing with the enemies and in successfully catering with the rebellious faction in case of absence of the Nawab from the capital. These traits are enough to prove her as equal partner or key player of state-making and building.

Begum Sadar un Nisa remained effective and helpful during Shuja ud Daula’s period also. She helped her son in many difficult times. On the issue of a Rajput girl who was kidnapped by the orders of Shuja ud Daula, the third ruler of Awadh and son of Sadr un Nisa; misunderstanding had been created between Hindu and Muslim nobility. Some of the King’s relatives including Muhammad Quli khan and Mughal courtiers wanted to dismiss Shuja ud Daula. At that occasion, Begum Sadar un Nisa called Ram Narain, a closest Rajput associate of Safdar Jang and reminded him of all favours, done by

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10Ibid., 253.
11Sa’adat Khan did not have any son so the state was inherited to his eldest son in law.
13Ibid., 163.
14Ibid., 175.
Nawab Safdar Jang. She asked him to be polite and patient and advised him not
to over-react on a minor issue of a common Hindu family and be supportive of
Shuja ud Daula. Resultantly, he requested the Queen-mother to call Ismail Baig
and sardars (leaders) of Mughals for the same advice. She called, talked to
them and convinced them. They deferred their idea of Shuja ud Daula’s
dismissal, only then. On the death-bed of Shuja ud Daula, his mother came
and issued three advices to him on basis of her long experience. She
emphasized that he should release Pathans and fix stipends for their livelihood,
to release stipend of inhabitants of occupied areas and to give reasonable
freedom to the people of Faizabad in their daily movement. However, he did
not listen to her advises.

Begums of Awadh had decision-making power in their hands with regard
to appointment of the next Nawab, after the death of the one. Begum Sadar un
Nisa had to take chief wife of Shuja ud Daula in her confidence while
appointing the next Nawab, after death of Shuja ud Daula. She advised Bahu
Begum at the time of Asif ud Daula’s accession that Asif ud Daula was not a
serious administrator and was involved in negative activities so he should be
appointed on the throne just as a formality and that actual administration
should be given to Sadat Ali khan, another son of Shuja ud Daula. Bahu
Begum refused while saying that she had only one son, either good or bad, she
would not be in favour of giving power to another son of Shujah. Grandmother
was highly disappointed, but agreed.

Finally, grandmother, on second day of appointment of Asif ud Daula gave
few advises to him. Begum Sadar un Nisa said while advising the new Nawab
to work with seasoned administrators and military generals including Eluch
Khan, Raja Soorat Singh and Raja Butar Chund, who had been trusted fellows
of his father and grandfather. She asked him to work according to the advices
of these ministers but Asif ud Daula was not ready to listen to his grandmother,
so sidelined the above ministers. Grandmother continued her efforts to keep
the state of Awadh on track through her advises to Asif ud Daula in future also.

In the period of Asif ud Daula, another woman besides Sadar un Nisa
emerged as a powerful lady. She was Bahu Begum (Aliya Begum), mother of
Asif ud Daula, sister of Najam ud Daula and daughter of Motam ud Daula
(governor of Gujrat) and was foster child of King Muhammad Shah. She was
Chief wife of Shuja ud Daula and was given high respect and esteem by royal
family of Awadh due to her respectable lineage. Bahu Begum was given with
the charge of the whole treasury during life of Shuja ud Daula because she was
the wife who had given whole of her wealth to her husband at the time of his
treaty with the British in 1764. Besides government treasury, she was owner of
a lot of Jagirs and utilized profit, earned from her agricultural land, for her
personal benefits. She wanted to rule the state of Awadh through her son and

17Ibid., 18.
practically, behaved like a ruler but Asif ud Daula resisted.\(^\text{19}\) Asif ud Daula was extravagant and started teasing his mother only few days after his father’s death for money again and again. He wanted to go for entertainment with a big troop. Her mother had to give him money, very reluctantly, in two installments i.e. Rs. 60,000 and Rs. 40,000. That was the start of rift between the mother and the son. She advised him not to be too profligate.\(^\text{20}\) Shuja ud Daula had left the whole property to his mother and wife, not to the son, before his death.\(^\text{21}\) The conflict between the Begums especially the mother and the son had reached to such a level that he was reluctant to live in the same city with her mother. He, finally, left Faizabad and settled in Lucknow, while upgrading its status as the capital.\(^\text{22}\)

Begum had appointed her forces in the territory under her control and replied all moves of the King Asif ud Daula wisely and tactfully. On listening to the rumor that Asif ud Daula wanted to annex her *jagirs*, she wrote a letter to the British resident and asked him for help but he did not take any action, at that time.\(^\text{23}\) A small force of Nawab interfered in Begum’s villages but that was dealt tactfully by the forces of the Begum. Unfortunately, the *jagirs* of Bahu Begum had been annexed by Asif ud Daula in 1196 hijra. He himself came to Faizabad with his forces. Bahu Begum shifted to the palace of her mother in law, Sadar un Nisa Begum. On second stage, the *jagirs* of grandmother were also occupied by the state.\(^\text{24}\) Bahu Begum wrote a letter to his son and another to the British authorities; abashed his son on his very cruel act against his grandmother and her dependents. Finally, the *jagirs* were restored with the order of the British resident as that act of Asif ud Daula had been rejected by the British authorities in London.\(^\text{25}\) Later, Bahu Begum ruled in her vast *jagir* as a powerful ruler, without interference from the Nawab of Awadh.

