

<http://double-dolphin.blogspot.com.es/2017/03/garden-reach-metiabruz-nawab-wajid-ali-shah-calcutta-kolkata.html>

The Concrete Paparazzi

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Garden Reach: The Forgotten Kingdom of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah

My research into Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of the Kingdom of Oudh (*Awadh*) started as a simple question - where was he buried? I knew that he had come to Calcutta once the East India Company had dethroned him. But if he had come to Calcutta, would he have died in Calcutta and if he had died in Calcutta, wouldn't he have been buried in Calcutta? Google threw up a name - Sibtainabad Imambara. But where was this? Further curiosity would lead me to this post on the Astounding Bengal blog. There were scattered newspaper articles on the Nawab as well, but there seemed to be no one place where I could get the complete information. That is when I knew that I would have to do this myself, and as a friend and collaborator, I found Shaikh Sohail, who has the twin advantages of being a resident of the area where the Nawab once stayed and being on good terms with his descendants. More than 100 years after he died, are there any vestiges of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah that still remain?



JAB CHHOR CHALEY LUCKNOW NAGRI

It is important to begin by addressing a common misconception. In 1799, when Tipu Sultan was killed when the British stormed Srirangapatnam, the East India Company exiled his family to Calcutta to prevent them from stirring up any more trouble in the South. Soldiers were known for harbouring loyalty to their former masters, even when they had been defeated and dethroned. By contrast, Wajid Ali Shah travelled to the British capital of his own free will and was only confined to the city later.

The East India Company had annexed Oudh in March of 1856. Governor General Lord Dalhousie had had his eye on Oudh for a long time. It was a rich, fertile territory and the vast majority of the men in the Company's army came from there. With Kingdoms such as Jhansi and Satara, the Company had at least made a pretense of legitimacy, through such laws as the infamous "Doctrine of Lapse", but in the case of Oudh, even such a thin pretense was missing. In 1848, Dalhousie had sent Major-general Sir William Henry Sleeman to Oudh as Resident with a brief to undertake "the reconstruction of a great, rich and oppressed country". Sleeman's report was not a flattering one but he explicitly warned against annexation, since he was concerned, not without reason, that "we shall be at the mercy of our native army...and accidents may possibly occur to unite them...in some desperate act". 6 years later, Outram was sent to Lucknow as the resident and he reported that the situation had not improved and Oudh's administration was "an orgy of massacre and corruption set to music".

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was not like Ashoka or Akbar. He was not a warrior king. Some would argue he was a far better poet than he was an administrator. Yet the fact remains that there had been no major rebellions against him by his subjects and among the residents of the capital, Lucknow, he remained extremely popular. To the Nawab's mind, the annexation of his Kingdom was a violation of treaties he and his ancestors had signed with the East India Company. Wajid Ali Shah was determined to get justice from Queen Victoria, and with this in mind, he refused to sign the new treaty handing over his realm to Lord Dalhousie and set off for Calcutta, on 13th March 1856. From there, he planned to travel to London where he would appeal to Queen Victoria. While many remember the famous ghazal "Jab Chhor Chalein Lucknow Nagri" (*As We Leave Lucknow City*) as being penned by the Nawab about his leaving Lucknow, "Babul Mora Naihar Chhuto Jaaye" a mournful song from the point of view of a girl as she leaves her father's house for that of her husband, after marriage, is also an oblique reference to the Nawab's separation from his homeland.



Resaldar is commander of a resala, a group of mounted troops.

A KING IN CALCUTTA

The royal party left Lucknow and reached Benares (*Varanasi*) via Cawnpore (*Kanpur*) and Allahabad in April of 1856. There they stayed as guests of the King, Ishwari Prasad Singh until the 25th, when they boarded a steamer named “General McLeod” which brought them to Calcutta on the 6th of May, 1856. Where did Nawab Wajid Ali Shah land? It is impossible to answer this question with any degree of accuracy. Many, including some of the Nawab’s descendants, are convinced that he landed at the place that is today known as “Bichali Ghat”, near the Garden Reach Shipbuilders & Engineers premises in Garden Reach. I can find no written confirmation of this and it seems to me unlikely for several reasons. Bichali means hay, and Bichali Ghat probably got its name from the fact that it was used to load and unload cargo, particularly fruit, which is often packed with hay in wooden crates, which is dumped once the crates are unloaded. A small ghat even today, Bichali Ghat would have been considered completely unsuitable for a royal landing in 1856, if at all it existed back then. It is much more likely that the Nawab landed at [Prinsep Ghat](#) ([read about Prinsep Ghat here](#)), which was in use even after the sepoy mutiny as the river then had not retreated to the place where it is now. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones speculates in her book “The Last King in India”, that the Nawab may have stayed for a while at [Spence’s Hotel](#) ([read about Spence’s hotel here](#)), while suitable accommodation for him was found.

We know for certain from multiple sources that the Nawab suffered a bout of dysentery on the steamer on the way to Calcutta, and may have spent his first few nights on the steamer while it was docked. Wajid Ali Shah was thoroughly burned out by now and had grave doubts about getting justice from the Queen in London. Instead of the Nawab, it was the Queen Mother who would proceed to England, while Wajid Ali Shah was content to wait in Calcutta. A house was found for the Nawab in a suburb right outside the city, on the riverbank, in a place called “Garden Reach”.



