

# The Politics of Matrimonial Alliances and Gender Dynamics in Awadh in the Aftermath of Mughal Disintegration: A Historical Analysis



Mohammad Salman

Centre for Discourse, Fusion, and Analysis (CDFA), New Delhi

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Mohammad Salman

Independent Researcher, Centre for Discourse, Fusion, and Analysis, New Delhi

B.A. Hons. and M.A. in History and Culture from Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi

## Abstract

The decline of the Imperial Mughal Empire in the 18th century led to a political reorganization in South Asia, with regional powers such as the Nawabs of Awadh, Bengal, and Hyderabad etc., seeking to consolidate authority amidst the rise of British colonialism. This paper explores the role of marriage in Awadh during the post-Mughal disintegration, focusing on how elite matrimonial alliances functioned as strategic tools for political legitimacy, dynastic succession, and resistance to colonial influence. In the absence of a central Mughal authority, the Nawabs used marriage alliances with Mughal aristocracy and regional families to reinforce their authority and align with Mughal prestige while asserting regional autonomy. These unions were not only cultural but deeply embedded in the political fabric of Awadh, serving as mechanisms for stabilizing power and navigating the complexities of post-Mughal politics.

The paper also examines the role of women in these political marriages, particularly figures like Begum Hazrat Mahal, who exemplified the agency of elite women in shaping both palace politics and resistance movements. These women, often seen as passive in colonial and nationalist narratives, were active agents in influencing political outcomes, challenging gendered assumptions about power.

Additionally, British colonialism reshaped the politics of marriage in Awadh by critiquing indigenous marriage practices as despotic and imposing new legal frameworks. This

colonial intervention sought to regulate kinship, restructure gender norms, and undermine local sovereignty. Through the lens of marriage, this paper highlights the intersection of gender, power, and colonialism, revealing how marriage was used as a political tool for survival, identity preservation, and resistance.

Ultimately, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the political, gendered, and colonial dynamics at play in Awadh, rethinking traditional historical narratives about marriage as both a cultural and political institution.

Keywords: Awadh, Mughal Decline, Matrimonial Politics, Gender and Power, Zenana Politics, Kinship, Nawab, British Colonialism.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The twilight of the Mughal Empire in the early eighteenth century marked a critical juncture in the history of South Asia. As imperial authority crumbled, a multitude of successor states emerged, each contending for political legitimacy, military security, and economic consolidation. Among these, the province of Awadh (Oudh) rose to prominence under the leadership of figures such as Saadat Khan and his successors. In this turbulent political environment, traditional mechanisms of statecraft were supplemented by newer strategies, among which marriage alliances played a crucial role.

Marriage has historically been a tool for political alliance making across civilizations. In the context of medieval and early modern India, matrimonial strategies were employed not only to forge alliances between powerful houses but also to cement loyalties, secure military aid, and legitimize rulership. As Mughal central authority weakened, regional polities like Awadh increasingly relied on marital diplomacy to strengthen their positions. These alliances often transcended simple kinship bonds and were embedded deeply within the broader matrix of gender politics, class stratification, and religious identity.

This paper investigates the nuanced role of marriage in the political sphere of eighteenth-century Awadh. It interrogates how gender, often sidelined in grand political narratives, became a powerful vehicle for alliance-building during a time of fragmentation and reconstitution. By examining specific case studies from the Nawabi court, this study sheds light on how elite women and matrimonial strategies shaped the political contours of Awadh.

Moreover, this paper situates the politics of marriage within the broader themes of religious identity, especially the consolidation of Shi'a Islam in Awadh, patronage networks, and evolving court cultures. While focusing on Awadh, a comparative framework is also employed, drawing parallels with contemporary successor states like Hyderabad and Bengal, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of matrimonial politics in post-Mughal India.

In doing so, the study contributes to larger historiographical debates on gender, state formation, and political culture in South Asian history. It underscores the significance of gendered agency in shaping early modern political landscapes, challenging conventional, male-centric narratives of power and governance.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE FRAGMENTATION OF MUGHAL AUTHORITY**

The disintegration of the Mughal Empire in the early eighteenth century constituted a pivotal transformation in South Asian political history. The once vast and centralized imperial structure, which had reached its zenith under emperors such as Akbar and Aurangzeb, began to fracture under the pressures of internal dissent, administrative inefficiencies, fiscal crises, and external invasions. This period witnessed the emergence of a new political order characterized by regional polities that both inherited and adapted the Mughal legacy to their specific local circumstances. (Richards, 1995)<sup>1</sup>.

