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RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘It all comes from me’: Bahu Begam and the making of the Awadh *nawabi*, circa 1765–1815

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Abstract

This article examines the durable, yet largely overlooked, claims of Bahu Begam (1727–1815) to dynastic wealth and authority in the Awadh *nawabi* (1722–1856), a North Indian Mughal ‘successor state’ and an important client of the East India Company. Chief consort (*khas mahal*) to Nawab Shuja-ud-Daula (r. 1754–75) and mother to his successor Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula (r. 1775–97), Bahu Begam played a well-documented role in the regime’s tumultuous politics, particularly during Warren Hastings’s tenure as the Company’s governor-general (1773–85) and his later parliamentary impeachment. But despite her prominent political influence, little attention has been paid to the substance of her persistent claims to proprietorship over revenue rights and the immense fortune in her custody, as well as her broader assertions of authority over Awadh’s male rulers. Taking those claims seriously, this article contends that the begam rooted her arguments in notions of natural deference to maternal authority and generational seniority, evolving dynastic traditions of co-sharing sovereignty and fiscal resources, and her particular history as a principal financier of the Awadh regime. In so doing, the article argues that the begam’s claims reflect the shifting conceptual language of late-Mughal Persianate political discourse and the ambivalent position of elite women as dynastic financiers and state-builders in early colonial South Asia.

Keywords: Awadh; women; property; sovereignty; state formation

Introduction

Few figures loom larger in the entangled histories of the Mughal successor polity of Awadh (1722–1856) and the East India Company than Ummat-uz-Zahra (1727–1815), a woman more commonly known by her marital sobriquet, Bahu Begam.¹ Chief consort

¹I have not found a record of Bahu Begam’s birth in any extant accounts, but according to a Persian-language news digest (*zubdat-i akhbarat*) from 1810, her birth commemoration ceremonies (*rusum-i salgira*) were performed on 29 Shaban 1225 AH, in which 86 knots (one for each lunar year) were counted on her birthday thread (*rishta-i salgira*). Reckoning backwards places her date of birth on 29 Shaban 1139 AH, or 21 Apr. 1727. British Library (hereafter: BL), Oriental and India Office Collections (hereafter: OIOC), OMS I.O. Islamic 4341, *Zubdat-i Akhbarat*, 2 Ramzan 1225 AH/2 Oct. 1810.

(*khas mahal*) of Nawab Shuja-ud-Daula (r. 1754–75) and mother to his successor Asaf-ud-Daula (r. 1775–97), Bahu Begam played pivotal roles in the shifting dynamics of Anglo-Awadh relations well into the nineteenth century. From financing her husband's restoration to the governorship of Awadh by the Company in 1765, to wrangling with her son and Governor-general Warren Hastings over a vast treasury in her possession, and from raising and deposing her putative grandson Wazir Ali Khan (r. 1797–8) in cooperation with British officials, to bequeathing the remainder of her fortune to the Company in 1813 to found a pensionary trust for her dependants—for decades the wealthy begam remained a potent economic and diplomatic force in the North Indian political arena. Moreover, as this article contends, for the duration of her lengthy and contentious engagements with Awadh's male rulers and the Company, the begam maintained consistent claims to political power and personal property, rooting her arguments in notions of natural deference to maternal authority and generational seniority, evolving dynastic traditions of co-sharing sovereignty and fiscal resources, and her particular history as a principal financier of the Awadh regime.

Bahu Begam's obvious impact on early colonial North India has, unsurprisingly, generated a sustained, if narrow, scholarly interest in her as a critical figure in Anglo-Awadh politics during Hastings's tenure as governor-general (1773–84) and as a contested and highly gendered symbol in the Hastings impeachment.² More curiously, however, her actual arguments in defence of her wealth and authority have largely been ignored or summarily dismissed, despite their regular rearticulation in her correspondence, conversations with Company officials, and in posthumous 'petitionary' histories like the *Tarikh-i Farah Bakhsh* authored by long-serving *munshi* Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh.³ Yet a more substantive engagement with the begam's neglected arguments concerning the fundamental interconnections of her property and familio-political authority appears increasingly necessary. A growing literature

²Useful discussions of Bahu Begam's life, and particularly her conflict with Asaf-ud-Daula and the East India Company, can be found in K. S. Santha, *Begums of Awadh* (Varanasi: Bharati Prakashan, 1980), pp. 61–104; and Richard B. Barnett, 'Embattled Begams: Women as Power Brokers in Early Modern India', in G. Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 522–56. Neither, however, interrogates substantively Bahu Begam's claims to property or her views on the Awadh regime. For the Hastings impeachment in British public debate, and especially the role of Bahu Begam and her mother-in-law Sadr-un-Nissa Begam—known jointly as 'the Begums of Oudh (Awadh)'—see P. J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 109–28; Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006), pp. 87–131; and Anna Clark, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 84–112.

³Historians have generally consulted this work through the English translation by William Hoey, *Memoirs of Delhi and Faizabad, being a Translation of the 'Tarikh-i-Farahbakhsh' of Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh from the original Persian. Vol II: Memoirs of Faizabad* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1889). Hoey's translation, however, is at times imprecise, and this article relies instead upon two extant manuscript copies of the original Persian text. The first is a copy of the second half of the text that was presented to William Sleeman and is now held at the British Library: OIOC, OMS I.O. Islamic 4674, Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh, *Tarikh-i Farah Bakhsh* (hereafter: *TFB-BL*). The second is purportedly Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh's 'original draft' (*asl masauwada*), now held at Aligarh Muslim University's Maulana Azad Library: Abd-us-Samad Collection, MS 482/7 (hereafter: *TFB-AMU*). For 'petitionary' modes of Indo-Persian historiography in early colonial India, see Robert Travers, *Empires of Complaints: Mughal Law and the Making of British India, 1765–1793* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

has detailed the multiple ways that women shaped interwoven political, agrarian, mercantile, and religious economies in early modern South Asia, but—owing to a relative paucity of sources—it has also left their intellectual lives much more obscure than those of their counterparts in later princely regimes.⁴ As such, Bahu Begam's overlooked yet uncommonly well-documented political thought sheds significant light on how wealthy female elites in pre- and early colonial India understood the nature of their financial and political power and the roles that their control of personal and dynastic capital played in state formation.

For this reason alone, her views would be worthy of much greater attention. Yet the begam—who lived through the waning of the Mughal empire, its fragmentation into regional 'successor states', and the establishment of a new imperial hegemony under the East India Company—also provides important insights into the broader intellectual shifts that attended the political and socio-economic upheavals of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Indeed, while much of the successor-state literature considers aspects of political culture within larger treatments of regionalized socio-economic realignment and colonial expansion, little attention has been paid to the political thought of the successor regimes as such.⁵ Nor, as I have argued elsewhere, have the ways in which these polities helped construct British India's emerging constitutional order upon late-Mughal conceptual foundations been fully appreciated.⁶ This omission is especially salient in the case of the Awadh regime, which is widely acknowledged to have been an essential (if coerced) political and financial prop of the

⁴Important works on pre- and early colonial India include Lisa Balabanlilar, 'The Begims of the Mystic Feast: Turco-Mongol Tradition in the Mughal Harem', *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 69, no. 1 (2010), pp. 123–47; Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Colonial Law* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages, and Memories of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013); Indrani Chatterjee, 'Monastic Commerce and Coverture in Eastern India, circa 1600 to 1800 CE', *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 50, no. 1 (2016), pp. 175–216; Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Rochisha Narayan, 'Widows, Family, Community, and the Formation of Anglo-Hindu Law in Eighteenth-Century India', *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 50, no. 3 (2016), pp. 866–97; Samira Sheikh, 'Jibhabhu's Rights to Ghee: Land Control and Vernacular Capitalism in Gujarat, circa 1803–10', *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 51, no. 2 (2017), pp. 350–74; and Ramya Sreenivasan, 'Honoring the Family: Narratives and Politics of Kinship in Pre-Colonial Rajasthan', in I. Chatterjee (ed.), *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp. 46–72. For the intellectual lives of royal women in later princely states, see Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. pp. 132–69; Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage: Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam of Bhopal* (London: Routledge, 2007); Angma D. Jhala, *Courtly Indian Women in Late Imperial India* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008); and Angma D. Jhala, *Royal Patronage, Power, and Princely Aesthetics in Princely India* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011).

⁵For North India, see Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986); Richard B. Barnett, *North India between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals, and the British, 1720–1801* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Kumkum Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics, and Society in Early Modern Bihar: 1733–1820* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

⁶Nicholas J. Abbott, 'A Mulk of One's Own: Languages of Sovereignty, Statehood, and Dominion in the Late-Mughal "Empire of Hindustan"', *Itinerario* vol. 44, no. 3 (2020), pp. 474–501.

Company's expanding military-fiscal 'garrison state',⁷ but whose ruling elite is often depicted as simply retreating from British encroachment into a solipsistic cocoon of artistic and courtly refinement.⁸ But, as the arguments deployed by Bahu Begam and Awadh's male rulers make clear, competing members of the dynasty and their subordinates responded to British challenges with considerable nuance and sophistication. In so doing, they drew rhetorical resources not only from the contractual forms, customary practices, and Islamicate juridical categories of 'Mughal' law and the increasingly proprietary idioms of rights-holding and political authority embedded in the 'commercialized' and 'zamindarized' political economy of late-Mughal India.⁹ As importantly, they also built their arguments from evolving conceptions of sovereignty and statehood fashioned through Anglo-Awadh diplomatic discourse and the East India Company's burgeoning treaty-based political order. In this regard, Bahu Begam's insistent linkage of property and familio-political authority was not an idiosyncratic concoction. Rather, it reflected the commercially inflected intellectual milieu of eighteenth-century state formation, and was itself a critical agent in shaping the political culture of the Awadh dynasty and the language and substance of British imperial 'inter-polity' law in early colonial India.¹⁰

Taking her outsized role in the Awadh regime and Anglo-Awadh diplomacy as a vantage point from which to consider the economic and political thought of wealthy female elites in pre- and early colonial India, and the changing conceptual landscapes of late eighteenth-century imperial politics, the remainder of this article charts Bahu Begam's claims to power and property against the shifting fortunes of the Awadh regime. It begins by examining how the regime was constructed, substantively and discursively, in the early decades of the eighteenth century, and how the treaty of Allahabad between Bahu Begam's husband, Nawab Shuja-ud-Daula, and the East India Company redefined the Awadh dynasty's sovereign and 'proprietary' authority over its dominions from 1765. It then turns to emerging traditions of dynastic co-sharing between the Awadh nawabs, their chief consorts, and their widowed mothers that underpinned the regime at mid-century but which were increasingly challenged after the death of Shuja-ud-Daula in 1775. From there, it considers the substance of Bahu Begam's interrelated claims to political power and personal property (particularly cash and revenue assignments 'gifted' by Shuja-ud-Daula) and the varying responses her arguments induced among her husband's successors and East India Company officials.

⁷For Awadh's role in funding the Company 'garrison state', see Douglas M. Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in 19th-century India* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995), esp. pp. 121–2, 201–2.

⁸See, for example, Thomas R. Metcalf, *Land, Landlords, and the British Raj* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 37–41; and Michael H. Fisher, *A Clash of Cultures: Awadh, the British, and the Mughals* (Riverdale, MD: The Riverdale Company, 1987).

⁹For a pathbreaking examination of 'Mughal law', see Nandini Chatterjee, *Negotiating Mughal Law: A Family of Landlords across Three Indian Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). For the eighteenth-century transformation of the Mughal empire as alternatively one of 'commercialization' and 'zamindarization', see, respectively, Bayly, *Indian Society*, p. 11, and Jos J. L. Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and the High Roads to Empire, 1500–1700* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 203–6.

¹⁰For the British imperial constitution as an amalgamated regime of inter-polity law, see Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800–1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 4.

Finally, it concludes with a discussion of Bahu Begam's will of 1813 in which the begam attempted to bequeath her entire estate to the East India Company.