Royal ladies’ role in appointment of the Kings was always significant. After the death of Asif ud Daula, his disputed son, Wazir Ali Khan, ascended the throne with the kind approval of Bahu Begum and the Company but controversy started and a wide-spread opposition was generated due to his behavior, aggressive policies and low birth.\(^\text{26}\) There was a strong feeling among the British also against Wazir Ali Khan because he was highly anti-British in his behavior and policies. Begum supported him just to have hand in the administration of the country. Later, when she observed large scale


\(^{22}\)Abdul Haleem Sharar, *The Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, translators and Editors, E.S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain (New Delhi: OUP, 2001), The Omnibus Addition, 45.


\(^{24}\)Ibid., 228.


opposition, she backed away her support. The dismissal of Wazir Ali Khan in 1797 was the unanimous decision of the Begums as well as the nobility. The Resident as well as Bahu Begum wanted to replace him with another son of Nawab Shuja ud Daula, and step son of Bahu Begum, Sadat Ali Khan. He was living in Banaras at that time. He was brought back from Banaras and ascended on the throne with the help of the British resident, who held darbar for congregation ceremony. Bahu Begum was instrumental in the whole process of this unnatural shift of power. Without strong support from within the royal house, that kind of change was difficult to implement.

Bahu Begum was on good terms with the British resident. She was such a forceful character that at the appointment of Sa’adat Ali Khan, the British resident wrote a letter to her and asked about her opinion related to Sa’adat. She requested to restore her remaining property which was occupied by her son, Asif ud Daula. She further requested to make the process of paying monthly salaries to all royal ladies smooth, without any delay and hindrances. The ownership of the big jagirs was left with Bahu Begum and Sadr un Nisa till the end of their lives. The ladies preferred to live in Faizabad. During Sa’adat’s regime, Bahu Begum ruled in Faizabad and other areas of her jagir as a powerful and independent ruler. She also appointed her forces and servants, who interfered in the administrative and judicial matters of the state of Awadh. Nawab met with the governor and informed him about the situation. Governor General ordered that Begum should not interfere in the matters of the state and that administration and justice should be ensured by Sa’adat’s authority with the help of the British resident. Bahu Begum had to agree but she did not appreciate occasional interference of the government and still most of the matters were handled by her employees.

Bahu Begum died at the age of eighty six on 18th December 1815. She appointed the Company as trustee of her property and through it, Ghaz iud Din, King of Awadh, would look after the affairs of her jagir. After her death, the administration of a lot of her factories, lands and other kinds of property was run by Bakhtawar Singh Brahmin, assistant of the resident and Munshi.

29Sharar, Lucknow: the Last Phase, 49. For further details on this episode, see details in Sleeman, Chapter. 4, Vol.II.
30Najmul Ghani, Tarikh-i-Oudh, Vol. IV, 5.
31Vil. III., 125.
32Chancey, “Rethinking the Reign of Asaf ud Daula…,” 15.
Hyder. Later, the profit of Bahu Begum’s property had been paid directly to the Company’s treasury.

With the death of Bahu Begum, another royal woman Badshah Begum, the chief consort/wife of King Ghazi ud Din Hyder and mother of Nasir ud din Hyder, emerged as a strong character in the list of powerful royal ladies. She was daughter of Munajjamul Mulk, a Rizvi Syed. She, an educated and learned lady, had a very good training in theory and practice of the science of astronomy. Ghazi ud Din Hyder, with the accession on the throne, entitled Badshah Begum as Bilkis us Sitwat. She was entrusted with the full powers inside the palace and to administer her newly granted jagir, pargana of Salan. She presented nazar (gift) of Rs. 25000 to Ghazi ud Din in coronation ceremony. She was owner of a big jagir and recruited a number of free-booters from the capital city and appointed them on her jagir and other areas under her authority. She had been described as an ‘illustrious lady’ and “the most wonderful woman in the world” by Capt. White, the author of The Murdered King of Oudh. Gazi ud Din Haider usually followed her advices.