1. Richards, J. F. (1995). *The Mughal Empire*. Cambridge University Press.

Several interrelated factors contributed to the collapse of Mughal authority. Foremost among these was the exhausting impact of prolonged warfare, especially the Deccan campaigns pursued under Aurangzeb, which drained the imperial treasury and overstretched administrative capacities (Alam, 1986)<sup>2</sup>. The subsequent emperors lacked both the charisma and military prowess to assert control over distant provinces. As imperial patronage weakened, regional governors (subahdars) and military commanders (mansabdars) asserted increasing autonomy, transforming themselves into de facto rulers.

In this context, the province of Awadh (modern-day Uttar Pradesh) became a notable example of regional consolidation. Initially entrusted to Saadat Khan Burhan-ul-Mulk in 1722 as a reward for his loyalty to the imperial centre, Awadh soon evolved into an autonomous polity. Saadat Khan, and his successors Safdar Jang and Shuja-ud-Daula, skilfully balanced nominal allegiance to the Mughal throne with the reality of independent governance (Fisher, 2018)<sup>3</sup>.

The emergence of Awadh must also be understood within the broader pattern of successor states that arose during this period, such as Hyderabad under the Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah and Bengal under Murshid Quli Khan. These polities, while maintaining the symbolic apparatus of Mughal sovereignty, such as issuing coins in the emperor's name and adopting Mughal titles, functioned in practice as independent monarchies. Their legitimacy was often rooted not only in military strength but also in their ability to forge effective alliances through mechanisms like marriage, diplomatic patronage, and religious endowments (Chatterjee, 1998)<sup>4</sup>.

Notably, the regional states that emerged during the post-Mughal fragmentation were not mere replicas of the Mughal model but adapted it to fit new socio-political realities. In Awadh, the consolidation of Shia Islam as a courtly and political identity marked a significant departure from the largely Sunni Mughal establishment.

2. Alam, M. (1986). *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–1748*. Oxford University Press.
3. Fisher, M. H. (2018). *A Short History of the Mughal Empire*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
4. Chatterjee, I. (1998). *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India*. Oxford University Press.

This religious dimension would deeply influence the politics of marriage and alliance-building in Awadh, distinguishing it from its contemporaries (Cole, 1988)<sup>5</sup>.

Marriage alliances in this period thus assumed an importance that went beyond personal unions. They became critical instruments for securing military alliances, establishing legitimacy among the nobility, and creating transregional networks of loyalty. Particularly in Awadh, where the nascent Nawabi court sought to stabilize its position amidst the chaos of imperial collapse, matrimonial strategies were deployed with remarkable deliberateness.

This background of imperial decline and regional assertion sets the stage for a closer examination of the politics of marriage in Awadh. Understanding the socio-political fabric of the time reveals why marriage was not a peripheral concern but a central axis around which the survival and prosperity of emerging states revolved.

## **THE ROLE OF GENDER AND MARRIAGE IN POLITICAL ALLIANCES**

In early modern South Asia, marriage functioned not merely as a private institution but as a key political strategy, intricately linked to questions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and alliance formation. In the successor states of the post-Mughal world, including Awadh, gendered practices surrounding marriage were deliberately mobilized to reinforce political stability and territorial control. Far from being passive actors in these processes, women from elite families were central to political calculations, serving as conduits of power, symbols of legitimacy, and agents of dynastic continuity.

### **Marriage as a Tool of Statecraft**

Marriage alliances in the post-Mughal context operated as vital instruments for consolidating fragmented sovereignties. For emerging polities like Awadh, matrimonial connections with powerful families or influential groups were strategic, facilitating the

5. Cole, J. R. I. (1988). *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722-1859*. University of California Press.

creation of networks of loyalty and mutual obligation (Bayly, 1983)<sup>6</sup>. Such alliances often transcended ethnic, sectarian, and regional lines, exemplifying the complex social fabric of eighteenth-century India.

In Awadh, marriages between the Nawabi family and influential Persian, Afghan, or even local aristocratic lineages helped secure critical military and administrative support. Through these alliances, newly autonomous rulers could buttress their claims to legitimacy in a context where imperial investiture alone was insufficient. These marriages functioned analogously to treaties: they formalized political commitments and wove familial ties into the very fabric of state governance.

