



MUGHAL COURT CULTURE IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NORTH INDIA

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Abstract:

This essay attempts to analyse the array of diffusion of Mughal court culture into the various regional centres and regional kingdoms. The Mughal culture that had been confined to the imperial courts was diffused and reconfigured across the subcontinent with the flavour of different regional identities. The cultural decentring of the eighteenth century was facilitated by the emergence of a variety of minor courts wherein arts flourished under the patronage of regional states. Patronage extended to the poets, learned men and religious scholars became more widespread when there regional court started copying the high culture of Mughals by emulating their mannerism, etiquettes, and aura which gave space for new talents to flourish and get more change to show their talents. The emergence of regional literary and artistic figures took the limelight away from Delhi both in terms of material benefits and with respect to new trends and genres. This led to the rise of a host of cultural centres like Awadh, Faizabad, Murshidabad, Azimabad, Najibabad etc. that rivalled Delhi for primacy. Unlike the heydays of the Mughals, literary and artistic pursuits were something to which anyone from any social strata could aspire for; it was no longer the privileged domain of the elite. The society, thus, witnessed a remarkable transformation in diverse fields of art, music, poetry, cuisine, literature etc.

KEY WORDS:

Mughal Empire, food, culture, Delhi, political rivalry, poetry, army, capital city.

INTRODUCTION-

The mid-eighteenth century witnessed a steady decline in terms of Delhi's image as the imperial city. In this period Delhi suffered repeated invasions and pillage from various quarters. From 1739 to 1760, the capital's populace lived under the shadow of constant invasion, massacre and atrocities perpetrated by the armies of Nadir Shah, Ahmad Shah Abdali, the Jats and the Marathas. The sense of despondency and doom was so predominant that Delhi soon came to be perceived as a city devoid of stability and security. This state of affairs compelled nobles, artists, scholars and poets into an exodus in search of security and livelihood in more peaceful places. Despite this development, the spirit of the age did not prove detrimental to the cause of art, culture, architecture, music, painting and poetry. On the contrary, cultural developments and consolidations continued to happen both in Delhi as well as provincial seat of power. It is important to note that many of the later Mughal rulers, princes and nobles were refined men of culture, noted particularly for their contribution to Persian and Urdu literature, especially the growth of Urdu poetry in the period. The

criticism of rulers by poets and intellectuals of the period may be due to their inability to provide patronage and protection.

Delhi had been denuded of its cultural elite after 1750s. Alamgir Sani was murdered and Imad-ul-Mulk was not able to defend it against the Marathas. Delhi began to recover after 1803 when the English East India Company took over its government. It may, however, be recalled that the flight of the men of talents of the provincial capitals led to the diffusion of imperial culture on a large scale. There is to be found a significant vibrancy when it comes to various aspects of cultural life and this can be seen in the diffusion of court culture to lower strata of society, percolating down in this case to the common man.

The period also witnessed a distinct cultural change emerging from interaction between elite norms and exuberant popular culture. Such a change resulted in creating a dynamic common cultural space towards the end of the eighteenth century. The accession of Mohammad Shah in 1719 witnessed encounters between the court traditions and the folk cultural patterns, with significant results. The distinctive force that the folk cultural paradigms assumed at this stage may be seen as an offshoot of the disintegration of the Mughal Empire and the subsequent development of various regional powers. When the fortunes of the Mughal Empire declined, the locus of art and culture shifted from Delhi to Lucknow, and the capital of Awadh and the Awadh court emerged as the refuge for the traditions and cultural patterns that had emerged and evolved in Delhi. However, the significant development in Awadh was indeed a rise of folk culture; various regional musical genres were elevated to a classical status. Literatures of the eighteenth century, however, hint at the emergence of new elites, changing tastes, the percolation of court-culture and the elevation of popular elements, as part of the cultural setting in Hindustani music and dance.

Most of the poets of this period belonged to wealthy families of Delhi, and came from professional, intellectual and Sufi backgrounds. Mazhar Jan-i-Jana and Khwaja Mir Dard were practicing Sufis, not dependant on court patronage, while other poets enjoyed patronage of the nobles. This was definitely a deviation from the aristocratic circles associated with the Mughal Persian culture. This has been succinctly expressed by Dard in his poetry:

Saltanat per naheen hai kuchh mauqoof
Jis ke hath aavae jam- o- jam hai
(Greatness is no longer the privilege of kings
Whosoever can lay hands on the cup becomes Jamshed.)

