

**WOMEN, LAW AND CUSTOM IN A REGIONAL
SHI'A KINGDOM: A STUDY OF THE BEGUMS
OF AWADH UP TO 1860'S**

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I

The medieval Islamic history is replete with numerous examples of women who straddled the dichotomous spheres of the 'public' and the 'private', making use of various avenues, not always direct, to participate in the political, economic and cultural life of Muslim societies and polities. Many aspects of the Islamic law were advantageous to women, even if they were interpreted differently by different sectarian units within Islam. Women's rights with respect to family, marriage and inheritance, and the ownership and disposal of property, were clearly defined in the corpus of Islamic law, thereby allowing women greater access to wealth than before.

The preference in Shi'a and Fatimid law and customs for the female heirs was also an important factor for women assuming positions of power in the ruling dynasties of Buyids, Fatimids and Safavids. The women in the medieval societies of the Islamic East were able to exercise power and influence, albeit in ways that were significantly different from modern times and which lay firmly outside the purview of the western paradigm. They circumvented the restraints and limitations imposed by the existing religious-cultural milieu to develop mechanisms to express their authority and influence in the 'public' domain. Women of the Mughal household were also able to assume positions of influence and authority.

Our study of women's position in the legal systems of Islam and as active participants in Muslim political, social and economic systems complicates the traditionally held view that women faced loss of autonomy and agency after the death of the Prophet and growing institutionalization of Islam. The growth of the orthodox scholarly class and normative texts as well as some of the changes in the socio-economic environments signaled the decline of their public participation, but women made use of various alternative mechanisms to make themselves a part of the ruling structure and public life. The exploration of the role played by women, especially noblewomen, and their access to financial resources and property, in such Muslim societies helps us to place our study of the Begums of Awadh within a broader context, and to identify the

social, political, cultural and religious conditions which worked together to confer power and authority on them.

The kingdom of Awadh, a successor state of the Mughal Empire, carried forward many of its cultural-political traditions. The Nawabi regime paid obeisance (if only for namesake) to the Mughals and based their claims to the *musnud* of Awadh on their being the representatives (*subadar*) of the Empire. The early Nawabs were able to carve out an autonomous regional kingdom, with the local Hindu landed chiefs and the Sunni Muslim Sheikhzadas inducted into the Nawabi regime. The coming of the British power led to several far-reaching alterations in the structure of the Nawabi regime. The Nawab Shujauddaulah (1754-75) tried to resist the growing English control over his administration and economic resources, even using his 'alliance' with the Company to add onto his kingdom's territory and wealth. He reorganized his army and administration, two moves that were not liked by the English. The Company was not yet interested in annexing Awadh as it served as a buffer state for its territories in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, and also because it provided them with an almost unlimited source of money and manpower.

Gradually, the Company's interference in the kingdom's administration, military and even the Nawabi household increased to such a level that Nawab Asafuddaulah (1775-1797), registering the gradual eroding of his political authority, looked towards religion and culture as the two avenues which could provide the new basis of his authority. The Shi'a Nawab had developed his capital Lucknow into the cultural centre of north India, a rival to Delhi which had fallen on hard days. The city saw construction activity on a large scale, patronage being extended to the ulema and learned Shi'a men, and the emergence of a Shi'a institutional structure.

This process of the 'institutionalization' of 'Shi'a' identity continued under the later Nawabs. The kingdom continued to grow distant from the Mughal Empire and, after a point of time, the Company was their sole point of contact. The search for acquiring sovereignty ended when the Nawab of Awadh became its King, emphasizing the breaking of the links between Delhi and Lucknow. This period marked the growing influence of the Resident at the Nawab's court, a corresponding fall in the Nawab's

authority and a further tightening of the regime. The later Nawabs of Awadh, hemmed in by the English territories on all side, tried to develop a distinct identity for themselves and their regime. Their Shi'a (and Saiyyad) descent was heavily emphasized upon, elaborate courtly rituals were performed and Shi'a religious institutions were patronized.

