Hazrat Mahal and the Many Archives: A Comparative Review

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This review examines two recent books on Begum Hazrat Mahal. The first, authored by Rudrangshu Mukherjee, delves into the lives of Hazrat Mahal and Laxmibai, exploring themes such as historical memory, amnesia, and the hierarchies of heroes within colonial and nationalist narratives. The second, by Sudipta Mitra, offers a narrative history of Hazrat Mahal and her husband, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. The essay advocates a dialogue between Mukherjee's emphasis on historical objectivity and the colonial archive, and Mitra's focus on indigenous archival sources, popular belief, and memory, emphasising the need for a more inclusive approach to women's historical representation.

Keywords: Revolt of 1857, feminist historiography, women's representation, colonial archive, Begum Hazrat Mahal.

Begum Hazrat Mahal is a popular figure in the historiography of the Indian Revolt of 1857. Known as a wife, mother, and queen-regent of the Indo-Persian Awadh dynasty (1722-1856) in North India, Hazrat Mahal has garnered much scholarly attention in the past decade for her participation in the revolt. The following essay reviews two books on Hazrat Mahal: one by the eminent historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee, and another by Sudipta Mitra, an independent researcher.

Rudrangshu Mukherjee's *A Begum & A Rani* (2021) discusses the life, origins, and participation of two queens of 19th-century North India—Hazrat Mahal and Laxmibai, who participated in the revolt of 1857. Through these figures, Mukherjee explores broader themes about the colonial archive, historical memory, and amnesia. He raises a significant question about how to write history when only the victor's account remains. Drawing from historians S.B. Chaudhari (1957) and Ranajit Guha (1983), Mukherjee's answer to this question is an exploration of the "genuineness" and "rebel consciousness" that

emerge from a critical reading of the colonial archive.[1] Regarding the protagonists of his book, Mukherjee argues that the act of remembering Laxmibai has inevitably necessitated the forgetting of Hazrat Mahal,[2] where the former has acquired far greater importance than her actual participation, and the latter has not been given her due in the roll call of history. He points out that this 'hierarchy of heroes' has primarily resulted from Indian scholars' dependence on colonial accounts of the revolt, where Laxmibai was more visible than Hazrat Mahal.[3] Not only was Laxmibai sighted by several British officers and soldiers on the field, she was also already a familiar figure in the politics of Jhansi (albeit written through the male gaze), and thus was known and recognised by British men, adding to her visibility even more in post-colonial India. In contrast, while dismissing the misconception that Hazrat Mahal was restricted by purdah (an argument put forth by Abdul Halim Sharar in *Guzishta Lucknow* [1926]),[4] Mukherjee agrees that there was no record of Hazrat Mahal on the field, and this resulted in her absence in historical writings.

Mukherjee also points out that the difference in how Laxmibai's and Hazrat Mahal's participation in the revolt ended could have influenced their memorialisation. While Laxmibai faced a soldier's death, Hazrat Mahal's flight and ultimate refuge in Nepal did not pass the test of a nationalist ideology "that privileged the explicit and outward show of valour" in its search for 'inspirational exemplars.'[5] However, Mukherjee does not assert that Laxmibai's choice over Hazrat Mahal was premeditated and deliberately prejudiced. Drawing from Gyanendra Pandey (2013), he suggests looking at it as common sense or the "natural order of things" that governed the nationalist quest for heroes in the historical record.[6]

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[1] Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *A Begum & A Rani: Hazrat Mahal and Lakshmibai in 1857* (Gurugram: Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2021), xxi-xxii.

[2] Ibid., xvii.

[3] Ibid., 130.

[4] Abdul Halim Sharar, *Guzishta Lucknow; or, Lucknow: Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, ed. and trans. E. H. Husain (London: Paul Elek, 1975), 66.

[5] Ibid., 135.

[6] Mukherjee, *A Begum & A Rani*, 136.

