Lucknow: Fire of Grace
The Story of its Revolution, Renaissance and the Aftermath

Amaresh Misra

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A Sensuality Emerges: the Life and Times of Wajid Ali Shah

Nasiruddin Haider too met a violent end. Some say he was poisoned by Dhania Mehri. Jealousy may have been the motive but the Company's hand was widely suspected.

Haider's death was followed by widespread violence. The succession of Munna Jaan who was his legal heir, was contested by the resident in a court of law. On losing, he resorted to a show of arms. The throne room, the Lal Baradari, was attacked with cannons and troops, and many lives were lost before Munna Jaan surrendered along with Badshah Begum, Nasiruddin Haider's fiery mother.

One of Saadat Ali Khan's brothers, Muhammad Ali Shah, was literally 'woken up' and crowned third king of Avadh. His accession was supported by the same clique of the 'leisurely nobility' which had opposed Badshah Begum and Munna Jaan. They were mainly court-pensioners, who were on the pay roll of the Avadh treasury via the good offices of the Company. Comprising of both Hindus and Muslims, they had little in common with the entrepreneur nobility spread over the length and breadth of Avadh administration. Bound by the treaties which committed the kingdom to the East India Company, this section constituted a silent, opposition-in-waiting.

The new king was immediately slapped with a treaty; he was also made the victim of a big fraud. The treaty increased the subsidiary amount payable by the nawab and specified that the Company would take over the administration of Avadh should it deem necessary. But it was struck down by the directors of the East India Company who considered it unjust and hardly an improvement on the treaty of 1801. Officially, no treaty existed — but it so happened that the governor general 'forgot' to inform the king of this very obvious detail. So unofficially, the treaty continued to be enforced. The king was unaware that the threats under which he was issuing loans to the Company — loans which were seldom paid back — had no locus standi.

But beneath the harassed frame of a frail king also lay a brilliant mind. The buildings of Muhammad Ali Shah did not follow the Saracenic baroque style. That phase ended with Roshan-ud-Daula who was Nasiruddin Haider's prime minister after Mehndi Ali Khan. A mixture of flamboyance and scientific sternness, his famous house had a dainty masjid besides giant, Acropolis-style Doric columns. The brooding, grand and scholarly look was broken by floral patterns on the pillars, brackets on the walls and the panoramic, non-linear structure of the building.

Muhammad Ali Shah's buildings leaned towards the rococo. He constructed the Sat Khanda, a giant observatory tower fit for observing the moon with the aid of a telescope. Situated near the Bara Imambara, it was a 'mood' and 'attitude' building resembling the architecture of Moorish Spain. While the structure rose like the leaning tower of Pisa, the columns danced in the manner of the palace of Cordova. Palladian tympanums stood atop Romanesque arches in all the four storeys. It gave a raw, energetic, darkish-red look, a precursor to the pure rococo of Hussenabad or the Chhota Imambara.

Polished with white limestone, the embellishments of the Chhota Imambara looked like frills of the khayal — the tinkering 'zamzama', the gliding 'meend' and the hanging 'taans'. The Muslim crescent stood atop the Hindu kalash and a flight of steps led to a small courtyard. The Chhota Imambara invoked parallels with the nearby Bara Imambara, but between Asaf-ud-Daula and Muhammad Ali Shah, the 'bigvaul' had given way to a 'cottage', and splendour to elegance. Both the Bara and the Chhota Imambara were traditional Shia buildings with a touch of the contemporary. But while the former was a 'farrashkhana'
with a Persian tray, the latter seemed like a pearl dropped from the sky. Angels, cast in the colour of gold, stood on each side of its gateway and a miniature Mughal garden was interrupted in the middle by a rectangular pond.

But Muhammad Ali Shah's Baradari, built near the Sat Khanda, went beyond the rococo. It had an arched balcony with pillars resembling the legs of an Indian bed. The space between the arches was curved like the space between two rods of the bed, making a 'C' shape with the two arms curved inwards and the two ends jutting outwards. The balcony top was occupied by three triangular 'huts', in the manner of rest houses on a hill side resort. Muhammad Ali Shah's style combined Greek, Moorish, Persian and even 'household' features, while always keeping close to a multiplicity of visions.

But the Sat Khanda was never completed. Muhammad Ali Shah died a premature death, leaving behind a Lucknow which appeared more and more startling to foreigners. Provincial styles of Europe, which had yet to grace the capitals of the occident, had found their way into the alleys, lanes and bylanes of the city. One could see Mughal, Jaunpuri, Rajput, Pahadi, even Japanese and Chinoiserie features existing side by side, exploding all notions of stylistic continuity.

A rococo phase was qualified by the sudden emergence of a Rajput haveli, a Turkish dome or a Masjid with pagodas. Ganjs and roads intermingled to establish elite shopping centres. After coming to power, Amjad Ali Shah, the son of Muhammad Ali Shah and the fourth king of Avadh, laid down a ganj. By his time, the road from the Rumi Darwaza to Dilkusha, from the west to the east, already marked the luxuriant arm of the city. What it needed was a modern reach into the inner heart of the city—a path linking the Zahoor Baksh and the Begum Kothi to the dense quarters of Aminabad. Thus emerged the Hazratganj—a market centre with a straight, wide road running uninterruptedly from one end to the other with pavements on the sides. The road resembled the grid like streets of Shajahanabad, Istanbul, Isfahan and the British dominated centres. It signified Lucknow's coming of age and her varied, cosmopolitan base. Saadat Ganj now looked like a busy market centre of Kanpur, and the chowk wore a walled, festive look on the pattern of Faizabad. The baghs, mini forests, waterfalls and canals reminded one of Nainital, Dehradun and Kashmir, the fiza bringing close the open, lush smells of the Punjab.

The city, however, was no disordered maze of streets, alleys, markets and environment. Her irregularity represented the sajawat, or beaification, of a Krishna Janmashtmi jhanki. The multilayered spread of spaces approximated to the burada of the jhanki, frayed on the sides with passages, leaving in the middle a wide mass of dense and uneven edges. The city thus emerged as a swinging tapestry, running ten to twelve miles from Charbagh in the south to Aishbagh in the north and Takia Bodhi in the west to Kothi Bibipur on the east, on a circumference of 152 villages. As in a jhanki, the complex of palaces with their many storeys gave way to thinly populated spaces surrounded by open fields, baghs and ponds. These again were cut by roads, more palaces and densely populated portions. The main streets were linked at vertical and horizontal points, seldom bulldozing through the living quarters.

The city's drainage system linked seven big underground canals with the Gomti. These were constructed keeping uneven slopes in mind, low points to the east being supplied by small canals to prevent waterlogging.

Amjad Ali Shah completed a modern, pucca road linking Lucknow and Kanpur. Hazratganj became a thriving market place of the new sort, housing foreign luxury and consumer goods plus smallscale workshops of shoes, candles and toys. Parsis, Afghans and Tajiks comprised the new breed of traders who introduced new occupations. The art of building carriages acquired a market orientation as Parsis began making bagghis for the middle class gentry and the British. Local ittars factories sprung up and so did paper mills and workshops for producing dyes and printing blocks.

By Lucknowi standards, Amjad Ali Shah's reign was a 'puritan' one. But the importance given to religious disciples was offset by a stress on secular learning and the cultivation of library science. His minister, Amin-ud-Daula, a man of learning himself, inhabited the new locality of Aminabad. This area was formerly the property of Prince Suleiman Shokh, a son of King Shah Alam who settled in Lucknow in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The Avadhi nawabs upto Saadat Ali Khan respected his superior status, allowing his personal court to become a centre of patronage and culture. After Ghaziuddin Haider's
coronation, his status was undermined and he had to give away one of his daughters in marriage to Nasiruddin Haider. But his family had become Lucknowites to the point of adopting the poetry, dress, custom and language of Avadh. They inhabited the area near Mauviganj in the southern part of the city which had evolved as the exclusive resort of the town nobility.

However, by Amjad Ali Shah’s time, the old Indo-Persian nobility was on the decline. A ‘mass level’ composite culture came to the fore going well beyond Persian manners. Revolving around Urdu and Avadh, it was led by the middle classes made up of shopkeepers, sportsmen, employees of private, Shahi and Company firms, educated youth, educationists, proprietors of printing presses, maulvis and professional artisans. These forces were present from before but now they took on the features of a ‘citizenry’ with an autonomy of their own. A large number of lower level courtesans came up as individuals in their own right. The courtesan salon was now witness to conflicts between the neo-rich and the old nobility, or middle class aspirations based on love and the older standards of etiquette based on distance and restraint.

‘Aminabad became the exclusive haunt of these middle classes. The transfer of property from Suleiman Shokh’s family to Amin-ud-Daula signified the transfer of a social milieu. The new Padain ki Masjid, which came up in the locality, was patronised by Amin-ud-Daula’s Brahmin mistress. She broke down restrictions of gender and religion to allow both Hindus and Muslims, men and women inside the prayer hall. The masjid adopted many Hindu customs, common hitherto, only to the Sufi dargahs. Aminabadi culture foreshadowed a new age — the age of Wajid Ali Shah.

When the young son of Amjad Ali Shah ascended the throne in 1847, he already enjoyed the reputation of being a ‘rasiya’. Oscillating between the company of religious and intellectual scholars on the one hand and musicians, courtesans, dancers on the other, he also showed, in those early days, a keen interest in mathematics and other rational sciences. Two sides were apparent from the very beginning — one that the organiser, the man interested in the world of ideas and politics, the other of the literary genius who saw the physical realm as a path to knowledge, experience and spirituality, and outwitted senior maulvis in the theory and practice of religion.

Wajid Ali Shah’s age was one of tumult and greatness. Under the Delhi trio of Momin Khan Momin, Zauq and Ghalib, Urdu poetry reached its pinnacle of gesture, mood, language and ideas. The Mughal court of Bahadur Shah Zafar finally departed from past nostalgia to inaugurate a phase of mature political and cultural diplomacy. Momin, a confirmed Walaiulahite, composed verses which extolled martyrs fighting for an anti-British egalitarian society in Punjab. Zauq, who was Zafar’s ushur, used the metaphor of the ‘morning breeze’ to comment caustically, on the ‘enlightenment’ promised by the British and how it would snuff out the Bahadur Shah Zafar’s candle:

\[
\text{Ae shuma ek chor hai manje naseem subah}\\
\text{Mare hai koi dam me tere taje zar pe haath}\\
\text{(O’ candle, this gust of morning breeze is a thief)}\\
\text{Anytime, it may snatch away your golden crown)}
\]

Ghalib spoke of the dimensions of pain — how emotional expressions require a full age to be effective. ‘Aah ko chaiye ek umra asar hone tak’. All at once, lament gave way to historical and political themes. A realisation that the power of the East India Company could no longer be negotiated peacefully became obvious. In Calcutta, a new governor general had arrived with a new weapon. Called the ‘Doctrine of Lapse’, doctrines lapsed with impunity following its application.

