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Eighteenth Century Lucknow: Eye-witness Account by a Persian Traveller

The following account is the English Translation* of selected portion from the Persian travelogue "Tuhfatul-Aalam" by Abdul Lateef Khan Shoshtree who had visited various countries of the world, including India, between 1792 and 1796. The travelogue had been translated into Urdu (Unpublished) by (Late) Prof. Shah Abdus Salam. Professor Salam was a noted scholar of Arabic and Persian. His scholarship had been acknowledged by the President of India and UNESCO by conferring on him the prestigious President's Award and the UNESCO Sharjah Prize. The Urdu translation by Prof. Salam has been used here as source.

During his visit to India, Abdul Lateef Khan Shoshtree visited various well known cities of the country and reached Lucknow on the invitation of Nawab Asif-ud-daula in the year 1795. Starting from Calcutta, he reached the city of Nawabs through the Banaras (Varanasi) and Jaunpur. Shoshtree received a warm welcome in the city and he stayed with Allama Tafazzul Husain Khan and Syed Mohammad Jafar for about a year.

The travelogue, Tuhfatul Aalam provides a detailed eye-witness description of Lucknow. On the one hand, we find Shoshtree describing the life style, behavior, etiquettes, cultural and social condition of the city of that time; on the other hand the writer gives a vivid account of the political condition of the Kingdom of Awadh and the life style of the rulers in particular. The travelogue was first published by Shaukatul Islam, Hyderabad in the later half of the nineteenth century. Shoshtree writes -

Lucknow is one of the big cities of Awadh and an ancient habitat of India. According to the Hindu historians, the city was built thousands of years ago. It is big and widely spread with no gates or towers. Nor does it have any rampart, fort or prefecture of fortresses for its protection. Most of the cities of this country are like that, without any defensive fortress, be it Calcutta, Murshidabad, Azimabad or Banaras. Anybody can enter the city from any direction. Owing to its size it is a really difficult task to construct any kind of defensive wall around the city. To guess the total area of the city of Lucknow is also not possible. It is located at a distance of thirty one point something from the Equator. The air is fresh and moderate. Very often in the summer season due to extremely hot winds people who can afford and the ones of refined taste make their own Khas Khanas to save themselves from the scorching heat of the sun. People build large and airy rooms with many doors and these

doors have grills, which are filled with Khas (a kind of fragrant grass) and water is sprinkled on it continuously by a fountain that is attached to the Mashk (a leather bag for storing water). The air passing through these doors turns cold and fragrant. Thus during the hot weather people take great pains to keep themselves safe from the harshness of summer. Inside the room, one feels so cold that one cannot sleep without covering oneself with a chadar (cloth sheet). Rich people have their Khas Khanas fixed with small channels of water line and at every door of these rooms small fountains are installed and the water falls by itself on these Khas covered doors. There is no need of waterman or attendant to come over and sprinkle water. It provides a mesmerizing view.

Varieties of cabbages and marsh-melons are found in the city and they are better, both in quality as well as taste, as compared to what is found in the other cities.

As the builders of this city were of Rai Family (Hindu Prince) who were not deftly skilled, the city is not levelled properly. Some parts of the city are at a height where as there are areas which are at steep slopes. Often we find particular portion of a house is at such a height from the courtyard that it is located behind the first floor of the house and the rest of the house is at such a low level that one has to use staircase to come down to that level. Streets, alleys, lanes , by lanes and markets are also similarly located at different heights.

In the court of Nawab Asif-ud-daula, ice is available in plenty throughout the year and Governors and the relatives of the Nawab get their share of ice from the state government. For making ice, in an area, on the outskirts of the city is first leveled up then paddy chaff or barley chaff is spread on it. On it is arranged very thin and delicate earthen pots. For every ten pots there is an attendant on duty. He has a large metal pot filled with luke-warm water. Before the break of dawn, when the morning breeze blows, the attendant drops a little of that slightly warm water into those Koozas (mud-posts). As soon as this warm water drips into the pot, it gets frozen and this way about one and a half inches of ice get stored into those pots which is later taken out and crushed.