Crowds at the Bichali Ghat market today

BUNGALOW NO. 11 - TODAY'S B.N.R. HOUSE

When Sir Lawrence Peel, Chief Justice of Calcutta, retired to the Isle of Wight in 1855, he built himself a house and named it “Garden Reach”. The name was a tribute to the area of Calcutta, where he had stayed. To the southwest of the city, on a two-mile stretch facing the Hooghly river, the English had been building bungalows for themselves since the 1770’s. Although they were called bungalows, these were very large, often three-storeyed buildings, Palladian in style which stood amidst substantial lawns since there was no space crunch here like there was in the city. Such houses often sold for as much as 35,000 rupees which was an astronomical sum back in the day. There were thirteen bungalows in all, and Sir Lawrence had stayed in Bungalow No. 11.



BNR House from across the river

A smaller version of the Metcalfe Hall on Strand Road in Calcutta, Bungalow No. 11 was a handsome building. 28 columns, 36 feet in height, rise from an ornamental pedestal, accommodating within two stories, with spacious drawing rooms on the ground floor and bedchambers on the first, creating an external appearance quite similar to the Temple of the Winds, in Athens. Inside the cruciform building, a central staircase rises to the upper floor. The high ceilings and tall doors had been specifically designed to allow the cool breeze from the river to travel through the entire house. The house even had its own ghat, or landing stage, offering the residents the option of road or river transport. There were four wide verandas on all sides, which was another Indian improvisation on classical architecture, to tackle the humid climate. Into this house, Wajid Ali Shah moved in on the 13th of May, 1856 and renamed it Sultan Khana.

At the time, Bungalow No. 11 was the only building which was owned by an Indian, Chand Mehtab Bahadur, the Raja of Burdwan. The house was initially taken on a monthly rent of 1000 rupees, but it was eventually purchased, along with two surrounding houses, for a sum of 300,000 rupees. But Bungalow No. 11 was meant to be an Englishman's house and was not fit to accommodate a Muslim royal. Wajid Ali Shah, therefore, made several alterations, including converting a room into an Imambara. Subsequent alterations were made by the erstwhile Bengal Nagpur Railway and then South Eastern Railway once they purchased the house after the Nawab's death. The most drastic and unfortunate of these happened in the mid 70's. From 1952, Bungalow No. 11 had housed the railways' central hospital. An expansion of the hospital was planned and for this, 8 southern columns of the

house were demolished to create space and 4 pillars were later added as a saving grace. With one stroke of his pen, the Chief Medical Officer of the railways forever destroyed the symmetry of the house!



An illuminated BNR House at night

Bungalow No. 11, today known as B.N.R. House, is the residence of the General Manager of South Eastern Railway, and Ratan Raj Bhandari, a former resident, says that it is without question, “the best residential accommodation for a railwayman”. Entry to the building is naturally restricted, but permission may be granted by the South Eastern Railway headquarters and periodic tours of the building are organized. Wajid Ali Shah’s estate would ultimately consist of Bungalow No. 11, which he renamed Sultan Khana, all the surrounding buildings, and a large part of the adjacent neighbourhood, which was and still is known as Metiabruz.

METIABRUZ - TOWER OF MUD

The spelling has been distorted and the meaning has been forgotten but before I can delve into the “Little Lucknow” that Wajid Ali Shah created around him, I must begin with the origins of the place. In a map of Bengal drawn in 1540, the Portuguese historian J.D. Barros notes the presence of two forts on opposite banks of the Bhagirathi, which we know today as the Hooghly River. To the North of the river, in Betor (*adjacent to Shibpur, Howrah*), was a fort he identified as “Tana”. To the South of the river, opposite the Tana Fort was “Matiyaburj Fort”, which was also known as the Aligarh or Makhwa Fort. The

word “matiya” comes from the word “mitti” meaning mud or earth. “Burj” is an Arabic/Persian word, meaning tower. So, Metiabruz should be spelled Matiyaburj, meaning mud tower, or earthen tower.

Since the medieval age in Bengal, it was a common practice to build small, temporary mud forts to house a garrison of soldiers to protect a particular area. It is precisely because they were made of mud that no trace of any such fort can be found anymore, although they do appear on old maps. Between 1530 and 1560 C.E., Portuguese trading ships would anchor at Betor. The sovereign in Bengal at the time was the most prominent of the Baro-Bhuiya, or twelve brothers, who had held the Mughal Empire at bay - Pratapaditya. Pratapaditya had a Portuguese general in his army by the name of Rodda and it was he who had ordered these two forts to be raised, to guard a bend in the river and protect ships from piracy. Burmese pirates, known colloquially as “mog” were a real menace in Bengal’s rivers back then, and even today Bengalis use the term “mog-er muluk” to mean “lawless”.

These mud forts would usually have a high tower or “burj” for purposes of observation. When the fort on the opposite bank of Betor had to be built, the chosen location appears to have had a very large mound. Where had the mound come from? It was probably the result of excavations that the Portuguese themselves had undertaken to create a navigable canal from Kidderpore to Rajgunj. Some of the earth from the mound was used to build the new fort. The remainder was left intact, and it was decided to use the vantage point provided by the high mound as the “burj” for the fort. No trace of any of this has survived, except for the name and much the same fate has befallen Wajid Ali Shah’s “Little Lucknow”.



