Chapter VI

The Socio-Cultural Life of Awadh (1748-1856)

Court and Social Fabric:

Awadh was a part of the Mughal imperium and shared, even after it became an autonomous state, the values and practices of the Mughal court culture. At the same time, in developing its distinctive regional identity, it borrowed a lot from indigenous traditions. What must have given a distinctiveness to the court was also to a large extent its composition. There had been attempts to bring together people and resources of varied kinds to build up the edifice of the upcoming state. Initially, there was much dependence of the early nawabs on outside elements and mercenaries, of different sort and sources, along with the main chunk of Mughal personnel in their establishment. From the time of Burhan-ul-Mulk, the office of diwani was entrusted to Punjabi khattris and kayaths. Safdar Jung further extended this by including low class men of the nearby region in his militia. The Gosians were incorporated, each commanding several thousands of troops, whose superb tactical mobility was greatly valued by the successive

1 Miratal-Auza, recognizes extensive presence of khattris and kayaths at various levels in the different departments of the administration. 'In those days no officials except these could be credited for trustworthiness and honesty'. Tafzihul Ghazilin, p.2.
nawabs, from Safdar Jung onwards. Later at Panipat (1761), this star-naked, ash-smeared Naga sanyasi contingent of Nawab Shuja-ud-Daula had been a culturally striking spectacle for the allying forces under Ahmad Shah Abdali, who having all ridicule for such men, lectured nawab Shuja over their impropriety of parading in nakedness in front of Muslims and ordered them to remain at a distance from his camp. The Awadh court however appears quite inclusive of such elements without such signs of disdain or contempt.

The major breakthrough in policy comes with Shuja-ud-Daula who appears keen on recruiting local men in his bureaucracy. They went together with the Awadh state’s assertions on autonomy in this period. His office had men from powerful castes of the region. For instance, Raja Beni

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2 The Gosians, ousted by Marathas from their fort in Moth (north-east of Jhansi), had been on pilgrimage to Allahabad where they defended the holy city, forming part of Nawab’s contingent, when attacked by Ahmad Khan Bangash (around 1750). From that time onwards had been very much part of the Awadh army. Cf. Barnett, p.56.

3 Ibid, pp. 56-7.

4 It has been held that especially after the experience of allying partners in Panipat (1761), he became all the more alienated with the ideology of holy war, combined with clashes over Muharram, which made him assert his autonomy all the more. Ibid, p. 57.
Bahadur, a brahman had become Awadh's chief minister along with the former office of diwan and his control over the domestic affairs was considerable. Among the chief officers in Nawab's cavalry were Gosians (under whom there were more men than all the others put together), among others, Tahawwur Jang, a native of Kakori, Muhammad Muazzuddin Khan, Sheikzada of Lucknow. Other local officers are noted; Bahram Ali Khan, from an old Sheikzada family of Lucknow and Sawa Sing, probably a local Rajput chief. Regiment of 3,000 men of red-coat regulars, employed to guard the city and Begam's palace, was commanded by a Hindu general named Bagh Rae. These regulars in the army had been of local peasant background. Around 3,160 regulars ('raw recruits') were under Parshad Singh, possibly Rajput. The local men and from lower classes were systematically inducted by the time of nawab Asaf-ud-Daula, one of the

5 Ibid, pp. 55-6.
7 Barnett, p. 79. He writes that heterogeneity was an important feature of nawab's army. Possibly, Sawa Singh could not have been an immigrant but a local Rajput since Rajasthani Rajputs were heavily engaged elsewhere.
8 Tarikh-i-Farahbaksh, p.30.
9 Barnett, p.81. Tarikh-i-Farahbaksh speaks of Raghunath Singh and Parshad Singh, each in command of 300 cavalry and four foot-regiments (p.7).
chief architects of Awadh’s cultural mosaic, under whom they had considerable presence.