I have heard that under the reign of Nawab Asif-ud-daula, in the suburbs of the city, these ice-makers who are about 1200 in number are employed in Shahjanabad (Lucknow). The well-off people arrange cold water for the ones who cannot afford to have ice in summer by digging special type of wells. These wells are dug down to the level of the underground water and then zinc plates are fixed. Zinc has the quality of keeping the water cool. In winter season they fill these wells with water and seal the opening of the well with stones making it air tight. During the summer season, they open these wells and use the cold water throughout the season. In Lucknow, a good number of Qazalbashes (Turk soldiers) lived

and served the government.

Nawab Asif-ud-daula Bahadur Yahya Khan, not very talented in the affairs of administration, was unable to discharge his duties as a ruler well. The administrative affairs were carried out with the help of Englishmen. Nevertheless he was a very generous man and helped the poor and needy of his kingdom. For him all the treasure was like piles of grass and that is why none was deprived from his generosity. He has built massive inns (sarais) for the pilgrims and visitors of his state. These inns were always occupied by the visitors and every occupant got daily allowance from the government according to his status. Generosity will always be associated with his (Nawab) name and people, till the Day of Judgment, will mention his name for generosity and will pray for the remission of his sins.

Because of his love and faith in the pious Imams and because of his efforts which he made regarding the observance of Muharram , he got constructed a Tazia Khana (Imambara) and next to it a mosque. He spent a huge amount of money in constructing these buildings. There is no match to these constructions throughout the country.

I have seen this Tazia Khana and the mosque personally. These are one of the wondrous monuments of the world. There are fourteen pillars in it and in each arch there is a place reserved for the grave of each of the fourteen Imams. The spot of each grave has been decorated with pure silver. In all

there are about four hundred to five hundred glass lamps and about two thousand small lamps and candle sticks with white camphor candles which adorn the place. All kinds of clocks made of gold and golden decoration pieces are placed here and there inside the monument. Six huge mirrors are placed on the walls and the doors. The light of innumerable lamps when falls on these mirrors, the reflection becomes manifolds and the whole building appears to be a mountain of luster and light. Three hundred thousand rupees are granted by the government for the expenses of the ceremonies on the ten days of Muharram and if some money is left, the poor get their share.

I have seen three hundred thousand well-written, neat and clean books in the library of Nawab Asif-ud-daula and for every hundred book there is a caretaker. The collection include book of Persian, Arabic, English, Prose, Poetry, History, Poetical collections and books on other sciences. At the end of the books there are well written pieces of poetry by famous calligraphers. There are a lot of paintings by the known painters of England and Rome. I saw numerous volumes on jurisprudence, commentaries on the Holy Quran, Islamic law and Islamic science in his library.

Hand written volumes of Shia fiqah is the handwriting of the author were also there. I came to know by an employee of the library that there are around seven hundred books of such kind. After the downfall of Tymore ruler, their total collection of

books came under the possession of Nawab Asif-ud-daula. It was in the temperament of the Nawab that he respected and honoured everyone equally. This quality of his becomes all the more evident in his dealings with the religious leaders; Sayeds and pilgrims , irrespective of class were given equal importance and respect and often offered them seat next to himself.

It was my third day when I was called by Nawab Wazir (Asif-ud-daula), I went to him with Khan Tafazzul Husain. He treated me with great respect and inquired about my health. All the physicians of the court were called and were directed to treat me with every care. Nawab Sahab suggested me to take a walk daily in any of the government gardens. About four hundred well-carpeted gardens full of flora and fauna were there in and outside the city. Each one was unique in itself. There were British farmers and Chinese florist in his kingdom who were always kept busy in beautifying the jungles and grafting the plants and trees. In one of those gardens which was known as Asif Bagh, I saw that there were some trees, not more than the height of one foot, loaded with fruits. Nawab Asif-ud-daula was very popular among his subjects that on the day of his death there was a great commotion in the city and people compared the day of the death of the Nawab with doomsday. On that day, every one, be it man or woman, was in great grief and full of tears. It appears as if the city itself was weeping. Asif-ud-daula was buried in the same Imambara that he built and his adopted