As though in consonance with this radical view of how cultural capital can be acquired and accumulated, the Awadh court gradually began to assert its own distinct cultural and political identity. In the second half of the eighteenth century the rulers of Awadh created a full-fledged court and capital at Lucknow. It rivalled and even surpassed the Mughal capital for its political pretensions and the wealth and vitality of its artistic worlds. The rulers enriched and generously patronised the most prominent and artistic luminaries (men of talents) of the Mughal Empire and thus strove earnestly to elevate the Awadh court as the cultural centre of north India. The cultural elite at the Awadh court both cultivated the existing forms of court life and also created new schools of poetry, music, dance, drama and art. Many of the styles and forms of the Mughal court were adopted and enriched with regional variations. Infact, the court of Awadh emerged as an upholder of the Mughal court culture that had long been accepted throughout India as the cultural standard against which all other cultural forms were to be measured. As has been pointed out earlier in this paper, the sense of evolution within this appropriation came from the manner in which the intricacies of the Mughal court culture were tinged with regional variations when it was adopted by the new states. Eventually, Lucknow developed its own *Lucknawi adab*, which sought to distinguish itself from the cultural pattern of the rest of the regions.

One of the characteristic features of the eighteenth century was that music and dance, by and large, came into the domain of dancing girls and courtesans. This along with the marked decline in the fortunes of the old nobility, forced artists to seek employment with those who had newly come into prominence in the changed socio-political conditions. The latter insisted on their own traditional preferences and demanded an art that had the impress of their folk traditions. During the late eighteenth century, the tradition of classical dance appears to have been revived at the Awadh court, Asif-ud-Daula, for example, patronised Prakash Nartak who was a great master. Later on, under the patronage of *Wajid Ali Shah* *kathak* was designed for an audience exclusively from the court circle. This exclusive image had its impact on the form itself, and one witnesses *kathak* absorbing some of the court etiquettes that were prevalent under *amad* and *mujra*. To a great extent, in Lucknow the renewed interest in classical *kathak* was facilitated by the development of *mujra*. The costumes were also designed in the contemporary fashion. *Kathak* as a dance style was developed and codified in the family of Prakash Nartak, by the *Kalka-Bindani* team. While Kalka

Prasad showed exceptional skill in the technique of pure dance, Bindadin enriched the lyrical side of *Kathak* by composing numerous *thumris*, *dadras*, *ghazals* and *bhajans*. He is also credited with the exceptional form of *Kathak* which is technically known as *batana*. Various aspects of *bhav-abhinaya* were developed in *nayan bhav*, considered to be the most difficult aspect, and almost all dancers of Lucknow specialised in it. Kalka and Bindadin trained numerous men and women dancers in *kathak*. Later on, the institution of *mujra* itself came to be identified as an institution of high culture.

In fact, the new culture and lifestyle that emerged in Lucknow (Awadh) consolidated itself to an extent wherein it went on to claim superiority over the cultural norms of Delhi. It has to be realised that the religious, identity-based aspect of cultural coding played a subtle yet significant part in this attempt to be visibly different and unique. The rulers of Awadh employed specific symbols, which distinguished them from their Mughal rivals. Also, the Iranian and Shiite identity of the rulers were invoked through court practices. They manifested their Shiite identity in the genealogy of their dynasty, in the titles they assumed and held and in the officials they appointed. The Mughal court culture continued to set the pattern for the lifestyle of the nobles and the wealthy.

A similar trajectory can also be discerned in the case of Asif-ud-Daula. Under his patronage and direction, Lucknow became the centre of a poetic school, a sophisticated lifestyle, and also a religious expression that surpassed most of the developments that had hitherto occurred in the subcontinent at that time. By drawing many luminaries of established fame from all over India to his court, Asif-ud-Daula created a distinguished style in his own court. He was keen to develop Lucknow as new cultural centre. This patronage of renowned Urdu poets of the age contributed to the emergence of Urdu as the new mode of assertion. Awadh became the best refuge for scholars and artists who were seeking a safe haven in which they could pursue their career and be suitably rewarded for their expertise. While Persian remained the recognised language of administration and cultured prose, Urdu consolidated its presence by becoming the urban vernacular and language of poetry. Asif-ud-Daula gathered most of the renowned Urdu poets of the age and lavishly bestowed stipends and gifts. Having heard of the patronage of Asif-ud-Daula, people from all parts of India flocked to the city and settled in Lucknow to avail his munificent generosity given to arts and literature. When Mir arrived at Awadh, he went to take part in a *musha'ira*. The fashionable, modern young gentlemen, who had gathered for the event smiled at the old fashioned dress of Mir. The latter recited the following verses as a response to their gesticulation:

Kiya bood o baad pucho ho purab ke sakino
Ham ko ghareeb jan ke hans hans pukar ke
Dilli jo ek shahar tha aalam main intekhab
Rahte the muntakhib hi jahan rozgar ke
Us ko falak ne loot kar veeran kar diya
Ham rahnevale hain usi ujde dayar ke
(Where in the world I come from, easterners?
Why do you mock at me and ask your selves
There was a city, famed throughout the world,
Delhi is the name, fairest among the fair.
Fate looted it and laid it desolate,
Where dwelt the chosen spirits of the age:
And to that ravaged city, I belonged.)

This couplet can be seen as a literary acknowledgement of a change of guard in the realm of culture – the usurpation of Delhi by Lucknow as the echelon of cultural luminance. A person from Delhi could be mocked in Lucknow for his dress, as that dress was old fashioned when assessed according to the standards of Lucknow. The response that Mir received in Lucknow and the discomfiture that is evident in his riposte throw light on the new state of affairs, a situation in which public consent was clear in its understanding that the trendsetter of the times had become Lucknow. According to Insha Allah Khan 'Insha', within a short span of time Lucknow had replaced Shahjahanabad which had by then become a ruined city. Men of eloquence and good manners, who were regarded as the soul and nourishers of the culture of Shahjahanabad, had moved over and settled in Lucknow. Among the prominent Urdu poets who settled in Lucknow were Mirza Rafi 'Sauda', Mir Taqi 'Mir', Mir Ghulam Hasan, Ghulam Hamdani 'Mushafi', Qalandar Bakhsh 'Jurat' and Insha Allah Khan 'Insha'.

Besides the migration of the men of talent to Lucknow, a change in the style of Urdu poetry also occurred. One Urdu poet who made a definite departure from the traditional style of Urdu poetry was Wali Muhammad popularly or poetically called Nazir Akbarabadi. He was born in Delhi in 1735 and was the contemporary of Mir, Sauda, Dard, Insha, Jurat and Nasikh. Curiously, his poetry did not belong either to

the Delhi or Lucknow schools. Contemporary tazkirah writers failed to recognise his talent and did not include him among the great poets of the time. However, popular sources clearly reveal that his verses were 'on the tongues of the people of the market.' Nazir broke away from the formal conversationalist literary style that was dominant during the age. Also, he did not adopt the pattern of life that was followed by the literati and the intellectuals. This was all the more glaring in his refusal to accept any kind of patronage; he even refused the patronages offered to him by the Raja of Bharatpur and the Nawab of Awadh. It is interesting to note that in his poetry Nazir did not restrict himself to the polished language of Delhi and Agra, but flavoured it with the local Urdu dialect of Agra - a region very much in the proximity of Mathura, popular for Braj poetry. Linguistically it may be asserted that his poetry is a manifestation of the free use of Hindi and Brajbhasha. Such a confluence of a local dialect with the polished language makes Nazir a pioneering innovator. Muhammad Sadiq is of the view that Nazir was certainly the most 'unaccountable' figure in the poetry of his age. At the outset, Nazir emerges as a lone figure who was wholly detached from the accepted literary ideas of his age. But the local colour in his poetry does grab the attention of all critics. At a time when almost all the poets wrote occasionally of nature, festivals and domestic animals, it is to Nazir's credit that he very consciously evolved a big canvas in which he could weave themes that vividly illustrated the beauty of men and nature in a radically fresh verse form. Nazir Akbarabadi's attempts to portray the life and conditions of the common man in his poetry is of great significance, and this step shows that at this point of time common people were gradually becoming the real takers for the poets.

