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## The Deposition of Wazir Ali Khan of Awadh: Understanding the Dynamics of Colonial Interventions (1797-98)

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### Abstract

*The demise of Nawab Asaf-ud-daula on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1797, brought Awadh's state of affairs in a complete flux. Lumsden, then English Resident at Lucknow, without approbation of upper echelon authorities at Calcutta, took the risk of declaring the deceased Nawab's eldest son Wazir Ali Khan as his successor in spite of the fact that he was cognizant of the controversy regarding his low birth origin. This sudden decision got Council's approbation by passing a resolution on 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1797, but in December, a volte-face was witnessed in the Company's policy. Governor General, who previously so firmly supported the claim of Wazir Ali to the extent of using force, suddenly conducted an enquiry himself on the issue birth spuriousness of Wazir Ali and soon, within four months, Nawab was deposed. The paper deals in detail with the events and contemporary changes of the concerned time period and attempts to study profoundly the reasons behind the volte-face of the English and the determining factors of the colonial policy regarding succession and deposition of the Awadh Nawab. The research is based on the interpretation of the correspondence and minutes of the principle figures involved in this policy related matters from Fort William to Lucknow. It studies the archival sources mainly consulted from National Archives of India, New Delhi, Regional Archives, Prayagraj and UP State Archives, Lucknow.*

### Keywords

Asaf-ud-daula, Awadh, Banaras, Sir John Shore, Lumsden, Saadat Ali Khan, Wazir Ali.

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## **The Deposition of Wazir Ali Khan of Awadh: Understanding the Dynamics of Colonial Interventions (1797-98)**

Awadh, also known as granary of India, always played significant role in shaping the nation's history due to its strategic importance. Being located in the proximity of Delhi, maintaining sway over this fertile region of *doab* was one of the mandatory requisite for the English. During the eighteenth century, when English Company was still in its formative phase of building the empire, the politics of Awadh directly catches the coveted eyes of these foreign traders, who commenced active interference into internal affairs since the battle of Buxar. They were cognizant that being a buffer state between Delhi and Company's territories, any political flux in that region would call for repercussions in Bengal territory sooner or later. This high-handed interference into Awadh internal affairs was triggered with the demise of Nawab Asaf-ud-daula and the issue of succession that was raised immediately after the death of the Nawab on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1797. The next four months was a period of complete political flux where the decision over the legal heir to the musnud was determined by the vested interests of the Company.

The demise of Asaf-ud-daula was not the first time that English interfered, infact it started during his lifetime itself, when Governor General Sir John Shore visited Lucknow in January 1797 and appointed Tafazzul Hussain as the Chief Minister of the Nawab much against his will and choice Almas Ali Khan. Almas Ali was an able administrator, who proved his mettle through his work. Sleeman appreciates the work of Almas Ali Khan in his words, "*He held for about forty years districts yielding to the Oudh Government an annual revenue of about eighty lakhs of rupees (₹800,000). During all this time he kept the people secure in life and property, and as happy as people in such a state of society can be; and the whole country under his charge was, during his lifetime, a garden*" (Irwin, 1880: 98-99).<sup>1</sup> The Nawab was not even free to make appointments of ministers of his choice. This high-handed interference multiplied to a tremendous degree after the demise of Asaf-ud-daula, when the most pertinent question

for the Company suddenly emerged for which they were not prepared: Who's next?

This question of succession became an issue of much more political import as it happened at a time when Company was preparing for impending invasion of Zaman Shah. Though this invasion was confined to Punjab in 1797, but the apprehensions of the English were strong, especially at a time when they were involved into hostile relations and military confrontations with so many Indian powers. Sir John Shore mentioned his reflections to the Board on the volatile political situation on 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1797, "*I should certainly conclude that he had for object the Invasion and Plunder of the Dominions of the Nabob Vizier or the Company, and the following considerations then...Whether the combined Forces of the Vizier, and the Company are sufficient for their Protection; if not, whether a Junction of both with the Mahratha, Troops would afford that security, and, thirdly, whether it would be prudent to Detach the Forces of the Company and the Vizier beyond the Jamuna.*" Shore further expressed the possibility of Tipu Sultan decision to commence hostilities against the Company in this situation and so the Company must ponder over the use of southern detachment and asked the Board members to consider whether these detachments would be required more for their services in the northern provinces or in south.<sup>2</sup>