There was considerable criticism of nawab’s policy of local recruitment to high offices, by the older Mughal elite. The author of Tafzihui’l Ghafilin says that the ‘agents of the Nawab Wazir’s family have mostly been men of low origin’. ‘There was no low or low-minded class, barbers, green-grocers, butchers, fuel-vendors, elephant-drivers, sweepers and tanners, but some of them rose to opulence and rode proudly through the market-places in fringed palankeens, on elephants with silver litters, or on state-horses’ (sic). ‘Now naked rustics, whose fathers and brothers were with their own hands guiding the plough, were enrolled in the regiments as regulars and rode about as Asaf-ud-Daula’s orderlies and were allowed to go in and out of the barahdari, the Nawab’s own court, riding on horseback: and round the Nawab Wazir’s palankeen there rode in disorderly fashion, on state horses with grand expansions, Bhawani Singh, Moti Singh, Hulas Singh, Nawaz Singh and Maiku Singh the upstarts.

The social motility in the period is evident in Haft Tamasha’s description of castes, written by Mirza Muhammad Hasan Qateel where he, a khattri convert, privileges khattris and rejects Rajput’s claims to status in

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10 Tafzihu’l Ghafilin, p. 2.
11 Tarikh-i-Farahbaksh, p.24.
12 Ibid., p.21.
caste-hierarchy (possibly as the Rajputs were the traditional landed classes of Awadh). Similarly, the ruling castes, the Kambos and Kayaths were ascribed sudra origin.\textsuperscript{13}

It is interesting to note that in spite of these noticeable tensions between the traditional elite and the new social classes, they shared a common socio-cultural and political space. It must have been important for the court to build up traditions of shared cultural forms and an inclusive cultural environment that wielded together the diverse sections at the court and at the same time proclaimed its specific identity vis-à-vis other provincial states, crucial also for its autonomy. We for the first time find the nawab of Saadat Khan commissioning Qateel to write about the culture of the common folk of the region. The distinction between the high and the low cultural and caste groups is obviously, evident, but the fact that the ‘low’ were also included in the cultural scene is equally significant.

Qateel gives vivid description of the festival of Holi celebrated at the court of Asaf-ud- Daula. A large assembly of thousands of men, all dressed in zardozi and expensive stuffs, were a fine spectacle at the court and all of them received generous gifts from the nawab. Fireworks were held at the river-side and scale of celebration was impressive.\textsuperscript{14} Mirza Abu Talib

\textsuperscript{13} Mirza Muhammad Hasan Qateel, \textit{Haft Tamasha}, pp.30-31.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Haft Tamasha}, pp.82-3.
Landani remarks: "The extravagance of their expenditure was immense……A trifle only of this is incurred during the whole month of phagun in celebrating Holi, the wazir’s carnival, and marriages, and illuminations. Each year five or six lakhs are set apart for these customary celebrations; and similar expenses are incurred during muharram".\(^{15}\)

Along with the courtly celebrations of religious festivals, we find the festivals such as basant (spring) celebrated.\(^{16}\) These festivals are described in detail also by Mrs. Meer Hasan (published 1832), who finds this an established part of Awadh court culture by then. On Basant, the king holds a court, gives a public breakfast and exhibits sports with ferocious’ animals.\(^{17}\) Qateel writes that there were celebrations and gaiety around the tombs, also visited by the officers of the town, for the performances by dancing girls.\(^{18}\)

\(^{15}\) *Tafzih-ul-Ghafilin*, pp.48-50

\(^{16}\) These are described in great details by Mrs. Meer Hasan. whose account is an entry to elite household. Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmans of India: Manners, Customs, Habits and Religious Opinions*. Delhi, reprint 1973, vol. I, p.287.

\(^{17}\) She thinks the amusement of this day was chiefly confined to the court but from the description of the festival by Qateel shows that celebrations were taken with enthusiasm by the elite and the common folk.