Lord Dalhousie’s most ardent and passionate victim, the city of Lucknow, kept passing through an unusual crisis of development and opportunity. Sleeman began his Avadh tours and the office of the resident became a means to empty Lucknow of resources and money. Elliot, the governor general’s secretary, started a drive to empty Lucknow of learning. Arriving in 1847, he began collecting rare manuscripts by persuasion and coercion, finally destroying the priceless library of Asaf-ud-Daula.

People grew restive as cultural authority collapsed. Young boys began correcting disciples of Nasikh, the ‘zila’ and the ‘tuk bandi’ (forms of versified satire) torpedoing puritanical strictures against the play of the material. In the countryside, Sleeman heard ominous portents of a
possible revolt. In the city, there was a sudden spurt of men carrying arms. The traveller Bishop Heber described the amazing sight when stern looking maulvis, dark skinned labourers and the fair skinned nobility talked in the language of armed forces.

Wajid Ali Shah entered an environment where the colour of Mir and Sauda had turned pale, and the ideas of Nasirh and Aatisah were passing through a phase of transition—noble aristocratic suffering and noble approval of the market was out. The ‘market’ with its labourer, trader and the rebellious noble, had come centre stage. Disciples of Aatisah and Naishk, Rind, Sava, Rashk, Aseer now arrived with a new kind of post-Mir Hasan, post-Daya Shankar Naseem Masnavi.

Slowly and subtly, society was being ripped apart by contradictions. Suppressed passions between the rich and the poor, the firangi and the native, the rich and rich, the middle class and the urban landlords, the nobility and the neo-rich, the criminals and the police, criminals and dacoits, the underclass and the sharaf, were coming to the surface. In keeping with the spirit, the new king understood the upheaval inside him. Younger than his contemporaries, he lived the ‘ideas’ which others only spoke of.

Wajid Ali Shah was an unusual man of an unusual time—when everything was possible he did the impossible. He preserved for posterity what it meant to be a true Asian in the best and worst of periods. Beneath the rapidly spreading tentacles of Western might and culture, he upturned the very meaning of tradition to create a concept of Asiatic freedom. This was a freedom which followed the mind and the heart according to the need of the situation. It did not take anything for granted, believing in the transitoriness of all phenomena. And yet every moment was captured in its entirety.

Wajid Ali Shah, in this form and content, was the greatest enemy of the British. He was the exact opposite of their puritanical, positivist, pugnacious and metaphysical value system. When they called him indolent, he involved the people in his sensual pleasures. When they termed him capricious, he shamed the British with his humanism. Charged with over indulgence, he institutionalised his love for music, dance and women.

On account of his previous reputation as the heir apparent, the Company did not expect Wajid Ali Shah to take an interest in the affairs of the administration. But on assuming the throne he mounted a horse and began conducting infantry parades at the Musa Bagh in an army uniform. In the early hours of the morning, the Corinthian pillars and trick huts of the Musa Bagh built by Asaf-ud-Daula shook to the sound of European drill in Persian terminology. But there was no compromise in style. The regiments had fancy names, cavalry troops being called Banka (Dandy), Tircha (Fop) and Ghangur (Dark), while the infantry was given titles such as Akhtari (Lucky) and Nadiri (Rare). This was a revolutionary concept as it did away with the earlier practice of naming regiments after troop leaders and regions.

The British were alarmed. They were doubly perplexed by the king’s intention to effect reforms in every sphere. To gauge the ‘people’s mood’, complaint boxes were placed near roads. In them, most of the complainants expressed their satisfaction over the existing judicial system founded on the principles of Mohammedan and Hindu law. So the king set about strengthening the existing judicial system and did not pay much heed to the British advice of introducing European style courts. He also stopped the practice of holding lavish durbars, finding them inconvenient and a burden on valuable resources. To tighten professional conduct, people were encouraged to seek redress in the Avadh courts and come to the king only in cases of emergency. In land revenue management, the state established direct contact with the cultivators and the Ijara, or the contract revenue system, was abolished. The king also transferred responsibilities to a set of trained officials, instead of concentrating autocratic power in his hands. He bade the district collectors to take into account the specifics of an area and public opinion while assessing the revenue. Justice on economic matters was dispensed in special courts and criticism was encouraged in the king’s personal durbar.

The British condemned Wajid Ali Shah’s system of justice, stopped the morning drill and placed barriers in the way of revenue reforms. They began complaining against the collectors, entangling the king in petty and inconsequential details while subverting his state machinery. The king simply ignored them. The British then began hitting below the belt. Wajid Ali Shah’s experiments in music, arts and personal ethics
became the butt of scathing, personalised attacks. He replied by setting up the Parikhana, a hostel of dance and music. There he expressed his ideas on mass culture and initiated new festivals while setting up exclusive fairs for ladies. His master stroke rested in creating an Urdu theatre, the crystallisation of a concept which had begun in the time of Nasiruddin Haider.

Wajid Ali Shah stamped the Indo-Persian cultural tendency, unleashed by Amir Khusro, with a last point of definition. If Khusro was the subconscious of the Indo-Gangetic belt, Wajid Ali Shah constituted its self-consciousness. Khusro entered deep within the Indian household with his loris’. Wajid Ali composed pahelis, or riddles, which taught wit and manner to children right up to the post-independence period.

Hari thi man bhari thi nau lakh moti jadi thi,
Raja ji ke bagh men, dashala odhi khadi thi —

(She was green, she was heady, and was embellished with nine lakh pearls, she was standing in the king’s garden encased in a shawl)

What is it? A corn on the cob.

His palace complex, the Qaiserbagh too marked the culmination of something begun as far back as the building of the Qutab Minar. In this sense, his character was assimilatory as well as singular. He wrote in Avadhi, Braj, Marwari, Punjabi, Bengali, English, Deccani, Urdu, Hindi and Persian. In over a hundred books he included his poetry, writings on literature and theories of art. The literature written on the art of love, or ‘ishkbaazi’, was biting enough to rival De Sade and Henry Miller.

Amir Khusro mixed Persian with Avadhi, Braj or Hindi, to create a fresh montage:

Zeehale miskin makun taghaful
Doraiye naina banaye batiyan

(Don’t ignore this poor and down and out You turn away your eyes and try to fool me through your talk!)

Or

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Ketabe bijra na daram ae jaan
Na leo kabe lagaye chatiyan

(O’ my love, I do not possess the capacity to bear the pain of separation

Why won’t you press against me your chest?)

The inclusion of ‘batiyan’ and ‘lagaye chatiyan’ changed the whole tenor of the qawwali. It provided the emotional break in the lyrical flow. It was like introducing a bit of ‘khameera’ in a beeda of paan, making it ‘adak’, sweet and mellifluous. But Wajid Ali Shah overturned the whole structure of the paan. He began his compositions in Avadhi, even Bengali, before going on to Urdu:

Asbo bosho na bolon banagalin meri jaan (Bengali-Urdu),
Aankhen teri ras raseelin, bhauen chadi kaman (Urdu).

Wajid Ali’s leitmotif combined gesture, humour and emotion. It could adopt the stance of a suffering woman, a proud tormentor, a rustic raisya, a sophisticated gentleman. He could write in an emotional, melancholy voice so typical of the ghazal mood —

Ravish chanegi gulsan me saba mere baad
Bulbuli bhalungi phoolon ki dua meri baad

(The morning wind will search for small pathways in the garden Nightingales will forget the grace of flowers after me)

And immediately adopt the ‘stringar ras’ with an ‘irony’ —

Gesu pe pari ru ke rasai hai kisi ki
Sar pe ye bala aaj bulai hai kisi ki

(Someone’s tresses are entangled like a fairy’s today, trouble will come calling on someone’s head!)

Irony entered his love poetry too:

Pada hai paane men ab silsila mohabbat ka
Bura bhamara bhu ho bhula mohabbat ka

(The chain of love now encases the feet As if I suffer and love prospers!)
Or

Ishk kyo kam tha aina ki kholi kalai
Ek hairani zyada hui hairano mein

(Was love not enough, that you had to expose the mirror's secret?
This was one more astonishment amongst many astonishments.)

These lines joined dissimilar metaphors with a 'bang' by
attitudinalising the physical excitement of doing so. Poetry had
acquired the tone and timber of the 'akhada' where two profiles clash with elan.
There was no contemporary example to rival Wajid Ali Shah’s duel.
Its legatee appeared later as the non-idealist working class poetry of the
twentieth century.

Akhtar Fiyaa exploded genres to introduce the narrative in the ghazal
and the singular idea in the masnavi. This 'something' between the
ghazal and the masnavi included a wall of patriotism (composed when
he was leaving Lucknow, never to return):

Doston shhad rabo tumko khuda ko saumpa
Hamne apne dile nazuk ko jafa ko saumpa
Qaiserbagh jo hai usko subu ko saumpa
Daroo deevar pe haarat se nazav karte hain —
Khusro rabo ahole watan hum to saafa karte hain
Sare ab shahar se hota hai akhtaa rukhsat
Aage baab mae mulk ki ya rab bhikhat
Daroo deevar pe —

Friends, be happy, I consign you to God
My tender heart I consign to the virtue of faithlessness
This place called Qaisarbagh I consign to the morning wind
I look at my house and walls with the look of aspiration —
Be happy, my nation, I journey ahead Akhtar departs from the whole
of the city
Beyond this I do not have the patience to state anything
That the people of my country should not get destroyed O’ God

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I look at my house and walls

When the Parikhana laid out the rudiments of Kathak, ancient
Indian dance forms, hitherto centred around temples, were also being
updated in the secular courts of south India. But they still relied on
ancient moods. The Bharatnatyam leaned on grand posture and the
Odissi on the supplie sway of the body. Kuchipudi undulated on the
elegance of rhythm while Manipuri on the grace and fixture of abstract,
mathematical movements. Only Kathakali was driven by narrative and
gesture. Kathak, formerly the Allahabadi art of story-telling and secular
dance, moved faster than the Kathakali. Despite revolving around
gesture and rhythm, rather than mood or posture, it drew its energy
from emotion and meaning.

These emotions, however, were not confined to the traditional
nirvans. While evolving the nritta, or pure dance, and nrtiya, the
thematic movement, Wajid Ali Shah and his dancers subsumed single
blocks of emotions into a montage of pure pleasure. Simple taals and
intricate footwork broke all naturalistic-thematic rules common to
Bharatnatyam or Kathakali. A celebration of style for its own sake,
Kathak nritta introduced the new attitude of freedom and individuality,
seen in the American tap and the Spanish flamenco. But its pure speed
and technique also had a story to tell and in that sense it came close
to the European classical ballet.