Shia graveyard in Metiabruz

A KING UNDER ARREST

On the 29th of March, 1857, an Indian sepoy of the 34th Bengal Native Infantry by the name of Mangal Pandey tried to kill his superior officers in Barrackpore and urged his comrades to rebel against their colonial masters. He was apprehended, tried and hanged, but the mutiny could not be controlled. It spread like wildfire in the Bengal army and ultimately consumed half the country. Many of the sepoys came from the Oudh region, once governed by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and his family and while they did have other grudges, the most infamous among them being the greased cartridges, the unceremonious removal of their sovereign was also a strong one. When Wajid Ali Shah traveled to Calcutta, his divorced first wife, Begum Hazrat Mahal stayed back in Lucknow. Rebellious sepoys united under her leadership and that of her son, Birjis Qadr and Lucknow became one of the most fiercely fought battles in the history of the Mutiny ([read more about the mutiny in Lucknow here](#)). Barrackpore was not very far away from Calcutta, and with Wajid Ali Shah himself sitting in Garden Reach, the British panicked. On the 15th of June, 1857, Wajid Ali Shah was woken up by a great commotion in his estate. His servants informed him that the estate was completely surrounded by British police who demanded that the Nawab come with them. The Nawab was taken from Garden Reach to Fort William and detained. Wajid Ali Shah would write about his detention, the poor housing and food and his general misery in a book called “Huzn-E-Akhtar” or “The Sorrows of Akhtar”. Half a world away, in England, Janab-i’Aliyyah, the Queen Mother, was pleading her son’s case to Queen Victoria. Her efforts would ultimately fail, and she would die at the age of 55 in Paris on 25th January 1858. Her grave may still be seen today in the Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

On Saturday, the 9th of July, 1859, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was released from Fort William. It had been three years and all his attempts at getting justice, getting his kingdom back from the East India Company, had failed. According to the terms of the new treaty, the East India Company wanted him to sign, he would receive a generous annual pension. But since he had refused to sign the agreement with the company, he had not received a single penny and his staff hadn’t been paid for over two years. It is not unreasonable to guess that the pressure to sign the agreement with the company was now mounting. The Nawab resigned himself to his fate and signed the agreement. The British considered it too risky to permit him to return to Lucknow and thus granted him an estate, and 3 buildings in the Garden Reach and Metiabruz area. Under Wajid Ali Shah now began the task of transforming Metiabruz, little more than a village, into a proper city, a “duniyabi jannat” or heaven on earth. The British had taken his dear Lucknow from him, he would now create another.



A lamp reflects the interiors of the Sibtainabad Imambara

WAJID ALI SHAH'S LITTLE LUCKNOW

Author and poet Abdul Halim Sharar spent his childhood in Metiabruz. He provides the following description of Wajid Ali 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". Among the many buildings that Sharar describes, was one called Qasrul Baiza, which was apparently shaped like an egg!

Apart from the buildings, the other attraction of Garden Reach and Metiabruz was the King's zoo. Wajid Ali Shah had a fondness for exotic animals and with his private zoo in Calcutta, he pulled out all the stops. The pastime of the rich in Lucknow was "kabootarbaazi" or training pigeons and several thousand pigeons had already arrived in Calcutta from Lucknow. But apart from that, the 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. Sharar writes about a large tank in front of Shainshah Manzil. "All four sides of the tank had been made very slippery and in the middle was an artificial hill...into which hundreds of pipes had been run...open at the top to act as fountains. Thousands of large snakes...had been released on this hill and would

crawl about in it...and catch the frogs which had been put there”. Sharar speculates that this was probably the first example of snakes in captivity anywhere in the world, and Wajid Ali Shah’s zoo predates the Alipore Zoo of Calcutta (*Kolkata*) which was opened to the public in 1876. As much as 9000 rupees a month was being spent at one point to buy food for the animals.

And yet, descriptions of Metiabruz vary widely depending on the source. The British reports are scathing. Metiabruz is described as being unsanitary and lawless, many of its 6000 inhabitants are said to have criminal tendencies and the general atmosphere is described as being chaotic and noisy. Sidney Hay in his book “Historic Lucknow” says that a visitor had described the Nawab’s zoo as being a “pitiable menagerie of neglected, ill-fed tigers, buffaloes, snakes and birds”. On the other hand, Sharar’s descriptions are always ecstatic and over the top. The truth must be somewhere in the middle. Sharar’s descriptions are coloured by nostalgia and a fading memory. He had stayed at Metiabruz between the ages of 9 and 19 and was writing about it 30 years later. British descriptions were no doubt prejudiced and unlikely to portray anything Oriental in a positive light. At the time of his death, Wajid Ali Shah’s estate was an astounding 257 bighas in size, with some 19 buildings. As we shall see, it is primarily the religious structures which have survived.

SHAHI MASJID - IRON GATE ROAD



Domeless wonder! The unpretentious frontage of the Shahi Masjid

Iron Gate Road gets its name from an actual iron gate at the entrance to the Nawab's estate. On Iron Gate Road is the Shahi Masjid or Royal Mosque, built around 1856-57. This was probably the first structure to be constructed by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and was meant for his personal use. Legend says that before the foundations of the mosque could be laid, Wajid Ali Shah made a proclamation, inviting anyone who had not missed even one of the five daily prayers since he became an adult to lay its foundation. When no one came forward even after a month, the King laid the foundation himself. The Shahi Masjid is devoid of any domes or minarets. Like [Aurangzeb's mosque](#) in Aurangabad ([read about it here](#)), since this was meant for personal use, it is a small and unpretentious structure. To the north of the mosque is a small garden but the whole thing was once part of a much larger compound. Also to the North are the remains of a fountain which doesn't work, but the water contains fish, to ensure that it remains free of mosquito larvae. The fountain is now used for "wazu" or ritual cleansing before prayer by the faithful.