Later, conflicts had been developed between Ghazi ud Din and Badshah Begum by some ministers who disliked high level of influence and dictation of a woman. In Tarikh-i-Husayniyyah, it is mentioned that Aqa Meer, one of the ministers was responsible for unpleasant relationship between Ghazi ud Din and Badshah Begum. According to another tradition, Mutama ud daula, the deputy to the king created misunderstandings between the king and his chief wife. She wanted to make her nephew, Fazal Ali, as deputy or Prime Minister, in the best interest of the state. Misunderstandings were settled, later, with the involvement of the British resident. The King revived relations with his wife.

Badshah Begum remained equally powerful during her son, Naseer ud Din Hyder’s ruling period. However, conflicting relationship developed between both son and mother. Naseer ud Din was addicted to alcoholic drinks a lot and could not develop interest in administrative affairs, so the gap was filled by Badshasash Begum on many occasions. She was there to direct the Ministers. On behalf of Naseer ud Din, the queen mother Badshah Begum, issued an order during the first year of her son’s regime that mourning period would continue up to 20th Saffar and that no celebration or marriage would be held in this period. Otherwise, the culprits would face wrath of the king. The

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37Taqi, Tarikh-i-Padshah Begam, 3-4.
39Taqi Ahmad, Tarikh-i-Padshah Begam, 20.
40Ibid., vii.
41Ibid., 6.
42Nawab Hussain Ali Khan, Tarikh-i-Husayniyyah cited in Sajida Sultana Alvi, Perspectives on Mughal India, 80.
43Taqi Ahmad, Tarikh-i-Padshah Begam, 20
The decision was taken back with the interference of the Resident only. The other reason of conflict between both of them was Qudsiya Mahal, one of the wives of Naseer-ud-Din. Badshah Begum disliked her a lot and did not consider her a trustworthy and faithful lady. Qudsiya, finally, committed suicide and the king blamed Badshash Begum for it. He remained under grief for many days to come. The conflicting relations between the mother and the son were transformed into rivalry due to evil character of some ministers who did not want to work under the orders of the Begum. It reached to its lowest ebb in April 1835 when royal forces attacked on palace of Badshash Begum. Begum and her forces resisted well and tens of her male and female servants were died while fighting. Begum and her remaining servants took refuge in imam bara constructed by her within the palace. Nawab Roshan-ud-Daula intervened and requested the King to let the Begum go to Almas Bagh. Permission was granted and Begum, along with her servants spent one night there without food and other necessities. Later, arrangements were done for her permanent stay and her remaining things were departed there with the orders of the King.

The sad episode had taken place due to malicious designs of selfish ministers who did not want to see power in hands of a respectable woman. Meanwhile, in 1837, Nasir ud Din Hyder was poisoned and died.

Badshah Begum wanted to make her grandson Munna Jan, as the new king. The name of Muna Jan’s mother was Afzal Mahal. She brought Munna Jan in Barah Dari, the throne room where congregation ceremony was taking place. The British resident brought Nasir u Doula Muhammad Ali Khan, son of Nawab Sa’adat Ali Khan for the said ceremony. The British Resident tried to stop Badshah Begum but she did not accept and forcefully placed Munna Jan on the throne. The resident and his assistant hurried to the court and showed a written order from the Governor General that Munna Jan could not be the king and that Begum would not be successful in her efforts. Begum continued with her orders. Some of her soldiers attacked on Assistant resident, also. In result, the British called its troops to attack on the congregation function. Many people died of gun-shots. Munna Jan tried to escape but he and the Begum were arrested. At the same time, Nasir ud Daula was installed on the throne with the title of Mohammad Ali Shah. Both Badshah Begum and Munna Jan were kept in Chunnar gargh with the monthly allowance of twenty four hundred from Lucknow royal treasury.

A controversy had been created on the royal lineage of Munna Jan. The resident did not want the appointment of Munna Jan so the British forces supported the other, whereas Col. Sleeman, after twelve-year coop, supported Munna Jan’s claim to be member of the royal family. He mentioned that Afzal Mahal was mother of Munna Jan. She was of humble birth but had a fair reputation among those who knew her. Badshah Begum, during the last days of

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45 Taqi Ahmad, Tarikh-i-Padshah Begam, 14.
47 Ibid., 327.
48 Taqi Ahmad, Tarikh-i-Padshah Begam, 89.
49 Ibid., 80-89
her life in the prison always declared that she had seen the birth of the boy i.e. 
Munna Jan. Later, she developed extra-ordinary affection with him. His deeds 
were remarkably like Nasir ud din and facial features were also like him.50 
Badshah Begum was such a dynamic politician that she resisted and performed 
well while having conflicting relations with her husband Ghazi ud din Hyder 
and son when both of them were in power. Her role was significant in 
appointment of the Kings. She was the best example of resistance also, unlike 
many other royal figures, as she took a stand against BEIC and forcefully 
fought for that stand. She was stronger than many males of the time. 