The gestures of Kathakali and Bharatnatyam invoked deep, primitive
forms of energy. Wajid Ali Shah’s ‘gatens’, or compositions, spoke
of modern functions, physical attitudes and material objects: Salami
(salute) gat, naaz (care) gat, fariyad (request) gat, mukut (crowns) gat,
banke (flamboyant) gat, ghunghat (veil) gat, bhainga (twisted eye) gat,
lehenga (garment) gat. This gesture ended up energising the tradition of
khayal, thumri, dadra, tappa, hori and dhrupad. Thumri evolved out
of the nritya but expressed feelings in a quasi staccato form, pitting pain,
complaint and masti in a competitive whole:

Gori lat khol de, lat men kala nag
Chati ki tu bani bajhi, akhtar sunao rag —
(thumri in Rag Aamodh)

Gori lat khol de, lat men kala nag
Chati ki tu bani bajhi, akhtar sunao rag —
(thumri in Rag Aamodh)
Wajid Ali Shah's khayals became 'un-khayaalised', following the abstract conventions of classical raags but producing shock, 'special effects':

\[\text{Kahi bosi biji, chamak chamak akhtar}\
\text{Dhak dhak chaitian bajat}\
\text{Chaudh chaudh man lapak lapak.}\]

This style changed the mood of his 'heroines'. He had a number of nikaahi and mutahi wives, as well as liasion women, some of whom were part of his Parikhana. They were all titled differently, as per their ada. One day, a begum who was quite vocal in her protests said to the king: ‘You enjoy life whenever you feel like, we are engrossed in only one occupation, there is very little application of our dance', and so on and so forth. The king came up with a solution: how about a play of Radha and Krishna? There were raas mandalis of Braj in Lucknow adept at performing Krishna's dance with the gopis. But their art had no plot. Wajid Ali Shah created events before the dance in the manner of the 'jalsewaliyan' of Lucknow and the folk peri. He then transformed the dance itself into an 'epic manner' to produce a full fledged drama or 'rahas'.

Soon Radha appeared on a proscenium stage speaking in Persian and Urdu. Krishna became the Avadhian peasant - lusty, rugged, witty and full of life. This was the 'proletarian' interpretation of Krishna, present in the original Mahabharata or in later Vaishnavite texts. The Krishna who caught the hand of binak Raskhan, about to leave Mathura thinking that Krishna would no longer visit him, and said — Kahan jaat ho, saar (Where are you off to, you sod).

In a 'rahas', a jogan wants to see the raslila of Krishna. Her servant sets out for the purpose and reaches Radha after several encounters with pariyan, sakhiyans and funsters. The Radha he meets acts tempestuously, like a regular heroine of the burlesque.

Before Radha enters, Wajid Ali Shah issues stage instructions: 'After the completion of the previous scene all sakhiyans, or friends of Radha, should say Raja Ramchandra ki jai. After that, the competition of Radha and Kanhaiya should commence, half the sakhiyans should stand on the side of Kanhaiya, half on Radha's side, question and answer should commence between Radha-Kanhaiya and meaning of the reference to the context ought to be elaborated alongside according to the already established custom through the right side of the circular stage after each she and each dohra'.

Radha enters and says:

\[\text{Majmey gair men aisa sitam ijad kiya, katila bhool ke humko na yaad kiya (Urdu).}\
\text{Dohra: Main virahni sanjog sang na ko saath, Nari chevrat bed ke fafla ho gaye haath (Braj-Hindi).}\]

Krishna replies:

\[\text{Naam mera hai kanhaiya main tujhko janat hun, Radha ji jaan se main tumko yahan maanta hun.}\]

Dohra: Radha ji ang par bindiya iti chavi det,
Mano fuli ketki bhor basan let.

Radha: Main teri ishk men diwani hui ae kanha,
Maine ji jaan se tujhko yahan pachhana.

Dohra: Aao pyare mohan palak dekh tohe leun,
Na main dekhun auran ko na tohe dekhan deun.

At one point, Radha gets angry with Kanhaiya; she suspects that he has given his flute to Kubri, or the other woman. Kanhaiya is in a fix; what to do now? He calls Ramcheera, the eternal jester, and the jogan's servant. Ramcheera arrives; from the beginning he is irreverent towards Kanhaiya. The rasas changes tone from verse to pure conversational dialogues, mainly in Avadh.

Ramcheera: Hazir Maharaj Hazir Raja ke Raj Adhvij Maharaj Shiv Pradhan Chattrapati batao to kya hua?
(I am here great king, I am here kingdom, of the king, great king Shiv Pradhan Chattrapati, do say what happened?)

[Why was Chattra Pati Shivaji, the Maratha ruler, being compared to Kanhaiya?]

Kanhaiya: Radhike khsaf ho gayin. Janat hain main murli kubri ko de aaya hun.
He went and brought an empty vessel from the market. He then
drilled a tree on which there was a beehive. He filled the vessel with
the hive, closed its mouth and kept it inside a small room of the house.

He told the thakur that he had brought the Band Raag. The thakur
was very happy; he went inside the room, the Ramcheera bolted the
door from the outside. The thakur shook the vessel; the bees hummed
— a bhan bhan bhan bhan bhan bhan —

The thakur was extremely happy. What excellent service by
Ramcheera, what an excellent raag. Ramcheera egged him on to open
the mouth of the vessel to hear the raag in its full form. As the thakur
did so, in an instant his body was covered by a swarm of bees.
Ramcheera had bolted the door and he could only tear his clothes, shout
and beat himself.

The moral of the story — never wrong a heartless, ‘unpaid’ servant.

Laughter.

In another nakal, Wajid Ali Shah gave instructions at every step,
inciting, putting on the gesture, and make the face of particular characters.
‘Make the face of qazi thus’, ‘that of the mufti in this way’. The
enactment tells the tale of an amir who asks his servant to send horsemen
in search of the new moon in the month of Ramzan so that Id can be
celebrated. The horsemen catch hold of a musafir, a traveller, and ask
whether he has seen the moon. The musafir replies that yes he has seen
a moon near the Jamuna, behind the leaves of the peepal tree.

The musafir is brought before the amir. The amir is happy and tells
his servants to take him to the qazi. The qazi sends him to the mufti.
The mufti sends him to the big court. The big court sends him back
to the small court. The musafir shuttles between various ‘offices’, gives
evidence about the moon, time and time again, and swears that he will
not see ‘the moon’ again in his life.

The musafir then goes off and sleeps in a broken masjid. There he
begins to talk in his sleep — the moon is at the qazi’s place, the moon
is at the mufti’s place. Some religious Muslims pass by — one of them
thinks he is a ghost, one is of the view that he is a martyr, the other
almoniser tells him to read the kalma. But the musafir, too tired and
suspicious by his experiences, continues — the moon is in the big court,
the moon is in the small court. The Muslims wake him up and on seeing
their faces, the musafir runs off swearing again that from that moment on he would never speak about the moon.

In these slapsticks, the author undermined authority and mocked it at institutionalised sacredness. They fell under the dramatic conventions of the non-Aristotelian, non-Victorian, non-Ibsenian, non-Stanislavskian theatre represented chiefly, by medieval European drama, German baroque comedy and Brechtian didactics. As if this was not enough, the rahas and the nakal soon inspired the first ‘opera’ of Lucknow, the ‘Indar Sabha’ of Amanat.

In contrast to the bawdy burlesque and the irreverent slapstick, dramatic forms of the elite and the working class, the opera grew out from the world of the middle class, bourgeois ‘citzenry’. Amanat himself belonged to the breed of the ‘Lucknowi bourgeoisie’ — he even used to call himself ‘citizen Amanat’. In Indar Sabha, the gods came down to the earth and the public stage of Lucknow in front of ordinary people. It unleashed, in a short while, a revolution in attitude, fun and social life. Amanat himself wrote:

“The moment when Indar Sabha was presented in a sequence, the whole world listened to it and praised it without a sequence. Idols cried Allah! Allah! each line is a line or a gift from God! Whomever remembered whatever, flew away with it, it was on everyone’s lips. Some remembered it, some wrote it down, some searched for meaning, ad infinitum. When its fame flew in Lucknow, ‘Amanat’, everyone presented their righteous wish.”

The sabha revived the post-Sanskrit tradition of Indian theatre, begun in the time of Jehangir in Rajasthan and Agra through the medium of the Braj language. The sabha posed stiff competition to the purely English theatre of Bombay and provided the standardised formula for a new genre.

Realist conventions, tragic twists and the sensational, akhad gesture balanced the fantastical plot in Indar Sabha. The play was translated in Marathi, German and Sinhalese and influenced the development of Parsi theatre. But before Indar Sabha became a raging box-office hit, Wajid Ali Shah had himself adorned the jogiya dress with his begums in a display of mass festivity. He had begun organising festivals during the spring and monsoon on the Gomti, when the river was lit up near the Chattr Manzil. Rows and rows of boats of every conceivable size cruised to the accompaniment of dance, music and revelry on board. Feasts by women, the meena bazaars, first organised by Akbar, were held at Qaisarbagh, the huge complex which the king had created in the heart of the city.

Enclosed by a wall of Romanesque arches and Greek pillars, Qaisarbagh had four gateways. Apart from the symbol of the two fishes, a number of angels stood as primary motifs at the gates. Bandaris, pavilions, manzils, waterfalls, gardens beautified the inner space. A huge, tent like structure, the lanka, was constructed near the white baradari as a massive auditorium. Some of the plays staged here by the king’s friends and courtiers showed sword fights and combats in precise realistic detail.

Qaisarbagh housed the peepal tree under which the king sat as a jaa near the the big house of Chaulakh. From a distance, the palace-complex looked like a never-ending carnival. All its arches were elliptic and the baradaris had big round ‘burj’ like structures at the ends. Appearing as pen castles, they were adorned by sculptures and surrounded by bridges.

Qaisarbagh summed up the history of Indo-Persian architecture, seriously and humorously. It tamed down and absorbed the romanticism of Rajput and Sur pavilions, the openness of Mughal gardens, the brooding elegance of Jaunpur and the Tughlaqs, and played a joke by making the pavilion work like a rest house near the gates. Gateways, also camouflaged the famed optical illusions of Golconda and Bijapur forts.

But Qaisarbagh was no garden of paradise. It stood forth as the king’s open house, or more appropriately the resort of an explorer who could go visiting a courtesan at night, disguised as a commoner. Indeed, Wajid Ali Shah met his future wazir at one such gathering. He represented the open, uninhibited culture of the Indo-Gangetic plain where even the most unconventional acts were permissible if
done with valour, in full view of the public. Exuding male power and
nazakat, Wajid Ali gave voice to the peasantry and introduced the
post-sensual, sexual sign in poetics of love. To him women were
faithful but ‘conscious’ individuals, capable of shifting ‘allegiance’ with
the changing balance of power.