The formation of the Awadh regime, the treaty of Allahabad, and proprietary sovereignty

Historians of eighteenth-century India have highlighted common patterns in the formation of regional Mughal successor states. Facing imperial fiscal crises, factionalism at court, and assertive rural gentries, provincial governors and revenue officers (*subadars*, *nazims*, *diwans*; colloquially, *nawabs*) forged stronger ties with influential regional soldiering, scribal, commercial, and landholding communities; wrested away expanded local powers from the imperial court; and consolidated hereditary control over more extractive forms of revenue collection.¹¹ In Awadh, Iranian-born governor Sa'adat Khan (r. 1722–39) established himself as a highly effective farmer of provincial revenues¹² through selective confrontation and conciliation of powerful landholding and gentry groups, amassing a strong enough base of support to resist attempts by the imperial court to recall him and laying the groundwork for his nephew and son-in-law Safdar Jang to succeed him.¹³ Safdar Jang (r. 1739–54) further strengthened the nascent dynasty by arrogating powers to assign provincial prebendal revenue rights (*jagirs*) in Awadh and neighbouring Allahabad to his relatives and adherents—a power that was further enhanced during his tenure as imperial *wazir* from 1748 to 1753.¹⁴ And although Safdar Jang and his supporters were violently ejected from Delhi after his dismissal from the *wizarat* in 1753, his family remained sufficiently well-positioned in the province for his only son Shuja-ud-Daula (r. 1754–75) to succeed him as governor the following year.¹⁵

Yet despite their continued hold on the province, the fortunes of Awadh's incipient ruling family—like other regional dynasties—were perhaps more precarious during the 1750s and 1760s than has been acknowledged by existing scholarship.¹⁶ While Awadh was not wracked by lengthy succession struggles as in Hyderabad or the Carnatic, or repeated dynastic overthrows as in neighbouring Bengal, its own dynasty remained little less vulnerable. Even at the height of his powers, Safdar Jang was very nearly ousted from Awadh in 1750 following a rout by the Bangash Afghans of Farrukhabad, and for the first decade of his reign Shuja-ud-Daula, too, faced a number of significant challenges from powerful relatives and regional rivals that he surmounted only

¹¹Bayly, *Indian Society*, pp. 7–44.

¹²That is, as a tax collector contracted to pay a stipulated sum from certain revenues to the holder of those rights, with the understanding that any additional surplus revenues constituted legitimate profits for the farmer. Sa'adat Khan, in particular, farmed *jagirs* in Awadh held by *jagirdars* residing outside the province. As Sa'adat Khan and his descendants gained greater control over provincial revenues, these were in turn contracted out to local revenue entrepreneurs. On the development of tax farming (*ijara*) in North India, see Barnett, *North India*, pp. 165–91; Bayly, *Rulers*, pp. 164–70; and Alam, *Crisis of Empire*, pp. 39–42, 206–7, 217–19.

¹³Alam, *Crisis of Empire*, pp. 204–46.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 254–88.

¹⁵Barnett, *North India*, p. 43.

¹⁶Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 42–66, which characterizes the Awadh regime as experiencing its period of 'greatest autonomy' at this time.

through adroit alliance-making and the fissiparousness of his opponents.¹⁷ Critically, while mid-century Persianate discourse began to reflect a tacit acknowledgement by the late-Mughal political community of the regional regimes as de facto autonomous polities, the hereditary claims of Shuja-ud-Daula and other regional dynasts to their respective domains remained at best ill-defined and, more often, readily contested.¹⁸

Ironically, Shuja-ud-Daula's authority would not only be crystallized but also expanded by the one power that came the closest to destroying it—the burgeoning East India Company regime to the east. Following a series of disastrous defeats in 1764–5, Shuja-ud-Daula was completely ousted from Awadh by the Company, which—considering itself the 'original proprietor' of the provinces by right of conquest¹⁹—was poised to bestow the territories upon a number of claimants, including the Mughal emperor in exile, Shah Alam II (r. 1759–1803).²⁰ British officials, however, ultimately reversed course, determining that the best means to preserve their own territorial holdings in Bengal was to establish a treaty-based community of independent polities under a notional Mughal suzerainty, within which the Company would act as 'umpire' and Awadh would serve as a friendly and dependent western frontier.²¹ To that end, they proposed to reinstate a presumably grateful Shuja-ud-Daula via a treaty of mutual defence, in which the nawab would effectively purchase from the Company its proprietorship of Awadh by conquest and British recognition of him as the province's hereditary 'natural prince' by paying a fifty-lakh (five-million) rupee indemnity, half of which was to be paid in cash within a month.²² The beleaguered Shuja-ud-Daula readily accepted the offer and, following the conclusion of the treaty in Allahabad in August 1765, he returned to Awadh to reclaim control of the province.

Following the peace at Allahabad, Shuja-ud-Daula and his male heirs were effectively recast, in the language of the 1765 treaty itself and in subsequent Anglo-Awadh discourse, as sole, sovereign 'masters' and proprietors (*malik*) of their 'hereditary dominions' (*mulk, mamalik-i maurusi*).²³ This reified status, however, would not be simply theoretical. As modern historians have pointed out, by establishing a subsidiary alliance in which the Awadh rulers paid for British military 'protection', the treaty laid the foundations for the regime's rapid subordination to the Company, as British

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 38, 43–9.

¹⁸Abbott, 'A *Mulk* of One's Own', pp. 481–5.

¹⁹For Governor-general Warren Hastings's use of this logic in conversation with Shuja-ud-Daula, see C. C. Davies, (ed.), 'The Benares Diary of Warren Hastings', *Camden Miscellany* XVIII (1948), pp. 3, 7.

²⁰Barnett, *North India*, p. 69.

²¹Governor Harry Verelst made the instrumentality of Company policy clear in a letter to the Court of Directors in which, after noting that 'most of the princes of Hindostan have no natural right to the countries they possess', he observed that the Company's 'generosity' towards Shuja-ud-Daula and 'attention to our treaties' had made rival powers 'ambitious of our friendship' and that the nawab himself had become an 'instrument to accomplish the Company's main point, the maintaining themselves the umpires of Hindostan'. Verelst to Court of Directors, 28 Mar. 1768, in Harry Verelst, *A View to the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the English Government in Bengal* (London: Printed for J. Nourse, 1772), Appendix, no. 24, pp. 101–3.

²²For a copy of the original Persian treaty, see BL, OIOC, Richard Johnson Papers, OMS I.O. Islamic 4753/B, ff. 20a–22b. For the English translation, see C. U. Aitchison (ed.), *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sunnuds Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries* (Calcutta: Foreign Office Press, 1876), Vol. 2, pp. 67–9.

²³Abbott, 'A *Mulk* of One's Own', p. 488.

officials used their control of (and threats to withdraw from) frontier defence to wring ever larger subsidies and eventually territorial concessions from the nawab's successors.²⁴ But, for the remainder of his own reign, Shuja-ud-Daula did successfully leverage his relationship with the Company to actualize his notional powers in Awadh. He quickly moved to strip away many of the *jagirs* and other long-held revenue rights of members of his extended family and other segments of Awadh's rural gentry and fended off attempts by the emperor Shah Alam to award new grants within his dominions.²⁵ More importantly, he imposed an expansive right of confiscation (*zabt*) derived from Mughal imperial practice, in which the sovereign laid claim to the property of deceased or disgraced relatives and subordinates.²⁶ Through these measures, the nawab amassed significant new financial resources, which he plunged into feverishly rebuilding his military, transforming it from primarily a loose constellation of unreliable cavalry contingents into a disciplined force of infantry and field artillery units trained in the European style.²⁷ By the time of his death in 1775, Shuja-ud-Daula had not only extended his sovereign proprietorship to the province of Allahabad (which he purchased back from the Company in 1773) but over the territories of his erstwhile Afghan rivals in Farrukhabad and Rohilkhand, which he conquered by force with British assistance in 1774.²⁸

Yet as much as Shuja-ud-Daula had gained in the short term within the Company's emergent treaty-based community of 'states', much about the new dispensation remained uncertain, including what, in fact, the Awadh 'state' was. To represent European notions of an autonomous 'government' of a bounded territorial state in the Company's diplomatic discourse, British translators adopted the term '*sarkar*', which could connote in Indo-Persian usage an individual overseer or superintendent, an administrative or territorial unit, or a household establishment.²⁹ More importantly, however, it was the primary term the Mughal imperial regime and (more tentatively) its successor polities used to represent themselves as discrete, unitary institutions.³⁰ Within this formulation, the ruling household establishment ('the *sarkar*') functioned as a metonym for the dynastic regime as a whole, establishing the long-term continuity of claims and obligations vis-à-vis its servants and subjects—particularly with regard to property, debt, and material and financial exchange—while also reflecting the Mughal regime's paternalistic vision of governance and political

²⁴ Metcalf, *Land, Landlords and the British Raj*, p. 21.

²⁵ Ghulam Husain Khan, and Abd-ul-Majid (ed.), *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhkhirin*, (Calcutta: Dar-ul-Imara, 1833) (hereafter: *Siyar*), Vol. 2, p. 94; Kamal-ud-Din Haidar, *Tawarikh-i Awadh* (Lucknow: Nawal Kishore, 1879), p. 79; *Calendar of Persian Correspondence, being letters, referring mainly to affairs in Bengal, which passed between some of the Company's servants and Indian rulers and notables. Vol. I (1759-1767)* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1911), nos. 2743 and 2750, pp. 445, 446–7.

²⁶ Abu Talib Khan, and Abid Reza Bedar (ed.), *Tafzih-ul-Ghafflin* (Rampur: Institute of Oriental Studies, 1965) (hereafter: *Tafzih*), p. 120. For Mughal traditions of confiscation ('escheat'), see M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb*, rev. edn (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1966]), pp. 63–8.

²⁷ Barnett, *North India*, pp. 75–83.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–5.

²⁹ Nicholas J. Abbott, 'Bringing the *Sarkar* Back In: Translating Patrimonialism and the State in Early Modern and Early Colonial India', in J. Brooke, J. Strauss and G. Anderson (eds), *State Formations: Global Histories and Cultures of Statehood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 124–37.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

economy grounded in Greco-Islamicate ethical traditions (*akhlaq*).³¹ But while high imperial (and later successor-state) discourse portrayed 'the *sarkar*' as a universal 'patrimonial-bureaucratic' ruling household and the ruler as a benevolent and omniscient father, such rhetoric belied a far more complicated reality.³² 'The *sarkar*' was hardly a unitary entity but in fact a complex concatenation of interpenetrating and oft-competing establishments (referred to, depending on context, either honorifically as a '*sarkar*' or in more quotidian fashion as '*khana*' or household), whose interactions with local society generated the 'everyday' substance of the Mughal empire.³³ Within such a fluid and multipolar structure, where personnel and material circulated perpetually among myriad establishments, drawing clear distinctions between the ruling metonymic *sarkar* and its subordinate and constituent households, particularly with regard to property, was never straightforward and frequently contentious. Such ambiguities persisted in successor regimes like that of Awadh. Regional rulers like Shuja-ud-Daula, particularly following the treaty of Allahabad, did manage to consolidate provincial resources far more than the Mughal emperors and to limit the number, size, and assets of potentially competing *sarkars* within their dominions.³⁴ Nevertheless, the Awadh regime still comprised numerous autonomous-yet-entangled establishments, including those of chief officials, military commanders, revenue farmers, and—not least—Shuja-ud-Daula's mother and his chief consort Bahu Begam. For Company officials, locating 'the state' in 'the *sarkar*', and enforcing 'public' sovereign debt obligations upon it, proved far easier in theory than in practice.

Compounding the ambiguity of the *sarkar*-as-state formulation were the seeming ambiguities of 'proprietary' sovereignty as imputed by the treaty of Allahabad. Company officials, as they would in their own territories, understood the sovereign authority of Shuja-ud-Daula and his heirs as encompassing exclusive proprietorship of revenues and rights to award, and resume, revenue within his hereditary

³¹For the influence of *akhlaq* in Mughal governance, see C. A. Bayly, *The Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 11–19; Muzaffar Alam, *Languages of Political Islam in India, 1200–1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), pp. 26–80; and Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Kingdom, Household, and Body: History, Gender, and Imperial Service under Akbar', *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 41, no. 5 (2007), pp. 889–923.