Shore was incessantly receiving intelligence regarding the military plans of Zaman Shah and his apprehensions were based on these reports. William Palmer, Resident at Sindhia's Court, wrote to Shore expressing confidently that the circumstances make him suspicious of Shah's views to be more extensive than mere expulsion of Maratha and that his expedition was planned in concert with Tipu Sultan "for the ultimate purpose of depressing the British Power in India." *There were also reports that French people were approaching Zaman Shah in his durbar indicating towards their endeavours to form an anti-English confederacy. The Resident concluded his report with the statement that though his conjectures might be overstrained, but in this political context, it was important to have "unremitting attention" on Zaman Shah strategies and military movements and also "the conduct of the Native Governments in Hindostan."*<sup>3</sup> The very next day Palmer wrote another letter to Shore that Zaman Shah had strong resentment against the Vizier and the wealth and capital of Awadh may excite his avidity.<sup>4</sup> By January, Company had asked Nawab Asaf-ud-daula to make preparations and adopt measures

necessary for the protection of this territory in light of the success and speedy approach of Zaman Shah's army.<sup>5</sup>

In such a volatile political situation and escalating danger of invasion, the demise of Nawab was a matter of great concern for the English that calls their immediate attention where the decision was to be determined keeping in view the situation on the north-west frontier, the high possibility of invasion on Nawab's territory penetrating as far as Banaras, due to its plethora of wealth.<sup>6</sup> Lumsden, who was the Resident at Lucknow, immediately visited the palace as soon as he came to know about the demise of Nawab. Initially, he deemed it proper to issue orders in the name of Nawab's mother till the decision of the successor was determined; but soon he realised possibility of a greater risk of an insurrection throughout Awadh turning the political milieu conducive for the enemies. The exigencies of the situation was too high that within few hours of the demise of Asaf-ud-daula, parwanas were expedited to all the amils announcing the succession of Wazir Ali, who received *Khil'at* of Investiture from the Begum. Soon, his succession was proclaimed throughout Lucknow on the same day. According to Lumsden, his decision of successor was determined by his discussion with the Begum and minister Tafazzul Hussain over the issue and assuming that it would be generally acceptable among all persons of prominence. In his words, "*no one could be found in every respect so eligible as Mirza Vizier Ali, who had long been acknowledged as the eldest son of the deceased.*"<sup>7</sup>

Though the high probability of intrigues and insurrection was the main cause behind the Resident's chosen course of action regarding the succession issue, even without any instructions from the Board in Calcutta, but his choice of successor was more determined by the vested interests of the Company. In spite of having no authority to take such pertinent decision as that of succession without the approbation of the upper echelon authorities, Lumsden was still confident as it goes in line with the Company's political and commercial interests in the region of Awadh and gives them control over the executive powers. It seems here apposite to quote these lines directly from the letter of Lumsden, where his words speak everything loudly and overtly,

*"I have been assured repeatedly by Vizier Ali, both in the course of yesterday evening and this morning that his sole dependence is on the protection and support of your Government, and that he will do*

*nothing without my approbation and that of Toffusal Hussein Khan on these declarations...The executive department will remain entirely in the hands of the Minister, and may be regulated as you shall hereafter suggest...Altho' very young and unqualified for taking any part in the administration of affairs, his disposition is mild and he will be easily advised, at least for the present..."* Lumsden had also clearly mentioned in the letter that it was generally understood that Wazir Ali was not the son of the deceased Nawab.<sup>8</sup>