\(^{18}\) *Haft Tamasha*, p.78
Meer Hasan’s description of celebrations of Awadh reveals out how these celebrations were different from the practices of other Indian states. For instances, on *Baqr-Eid*, the procession of well arranged elephant carriages, troops on horses, camel-drivers, foot-soldiers, kettle-drummers etc. made an imposing effect and all that passed in the court after the sacrificial ceremony, the rituals of receiving the presents, ‘nuzzas’ and conferring favors ‘khilauts’ etc. “The magnificent style of celebrating Buchrah Eade at Lucknow is perhaps unequalled by any other Native Court now existing in Hindoostaun”. This was one of the ways through which the Awadh state sought to develop its distinctive identity. This is visible also through Court patronage to specific crafts, development of Urdu literature, distinct food culture etc.

Likewise, Muharram, the mourning of Shiite martyrs in the month of Muharram was observed by the nawabs. Sources inform us of the elaborate manner in which the mourning was observed and also the set of specific rites practiced by the elites during Muharram. Elite Shiite household had *imambaras* and prepared well-decorated *tazias* during the muharram. The *tazia* of the nawab was undoubtedly the best. The political relevance of these rituals was, according to Meer Hasan, that “violence of party spirit may have acted as an inducement to the Sheahs for the zealous annual

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19 Ibid, pp. 262-274, 281.

observance of this period" as a means to consolidate the Shiite asabiya and that muharram was a season of social contest 'the two sects hoard up their private animosities and dislike until the return of Muharram'\(^{21}\). This emphasize the point of clash and conflict between the two sects, but that which could be confined to a particular period or month, and not which takes the toll unceasingly.

In fact, Shiite-Sunni conflict was overplayed in the context of Awadh court politics. *Haft-Tamasha* brings out clearly the cultural sharing between the people. He writes that Shiite women, in company with the Sunni women had learnt a lot about each others ritualistic practices\(^{22}\). Sunnis did *rozakhwani* and recited *mersiyah* in both Persian and Hindi, expressed grief recounting incidents at Karbala.\(^{23}\) It was a common practice among sunnis, of especially lower classes and also Hindus to prepare *tazias*.\(^{24}\) Even some of the elite Sunnis participated in the *tazia* procession. In order to show reverence to the martyrs, Sunnis also tried not to partake meat and ghee for ten days and visited *imambaras* on the eve of *ashura*. The Muharram undoubtedly had become a civic function in which people of all communities took part. This participation at the same time

\(^{21}\) Ibid, p.25

\(^{22}\) *Haft-Tamasha*, p.131.

\(^{23}\) Ibid, p.132.

\(^{24}\) Ibid, pp.132-3.
could not have been, as held out, simply on account of identification with Shiite theme\textsuperscript{25}, imposed from above and mindless from the point of the participants, but had been through invoking common themes in faith. Mrs. Meer Hasan writes on Hindu participation in \textit{taziyedari} that “Hindoos, even, on approaching the shrine, bow their heads with much solemn gravity; - I often fancied they mistook the \textit{Tazia} for a \textit{Booth Khanah} (the house of an idol)”.\textsuperscript{26}

The courtly cultural practices could not be regarded as emanating from the court as a one-way process. Perhaps the court was able to build up a shared cultural space, incorporating the Hindu rituals with the corpus of Muslim rites and symbolism by drawing upon the cultural material of the region. This possibly explains the ready acceptance of Hindu rites such as Holi by the Muslim elite at the court and which came to be cherished so much that even when it was officially abandoned by the nawabs it continued with as much fanfare in their houses.\textsuperscript{27}

The religious temper of the people of Awadh is described by Donald Butter (1839)\textsuperscript{28} in the following words: “the proselytising zeal of the Muslims has indeed long since passed away; and they have... finished (sic)

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Clash of Culture}, p.77

\textsuperscript{26} Meer Hasan, vol.1, p.48

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Haft-Tamasha}, pp.82-3.