Moreover, marriage alliances were often linked to the transmission of wealth and land. Dowries were not merely gifts but substantial economic transfers that could reinforce a family's financial and political base. Similarly, strategic marriages enabled access to critical resources, whether military manpower, revenue rights, or symbolic capital necessary for establishing hegemony in a competitive political landscape (Oldenburg, 2002)<sup>7</sup>.

### **Elite Women as Political Agents**

Elite women in Awadh and broader Mughal successor states were not simply pawns in the political game; they actively shaped political outcomes through their marital and maternal roles. Royal and aristocratic women exercised agency in negotiating marriages, influencing succession politics, and maintaining intricate patronage networks. The historiographical tradition that depicts early modern South Asian women solely as victims of patriarchal structures is increasingly being challenged by scholarship emphasizing their active participation in political processes (Lal, 2005)<sup>8</sup>.

6. Bayly, C. A. (1983). *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770–1870*. Cambridge University Press.

7. Oldenburg, V. T. (2002). *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime*. Oxford University Press.

8. Lal, R. (2005). *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*. Cambridge University Press.

In Awadh, women from prominent Shia families often served as cultural and religious patrons, establishing endowments (waqf) and sponsoring religious gatherings such as majalis. Through these activities, they bolstered the religious legitimacy of the Nawabi court and extended its influence into the realm of public piety. Marriages, therefore, often intertwined with religious diplomacy, enhancing the court's Shi'a credentials while reinforcing alliances with the clerical classes (ulema).

The position of mothers of reigning nawabs further exemplifies the centrality of women in political life. As queen mothers (commonly referred to as "Begum Sahibas"), they exercised substantial influence over court politics, succession disputes, and administrative appointments. Their lineage and marriage connections were crucial in legitimizing the authority of the ruling male elite (Fisher, 2003)<sup>9</sup>.

### **Strategic Matriliney and "Dowry Diplomacy"**

The concept of "strategic matriliney," though distinct from formal matrilineal inheritance systems, is useful in understanding how alliances were reinforced through female lineage in Awadh. Marriages to women from prominent families provided rulers with vital political capital, often influencing the allegiance of entire factions within the nobility. The maternal lineage of a ruler could be strategically emphasized to garner support among powerful regional actors.

Additionally, "dowry diplomacy"—the use of dowries as instruments of political negotiation—was a prominent feature of marriage politics. Substantial dowries could secure not only advantageous marriages but also military alliances, territorial concessions, or revenue rights. In a period marked by financial strain and political uncertainty, dowries assumed an outsized importance, operating as both economic and diplomatic tools (Chatterjee, 1998)<sup>10</sup>.

9. Fisher, M. H. (2018). *A Short History of the Mughal Empire*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

10. Chatterjee, I. (1998). *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India*. Oxford University Press.



Thus, in the political world of post-Mughal Awadh, gender and marriage operated within a highly instrumental logic. Women's bodies, wealth, and symbolic capital became vital resources in the complex chessboard of regional politics. Far from being a peripheral concern, matrimonial alliances were integral to the very constitution of political authority and state-building processes during the period of imperial disintegration.

## **MARRIAGE POLITICS IN AWADH: THE NAWABI COURT**

The court of Awadh in the eighteenth century functioned as both a political theatre and a dynastic household. Within its architecture of power, marriage politics operated not only to secure external alliances but also to regulate internal hierarchies, manage succession, and stabilize factional dynamics. Through a close examination of the Nawabi rulers, especially Safdar Jang and Shuja-ud-Daula, one observes how marriage was deployed as a calculated statecraft strategy shaped by sectarian identity, kinship politics, and imperial legacies.

### **Safdar Jang and the Consolidation of Political Authority**

Safdar Jang, the successor to Saadat Khan and Nawab of Awadh from 1739 to 1754, strategically used marriage to consolidate his authority in an increasingly fragmented subcontinental political landscape. A Persian Shia noble, he inherited both the office and the ambitions of his maternal uncle Saadat Khan, and rapidly sought to expand Awadh's territorial and political influence. Central to this project was the cultivation of loyalties among the Mughal nobility and the Afghan and Rajput chieftains through carefully arranged marriages (Alam, 1986)<sup>11</sup>.