The next influential and active royal lady was Queen mother of Wajid Ali 
Shah, Janab Aliah Queen Kishwar. She was daughter of Nawab Hussain ud 
Din Khan or Imam ud Din. Her real name was Taj Ara and she was chief wife 
of Amjad Ali Shah (ruling period 1842-1847) and mother of Wajid Ali Shah, 
the last ruler of the state of Awadh. It was she who finalized the terms of the 
last treaty between the State of Awadh and the Company. The Resident 
General Ottram had a meeting with Queen Kishwar at the zard palace before 
getting signature on the new treaty from the king. She was astonished and 
requested the Resident to intercede for her son and avert the impending 
calamity.51 The Resident regretfully said that he did not have that kind of right. 
Queen mother’s request of grace period of improvement of administration was 
also rejected by the Resident. The meeting with the mother was followed by 
the meeting with the King on 4 February 1856. The King was informed 
formally who was reluctant to sign the treaty and was in high grief. The 
Resident utilized the services of Queen mother again to get signatures on the 
treaty of annexation. He promised to arrange annual stipend of one 
lakh rupees 
to the royal family in the name of Wajid Ali Shah, if she could manage to get 
signatures on the said treaty, which would be paid by the Company.52 She 
played instrumental role and no doubt, there was no other practical option to be 
followed. 

It was again Queen mother who led the royal group to England to file a 
petition against the ‘shameful occupation’53 of their kingdom by the BEIC in 
place of Wajid Ali Shah. Maseeh-ud-Din Alvi was lawyer and ambassador of 
the ex-King.54 Queen mother led the case in the British parliament and the 
court with the argument that Awadh was unresisting ally and it was annexed 
without reasonable cause.55 They were hopeful of the decision in their favour 
but selfish associates of Wajid Ali Shah convinced him to accept the offer of 
high annual stipend from the Company in place of the state. He announced the

50Sleeman, Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official, Revised by Vincent A. Smith 
146. 
52Ibid., 150-151. 
53Robert Wilberforce, Dacoity in Excelsis or the Spoliation of Oude by the East India 
Company: Faithfully Recounted with Notes and Documentary Illustrations (London: J. R. 
Taylor, 1954), iii. 
54Maseeh-ud-Din Alvi, Safeer-e-Awadh (Lucknow: Dar un Nazir Press, nd), 93. 
55Wilberforce, Dacoity in Excelsis, iv.
withdrawal of the case from the court. Queen Kishwar was so upset with the decision that she was died in Paris, on her way back to India.

The last but not the least mighty character in the list of such royal ladies was Hazarat Mahal, mother of Birjis Qadar, one of the wives of Wajid Ali Shah. She led the revolt in Lucknow. Birjis ascended the throne under supervision of her mother Hazarat Mahal. She was a brave leader and had practically good sense of leading the force. She extended respect to the soldiers but was helpless to lead the forces directly due to prevailing purdah. She could rule for seven months in the period of confusion and utter lawlessness. Her army was divided into many factions and all factions were fighting for their personal gains. A parallel court was also established under Ahmadullah, scholar-saint in Lucknow besides Hazarat Mahal. It further divided Lucknow society and forces into Shia and Sunni factions. This new kingdom was disintegrated within only two or three days, once the bombardment was started by the British forces. Hazarat Mahal fled to Nepal with thousands of other fugitives. Only Hazarat Mahal and Birjis Qadar were given refuge by the state with small amount of stipend. Awadh was re-occupied by the British completely in January 1858. Hazarat Mahal was another symbol of resistance among the list of royal women, who fought the game of ‘do or die.’ She led the resisting forces at the time when majority of the members of royal family including last King of Awadh were not in favour of fighting against the British. She did not make compromise with the prevailing circumstances and decided to rise in rebellion against the usurper.

This group of powerful royal women of Awadh had proved themselves as parallel partner of the state-machinery. If on one side, Begum Sadar un Nisa, Bahu Begum and Queen Kishwar were fulfilling their duties of faithful associate of the game of politics and were successful in many cases. Then on the other side, Badshah Begum and Hazarat Mahal had tried to resist against the government and the BIEC. They were more courageous than many other male members of the royal family and had shown resistance in the difficult times.

Institution of Courtesan/Tawaif

The second cadre of influential women in Awadh can be named as courtesans, the most neglected section of women in the writings of history. This institution describes the life-style of Awadh. They were influential female elite section of the society not only in Awadh but also in all Hindu and Muslim regions. They were parallel partners of the state machinery in Awadh. If on one side, Begum Sadar-un-Nisa, Bahu Begum and Queen Kishwar were fulfilling their duties of faithful associate of the game of politics and were successful in many cases. Then on the other side, Badshah Begum and Hazarat Mahal had tried to resist against the government and the British. They were more courageous than many other male members of the royal family and had shown resistance in the difficult times.