\textsuperscript{28} Butter, pp. 164-5.
by intermingling with many innate corruptions of their peculiar creed, not a few of the superstitious of their Pagan subjects; who seem not unwilling, in return, to adopt some of the religious observances of their victors". When the Maulvi from Bengal (who led a 'petty religious war' there), tried to bring reforms in Awadh, the disturbances occasioned by his preaching induced the darbar to silence him. Similarly his missionaries sent to Salon were dismissed by the Muslim zamindars of the region, who informed the Maulvi that they cherished the customs of their fathers.

There is a description of considerable cultural sharing between the communities. The numerous functions and festivals were jointly celebrated. For instance, Muslims were a part and parcel of Dussehra festivities. In Diwali, Muslim men joined in the play of dice and candles and lamps were lit at home. In Janmashtmi, Muslims too slit the effigy of Kans (Lord Krishna's opponent) and consumed the honey filled in it believed to be his blood. Devotees of both communities flocked in large numbers to the graves of sufis and saints. Muslim marriages resembled the Hindu marriages. There were common beliefs and practices. Qateel describes a number of these as 'superstitions' of the people. In fact, Haft-Tamasha brings out a number of syncretic groups of the region. Aghor

29 Haft-Tamasha, pp. 69-70, 74-5, 77 etc.
31 Ibid, p. 121.
Panthis, Sarabgis, Husseini Brahmans, Shanbis, etc. who incorporated Islamic myths and dogmas in their belief-system and had cultural practices common to both Hindu and Muslim communities. The enumeration of these sects also suggest a multi-religious belief system. The culture, therefore, had been quite an inclusive one, with no rigid and conclusive boundaries between communities.

Sleeman informs us of the syncretic aspect of landed class of Ahbun Rajputs, who were holders of nine hundred and eighty nine villages. A number of them became Muslims. 'They live together, however, though of different creeds, in tolerable harmony; and eat together on occasions of ceremony, though not from the same dishes. No member of the tribe ever forfeited his inheritance by changing his creed, except to retain his inheritance, liberty or life, threatened by despotic and unscrupulous rulers.'

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32 Ibid, pp. 36,37-9, 39-40, 44

33 We find in Qateel homogenizing tendency as well, in presenting many of these as deviant sects of Hinduism and is critical of the fact that they are neither Hindus nor Muslims. To make his criticism look more genuine, he commonly attacks their sexual practices. Hindu religion and Islam been presented as the major religious systems in spite of unavoidable detailing of the syncretic forms and shared aspects of their beliefs and practices.
The Musulmans have Mahommedan names, and the Hindoos Hindoo names; but both still go by the common patronymic name of Ahbuns’.  

These shared aspects of culture possibly then explain why the Muslims city/town officials, as informed by Qateel, were a part of the Dussehra festivities, as that was important to demonstrate their own grandeur in the locality. Horses and elephants were dyed, and decorated with golden and silver draping and carriages and with soldiers and officers of the establishment in best of dresses and weapons, marched through the bazaar, distributed costly gifts to people of every community. Muskets and cannons were fired on the occasion.

At the same time, there is also a discussion of what the Muslim elite did not take up and considered low. Distinction was made between aspects of high and low culture. For instance, the Muslims elite kept away from the kathak dance performed by the boys (part of the Hindu high culture), but it was within dignity to have performances by dancing girls at home. In fact, the definition of high and low made here was on the grounds of certain elite practices of the urban and courtly class, which were distinctly upheld.

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35 Haft-Tamasha, pp. 69-70.

36 Ibid, pp. 70-71.

37 The concept of high and low in Qateel is clearly from urban elite perspective and greatly accounts for his own biases.
The other groups, lower in hierarchy, aspiring for status, were thereby seen imitating these practices. Specific Muslim variety of *purdah* was learnt by Hindu elite groups. The Ananiyas, Khattris, Kayastha, closer to the court, were regarded as more elite than the landed Rajput class, also on account of the knowledge of Persian. We have found the courtly elite participative in the mixed cultural milieu, but also keen to have a definite elitist identity defined by their etiquettes and manners, language and diction, food and clothing, life-style etc.