Lovemaking under him was shorn of mystery or romance, becom-
ing scientific and casual. His code of cultural sexuality complemented
his ideological code of post-humanist politics and philosophy. He cul-
tivated talents like the painter-architect Kanshiram who blended the
hand of the Lucknowi calligraphist, seen in khat-e-bahar, khat-e-gulzar,
khat-e-nastalikh, with the Company school of painting. Popularised
by the lithographs of the Daniel brothers, this marked the culmination of
the Avadh school of painting classified earlier by Juan, Jofeni, the
internationally renowned German painter, during Asaf-ud-Daula’s time.
Though drawing on the epic, gestural, non-Western perspective of
Mughal painting, Kanshiram painted ‘dotted’ figures in the manner of
Monet.

His art showed that perspective, far from only being three dimen-
sional, could also be epic. The observer’s eye, instead of receding to
a vanishing point in the centre, could well savour a narrative in three
or four successive stages. Mughal scenes did not cleanse or present the
viewer with lofty ideals. Colliding idea with idea, emotion with mind,
drama with drama, they planted surrender, loyalty, submission, tac;
battle, retreat in a single, ‘multipart’, whole. This epic style is unpar-
alleled in the history of European, Chinese and Japanese art, being the
handiwork of ordinary workmen like Balchand and Payag in
Shahjahan’s time.

Kanshiram, along with Dayanat-ud-Daulah, the king’s courtier, was
also one of the architects of Sikander Bagh. A big walled garden built
for Sikandar Mahal, one of the principal wives of the king and a forceful
personality in her own right, its gates had semi-circular ‘dalans’ with
Greek pillars. The second floor was adorned with Romanesque arches,
interpreted more like the round, non-European or Asiatic-European
arches of Cordova. The top floor was fragmented with pagoda-pyramid
style pavilions on either side. The main gate itself had a big arch flanked
by elephants and two fishes.

It was this vision which applauded the new trend in fashion and
literature. In Lucknow the Delhi style angarkha evolved out of com-
buying the jama and the balabar while doing away with the bodice. The
two flaps were fixed to each other in a way which exposed the left
side of the chest. Wajid Ali Shah wore the Lucknowi angarkha with
the semi-circular jabot and the crescent shaped necklet, unmasking the
left nipple. Modern men’s wear has yet to beat this pure, unadulterated
Asian-Lucknowi flamboyance, before which contemporary Western
fashion must have paled into drab, philistine, peasant insignificance.
Ghette shoes and the ‘kulah’ topi imparted a gorgeous look to the
akhani, now captured not in oil paint but the still image. The reign
of Asghar Jha, the photographer of Lucknow, had begun, which
brought latest European technology right into Lucknowi homes.

Wajid Ali Shah’s rule was marked by an aggressive de-Westernisa-
tion and full-blooded assertion of Indianness. This was the culture of
the gut, power, mind and humour which blasted all idealist, heathen,
Western myths about India. In contrast to the clerical-Bengali, and the
comparador-Bombay, mentality, it showed the pride, self-respect, thanak
and thanak of the Indo-Gangetic belt. Its realism saw Mirza Shauq’s
masnavi departing from the stories of fairies and houris to portray
the trials and tribulations of khangins or ordinary women. This shift
encouraged Wajid Ali to write an early work of Urdu prose — an
account of his love life or ishkaazi ki dastaan. Brutally frank and
pointless, the work spared neither the beloved nor the lover. It also
revealed a dim desire for a community of love, a concept, at once Shiiite
and universal where relations are struck and broken on the basis of
passion and style without jealousy, possessiveness and narrow restric-
tions of social-legal laws. In the end, there was a note of uncaring
sadness about a suffering life that was lived and enjoyed, but in which
the search for faith, love and more suffering has yet to cease.
On 21 November 1856, an item appeared in Tilism, an Urdu weekly newspaper of Lucknow:

"On Mondays and Wednesdays, a crowd collects at places, fakirs sprout fire from their mouths, neither their mouth gets blisters, nor do their clothes get stained."

The editor of the newspaper was Maulvi Muhammad Yakub Ansari, a firangi mahali. Only a few months had passed since its first issue was published from the city’s leading printing press. Tilism was the second newspaper to hit the newsstands — Lucknow Akhbar, edited by Lajja—had been in publication since 1847.

But the language of Tilism, and its presentation of news, was unmatched. It mirrored truly, the special, embellished, spunky flavor of Lucknowi Urdu. The item was about a series of alarming incidents rocking Avadh — bands of fakirs and agent-provocateurs speaking out openly against the British and spreading the gospel of revolution.

Surreptitiously, the Tilism smuggled a political message, establishing the fakirs as revolutionaries, as people who were playing with fire and yet not getting burned. The message was so coded that it could also be read as an ironic, derisive comment on the fakirs.

In Urdu prose, irony, twists and the exhorting tone entered the realm of diction and vocabulary itself—

'In dino galle ki girani hai, giraniye khatir ki aurani hai, goya mufassir men aata gila hai, khune dil bajaye sharab hai, tarje dil kabab hai'.

In this new use of language, satire, pun and emotion found their way into everyday speech. The structure of Khari Boli, which lay at the base of Urdu, underwent a strange twist of outlandishness, sweetness and sourness in the bargain. This ‘coexistence of opposites’ gave a new charge to political and social commentary. The ‘idea’ in the above-mentioned extract, published in the Urdu weekly, Sabre Samro, expressed a simple fact of a shortage of foodgrains, a problem hitting the city with increasing regularity. The reporting was factual but prosaic twists were drawn out of the objective text. Inflation was high so the market must be down. A down market suffers from shortages; so instead of foodgrains, it receives bags of complaint. The heart is (normally) full of blood. But (due to complaints) it gets drowsy, like the effect of wine; and then angry like a fried kebab!

The additional use of zabar and zer, the ‘a’ and ‘e’; in Lucknowi Urdu stretched words and made them pukhta and rounded in comparison with Delhi. Linguistic extensions brought a change in lip movements which in the mid-1850s expressed a momentous event in the history of the Indian subcontinent — the annexation of Avadh.

On 9 February 1856 Wajid Ali Shah was informed by the then resident, General Outram, that the Company was assuming charge of Avadh’s civil and military administration. The king was allowed his title, claim to a generous pension and possession of prized buildings. He was to put a seal on a treaty, specifying his consent in the matter.

The terms were generous; what had the king to lose in signing it? As it is, fighting the British was out of the question. Hadn’t his brethren tried and failed in this endeavours? Had not all the native powers, from Satara in 1846 to Nagpur in 1854 to Tanjore in 1855, proved ineffective in resisting Company encroachment on their sovereignty?

These arguments were fed to the king by Ali Naqi Khan, the controversial wazir of Avadh. Ali Naqi was presumably acting at the
behest of the British on the promise of a jagir and other rewards. The king's seal on the treaty was very important to the Company as it would have conferred legitimacy on a document of doubtful legal validity. The treaty of 1837, which had mentioned the possibility of a Company takeover, was not in force. And no such clause existed in the treaty of 1801. In fact, the king had to be informed that the treaty of 1801 had become redundant; the Company in effect, had to rescind, arbitrarily, its own agreement. An Indian territory was being seized by a foreign Company still, theoretically, a vassal of the Mughal emperor, on the issue of maladministration, without the consent of that emperor. Even on the scale of the informal relation which had evolved between the Company and Avadh, the king's side tipped heavier. Wajid Ali Shah had tried to implement reforms suggested by the Company and observed all norms of 'special friendship' with cordial sincerity.

The annexation of Avadh was thus a political move; its 'irrational' and history of fraud was compiled, blow by blow, with intense precision, by a servant of the East India Company. R.W. Bird, an assistant of Sleeman, fell out with the British administration on the Avadh policy and after its annexation wrote an expose — *The Spoilation of Avadh*. He detailed the rapacious exploitation of Avadh by the Company with satirical relish. The titles of chapters were: *With what Means did the Company come to Know about the Wealth of Shuja-ud-Daula and How Soon it Grew Close to his Kingdom and Treasure; How did the Company Turn Ghaziuddin Haider into a Treasure of Benevolence; Col. Sleeman as the Basic Tool for the Spoilation of Avadh; General Outram Finishes the Unfinished Task of Col Sleeman*, and so on.

The book was published in early 1857 and brought into focus the irreconcilable conflict between the British and the native powers. At that point, other social forces, from the bourgeoisie and the peasantry to the modern soldierly, held the fragile levers of social and economic power. But political legitimacy still rested with native rulers. Even after decades of direct and indirect Company rule, they housed the memories, struggles, hopes and despair of the people. So long as there was a Bahadur Shah Zafar, a symbolic 'Sovereign of the World', 'Frie of Hindustan', in Delhi, a hope for an indigenous 'renewal' remained. So long as dupalli topis, angarkhas, shalukas, ghararas and dhotis remained in force, why would clerks and sepoys of the East India Company be interested in pants and tunics?

Deep cultural, economic and psychological reasons worked behind British attacks on native rulers. Qaiserbagh's rahas and Amanat's Indar Saha portrayed the psychological and contemporary urges of the native mind with all their splendour and tradition. Who would then be interested in the mealy outputs of the European stage put up by stiff-tipped realists? When women had their own rekhti and fashion, courtesans their exclusive salons and housewives their exclusive interiors a lord over, who would be interested in the drab look of an European woman?

The native Hindus had a religion in which aesthetically pleasing human forms of the divine were worshipped without an innate concept of guilt. The native Muslims bowed their heads to the one and only Allah with pride and freedom unencumbered by stern injunctions of mortal suffering. Who would then be interested in a Christian god whose unity was split in three? A god who, on the other hand, could never be a playmate, or a valorous hero like Krishna and Rama?

This historical mindset of the Indian people on the eve of 1857 ended the British in a dilemma. The time for accessibility to native culture was running out. Tainted with exploitation, European modernity also sounded less appealing to Indians.

A court like Lucknow enjoyed a particular type of legitimacy — it was the repository of tradition but it was also the centre of innovation. A Mughal badshah or the Avadhian king could change the time held traditions of the Hindu religion — the temple of Hanuman at Aliganj on the north bank of the Gomti was endowed and further developed by Mallika Kishwar, the wife of Amjad Ali Shah and mother of Wajid Ali. She placed a crescent over the kalash, which too become a sacred symbol of Hindu culture. Similarly, a Hindu talukedar could introduce changes in Muharram celebrations. In Gonda and Rae Bareli, the tazia had to pass the deori of the Hindu raja before the annual procession.

The ruling class did not regard itself as Hindus or Muslims in their social calling. Indeed, dharma was more concerned with one's virtue and calling as a 'man', rather than with being a Hindu or a Muslim. For an Avadhian peasant of that period it would have appeared strange to
be told that he was to deal with two persons, one Hindu and one Muslim, as men of separate dharma. He would have replied, ‘deen to ek hi hai, chahe Hindu ya Musalman (‘faith’ is one whether Hindu or Muslim).

This mass secularisation unnerved the British. Their reforms were rejected but the modern injunctions of native rulers received wide popularity. More dangerous was the possibility that indigenous courts, if kept alive, could well become the hub of political activity should the native decide to switch his loyalty.