Another significant development that was played out primarily in Lucknow at the level of poetic genre also merits our attention. The foundation of Shia states in the eighteenth century witnessed the rise of marsiya as a new poetic genre, which became very popular. It has to be kept in mind that the development of *marsiya khwani*, as a distinct musical genre in northern India occurred very early in the eighteenth century and it was contemporaneous with the emergence of *marsiyagoi*. The trendsetters among the *marsiya-khwans*, during its nascent phase, were Mir Miskin and Miyan Sikandar, two maestros who were highly accomplished in both classical and folk music. Miyan Sikandar composed marsiya in Punjabi, Marwari and Purbi dialects. His Purbi *marsiyas* are famous even today. Contemporary tazkirahs show that there were a good number of poets who composed marsiyas. This gave birth to a large-scale composition of marsiya. Sauda, Miskin, Sikandar and Mir Zahik composed *marsiyas* as a religious duty. With the passage of time, this form of composition became a popular literary genre. The social significance of these poems was immense. They served as clarions that were very effectively used in special social gatherings that were perceived as vital to the community's cohesion. In the first two months of the *hijra* year and the first eight days of the third month, assemblies were held commemorating the tragedy of *Karbala*. Elegies of Imam Hussain and the other martyrs of *Karbala* were recited. The greatest composer of elegies (*marsiya*) was Mir Babar Ali Anis; his great grand father, Mir Hasan, and his father, Mir *Khaliq*, were all gifted and popular poets of Lucknow.

One cannot ignore the role played by the city of Faizabad in this cultural diffusion from the centrality of the Mughal court to the various provincial cultural centres. For a short period of time Faizabad had served as the cultural centre, before the capital of Awadh was shifted to Lucknow. This short-lived yet significant status is attested to in the writings of Mir Hasan and Jurat. Both these writers have showered praises on the grandeur and the general state of prosperity that existed in Faizabad. Jurat wrote that he had lived in that city since the decline of Delhi. Many inhabitants of Delhi came to this city and settled down there. Another city that became a centre of Muslim culture and learning in the second half of eighteenth century was Azimabad. Many uprooted poets and scholars of Delhi migrated to this city for their livelihood. Many scholars, poets and artists who had been left without source of livelihood in Delhi flocked to the courts of the Rohila chiefs. The Rohila chiefs, who came from the tribal Afghan region with the North-West of Punjab with no pretensions to a cultural or literary background, carved out principalities in the upper Doab and emulated Mughal culture and Politics. They extended patronage to men of learning, arts and crafts. With these efforts, literature produced under their patronage is rich in quality as well as in variety. Besides historical works, *diwans* and *kulliyats* (collection of poem) and *tazkiras* form an important part of the sources of information about socio-economic conditions in different region. The best example from the Rohila territory is *Qaim Cahndpuri* and his *Tazkira*, the poem contained in the kulliat of Qaim Chandpuri also yield interesting data on the society of Rohilkhand region during the later half of eighteenth century. It also gives us vital insights to cultural life and patronage extended by the nobles to the men of learning and talents. Even minor nobles and chiefs associated with the Rampur court, after the fall of Rohila power in 1774, went out of their way to support financially poets and scholars.

Besides Lucknow, Faizabad, Rohilkhand and Azimabad, a city that became a safe refuge for the educated luminaries was Murshidabad. Ghulam Hussain Khan Taba Tabai tells us that Alivardi Khan invited several families from amongst his relatives who were residing in Delhi to settle down in Murshidabad. Consequently, many men of letters, scholars and men from the professional classes

migrated to Murshidabad. Insha Allah Khan Insha has noted that during the reign of Siraj-ud-Daula some Mughal mansabdars, some mimics, called bhandas, two or three famous musicians and dancing girls (*kasbis*), ten to twelve in number, along with *marsiya* reciters and other professional classes had migrated to Murshidabad. He also records that an entire mohallah from Delhi, known by the name *Mughalpurā*, migrated to Murshidabad. However, it was during the reign of Mir Qasim that the court at Murshidabad found it fashionable to generously extend special patronage to men of talent and eloquence. Mir Qasim himself set an example by extending personal patronage to deserving people, especially those who had a serious bent of mind. Ghulam Hussain Salim remarked: 'It is a beautiful city. Its inhabitants, in the society of subedars, being thrown into contact with the people of Delhi, in point of refinement of manners and conversation, resemble the people of Hindustan, unlike those of other parts of Bengal.'

It was in fact the efforts of the nawabs of Bengal to promote art and literature that facilitated the development of Murshidabad as a cultural and religious centre in the eighteenth century. Prominent amongst the rulers who set out such a benevolent and enlightened agenda was *Alivadi Khan*. It is said that Alivadi Khan was a man of religious bent of mind, and therefore, extended great favours to the Shia *ulama*. A number of pious and learned men came under his sphere of influence. This included eminent personalities such as Maulvi Nasir Ali Khan, Daud Ali Khan, Zair Hussain Khan, Mir Muhammad Amin, Shah *Alam*, Hayat Beg, Maulvi Muhammad Arif, Mir Rustam Ali, Shah Khizr, Syed Muhammad Sajjad, Syed Alimullah and Qazi Ghulam Muzaffar whom he had appointed as Chief Qazi of Murshidabad. The Nawab also took interest in the education of Muslim children. In this sequence another notable endeavour was the *katra* erected by Murshid Quli Khan to serve as a madrasa. Many eminent scholars were appointed as teachers there.

