

Forgotten history: How the last Nawab of Oudh built a mini Lucknow in Calcutta

Deepanjan Ghosh

On May 6, 1856, a steamer named General McLeod docked in Calcutta. On board was Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of the Kingdom of Oudh. He was the last in a long line of Nishapuri kings who had reigned over Oudh and he had held the title for just two days short of nine years. His reign had been cut short by the imperial ambitions of Lord Dalhousie, Governor General of British India, who had deposed him under the pretext of mis-governance.

The king's plan was to appeal to Queen Victoria against this unjust annexation of Oudh and Calcutta was supposed to be a stopover on his journey to England. No-one in the royal entourage could have guessed that this was to become his final stop, where he would live out the rest of his days in exile, creating around him a faux Lucknow, a shadow of the one he had been forced to leave behind.

Life at Bungalow 11

There is some debate about where Shah landed, with some

suggesting it was Bhoot Ghat, while others say it was Dahi Ghat or Bichali Ghat near Metiabruz in western Calcutta. Historian Rosie Llewellyn-Jones writes in *Last King in India* that the likely landing place was probably Prinsep Ghat. By this time Shah was thoroughly burnt out. He had suffered a bout of dysentery on the boat and may have spent his first night on the vessel on the Hooghly while suitable accommodation was found for him.

An engraving of Wajid Ali Shah from 1872. Image credit: Wikimedia Commons [Public Domain]

This turned out to be a suburban neighbourhood known as Garden Reach, where affluent Europeans had built large mansions surrounded by beautiful gardens on a two-and-a-half mile stretch along the Hooghly's bank. Along this stretch, there were 13 bungalows and the deposed king moved into number 11, which had once been the residence of the Supreme Court Chief Justice, Sir Lawrence Peel. At the time, it was the property of the Maharaja of Burdwan, Chand Mehtab Bahadur, and was rented from him for Rs 500 a month. Eventually, it would be purchased along with two neighbouring buildings and renamed Sultan Khana, Asad Manzil and Murassa Manzil.

The cruciform building, with its massive 36-foot-tall columns, was a smaller version of Metcalfe Hall on Strand Road. It had been meant to serve as the residence of Europeans and as such needed modifications to make it suitable for a nawab. Shah may have converted one of the ground floor rooms into a private imambara. He also constructed an unusual, dome-less, flat-roofed mosque for his personal use within the compound.

Garden Reach BNR House. Photo credit: Deepanjan Ghosh.

From his first-floor balcony, the king had a grand view of the Hooghly, similar to, but much bigger, than the Gomti in his native Lucknow. The house even had its own ghat or landing stage, giving residents the option of river transport. But Shah's travels had come to an end. His doctors advised him against undertaking the strenuous trip to London to meet the queen and seek justice. In his stead, the 52-year-old Queen Mother, Janab-i'Aliyyah Malika Kishwar would lead the mission, accompanied by the king's brother, Sikandar Hashmat and heir apparent, Mirza Hamid Ali Bahadur. The mission was destined to fail, and the "sorrows of Akhtar" had only just begun.

Sorrows of Akhtar

Meanwhile, in Calcutta, on June 13, 1857, a young Muslim boy named Abdul Subhan was caught spying inside Fort William. When interrogated, he revealed that Shah and Bahadur Shah Zafar were planning to oust the British from Calcutta. He was there to test whom the native troops were likely to side with in case of an uprising. Two days later, some 500 troops arrived at Garden Reach, placed the king under arrest and detained him in Fort William. On July 4, as Malika Kishwar and Queen Victoria were shaking hands in Buckingham Palace, back in Lucknow, the British resident, Sir Henry Lawrence, was dying from injuries sustained from the rebel shelling of the Lucknow residency.

In London, the Nawab's messengers now had to deal with hostile public opinion as reports of the mutiny and the massacre of Europeans filtered through. It was Shah's former wife, Begum Hazrat Mahal, who was leading the rebellion in Lucknow and her son, Birjis Qadr, had been placed on the throne. The bulk of the

rebellious sepoy of the Bengal Native Infantry also hailed from the Oudh region. Apart from creating a lot of noise in the press, the mission led by Malika Kishwar achieved little.