One unusual feature of the mosque is its Mihrab. A Mihrab is a semi-circular niche found in the Western walls of mosques which serves three purposes; first, it indicates the Qibla, the direction of Mecca, which Muslims are supposed to face when praying, second, even if the mosque is filled to capacity, the Imam, seated inside the Mihrab would remain ahead of the Jamaat or congregation, and third, the architecture of the Mihrab creates acoustics which magnify the Imam's voice, ensuring that he can be heard even without amplification. Shahi Masjid's Mihrab is probably more for ornamental purposes, but it is made entirely of marble while the walls are otherwise of masonry, and hence it stands out.



Shahi Masjid's marble mihrab

One later addition to the Shahi Masjid is a marble plaque to the memory of “Aalee Janab Maulana Syed Mohamed Sadiq ur Rizvi Munjir Al Allah Maqammeh”, who died on the 30th July 1985. The writing on the plaque is in Urdu, but it is unclear how Syed Mohamed Sadiq was connected to the Royal Mosque. Shahi Masjid remains active and has a modest congregation consisting mostly of Shia Muslims. The caretaker of the mosque serves also as its Imam and muezzin, reciting the call to prayer five times a day. The mosque is in good shape and is regularly painted, but the garden is unkempt and could use some attention.

BEGUM MASJID - S.A. FAROOQUE ROAD



The modernised Begum Masjid

Begum Masjid’s history brings to light a curious royal tradition. At the time of his death, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was said to have had 375 wives, which shocked contemporary British commentators. His descendants provide an explanation for that astounding figure. The conservative Islamic tradition of “purdah” did not allow women to be seen by men who were not family members. In a strange twist, Wajid Ali Shah extended this to the women who were serving him. Since even a woman who was sweeping or cleaning a room could be seen by the King, who was not part of her family, he contracted mut’ah marriages with them all. Nikāḥ al-mut’ah is a Shia Islamic practice of a temporary marriage where the duration of the marriage is agreed upon in advance. So, in reality, while on paper Wajid Ali Shah may well have had 375 wives, most of his mut’ah wives were servants with whom he did not have conjugal relations.



The graves inside Begum Masjid

Begum Masjid was constructed by one such mut'ah wife of the Nawab, who served as his food taster. But unfortunately, nothing remains of the original structure of the Begum Masjid. The only available description of the old structure is from an article published in *The Statesman* in 1982, which was written by Soumitra Das. In it, Begum Masjid is described as having “a light and feminine appearance” and being an “elegant structure”, with “arched doorways, and slender cupolas”. That structure has been demolished and replaced by a completely modern one. Begum Masjid is now a multi-storeyed, air-conditioned mosque with aluminium and glass doors. Inside, adjacent to the mosque, behind a set of scalloped arches, are 4 tombs. Newspaper articles suggest that one of them is the tomb of the food taster mut'ah wife. But the present Imam of the mosque says that all the tombs are of past Imams. Since none of the tombs have any plaques with names and dates on them, it is impossible to tell who is right.

BAIT-UN-NIJAT IMAMBARA



Bait-un-Nijat's collapsed roof

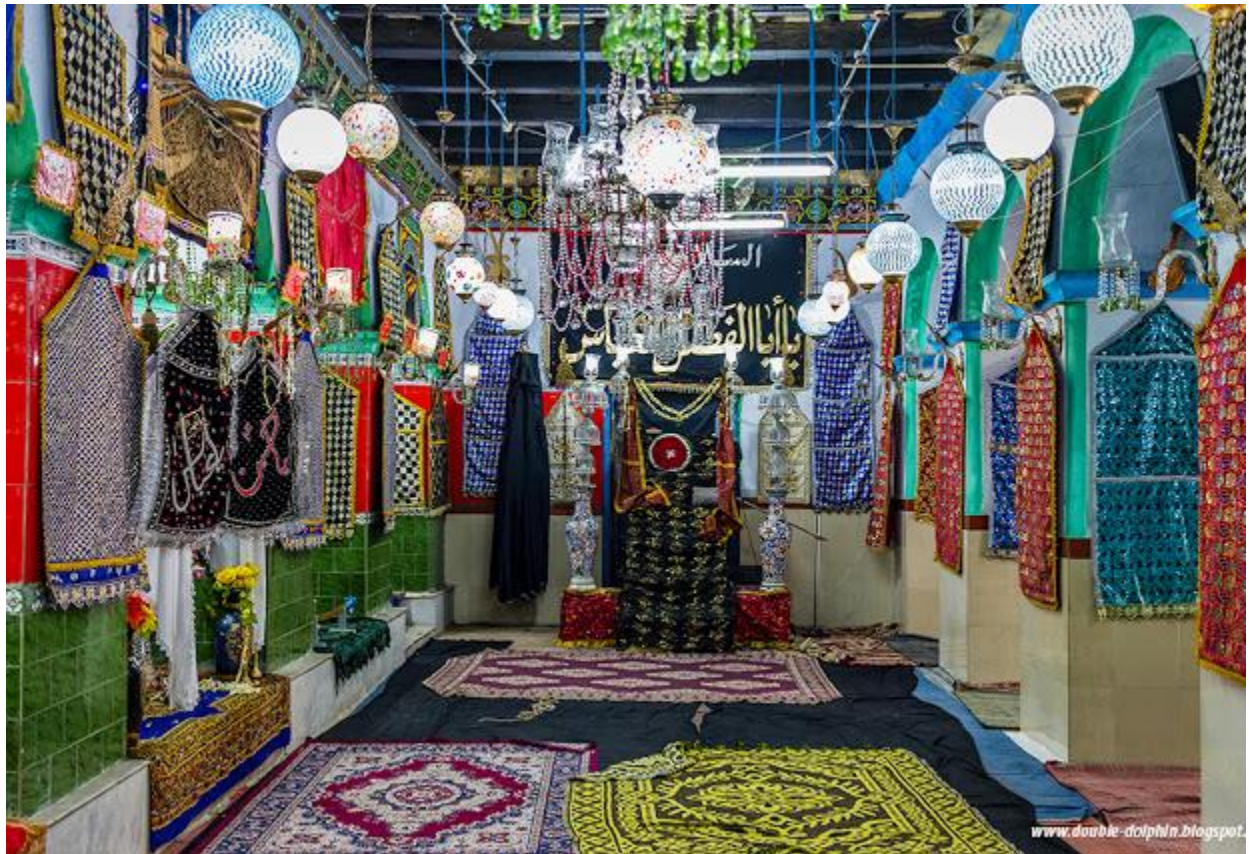
Bait-un-Nijat Imambara may be found on Garden Reach Road, near the Kamal Talkies cinema hall. The name Bait-un-Nijat means “house of relief” or “house of salvation”. An Imambara also referred to as a Hussainia, an Ashurkhana or Imambargah, is a congregation hall for Shia commemoration ceremonies, especially those associated with the Remembrance of Muharram. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah had Bait-un-Nijat Imambara built in 1863 to commemorate Muharram with his family members. It is a single-storey building, with scalloped arches, green-shuttered doors, and cast iron railings.