36Ibid., 99.
40Ibid., 76.
41Sahai, Ahsan-ut-Tawareekh, 99.
courts of pre-colonial India. They, like many other courts of medieval India were consorted with the Royal court and courtiers. They had influence and association with the royal family, nobility, merchants, courtiers etc. They were highly active in urban areas. They manipulated men and means for their own social and political ends. They had deep influence on the male identity which was then distant away from the ideal of warrior of Mughal times.

There was inner stratification of tawaifs also. Elite section was associated with the court or upper hierarchy. The other categories were thakahi and randi. They were ranked lower in stratification. The courtesans, the leading section of tawaif, were the highest tax-payers with the heaviest income-earners and property-holders. The influence of this section of women was observed for the first time in Awadh since the time of Nawab Shuja ud Daulah, who was slave to his sexual needs. Such girls were kept ready for the Nawab even during military campaigns and the usual travel.

Nawab Shuja ud Daula was extremely inclined towards such women. He always kept a group of tawaif with the royal caravan in case of travelling or even during military campaigns or sometimes, such women were locally arranged. His death had happened due to knife-wound on his upper-leg, which was given by a noble girl, mistakenly had been kidnapped, for sexual pleasure of the king. The knife was poisoned and Nawab Shuja got sick after that event. The poison spread in his whole body and he died within few days. Nevertheless, the rise of courtesans had been started in the state of Awadh.

Nawab Asif ud Daula was kind towards dancing girls and gave heavy prizes to even common dancers. Mukhtar ud Daula, Prime Minister of Asif-ud Daula, was involved extremely in love of a tawaif, perhaps Jalalu. She was clever and highly cultured lady. Mukhtar did what that lady wanted. She actually ruled in place of Mukhtar ud Daula. Mukhtar, on instigation of Jalalu had created misunderstandings between the son and the mother and later, convinced Asif ud Daula to take heavy amount of money from Bahu Begum. Mukhtar, after getting accent led the campaign to Faizabad for exploring money. There were only eunuchs in the palace. Begum was reluctant but she had to give Rs. 60 lac through the British resident. Later, the Begum developed hatred for her son and started favouring other sons of Shuja ud Daula.

Nasir ud Din Hyder lived so excessively in the company of such women that most of his styles had been transformed into womanish. He spoke like

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67Ghani, Tarikh-i-Oudh, Vol.II., 145.
69Ibid., 54-56.
women, sang like women, behaved like women and even dressed like women. This combined with his religious ardour, “made him influenced to perform practically, while celebrating birth ceremony of Imam to play role of a pregnant women.”\(^{70}\) King would take a bath and went to the city in palanquin in rich female costume. In December 1849, the King divorced one of his courtesan wife, Surfraz Muhal and sent her to Mecca for pilgrimage. She had been cohabiting with the Chief singer, Gholam Reza and with some other royal men, even with the ministers. The king was highly dejected on finding it true.\(^{71}\)

Moral degeneration was also part of the life of such wives.

The courtesans had become cause of sever conflicts among courtiers and respectable persons also. Two sons of Aga Meer, Minister of Ghazi ud Din Hyder, were kidnapped by Eesa Mian, a kind of a fake saint. He developed liaison with a dancing girl, Beeba Jan. The girl was not happy on furious attitude of Eesa Mian and took refuge with Khasmahal or Chief consort of Aga Meer. He wanted the release of the girl. The issue was settled peacefully only with the involvement of the British Resident. Beeba Jan was released and in response to it, the two sons of the ministers were handed over to their parents.\(^{72}\)

Overall, the courtesans were politically conscious and knew where to accept the commandments and where to reject and react. They were well connected with the local elites and had plenty of revenue since 1780s\(^{73}\). They whole heartedly supported the war of independence 1857\(^{74}\), even some of them became part and parcel of the activities of the freedom-fighters. They were fearful of the shift of their position from high cadre courtesan to common prostitutes,\(^{75}\) so decided in favour of the revolt. Although, they were not respectable class in moral terminology, yet their resistance had value. This group gained much power in the later period of the dynasty and at most of the occasions, this group of women interfered indirectly, through the royal men with whom they had illicit relationship.

Less Influential Royal Women

There was a large group of royal women who were less influential due to their position in the court, but this group was comparatively more active than the first two groups. This group included sisters, daughters, wives other than the chief wife and other relatives. Shuja ud Doula had twenty-five daughters, only one was married, Izzat un Nisa Begum. All others did not want to marry due to their inability to obey their husbands. They spent lives like liberal men. Initially they were paid Rs. 70 per month. Later, Nawab Sada’at Ali Khan raised the stipend to Rs. 250 as monthly salary. All of them were fed up of less

\(^{70}\)Sharar, *Lucknow: the Last Phase*, 57.


\(^{73}\)Lata Singh, “The Visibility of the ‘Other’, 1680.