While the specific details of Safdar Jang's own marital alliances remain only partially documented, the broader contours of his strategy included placing female members of his family into households of potential allies, and reciprocally accepting daughters of nobles to cement loyalty.

11. Alam, M. (1986). *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–1748*. Oxford University Press.

These alliances helped secure his position in Delhi, where he served as Wazir (prime minister) under Emperor Ahmad Shah Bahadur. His ability to command allegiance beyond Awadh, particularly in the imperial court, was due in part to his kinship diplomacy (Fisher, 2003)<sup>12</sup>.

Moreover, the incorporation of Afghan noble families through marital diplomacy allowed Safdar Jang to balance the dominant Persian identity of the Awadhi court with the ethnically diverse nobility. This pluralistic approach mitigated sectarian tensions and fortified Awadh's regional influence, while preserving its distinct Shia character.

### **Shuja-ud-Daula and Marital Diplomacy in Crisis**

Perhaps the most illustrative case of marriage politics in Awadh is that of Shuja-ud-Daula, who ruled from 1754 to 1775. His reign coincided with significant political upheavals, including the aftermath of Nadir Shah's invasion, the Battle of Buxar (1764), and increasing British interference in Indian affairs. Against this turbulent backdrop, Shuja-ud-Daula used marriage diplomacy with strategic brilliance.

The most famous of these alliances was his marriage to the daughter of a prominent Mughal noble, aligning himself with the remnants of imperial legitimacy. But more significantly, he arranged the marriage of his son, Asaf-ud-Daula, to a woman from an influential Persian lineage in Delhi. This not only reaffirmed the Nawabi family's Shia credentials but also reinvigorated its connection to the cultural heart of the Mughal world (Cole, 1988)<sup>13</sup>. The dowry involved in this marriage included large sums of cash, land rights, and symbolic gifts that functioned as tools of prestige and bargaining.

At the same time, Shuja-ud-Daula balanced these elite alliances with more localized marital networks, including ties to zamindari families in Awadh.

12. Fisher, M. H. (2003). *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857*.

13. Cole, J. R. I. (1988). *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722–1859*. University of California Press.

These alliances enabled him to anchor the Nawabi regime in rural society and maintain a delicate equilibrium between courtly grandeur and agrarian control (Bayly, 1983)<sup>14</sup>.

Following the defeat at Buxar, when Shuja-ud-Daula was compelled to sign treaties with the British East India Company, the political utility of marriage alliances became even more pronounced. As his court's autonomy diminished, the Nawab used marriage alliances to shield internal cohesion and project a semblance of sovereignty. Marriages were no longer just tools of expansion but became mechanisms for survival.

### **Courtly Concubinage, Patronage, and Informal Marital Structures**

The politics of marriage in Awadh also extended beyond formal unions. The Nawabi court, in emulation of Mughal traditions, maintained a complex institution of courtly concubinage. These women, often of noble or artistic origin, were not merely sexual companions but influential figures who wielded soft power within the palace complex. They were educated, trained in music, poetry, and etiquette, and frequently acted as intermediaries between factions (Oldenburg, 2002)<sup>15</sup>.

While technically outside the realm of formal marriage, concubines could gain elevated status—sometimes even influencing succession politics. The status of a concubine's son often depended on the social standing of the mother and the political climate. Some concubines received titles and estates, and their relationships with Nawabs were subject to extensive court gossip and political intrigue.

In this regard, concubinage functioned as a shadow institution of marriage—less constrained by religious legalities but deeply enmeshed in political calculations. These relationships could bypass the formalities and obligations of marital alliances while offering the Nawab a flexible tool to reward loyalty, patronize talent, and control court factions.

14. Bayly, C. A. (1983). *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770–1870*. Cambridge University Press.

15. Oldenburg, V. T. (2002). *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime*. Oxford University Press.

## **Sectarian Dimensions and Religious Legitimacy**

The Awadhi court's Shia identity significantly shaped its marriage politics. Unlike the Sunni-dominated Mughal and other successor states, Awadh integrated Twelver Shi'ism into its administrative and ceremonial life. Marriages to Sayyid families—those claiming descent from the Prophet—were considered especially prestigious and served as markers of piety and legitimacy. Female Sayyids held unique social capital and their marriages into the Nawabi lineage added a layer of sacred authority to the court's claim to rule (Cole, 1988)<sup>16</sup>.