The state formation in a patrimonial bureaucracy is often linked with religion to strengthen bonds of loyalty between the ruler and the ruling elite. In Awadh, Shi'a nobles were given posts of prominence, the Friday prayers as separate from the Sunnis were established, Shi'a scholarship and ulema class crystallized into a distinct group; all contributing towards the emergence of Awadh as a 'Shi'a' kingdom. This outwardly sectarian identity of the regime did not mean that there was no non-Shi'a participation in its ruling structure. Nawab Asaf was known to give generous grants and stipends to the religious heads of many temples for the purpose of building and repairs. The public commemoration of Muharram and the building of *Imambaras* and *dargahs* were other ways through which the ruling class could convey its rank, status, wealth and even piety and devotion towards Imam Ali and his family.

The Begums of Awadh also played an important part in the two-fold transformation of the kingdom, in the political and religious-cultural spheres. The Begums' 'hegemony' and influence in the court and household of the Nawabi regime is evident through a careful examination of the English records and the indigenous sources. They commanded great personal resources, moveable and immovable wealth, which they managed through their extensive retinue of officials and servants.

The most important of these royal women was Bahu Begum (wife of Nawab Shuja-ud-Daulah), a powerful presence in the public life of the kingdom for almost 50 years. Her autonomous establishment was large enough to accommodate hundreds of her relations and dependents, and employed thousands of officials, soldiers, scribes, physicians and artists. Her prosperous jagirs included Salon, Gonda, Tanda, Tiloi etc. with the rights to collect various taxes and control over certain markets in the province. Her immense personal wealth and control over the treasure of the late Nawab was challenged many times by the rulers and the Company, with

the Begum doing her outmost to keep her control over it as she realized that her power and status owed a lot to her access to this wealth.

The Begum, not wanting the Nawab to get her estate after her death, left it to the English (her rivals and protectors!) in a loan guaranteeing them to pay allowances and pensions to her dependents and some religious institutions in perpetuity.¹ Some other Begums, like *Mallika-i-Kishwar*, wife of Nawab Amjad Ali Shah, also made use of the economic avenues offered by the English Government to invest their money in Government loans or promissory loans to safeguard the interest of their family and dependents.²

Though the Begums did not have formal political roles (except perhaps Begum Hazrat Mahal), they had been an intrinsic part of the dynastic house and ruling structure of the kingdom since its inception. But that is not to say that they were only the 'repositories' of power, as they did, on numerous occasions, exercise direct political power. The part played by Sadr un nissa Begum, wife of Nawab Safdar Jung and Bahu Begum, in the accession of Nawab Asafuddaulah, Bahu Begum's indirect backing to the rebelling groups in Benaras (1781) and to Wazir Ali (1797) were proof enough of her clout and authoritative role amongst the ruling classes.

The bloody *coup* led by Badshah Begum, mother of Nasir uddaulah, and her supporters, to place her candidate on the throne after the death of her son, (against the one backed by the English), demonstrates how the Begums were seen as a legitimizing force for a dynastic succession. The leadership role assigned to Hazrat Mahal during the mutiny, went beyond her being the wife of the last Nawab of Awadh and the mother of the young heir; it was an acknowledgement of her political position amongst the ruling elite and the masses of the kingdom. She was the symbol of the Nawabi regime, and her authority was accepted by other rebel leaders, ta'alluqadars and sepoys.

¹ Dated 25th July 1813, FDSP, 27th Aug. 1813, No.2.

² Claim of Afsar Bahoo Begum, sister of ex-King Wajid Ali Shah to interest amounting to 5 lakhs deposited in treasury, dated 10th Jan. 1859, Lucknow District, Revenue Dept., File No.911, No. 9 of 1859, U.P.State Archives, Lucknow.