Mukherjee has authored a valuable book in a style that has become characteristic of his writing—laden with important facts, details, and a rich appendix. Writing about Laxmibai, Mukherjee focuses on separating fact from fiction, threading out aspects of Laxmibai's memorialisation that tend to become devotional. He details how Laxmibai was a late and reluctant entrant to the revolt and that she too 'fled' from her post—aspects often erased in her valorisation. Despite citing the limitations of sources on Hazrat Mahal, Mukherjee makes a strong argument about her role in the revolt, presenting a critical analysis of Hazrat Mahal's counter-proclamation to illuminate her political and military prowess. He highlights some factors, such as Hazrat Mahal's slave descent, her familial association with courtesans, and her separation from Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, which deserve credit as these facts are often glossed over in historical accounts.

Mukherjee's search for documents on Hazrat Mahal can be enriched by a more substantial engagement with primary and secondary sources produced in indigenous languages. For example, Amritlal Nagar (1957) has written numerous texts in Hindi on the revolt—citing Mufti Intezamullah Shihabi's *Begamat Awadh ke Khatut* (1948), which is a reproduction of the correspondence between several begums of Awadh and Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (r. 1847-1856) in Urdu.[7] These letters detail Hazrat Mahal's presence on the battlefield and may help in complicating the perception of her physical absence from the scenes of the revolt. Similarly, several facts regarding Hazrat Mahal's life and the accompanying archival sources were well-documented by historians writing in Urdu in the early 21st century, such as Nusrat Naheed (2001) and Wasim Ahmad Saeed (2006), and can be added to the discussion.

Furthermore, while it is true that Laxmibai was the focus of many early nationalist and post-independence centenary writings, Hazrat Mahal was also written about in the post-1950s—for example, in the works of Iqbal B. Devsare (1973) and Surendra Kant (1989), which were mainly published by state government departments. These works can be reviewed alongside works on Laxmibai that emerged in the same period to trace the differences and similarities in the representation of women. Nevertheless, Mukherjee's book

[7] Amritlal Nagar, *Gadar ke Phool* (Lucknow: Suchna Vibhag, 1957), 262.

is one of the first academic engagements that explores why Hazrat Mahal's historical remembrance has been so starkly different from Rani Laxmibai's, offering a significant, expert perspective for historians to consider.

Sudipta Mitra's *A Nawab and a Begum* (2024) presents a more narrativised history of Hazrat Mahal and Wajid Ali Shah, drawing from a rich array of sources, including colonial reports, indigenous accounts, newspapers, manuscripts, and several secondary writings of significance. Through its dual biographical structure, the book skilfully attempts to document the "enigmatic relationship between the couple," presenting their simultaneous, often overlapping, but radically different responses to Awadh's annexation and the ensuing revolt.[8] It presents a microcosmic account, emphasising the historical significance of examining the interconnectedness of personal and political lives in the backdrop of colonialism. One of the most substantial contributions of the book is Mitra's attempt to write about Hazrat Mahal's life after the revolt, a theme rarely touched upon by historians, including Mukherjee.

Mitra explores the year-long journey that Hazrat Mahal undertook in the terai (lowland) region bordering Awadh and Nepal, her interactions with Nepal's Prime Minister Jung Bahadur, and ultimately, the negotiations she made to seek asylum in Nepal.[9] These details enrich our understanding of Hazrat Mahal's later years, offering a fresh perspective on her life and legacy, and can be potentially examined beyond the trope of women's helpless victimhood. Mitra's effort to centre Hazrat Mahal in the narrative is a significant historical project, but at times, the narrative leans towards idealisation.[10] However, the complexities of Hazrat Mahal's identity and political agency could be investigated further. She often seems to get lost in the rich details of the revolt, appearing in short spurts, repeatedly through the lens of Mammu Khan—her advisor and confidant.[11] These appearances are sometimes couched in speculation (beginning with 'Hazrat Mahal most likely…') and would benefit from more robust citation of primary sources. Despite this, the book's

[8] Sudipta Mitra, *A Nawab and a Begum* (New Delhi: Rupa Publication India, 2024), xvi.

[9] Mitra, *A Nawab and a Begum*, 204-218.

[10] Ibid., 15, 35.

[11] Ibid., 127.

accessible language and focus on lesser-known aspects of Hazrat Mahal's life make it a valuable addition to the literature on the subject.