There were two ways open — either the destruction of courts as independent places of affluence and influence, or their ‘redefinition’ according to colonial versions of tradition and modernity. The court of Lucknow resisted the latter trend by mocking the British version of Bengal modernity and upturning the Western view of the east. It conformed to no specific view of caste, of the eternal separatedness of Hindu and Muslim ‘nations’. It also subverted the very idea of the east as a backyard of knowledge whose science, astronomy and medical sciences were ‘fit to be laughed at by girls at an English boarding school, and disgrace an English farrier and its geography made up of seas of treacle and butter’.

The British first set about destroying and appropriating for themselves India’s scientific and intellectual achievements. The Mughul empire competed with Europe in the age of the commercial revolution, but the Industrial Revolution saw England and France edging past in the eighteenth century. During this time, the Indian subcontinent too moved towards an industrial renaissance through a period of great social turmoil and political flux. This process was enhanced, interrupted and distorted in stages due to England’s intervention. Colonial designs reduced India, the premier power in world trade of manufactured goods, to the status of a vast, revenue drawing agricultural machine of primary export and foreign import.

But prevailing trends set by native courts, made it difficult for Manchester cotton to be widely and culturally acceptable. The end of the Company’s trade monopoly in 1813 terminated the period when its primary aim was to act as an entrepôt to balance
The Choti Chattar Manzil Darshan Bilas.
(top) Sikandar Bagh with the scars of war.
(Courtesy - State Museum, Lucknow)

Wajid Ali Shah in posture, a statement of material
and gestural art of the Avadhi school.
(top) Lanka – the great Lucknowi auditorium, a statement of
Aristotelian, epic aesthetic – destroyed by the British deliberately.
(Courtesy - State Museum, Lucknow)
The Choti Chattar Manzil Darshan Bilas.
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Wajid Ali Shah in posture, a statement of material
and gestural art of the Avadh school.
(top) Lanka – the great Lucknowi auditorium, a statement of
anti-Aristotelian, epic aesthetic – destroyed by the British deliberately.
(Courtesy - State Museum, Lucknow)
Qaiserbagh, the mermaid gate.
(Courtesy - State Museum, Lucknow)
(top) The sack of Qaiserbagh.
(Courtesy - State Archives, Lucknow)

Mallika Zamaniya's imambara, a woman's
demeanour in stucco — vandalized.
(top) Begum Hazrat Mahal —
cunning and compassionate — The Woman of India.
(Courtesy - State Archives, Lucknow)
The young Akhtari Bai Faizabadi, Avadhi cosmopolitanism in profile.

Nana Saheb leaving Lucknow.
(Courtesy - State Archives, Lucknow)
(top) Birjis Qadir — riding to battle
“Jai Avadh — Down with anti-1857-ites”.
(Courtesy - State Museum, Lucknow)
the British world export-import trade bill. Indigenous commerce and industrialisation had to take secondary place; industrial centres like Mirzapur, developing with British and native capital, collapsed when the East India Company withdrew its patronage. On the face of it there was a crisis of demand. But demand in any economy is a product of market and political factors; native capital, which could have supplanted the flight of British capital, was discouraged in Mirzapur due to the absence of a supportive state power.

The 1820s and ’30s were very crucial for the subcontinent for they marked the beginning of the end of the possibilities that had emerged in the eighteenth century. After withdrawing their capital in large measure, the British began closing down the native courts which provided the source for investment and development. Within a few years, places like Bundelkhand, Agra, Doab, Rohilkhand, even Mathura, Bharatpur and Rajasthan turned from great cotton, opium, salt and other luxury production centres to backwaters of starving peasants and insurgent landlords.

But Lucknow remained the one pebble in the eye. The British did not have full control over its resources and the court still encouraged local industry. Lucknow capital was also invested in Kanpur. In the years after the 1830s, population from the Company territories had actually crossed over to Avadh which they found more prosperous than the miserable conditions in the Doab and Rohilkhand.

The destruction of Avadh and Lucknow was imperative. The British did not fear Wajid Ali Shah as a decadent king existing in splendid isolation. They dreaded his presence as a man of free will in touch with the people. This was why it was important to make him sign the treaty; and that was why Wajid Ali Shah refused to do so. He called his treasurer, Miftah-ud-Daula, and told him not to hand over the royal seal even if asked for. When Outram arrived, he found a king making a show of handing over his articles of kingship without putting his seal on this act.

Behind Wajid Ali Shah’s action was a covert political pattern. He neither sought armed confrontation with the British nor did he succumb to their demands. He also made a show of the fact that he was being wronged. On the surface, his behaviour confirmed his ‘weak’ character.
But his uncomplaining attitude, his meek surrender before a 'higher power', without conceding ground, sent a different message to an Asian audience. It generated suppressed anger at the sight of a tormentor assailing a proud victim. This was classic passive resistance, Asian style, and the British understood this. They were doubly perturbed when the former king decided to embark on a tour to Calcutta while his mother, brother and a number of vakils, went to England to plead with Queen Victoria. Cracks had appeared in the British camp too — R.W. Bird had openly thrown in his lot with the former king and his book was suffering censure by the authorities. This very important document on the annexation of Avadh vanished as a regular source material after 1857.

Bird was forced to remove his name from the title and twentieth century English, European and Indian authors on Lucknow continued that censure by seldom alluding to its content.

Back in Lucknow, Wajid Ali Shah’s departure to Calcutta turned into a political sideshow — a show of public mourning, anger and protest. A crowd began gathering from Qaisrnbagh’s exit gate proclaiming loudly that a proclamation from London would come, giving him back his throne. A wail arose from the womenfolk and the villagers. He was, after all, their ‘Jan-e-Alam’ (beloved of the world). As the royal train left, the gardens and fields of Avadh echoed:

_Hazrat jaye main London_  
_Hum par kripa karo raghunandan_  
(Our Hazrat is departing for London  
Now we have only your care left O’ Lord Rama)

And long after his departure, a feminine cry was heard from the inner chambers of houses:

_Tore bin bakhra na sabaye_  
_Calcutta vale jaya, kab aake tum_  
(Without you rains bring no enjoyment  
O’ my lover of Calcutta when will you come back?)

The king departed but he left behind an uneasy Lucknow and a seething Avadh — perhaps, the exact intended effect. Wajid Ali Shah, after all, was a king who began his reign with the military drill rather

than the muse. Unknown to many, including the British, he had never given up this hobby. When the Parikhana was resounding with the vibrations of the _ghungroo_ and the _jhanjar_, his harem reverberated with the clang of weapons being made by the female platoons of the king. These platoons whose Hindu and Muslim members were drawn from the bylanes of Lucknow, practised an army drill with perfect discipline in Persian dress.

But the king had another ace up his sleeve. This was a woman, one of his wives with no apparent special quality. Only, she smoked the _hookah_ with style and struck coins of a type bearing no resemblance with the traditions of the ‘harem’. While the coins of all other queens bore the symbols of _bel-butes_ and flowers, hers showed the ‘sword’ and the ‘shield’. She was Wajid Ali Shah’s ‘mahak pari’ who later acquired a name and title that was to resonate throughout India and Britain — Begum Hazrat Mahal.

Before leaving, Wajid Ali Shah indicated that though he did not fight the British, he had left the fate of Lucknow to its _avam_ or the public. Apparently, he was leaving all options, including the military one, open. He also left Hazrat Mahal behind to guard the interests of the people of Lucknow in their time of trial and tribulation. One of Wajid Ali Shah’s couplets written before 1857, praises her ‘golden colour’, straight nose, black hair, sophisticated demeanour and then goes on to say:

_Gharon par tababi padi saher men, khude mere bazaar Hazrat Mahal_  
_Tu hi baiye aekho aaram hai garibon ki gambarkhar Hazrat Mahal_  
(Calamity visits houses and families in the city  
My markets were uprooted, Hazrat Mahal  
You are the only means for comfort  
You who shares the pain of the poor, Hazrat Mahal)

Implicit in this couplet, which shows how the annexation had tuned a thriving bourgeoisie economy, was also a tacit recognition that in Lucknow and Avadh a new force had gained predominance: the _gareeb avam_ or the poor public. The Company now directly faced the people as the new British administration set about effecting a land
revenue settlement under a chief commissioner. Apart from the talukedars, the land was also settled with the small landlords and the substantial peasantry — that is those who ploughed their land but also lent it out on share cropping and lease. It was from this section that the East India Company drew its Thakur-Brahmin sepoys. They were not exceptionally well off at this point, constituting a rural lower middle class. Mangal Pandey, the first sepoy to train the gun on the British in Barrackpore on 29 March, 1857, belonged to Faizabad, Avadh. He, along with his warrior nephew Bujhavan Pandey, was a typical pre-1857 Avadhi Saryu Parin' Brahmin — mercural, akkhd, rural, passionate and individually oriented, the prototype of the rising new men of Avadh who were as proud of their janaos as of their trousers and company bonds.

The British land policy, however, differed from the liberal reforms of Wajid Ali Shah. Assessment was higher, there was no immediate ploughing back of investment in agriculture and an alien political apparatus implemented Company laws. But more importantly and crucially, it meant a transfer of property and resources from the landlords and peasantry to new men: outsiders, traders and speculators who entered the rural scene with the protection of British arms and courts. The phenomena was offensive — British rule became synonymous with a radical shifting of social forces and classes. Instead of the much awaited haven of yeoman farmers, Avadh began degenerating into a hunting ground for rapacious outsiders and unscrupulous people. Thus, instead of the lessening of landlordism, there was the emergence of a new type of an extractive zamindari, lacking the benevolence of the traditional nobility. The peasantry and the small landlords, who were supposed to gain, became more dispossessed. The talukedars did not lose much: out of 4,243 villages originally held by them, they lost only 916. But they smarted under the rule of the firangi and the 'banta'. Many of them were Avadhian patriots with unswerving loyalty to Wajid Ali Shah.

In the city, which became the headquarters of the new establishment, the situation was worse. Many of the 70,000 sacked employees of the former king used to collect near the Chattar Manzil, the seat of the government, to curse the British. Unemployment became large scale and dispossessed begums were another source of unrest. The karigars of the kaasha — a special shoe designed for religious purposes — were suddenly without orders or clients. Some of them, like Dulli Chamar, were well known entrepreneurs. Their decline was pathetic — when one of them was leaving the city, a maulvi cried and said, 'there goes my beauty, what will I do without the kaasha?'

The middle classes too, were hit by the increase in prices, insecurity and corruption. In a petition dated 28 March 1857, Lucknowi residents complained to the governor general about a certain Muslim contractor who had been involved in quadrupling taxes, imprisoning people, running a regime of bribes and usurping lakhs of rupees with the collusion of British officers. They also complained about the complete breakdown of law and order in Lucknow and an increase in thefts and dacoities on the Kanpur-Lucknow road. The residents warned that if negligence and oppression on the part of the British officers did not stop, great rebellion might take place at Lucknow which would not be easily suppressed.