Also important was the role played by the Begums in the religious-cultural life of the kingdom. Religious patronage afforded the Begums with an avenue to interact with the public and demonstrate their authority. They patronized religious scholars, *marsiya-khwans*, poets and physicians, and gave generously to various Shi'a institutions in India and Iran-Iraq to strengthen the perception of their status, wealth and piety. The most visible form of patronage was the building of religious structures in Awadh. Bahu Begum gave 1 lakh of rupees under her will to the Shi'a shrines in Karbala and Najaf. She built her own tomb and a mosque, along with provisions in her will to hold Muharram ceremonies and regular *fatiha* and Quran recitations there. *Mallika-i-Afaq Mahal*, the wife of Muhammad Ali Shah, built a *karbala* and one of his daughters patronized the construction of a mosque in the capital.³

Begum Hazrat Mahal, living in exile in the Nepal region after 1859, built a mosque.⁴ Badshah Begum's role in the expansion and development of certain ritualistic aspects of Muharram has been chronicled by a contemporary writer.⁵ Her legacy can be seen in the Shi'a practice of continuing the *sog* (mourning period) of Muharram for 40 days (*chehlum*) when earlier it only lasted till the third day of *ashura* (10th Muharram). Nawab Nasir ud din was probably inspired by his step-mother's beliefs when he issued a proclamation banning the celebration of any marriage or any other happy occasion in these 40 days. The Begums, as a part of the Shi'a culture of Awadh, influenced many of its devotional and ritualistic aspects, popularizing it among the various sections of the society. The influence exerted by the Begums on the religious-cultural imagination of the kingdom counters the view which attempts to categorize religious patronage as an activity confined to the private sphere and limited only to spiritual concerns. The very public nature and reach of the Begum's patronage and its obvious political undertones leads us to formulate that these 'religious' activities were often used to serve political-secular functions.

³ Rizvi, S.A.A., *The History of the Isna Ashari Shi'is in India*, Delhi, 1986, Vol. II, p. 83.

⁴ Khan, Najmul Ghani, *Tarikh-i-Awadh*, Lucknow, 1919, Vol.5, p.286

⁵ Ahad, Abdul, *Tarikh-i-Badshah Begum*, trans. Mohd. Taqi Ahmad, Allahabad, 1938

II

There were several similarities in the trajectories of the historical processes and forces at play in the two kingdoms of Awadh and Bengal. They both were ‘successor’ states of the Mughal Empire and experienced a loss of their political autonomy with their coming into contact with the English power. We can find several parallels between the means and mechanisms that were made use of by the royal women of both the kingdoms, to circumvent the traditional constraints on their exercise of power, to participate in the process of decision-making and to contribute to the political life of Bengal and Awadh. The Begums of Bengal, chiefly Munny Begum, the wife of Nawab Mir Jafar (d.1765) played an active role in the negotiations and dialogue with the East India Company, the new masters of the Nawabi kingdom of Bengal.

Through archival data, we can trace the career of Munny Begum(d. 1813), a woman of obscure origins who exercised power and agency in the restricted sphere made available to her after the defeat of the Nawab of Bengal at the Battle of Buxar in 1764. Her husband Mir Jafar was given the kingdom after his predecessor’s defeat at Buxar, but died shortly after. The kingdom passed on to his minor son, Mubarak uddauah. The Begum lobbied for the appointment of the *Niabat* and convinced the English of her loyalty and the benefit of her taking on this position, which would foster better relations between the Nawabi regime and the English.⁶ The English Government, led by Lord Hastings decided to divide the guardianship⁷ (*naibat-i-nizamat*) of the Nawab between Munny Begum (step mother of the Nawab, as *Naib*) and Raja Guru Dass (son of Raja NandKumar, as *Diwan*), replacing Mohammad Reza Khan. The Begum was allowed

⁶ The Begum’s arguments with the English bring to mind similar ones that Begum Qudsia of Bhopal (d.1881) used to convince the English authorities to allow her to rule as the regent of her daughter NawabSikander Begum, who was the legitimate ruler of Bhopal after the death of her father, NawabNazar Mohammad (d.1819). The Begums of Bhopal, four in number and quick succession, ruling till the early 20th century, were powerful rulers who managed the administration and diplomatic relations of the kingdom with great acumen. See ShaharyarM.Khan, *Begums ofBhopal- A Dynasty of Women Rulers in Raj India*, I.B.Tauris, New York, 2000, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (ed. and with an introduction), *A Princess’sPilgrimage* NawabSikandar Begum ‘s *A Pilgrimage to Mecca*, Kali for Women, Delhi, 2007.