Soon, all these proceedings of Lumsden got approbation by the minute of Governor General passed by the Board. In this minute, Governor General addressed the English approach towards the issue of spuriousness of Wazir Ali's birth. He accepted the fact that though Wazir Ali was born in harem and not the son of Asaf-ud-daula, but he was publicly acknowledged by the Nawab as his son, received suitable education and was invested with the office of minister. Moreover, it was beyond the English capabilities to investigate it and Wazir Ali was always seen as heir apparent.<sup>9</sup> According to Shore, the decision to support the claim of Wazir Ali was mainly because he was the ostensible successor, heir apparent and the concurrence of the principle natives at Lucknow including elder Begum, who publicly presented *Khil'at* of Investiture that displayed no objection on the birth issue and claim of succession.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding the birth spuriousness issue, the approach of Governor General was very clear in the sense that if it's politically convenient for the Company, then the succession of Wazir Ali must be supported and all issues raised in contrary to the decision must be denied in toto. He opined in Board, *"...we can have no hesitation in acknowledging the succession of Vizier Ali, and of determining that it shall be supported. If any doubt could be entertained of the propriety of his determination, it would still be highly imprudent to declare them. The Preservation of the Peace and tranquility of Oude indispensably require that the administration of Vizier Ali, should be acknowledged and supported by this Government. He has the ostensible Right of succession and we have no right when any grounds before us to dispute it, or to support claims and objections, which have not been preferred."* The Board further instructed Agent to Governor General at Banaras to oppose every endeavour of Saadat Ali Khan, to proceed outside Banaras without previous sanctions of the Government and also authorised him to use force, if required.<sup>11</sup>

The claim of Wazir Ali on the throne of Awadh that was “unexceptionable” in the eyes of Lumsden and “*ostensible right*” in the words of Shore, soon changed. Within two-three days of the demise of Asaf-ud-daula, Lumsden was visited by the sons of Shuja-ud-daula in Lucknow where they displayed their fidelity, but refused to offer customary *nazar* to the new Nawab due to his low origin that was known to all.<sup>12</sup> On the basis of these reports by the Resident, Shore instructed Lumsden on 30<sup>th</sup> September to conduct a secret investigation on the issue of birth spuriousness of Wazir Ali with all circumspection and to report about the possibility of alteration in the resolution passed by the Board that was open to reconsideration. Shore made this a point to confirm that this enquiry must be held surreptitiously and was not meant to be disclosed as he was apprehensive of anarchical state that Marathas would not fail to take advantage of.<sup>13</sup> Only minister Tafazzul Hussain was cognizant of this enquiry.<sup>14</sup> On the same day when Governor General asked for the enquiry, he received letters from Nawab Wazir Ali,<sup>15</sup> Begum<sup>16</sup> and Minister Tafazzul Hussain Khan<sup>17</sup> that made Shore to reconsider his instructions of enquiry. These letters were in extremely submissive language, where Begum accepted the claim of Wazir Ali. The new Nawab writes, “...*he (Asaf-ud-daula) rested his hopes of prosperity and welfare present and to come, and the ... (one word not clear) arrangement and power of his Hereditary Government upon the greatness of your favor and regard; This indeed from its extreme publicity needs not to be repeated, it is clear as is Sun and apparent as the Mon, and celebrated throughout the four quarter of the Globe.*” These three letters were laid before the Board members on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1797 and a Minute was passed by the Governor General, where he reasserted the Company’s decision and reconfirmed the original resolution passed by the Board on supporting Wazir Ali’s claim as the successor. The Minute further suspended the instructions of enquiry given to Resident Lucknow on 30<sup>th</sup> September stating the reason that such secret enquiry, due to its nature, must be unsatisfactory and would be a discredit to the Company. It was passed in strong terms that the succession of Wazir Ali to be supported against all endeavours to molest it to the extent that the Commanding Officers of Kanpur and Fatehgar were instructed to take prepare the troops to take the field in shortest notice.<sup>18</sup> A day after the Minute was passed in favour of Wazir Ali, Shore assured him the support of the Company in the same way as it was towards his predecessors.<sup>19</sup>

Though Governor General suspended the enquiry, but the Minute that was passed was never meant to end all its possibility of reopening the case in future. In order to identify the subtle underlying currents behind the decision to withhold the enquiry, it is apt to mention here the Minute of Commander-in-Chief that was laid and approved by the Board on 9<sup>th</sup> October, 1797. This Minute gives briefly an exact picture of the intensity of military exigencies in light of Zaman Shah invasion. The Minute clearly mentions that though the present force was enough to cope up with the invasion on the fields, but Company had to rely on Nawab's troops for guards to protect the cantonments and to escort stores and provisions. Further, he states that in the long stretch of territory from Chittagaon to Chunar there were only four regiments of native infantry, three in Bihar and five in Bengal, where to its maximum, only one regiment could be called from Bihar or it would expose the territory to plunder. In case of Bengal, the place was too distant to call the regiment for the purpose. So, it was proposed that each native battalion be increased by 100 privates, which would mean an additional 2000 men in total.<sup>20</sup> All these military plans required a submissive Nawab in Awadh and English control over the executive powers.