³²For the Mughal imperial household as the centre of 'patrimonial-bureaucratic empire', see Stephen P. Blake, 'The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals', *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 39, no. 1 (1979), pp. 77–94; and for a useful critique, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'The Mughal State—Structure or Process? Reflections on Recent Western Historiography', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* vol. 29, no. 3 (1992), pp. 291–321.

³³For interpenetrating noble and princely establishments, see Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility*, pp. 161–2; John F. Richards, 'Norms of Comportment among Mughal Imperial Officers', in Barbara D. Metcalf (ed.), *Modes of Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 255–89; and Munis D. Faruqi, *Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504–1719* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For everyday interactions between these establishments and local society, see Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Chatterjee, *Negotiating Mughal Law*.

³⁴The Mughal emperors, for example, never claimed more than a third of imperial revenues for the *khalisa*, or imperial demesne, leaving the remainder for grants to the imperial military and service elite, whereas in Awadh, by the end of Shuja-ud-Daula's reign, the nawab claimed close to 85 per cent of provincial revenues. John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 139; Barnett, *North India*, p. 173.

dominions—prerogatives the Company would regularly help the nawab to enforce in the decade following the signing of the treaty.³⁵ At the same time, as evidenced by the Company's sale of its conquest proprietorship over Awadh and later Allahabad, as well as subsequent territorial cessions made by the Awadh nawabs in 1775 and 1801, proprietary sovereignty also appeared to entail the ability to permanently alienate territory and revenue to service debts or as part of larger financial and diplomatic transactions.³⁶ Apart from these broad prerogatives, however, many questions about the nawab's sovereign and proprietary powers remained unanswered, particularly within the nawab's 'hereditary dominions'. For example, could the nawab make theoretically temporary grants of revenue like the *jaqir* permanent and inalienable as well, even if they undermined his successors' ability to meet the 'public' debts of the 'state'? Or were these ultimately revocable by the reigning sovereign, however long standing? Most pertinently, did those who had made the new dispensation possible—politically or financially—enjoy any durable rights vis-à-vis the nawab and his successors? Or was the nawab's authority, once instantiated by the treaty agreement, now absolute within his dominions?

These questions went largely unaddressed during Shuja-ud-Daula's lifetime but would critically shape Anglo-Awadh relations following his death in 1775. For British officials, the contradictory notion that the nawab and his heirs were both Awadh's 'natural princes' and subject 'creations' of a paramount Company underpinned repeated demands for treaty revisions, territorial cessions, and eventually the complete annexation of Awadh in 1856. More immediately, however, these tensions between the absolute and created aspects of proprietary sovereignty would generate considerable conflict within the Awadh dynasty, for it was not the nawab who paid the bulk of the indemnity to purchase his sovereignty in 1765 but his chief consort, Bahu Begam. In what would become a foundational narrative of the Awadh dynasty, following the conclusion of the Allahabad treaty, Shuja-ud-Daula, now drained by his recent defeats by Company forces, sought assistance from his broad network of kin and adherents to help pay the initial sum demanded by the treaty. When most of these balked at his request, Bahu Begam readily provided the entire down payment of two million rupees in cash and jewels from her personal assets.³⁷ The begam's storied contribution to her husband's indemnity thus not only helped establish a new foundation for proprietary sovereign authority in Awadh through the treaty of Allahabad. Coupled with emergent traditions within the Awadh dynasty, it also provided her with a firm

³⁵Abbott, 'A Mulk of One's Own', pp. 489–90.

³⁶As Shuja-ud-Daula's grandson Ghazi-ud-Din Haidar (r. 1814–27) wryly observed in 1825 to the Company's Resident in Awadh with reference to the annexation of 1801, 'If the Rulers of Oude had no right or power to give away the houses and lands of their Kingdom, [the British] Government ought in Justice to give back the half of his Country, which his Father had alienated from him.' National Archives of India (hereafter: NAI), Foreign Department Public Consultation (hereafter: FDPC), 16 Sep. 1825, no. 50: Ricketts to Amherst, 11 Aug. 1825.

³⁷The earliest accounts of this transaction can be found in a narrative Warren Hastings collected during a trip to Benares in 1773 (BL, Hastings Papers, Eur. Ms. Add. 29, 202, ff. 110a–b) and in the *Siyar* (Vol. 1, p. 35) of 1782–3. Revealingly, however, along with almost all reference to Bahu Begam, it was omitted from Ghulam Ali Khan's *Imad-us-Sa'adat* (1808), a history of the Awadh dynasty jointly patronized by Resident John Baillie and Nawab Sa'adat Ali Khan that would serve as the foundation for several subsequent Indo-Persian histories of the regime.

basis to argue after her husband's death that she was both the recipient of permanent, irrevocable grants made through her husband's sovereign largesse and an effective co-sharer in—and perhaps co-proprietor of—that authority itself.

Chief consorts, familial finance, and dynastic co-sharing, circa 1739–75

In subsequent debates between the Awadh regime and East India Company officials, how Bahu Begam came to her vast wealth became as important as her payment of Shuja-ud-Daula's war indemnity. The daughter of Muhammad Ishaq Khan, an Iranian companion of the emperor Muhammad Shah, Ummat-uz-Zahra was married to Safdar Jang's son, Jalal-ud-Din Haidar (later entitled Shuja-ud-Daula) in 1745.³⁸ At a reputed cost of nearly five million rupees, the wedding festivities were the second most expensive in the Mughal empire's history, surpassed only by the marriage of Prince Dara Shukoh a century before when the empire was at its peak. While much of the expenditure went to reciprocal gift exchanges between the fathers of the bride and groom, it also went to building the bride's personal property in the form of her trousseau (*jahiz*), which consisted not only of cash and jewels, but also of other forms of moveable property, including clothing, furniture, animals, and enslaved men and women.³⁹

It is likely that joined to this moveable wealth were also provincial emoluments. As noted above, Safdar Jang used his brief ascendancy at the imperial court to gain control of *jagir* assignments in Awadh and the neighbouring province of Allahabad, transferring many of these prebends to members of his household, his military entourage, and his extended family.⁴⁰ Accordingly, he also may have assigned to her—at least according to the begam and her chief officials—*jagirs* in Awadh as part of her dower settlement (*mahr*).⁴¹ More certainly, following his own accession in 1754, and particularly after the 1765 restoration, Shuja-ud-Daula continued to augment his wife's assets, not only awarding her additional *jagirs* but also various monetary perquisites, including transit duties (*sa'ir*), fees for notarizing official pay orders with his seal (*muhrana*), and income from mints in the capital at Faizabad.⁴² In turn, the begam—like many wealthy women of the era—reinvested much of her earnings in Awadh's agrarian economy, founding new revenue-generating commercial grain entrepôts (*ganjs*) in her *jagirs* and in the vicinity of Awadh's twin capitals of Lucknow and Faizabad, as well as issuing interest-bearing loans through her eunuch agents and their expansive kin networks.⁴³

³⁸Santha, *Begums of Awadh*, p. 62.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Alam, *Crisis of Empire*, p. 209.

⁴¹NAI, Foreign Department Secret Consultation (hereafter: FDSC), 30 Apr. 1813, no. 2; Baillie to Adam, 15 Apr. 1813, and 27 Aug. 1813; nos. 1 and 3; Baillie to Minto, 31 Jul. 1813 and 6 Aug. 1813. *Jagir* registers from the early 1740s (for example, BL, OIOC, OMS I.O. Islamic 4503, *Kaifiyat-i Jagirdaran-i Suba-i Allahabad* and I.O. Islamic 4506, *Kaifiyat-i Jagirdaran-i Suba-i Awadh*) do not list Bahu Begam as a *jagirdar* but this may reflect either the state of assignments prior to her marriage in 1745 or that any *jagirs* assigned in lieu of *mahr* may have been held in another's name. For a more detailed discussion of these sources, see Alam, *Crisis of Empire*, p. 320.

⁴²BL, Hastings Papers, Eur. Ms. 29,202, f. 11b; and NAI, FDPC, 30 Apr. 1813, no. 2.

⁴³Barnett, *North India*, p. 196n, and Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh, and Shah Abd-us-Salam (ed. and trans.), *Tarikh-i Farah Bakhsh, Volume II* (Rampur: Rampur Raza Library, 2010), p. 18. For *ganjs* and commercial agriculture in eighteenth-century North India, see Bayly, *Rulers*, esp. pp. 96–100.

At the same time, she also received often sizeable tributary gifts from those seeking to gain favour with her husband, as well as treasures confiscated by him.⁴⁴

From these numerous sources of wealth, Bahu Begam was thus exceptionally well capitalized to assist her husband with the indemnity demanded by the treaty of Allahabad in 1765. Contemporary chroniclers lauded Bahu Begam's contribution as a singular act of wifely devotion, celebrating her forfeiture of her personal property, even down to that critical marker of married womanhood, her pearled nose ring.⁴⁵ Yet her sacrifice was hardly exceptional in the history of the Awadh regime. The begam's mother-in-law, Sadr-un-Nissa Begam, had provided similar assistance to both her husband Safdar Jang and her son Shuja-ud-Daula. Following Safdar Jang's devastating defeat by Ahmad Khan Bangash in 1750, for example, she rallied retainers at their residence in Delhi to defend it from plunder by her husband's imperial rivals.⁴⁶ According to one sympathetic chronicler, after Safdar Jang's eventual return, she 'sacrificed her [own] treasury to him (*khizana-i khwud fida-yi u karda*)' so that he could re-equip his forces and defeat the Bangash.⁴⁷ In the more vivid account of a later historian, after finding Safdar Jang in an abject state after the defeat, Sadr-un-Nissa chastised him for his self-pity, declaring, 'I have eleven-lakh rupees and four-lakh *ashrafis*; take it whenever you want, but get up and do something'—'life-giving' (*jan bakhsh*) words that roused Safdar Jang to subsequent victory against the Afghans.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, the same author also describes how, after Shuja-ud-Daula's accession in 1754, Sadr-un-Nissa Begam defused an incipient plot against her son by paying off her late husband's retainers who had conspired to install his nephew Muhammad Quli Khan in Shuja-ud-Daula's place.⁴⁹

What such accounts also make clear, however, is that these massive contributions of personal wealth were neither purely selfless nor uncompensated. Indeed, Sadr-un-Nissa Begam seems to have gained substantially from supporting her husband and son's careers. During the latter years of the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah's reign, Sadr-un-Nissa was one of only two women listed among *jaqirdars* in Awadh and Allahabad—the other being Udham Bai, the emperor's favourite wife, whose own *jaqirs* were probably farmed by local agents controlled by Safdar Jang. Sadr-un-Nissa's assignments accounted for some 1.5 per cent of provincial revenues, placing her among a dozen *jaqirdars*, including her husband and son, who together claimed more than 40 per cent of the province's produce.⁵⁰ By the end of her son's

⁴⁴For example, upon taking refuge in Shuja-ud-Daula's camp in 1764, Mir Qasim made sizeable gifts to Bahu Begam and the nawab's mother, Sadr-un-Nissa Begam: *Siyar*, Vol. 1, p. 327. When Shuja-ud-Daula later confiscated Mir Qasim's household property, much of it ended up in the custody of Bahu Begam: *TFB-BL*, f. 112b.

⁴⁵*Siyar*, Vol. 1, p. 351.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 36.

⁴⁷*Tafzih*, p. 149.

⁴⁸Ghulam Ali Khan, *Imad-us-Sa'adat* (Lucknow: Nawal Kishore, 1897), p. 53. The gold *ashrafi* was, by the eighteenth century, typically reckoned at 16 rupees to the *ashrafi*, making the total amount offered by Sadr-un-Nissa Begam some 75 *lakh*, or seven-and-a-half million rupees.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 66–8.