The abandoned Eastern corner

Unfortunately, it is in rather sad shape now. A portion of the roof has collapsed and the Eastern corner of the Imambara appears abandoned and unused. Some of the cast iron railing has broken off as well. Bait-un-Nijat once stood in the middle of a large open ground, but most of that has been taken over, the Nawab's descendants say illegally, by car parks and a sawmill. Today, it is difficult to imagine that this was once frequented by a royal, and only those who know about it, or like me, go out looking for it, will ever find Bait-un-Nijat.

QASR-UL-BUKA IMAMBARA



The dazzling interiors of Qasr-ul-Buka

The name Qasr-ul-Buka means “House of Mourning” and newspaper articles suggest that it is a “ladies’ imambara”, although the Nawab’s descendants say this is not so. Perhaps this reputation is thanks to the fact that Qasr-ul-Buka was built by Akhtar Mahal Sahiba, one of the Nawab’s two “nikah” wives who accompanied him from Lucknow. There is an old Hindi adage referring to the difference between an elephant’s magnificent tusks and its actual teeth - Qasr-ul-Buka is a great example of this. From the outside, while the rounded façade is interesting, it is dirty and decayed. But once you step inside, the sight that greets you is nothing short of stunning. While the proportions of the interior are modest, the chandeliers and other glassware, the fabulous wall-hangings and carpets, all create a dazzling effect. To one end of the room stands the minbar, a platform used by the preacher. On the opposite end is a small room containing one of those curiosities one only associates with Shia Islam - a replica tomb inside what appears to be a prison cell.



Zindan-e-Sakinah

To understand the significance of this one needs to know the history of Islam and the Shia-Sunni split. After the death of the Prophet (S.A.W.), a number of caliphates were established. The caliph, the head of the caliphate, was acknowledged as the successor to the Prophet (S.A.W.), and the leader of the Muslim community. When Yazid ibn Mu'awiya was appointed as the 2nd caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate by his father, the previous caliph, many objected as they found him unsuitable and thought the post of caliph ought not to be hereditary. Prominent among them was Husayn ibn 'Alī, the Prophet's grandson. To cut a long story short, things came to a head, a battle was fought in Karbala, in present day Iraq, and Husayn was killed and his family imprisoned in Damascus. When Sakinah, Husayn's daughter, a child of 5, began crying for her father in the dungeon, Yazid sent her her father's severed head and she died of shock and sorrow. She was buried inside the dungeon, and this is a replica of her grave, called a Zindan-E-Sakinah.

Although the exact date of construction is now difficult to verify, Qasr-ul-Buka is said to have been the first Imambara to have been constructed in Metiabruz. Like Bait-un-Nijat, parts of the property are being illegally occupied by a factory with a somewhat hostile owner. When my friend Sohail and I were taking photographs of the exterior of the building, he rushed out, demanding that we stop and even threatened to call the police! But we called his bluff and he retreated. Located near the intersection of Shyam Lal Lane and Garden Reach Road, the entrance to Qasr-ul-Buka is a little hard to find, thanks to the factory, but the Sibtainabad Trust, which now administers the Nawab's properties, through a slow process of litigation is taking back these properties and arranging for their upkeep. Lucknow's [Safed Baradari](#), built by Wajid Ali Shah and now used for wedding

receptions and similar events, was originally an Imambara and was also called Qasr-ul-Buka ([more about Safed Baradari here](#)).

SIBTAINABAD IMAMBARA



The Hamsa Hand and the Oudh royal coat of arms

The most well-known and most visible reminder of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in Metiabruz today is the Sibtainabad Imambara. Built in 1864, this is a replica of the Bada Imambara of Lucknow on a much smaller scale. Above the main entrance, the Oudh coat of arms may be seen and immediately above it is the symbol of an open palm. This is called the “hamsa hand”, which is a Shia symbol referring to the 5 most sacred people in Islam. A marble plaque proclaims - “Mausoleum of the last two Kings of Oudh - Wajid Ali Shah (1847 - 56), Birjis Qadr (1857 - 58)”. The dates, of course, refer to the period that they were on the throne of Oudh.