Urdu professionals, also, could not be accommodated in the British establishment even though Urdu had become the official language throughout north India by 1836. Traders and merchants, who had depended upon old tariffs, became unsure about their future. Several entrepreneurs in the town had to shut their Urdu presses and ittar factories in face of a hostile market situation.

After 1856, Lucknow was fully drawn into the anti-British mobilisation going on in north India and beyond. Lucknowi resistance had three different shades: petty bourgeois intelligentsia inspired by Walliullahism, aspiring peasants with a tradition of militant Bhaktism and the elite intelligentsia with a schooling in the Tipu Sultan brand of Indo-Persian republican, European-American thought. Remnants of the entrepreneurial nobility, portfolio capitalists, the trend of Almas Ali Khan and Darshan Singh, made up for a ruined, gloomy, anti-British bourgeoisie. Many of their ilk were in British government service, smarting, restively, with slighted pride. The big merchants of Lucknow, Kanpur and Delhi, who had not turned into big landowners, saw their capital blocked between a dying north Indian intermediate economy and a hostile alien power. They needed state
republican trend in the ongoing mobilisation. Nana Sahib was the last Maratha Peshwa’s adopted son, but his claim to Peshwahood was redundant in the eyes of the British. Outwardly, he was the Asian man of pleasure, corpulent and fond of dancing girls. But he was also a member of the secret society of Freemasons in Kanpur — the elite society of ‘people of the mind’ who exchanged, amongst other things, ideas of Diderot, Voltaire and other heroes of European enlightenment.

Freemasons operated in Lucknow too and Azimullah Khan in particular embodied many of their ideals. He was the one who had gone to England to plead Nana Sahib’s case. There he became the protege of a British lady who introduced him to the upper echelons of English society. Soon he won over the minds of men and the hearts of ladies and made them aware of shades of Asian enlightenment. He surprised Russell, the war correspondent of the Times in Crimea and Turkey with his agnosticism and casual valour. He drank wine, appeared unconcerned about religion and smoked a cigar while bombs exploded all around him. Azimullah Khan represented the Girondists-Jacobean arm of 1857. He stopped in Crimea on his return journey from England in order to study the military technology of the British. In Lucknow, Nana Sahib and Azimullah Khan consorted with talukdars and the soldiers with active help from Hazrat Mahal.

The British command in the city was headed by Sir Henry Lawrence — a man with a hand on the pulse of the situation. After Governor General Lord Canning, he was perhaps the most important British official in India. After the departure of both Nana Sahib and Azimullah Khan, he faced the first incidence of ‘rebelliousness’ — the soldiers’ refusal to bite the new cartridge prescribed for the Enfield rifles imported from England. A letter addressed to soldiers of the Mandian cantonment was intercepted and disturbances broke out in Musabagh. On 1 May, Henry Lawrence convened a durbar in Lucknow. There he harangued against the possibilities of a revolt and impressed upon local native men of influence gathered there, the invincibility of British rule. The atmosphere was sullen and the people assembled did not give the customary response. By the time of the Meerut uprising on 10 May, the city was in ferment. The cantonment had a number of native regiments but only one European force of note — a highly disciplined unit of the 32nd foot with a cavalry detachment. Unlike Mathura or Fatehpur, the city was in the firm grip of the British. The districts of the Doab slipped out of British control in the early days of the revolt as long years of unstable Company rule had eroded their administrative framework.

A newly annexed area, Lucknow’s officialdom was fresh and well oiled. Avadh’s hierarchical society also did not lend itself easily to temporary disaffection. It was not sufficient to take the city by a mutiny of the army backed by an insurgent mob. This was attempted on 31 May when the native regiments revolted in the Muriaon cantonments — but they were repelled by British and ‘loyal’ native troops. The next day, a civil uprising began in the city — crowds gathered at several points towards the west and marched on to the jail. But the police held firm and did a large section of the elite. The crowds were dispersed after heavy casualties. The insurgency was a result of a planned conspiracy fuelled by leaders like Kadir Ali Shah who had also sent a letter to the Shah of Kabul asking for help. His ‘underground’ organisation had enrolled thousands of recruits belonging mainly to the poor, karigars and the lower-middle classes.

Widespread reprisals followed the failure of the operation. Maulvis were hanged near the Macchi Bhavan and the area between the bhavan and the residency was levelled. This began the systematic demolition of the city which was to take a horrifying shape after 1857. Many baghs were ruined, houses destroyed and mahallas and ganjis devastated. The only concern of the British seemed to be to secure a line of defence from the west to the centre along the Gomti.

One of the first prisoners to be hanged went by the name of Mir Abbas, a trader who had taken an amount of Rs. 4,000 from the British officer Carneigh for his business. The list included Munshi Rasool Bux, Hafiz Abdul Samad and a havaldar. The early phase of insurgency included hakims, small vakils, traders and craftsmen of Saadat Ganj, Mashakganj and Rakabganj who organised another uprising on 15 June. This too was crushed. It seemed that in Avadh urban insurrection was in urgent need of another component — the armed might of a regular, organised military backed by an insurgent rural population.

This combination was ignited by the revolt of sepoy units in Sitapur
on 3 June and in Faizabad on 8 June. Soon other stations revolted and, in a matter of days, major districts came under the control of the revolutionaries. Ahmadullah Shah was freed from Faizabad jail as sepoys began gathering around Lucknow, their ranks swelled by peasants and talukedari forces. Led by Barkat Ahmad and Shahabuddin, the Avadhi army massed its ranks at Nawabganj, Barabanki. It was a little further from this township, twelve miles east of Lucknow, that the decisive engagement of Chinhat, which changed the course of 1857, took place.

In a bid to pre-empt ‘rebel’ movement, Henry Lawrence took his best force and set out to intercept the insurgents at Chinhat. He had the sound backing of the artillery and a spy network. A masnawi, composed by a Lucknowi eye witness, was to record:

‘Lawrence Sahab went to battle, said I’ll overcome this hurdle; as the cannon wagon moved carrying the cannons the white regiments moved ahead.’

The Battle of Chinhat engaged the British and the Avadhians in an insatiable violence of mind, manoeuvering and subterfuge. The war of Lucknow was fought, consciously, as a bitter civilisational and racial struggle, in which ‘no one asked for mercy, and no mercy was given’. It was a chilling, cold and calculating battle of annihilation from both sides, with no scope for ‘lesser’, humanist concerns. From the native side it was a fight to preserve the culture of Lord Ramchandra, Prophet Muhammad, Hazrat Ali, Krishna, Mahadev and Mahavir, the memory of Amir Khusro, Sher Shah Suri, the Mughals, Shah Waliullah, the emotion of the qawwals and the faith of the mazars, Qaiserbagh, Wajid Ali Shah, the Ganga and Yamuna; and hopes of national renewal on this basis.

For the British it was a struggle to preserve the virtues of the Christian civilisation and the myth of racial superiority, on which rested the whole edifice of the Imperial empire. Charles Dickens, the British novelist was in the habit of offending the government and the British public with realistic, critical portrayals of conditions in England. He was not expected to be a bigot where a political struggle was concerned. But the response of this liberal humanist to the Indian ‘mutiny’ was —

I wish I were Commander in Chief in India. The first thing I would do to strike that Oriental race with amazement — should be to proclaim to them, in their language, that I considered my holding that appointment by the leave of God, to mean that I should do my utmost to exterminate the race —

The international reaction too spoke of a racial dimension that often overrode economic considerations. Dependant on sugar and cotton imports from India, the United States of America was facing economic difficulties at the time of the outbreak. It could have, at the least, adopted a neutral position or kept a distance from what educated, pro-British Indians were describing as ‘just a mere local rebellion’. But one of the dispatches of the Washington Post, reproduced in *The Englishman* of 15 October 1857, mentioned nervously, its worldwide impact in terms that put a question mark on the ‘secularism’ of Western democracies: ‘We do not believe that the rebellion in India will eventuate in successful revolution…’

‘England never was so powerful as she is now, and never so well prepared to carry on war in a distant theatre. Her immense steam navy, aided by rapid communications by mail and the telegraph, makes it less difficult for her to conduct a war now in India than to have carried on one in America 40 years ago. Yet, with all these advantages, the struggle may be protracted; and even when the rebellion is suppressed, consequences will probably ensue seriously affecting, the weal of Christendom. Instead of exerting herself, as she has just proposed, to increase the supply, of sugar and cotton, which have become alarmingly deficient, the fact stare us in the face that this deficiency must increase, and the suffering consequent on it be aggravated. But England is alone concerned on this matter. All Christendom — will suffer alike —

‘The momentous consequences likely to ensue from the rebellion in India can be justly appreciated when viewed in connection with the deficient supply of slave products which now perplex nations —’
French journals, however, noted the growing anger of the Indians. Sitting between files and notes in London, Karl Marx also spoke of 1857 as an Asiatic racial, civilizational and political war, led by the most modern institution then in existence in India, the Sepoy Army. He linked it with the anti-British Persian war and the anti-Imperialist Opium war being fought in China in the 1850s. He also justified the so-called cruelties of Indians against the British during the revolt as a natural consequence of British colonial policy. Almost endorsing his views, a French ministerial paper, *The Imperial Estafette*, commented:

There is profound panic in London; for in the worst days of its history England has received no more violent check. In fact, the loss of India would be a death blow to her commerce and industry; and once driven out of that country, the former conquerors would find insurmountable obstacles if ever they should think of returning.

In the first instance, they have cruelly oppressed the Indians, who are now taking their revenge and who probably will prefer to be exterminated to the last man, rather than to bear again the odious yoke of the foreigner.

The English have hurt the national feeling, and committed acts of breach of civilisation. They have to answer now a terrible account; instead of civilizing India they have exploited it. They only wanted slaves but they have created Spartacuses.

The reply of the ‘Spartacuses’ was no less vitriolic. They summed up the breach of civilisation by the English thus:

‘To all Hindoos and Mahommedans of Hindoostan who are faithful to their religion know that sovereignty is one of God’s chief boons, one which a deceitful tyrant is never allowed to retain. For several years the English have been committing all kinds of excesses and tyrannies being desirous of converting all men to Christianity by force, and of subverting and doing away with the religion of Hindoos and Mahommedans. When God saw this fact, he so altered the hearts of the inhabitants of Hindoostan, that they have been doing their best to get rid of the English themselves — Soon they will have been, by the grace of God, so utterly exterminated, that no traces of them will remain. Know that all Hindoos and Mussalmans have become so hateful of them that they will not suffer any to live with honour.’

So ‘All you Hindoos are hereby solemnly adjured, by your faith in the Ganges, Tulsi and Saligram; and all you Mussalmans, by your belief in God and the Koran, as these English are the common enemy of both, that you unite in considering their slaughter extremely expedient, for by this alone will the lives and faith of both be saved. It is expedient, then, that you should coalesce and slay them.’