⁵⁰*BL*, OIOC, OMS I.O. Islamic 4506, ff. 29b and 31a, and I.O. Islamic 4503, f. 7a. By comparison, Safdar Jang and Shuja-ud-Daula held at this time (*circa* 1745) *jaqirs* worth 14 and 7 per cent of provincial revenues respectively.

reign some 25 years later, British observers found that the elderly Sadr-un-Nissa Begam possessed 'a large extent of the Country in [Shuja-ud-Daula's] Dominions', a 'considerable part' of which she held as *jagir*.⁵¹ As an Iranian traveller wrote of her in the early nineteenth century, all the nobles and *zamindars* in Awadh 'held the rope of submission round their necks...moving not a hair on their heads in opposition to her commands'.⁵² She also wielded her influence and authority more directly with both her husband and son. After his defeat by the Bangash, Sadr-un-Nissa Begam persuaded Safdar Jang to ally with Maratha *sardars* against the Afghans and probably helped finance the alliance. Later, whenever similar 'knots' (*gira*) arose in the administration of the regime, she 'loosened them with the talons of her wisdom'.⁵³ Such 'knotty' issues included managing the transfer of power between her husband Safdar Jang and her son Shuja-ud-Daula, as she not only fended off challenges from Muhammad Quli Khan—who was later executed, purportedly at her suggestion⁵⁴—but also served as a de facto regent for the early years of her son's reign.⁵⁵ To this end, until her death in 1796 she maintained independent lines of communication with the Marathas, the imperial court, and, later, East India Company officials.

The widowed Sadr-un-Nissa Begam's correspondence, however, also points to critical ways in which her, and Bahu Begam's, financial power and political influence were both defined and circumscribed by gender, generation, and marital status. Like Bahu Begam, Sadr-un-Nissa Begam was her husband's sole *mankuha* wife (that is, married by the contractual *nikah* rite recognized by both Shi'i and Sunni jurists), a status usually referred to in Awadh as that of *khas mahal* or 'chief consort'. Significantly, until the early nineteenth century, despite being legally permitted to marry by *nikah* up to four women, the Awadh nawabs—like many of their successor state contemporaries—seldom married more than one, a practice which further reified the status of the chief consort vis-à-vis *mamtu'a* wives, that is, those married by the far less prestigious *mut'a* or 'temporary' rite recognized only by Shi'a jurists.⁵⁶ Since 'respectable' *nikah* unions were typically contracted with other elite families and entailed sizeable *mahr* settlements, the chief consort was usually the nawab's only wife to enter into marriage with significant personal assets of her own and to receive substantial economic perquisites thereafter.⁵⁷ Moreover, much as in other elite Indo-Muslim families of the period, the status of *khas mahal* generally conferred upon the nawab's chief consort recognized prerogatives to manage her husband's household finances and his

⁵¹BL, Hastings Papers, Eur. Ms. Add. 29,202, f. 110a. By 1780, however, her *jagirs* had been reduced to less than 1 per cent of provincial revenues, whereas Bahu Begam and her relatives still controlled roughly 5 per cent: Barnett, *North India*, p. 176.

⁵²Ahmad Behbahani, and Shayesta Khan (ed.), *Mir'at-i Ahwal-Jahannuma* (Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 1992), p. 230.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 235.

⁵⁵Jean Law de Lauriston, and G. S. Cheema (trans.), *A Memoir of the Mughal Empire: Events of 1757-61* (Delhi: Manohar, 2014), p. 128.

⁵⁶For distinctions between the two marriage rites in the context of the Awadh ruling family, see Michael H. Fisher, 'Women and the Feminine in the Court and High Culture of Awadh, 1722–1856', in Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, pp. 489–511, esp. pp. 491–3.

⁵⁷Ibid.

children's marital unions, in addition to her own personal property.⁵⁸ Such power, in turn, allowed her to exercise considerable control over successions by ensuring her son was the only of the nawab's children to be married (and thus to be considered fully adult and eligible to assume political authority) and by mediating the redistribution of assets from her and her husband's household establishments (*sarkar*) to that of his new successor.⁵⁹

It would, however, be a mistake to assume that chief consorts enjoyed complete economic or personal autonomy during the reigns of their husbands or sons. Following Timurid imperial precedents, contemporary Persianate discourse framed eighteenth-century *khas mahals* as embodying, and even synonymous with, the personal and familial 'honour' (*namus*) of their husbands. Consequently, chief consorts were expected to remain physically secluded within the 'sacred' space of the harem, visible only to other women, children, close male kin, and castrated eunuchs.⁶⁰ Such restricted access and attendant notions of corporeal sacrality did furnish married and widowed chief consorts with not insignificant resources, as elite men, holding mutual regard of *namus* as a sign of moral refinement, were highly reluctant to breach harem boundaries without sufficient cause—a tendency that, in turn, only further incentivized female custodianship of familial fiscal resources. And, as long as *khas mahals* maintained their seclusion, upheld associated norms of sexual propriety (most notably a chaste, 'post-sexual' widowhood), and demonstrated a commitment to the interests of the dynasty, they—along with property in their control—could generally expect to remain physically secure.⁶¹ But despite the limited powers they conferred, ideas of embodied *namus* and expectations of physical seclusion also imposed real constraints on chief consorts' comportment and activities. These limitations, in turn, made women like Bahu Begam highly dependent upon individuals who could move freely between harem spaces and the outside world to help manage their affairs, a reliance that was especially pronounced in the case of high-ranking eunuchs (*khwajasaras*). Effectively 'de-sexed' through castration and thereby rendered admissible to the harem (*mahram*), enslaved eunuchs in Awadh and elsewhere not only served as harem guards and overseers (*nazirs*), but also frequently as business agents and managers of chief consorts'

⁵⁸Former revenue farmer in Awadh and early Indian traveller to Britain, Abu Talib Khan maintained to interlocutors in London that such privileges in fact gave Indian women—who, to European eyes, were apparently hobbled by norms of female seclusion—significantly more power and autonomy than their British counterparts. Abu Talib Khan, 'Vindication of the Liberties of the Asiatic Women', in Charles Stewart (trans.), *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe* (London: Longman et al., 1810), Vol. 2, Appendix B, pp. 410–18.

⁵⁹At the time of Shuja-ud-Daula's death, for example, only Asaf-ud-Daula—his eldest son and sole child by Bahu Begam—had been married. As, however, the political and economic authority of the *khas mahals* declined and the Company increasingly enforced a principle of primogeniture, limitations on marriage were largely lifted in the early nineteenth century. Haidar, *Tawarikh-i Awadh*, p. 3.

⁶⁰For the construction of a sacralized Mughal imperial harem, see Lal, *Domesticity and Power*. For contemporary definitions of '*namus*', see, for example, Ghiyas-ud-Din Rampuri, and Muhammad Dabirsiyaqi (ed.), *Farhang-i Ghiyas-ul-Lughat* (Tehran: Kanun-i Ma'arif, 1958 [1337]), Vol. 2, p. 463.

⁶¹Not surprisingly, when seeking to justify stripping *khas mahals* of property by force, male rulers and chroniclers often pointed to alleged sexual impropriety on the part of their female relatives. See, for example, an account of the nawab of Bengal Siraj-ud-Daula's confiscation of property from his aunt Ghasiti Begam in 1756: *Siyar*, Vol. 1, 191.

vast portfolios.⁶² Through their own localized networks of kinship and household service, eunuchs also linked secluded chief consorts to Awadh's wider agrarian society and—as evidenced by the Chait Singh rebellion discussed below—provided them a potent means to project their influence far beyond the harem. As a result of these partnerships, *khas mahals* maintained close, even intimate, relationships with the eunuchs that served them. At the same time, however, the considerable practical control eunuchs wielded over women's persons and fortunes could also make their interactions highly fraught.⁶³

Khas mahals were similarly constrained when it came to property under their control. Particularly in moments of crisis, such as Safdar Jang's rout by the Bangash or Shuja-ud-Daula's defeat by the Company, chief consorts seem to have had little choice but to forfeit their own assets to their husbands. As Bahu Begam is supposed to have commented upon hearing Shuja-ud-Daula's request for assistance, 'All this wealth means nothing without my husband's safety.'⁶⁴ To some degree, compulsory forfeiture was mitigated by the greater autonomy of widowhood. Sadr-un-Nissa Begam, for example, apparently felt no obligation to assist Shuja-ud-Daula in paying his war indemnity, all the more so because he had allegedly disregarded her in pursuing hostilities against the Company in the first place.⁶⁵ At the same time, widowhood also conferred increased diplomatic agency, allowing the *khas mahal* to correspond more openly and independently with non-relatives. Thus, while Sadr-un-Nissa Begam corresponded with the Maratha *sardars* from Safdar Jang's death onwards and wrote to Governor Robert Clive after the signing of the treaty of Allahabad,⁶⁶ Bahu Begam only began her voluminous communication with the Company after Shuja-ud-Daula's death in January 1775.⁶⁷ But, whether married or widowed, the *khas mahal's* entangled status as an embodiment of dynastic honour and a custodian of her husband's family and finances placed real limitations on how she could use the wealth in her possession, and contemporary observers heaped scorn on women like Bahu Begam when they perceived them to be prioritizing personal interests over familial obligations.⁶⁸

Still, despite these many limitations and the seemingly compulsory nature of contributions made by the chief consorts, descriptions of this assistance as a gift or loan ultimately reinforced that the *khas mahals* possessed at least some distinct claims to personal property. In the telling of Bahu Begam's secretary, after Shuja-ud-Daula made

⁶²For a discussion of eunuchs in Awadh, see Nicholas J. Abbott, "'In that One the Ālif is Missing': Eunuchs and the Politics of Masculinity in Early Colonial North India', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* vol. 63, no. 1 (2019), pp. 76–119.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴*Siyar*, quoted in Barnett, *North India*, p. 76.

⁶⁵BL, Hastings Papers, Eur. Ms. Add. 29,202, f. 110a.

⁶⁶Srivastava, *Shuja-ud-Daulah. Vol. I (1754–65)*, 2nd edn (Agra: Shivlal Agarwala and Co., 1961 [1938]), p. 8; and National Library of Wales, Robert Clive Papers, Original Correspondence, Persian Letters, CR9/27/49: Sadr-un-Nissa to Clive, 16 Aug. 1766.

⁶⁷NAI, Foreign Department Persian Branch (hereafter: FDPr), Copies Received (hereafter: CR) vol. 3, no. 78: Bahu Begam to Warren Hastings, 22 Mar. 1775.

⁶⁸Thus, in his history of Asaf-ud-Daula's reign, Abu Talib Khan contrasted Sadr-un-Nissa Begam's continued support of Shuja-ud-Daula's many children with Bahu Begam's 'hard-heartedness and shamelessness' (*qasawat-i qalb wa adam-i haya*) in pursuing 'her own amusements' (*mashghalaha-yi khwud*)—a detailed explanation of which he found too 'disgusting' (*qabih*) to inflict on his readers. *Tafzih*, p. 47.

his request for financial aid, the begam presented her wealth to Shuja-ud-Daula as a *nazr*, or a tributary gift presented to one's superior—incidentally the same terms used by Shuja-ud-Daula to later assert an original proprietorship of territories transferred to the emperor in 1765.⁶⁹ Similarly, Faiz Bakhsh glossed the nawab's subsequent cash payments and *jagir* grants to Bahu Begam as '*bakhshida*' or '*ata*', terms that correspondingly conveyed the sense of a gift from a superior.⁷⁰ At the same time, in his broad pleas for assistance, Shuja-ud-Daula had promised to repay anyone who assisted him with double the amount they contributed and, according to most contemporary sources, he deliberately deposited with Bahu Begam all surplus revenue collections in 'exchange' (*iwaz*) for her contribution towards the restoration of his authority.⁷¹ The nawab's obligation to repay his wife in this fashion seems to have been acknowledged not only by Shuja-ud-Daula but by contemporary observers more generally. As the historian Ghulam Husain Khan wrote of the arrangement, 'Whatever he acquired, he gave the remainder to his wife after expenses; and, in truth, he had to do so (*wa'l-haqq chunin mibayist*)'—a formulation that suggested the transfer was not simply, as Company officials would later maintain, an ad hoc and temporary custodianship of 'state' property (that is, of 'the *sarkar*'), but a deliberate exchange of discrete personal assets.⁷² Repayment appeared still more incumbent for the more voluntary contributions made by the nawabs' widowed mothers. Warren Hastings learned in 1773, for example, that although Shuja-ud-Daula's mother Sadr-un-Nissa Begam held many sizeable *jagirs*, the vast majority of her landed assets were held 'upon Mortgage for Sums of money she [had] from time to time sent him'.⁷³ As discussed below, Bahu Begam explicitly construed similar donations of cash to her son Asaf-ud-Daula as loans (*qarz, istiqraz*) she expected to be repaid, either in cash or additional *jagir* assignments.