Sibtainabad's courtyard

Through the entrance one reaches a courtyard with stairs on two sides and what looks like an incomplete memorial on the right. The Nawab had planned to install plaques honouring his wife, Begum Hazrat Mahal, but passed away before the work could be completed and the memorial has remained frozen in time. To the left are rooms that were once used as offices by Prince Nayar Qudr when he was administering the Sibtainabad Trust. Apart from that are rooms accommodating staff and caretakers. Straight ahead lies the main hall of the Imambara. On the Eastern side of the hall, behind 3 scalloped arches, lies buried Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, the “last King in India”. Along with his tomb, this enclosure also accommodates a number of “tazias”, ceremonial tomb replicas which are taken out for Muharram processions.



Inside Sibtainabad Imambara

Images of the Nawab, verses of his poetry and images from Shia Islamic lore adorn the walls of the Imambara. A number of colourful chandeliers hang from the ceiling. The southern wall contains niches accommodating more tazias, which should look familiar to anyone who has visited Lucknow. On the western end of the room is a large display case containing a variety of memorabilia related to the Nawab, including a Qur'an said to have been copied by Wajid Ali Shah himself. Outside, near the incomplete memorial, on the wall is another marble plaque that says the following - "National Flag (*replacing the British flag, Union Jack*) was unfurled on this monument 27 years after Independence on 26th January 1975 by Mr. S. M. Abdullah, chairman, Garden Reach Municipality, organized by Prince Nayer Qadr, the newly appointed first nationalist trustee of King of Awadh's Trust." This relates to the battle of succession and of control over the Trust after the Nawab's death, and we shall be looking at it in detail later in the story. Sibtainabad Imambara remains active and is fairly well maintained, although, not too many Calcuttans would be aware of its location or significance.

BEGUM UMDA MAHAL IMAMBARA



Glass decorations on the walls of Begum Umda Mahal Imambara

Located immediately to the West of the Sibtainabad Imambara is the Imambara of Begum Umda Mahal, one of the wives the Nawab took when he was in Calcutta. While the exterior of the Imambara is decayed, and the entrance is concealed by a number of shops, the interiors are surprisingly beautiful, albeit heavily damaged. The walls were once completely covered with vegetal and floral patterns created by sticking pieces of coloured glass onto the plaster. Unfortunately, almost half of the patterns have simply fallen off from rain damage and have been smoothed over. But what remains is fascinating enough.



The mosque attached to the Imambara

Attached to the Begum Umda Mahal Imambara is a mosque where prayers happen regularly. Behind the imambara is what is known as a “chhoti Karbala” - an open field where Muhurram tazia processions usually terminate. Here too is another mosque which has been recently renovated. Both these properties are under the Sibtainabad Trust.

SHAHI ASTABAL



The mosque that stands where the Shahi Astabal once was

Like many other parts of the Nawab's estate, the Shahi Astabal, the royal stable, has disappeared entirely. But its former location is now marked by a mosque. Locals are of course able to point out the location of the stable almost immediately and the mosque that has taken its place is now called the Shahi Masjid, or Royal Mosque, but it wasn't built by members of the royal family. The interiors are large and fairly modern and contain a madrassa for religious instruction.

LOUDH ROYAL FAMILY BURIAL GROUND



The Oudh family burial ground

The Oudh Royal Family Burial Ground occupies a small plot of land on Karl Marx Sarani, adjacent to the high walls that guard 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. Entrance to the burial ground is not normally permitted, however since neither the gate nor the street-side wall is high, it is possible to have a look inside. The graves are plain and have simple tombstones. Interred here are Prince Asif Jah Gholam Abbas Jani Mirza, Qaisar Jah Saleh Ali Mirza, Afsar Jah, Anjuman Ara Amna Begum, Manzilat Ara Manjho Begum and other members of the Oudh Royal Family. Entangled in legal disputes for a very long time, and once almost cleared, some attempts are being made now, to keep the grounds free of weeds and bushes with the Sibtainabad Trust becoming more active.

THE DEATH OF THE NAWAB, THE SALE OF THE ESTATE AND THE BATTLE FOR SUCCESSION

Wajid Ali Shah died on the 21st of September, 1887 at 2:00 am. There is some speculation about the cause of death. The legend in Metizbruz is that he had been poisoned by one of his officers, by the name of Munsarimud-daula. But it should also be noted that the Nawab was suffering from an anal fistula for several months, which could have resulted in an infection, and eventually, death.

There had been reports of some looting on the Sultan Khana when the Nawab had died, but Colonel Prideaux, the government's agent to Wajid Ali Shah, had been able to maintain the peace quite effectively. But the challenge now was how to dispose of the property of the late king, since the government was adamant that the title of king ended with Wajid Ali Shah. The Nawab's furniture was auctioned off. His vast personal library was transferred to the Board of Examiners, who returned some pieces of little value to the Sibtainabad Imambara. From his wardrobe, clothes that he had actually worn, were handed over to Prince Qamar Qadr, who was considered his heir, while new and unused clothes were auctioned. The animals in the Nawab's zoo were also auctioned off, but his jewellery would prove to be much more difficult. While the government considered jewellery to be part of the Nawab's estate and only on loan to the wives and princesses, they thought of them as gifts to be kept in perpetuity and it took some persuasion for the government to get its way. Ultimately, much of the late Nawab's estate would end up with shipping companies. The port commissioners would get some part of it, and by the 1890's, the Sultan Khana had been acquired by Bengal Nagpur Railway. Today large parts of the estate are occupied by jute mills, Hindustan Lever, C.E.S.C., and I.T.C.