After this, there was no question of a middle ground, no mercy from either side; it was either victory or death.

Lucknow and the people of Avadh had been preparing for 1857 for quite some time. But their situation was like that of a combat soldier forced to sit idle, not for one or two months but in this case, since the Battle of Buxar. There is something elemental, almost beauteous and sensual, about the violence of 1857. The veteran Bihar leader of 1857, Kuwar Singh, remarked on the eve of the outbreak of the Arrah uprising in his hometown — ‘this bloody revolution had to come so late, when I was past my prime’. It was as if he was waiting for something to happen. Avadhians and Lucknowites must have shared this sentiment — they too were waiting to battle.

At Ismaelganj, a hamlet close to Chinhat, Barkat Ahmad and Shahabuddin first lured Lawrence into combat with a small force. Lawrence thought that the rest of the ‘rebels’ had fallen back on Nawabganj. But his advance was checked by heavy artillery fire which pinned him down in the village fields. But even then it looked as if the ‘enemy’ was in retreat. One British officer even encouraged his men to charge, sensing victory at hand. But the retreat was a ruse — soon columns of rebels appeared on the British right flank, ready to charge.

A surprised Lawrence saw uninhabited groves and dunes swarming with Indian soldiers, holding green and saffron flags. Then the cavalry charged, lead by someone identified by the Britshers as a Russian —
an Asiatic European who had crossed over to the Indians — and all was over. The great army of Sir Henry Lawrence, now beaten and bruised, was hurrying back to Lucknow. The British blew up the Macchi Bhawan and decamped for the Residency with the Indians on their heels. In a matter of a day and a half, the ‘rebels’ had become rulers.

The myth of British invincibility lay shattered. Chinhait was an open, fair engagement, not a guerrilla affair. After Crimea, it was the first instance of the defeat of the British army anywhere in the world in a straight combat. The masnavi spoke further of its ‘even handed’ nature:

First the White regiment chased away the enemy and returned to their lines, they won and retreated for a while. Then the rebels counter-attacked, surrounding from all sides. The White regiments again attacked in desperate irritation. Swords flew equally from both sides, every cannon spewed fire.

The battle that took place was intense, the British too fought for every inch of their fame.

From Chinhait to Lucknow thus was the situation, that there were corpses and corpses all along the way. The White Regiments retreated into the Bailey Guard, they brought the rebels too trailing on their back.

Then the battle began again in earnest, blood started flowing again in sequences. Excitement grew on both sides — corpses fell on corpses on both sides.

As the battle raged, now for the capture of the Residency, a new ruler of Avadh was coronated at the Patharwali Baradari in Qaiserbagh. He recognised the suzerainty of Bahadur Shah Zafar, declaring himself his wazir, thus reverting back to the original position of the Nishapuri house. Birjis Qadar was eleven years old then, a son of Wajid Ali by Hazrat Mahal. The masnavi went on:

Now lend an ear to the story of the prince, he is comely in his adolescence, he is happy go lucky in attitude. Fairy like, he looks happy, his body is tall and thin, Shah’s son by Begum Hazrat Mahal is not much acquainted with the world and is reserved in his expressions.

His age is just eleven years, this is childhood, these ought to have been days of play and fun.

But in his heart is ingrained, that I will fight the battle which has been unleashed.

He is a child, so he is innocent, his eyes can see where lies justice and where injustice.

So he orders the troops to fall in line, and tells them to show the drill.

And then he fires balls of cannon, he does not flinch even if he gets burned.

He conducts the drill personally, and lavishes the troops with rewards of money.

During the coronation, the prince was called ‘kanhaiya’ by the Indian troops who crowded in the assembly hall with naked swords and loaded guns. The crown was placed on Birjis Qadar’s head not by a religious leader, as was the conventional practice, but by Barkat Ahmad himself. There was fun and gaiety all around. The talukedars welcomed the event by firing cannon shots in their villages. A mass of green and saffron flags engulfed the city as a big procession proceeded towards Qaiserbagh. Children sang and danced, people wore their best clothes as if this was the Id and Diwali.

This, however, was a government with difference. Real power of decision making lay in the hands of the executive and military council, acting in concert with the Begum. The executive council had important people belonging to the old regime like the well known Kayastha Raja Balkrishna, who had refused to hand over the details of the revenue administration after the annexation. A finance minister of Wajid Ali Shah’s time, he remained so with the new regime. Sharif-ud-Daula, a Kashmiri Sunni convert, minister under Muhammad Ali Shah and Amjad Ali Shah, was made naib. A number of new men of low origin...
headed the important posts of the paymaster and the darogah of the magazine. The darogah or chief of the diwankhana was Mammo Khan, a close aide of the begum and a true man of fortune.

The military body was led by ordinary sepoys: Ghamandi Singh, Rajmund Tiwari, Jahangir Khan, Raghunath Singh and Umrao Singh. Darshan Singh’s son, Raja Jai Lal Singh, assumed charge as the president of a council of ministers, engaged in stipulating and supervising matters of the new provincial government. The council fixed norms for the army to nominate the chief minister and officers of regiments, receive increased pay and decide the treatment of pre-British elements. The high court was ordered to obey the strictures coming from Delhi where Bahadur Shah Zafar headed a national government, once again as the sovereign of the world.

Avadh followed the democratic pattern of Delhi’s court of administration in which armed peasants, the ex-sepoys, sat as new heads of state under the leadership of Bahadur Shah Zafar. Besides establishing law and order on the basis of modern principles of justice, the Delhi court issued firmans promising capital to merchants for trade, industry and ship building. Patriotic landlords were offered light revenue assessments. Perhaps for the first time in the history of Asia, a state announced “land to the tiller” as its official policy. With this one slogan, 1857 became a movement imbued with distinct revolutionary-democratic features, complementing Bahadur Shah Zafar’s thrust on constitutional monarchy. Delhi and Azamgarh proclamations also promised prosperity to the artisans, the latter going far to produce a penetrating analysis of colonial economics and promise respite to the working man.

The elective principal followed in the Delhi Court was applied to Avadh as well. Taluksanders and small landlords, hitherto excluded from the power structure of Lucknow, participated in the new government. They began arriving in Lucknow with their levies along with a substantial number of low caste peasants, the Pasis and the Ahirs. Many of them were professional miners, sappers and marksmen who led the assault on the residency. This British citadel of defence was now transformed into a fortress besieged by Indians from all sides. The sound tactics that he was, Henry Lawrence took advantage of the lofty slopes of the Residency to resist Indian assaults. Despite being low in numbers, the British possessed substantial ammunition and guns; forces of Avadh government therefore decided to combine violent attacks with a policy of wearing down the enemy.

The Residency assaults were led by Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah. Jai Lal Singh, Mammo Khan and the maulvi formed a trio which guided military and state matters. Jai Lal Singh raised the necessary finance and formed the link between various groups and the begum. The maulvi worked on military strategy; a man of vision, he combined passion with precision, deep-dark eyes with an aquiline nose, schooling in theology with radical politics.

The maulvi advocated a normative civil administration in Lucknow and a concert with the taluksandars for an offensive towards the east. He objected the Residency to heavy artillery fire in which Henry Lawrence lost his life, much before the Residency siege turned into a historic battle. In that interlude, Delhi fell on 20 September after a fight in which the British troops covered the small distance from Kashmiri gate to the Red Fort in six days with the loss of a thousand soldiers. Kanpur, which had been won over by Nana Sahib in June, was also lost on 16 July. But Henry Havelock, the ‘butcher’ of Allahabad and Kanpur, was unable to proceed to Lucknow from Kanpur. Twice they tried and failed, falling back from Unnao. There he was resisted by the taluksandars of Mohan and Dhundia Khaira, Thakurs, Brahmins and Pathans of Biswara, the sons of Faqir Mohammad Goya and peasant fighters. He won the skirmishes fought around the villages but was pinned down in the fields and mud baked walls due to dogged guerrilla resistance. The new Indian tactic deflected his forces and wore down their morale by show of exemplary courage. In one of these battles, Muhammad Ahmad Khan, a son of Faqir Muhammad, continued, even when the rest of the force had retreated, to strike at the enemy with his shield and then his bare hands till he was captured.

This resistance from the villages shook Lucknow and Avadh society. The traditional caste structure was severely impaired and so were relations within the family. There were cases where a religious father forbade his son to participate in the ‘rebellion’. The son taunted the father that he was the one who used to talk about religion and now
when a war was being waged in its name, why was he afraid? The father gathered all his logic but to no avail. Finally, the mother came forward. She handed the father a pair of bangles and told him that from that day, he stood abandoned. The father entreated her in the name of religion and the duties of a Hindu wife, to which she replied that her duty to Birjis Qadar and watan was higher than her duties as a wife.

In Hardoi, a Brahmin ran off from the midst of a battle where the British had pinned down a talukdar. His father saw his close friend, a Kurmi, running back towards the house. On learning about the incident, he picked up his gun and told the friend that he and his son would be dead if they showed their cowardly faces. Both of them went back to the battlefield and embraced martyrdom.

Fakirs and sadhus did not worry about religious predilections and women abandoned their veils when they charged the Company cavalry with crude swords. Maulvis and ulamas sacrificed everything, often defying the orders of pro-British superiors and religious heads. In the city, there was great controversy over the proclamation of jihad, or the Muslim religious war. To many orthodox Muslims, 1857 was not a religious but a political war. It had more Hindus than Muslims and Bahadur Shah Zafar, born of a Rajput mother, was not a religious head. He wore the sacred thread on several occasions and welcomed those natives who wanted to convert to Christianity of their own free will. At a durbar at Red Fort, he spelt 'freedom' as God’s greatest gift to man and the anti-British fight as a revolution. He also expressed his willingness to hand over power to any man of history as the war was not for the benefit of only the Mughal house.

1857 raised the issue of religion as a political war cry, as a means to assert the value of deen in one’s culture and nation. The orthodox and ritualistic religious leadership hesitated to support such a move. But to Waliaulahites like Ahmadullah Shah and Maulvi Liaquat Ali, the leader of Allahabad, the debate over jihad was academic. Within Shia too, while the elite family of Dildar Ali Nasirabadi in Lucknow and Maulana Muhammad Baqar in Delhi supported the revolution, the orthodox group of Allahabad helped the British. Non-Walialahite maulvis also supported the call for jihad; Maulvi Fazle Haq ‘Khairabadi’ belonged to an Avadh qasba and was a contemporary symbol of the great rationalist-liberal-intellectual ‘country town’ churning of the region in the eighteenth century. He signed the jihadi fatwa in Delhi and combined a penetrating economic analysis with religious grievances to present a theoretical exposition of 1857.

Begum Hazrat Mahal, the real power behind Birjis Qadar, held court at Qaiserbagh, adding glamour to diplomacy. Combining softness with fire, she personified the political potential of the petite household woman of Avadh. Leading the concord of talukdars in the austere Tarwali Kothi, she impressed upon the elite the 'practical' necessity to remain united during the crucial test between September and November.