\(^{74}\)Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance…”, 3.

salary. They got reactionary, attacked on a government’s bungalow in Pitch Muhallah (street), while closing Shaikhan door and doors of Hasan Bhaagh (garden). They looted everything from the house while claiming that it was their father’s property. Nawab increased their salary as Rs. 500 per head. They were still dissatisfied and reminded Nawab Saadat that they were like him. Nawab’s attitude was polite towards them. During Ghazi ud Din Hyder’s period, three sisters, Anjumanissa, Zaibunnisa and Jeena Begum went to Lord Myre, in Benaras, with the petition of less salary. He extended respect to them and said that he will settle the matter on his visit to Lucknow. Ghaziuddin increased their salary as Rs.700 per person.76

Shams un Nisa Begum, wife of Asif ud Daula, daughter of Nawab Intizam ud Daula and granddaughter of Nawab Qamar ud Din, Prime Minister of Delhi, was one of the less active royal ladies. She did not have any child and could not develop cordial relations with her husband. Asif ud Daula left her in Faizabad while leaving the capital and settled a new capital in Lucknow.77 She lived in Machli Bhawan and was given with the jagir of Partab Ganj and Nawab Ganj with Rs. 60000 annual income. In addition to it, daily Rs. 60 were fixed for her kitchen. A small part of her jagir was taken over by the Nawab on which she got infuriated and went to her jagir. She could not revive relationship with her husband later and died there after few years.78

The royal ladies of this cadre were found to be involved in palace skirmishes. Queen mother Dowager, with the help of the King Amjad Ali Shah used power against some wives of the king. The King was informed by the Queen mother, Dowager that having mark of “Sampun” on the neck of any wife of the King could be harmful for his children. The King checked the mark with the help of chief eunuch and discovered that eight of his wives had that mark. He, immediately ordered them to leave the palace with their all belongings and the ladies had to follow the orders.79 Chief wife of Wajid Ali Shah, Azam Bahu, daughter of Nawab Ali Khan Bahadur was another less powerful lady. She was fed up of many love-affairs of her husband. She tried to successfully cater with those girls but later, she had to make compromises.80

This third category of royal women had some very active ladies besides less active. Some of them did not make any compromise but others had to.

The Employees of the Royal Household

Some associated ladies like head cook, governess etc. also got influence and power with some kings. During Nasir ud Din’s period, Barati Khanum (king called her duda) was incharge of the kitchen. King trusted her a lot. Even some ministers also conveyed their wishes or requests to the King through her.

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77 Michael H. Fisher, “Political Marriage Alliances…,” 603.
78 Hyder, Sawanehayat-Salateen, 81.
79 Sleeman, Rambles and Recollections Vol, I 107-108.
80 Ghani, Tarikh-i-Oudh Vol. V., 55.
Two other ladies, Jugna Khanum and Naurozi Begum worked under Barati Khanum and were also very influential. This group of women was very rich and celebrated taziya and other Shia rituals with great pomp and show.81 Their influence reached to such level that Resident scolded Nasir ud Din as state affairs had reached to the king through Naurozi Khanum. King thought that she had leaked out the news of the bad state of affairs so she was dismissed and sent out of the palace.82 Another example in this regard was Fyz un Nisa Begum, who was very close to Badshah Begum and was adoptive mother of her son/heir apparent, Naseer ud Din. She convinced Badshah Begum and then approached Naseer ud Din to appoint he nephew, Fuzl Allee on higher position. The King appointed him as the prime minister.83 It was unusual in the history of Indo-Pakistan subcontinent that female royal employees could enjoy this level of power and esteem, which they had earned in Awadh.

**Literary, Architecture, and Cultural Activities**

History of Awadh is unique in the sense of its cultural, literary and creative development also. A lot of such works had been produced there which were exemplary.84 Persian and Urdu both flourished there and the contribution of women was equally visible in this regard also. Bahu Begum patronized the men of literature and historians also. Faiz Bakhsh Kakori, author of Tarikh-i-Farah Bakhsh was employee in jagir of Bahu Begu. His book covers period of Shuja ud aula, Asif ud Daula and Sada’at Ali Khan. Many of his account are eye-witness. His book Shahma-i-Faiz was autobiographical work besides historical. He had access to such facts and files, where common historian could not reach because he was trustworthy employee of Bahu Begum. His third work was social history of Awadh. In another work, he had written about land lords, friends, relatives etc. who lived in Lucknow, Faizabad and other area.85 Aqleel Mahal, one of the wives of Wajid Ali Shah and was named as Mumtaz Mahal by the last king of Awadh also had literary taste. She was granddaughter of Shuja ud Daula and had a son Qira Hussain Mirza. She did not accompany Wajid Ali Shah to Calcutta and was left behind in Lucknow. Wajid Ali Shah wrote a series of letters to her and wished that all his letters be compiled in form of a book. Being a faithful wife, she collected all letters and got it published in form of a book with the title of Tarikh-i-Mumtaz.86 The letters are of high literary taste and show passionate relationship of husband and wife.