Additionally, these religiously inflected marriages reinforced the Nawab's authority among Shia clerics (ulama) and urban populations of Lucknow and Faizabad, where Shia rituals and public ceremonies became vehicles for both religious expression and political messaging. Through such alliances, the court cultivated both material support and spiritual credibility.

## **WOMEN'S AGENCY AND THE NAWABI ZENANA**

Contrary to dominant colonial and nationalist historiographies that often reduce elite women in princely courts to passive domesticity, the zenana in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Awadh emerges as a vibrant site of political influence, cultural patronage, and informal diplomacy. The royal household was not merely an enclosure; it was a parallel power structure where women, particularly begums, dowager mothers, and female patrons, engaged in governance, alliance-making, and symbolic statecraft. Their roles challenge binary understandings of gendered power and reveal the textured dimensions of political agency in a declining yet resilient polity.

16. Cole, J. R. I. (1988). *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722–1859*. University of California Press.

## **The Begums of Awadh: Political Intermediaries and Patrons of Authority**

Among the most prominent figures in the Nawabi zenana was Begum Hazrat Mahal, wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, who later played a crucial leadership role during the Revolt of 1857. Though her activism postdates the initial phase of Mughal disintegration, her career was deeply rooted in the gendered political traditions of the Awadhi court. Initially a courtesan, she rose to the position of chief consort and ultimately wielded sovereign power during her son's minority and the Nawab's exile (Mukherjee, 2002)<sup>17</sup>. Her leadership exemplifies how women's social mobility and political ascendancy were deeply linked to the fluid structures of marriage, concubinage, and patronage.

Similarly, Mughlai Mahal, the mother of Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula, was instrumental in shaping courtly alliances and mediating between factions. As the Padshah Begum, she exercised considerable control over the palace economy, appointments in the inner court, and even ceremonial protocols. Her influence also extended to the court's aesthetic culture, including architecture, cuisine, and the performance arts, all of which were deeply gendered expressions of sovereignty (Oldenburg, 2002)<sup>18</sup>.

These women participated in indirect rule through influence over the male Nawabs, their sons, or regents. Their letters, petitions, and household directives have been preserved in archival fragments, offering glimpses into their governance. This soft power allowed women to mobilize kinship networks, advocate for religious endowments, and shape succession politics from behind the veil.

## **The Zenana as a Political Institution**

The zenana of the Awadhi court was not a passive domestic sphere but a semi-public institution of governance, laden with administrative, ritual, and strategic functions.

17. Mukherjee, R. (2002). *Awadh in Revolt, 1857–1858: A Study of Popular Resistance*. Permanent Black.

18. Oldenburg, V. T. (2002). *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime*. Oxford University Press.

It was hierarchically organized, with senior begums at the top, followed by lesser wives, concubines, attendants, and slaves. Senior women maintained their own madads (grants), commanded resources, and often had exclusive access to Nawabs in moments of decision-making (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2012)<sup>19</sup>.

This structure enabled an internal diplomacy that operated in tandem with the formal apparatus of the state. Gift-giving, marriage arrangements, and alliances were frequently managed by women within the zenana. Their knowledge of family trees, court gossip, and social sentiments made them indispensable to strategic negotiations. Female confidantes often acted as emissaries between conflicting male factions, particularly during times of succession disputes or external threats.

Moreover, the zenana was a centre of elite education, where women learned Persian, Urdu, and Arabic alongside court etiquette. Their literary production — including letters, poetry, and commentaries, signals their intellectual engagement with the political discourses of their time. The cultural capital they generated served as a form of soft power and contributed to the Awadhi elite's self-representation.

### **Architectural Patronage and Cultural Sovereignty**

Awadhi women, particularly in the late Nawabi period, sponsored significant architectural and cultural projects. Begum Umdat-ul-Zehra, Raj Begum, and others commissioned mosques, imambaras (Shia religious structures), and gardens, embedding their political authority into the cityscape of Lucknow and Faizabad (Metcalf, 1995)<sup>20</sup>. These projects were often tied to religious piety but simultaneously served as visual claims to power and legacy.

The Imambara of Sibtainabad, for example, commissioned by a royal begum, stands as both a devotional structure and a political monument. Through such patronage, women marked the Nawabi court with distinctly Shia and gendered iconography.