By the time, Lumsden was communicated with the Minute passed regarding the suspension of enquiry; he had conducted some and wrote to Shore on the issue. According to his enquiry done furtively, it was universally believed that Wazir Ali was not the real son of Asaf-ud-daula, but when he was born in zenana in May 1780, he was announced to be the eldest son and heir.<sup>21</sup> On 4<sup>th</sup> October, 1797, Shore received a letter from Saadat-Ali-Khan claiming the masnad of Awadh being the eldest surviving son of the family. He claimed himself to be the rightful heir as Asaf-ud-daula had no son of his own and this could be reconfirmed through the English Residents in Awadh at that time, Bristow and Cherry.<sup>22</sup> Bristow, who was Resident at Awadh from October 1782 to early months of 1784, accepted that the Nawab introduced Wazir Ali as his son, who was 2 or 3 year of age at that time. No other person was introduced to him in such a way.<sup>23</sup>

On 17<sup>th</sup> October, Saadat Ali reiterated his claim on the throne manifesting his zeal for Company's interest in a much greater degree than his predecessors.<sup>24</sup> This claim further raised the question of Wazir Ali's claim on the throne. On 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1797, Shore passed another Minute supporting the claim of Wazir Ali. The Minute mentioned that Wazir Ali was placed on the throne "*to prevent the*

*unavoidable consequences of Anarchy*” otherwise it would have made the situation conducive for the pathans, rohillas and Marathas and this immediate declaration of successor done by the resident was in concurrence with all the principal inhabitants at Lucknow including minister and begum. The birth of Wazir Ali was not recorded on the proceedings at that time, but was mentioned by the Resident Middleton on 7<sup>th</sup> April, 1782 that he was invited to celebrate Wazir Ali’s birth anniversary on 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1782. The Minute further states that the marriage of Wazir Ali was publicly celebrated in 1794 as the son of Nawab, who also invited the Government people on the occasion. In June 1796, Wazir Ali was appointed as Dewan. All these acts of Nawab Asaf-ud-daula give strong evidence in favour of Wazir Ali’s claim. This was a protracted deliberation on the issue of the birth of Wazir Ali as evident from the long and elaborative Minute where all the councilors gave their arguments to support his succession.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the Minute passed on 20<sup>th</sup> October reiterated Company’s strong support to the claim of Wazir Ali on the throne in spite of its objection by Saadat Ali Khan.

In the meantime, Shore continued to receive communications regarding the issue of succession. The minister came to meet him in Jaunpur on 6<sup>th</sup> December and expressed that no son of the deceased Nawab had the right to succession due to low birth origin and as per the rules of justice the right of Saadat Ali to succession was indisputable. Many people of prominence in Lucknow had expressed their disappointment after Wazir Ali’ elevation and regarded that the decision was “hasty and inconsiderate”. The Minister opined that Wazir Ali had gained support of many sections, particularly army by being liberal and offering future benefits. Wazir Ali’ spurious birth was also confirmed by Busra Mirza, who was *daroga* of the *Dewan Khana* under Nawab Shuja-ud-daula. All this led to Shore’s decision to open an enquiry on his right to masnad without raising suspicion. The Governor General when left Calcutta, had no plans of reversal of his previous decision on the succession issue, but, soon after he reached Jaunpur his mind changed and determined to conduct enquiry on the spuriousness of the birth. He writes, “...*but under the state impression I conceive it possible that the repugnance of the inhabitants of Oude to the Title of Vizier Ali might be such as to force upon me the further consideration of it.*” Shore conducted his enquiry during this period of protracted journey. He reached Lucknow on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1797 and attempted to gather information related to

parentage of Wazir Ali. Shore, in his letter, refers to three papers collected from Zehseen Ali Khan, where the first contains an account of the children of Rehmat, mother of Wazir Ali; second was an explanatory answer of Zehseen Ali and third paper includes the history of other 15 surviving sons of the deceased Nawab. According to first paper, Rehmat was in zehseen house, where her monthly income was Rs. 4. She had three children and when the third child Wazir Ali was about to born Nawab said that he would take the child for Rs 500 to which Rehmat consent. These reports are so exhaustive that it includes mention in almost 75 pages.<sup>26</sup>