82 Ibid., 338.
84 Dr. Moeen ud Din Aqeel, *Janubi Asia Ki Tarikh Naweesi, Noeeyat, Rawaiyat and Mayar* (Historiography of South Asia: Style, Tradition and Standard) (Lahore: Nashriyat, 2015), 83.
85 Ibid., 85.
Women became directly the theme of poetry. Wajid Ali Shah had written such poetry in abundance in which he had mentioned his love affairs clearly with the indication of one or the other women including courtesans, maids, passer-bys or others.\(^87\) Nawab Mirza Shauq, “in his poems became the lover of beautiful veiled women and made his poetry the scourge of conventional morality.”\(^88\) The language of his masnavis was so beautiful, frank, pure and clean that even honorable and decent people could not abstain from reading and enjoying it. Wajid Ali Shah, on contrary, had showed shamefully low taste and used obscene language.

The institution of courtesan meant to preserve high culture of Lucknow. They were the real protector of the cultural norms of Lucknow and practically shaped the development of modern music, dancing and singing. Lucknow court was celebrated ‘center of musical entertainment.’\(^89\) Women especially courtesans had great aesthetic sense. The other centers of India followed the styles, introduced by the courtesans of Awadh.\(^90\) Some of them like Zohra and Mushtari were not only poetesses but also were singers and dancers. Jaddan was another singer and dancer.\(^91\) They introduced music and dancing as a profession. Court of Wajid Ali Shah was immune to such performances on daily basis. Drama also flourished during Wajid Ali Shah’s period with the skillful courtesans.\(^92\) One group of men and women were employed and trained especially for the drama, ‘Daryaye Ta’shque’ (Ocean of love) in art of dancing and singing. They were taught a number of couplets to be recited on appropriate places. With the start of war of independence, development of music was stopped to a large extent.\(^93\)

Begums of Awadh were also fond of constructing buildings, especially from religious point of view and for welfare of their dependents. Begum Sadar un Nisa constructed an imam bara and a mosque behind Moti Baagh. Her dependents were very happy on her attitude.\(^94\) Bahu Begum laid the foundation of Nagariya and Ali Ganj, on the other side of the river. These were new colonies for her associated people.\(^95\) In the palace of Awadh, Badshah Begum had built twelve tombs for each of the twelve imams, besides a mosque, adjacent to every tomb. One building similar to the tomb of Hazrat Abbas was also constructed.\(^96\) The buildings constructed by the Begums were symbol of their power and inclination besides high taste.

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\(^88\) Ibid., 63.
\(^90\) Lata Singh, “Visibility the ‘Other’…” 1678.
\(^93\) Subramanian, “Music and Society in North India…,” 1784.
\(^96\) Taqi Ahmad, *Tarikh Badshah Begam*, 9.
Rulers of Awadh were practicing Shia faith with scrupulous care and regularity and adopted pure Shia rituals on state level. The most prominent rituals were holding of Majlis (mourning assembly), Soz Khawani and taking out tazia processions. \(^{97}\) Sleeman had also mentioned the hectic schedules during Islamic month of Moharram. \(^{98}\) Mourning of Moharram and taziyya was the most important aspect of royal women’s lives in Awadh. Some innovations had also been introduced specifically by the females of the royal family especially Badshah Begum, including celebration of chhati ceremony of Imam Mehdi, celebrated every year in the month of Shaban and secondly, eleven beautiful Syed girls were declared as wives of eleven imams and were kept in the royal palace with high respect and status. \(^{99}\) Begum spent days and nights in prayer and worship. As Nirza Naseer –ud Din Hyder was brought up by Badshah Begum, so he was highly careful of these practices in his life. \(^{100}\)

Most of these rituals gradually were adopted by Shias of the other parts of India. Courtesan also compelled themselves to sing ‘religious songs of mourning’ \(^{101}\) during the days of Muharram. All other activities were banned and the days were spent in complete sorrow in that period.

The cultural norms and innovations of the royal women had a deep impact on common women also. Common women were fond of soz khowani a special form of music. Especially during days of Muharram matchless sounds of dirges could be heard from every street and mohalla. \(^{102}\) Common women had a lot of occasions in their lives to celebrate. Most of the Muslim families had sufficient financial resources and the women could spend money on such occasions. Celebration of Chhati, cutting of the hair of baby, aqiqa, bismillah (at the age of four), start of the commencement of their education, circumcision, roza kushai, aqdi-i-Nikhah were common festivities among the women. \(^{103}\)

The tradition of majlis with inclusion of marsiya and soz khowani had great impact on noble and common women of Awadh. Due to regular assemblies, taste for poetry and music had become part of noble women’s life, which was specific to only this part of Indian Muslim society. \(^{104}\) Soz khowani had given vitality to music especially to Urdu music.