⁷ Under Islamic Law, a mother is not the *de facto* guardian of a minor, only when appointed by a court. A.A.A.Fyzee, *Outlines of Muhammadan Law*, 4th ed., OUP, Delhi, 1993, p.202.

access to Nawabi resources and a monthly stipend of Rs.6,000 per month.⁸ Some members of the Council, Hastings's detractors Mr. Francis and Col. Monson, blamed the Governor General for appointing a 'weak woman' so he could siphon off the province's revenue as he liked.⁹ Munny Begum was blamed for "neglecting the upbringing of the Nawab, wasting his fortune and denying him even the common necessities."¹⁰ A close supervision was kept on the Begum, with her correspondence and her principal officers and servants being placed under watch. The young Nawab was satisfied with her regency, but several factions within the Nawabi household were opposed to her reign of power. The other ladies of the *zenana* petitioned the British Government that she had not paid their stipends regularly.¹¹ The Begum was charged with withholding more money than was required to manage the royal household (accruing a balance of more than Rs.9 lakhs) and for keeping this information from the Company. There was an enquiry instituted against her and she was temporarily removed from her position.

The Governor General might have recommended the appointment of the Begum to the post of *naibat-i-nizamat* and given her the charge of the Nawabi household and education of the young Nawab, because he might have felt that she was not a threat to the English authorities. The Board believed that the Begum's rank would satisfy the indigenous court without infringing on the English authority.¹² The Begum was appointed because the English wanted someone who did not pose a serious threat to their influence at the Nawabi court. The Begum was able to exercise substantial amount of clout at the court because the Nawab greatly respected her. She could guide his decisions as she was in

⁸ Letter to Council from the Nawab of Bengal, dated 4th May 1778, Foreign Dept., Secret Cons., 11th May, 1778.

⁹ At his infamous trial at the British Parliament, Hastings was accused of taking payments from the Begum in lieu of granting her the appointment. Edmund Burke, *Articles of High Crimes, Misdemeanors against Warren Hastings Esq.*, 1786.

¹⁰ Minutes from General Clavering, Mr. Francis and Col. Monson, Dated 15th Sept., Foreign Dept. Secret Cons. [FDSP], 25th Jan. 1776, National Archives of India [NAI], Delhi.

¹¹ Petitions to the English Govt., FDSP, 8th June 1775, No.1.

¹² The Resolution passing the order of appointing Munny Begum to guardianship of the Nabob states, "Her rank may give her a claim to this pre-eminence without hazard to our own policy nor will be incompatible with the rules prescribed to her sex by the laws and manners of the country, as her authority will be confined to the walls of the Nabob's office and the *Dewan* will act in all cases where she cannot personally appear. Great abilities are not to be expected in the *zenana*, but in these she is far from being deficient, nor any extraordinary reach of understanding requisite for so limited an employ." Resolution of the Committee of Circuit, FDSP, 21st May, 1772, No.2.

charge of his education and upbringing. Even after being removed from her position, the Begum kept up her correspondence with the English authorities, often interceding on the behalf of the members of the Nawabi household who applied for stipends from the Company. She built a magnificent mosque at Murshidabad¹³ and patronized many artists and learned men. She died in 1813 and left behind substantial wealth that was coveted by many, including the Nawab and the English. She was buried with state honours at the family burial grounds at Jafarganj. Her will was found in bags under her seal, which appointed the Nawab Syed Zain ul din Ali Khan Bahadur as her sole heir and executor,¹⁴ the authenticity of which was doubted by the English authorities who secretly ordered an enquiry. Their argument for this was that the Begum had disliked the present Nawab and had supported his rival claimant (his brother) to the throne. Her *Vakil* at the Presidency at Calcutta was reported to have stated that the will was not genuine as it wasn't in the hand of her usual *Munshi*.¹⁵