By the time of Shuja-ud-Daula's death in 1775, then, a loose set of dynastic conventions and precedents—established primarily through Sadr-un-Nissa's interactions with Safdar Jang and Shuja-ud-Daula but more lately between Bahu Begam and her husband—had emerged to govern financial and familial-political relations among the Awadh nawabs, their chief consorts, and their widowed mothers. Although chief consorts commanded nominally independent assets in the form of bride wealth and subsequent earnings, they were frequently compelled to forfeit their fortunes during moments of military-fiscal crisis. Nevertheless, the chief consorts expected to be, and typically were, compensated economically and politically, receiving cash payments, *jagirs*, and additional emoluments; becoming principal, if not dominant, voices among the nawab's advisers; and serving as de facto managers of treasure accumulated by their husbands. The chief consort's power also helped her to ensure that her son succeeded her husband upon the latter's demise, with the now-widowed *khas mahal* using her own wealth, influence, and epistolary freedom to establish the new nawab's authority, in exchange for additional revenue assignments and a perpetuation and expansion of the authority she had enjoyed under her late husband.

⁶⁹ TFB-BL, f. 9b; Abbott, 'A Mulk of One's Own', p. 491.

⁷⁰ TFB-BL, f. 101a.

⁷¹ Ibid., f. 9b.

⁷² *Siyar*, Vol. 1, p. 351. Emphasis added.

⁷³ BL, Hastings Papers, Eur. Ms. Add. 29,202, f. 110a.

Yet the treaty of Allahabad, and its contradictory framing of provincial territorial sovereignty as both hereditary and proprietary, set the stage for more contentious succession conflicts in the decades to come. Recognizing dominion as lying solely with Shuja-ud-Daula and his (male) 'heirs', the treaty—and later Company officials—encouraged the nawab's successors to interpret their hereditary rights to property and political authority in Awadh as expansively and exclusively as possible, particularly with regard to moveable property and *jagirs* held by widowed chief consorts like Sadr-un-Nissa Begam and Bahu Begam. The *khas mahals*, however, understood their claims to their private fortunes, landed estates, and maternal authority over their sons and grandsons as not only supported by the new dispensation and its reification of local sovereign authority, but also grounded in longer-term dynastic precedents of spousal and maternal co-sharing. Following the death of Shuja-ud-Daula in 1775, Bahu Begam in particular defended her rights to retain cash and jewels deposited with her by her late husband, as well as *jagirs* and emoluments granted by Safdar Jang and Shuja-ud-Daula, by framing her assets as a broad portfolio of private dower wealth, irrevocable gifts made by her sovereign spouse, due compensation for elevating his successors to the throne, and, most radically, her rights as a key financier of the Awadh regime's restoration. It is to these specific claims, and their articulation after the accession of Asaf-ud-Daula, that we now turn.

Gifts, inheritance, or property of the state? Debating Bahu Begam's wealth, 1775–85

Initially, despite the looming impact of the treaty of Allahabad upon intra-dynastic and Anglo-Awadh relations, the death of Shuja-ud-Daula seemed to conform to emerging dynastic practices and expectations. Immediately before and after her husband's death, Bahu Begam worked to ensure the succession of their only son, Asaf-ud-Daula. In the days prior to Shuja-ud-Daula's demise, she sequestered her dying husband in her household, isolating him from everyone except her close blood relatives and encouraging Asaf-ud-Daula to act in the nawab's stead.⁷⁴ After his death, she used her new diplomatic prerogatives as a widowed chief consort to write to Company officials and her late husband's infantry commanders to guarantee their acknowledgement of her son's accession.⁷⁵ She also furnished Asaf-ud-Daula with large sums of cash, some of which she and her officials considered voluntary 'donations' (*tabarru*) in support of his nascent authority, and others—as observed by Company officials of payments made by Sadr-un-Nissa Begam to Shuja-ud-Daula—she viewed as loans (*qarz*) to be repaid with new revenue assignments.⁷⁶

What was novel about the 1775 succession, then, was not the behaviour of Bahu Begam, but rather the attitudes of Asaf-ud-Daula and his advisers, and the role of the East India Company in both spurring and mediating subsequent disputes.⁷⁷ Upon his

⁷⁴NAI, FDSC, 2 Jan. 1775, no. 11: Middleton to Hastings, 21 Dec. 1774; 3 Feb. 1775, no. 1: Minutes of Council; and 6 Feb. 1775, no. 2: Polier to Hastings and Council, 24 Jan. 1775.

⁷⁵NAI, FDP, CR vol. 3, no. 78: Bahu Begam to Hastings, 22 Mar. 1775; and BL, OIOC, OMS Or. 1716, Khair-ud-Din Muhammad, *Ibratnama*, f. 39b.

⁷⁶TFB-BL, f. 66a.

⁷⁷Except where noted, the following narrative draws from Barnett, *North India*, esp. pp. 99–126.

accession, Asaf-ud-Daula faced intense financial pressure from the Company. At the time of his death, Shuja-ud-Daula had left a large debt for Company assistance during their joint conquest of Rohilkhand the previous year, as well as a standing schedule of subsidy payments for British troops now permanently stationed in Awadh. Moreover, Company officials intended to use the nawab's death as an opportunity to renegotiate the treaty alliance for more favourable terms and inflated subsidy payments. At the same time, the young nawab and his advisers hoped to use Company support to radically expedite the transfer of power. Where Shuja-ud-Daula's own succession had entailed lengthy negotiations and a prolonged period of inter-generational co-sharing, Asaf-ud-Daula and his principal official Murtaza Khan sought a rapid assumption of Shuja-ud-Daula's assets, the immediate removal of many of his adherents, and a decisive break from his mother's authority. Any opposition, they assumed, would be crushed by British forces in Awadh, which were obliged by treaty to defend him from attacks 'foreign and domestic'.

The rupture between Asaf-ud-Daula and his mother came a few months after his accession. At the urging of the British Resident, Asaf-ud-Daula reluctantly agreed to cede the wealthy principality and merchant-banking centre of Benares to the Company to pay off his father's outstanding debts—a move fiercely opposed by both Bahu Begam and her mother-in-law Sadr-un-Nissa Begam. In addition, over the begams' vehement objections, he allowed Murtaza Khan to dismiss many long-serving officials of Shuja-ud-Daula's household in favour of his own relatives and partisans. Finally, despite his refusal to heed advice with regard to the Company debt or his father's adherents, the nawab continued to demand additional sums from his mother. After making clear that any further payments were conditional upon a recognition of her authority, Bahu Begam refused to part with any more money. Accordingly, Asaf-ud-Daula withdrew his household establishment from Shuja-ud-Daula's erstwhile capital in Faizabad and relocated to Lucknow. Alarmed at Asaf-ud-Daula's still-growing subsidy debt and the loss of access to the hoard of cash in Bahu Begam's control, the Company's new Resident in Awadh resolved to broker an agreement between the nawab and his mother. In exchange for a payment of three million rupees (in addition to the 2.6 million she had already provided), Asaf-ud-Daula would relinquish all additional claims upon Bahu Begam, cease all interference with her *jagirs* and the officials of her household, and permit her to depart for a pilgrimage to Karbala anytime she wished. Persuaded by her two elder brothers, who had been influential figures under Shuja-ud-Daula, that this was the best deal she could attain from the ungrateful son she had made 'master and reigning sovereign (*malik wa masnad nishin-i riyasat*)', the begam accepted the bargain.⁷⁸

Following later assertions made by Hastings and other Company officials, most modern historians have characterized the principal assets in dispute—the cash, jewels, and other moveable property deposited with Bahu Begam by Shuja-ud-Daula after 1765—as misappropriated 'state property'.⁷⁹ It is, however, readily apparent that neither Asaf-ud-Daula, Bahu Begam, nor contemporary Indo-Persian chroniclers framed

⁷⁸TFB-BL, f. 14b.

⁷⁹For example, C. C. Davies, *Warren Hastings and Oudh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 168–9; Marshall, *Impeachment of Warren Hastings*, p. 113; Barnett, *North India*, p. 102, and Barnett, 'Embattled Begams', p. 524.

the contested wealth in these terms.⁸⁰ As noted above, following Mughal discursive precedents, the reigning nawab's household establishment ('the *sarkar*') served as a metonym for the province's governing institution upon which to anchor fiscal claims and obligations and, particularly following the establishment of the post-1765 treaty order, Company officials construed the political landscape of eighteenth-century India as one of multiple independent *sarkar*-states.⁸¹ Yet, as had been the case with the Mughal imperial household, the ruling establishment in Awadh overlapped with, and was interpenetrated by, other households through shared personnel and material and financial exchanges, a dispensation that made the boundaries of 'the *sarkar*' and its property, especially during transitional episodes of dynastic succession, nebulous at best.

Owing to this ambiguity, Asaf-ud-Daula and Bahu Begam framed their claims not in terms of their respective relationship to 'the state', but through competing Islamicate legal categories of property transfer, to wit inheritance (*wirasat*) and the gift (*hiba*).⁸² Following the hereditary language and logic of the treaty of Allahabad, his own desire to block potential claims by his brother Sa'adat Ali Khan to shares of their 'hereditary dominions', and, perhaps, the suggestion of the Resident and his chief minister, Asaf-ud-Daula embraced the Company's designation of him as 'the rightful heir (*waris-i qawwi*) of the late nawab's property and dominions (*mamluka wa mamalik*)' and asserted his rights to the hoard as comprising his father's patrimony (*warsa*) and residual property (*tarikah*).⁸³ Bahu Begam, however—imputing her husband's rights to alienate his property as sovereign—construed the wealth in her possession primarily as permanent and irrevocable spousal gifts made long before her husband's death (and therefore exempt from the inheritance claims of her husband's children), while also underscoring how her own financial contributions had made the current dispensation possible. Over several letters to Warren Hastings in 1775, she reminded him first that 'everything paid to the English gentlemen by the late nawab [in 1765] had been taken from me' (*az in janab girifta*),⁸⁴ before complaining later that, 'All that I possess is by the bounty of the late blessed Nabob [but] nobody will pay attention to this.'⁸⁵

⁸⁰Instead, chroniclers Ghulam Husain Khan and Abu Talib Khan, both intimately familiar with the Awadh regime, described the contested wealth in personal and familial terms. Ghulam Husain Khan writes that Asaf-ud-Daula 'sent a message to his mother to give him money from his father's treasury (*khizana-i pidar*), since Shuja-ud-Daula, having witnessed his wife's faithfulness and sacrifice (*wafa wa isar*) at the time of the treaty negotiations with the English, had entrusted his treasury to her (*ba-dast-i u sipurd*)'. *Siyar*, Vol. 2, p. 95. More tersely, Abu Talib notes that Asaf-ud-Daula 'claimed his father's entrusted cash from his mother (*da'wa-i tahwil-i pidar az madar karda*)'. *Tafzih*, p. 17. Neither, it should be noted, did even the otherwise intensely hostile Abu Talib describe Bahu Begam's actions as obviously illicit, a stark contrast to C. C. Davies's confident declaration that, 'We are therefore justified in drawing the conclusion that the Bahu Begam had no right whatever to appropriate state funds. Any assertion to the contrary has its origin in a complete ignorance of Muslim law.' Davies, *Warren Hastings and Oudh*, pp. 168, 175.

⁸¹Abbott, 'A Mulk of One's Own', pp. 488–9.

⁸²For which, see Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 268–9, 289–95.

⁸³NAI, FDSC, 6 Jun. 1775, no. 5: Bristow to the Board, 25 Mar. 1775; and 25 Sep. 1775, no. 2: Bristow to Board, 9 Sep. 1775; NAI, FDP, CR vol. 5, no. 8: Bristow to Asaf-ud-Daula, 11 May 1775.

⁸⁴NAI, FDP, CR vol. 3, no. 78: Bahu Begam to Hastings, 22 Mar. 1775.