After the Mutiny of 1857, the Nawab's divorced first wife, Begum Hazrat Mahal had escaped to Nepal, with her son, Birjis Qadr. Birjis was Wajid Ali Shah's eldest son and had been crowned king by the rebels. In his absence, the government in Calcutta announced the next in line, Qamar Qadr as the Nawab's successor and inheritor of his property. On 7th April 1879, Begum Hazrat Mahal passed away in Kathmandu. 13 years later, Birjis Qadr would return to Metiabruz. He has already been pardoned in 1887, on the occasion of Queen Victoria Jubilee, for the "crime" of rebellion against the colonial government. In Calcutta, Birjis put in a claim that he was the eldest surviving son of the King and demanded a pension equal to two-thirds of the allowance allotted to the king. Then, one evening, Birjis and his family were invited to dinner by one of his many step brothers. His descendants allege that at this dinner, he was poisoned. His eldest son Khurshid Qadr and daughter Jamal Ara Begum and two friends accompanying him also died that night.

Birjis Qadr's wife, Mehtab Ara Begum, a granddaughter of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, had not attended the dinner that night as she was pregnant. Thus she survived. Four months after Birjis Qadr's death, Mehar Qadr was born, on Christmas eve, 1893. For many years, the family kept a low profile, because they feared they too would be murdered. In 1901, the Sibtainabad Trust was established to administer the Nawab's properties by Qamar Qadr descendants. The following year began the legal battle between them and Mehar Qadr, which was to last for 73 years, ending in victory for Mehar Qadr. And so it came to pass, that on 26th January 1975, 28 long years after India became independent, the Indian tricolour was raised at the Sibtainabad Imambara

for the very first time. The Sibtainabad Trust has since been headed by Mehar's sons, Nayyer Qadr and Anjum Qadr and now by Kaukab Qadr.



Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's grave

DID WAJID ALI SHAH BRING BIRYANI TO CALCUTTA?

Ask any biryani lover in Calcutta who brought the dish to the city and they will say it was Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. In Calcutta, this spicy meat and rice dish is said to have entered poorer homes, who couldn't afford the large amount of meat that the dish demanded and therefore added potatoes and eggs, and rather like Fellini's jump-cuts, an improvisation for purposes of economy became a style. To date, that potato and boiled egg continues to be a signature of Calcutta Biryani. But Humayun Mirza, one of the Nawab's descendants is adamant, "Nawab Wajid Ali Shah never brought anything called biryani to Calcutta. What does that word even mean? We never call it that at home. It is simply called pulao. There is gosht pulao with chunks of meat and for those who have trouble chewing, there is keema pulao, made with rice and minced meat".

The word biryani, it would seem stems from the Persian word "beryaan", which means "to fry". This is said to be a reference to the custom of frying rice in ghee before boiling it, which the Persians apparently did. But that would mean the Persian dish was significantly different from the Indian biryani, which is said to have been invented in the city of Lucknow during Nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah's time. So how did the dish come to be

known as biryani when the family that brought it to Calcutta called it pulao? Are we perhaps missing some links in the evolution of the dish? There are suggestions that the origins of biryani may have been in Buddhist India and that ancient Buddhists cooked rice by frying it first. While biryani continues to be the most popular one-dish meal in most of India, its exact origins are still shrouded in mystery and while the people of Calcutta would still credit Nawab Wajid Ali Shah with bringing biryani to Calcutta, his descendants are certain that it wasn't him.



Shahi Masjid

BEYOND BIRYANI - NAWAB WAJID ALI SHAH'S LASTING CONTRIBUTIONS TO CALCUTTA

But beyond biryani, Wajid Ali Shah's lasting contributions to Calcutta's culture are overlooked. From Lucknow, along with his followers, the Nawab also brought the Lucknow tradition of pigeon-raising to Calcutta. Said to be the downfall of the rich and famous, raising, training and often racing pigeons, known as "kabootar" in Hindi/Urdu is something one still sees in Metiabruz. Also forgotten is the fact that tailoring is something the Nawab brought with him. Hindus, back in the day, would be happy to wear unstitched cloth. Neither the saree nor the dhoti required tailors. The Brits had their own European master tailors to create suits and dresses for them. But with the Nawab came Lucknow-style fine tailoring. Skilled at creating the elaborate costumes that Lucknow's finest

wore, these tailors would go on to find employment under Europeans and would ultimately set up shops of their own. To date, the finest tailors in Calcutta are Muslim, and the best of the best may be found in the Metiabruz area, where one can get suits tailored at rock bottom prices.



The connection to Lucknow is still strong in Metiabruz



Kites being made

The other great Lucknow tradition which Nawab Wajid Ali Shah brought with him was kite-flying. In the Nawab's entourage, there had been kite-makers and as the pastime caught on with Calcuttans, they set up shop in the Metiabruz area from where their descendants still operate. In Bengali Hindu households, it was once traditional to fly kites on the day of Vishwakarma Puja. But as Bengalis in their posh, air-conditioned flats have lost touch with their traditions, the number of kites in Calcutta's skies has fallen drastically. Metiabruz still holds on to the old ways, and on a fine day, hundreds of colourful kites fill the sky and cheers of onlookers and participants echo through the lanes. Kites are now serious business in Metiabruz and shops export kites worth lakhs of rupees every year.