Munny Begum's career is highly reminiscent of the influence exerted by the Begums of Awadh on the Nawabi court, especially Bahu Begum (d.1816). The two Begums were almost contemporaries, belonging to a Shi'a regional kingdom which had originated from the Mughal set-up. After their death, their wills were subjected to intense scrutiny, with Munny Begum leaving everything to the Nawab of Bengal (a fact not appreciated by the English who were probably expecting a windfall at her death!) and Bahu Begum making the English Government her sole trustee and executor. They both left behind an assortment of dependents and relatives, who drew their livelihood from the allowances and stipends allotted to them in the Begum's will. Though none of the Begums of Awadh held an official position in the kingdom's administration, like Munny Begum (who had been formally appointed as the guardian of the minor Nawab and given in charge of the Nawabi household), they were an important link in the hierarchical ruling structure of Awadh.

¹³ This *ja'mi masjid* was known as the Chowk mosque, built in 1767-68. It was the most important religious structure of the Nawabi capital as well as a symbolic representation of a politically rejuvenated Murshidabad under Munny Begum's leadership. Catherine Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, Part 1, Vol.4, Cambridge 1992, p.330

¹⁴ Letter from Superintendent of the *Nizamut*, to Secretary to the Govt. of India, dated 11th Jan.1813, FDSP, 26th Feb.1813, No.18.

¹⁵ Letter from the Council, dated 16th Jan. 1813, FDSP, 26th Feb,1813, No. 20.

The Begums in these kingdoms¹⁶, due to their access to the ruler and command over substantial personal wealth, actively participated in the process of decision-making. Another common factor was their use of religious institutions and patronage to add to their authority and status. The Begums, of Awadh and Bengal, built mosques and *imambaras*, donated to Shi'a institutions and shrines in India, Iran and Iraq, patronized scholars and artists and took part in the courtly and ritual life of the kingdoms. Their participation in the religious life of the kingdoms was away to communicate their social rank, affluence and piety. The Begums also maintained diplomatic and political relations with the English authorities. They looked towards the English as both their rivals and protectors, alternating their stance between resistance and conformity towards the new masters of Bengal and Awadh. They negotiated with the English in their role as the important links in the ruling hierarchy, to secure the office of their husbands and sons¹⁷, and acknowledged the protection guaranteed to them by the English power, when faced with the antagonism of those rulers. They applied to the Company for taking their side in their conflict with the Nawabs and looked towards them as the upholders of their rank and status. On the other hand, the Begums led coups and intrigues against the English presence at their courts. The English Government's attitude towards the politically active Begums was one marked by disdain and caution. In their letters and documents, the English refer to these women as being deficient in the abilities to rule and make decisions, hampered as they were by their 'sex, religion and country', while admittedly seeing them as formidable challenges ('fountain of all authority'¹⁸) to the uninterrupted exercise of the Company's control in the kingdom.

¹⁶ Apart from Munny Begum, the other politically active royal women of the Nawabi kingdom of Bengal included Zinatunnissa Begum, of Sarfaraz Khan (d.1741) Ghasiti Begum, daughter of Ali Vardi Khan (1740-56) and Luft un nissa Begum, wife of Sirajuddaulah (d.1757).

¹⁷ The Begums of Farrukhabad, the Afghan kingdom of north India, which had been defeated by the combined forces of Nawab Shujaudaulah and the Company, often wrote to the English authorities applying for assistance or negotiating for certain political gains. The Mother of Nawab Muzaffar Jung wrote to the Governor General in the late 1780's, persuading him to replace the present Nawab with her younger son. The Nawab had confined her to her palace and forcibly taken away her seals. Letter from Ali'a Begum, Mother of the Nawab of Furruckabad to the Governor General, dated 29th Jan. 1787, FDSP, 31st Jan. 1787, No. 17.

¹⁸ Letter from Resident at Lucknow, FDSP, 16th Oct. 1797, No. 7.