The court of Wajid Ali Shah. Image credit: Royal Collection Trust/Wikimedia Commons [Public Domain]

From his dingy and insect-filled room in Fort William, Shah composed *Masnavi Huzn-e-Akhtar*, or “the sorrows of Akhtar”, detailing his misery. Money to provide for both his considerable retinue and the mission he had sent to London was running out and the king was forced to borrow from his captors. By the end of September 1857, the mission had split into two factions, with Malika Kishwar wanting to return home via France and Mecca. She started on the long trek back, but died in Paris the day after her arrival. Sikandar Hashmat died shortly after in London, along with two of his infant daughters. With its two senior members gone, the mission was in complete disarray, led nominally by Mirza Hamid Ali Bahadur. He, too, would leave England for France and would eventually return to India.

A faux kingdom

Few remember, or even know, that it is not one but two Oudh royals who were once imprisoned in Fort William and subsequently buried in Calcutta. The short-lived reign of Wazir Ali Khan, the fourth Nawab of Oudh, had ended with his confinement in a cage in Fort William and [burial in the Kasiabagan Muslim Cemetery](#), which has since been obliterated.

Shah was able to secure more comfortable quarters for himself after an appeal to Governor General Lord Canning, but he would

remain a prisoner for 25 months. In the end, it was practical considerations such as finances that forced him to settle with the British. According to the terms of the agreement that Shah signed, he would be entitled to a monthly allowance of Rs 1 lakh and with this, he set out to create in Garden Reach and neighbouring Metiabruz a “[mimic kingdom](#)” in imitation of the Lucknow that he had been forced to leave behind.

Author and poet Abdul Halim Sharar, who spent his childhood in Metiabruz, provides the following description in [Lucknow : The Last Phase: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture](#) of Shah’s estate:

“The King had received only Sultan Khana, Asad Manzil and Murassa Manzil from the British Government of India, but in a very short time, he built several more houses which were surrounded by beautiful gardens and pleasing lawns. For about a mile along the municipal high road, there were some fine shops. Near the gate to Sultan Khana, there was a very imposing guard-house in which drums were beaten and the hours of the day and night were announced by gongs according to the old fashion.”

— *Translated and edited by ES Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain*

The other attraction of Metiabruz was the king’s zoo. Shah had a fondness for exotic animals and his private zoo contained exotic birds of every description, exotic animals from all over the world, fish, monkeys, a rhinoceros and even tigers, but the highlight was the snake enclosure. As much as 9,000 rupees a month was being spent at one point to buy food for the animals. Shah’s zoo predates the Alipore Zoo of Calcutta, which was opened to the public in 1876.

The end of days

The cultural aspects of Metiabruz have been almost completely forgotten. With 6,000 people following their king from Lucknow to Kolkata, Metiabruz and Garden Reach effectively formed a mini Lucknow. The shopkeepers, tailors, moneylenders and paanwallas were all from Lucknow. They spoke the same language, wore the same clothes and even indulged in the same opium.

The entrance to Shahi Masjid. Photo credit: Deepanjan Ghosh.

They were woken up in the morning by the music from the naubat-khana, as they had been in Lucknow, and were entertained by the cockfights and ram fights that were common in that city. There was also the tradition of kabootarbaazi, with the king himself owning around 24,000 pigeons of every variety. Also making its way to Metiabruz was the tradition of kite-flying which the Bengalis adopted. Shah also brought with him the fine art of Lucknawi tailoring.

Perhaps the most significant of the king's imports were kathak and thumri. While kathak was a Hindu dance form, it was under Shah's patronage in Lucknow that the unique Lucknow gharana of kathak evolved. Raja Sourindra Mohan Tagore of the Pathuriaghata Tagore family and Pundit Jadu Bhatta, who went on to teach music to Rabindranath Tagore, were among the few Bengalis to have attended musical soirees in Metiabruz. But without a doubt, the one import Bengalis remember and love Shah the most for is biryani. How the meat and rice dish from Lucknow came to Calcutta, and how it came to evolve into the Calcutta biryani, with its signature potato, is an oft-told story.