It would be worthwhile to take Mrs. Meer Hasan's treatment of elite culture here. Speaking mainly in terms of the aristocratic Shiite household (with which she was acquainted) generalizing it to represent the state of Muslim culture as a whole. She speaks of the inferior and low-traditions in the mix of over-all cultural milieu of the elite, these classes seen mainly as providers of service and comfort to the elite. There is an insistence that only lower classes of Muslims borrow a lot from the Hindus. Qateel also mentions that the low traditions are not worthy of imitation. But what was considered as aspects of low culture was still practiced by rural elite and those considered high in Muslim hierarchy such as the Sheikhs, Sayyads,
Mirzas, Khans etc. There appears a lot of sharing between the Muslim rural elite described as ‘low’ and the Hindus, not to speak of the lower classes.

The high and the low were fluid cultural categories with space and scope of sharing and transcendence. The traditional basis of caste and lineage got complicated with the interplay of class and occupational mobility. For instance, among Muslims, it is mentioned that the Sayyads who took to ‘mean’ professions, in spite of wealth fell in hierarchy. For instance, the mersiyah readers who were saiyyads, reduced to poverty still retained the ‘respectable’ status but not enough to get their daughters married to elite saiyyads; enough still to get proposals from the richer lower ones. These lower ones generally meant the wealthy market men (bazaaris), but who did not have claims to good lineage-caste.

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42 Ibid, pp.113,71.
44 Meer Hasan, pp. 8-9. Qateel considers the saiyyads who did rozakhwani as depressed and the rich did not consider them worthy of company except in muharram. While Hasan allows the depressed saiyyads claims to elite status on this very basis, seen as a pious profession but still not enough to get their daughters married to richer Sayyads. Zealous to preserve the respectability through lineage, daughters could not be given to richer lower ones; instead they preferred to let them work for subsistence.
Nevertheless, the shifts in the proprietary rights and patronage to the newer elements in the nawabi period also had bearing for the traditional elite; there being visible signs of tensions between the new and the traditional ruling classes with implications for the cultural fabric. A number of taluqdaris, as we know, were created in this period. Rajputs, a major landed class in the region, lost or had reduced estates – Amethias (in Mohanlal pargana), Bias (in Mohanlal and Dewa parganas), Gautams (in Malihabad), Janwars (in Malihabad). Action was taken against them and they were described (also in European accounts of the period) as refractory – recalcitrant tribes. We have seen Qateel, a member of new elite, dismissing Rajput claims to caste-status. The elaboration on crudity of rural elite possibly could be seen in the backdrop of these tensions between the new elite and the traditional landed class.

The response of the rural landed elite to the new elite, though not forthcoming through literary accounts, as is available to the court elite, we find from time to time assertions of the displaced older classes; their ability to forge joint combats. For instance, Amethia Rajputs always resented the loss of their rights and were joined by the Kurmis against the British in the study.


revolt.\textsuperscript{47} The local Rajputs at Hanumangarhi, supported the \textit{mahants} to capture the \textit{chabutra} (in 1855) which escalated tensions between the communities. The Muslim under Maulvi Amir Ahmad tried to recapture it. It is to be noted that the nawab remained neutral in Hanumangarhi episode: the clash took a heavy toll of Muslims. We find groups trying to assert through new devises, resented by the powered groups. Tilism reports of innovation in making the demand for Kali puja procession and the British government at that time disallowing it on grounds that it threatened peace.\textsuperscript{48}

All these were found in an overall environment of sharing between the elites and the common folk of both communities at the local level. The shared culture was not necessarily without tensions and conflict and always fully harmonious.