⁸⁵NAI, FDSC, 21 Dec. 1775, no. 2. Unfortunately, the original language of this second letter does not appear to have survived, but based upon other surviving letters and Faiz Bakhsh's account, it is likely the

In his later history of Faizabad, the begam's secretary Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh further underscored the inadmissibility of inheritance claims, stating in a marginal note of an original draft of his history that:

Every item the begam possessed, apart from her bridal trousseau (*jahiz*), etc., were gifts from a [legitimate] giver, that is her husband (*atiya-i muta ya'ni shauharish*). Neither Asaf-ud-Daula nor any other of Shuja-ud-Daula's descendants (*digar aulad*) had any claim, right, or share (*da'wa wa haqqi wa nasibi*).⁸⁶

The documents subsequently drafted by the British Resident attempted, if awkwardly, to accommodate the views of both parties. The initial agreement (*qaulnama*) construed the wealth in Bahu Begam's possession as definitely the nawab's 'patrimony' (*irs, warsa*), parts of which Asaf-ud-Daula had received to pay back prior and present 'debts' (*qarz*) to the Company.⁸⁷ But, more significantly, through the subsequent deed of acquittance (*farighkhatti*) signed by the nawab and the Resident, Asaf-ud-Daula renounced any further claim (*da'wa*) to the fortune, regardless of his inheritance rights, and effectively consented to her continued custody of the treasure.⁸⁸ Lastly, by foreswearing all further interference in the begam's *jagirs* for the remainder of her life, the nawab effectively conceded as irrevocable 'the ancient *jagirs*' (*jagirat-i qadim*) and other revenue rights bestowed by Shuja-ud-Daula on his mother.⁸⁹

Yet in appearing to validate her views, the agreement set the stage for rapidly intensifying conflict between the begam, her son, and the Company. Facing their own escalating fiscal crises in the late 1770s and early 1780s, Company officials attempted to shift ever more of their own financial burdens onto subsidiary allies like Asaf-ud-Daula by deploying new 'temporary' units, raising currency exchange rates (*batta*), and inflating monthly subsidy payments. Their ambitions, however, were often complicated by fierce personal and policy disputes among Hastings and rival members of the governing council and frequent rotation of their respective partisans appointed as Residents in Awadh. The constant vacillation of demands and personnel, in turn, provided both a cause of constant frustration and a useful means of resistance and evasion on the part of the nawab, his ministers, and the begams in Faizabad. The result was a swelling balance and new demands from the Company for rights to collect revenue directly in Awadh.⁹⁰ Eventually, in order to find even more sources of revenue to meet the nawab's debts, Governor-general Hastings gave Asaf-ud-Daula permission to exchange the *jagirs* of his family members—including those, like Bahu Begam's, that had been guaranteed by the Company—for equivalent cash stipends, assuming

begam and her secretaries used synonyms for 'gift' (*bakhshida, ata*, pl. *atiya*) which Company translators rendered as 'bounty'.

⁸⁶TFB-AMU, f. 230a.

⁸⁷For the deeds' original Persian language, see NAI, FDP, CR vol. 5, nos. 65–6, and for the English translation, see Aitchison, *A Collection*, Vol. 2, pp. 78–80.

⁸⁸NAI, FDP, CR vol. 5, no. 78. For the importance of the *farighkhatti* as a documentary mainstay of Indo-Islamic legal practice, see Elizabeth Lhost, 'Writing Law at the Edge of Empire: Evidence from the Qazis of Bharuch (1799–1864)', *Itinerario* vol. 42, no. 2, 2018, pp. 256–78, and Chatterjee, *Negotiating Mughal Law*, pp. 156–8.

⁸⁹NAI, FDP, CR vol. 5, no. 78.

⁹⁰Barnett, *North India*, p. 165.

(probably correctly) that their well-managed *jagirs* were significantly under-assessed. Shortly thereafter, Hastings's deposition of the raja of Benares, Chait Singh, in 1781 sparked a broad-based rebellion that quickly blazed throughout eastern Awadh, as peasants, rural magnates, and segments of the ruling elite seized on the raja's initial successes against Company forces to lash out against growing British encroachments. Not least of these were Bahu Begam and her mother-in-law Sadr-un-Nissa Begam, who—resentful of the nawab's continued requests for cash, the rotating Residents' flimsy guarantees, and the disruptive activities of nearby British revenue collectors—were widely believed to have lent their considerable wealth and influence to the ultimately failed rebellion.⁹¹

For apologists like scribal historian Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh, the begams' seclusion offered them plausible deniability for having supported the uprising, and his own work points the finger at certain rogue eunuchs as the primary instigators of anti-British violence in eastern Awadh.⁹² But for Hastings, the conviction that the begams had played a prominent role in the rebellion led him to consider the 1775 *qaulnama*'s prior, though weakly enforced, guarantees of protection as now null and void. Moreover, the governor-general subsequently demanded that Asaf-ud-Daula not only resume the begams' *jagirs* but also that he proceed to Faizabad and seize the remainder of the contested treasury from his mother once and for all. By January 1782, the nawab's collectors had been sent into the begam's *jagirs* and forces led by the Resident and Asaf-ud-Daula had surrounded her palace in Faizabad. Soon thereafter, several of her high-ranking eunuch officials were imprisoned until they forfeited large sums of cash, and Company forces continued to occupy the city for more than a year in the hopes of recovering her fortune.⁹³

In the long term, the resumption of the *jagirs* and the occupation of Faizabad ultimately proved a costly fiasco, particularly for Warren Hastings, whose violation of the *qaulnama* and his alleged extortion of Bahu Begam and her mother-in-law comprised some of the most notorious charges in his interminable impeachment.⁹⁴ More immediately, however, the episode exposed the increasingly divergent perceptions of Asaf-ud-Daula, Company officials, and Bahu Begam over what the wealth in her possession was and what, if any, rights she had to it or to her *jagirs*. Although Company officials continued to categorize the contested wealth as Asaf-ud-Daula's 'inheritance' and 'patrimony', they also began to frame the issue interchangeably in their English-language correspondence and deliberations in terms of the nawab's sovereignty and the rights of the Awadh 'state'. Rather than glossing the begam's fortune as Asaf-ud-Daula's personal inheritance, they construed it instead as part of Awadh's 'public treasury'⁹⁵—a categorical shift that bolstered concurrent efforts to compel Asaf-ud-Daula to limit his vast personal expenses and to establish, under Company supervision, a single 'state' treasury (*khizana-i kull-i mulk*) from which the nawab's 'private' household expenses

⁹¹Barnett, 'Embattled Begams', pp. 525–9.

⁹²TFB-BL, ff. 53b–55a.

⁹³Barnett, 'Embattled Begams', pp. 529–30.

⁹⁴Marshall, *Impeachment of Warren Hastings*, pp. 109–28; Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*, pp. 87–131; and Clark, *Scandal*, pp. 84–112.

⁹⁵For example, NAI, FDSC, 12 Jun. 1783, nos. 19A and 54A: Middleton to Hastings, 27 Dec. 1781 and 25 Mar. 1782.

and his 'public' debts to the Company would be administered separately.⁹⁶ Hastings similarly justified the resumption of the *jagirs* and the seizure of the treasury as necessary measures for safeguarding the nawab's sovereignty, since, as evidenced by the Chait Singh rebellion, the independence encouraged by the begam's *jagirs* and her hoard of cash clearly threatened Asaf-ud-Daula's authority and undermined his ability to meet his obligations to the Company.⁹⁷ In turn, the Resident echoed the position, arguing in letters to the begam that, since the nawab was 'master' (*malik*) and 'supreme in all affairs' (*dar umurat mukhtar*), his sovereign authority permitted him to resume her *jagirs*, even if it violated the *qaulnama*.⁹⁸

Bahu Begam, however, continued to insist that, as gifts previously alienated by Shuja-ud-Daula, her son had neither legal nor customary authority over her *jagirs*. As she declared summarily in one letter to the Resident, 'The Jagheer is not the Grant of the Nabob that he should resume it. Let he who granted it resume it. The Nabob has nothing to do with me.'⁹⁹ The same logic underpinned her refusal to surrender the cash fortune, points she made in letters to Asaf-ud-Daula that were later reproduced by her secretary in his history of Faizabad. Since the death of Shuja-ud-Daula, she complained, Asaf-ud-Daula had failed to observe her 'legal and customary rights' (*huquq-i shar'i wa urfi*), the most important being those to her *jagirs* and cash fortune (*zar-i naqd*), which had originated in part from the wealth of her late husband (*ba-daulat-i an marhum*). Had she received anything from Asaf-ud-Daula, she noted, he might have the right to reclaim it, but as she had not been 'stained by a single farthing' (*aluda-i yak dam*) from him, he could demand nothing from her.¹⁰⁰

As they have with her claims more generally, modern historians, citing the theoretical revocability of *jagir* assignments under the Mughals, have summarily dismissed the begam's appeals to spousal gifting,¹⁰¹ despite the proliferation of long-term and de facto hereditary *jagir*-holding in the eighteenth century more broadly,¹⁰² or the earlier willingness of Company officials to recognize spousal gifts of *jagir*.¹⁰³ Apart from these claims, however, her letters from this period also made clear how the begam and her officials saw her rights as grounded in recent dynastic precedents of financial and political co-sharing mediated by generational hierarchy and maternal authority. Contrasting the deference shown by Shuja-ud-Daula with her son's continued defiance, she stressed to Asaf-ud-Daula that, as a child 'born of [her] womb

⁹⁶NAI, FDSC, 9 Jul. 1783, no. 2: Bristow to Council, 6 Jun. 1783, and Appendix; NAI, FDP, 4 May 1783, Original Letter Received (hereafter: OR) 32 and 13 May 1783, OR 35. See also Davies, *Warren Hastings and Oudh*, pp. 156–8, 196.

⁹⁷NAI, FDSC, 5 Feb. 1782, no. 1B: Hastings to Wheeler, 23 Jan. 1782.

⁹⁸BL, OIOC, Richard Johnson Papers, OMS I.O. Islamic 4753/C, pp. 47–50 and 51–3: Middleton to Bahu Begam, 5 Muharram 1196 AH/21 Dec. 1781 and 7 Muharram 1196 AH/23 Dec. 1781.

⁹⁹NAI, FDSC, 12 Jun. 1783, no. 20A: Bahu Begam to Middleton, n.d.

¹⁰⁰TFB-BL, f. 61a.

¹⁰¹For example, Davies, *Warren Hastings and Oudh*, p. 175.

¹⁰²Alam, *Crisis of Empire*, pp. 303, 319.

¹⁰³See, for example, the case of Nadira Begam in Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 191–200. British officials, however, were far less sympathetic to women's claims to *zamindari* rights or shares in more complex economic partnerships, for which see Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends*, pp. 127–72, and Chatterjee, 'Women, Monastic Governance, and Coverture'.

(*az batn-i man paida shuda*)' and 'a piece of her liver (*lakht-i jigar*)', 'submission and obedience (*inqiyad wa farmanburdari*)' to her were a 'thousand times more incumbent (*hazar chandan wajib*)' upon him than they had been upon his father.¹⁰⁴ Elsewhere, in one of his first letters composed for Bahu Begam, Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh posed an elaborate rhetorical question to Asaf-ud-Daula that laid out the begam's expectations for intergenerational co-sharing of sovereign authority and the management of familial wealth. Knowing the nawab to have a passion for works of history, he asked whether Asaf-ud-Daula had ever read of any son, from the age of Adam to the present, who, born of his mother's body, nurtured tenderly by her, and placed by her upon the throne of sovereignty (*masnad-i riyasat*), had then endeavoured to deprive his poor mother of the modest gifts (*ata farmuda wa bakhshida*) bestowed upon her by his father and managed by her in anticipation of any unforeseen expenses her son might face.¹⁰⁵ (One suspects the nawab had not, in fact, heard such a story.) Thus, in Faiz Bakhsh's vision of dynastic practice, the begam deployed her property on behalf of her husband and son in the interest of dynastic continuity and familial stability. Much as she had with her husband after his defeat to the Company, she had used her private wealth and personal influence to ensure her son's succession, and she would continue to do so, particularly in the event that her son was overtaken by a fiscal crisis. Her continued support, however, would be conditional upon the nawab's due deference to her generational seniority and maternal authority—an expectation that the begam and her officials grounded in Qur'anic exhortations to filial piety as well as dynastic custom.¹⁰⁶ If Asaf-ud-Daula was unwilling to conform to recent dynastic precedents of co-sharing, her assets (including her cash and *jagirs*) would remain legally and customarily hers alone to do with as she saw fit.

