

Madhu Trivedi, *The Making of the Awadh Culture*, Primus Books, New Delhi, 2010, pp. xii + 314. ISBN 978-81-908918-8-2.

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Nawabi Awadh (c. 1722–1856) produced rich and complex cultures during its semi-independent period of transition between Mughal and British imperial rule. Professor Madhu Trivedi has thoroughly compiled the major sources in Persian, Urdu and English that describe an array of Awadh's urban arts—theological, representational and material. Taking each genre in turn, she details and celebrates its main features, high-lighting virtually all of them as a creative syntheses of Mughal, Iranian, European and indigenous north Indian artistic traditions. Her stated goals to accord the long neglected and disparaged 'culture of Awadh ... its due place in history' (p. 5).

Each of Trivedi's chapters considers a particular cultural form, ranging from its distinctive Shi'ism, through Awadh's literature, music, painting and architecture, to its industrial arts. In most chapters, she proceeds synchronically, although she does set out broad phases and stages of development for some cultural forms. This topical organisation occasionally requires her to recapitulate in several chapters the same historical events and names of patrons. However, this organisational strategy also enables her to feature and juxtapose each individual genre's particular artists and their major works. She includes 32 illustrations (four of them in colour) to enable readers to appreciate the works of art and buildings that she discusses.

Trivedi considers Awadh's urban elite culture in its own terms, largely in isolation from the political and social conflicts that wracked north India, and this region in particular, during this 130 year period. She generously lauds Awadh's rulers for strengthening the arts 'by creating an atmosphere of trust and cooperation among their subjects' (p. 11). She asserts that the Nawabi courts in Faizabad and then Lucknow welcomed and patronised all artists and scholars who came from many lands to contribute to Awadhi culture. She confidently asserts that Awadh's religious 'scholars never discriminated in issues on sectarian bases' (p. 49), despite occasional

minor misunderstandings that led to violent communal conflicts. Europeans seem to have played little role in Trivedi's history of Awadh, except as patrons or artistic influences to be assimilated into Awadh's own distinctive style. By downplaying the ongoing struggles around and within Awadh, Trivedi concentrates on her purpose of showing Awadh's culture as widely unappreciated but actually the 'cultural hub of north India' of its day (p. 4).

While many other scholars have written about Awadh's cultural world, they do not appear much in her text (although most do appear in her endnotes and extensive Bibliography). When she explicitly mentions an earlier writer about one of the arts in her text, she usually does so to defend Awadhi culture against a disparaging critic. In fact, Trivedi portrays most of Awadh's cultural and artistic forms throughout in the most positive light. Thus, despite the judgments of most Indian and non-Indian commentators at the time and today about the 'General debasement' of Awadh's culture, Trivedi 'does not support an unqualified use of the expression "decline"' (p. 109). Rather, she sees a general shift away from earlier classical artistic forms in order to incorporate more folk traditions which, in Lucknow, were themselves then 'refined and elevated' (p. 109) to the highest degree of sophistication and synthesis.

Even Awadh's much maligned rulers are recuperated in her book. For instance, King Nasir al-Din Haidar (r. 1827–37) forbade widows from committing Sati not, as other scholars have argued, because he was anti-Hindu or else because he hoped to impress the sceptical British with his 'modernity'. Rather, Trivedi projects 'an altogether different image of this unfortunate ruler who is so misunderstood.... No one has appreciated this courageous step on the part of a young ruler who showed concern for the torment of a Hindu widow' (p. 16). Indeed, she argues, the Nawabs made Lucknow 'a modern city in all its appearances' (p. 171).

Some of Trivedi's most impressive sections are where she analyses a particular work or genre for its underlying significance. For instance, she insightfully shows how Lucknow's poets recast some Urdu poems of the

commemorative *marsiya* genre to reflect local society. The authors of these poems created ‘images [which] portray the family of Imam Husain as an aristocratic family of Awadh’ of the Nawabi period instead of as Arabs in Iraq in 680 CE (pp. 58–59). This adaptation of many artistic forms by the artists of Awadh made it ‘the full fruition of the *ganga-jamuni tehzib* that represented Persian aesthetics and Indian cultural values’ (p. xi).

Through careful research into many of the texts of the period, Trivedi has produced an extensive description of the glories and accomplishments of the cultures of Nawabi Awadh. Her work thus deepens our appreciation of them by building upon the widely known Urdu book of nostalgia about a culture that the author had glimpsed in its final phase: Abdul Halim Sharar, *Guzishta Lucknow: Mashriqi Tamaddun ka Akhiri Namuna*, translated and edited by E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain as *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* (London: Paul Elek, 1975). Trivedi’s substantial work clearly provides readers with much information about—and appreciation for—the patrons, artists and artistic accomplishments of Nawabi Awadh.

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