\textbf{Women in Awadh Culture:}

There is a great deal of discussion on the beliefs and customs of women also regarded as low and inferior but which appears crucial in the

\textsuperscript{47} Butt, \textit{Report of Lucknow}, Appendix II,p.XXXV. The Kurmis cultivating proprietors (till 1847) lost their rights owing to assessment by contractor and became feudal tenants under Rajput chief. Sleeman considered them peaceful people, who had settled to this fact, but would see their ability to fight later on. Sleeman, vol.II,p.88.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Tilism}, no.12, vol. I, p.4 ,10\textsuperscript{th} Oct 1856.
syncretic life and integrative practices of the region. *Haft-Tamasha* brings out numerous such instances and how they had great freedom in these matters. They decided the cultural matters at home and the men folk were described, to a great extent, as helpless in this regard, compelled to follow their dictates. Their ‘superstitious’ beliefs, customs and rituals came to be practiced by their men as well, ‘under their influence’. For instance, in Diwali, Muslim women lit lamps and candles in their houses, bought clay-toys for children, sweetmeat etc. for the festivities and for a particular ritual called *diwali-pur-kardan*. This was considered auspicious and there was a common belief that if they fail to do so, the entire year will pass in sorrow and resentment. Men too feared the bad omen.49

Women thus exercised considerable influence on domestic and social concerns. This, however, in the latter colonial constructs was seen emanating from simply wifely devotion of Indian women.50 The theme also got developed around the ideal of ‘native’ wifely fidelity in ultimate self-sacrifice, a sati on the husband’s funeral pyre.51 The spaces women enjoyed

49 *HaftTamasha*, p.75
50 The colonial construct of veiled native women and ideal Hindu wife had therefore multiple and complex implications, meaning at the same time female sensuality, devotion and sacrifice.
51 Though Sati was banned by the legislation in 1829 and despite opposition to widow immolation and horror it evoked in European imagination, we find
were not simply around built 'devotion' and 'fidelity', as held out, but on account of an overall inclusiveness of culture. The discussion on festivals, Holi, Dussehra etc. when young men went singing round and there were bands of women too, with lots of interaction between them, speaks of society with considerable spaces for women. These duels between men and women such as in Holi allowing physicality and advances were later seen as signs of sexual depravity in the natives.

On the elite women's lives in segregated zenanas, Mrs. Meer Hasan comes out with picturesque detail. As such purdah had been one of the most striking themes taken up in the colonial discourse of the period, assuming variety of constructs: describes as an oppressive system, women doomed to idleness and confinement on account of male's sexual suspiciousness and tyrannical patriarchy. The discourse thus fore grounded the sensuality of female life in zenana and zenana's obsession with sensuality' etc. Hasan, some sort of convert admiration as well. It was favorably remarked, equating it with womanly love and also to combat the feminism at home. Indrani Sen, Woman and Empire, Representation in the writings of British India (1858-1900); New Delhi, 2002, p.61.

52 Haft-Tamasha, pp.81,70.
53 Cf. Indrani Sen, p.57.
though impressed by the general trend of the period, takes her subject quite differently.

The European distaste for confinement in zenana is there, brought about by the style of narration of how women were denied simple pleasures in life but tried to emphasize more on the cultural specificity of the people that essentially promoted a sense of happiness in confinement. The feelings of pity for these women confined to zenana were therefore unrequited.

Pudah elaborated in great details speaks of a conscious minds selection of the prevailing major themes. A European subjectivity and arrogance of culture is reflected with the natives presented as closer to native (Meer Hasan, I. pp. 320, 327-8). Interestingly Qateel takes a number of themes on women that gained currency- purdah, nautsch, widow remarriage, sati etc. suggesting an impact of the discourse/reform in ceded territories on the consciousness in Awadh.

The narration is subtle-'Not knowing the sweets of liberty, would not know how to use boon if it were to be granted them'. The story of a woman who was denied permission to see a river-bridge, she had never seen, is spoken at length. The lack of education etc. is commented upon (Meer Hasan, I. p. 313,315). Still careful not to appear as culturally biased and so a lot of restraint is visible.
Zenana was seen as hub for women's own employments and amusements. 'Female society is unlimited and that they enjoy without restraint'.