What exactly Asaf-ud-Daula made of his mother and her officials' arguments is unclear. Pressed by Hastings and the Resident, the nawab had resumed her *jagirs* and participated in the occupation of Faizabad. And according to Faiz Bakhsh, in justifying these moves, the nawab's advisers mirrored both Bahu Begam and Company officials' own language, arguing that the nawab was 'legally and customarily' (*shar'an wa urfan*) the true 'owner' (*malik*) of all the begam's possessions, which were now absolutely required to safeguard his sovereign authority (*riyasat*).¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, despite Hastings's determination that Bahu Begam had effectively forfeited gendered expectations of inviolability after the Chait Singh rebellion, Asaf-ud-Daula displayed clear personal discomfort with the project to confront his mother more directly.¹⁰⁸ After imprisoning her eunuch officials and taking a sizeable payment from them, the nawab quickly withdrew from Faizabad. In so doing, he left the Resident—who was himself extremely reluctant to be perceived as violating an ally's secluded *namus* without the

¹⁰⁴ TFB-BL, f. 61a.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 102a.

¹⁰⁶ In the letter noted above, Faiz Bakhsh cites a verse from the *sura 'al-Isra'* (17:23): 'Your Lord has commanded that you should worship none but Him, and that you be kind to your parents. If either or both of them attain old age with you, say no word that shows impatience with them, and do not be harsh with them, but speak to them respectfully.' M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (trans.), *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 176.

¹⁰⁷ TFB-BL, f. 54a.

¹⁰⁸ Barnett, 'Embattled Begams', p. 529.

nawab's explicit authorization and active cooperation—with few options for securing additional cash from Bahu Begam. Furthermore, once back in Lucknow, Asaf-ud-Daula found the Company determined to liquidate the debt not only by expanding its hold on provincial revenues but also by continuing to insist on direct supervision of his household finances—a stance he evidently perceived as a far graver threat to his sovereignty than his mother's wealth. Emboldened by his successes in disrupting the Resident's agenda by calculated non-cooperation and remonstrance, the nawab now seemed to have abandoned his earlier intent to consolidate his personal authority, favouring instead a return to dynastic solidarity in opposition to British intrusions.¹⁰⁹ Prior to Hastings's recall to face impeachment proceedings in 1785, Asaf-ud-Daula restored most of his mother's *jaqirs* and, in a celebration of familial reconciliation, the nawab invited his mother and grandmother to attend lavish wedding ceremonies in Lucknow jointly arranged with the two begams. In the telling of Faiz Bakhsh, as they entered the city, the nawab proclaimed himself but the begams' 'deputy' (*na'ib*) and declared that all residents of his capital were 'subject' (*mahkum*) to their authority.¹¹⁰

Possibly apocryphal proclamations aside, in the dozen years between Hastings's departure and Asaf-ud-Daula's death, the regime appears to have operated far more in accordance with the begam's expectations. Much of this détente resulted from a lessening of political and financial pressure from the Company, as Hastings and his successors, having weathered the fiscal crises of the 1780s and been chastened by metropolitan scandal, now prioritized rapprochement with their long-time ally by restructuring the nawab's debt and stabilizing the annual subsidy charges.¹¹¹ But it also reflected a substantive change of practice on the nawab's part. For instance, while he continued to make repeated monetary requests, he also consulted his mother before making official appointments and regularly forwarded copies of news and intelligence letters for her consideration.¹¹² More significantly, he appeared to re-embrace the idea of his mother as a joint manager and custodian of dynastic finances. According to retired French mercenary Claude Martin, for example, prior to an expedition to Rampur in 1794, the nawab—under the pretext of requesting more money from her—secretly deposited with his mother nearly his entire treasury.¹¹³ Similarly, when his grandmother Sadr-un-Nissa Begam died in 1796, the nawab exercised considerable force in confiscating her estate from her eunuch subordinates. Yet soon thereafter he purportedly transferred to Bahu Begam most of the seized assets, which were rumoured to amount to several million or more rupees.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹Barnett, *North India*, pp. 212–22.

¹¹⁰TFB-BL, f. 117b. Here, Faiz Bakhsh puns on the literal meaning of 'nawab', an honorific plural of 'na'ib', or 'deputy'.

¹¹¹Barnett, *North India*, pp. 223–33.

¹¹²For examples throughout, see the following collections of the Company's Persian-language intelligence reports (*akhbarat*): BL, OIOC, OMS Or. 4608, *Akhbarat* (26 Rabi-ul-Awwal 1210/Oct. 1795–17 Rajab/Feb. 1796); OMS Or. 4609, *Akhbarat* (18 Safar 1210/Aug. 1795–26 Rabi-ul-Awwal/Oct. 1795); and OMS Add. 16721, *Intikhab-i Akhbarat*. For Company *akhbarat* and intelligence gathering, see Michael H. Fisher, 'The Office of Akhbār Nawīs: The Transition from Mughal to British Forms', *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 27, no. 1, 1993, pp. 45–82.

¹¹³Claude Martin, and R. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *A Man of the Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century India: The Letters of Claude Martin, 1766–1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), pp. 249–50.

¹¹⁴BL, OIOC, OMS Or. 1726, Muhammad Riza Tabataba'i, *Akhbarat-i Hind*, f. 312a.

Bahu Begam's will and the end of dynastic co-sharing, 1797–1815

Although sources of friction between Bahu Begam and her son remained, particularly over who would serve as the nawab's chief minister, the restored dispensation might have persisted had Asaf-ud-Daula not died suddenly in the summer of 1797. As it happened, however, Asaf-ud-Daula's death and the eventual accession of his half-brother Sa'adat Ali Khan occasioned not only a complete breakdown of the co-sharing dispensation but also Bahu Begam's attempts to divest completely from the Awadh regime. Following Asaf-ud-Daula's death, in consultation with both Bahu Begam and Shams-un-Nissa Begam, the late nawab's own *khas mahal*, Company officials installed on the throne Wazir Ali Khan, Asaf-ud-Daula's adopted son. The 18-year-old nawab, however, soon lost the confidence of Company officials, many of whom feared he would be a vehicle for Bahu Begam and her partisans—still mistrusted after their suspected complicity in the Chait Singh rebellion—to assert their complete control over the regime and undermine British interests.¹¹⁵ After three months on the throne, he was deposed in favour of Sa'adat Ali Khan, Shuja-ud-Daula's eldest living son, who had been living in exile in Benares for more than 20 years. Yet despite their wariness of strengthening her authority, the Resident and governor-general once again turned to Bahu Begam to leverage her dynastic seniority to legitimate the controversial regime change.¹¹⁶

In exchange for her recognition of the new nawab, Governor-general John Shore brokered a new agreement between Sa'adat Ali Khan and Bahu Begam, in which the begam was guaranteed lifetime rights to a consolidated, territorially contiguous estate (*ilaqa*) of *jagirs* and other revenue assignments around Faizabad and to the still vast wealth in her possession.¹¹⁷ The new agreement, however, did little to conciliate Sa'adat Ali Khan and Bahu Begam, whose mutual enmity was long-standing. Moreover, the Anglophile new nawab—who was conversant in English, frequently wore European clothing, and had been in regular contact with Company officials during his lengthy Benares exile—had also adopted harder-edged British views of his own sovereignty and was prepared to assert his authority much more aggressively over the begam and her *jagirs*. He not only curtailed the allowances the begam had received from Asaf-ud-Daula, but he also resumed the *jagirs* of her relatives (which were not guaranteed by the Company) and later stationed troops in Faizabad under the pretence of guarding the city.¹¹⁸ Outraged, the begam fumed to her subordinates and, according to Muhammad Faiz Bakhsh, restated in the clearest possible terms her views on the fundamental linkages between an expansive maternal authority, traditions of dynastic co-sharing, and her personal history of financing of the Awadh regime:

This son (*farzand*) of mine is a very base sort (*dani-ut-taba*). In the first instance, all this wealth (*in hama amwal*) [he now possesses] is from Shuja-ud-Daula, and

¹¹⁵Barnett, 'Embattled Begams', p. 531.

¹¹⁶Indeed, the Company's Persian-language proclamation posted throughout Lucknow declared that the Company had installed Sa'adat Ali Khan because, 'according to the begam's pronouncements (*ba-taqirir-i begam sahiba*)', Wazir Ali Khan had ultimately been found to be illegitimate: NAI, Oriental Records, Acc. No. 99.

¹¹⁷NAI, FDSC, 5 May 1798, nos. 1 and 2.

¹¹⁸NAI, FDP, 12 Mar. 1802, OR 109.

after that from Asaf-ud-Daula, and in actuality, *it all comes from me (dar haqiqat az an-i ma ba-daulat)*.¹¹⁹

So outraged, the begam now proposed the radical step of declaring her intention to bequeath the entirety of her assets—including her cash, jewels, and *jagirs*—to the East India Company.

The curious reversal represented by Bahu Begam's will, with the begam now proposing to transfer her assets to the same power that had once sought to seize them by force, has been noted elsewhere.¹²⁰ What has often been overlooked, however, was that the primary aim of the bequest was to force the Company to recognize officially her proprietary and hereditary rights to the *jagirs*, as well as her claims to her disputed treasury. Moreover, while the will appeared to be an ironic turnaround in the begam's controversial relationship with the Company, it nevertheless represented a logical extension of her long-held beliefs regarding her property rights with respect to the Awadh regime. This consistency is evident in the first set of written proposals (*manzurat*) sent to Governor-general Wellesley in 1802. After describing how John Shore had 'separated (*alihada karda*)' and consolidated previously dispersed *jagirs* around her residence in Faizabad, 'so that no one else could interfere in them (*ta dakhli digari nabashad*)', she declared her intention to transfer to the Company her sole 'proprietary and hereditary rights to the estate (*milkiyat wa wirasat-i ilaqa*)'.¹²¹ Importantly, the begam's initial proposals said nothing about the hoard of cash that had long preoccupied British officials, thus suggesting that by now she considered her rights to have been well established.

Wellesley thought favourably of the offer, but no further action was taken during his tenure.¹²² Yet when the matter was revisited during the governorship of Lord Minto (1807–13), British officials were far less sanguine. In contrast to Hastings's previous characterization of cash, jewels, and other moveable items in her custody as the misappropriated 'public treasury' of the Awadh state, British officials now conveniently found them to be her private property and 'unquestionably her own'.¹²³ Her *jagirs*, however, were still understood as temporary and ultimately revocable grants awarded by the sovereign. While Shore had guaranteed her lifetime possession of the *jagirs* through the 1798 agreement, Lord Minto concluded that acknowledging and accepting hereditary rights to them would undermine the exclusive proprietary sovereignty guaranteed to Awadh's rulers by the treaty of Allahabad and subsequent Anglo-Awadh treaties. Furthermore, as Sa'adat Ali Khan and his Angloophile successors increasingly joined proprietary sovereignty to British visions of a unitary *sarkar* and insisted on the sovereign's right to confiscate residual dynastic property in the name of 'the state', Company officials remained reluctant to obstruct that authority—especially if doing so would jeopardize concurrent British efforts to reform revenue administration

¹¹⁹TFB-BL, f. 114a. Emphasis added.

¹²⁰Barnett, 'Embattled Begams', 531–2. See also the useful summary in A. F. M. Abdul Ali, 'The Last Will and Testament of Bahu Begam', *Proceedings of the Indian Historical Records Commission* vol. 6 (1924), pp. 149–56.

¹²¹NAI, FDP, 12 Mar. 1802, OR 109.

¹²²NAI, FDP, 17 Oct. 1808, no. 86: Edmonstone to Baillie, 17 Oct. 1808.