In a way, Mitra's book offers to complete the narrative of Hazrat Mahal's extraordinary life and heroic death in order to match the way Rani Laxmibai's story has been told—as more composite, precise, and linear. Thus, it is a project that is starkly different from Mukherjee's. Nonetheless, Mukherjee's historical objectivity and focus on the colonial archive, and Mitra's exploration of indigenous archival sources, popular belief, memory, and myths are equally valuable in studying Hazrat Mahal. They prompt significant historical questions: how has Hazrat Mahal been resurrected and represented in contemporary times? What are the underlying tropes that govern her historical writing and memorialisation? And how can one approach historical memory? Both books encourage the reader to reflect not only on why it is important to retrieve Hazrat Mahal from historical amnesia, but also on the act of retrieval itself, precisely to what is being lost during this process.

What may strengthen future research on this subject is a feminist engagement with history-writing and the archive, to draw attention to (a) the prerequisites of women's visibility in history, (b) the methods that historians can employ to retrieve lost subjects of history, and (c) a sustained discussion of what constitutes the archive itself. While Mukherjee mentions Ruby Lal's conceptualization of women's "playfulness" to talk about Laxmibai and Hazrat Mahal's politics,[12] her insights into how one can write or read history where there is no recovery, or where the subject is not apparent, can open new avenues of inquiry.[13] Through such an approach, the oft-commented-upon 'mystery' of Hazrat Mahal's invisibility may be solved.

As scholars of women's history argue, it is pertinent to re-examine the entire analytical and epistemological apparatus of the traditional archive and the seemingly gender-neutral methodologies. In the absence of such an academic exercise an attempt to retrieve women's agency remains merely an act of 'adding' women to an already established, universalized (and masculinized)

[12] Mukherjee, *A Begum & A Rani*, 137.

[13] Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 58-60.

history.[14] Numerous scholars, such as D. Fairchild Ruggles (2000), Barbara Metcalf (2011), Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (2015), Susan Broomhall (2018), and others, have explored archives of emotions, orality, living histories, and memory in writing about women. They contend that informal, personal writings—letters, diaries, manuals, poems—as well as non-textual evidence such as art, architecture, coins, clothing, and courtly mannerisms, practices of piety, and travel et cetera, must be treated as significant sites for gendered historical inquiry that allow us to consider women's "self-in-performance" in society.[15] That is, to understand how women performed their gendered identities in the public-private domain by reiterating, expanding, or subverting the socio-political institutions and ideologies of their times.

Hazrat Mahal's courtly rituals and mannerisms, particularly her act of granting titles and gift-giving during the revolt, as recorded in several indigenous accounts like that of Kamal-ud-Din Haidar (1879), can be read as a site of her self-assertion.[16] Her painting in Wajid Ali Shah's *Ishqnama* (1848-9) can substantiate scholarly claims of her African descent and courtesan past.[17] Her letters of correspondence to British officials posted in Lucknow after the annexation of Awadh in 1856, reproduced in Rizvi and Bhargava (1957), can complicate the perception that she held anti-colonial sentiments from the beginning.[18] Lastly, her architectural endeavours in Nepal challenge the conception of her miserable life in exile, which is essential to the narrative of her sacrifice and bravery.[19]

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[14] Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 1989), 3.

[15] Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 1.

[16] Tanya Burman, "Begum Hazrat Mahal and the Revolt of 1857: Some Reflections on Women's 'Self-Representation' in Politics," *Women's Link* 30, no. 1 (January 2023): 86.

[17] Rosie Lewellyn-Jones, *The Last King in India: Wajid Ali Shah, 1822-1887* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 136.

[18] Tanya Burman, "Begum Hazrat Mahal: Power, Politics, and Representation in the Revolt of 1857" (PhD dissertation, Ambedkar University Delhi, New Delhi, 2024), 197, Shodhganga@INFLIBNET: Begum Hazrat Mahal Power Politics and Representation in the Revolt of 1857 (accessed 7 June 2025).

[19] Ibid., 300-1.

While Mitra believes that the controversies surrounding "the queen's murky past" should be "shelved,"[20] an inquiry that does not attempt to sanitise Hazrat Mahal's retrieval may be fruitful in presenting a richer account of the past. We could explore Hazrat Mahal's participation alongside the complexities, intersections, and liminalities that shaped her life and agency. Perhaps then we could move beyond comparisons—whether to her husband or to a woman with whom she never crossed paths—to write the history of Hazrat Mahal.

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[20] Mitra, *A Nawab and a Begum*, 230.