son Wazir Ali Khan was crowned the Nawab in succession. Due to his tender age, mean temperament and incapability to rule, he got in the company of vile and base friends and started taking advices from them in the administrative affairs of the state. Cruelty towards the innocent countrymen and wastage of the royal treasury soon became a common practice. Khan Tafazzul Husain, who was his deputy, and some other British officers objected and tried to stop him and even suspended certain of his powers in various matters. Wazir Ali Khan did not like these objections and suspension of his personal powers. Tafazzul Husain, witnessing such a condition, considered it wise to resign from the post of deputy. Soon the condition deteriorated so much that even the Company's counselor stopped coming to the court and sent the report of his estrangement and disobedience and the resignation of the deputy to Calcutta. It was at that time that Wazir Ali Khan, like late Nawab Asif-ud-daula, wanted to have discussion with me (Shooshtree) in privacy. He wanted to know, who were his true friends, what was the demand of the time and what consequences would it have. I told him everything that suited the situation in order to save the state. Neither did he pay any heed to my advice nor did he take any preventive measure which resulted in very difficult time for him in the days to come. When the Governor General came to know about the prevailing situation of the state, he, without any delay, along with some British officers, rushed to Lucknow from Calcutta. The

British knew that still there were many opulent and dissolute subjects and many army men who had their loyalty towards Wazir Ali Khan so instead of taking any step in haste they decided to hatch a secret plan to overthrow the Nawab. Had they chosen to get into open war with the state, it would have resulted in a civil war. Many innocent lives would have been lost and immense royal treasure would have been wasted. The Governor General, very cunningly won the confidence of Wazir Ali Khan, making him believe that there is no chance by which the British could be doubted.

Very soon, the Governor General made an excuse of his illness and expressed his wish to spend some time outside the city. Staying six miles away from the city, in Bibipur, he started calling the officers and soldiers of the Company there and hatched a conspiracy along with the mother of Asif-ud-daula, who was a wise woman, and noblemen of the state, who were not satisfied with the state of affairs. Feeling the closeness of these people with the Governor General, Wazir Ali Khan became a little doubtful and himself visited Bibipur where he was well received by the British officers and the general himself. Wazir Ali Khan's visit to Bibipur became a routine affair and the cunning mannerisms of the British people relieved him of any kind of doubt towards them. He became confident to such an extent that the army personnel deployed in and on the outskirts of the city were also relinquished from their duty.

One day the Governor said to Wazir Ali Khan, "I have an intention to visit Britain therefore I wish to inspect the army of the Company which is in the area and I want you also to inspect the parade. In reality the army in this area is directly under your command." He became happy on this proposal. I was there watching them with pity for the fraudulent manner and malice with which the British were handling the situation. I was concerned about their intentions but remained patient. I felt pity for him and those who were with him. The army of the Company had reached there with British officers. By this time the Governor General had already won the confidence of the few remaining supporters of Wazir Ali Khan.

Wazir Ali Khan was always busy in drinking and merry making and was unaware of these developments. The army marched in front of the Governor and every officer of the army was patronized with a golden robe of honour by the Nawab. Saadat Ali Khan, the real brother of Asif-ud-daula was summoned from Banaras and when the British were confident that Wazir Ali Khan is all alone, without any supporters, the army was ordered to surround him and take him into custody. Learning the situation, Wazir Khan became very frightened and tried to go back to the city but he was stopped by the army and forced to return to the camp. He wanted to call his friends and supporters but all of them abstained doing so by giving one excuse or the other. Even his personal servants were also not

with him. He realized that nothing could be done now and that the destiny has something else in store for him.

He put hands on his head and wept for a while

Cruelty and injustice results in weeping and what else*

He passed the night in the same condition. The Governor General got it announced by the drummers that "By the order of the Nawab Asif-ud-daula's mother, Wazir Ali Khan has been dismissed and now Nawab Saadat Ali Khan will take over the charge of the state. All lords and noblemen and people of all ranks should have trust in the kingdom and consider Wazir Ali Khan out of power."

Wazir Ali Khan was horrified at Saadat Ali Khan's rise to power. He thought it better to surrender before the Governor and get imprisoned by the Company. He came on his own to take shelter in the house of the Governor. At that time too the Governor gave him due respect and came out of his house to receive him.

*A Persian Couplet -

Dast ba-sar zad va lakhte girist
Haasile bedaas bajuz giry chiist

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