¹²³*Ibid.*

in Awadh.¹²⁴ As a result, it was determined that the Company would accept neither the begam's *jagirs* nor her fortune. Instead, the Company would assist her in establishing a permanent endowment, in which she would set aside one-third of her moveable property (the maximum amount British scholar-officials determined legally permissible for her to alienate by testament) to be invested in Company bonds, with the resulting interest funding perpetual pensions for her dependants.¹²⁵

Not surprisingly, when she was presented with the Company's counter-offer in the summer of 1813, Bahu Begam was unimpressed. As they had for decades, the begam and her officials argued that the *jagirs*, constituting both her dower (*mahr*) and spousal gifts from Shuja-ud-Daula, were her exclusive private property. In any case, denying the nawab's right of sovereign confiscation, they maintained that, as merely the begam's stepson, Sa'adat Ali Khan could have no legal claim to any of her property, moveable or otherwise, particularly as that would prejudice the surviving blood relations she hoped to support with her assets.¹²⁶ More provocatively, however, the begam and her chief eunuch adviser Darab Ali Khan now also suggested that—particularly after the jointly managed accessions of Wazir Ali Khan and Sa'adat Ali Khan—the Awadh regime was in essence a partnership not just between senior *khasmahals* of the Awadh dynasty and younger male Awadh rulers but, more importantly, one between Bahu Begam and the Company. For Darab Ali Khan and Bahu Begam, the hierarchy of partnership was especially relevant for Sa'adat Ali Khan, whose legitimacy, in their eyes, depended entirely upon formal acknowledgement by the begam. Moreover, it also obviated the Company's ostensible concerns with the nawab's sovereignty. In one conversation with the Resident, Darab Ali Khan asserted that as 'princes', Islamic law and legal categories did not strictly apply to either Bahu Begam or Sa'adat Ali Khan. Nevertheless, in a rather prescient articulation of British doctrines of paramountcy over subordinate princely states, he argued that in any case the Company was clearly the ultimate source of authority. John Shore had demonstrated as much by reorganizing the begam's *jagirs* at the time of Sa'adat Ali Khan's accession in 1798, and the Company could now enforce her hereditary and proprietary rights to them if it so wished.¹²⁷

Ultimately, however, Company officials did not wish to assert their authority in this particular case. Conscious of how the Company had (or was perceived to have) violated the sovereignty of their Indian allies during the controversial governorships of Warren Hastings and Richard Wellesley, Lord Minto and Lord Moira (1813–23) sought to conciliate rulers like the Awadh nawabs, particularly where sovereign right was seen to intersect with what they understood as the ruler's 'natural' patriarchal authority over their families. Following Lord Minto's instructions, the Resident refused to

¹²⁴Sa'adat Ali Khan, for example, proposed that the treaty of 1801 include a clause stating 'Let no one interfere in the exaction of this *sarkar*'s rights of inheritance (*akhaz-i huquq-i wirasat-i in sarkar*), so that all the ancestral inheritance and associated rights of this family (*hamagi mawaris-i aslaf wa huquq-i muta'alliqa-i in khandan*) will, by sovereign right (*istihqaq-i riyasat*), be paid to the *sarkar*'. NAI, FDP, May 1801, OR 440. Wellesley sternly rejected the proposed addition, but the principle would generally be conceded thereafter. For the Company's administrative reform projects in Awadh during this period, see Fisher, *Clash of Cultures*, esp. Chapters 3–5.

¹²⁵NAI, FDSC, 27 Aug. 1813, no. 1: Baillie to Minto, 31 Jul. 1813.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

budge on the matter of the begam's *jagirs* and threatened to withdraw British support if she and her advisers continued to press the issue. Faced with the possibility of the nawab confiscating everything after her death and the loss of British protection for her dependants, Bahu Begam finally relented, authorizing the Company's proposal and producing a detailed inventory of her moveable property, which totalled some seven million rupees.¹²⁸

These considerable concessions notwithstanding, another final defeat lay in store for the begam. Anticipating Sa'adat Ali Khan's objections to the arrangement, Lord Moira had instructed the Resident to tell the nawab that, after taking the requisite seven million rupees for the funding of the begam's trust, the Company would transfer any additional wealth recovered from her estate into his custody.¹²⁹ In the event, Bahu Begam, now in her late eighties, survived Sa'adat Ali Khan by more than a year, passing away in December 1815.¹³⁰ Sa'adat Ali Khan's eldest son and successor Ghazi-ud-Din Haidar now voiced objections of his own. Declaring the management and confiscation of dynastic, and particularly women's, property a right of the reigning sovereign (*ra'is-i waqt*), the nawab proposed to pay the Company the seven million rupees to fund the begam's trust in exchange for the right to seize directly the begam's estate in its entirety.¹³¹ Although the governor-general refused to withdraw British protection for the begam's dependants, he ultimately agreed to the nawab's request. After advancing the Company the promised sum to fund Bahu Begam's endowment, Ghazi-ud-Din Haidar was permitted to resume the begam's *jagirs* and to seize her long-disputed fortune, eventually yielding him a net profit of some three or four million rupees.¹³² For the nawab, however, the real victory was what he saw as the governor-general's final acknowledgement of his familial and proprietary authority over the begam and the dynasty, a triumph he celebrated publicly at court with gifts to his chief advisers.¹³³

Conclusion

Over the course of her 40 years of dispute with a succession of male rulers and multiple generations of East India Company officials, Bahu Begam's claims to wealth and power remained remarkably consistent. Enjoying what she perceived to be permanent and irrevocable personal property rights to revenue assignments (*jagirs*) and to cash,

¹²⁸NAI, FDSC, 27 Aug. 1813, no. 3: Baillie to Minto, 6 Aug. 1813. For the final agreement and inventory, see Aitchison, *A Collection*, Vol. 2, pp. 115–25.

¹²⁹NAI, FDSC, 24 Sep. 1813, no. 7: Adam to Baillie, 24 Sep. 1813; and 29 Oct. 1813, no. 2: Adam to Baillie, 29 Oct. 1813.

¹³⁰NAI, FDPC, 6 Jan. 1816, no. 25: Strachey to Adam, 29 Dec. 1815.

¹³¹NAI, FDPC, 2 Mar. 1816, no. 88: Ghazi-ud-Din Haidar to Moira, rec. 16 Feb. 1816; FDPPr, 16 Feb. 1816, OR 130.

¹³²NAI, FDPC, 2 Mar. 1816, no. 93: Adam to Strachey, 27 Feb. 1816. According to the British Resident in Lucknow, the confiscation recovered, apart from jewels and other moveable goods, nearly nine million rupees of cash and gold and silver plate: NAI, FDPC, 11 May 1816, no. 22: Strachey to Adam, 22 Apr. 1816. What percentage of Bahu Begam's actual fortune this represented is unclear but it was long rumoured that during her husband's reign she had amassed at least some 20 million (two-*karor*) rupees—the equivalent of two million pounds sterling, or roughly the entirety of Awadh's annual land revenues—and many contemporaries suspected much more remained hidden or in the possession of her protected dependants. BL, Hastings Papers, Add. 29209, ff. 380a–b; and Haidar, *Tawarikh-i Awadh*, pp. 233–4.

¹³³NAI, FDPC, 6 Apr. 1816, no. 27: Strachey to Adam, 17 Mar. 1816.

jewels, and other moveable property as forms of bride wealth (*jahiz*), dower (*mahr*), personal earnings, and gifts, the begam had regularly used her fortune to fund her husband Shuja-ud-Daula and her son Asaf-ud-Daula in moments of financial exigency. The former, in particular, had duly compensated her by bestowing upon her additional 'gifts' of cash and *jagir* grants, thereby increasing her portfolio of private, heritable assets. Furthermore, in the begam's view, both men had eventually recognized her as a rightful administrative partner, if not the pre-eminent stakeholder, in the regime, by virtue of both her personal contributions and her particular marital and dynastic status as Shuja-ud-Daula's chief consort (*khas mahal*) and Asaf-ud-Daula's widowed mother. Gendered expectations demanded that the begam's fortune remain effectively at the disposal of her husband, her son, and the dynasty, but her discrete rights—grounded for the begam and her officials in both dynastic precedents and Indo-Islamic legal practice—meant that she could rightfully withhold her assets if co-sharing norms were violated.

In and of themselves, the begam's arguments were highly influential in shaping Anglo-Awadh and intra-dynastic relations well into the nineteenth century. Equally significant, however, is what the begam's ideas illustrate about how female elites perceived themselves within the shifting political and economic landscape of eighteenth-century South Asia, and how they and their wealth helped generate both the late-Mughal and emerging colonial orders. Depicting the Awadh regime as a kind of family 'firm', Bahu Begam and her subordinates frequently centred her within gendered practices of individual investment, co-sharing of dynastic finances, and intergenerational custodianship of familial fortunes—a matriarchal managerial mode that differed little from those of other contemporary ruling dynasties or from merchant-banking and revenue-enterprising families. In a political and socio-economic milieu in which landed, scribal, banking, and martial elites became ever more intertwined but individual family fortunes remained precarious, it should not be surprising that, across this spectrum of firms, wealthy women would become central to shared entrepreneurial and risk-mitigation strategies or that they should recognize themselves, and demand concomitant rights, as such. Nor is it unexpected that, in the 'commercialized' and 'zamindarized' political landscape of the eighteenth century, women like Bahu Begam would—much like both male and female commercial elites—advance increasingly permanent, proprietary claims to theoretically revocable assets like the *jagir* as legitimate compensation for loans and other forms of financial and political support. But in her willingness to draw upon the implications of the treaty of Allahabad and 'proprietary' sovereignty to assert the possibility of permanent alienation of 'state' property, Bahu Begam also reflected the readiness of her, and the wider Awadh dynasty, to engage substantively with the emerging colonial political order, even where their claims were ultimately denied by British officials. Indeed, in eventually attempting to leverage Company power to wrest away hereditary autonomy for her *jagirs*, along with women like Begam Samru and others, Bahu Begam formed a vocal vanguard in arguing for British paramountcy over the local sovereignties they had helped generate in the first place.¹³⁴

¹³⁴For Begam Samru and her attempts to render her Sardhana *jagir* a hereditary principality, see Fisher, 'Becoming and Making "Family"', pp. 95–121.

Yet as the prolonged conflict between Bahu Begam and her husband's successors also illustrates, matriarchs of means were not just integral to the construction and maintenance of a spectrum of eighteenth-century 'firms' within a rapidly shifting political landscape. Their wealth, and the family feuds they generated, also opened critical fissures for rupturing those same enterprises. Bahu Begam's contribution towards the 1765 indemnity, and the subsequent formalization of 'proprietary' sovereignty in Awadh, grounded her claims to property 'gifted' by her husband. But the Allahabad agreement and subsequent Anglo-Awadh treaties also opened the door for Shuja-ud-Daula's successors to make increasingly exclusive claims to an expansively conceived pool of dynastic property in the name of their hereditary sovereignty and 'the state', notions bolstered by British convictions that patriarchal absolutism was a fundamental component of India's 'despotic' constitution.

Manipulating the fiscal needs of the nawabs and the Company, as well as their reluctance to confront her with violence, Bahu Begam managed to safeguard a large proportion of her assets through formal agreements. *Khass mahals* in the nineteenth century, however, would be far less fortunate. While some continued to press their discrete proprietary and political rights, often by appealing to precedents set by Bahu Begam, neither Awadh's rulers nor Company administrators had any interest in returning to the multipolar, dynastic co-sharing of the mid-eighteenth century. Even the model Bahu Begam embraced to protect her dependants—perpetual pensions funded by interest from Company securities, known in Awadh as *wasiqa*—proved less beneficial for future *khass mahals* than for Awadh's rulers, who eventually appropriated the instrument to shield select favourites from the expansive claims of their successors or, more particularly, the Company, which secured massive infusions of cash to bolster its vast debt-financed military machine.¹³⁵ By the time of Bahu Begam's death in 1815, the era of expansive co-sharing between the Awadh nawabs, their chief consorts, and widowed mothers was decidedly at an end; 'proprietary' sovereignty, although financed by eighteenth-century *khass mahals*, was to be the exclusive, though rapidly diminishing, property of Awadh's nineteenth-century male rulers.

Competing interests. None.

¹³⁵For the growth of the *wasiqa* instrument in mid-nineteenth-century Awadh, see Fisher, *Clash of Cultures*, pp. 181–7, and Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon*, pp. 121–2, 201–3.

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