19. Alam, M., & Subrahmanyam, S. (2012). *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics*. Columbia University Press.

20. Metcalf, T. R. (1995). *Ideologies of the Raj*. Cambridge University Press.

They also contributed to public festivals such as Muharram, where their participation in mourning rituals and processions blurred the boundaries between private piety and public authority.

Women also patronized poets, musicians, and artisans, fostering a syncretic Indo-Persian culture that became the hallmark of Awadh. These cultural investments created a parallel form of diplomacy that enhanced the court's prestige and moral legitimacy in the absence of military expansion.

### **Constraints, Surveillance, and Gendered Vulnerability**

Despite these spaces of agency, elite women in Awadh were not immune to constraints. Their power was contingent upon their relationships with male patrons and heirs. In times of political instability, especially during the Company's increasing interference, they faced surveillance, dispossession, and humiliation. After the annexation of Awadh in 1856, many zenana women were displaced from palaces and stripped of pensions and property (Metcalf, 1995)<sup>21</sup>. British officials often portrayed them as parasitic dependents to justify imperial control, ignoring their prior roles in governance and cultural life.

Further, gendered narratives of morality were weaponized against politically active women. Begum Hazrat Mahal, for instance, was vilified in colonial accounts as a seductress rather than a leader. These caricatures sought to delegitimize female resistance by undermining the gendered legitimacy it once held within indigenous frameworks.

## **CONCLUSION: GENDER, POWER, AND THE LEGACY OF MARRIAGE POLITICS IN AWADH**

The politics of marriage in post-Mughal Awadh constituted more than just private arrangements or dynastic routines. Rather, it served as a potent political tool and symbolic register of sovereignty, legitimacy, and resistance.

21. Metcalf, T. R. (1995). *Ideologies of the Raj*. Cambridge University Press.

As the Mughal Empire declined and regional powers like Awadh emerged, elite matrimonial alliances became key strategies in managing both internal succession and external diplomacy, embedding themselves within broader transformations of gender, authority, and colonial encroachment.

This paper has sought to uncover how marriage alliances during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries functioned within the Awadhi polity not simply as a cultural continuity, but as a response to shifting political realities.

Marriages between Nawabs and Mughal princesses were crucial in crafting a veneer of imperial continuity even as autonomous regional sovereignty was being asserted. Such alliances allowed Awadhi rulers to draw upon the symbolic capital of the Mughal past, while simultaneously establishing their own dynastic legitimacy and administrative independence. The fluid use of Mughal titles, architectural patronage, and inter-dynastic relationships demonstrates how gender and kinship were marshalled to sustain power in a fragile, transitional era.

More importantly, this research has challenged simplistic portrayals of women as passive instruments in these marital arrangements. As the case of Begum Hazrat Mahal and other powerful zenana figures shows, elite women actively participated in political, cultural, and spiritual leadership. Their influence extended from palace governance to public diplomacy, from cultural patronage to wartime resistance. The zenana was not merely a private space of seclusion, but a parallel arena of power, one that operated within patriarchal structures but was never entirely contained by them. This gendered duality complicates the binaries of power and powerlessness, visibility, and invisibility, that dominate colonial and nationalist historiographies.

Furthermore, the colonial intervention into Awadh's marital politics, especially through surveillance, moralizing rhetoric, and legal restructuring, illustrates how gendered power was not only local but increasingly entangled in imperial ideologies. British portrayals of Nawabi polygamy, female seclusion, and dowry practices as "oriental despotism" were not neutral observations; they served to delegitimize indigenous governance and justify intervention. Thus, the colonial discourse on marriage and gender was itself a political act,



one that erased nuanced traditions while simultaneously reconstituting social hierarchies through a Eurocentric framework.

The legacy of marriage politics in Awadh is, therefore, not confined to the annals of courtly history. It resonates with larger questions about gendered authority, the construction of legitimacy, and the role of kinship in political transitions. By situating marriage at the intersection of dynastic survival, cultural memory, and gendered power, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of the early modern and colonial encounter in India.

In a nutshell, the story of Awadh's marriage politics is not just a tale of love, lineage, or loyalty, it is a deeply political narrative of adaptation, resilience, and gendered governance in a world on the apex of transformation.

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Metcalf, T. R. (1995). *Ideologies of the Raj*. Cambridge University Press.