Hasan brings out the autonomy of women in domestic matters in these households. Her description to a great deal de-sexualizes the harem, elaborating more on the day to day activities and functions of an elite household. There were considerable scope for cultural activities and organizing festivals and celebrations. Women were crucial in the observance of rites and rituals, in both the spheres of segregated households in spite of their seclusion to zenana. The daily routine for most women in zenana, including that of the middle classes, with the exception of very rich families was extremely arduous, with no scope for idleness.

The culture afforded a lot of movement out of home. Women's camp remain segregated but her outdoor engagements were given due importance and were properly arranged. For example, a visit of the lady to the dargah at Lucknow is reported: "she is conveyed with all pomp and parade due to her rank in life to this Dargah, attended by her female relatives, friends, domestics, eunuchs, and slaves, in conveyed carriages, in her train are gentlemen or horseback, in palkies, or on elephants, to do homage to the

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joyful event; the Guardian’s wife (of the dargah) having charge of these occasions of the ladies visits.\textsuperscript{57}

The women also had considerable influence in not only domestic matters but over the affairs of men. The colonial discourse of the period also particularly takes this position for various reasons. A sympathetic observation Fanny Parks, writing in 1850s, of her experience of two decades back, says that ‘women have more influence over men in India than in any other country’.\textsuperscript{58} Maud Diver (in 1909) valorized as the ‘veiled women who, by reason of their worship service, dominate the men they serve as unveiled women cannot hope to do;\textsuperscript{59} thereby strengthening the myth of effeminacy of Indian male who could be ruled.

We find number of royal and aristocratic women wielding political power and whose exercise of power was not exception to the system. Besides, women being central in building alliances and bonds between families; we find elite women shaping policies and controlling many of


\textsuperscript{59} Cf. Indrani Sen, p. 60.
Awadh’s financial resources. Shuja-ud-Daula’s wife, Bahu Begum and her mother-in-law, Sadr al-Nisa Begam continued to play major roles in Awadh. Bahu Begum helped Shuja-ud-Daula out of the financial crisis he faced after the defeat at Buxar. She used her funds to enable him pay off the Rs.200,000,000 indemnity demanded by the British and thereafter continued as the trustee of Shuja’s treasury. She along with Sadr al-Nisa controlled much land revenue in Awadh. Similarly we find Badshah Begam, wife of Ghazi-ud-Din Haider, Jahan Ara Begam and Nawab Taj Ara Begam, wives of Muhammad Ali Shah, important in Awadh politics. They determined many appointments in the court. Some of these however had to work through their husbands or male relatives rather than in their own name. The opportunities for upward social mobility for women within the separated zenanas were immense.

Women contributed in the literary sphere as well. Though among the women of the gentry, knowing how to read and write was considered a taboo. There was however exceptions and women of higher aristocratic

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61 Gail Minault, Secluded Scholars, Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in the Colonial India, Delhi, 1998, p. 24.
circles received formal education which was equal in quality to that provided to men. Some poetesses find space (zikr) in the famous tazkiras of this period. We come to notice more women towards the end of 18th century with the famous tazkira of Ghulam Hamdani Mushafi, tazkira-e-Hindi, (written in 1794-5). It seems, by the time Mushafi was writing, the trend of women composing poetry had become quite widespread. He mentions several women of aristocratic backgrounds composing poetry: Dulhan Begum (wife of nawab Asaf-ud-Daula), Jeena begum (wife of Jahandar Shah, the Mughal prince) and Guna Begum (wife of Imadul-Mulk, the famous minister). More significantly, perhaps, he also mentions women from less aristocratic backgrounds composing poetry, such as Zeenat and Moti.