The British force under Outram and Havelock managed to break the resistance in the countryside during the third British offensive, launched in late October. They crossed the Ghaziuddin Haider Canal with the intention of marching on to the Qaiserbagh through Naka Hindola in the centre of the city. But heavy firing forced them to retreat towards the Chatter Manzil, from where they passed over to the Residency. Besieged with the rest of the garrison, they were pushed away from the borders of Qaiserbagh in a desperate musket, bayonet and sword fight. The ‘great’ General Neil, who had made Brahmans and maulvis lick beef and pork meat at Kanpur besides hanging hundreds of innocent villagers at Allahabad, fell fighting near Qaiserbagh’s Sher Darwaza.

The residency faced further trouble. Outram and Havelock, despite naming a larger area, had to face constant bombardment from Qaiserbagh. Sorties from fortified positions in Sikandar Bagh and Shah Najaf reduced their number every day. The situation was getting desperate when Colin Campbell’s army arrived at Dilkusha in November.

In Lucknow, the morale of the native government was high. Till now, the British had proved superior only when assisted by massive guns, the weak point of the Avadh army. The begum was leading an anti-status-quoist revolution due to which she was short of funds and resources. The army had cannons and carbines but little access to British howitzers and missiles. They could outsmart the British in tactics, but lacked the power battery to demolish the thick walls of the Residency.
Meanwhile, the revolt spread to the countryside as the city swarmed with soldiers and ghazis from the Doab and Delhi as well. Lucknow became the prime focus of national interest; Khan Bahadur Khan, Bahadur Shah Zafar's representative in Bareli, Rohilkhand and a descendant of Hafiz Rehmat Khan, wrote that if Bareli fell before it would not amount to much in the overall scheme. But if Lucknow fell it would be difficult to save Bareli.

Colin Campbell's entry into the city was resisted fiercely at Sikandar Bagh. There, in the shade of Egyptian style pyramidal roofs holding the banners of Bahadur Shah Zafar and Birjis Qadar, 2,000 Hindus and Musalmans took a fatal decision — either to win or perish — neither to ask for mercy nor grant any. En route to the garden the British had a foretaste of things to come. On seeing a jogi, a Scottish highlander wanted to do away with him. The staff officer told him not to do so as he was a harmless Hindu, the real trouble makers being the Muslims. As soon as he had spoken, the 'harmless', bead-counting jogi, with ash and sacred marks smeared on his body, took out a blunderbuss from under his leopard skin and shot the officer point blank.

At Sikandar Bagh, the British troops made up of Scottish Highlanders and Sikhs, were pinned down for well over three hours. The defenders did not have heavy guns but their firing was so intense the casualties began mounting on the British side. The day was carried on chance, when seeing a breach in the wall, the British force hurled into the native troops fought with everything they had, even their empty muskets and talwars up to a moment when nearly all of them perished. There was heavy resistance at Qadam Rusool and Shah Najaf, which stood almost in a line from Sikandar Bagh, where native guns stood in a better position. Campbell was almost forced to retire but heavy mortar and rocket fire, to which the Indians had no reply, gave him a pyrrhic victory.

Colin Campbell finally caught up with Outram and Havelock, who were coming from the Residency through the Moti Mahal, at Khum Manzil. But triumph turned to defeat as Campbell ordered a retreat all British troops to Kanpur in face of the overwhelming superiority of the 'enemy'. He still had a large force at his disposal but it had the back up of guns and howitzers. An open struggle in the city between evenly matched armies was risky; Campbell had almost got defeated at Shah Najaf in a pure artillery to artillery battle.

So instead of storming the Qaiserbagh, the British retreated to the Shikusha with a wounded and dying Henry Havelock. Leaving a small army in charge of Outram at Alambagh, Campbell hurried back to meet Nana Sahib's lieutenant Tantia Tope who had won decisively in the hard fought second battle of Kanpur.

In Lucknow, government forces were re-aligned before the final battle in March 1858. Between December and February, important events occurred in north India. While a section of the old leadership dropped out, new areas joined in with a deeper base. The revolt in Bihar, Hindelkhand, parts of the present day Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan acquired depth and momentum, even as the interiors of Avadh and Rohilkhand became more prominent. Sometime in December, Begum Hazrat Mahal called a meeting of the talukedars in Lucknow. There she convinced a majority of them to stick to the cause, resorting to every possible argument, including the possibility of victory in the countryside. It is possible that the decision to take the battle directly to the people of Avadh, was taken here. This thinking was also echoed by Khan Bahadur Khan, then evolving a theory for the proper conduct of a protracted insurgent war. Kunwar Singh, General Bakht Khan of Delhi, Nana Sahib, Azimullah Khan and Engineer Mohammad Ali too came to assist the begum. From the west arrived a legendary figure — Prince Firoze Shah, Bahadur Shah Zafar's nephew. He was to lead the revolt in Rajasthan and defeat the British in successive engagements at Jhan and Kotah. Lucknow also excited tremendous interest overseas in Arurma, China, Turkey, Russia and Persia.

The British forces, now numbering over 30,000, were resisted village en route to Lucknow in March, 1858. At Mianganj, the Lucknowi bourgeoisie town of the eighteenth century, the army of Hope Grant burned down houses and raised the once prosperous markets to the ground. They were defied by old men, women and children as the young had left for Lucknow to defend the city.

Lucknow was well protected with three lines of defence running in a semicircle, narrowing in the third stage from the Qaiserbagh right into the Ghazviuddin Haider canal. It was designed by Engineer
Mohammad Ali, a product of Roorke Engineering College and an aide of Azimullah Khan, and Ahmadullah Shah. The maulvi took personal charge of the operation, bringing his vast experience of beating back the British at Alambagh and Jalalabad Fort into play.

But the British pressurised the city from three sides. Outram crossed the Gomti and began pounding the lines from the northern bank, Colin Campbell's offensive proceeded from the Dilkusha towards the Begum Kothi, while the Nepalese army of Jung Bahadur appeared on the outskirts ready to enter from the south. General Frank's army also arrived from Gorakhpur via Sultanpur and Amethi, after losing officers and men to desperate village resistance in the two districts. The British contingents had a large number of Sikh soldiers who played an important role in altering the balance of forces. But the Sikhs fought from the begum's side also; previously, they had heroically defended Delhi along with Hindu and Muslim sepoys. They were the first to revolt in Benaras and Jampur and fight with eastern sepoys in the 'mutinies' of the Punjab. The flag song of the 'sepoys' referred to Hindustan as the land of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and Bahadur Shah Zafar appealed specifically to Sikhs on the British side before the fall of Delhi.

Campbell's Sikhs were fresh recruits drawn from the countryside of Punjab, where the revolt had been rooted before Delhi fell in September 1857. The British took to heavy repression of army units, besides imposing severe exactions on the Jat and Muslim peasantry of west and east Punjab. The Company officers in Punjab were helped by big Punjabi princes. The original Sikh aristocracy had died fighting in the successive Punjab wars of the 1840s and most of those who ruled now were being propped up by the British. More importantly, the elite Jat Sikh peasantry, unlike the Company and nawabi trained Thakur-Brahmin peasantry of Avadh, lacked long years of military and political exposure. Devoid, thus, of a native aristocratic leadership and the necessary context to emerge as independent power aspirants, the Punjabi kisans or farmers, despite expressing anti-British hostility, could not put up an organised resistance.

In Lucknow, the bloodiest engagement took place at the Begum Kothi, once the Lucknow defence broke down in face of determined British encirclement. Hodson, the officer responsible for massacring Indians at Delhi, fell to a stray bullet here, meeting his Waterloo at Lucknow. Hundreds of British officers and men were killed beneath the high ceilings of the Begum Kothi, resembling a Roman lodge of yore, defended staunchly and to the last by 900 fighters. Soon Campbell was joined in by the Nepalese army from the south even as Outram continued to advance from the west.

Even before the fall of Lucknow, the loot and wholesale destruction of this Babylon-Paris-Alexandria-Kremlin-Constantinople of Asia, had begun. The native troops kept inflicting heavy casualties and retreating as part of a pre-conceived plan. House to house fighting commenced in which the middle classes and the poor took up arms. The begum moved towards the west with her forces and Birjis Qadar, taking shelter at various houses and exhorting people to fight. Outram sent her a proposal of 'honourable' surrender which was rejected. Without losing courage, she amassed her troops once more at Musa Bagh but lost out to a heavy cannon charge from three directions. The British tried capturing the begum but proved incapable of cutting off her retreat towards Baundi in the northeast. A number of troops also crossed over to Faizabad, dodging Outram and Campbell. The maulvi established himself at Saadat Ganj, then lured the British towards the Dargah Abbas in the heart of the city before catching the Sitapur road.

Summary executions began back in Lucknow. People were blown apart by cannon fire and bare hands tore the limbs of captured soldiers. Acts of despoilation left Nadir Shah far behind in cruelty and savagery. It was as if a barbarian race had embarked upon the 'valorous' task of stripping and raping a fair but defiant damsels. The 'civilised' British became bloody, lusty, gold thirsty mobsters gouging gems from sword hilts, caskets, pipe stems, saddlery, shawls, brocades and muslins. Clothes with zari gold and silver work, which still smelled of musk and sandalwood, were wrapped around smelly bodies. It was as though a new culture had chanced upon the beauties of a higher culture-jade vases were reduced to smithereens and stolen brass pots were paraded as gold items.

Qaiserbagh, the symbol of the Avadh political and cultural power, was destroyed with a vengeance. Ankle deep piles of looking glasses,
giandoles, vases, crockery, furniture, glassware and alabaster figurines could be seen in its courtyards. All native records were destroyed. Across the Gomti, Indian ‘niggers’ were shot at in fun and villagers maimed. Even the servants of the British, who had remained loyal, were treated like animals and objects of a shooting ‘game’. The modern masters of India performed a planned genocide for which there would be no Nuremberg.

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A Sensuality Passes Away: the Women of Lucknow

Sunate bo mujhe baten hazaron, kahun main bhi kuch apni zabon se to is dam kirkiri ho jayegi bas, sabhon ke samne meri watan se
Hui jab Dehli chaavni men se bi, vahan log aa gaye sare jahan se
arab tha koi to koi ajam tha, koi sheeraz koi sherwan se
j po ki aapas men in longon ne baten, to Urdu ki zabon nikli zabon se
Namak mirche mili hain Lucknow men, ki ab tak raal babti hai zabon se
Yeh Urdu thi ki ek lakri ka chaila, na nkle jiske katen bhabhan se
Khatana Lucknow walon ne isko, tumhen kyon fakhr tum layi kahan se
Mere jaan Lucknow vaalon ke aage
Babur mushtil hai kuch kahna zabon se
Zaban ke mulk ka sikka hai aurat
Zaban ke faida hai aurton par
Yeh baaten mardduen laaye kahan se

— Rekhti