Shore gives in detail his arguments against Wazir Ali on the basis of the information gathered and enquiry conducted. According to Shore, Wazir Ali was undoubtedly of low birth and by character and conduct was unworthy of accession. Any support to him would bring indelible disgrace to Company's reputation and ruin its sway over the region of Awadh. Since all the sons of Asaf-ud-daula were undoubtedly spurious, the succession line should be transferred to the lineage of Shujaj-ud-daula. He firmly recommended deposition of Wazir Ali and his replacement by Saadat Ali Khan.<sup>27</sup>

The closing lines of 76 pages long letter speak out loud all about the mind of Shore and the exact reasons behind the *volte-face* of his policy and sudden reversal of his decision on the issue of succession. He remarked, "*In a question of this nature when the Eyes of all Hindostan are upon us the reputation of our decision even undefeateably of the justice a fit is no ...(one word not clear due to brittle paper) consideration to the political interest of the Company.... A regard to justice, to reputation and to our political interests as involved with them require the revocation of a decision which has already affected them all.*" The birth spuriousness of Wazir Ali was a universal fact and known to all Company's officer. Even if the Resident, due to emergent situation at the time of the demise of Asaf-ud-daula, took the decision to make announcement in favour of Wazir Ali succession, this should not have been approved by the Board later. The decision of the Board to support Wazir Ali and its reiteration later by passing another Minute of Governor General, all was taken cognizance of the fact related to his low origin. Earlier Saadat Ali Khan, who was not even permitted to leave Banaras and instructions were given to use force against him, if required, was now been regarded as "an illustrious family" that was deprived of "an exclusive right" to the *masnad*.

Shore was apprehensive of violent disturbance in the execution of his decision, so he made all his military preparations. There was an army of about six to seven thousand men encamped near his place of stay and force of almost same strength was stationed in Kanpur in case emergency reinforcements required.<sup>28</sup> Furtively, he deliberated with Saadat Ali Khan through Cherry, Agent to Governor General at Banaras, on the provisions of new treaty with the Company<sup>29</sup> and it was signed on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 1798.<sup>30</sup> On 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1798 he was placed on the throne.<sup>31</sup> Wazir Ali was asked to move to Banaras with a monthly pension of Rs.12,500.

If we go through the correspondence between Calcutta and Lucknow authorities and minutes of the Board and interpret those documents, it will become too obvious that the colonial approach adopted towards Awadh at the time of Wazir Ali's succession and deposition was that of political convenience. If we compare the minutes of 29<sup>th</sup> September and 20<sup>th</sup> October 1797 with the Governor General's letter of 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> January 1798, a lot of conflict in their own statements and reasons of their decision are quite evident. The cogent reasons that English drafted with an unerring knack supporting Wazir Ali's claim, suddenly withered away by the month of December. In the letter of 13<sup>th</sup> January, 1798 the cogent reasons suddenly diverted against Wazir Ali. Apparently, what was politically convenient to the Company and goes with the wave of their vested interests must be supported, otherwise it should be eliminated. A Nawab of 17-18 years age, who was a weak claimant, inexperienced and inefficient administrator, was definitely a smart choice for the English that would allow them to effortlessly control the affairs of Awadh. When he turns hostile towards English, the controversy, that was earlier suppressed, suddenly came on the fore to establish a cogent reason to depose him. The spuriousness of birth, which was difficult to enquire as it was a matter that happened about two decades earlier, could now be enquired very efficiently with all evidence. All the principle inhabitants of Awadh, who were, till now, in favour of Wazir Ali, suddenly turned against his succession. The English were able to dig out the evidence of Wazir Ali's low birth origin that was impossible for them couple of months back. All these correspondences manifest loudly that English were cognizant of all, but they willingly suppressed it and the moment they realized that the new Nawab may not become a puppet in the show, they deposed him using the same causes that were earlier suppressed.

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