The trend continued right into the nineteenth century as is evident from another important tazkira of the nineteenth century, Abdul Qasim Mir Qudratullah’s Majmu’a-e-Naghz / Tazkira-e-Shu’ara-e-Urdu. Writing in 1806-07, Qasim also mentions quite a few women in his tazkira. A later

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English work (1923) on collection of poetry by Indian women includes the poems of Dulhan Begum and Bahu Begam. They must have earned considerable reputations in the poetic circles of the nineteenth century to have been noticed by the women writing the anthology in early twentieth century\textsuperscript{65}.

It is important to stress that women participating in literary activities did so within a strictly patriarchal order. Composition of poetry was not an act of ideological struggle but a means of expression of feelings and thought within a shared normative system. The account of Dulhan Begum by Qasim is full of praises for her being chaste and strict observant of purdah\textsuperscript{66}. She had, however, carved out for herself the necessary space required for practicing different faith from that of her husband and with a great rigor. She remained the chief wife of Nawab Asaf-ud-daula and enjoyed high position. She is praised for being highly competent in the skill of poetry in rekhta (Urdu).

Women poetesses, as we find, were at least from two different backgrounds. The aristocratic women, who observed a rigid system of purdah, yet made their presence felt in the literary domain by men. The other kinds of women were the public women, as it were, whose profession

\textsuperscript{65} Poems by Indian women, ed. Margret Macnicol, Calcutta 1923, pp. 36, 78, 87.

\textsuperscript{66} Qasim, Tazkira, opcit. p. 257.
offered them ample opportunity for creative pursuits and allowed them to interact with the patriarchal literary order and to a degree challenge it.

The spaces and patronage to the women performers appear phenomenal. Their presence was commonplace, not only at the court, but at the routine festivities of the elite and the common folk.\textsuperscript{67} Hasan, however, brings out separate arrangements for amusement in elite households. ‘The Nautchunies are entirely excluded from the female apartments of better sort of people, no respectable mussalmann would allow these imprudent women to perform before their wives and daughters’. On the contrary, dominies, dancers and singers, admitted in the interiors,’ are women of good character and their songs are of the chastest description.’\textsuperscript{68} It was later on that the association of elite women with female performers was restricted and their songs considered vulgar and licentious.

The category of unchaste type \textit{Nautsch} girl, as brought about by Hasan, however, betrays an effect of an over-all campaign against the \textit{Nautsch}\textsuperscript{69}. There were definitely hierarchy among the performers\textsuperscript{70}, but

\textsuperscript{67} There are numerous references in \textit{Haft-Tamasha}.

\textsuperscript{68} Meer Hasan, vol I, p.195.

\textsuperscript{69} From eighteenth century till early nineteenth century, nautsch constituted a popular form of entertainment during the formal interaction between the British colonials and wealthy Indian. It was later that it was regarded with revulsion, and fear, as sexually threatening etc.
these were high class courtesans who performed on occasions, and were regarded as preservers and performers of high culture. They were instrumental in the development in music and dance styles. They were artists who underwent rigorous training. Sons of nobles were sent to them to learn etiquettes. They received considerable patronage from the nawab. Many of them were patrons of poets, scholars, musicians and dancers\(^{71}\). The affluence and organization of kothas, especially in the city of Lucknow is brought out by the literary writing of the period, *Umrao Jan* by Ruswa\(^{72}\). They organized funds, owned property and paid tax, some of them with largest individual incomes of any city\(^{73}\), and thus were integral part of the elite. We know of a number of courtesans, who emerged as important

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73 Veena Oldenburg, pp. 145-80.
political figures like Begum Hazrat Mahal, Begum Sapru. A number of these were established poetess of their times.

The figure of the courtesan aroused considerable anxiety among the British in India. In their insistence on treating them all as prostitutes, they ignored their tremendous influence and power in society. The revolt of 1857, and the role of these marginalized group in the revolt, brought home to the British rulers the power that they wielded in society. No wonder, the ruthlessly with which they dealt with them was severe — it led to the decline of the institution.

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