A kite shop on "Kachchi Sadak"

Also still in existence after all these years is the paan shop of the family that once served paan to the Nawab. Ramesh Kumar Saini now runs the Motilal Nawab Pan Shop, named after Motilal Srimali, his father. Hindus from Lucknow, Saini says his family still owns property in Lucknow and they visit often, although he has grown up mostly in Calcutta. A well-read man, Saini is aware of the history of Metiabruz and can rattle off the names of books that have been written about the area and can even give you the page numbers where his shop has been mentioned. The shop, at the corner of Paharpur Road aka Kachchi

Sadak and Garden Reach Road, has multiple pictures of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. It was vandalized in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition but has managed to continue on.



Ramesh Kumar Saini at his Pan Shop

CONCLUSION - WHEN THE TIGERS BROKE FREE

On the 6th of January, 1879, on what must have been a cold winter morning, workers who were preparing to start work at the Botanic Gardens were startled by a tiger “swimming in the river a few yards from the shore”. The tiger would enter the Botanic Gardens only moments later, and would severely wound its curator, the German Adolph Biermann. Beaters managed to chase the tiger out of the garden and into a neighbouring sugarcane field where it severely wounded Lance Corporal Sheikh Azeem. Two days later, after it had and killed two cows, the tiger was finally shot dead by Howrah’s Joint Magistrate, Alfred Augusta Wace, from the roof of a building in the village of Puddapukur (*not to be confused with the neighbourhood of Puddapukur in South Calcutta*). It was immediately clear to everyone where the tiger (*which turned out to be a tigress*), had come from. Garden Reach was less than half a mile directly across the river from the Botanic Gardens (*which is how it got its name*) and it was well known that Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was keeping tigers and other “dangerous carnivora” there, although Europeans were not allowed to visit the zoo. On the morning of the 6th of January, a tiger and a tigress had escaped from the King’s zoo. Superintendent Hill of the Calcutta Police had rushed to the

spot and managed to shoot down the tiger, but the tigress had managed to get away, and shortly afterwards, struck down the unfortunate Biermann.

A little over a month later, on the 17th of February, a leopard escaped from the King's zoo and was shot dead again in the Botanic Gardens. The government had had quite enough this time. Germans living in Calcutta had demanded financial compensation for Biermann and with Wajid Ali Shah's agent Mowbray Thomson, himself one of the only survivors of the siege of Cawnpore, painted the disturbing picture of a tiger interrupting a British family picnic at the Botanic Gardens, the government formed a committee to periodically inspect the Nawab's zoo and keep things under control.



Exterior of the Qasr-ul-Buka Imambara

The incident highlights the peculiar contrast of Garden Reach, one that is still found today. During the Nawab's time, it was a piece of old India in the heart of modern Bengal. Today, it remains one of Calcutta's only Muslim neighbourhoods which is primarily Shia, as opposed to Sunni. For many years, it was the only place in Calcutta where one could get smuggled foreign goods, particularly electronics, even during India's socialist-style command economy days. For many years, Garden Reach has also been considered one of the most crime-prone areas of Calcutta. This perception is reinforced by incidents such as the brutal murder of Vinod Kumar Mehta, a 35-year-old Deputy Commissioner of Police of the Port Division of Calcutta Police, on 18th March 1984. Mehta had gone into Fatehpur Village Road with his bodyguard Mukhtar Ali to quell a riot. His charred body was discovered in a gutter later that day, while that of Mukhtar was found in the next lane. The post-mortem report found as many as 22 injuries on Mehta's body from iron

rods and knives. 29 years later, on 11th February 2013, as a students' union election at Hari Mohan Ghosh College in Garden Reach snowballed into all-out war, another police officer, Sub Inspector Tapas Chowdhury was shot dead on live television by a known criminal by the name of Sheikh Suhan. In the intervening years, there have been numerous cases of rioting and political violence in Garden Reach, including in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992.

But to be fair, the ordinary tourist or passer-by is usually left unmolested even during troubles. I have been exploring Garden Reach and Metiabruz for over a year, and I have faced nothing but gracious behaviour. But even I would avoid Garden Reach, Metiabruz or Kidderpore on election days, for example. In the public mind, curiosity is slowly replacing fear, as more people become aware of Metiabruz and Garden Reach's Nawabi heritage thanks to explorers and bloggers. Corporates have recently got into the act with ITC Shonar, one of Calcutta's leading 5-star hotels organizing a heritage walk of Metiabruz and organizing a Metiabruz Food Festival. In India, the first people to realize that heritage could mean good business were the Marwaris of Rajasthan. So far, the descendants of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah have failed to capitalize on their heritage. Not just buildings, even rare photographs of the Garden Reach estate during the days of the Nawab, have been slowly decaying in personal collections. The renewed interest I have seen in the last year is refreshing, but it remains to be seen if that grows into anything more than a flash in the pan.

- *By Deepanjan Ghosh and Shaikh Sohailuddin Siddiqui*

GPS COORDINATES OF MONUMENTS IN GARDEN REACH

- Oudh Royal Family Burial Ground - 22° 32'35.4"N 88° 17'43.0"E
- Sibtainabad Imambara - 22° 32'56.9"N 88° 17'03.2"E
- Begum Umda Mahal Imambara - 22° 32'56.9"N 88° 17'02.1"E
- Bait-un-Nijat Imambara - 22° 32'56.8"N 88° 17'18.7"E
- Qasr-ul-Buka Imambara - 22° 32'53.6"N 88° 17'22.9"E
- Begum Masjid - 22° 32'56.4"N 88° 16'52.8"E
- Shahi Masjid - 22° 32'57.8"N 88° 17'16.4"E
- Shahi Astabal (*now Mosque*) - 22° 32'46.9"N 88° 17'33.3"E

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