\(^{97}\)Sharar, _The Lucknow: The Last Phase_, 215.


\(^{100}\)Ibid., 6 and 9.


\(^{102}\)Sharar, _Lucknow: the Last Phase_, 149.

\(^{103}\)Ibid., 203-205.

\(^{104}\)Ibid., 217.
Financial Resources

Begums of Awadh had plenty of wealth. Every Chief Wife was granted with very big jagirs or estates. They were all in all to manage the affairs of their big jagirs and to utilize the resources. Begum Sadar un Nisa, Bahu Begum, Badshah Begum etc were even more financially sound than the Nawabs or Kings. They came up with their money on many occasions to help the Nawab. Begum Sadar un Nisa controlled a big jagir and money, which was spent for the state on the basis of need.\(^{105}\) Bahu Begum was owner of the jagirs of Gonda and Faizabad during life of Shuja and later other jagirs were also given to her. Besides it, she was Incharge of the royal treasury. Chief wife of Asif ud Daula was owner of the jagirs of Partab Ganj and Nawab Ganj with Rs. 60000 annual income. Nawab Saadat Ali Khan gave Nawab Ganj as jaagir to his favorite wife, Tat Mahal. Its annual income was one lac twenty thousand. She had ownership of jewelry of one crore.\(^{106}\)

The finances of the Chief wives or the other wives were always given priority. Article Six of the Treaty between Nawab Shuja ud Daula and the Company said that 2 lac out of 76 lacs revenue would be fixed for the stipend of the Begums and princesses of the royal family.\(^{107}\) Financial recourses of some of the wives of the kings was part of the loan agreements between the Company and the state. While taking third loan from Awadh, the Company agreed to pay back the loan with 5 percent interest. Besides it, the Company pledged to monthly allowances of Rs. 10,000 and 2500 respectively to Nawab Mubarak Mahal Sahib and Sultan Mariyam Begum, both wives of Ghazi ud Din Hyder.\(^{108}\) Such large estates of lands and jewelry were later extracted by governor general, Warren Hastings.\(^{109}\)

These Begums were mostly very kind and gave a large part of their wealth in alms to the poor. Begum Sadar un Nisa was very kind and spent most of her time in praying. A lot of poor were paid with the monthly stipend from her jagir’s income.\(^{110}\) Bahu Begum had fixed stipend of a lot of her relatives and poor on monthly basis. Her nephew, Nawab Qasim Ali Khan, Asghar Ali Khan and Akbar Ali Khan were paid with Rs.1000 each.\(^{111}\) She was so much careful about the livelihood of all her dependents that made arrangements with the help of the Resident to pay them monthly allowances after her death even. All other categories of royal women were paid with the monthly salaries. Wives, khurd mahals, sisters, daughters, all were paid with the monthly

\(^{105}\) Details are given on the above pages.
\(^{107}\) Knowsley Pamphlet Collection, *Oudh or How to Make and Unbreak a Treaty* (Calcutta: J. F. Bella my Englishman Press, 1856), 12.
Conclusion

Awadh, a Shia state was comparatively more liberal than many Sunni states of India in the period of resistance against foreign powers. Royal women had enjoyed high status since beginning, which gradually increased. One of the reasons could be that state was inherited to son in law of its founding father and as Sadr un Nisa Begum was daughter of an ex-Nawab and the wife of the second Nawab, her power and esteem was countless even during period of Shuja ud Daula, when she directly interfered to settle some issues related to Hindu Rajput family. The ministers of the state listen to her and obeyed her. Bahu Begum was equally powerful in a long period to come because she was given high esteem by her husband, Shuja ud Daulah. She had complete authority on the royal treasury and was owner of an enormous estate. She, was one step away than Begum Sadr un Nisa as she was on very cordial terms with the BEIC through its resident. The Company’s officials had also accepted her power. Badshah Begum was comparatively a different case. She led a coup against the sitting King and the Company which took her to the height of resistance. Another royal woman who proved to be more courageous and dynamic was Hazarat Mahal. She can be quoted as the best example or symbol of resistance against a colonial power. She fought a war of do or die. Many courtesans also were supporting that difficult war for their personal interests or regaining their past glory of ruling indirectly while having closer links with the royal family and other courtiers. Besides politics, the Awadhian women were not behind men in bringing revolution in multiple fields of literature and art including poetry, music, singing, dancing etc. Besides it, they were also fond of constructing buildings like their men and some master pieces especially religious buildings were constructed by them. In the later period, space for women had been left by royal men also who were involved in marry making, wine; women and other unproductive works. This all proves that royal ladies of Awadh were equal to men in all fields of life and in some cases they were better, wiser and more powerful than their men.

112 Najmul Ghani, Tarikh-i-Oudh, Vol. IV, 5.
113 Sahai, Ahsan-ut-Tawareekh, 124.