It all ended as suddenly as it had begun, with the death of the king

on September 21, 1887. Shah had been suffering from anal fistula for some time and this may have led to an infection and ultimately his death, although the legend in Metiabruz is that he was poisoned by one of his officers, Munsarim-ud-daula. Since practically the entire settlement depended on him for their livelihood, things unravelled fast. The government in Calcutta was determined to erase all traces of the man.

The grave of Wajid Ali Shah. Photo credit: Deepanjan Ghosh.

The Garden Reach estate was dismantled piece by piece. The palaces were sold and much of the king's personal belongings were auctioned off. Many of the books written by the king have ended up in museums and private collections all over the world, but much of his household records and correspondence were lost forever in the looting that ensued after his death.

Remnants of a glorious past

Little survives of Shah's little Lucknow, save the religious structures. The flat-roofed Shahi Masjid on Iron Gate Road remains active although it has seen better days. The original structure of the Begum Masjid on SA Farooque Road was torn down and in its place today stands a modern, air-conditioned mosque. Inside there are several tombs, one of which is said to belong to the begum in question, one of the king's many mut'ah wives.

Bait-un-Nijat Imambara on Circular Garden Reach Road also survives, but just barely. It was built in 1863, probably for the use of the royal family. Portions of its roof have collapsed and a lot of the land around it is now illegally occupied by businesses. Qasr-ul-

Buka, said to be the first imambara built in Metiabruz, still stands on Circular Garden Reach Road, although it is also fighting illegal occupants.

But the star attraction of Metiabruz remains the Sibtainabad Imambara. Built as a more modest copy of the Bada Imambara of Lucknow, it is here that Shah and several of his descendants lie buried. Beside it is the Begum Umda Mahal Imambara, said to have been built by one of the Nawab's wives. The Oudh Royal Family Burial Ground occupies a small plot of land on Karl Marx Sarani, adjacent to the Hindustan Unilever factory that now occupies a large chunk of the former estate. Apart from the large painted letters on the gate, there is nothing else about the two dozen or so graves inside, which would betray their royal character.

Oudh Family Burial Ground. Photo credit: Deepanjan Ghosh.

Many members of the erstwhile royal family continue to reside in Metiabruz, which remains a mostly Shia neighbourhood, 131 years after the Shia king breathed his last. There has been renewed interest in Wajid Ali Shah in the last few years. Walking tours of the area have been organised by local resident Shaikh Sohailuddin Siddiqui and well-known Calcutta chronicler Rangan Datta. The Metiabruz festival celebrates the cuisine brought to Calcutta by Shah, and the king's great great grandson Shahenshah Mirza has also participated in it.

Another descendant, Manzilat Fatima, is now serving Nawabi-style biryani and kebabs at her outlet, Manzilat's, and pop-up restaurants. Noted director Srijeet Mukherjee shot extensively in the area for his Bengali film *Zulfiqar*. On the streets, Metiabruz has

a somewhat sinister reputation, thanks to incidents like the murder of the Deputy Commissioner of Police of the Port Division, Vinod Mehta, in 1984, and of Sub-Inspector Tapas Chowdhury in 2013. [Its kite-making industry may be in decline](#), but near Kachchi Sadak, Ramesh Kumar Saini still continues to make paan, like his ancestors once did for the Nawab himself. The best tailors in the city still come from Metiabruz and even among all the poverty and squalor, street signs like “Iron Gate Road” and “Resaldar Gate” are reminders of the neighbourhood’s royal heritage.

Support our journalism by contributing to [Scroll Ground Reporting Fund](#). We welcome your comments at letters@scroll.in.

- [Wajid Ali Shah](#)
- [Lucknow](#)
- [Nawab of Oudh](#)
- [Kolkata](#)
- [Biryani](#)
- [Kathak](#)
- [History](#)
- [Calcutta](#)

Respond to this article with a post

Share your perspective on this article with a post on ScrollStack, and send it to your followers.