The eighteenth century was definitely a time of political disintegration of the Mughal Empire. But as the Empire was disintegrating, its politics did not pull down the vitality of the Mughal court culture. Rather, the eighteenth century North India witnessed an efflorescence of culture in its various manifestations. With the disintegrating Mughal authority, diffusion and dissemination of Mughal court culture enveloped more people and involved several regions, unlike the Delhi-centric Mughal court culture of earlier times.

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10. *Ibid.*, p. 298
11. A rhythmical prologue composed of a characteristic pattern sequence of *natwari-bol*. This piece is performed at the beginning of the *kathak* repertoire.
12. A stylized way of salutations performed after the *amad*. This term became synonymous with a performance.
13. In this, expressions conveyed through movement of eyes.
14. Muhammad Mardan Ali Khan, *Guncha-i-Rag* (Urdu), Lucknow, 1863, p. 123.
15. *Kathak* as a dance style was developed and codified in the family of Prakash Nartak by the Kalka and Bindadin team. While Kalka Prasad showed exceptional skill in the technique of pure dance, Bindadin

enriched the lyrical side of kathak by composing numerous thumris, dadras, Ghazals and bhajans. He is also credited with the expressional form of kathak which is technically known as batana. (Various aspects of bhav-abhinava were developed in nayan bhav {expressions conveyed through movement of eyes}, considered to be the most difficult aspect, and almost all dancers of Lucknow specialised in it.

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23. A short accounts of Poets, giving for each entry brief biographical details and a few specimen verses.

24. Mustafa Khan Shefta, *Gulshan-i-Bekhar*, Karanchi, 1963, p. 320; as cited in Shrat Haque, *Glimpses of Mughal Society and Culture-a Study Based of Urdu Literature: in the 2nd Half of the 18th Century*, New Delhi, 1992, p. 45.

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27. Nazir Akbarabadi, *Kulliat-i-Nazir*, Allahabad, 1976, pp. 55-96, as cited in *Glimpses of Mughal Society...*, p. 46.

28. The term marsiya (an elegy) is a derivative of the Arabic risa, which means an oration in mourning. It is a poem recited to express sorrow on the death of a person; it is also a poem to commemorate a particular pathetic event. Gradually marsiya came to narrate the event of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grand son of Prophet Muhammad and his kinsmen at Karbala (in Iraq), during the Muharram, the first month of Islamic calendar. Imam Hussain died on the tenth of Muharram. The shia community, all over the world, commemorates the event during the first ten days of Muharram. In India many mourning rituals are observed: taziyas (the replica of tomb of Imam Hussain) are taken out in procession, majlises (mourning assemblies) are held and i are recited.

29. Trivedi, Madhu, *Hindustani Music and Dance...*, pp. 293-4

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34. Qaim Chandpuri's actual name was Muhammad Qiyamuddin as mentioned in his tazkirah, however, he become famous by his pen name Qaim Chandpuri. He was born to a Shaikhzada family in the town of Chandpur (Bijnore), in the reign of Muhammad Shah (1719-48). Having completed his early education in his hometown, he left for Delhi to reside with his elder brother Munim. His *Makhzan-i-Nikat* and *Kulliat* contains biographical details of poets and specimen verses in a chronological order. It gives vivid descriptions of the Hindu poets of the time, political and administrative information regarding the zila and sarkars and also yields interesting data on the society of Rohilkhand region during the later half of Eighteenth century etc.

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36. *Ibid.*, II, , pp. 119, 130, 131, qasida, nos. 10-13.

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39. Ghulam Huassain Salim, *Riyaz-us-Salatin. A History of Bengal*, English translation by Maulvi Abdus Salam, Delhi, 1975, P. 28; see for detail Mohammad Umar, *Urban Culture in North India During the Eighteenth Century*, Aligarh, 2001, p.18.

40. Ghulam Hussain Khan Taba Tabai, *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhhirin, II*, Urdu translation by Gokul Prasad, Lucknow, 1874, II, pp. 611-14.

41. *Ibid.*