

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in Calcutta : The birth of “Metiabruz” Biryani

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ABSTRACT

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah took up residence in Calcutta in 1856 after his unceremonious removal from the throne of Lucknow. The annexation of Oudh by Governor General Lord Dalhousie made Wajid Ali its last ruler. Subsequently, he moved to Calcutta as an East India Company pensioner with a huge retinue of former officials, servants and attendants, singers and musicians, dancing girls and prostitutes, animals and birds. And, of course, he took with him the famed cooks of Lucknow. Wajid Ali settled in Metiabruz in south Calcutta, on the banks of the Hooghly. From the time he set foot in the capital of British India, the former Badshah of Lucknow wanted to recreate his beloved city which he sorely missed every moment (immortalized by his nostalgic song जब छोड़ चले लखनऊ नगरी). In Metiabruz, where the deposed Nawab spent the rest of his life, he built palaces Lucknow style (even an Imambara) and started his dance recitals and musical soirees in right earnest. But then Wajid Ali could not avoid getting embroiled in the politics of the day. He was confined for a little more than two years in Fort William to prevent the mutinous Sepoys from contacting him (they wanted him to lead them during that time of crisis). The delay in the disbursal of his pension put those in his employment in hard times, and many royal cooks, to tide over difficulties created by irregular salaries, opened eateries all over Metiabruz and then in the rest of Calcutta. They started selling, for the first time in the city, a variant of the Lucknow biryani: a rice-and-meat dish cooked with potatoes. Since it was sold by cooks who were in the employ of the former King of Awadh, their Bengali clientele started imagining that Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was served the same biryani too. The rumor went around that since Wajid Ali had little money, he could not afford too much mutton and hence the potatoes were introduced as a compensation. What the Calcutta babus, who fell in love with this biryani instantly—the only biryani of its kind which had potatoes in it—did not know was that it was not Wajid Ali but the cooks who had fallen on hard times. These royal cooks, suffering from temporary financial distress, concocted a biryani with potatoes by reducing the amount of mutton, not to serve the former Nawab of Awadh, but to sell to their Calcutta clientele. Sadly for the Bengalee babus, they were also not aware that the royal family was mostly served pulao (another exquisite rice-and-meat dish) and not biryani. Wajid Ali may have eaten and even appreciated this new version of the biryani (with potatoes) but it was not his but his cooks' signature dish. It is this biryani which is sold to Bengalees till today as Calcutta biryani. Ideally, since it was innovated in Metiabruz, it should be called Metiabruz biryani.

Keywords: Wajid Ali Shah, Lucknow, Sleeman Report, Lord Dalhousie, Biryani, Metiabruz, Pulao, *Dumpukht* style, Nautch girls

That the last king of Ayodhya (Awadh or Oude in contemporary parlance) was most unceremoniously expelled from his realm by the British East India Company is public knowledge. So is the fact that he took up residence in far-off Calcutta, the headquarters of his nemesis, the hated Company and its government headed

by the Anglicist Governor General, Lord Dalhousie. At the root of the decision to bring to an abrupt end the “misrule” of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was the damning report submitted to the Governor General by the then resident of Lucknow, General William Henry Sleeman. Known as the *Sleeman Report* in administrative circles,

it highlighted widespread discontent among Awadh's subjects with the government of Wajid Ali¹, usually perceived by the British ruling elite as an effeminate ruler interested in everything but matters of state. He was a king who wrote poetry, composed and performed in operas², had orgies with nautch girls, kept a legion of *mutta* wives (temporary wives married for pleasurable purposes, a Shia custom), flew kites and played with pigeons, and wasted valuable time praying five times a day. In the words of General James Outram, the last resident of Lucknow, immortalized by the late Satyajit Ray in his *SHATRANJ KE KHILADI* (The Chess Players), Wajid Ali couldn't rule, had no wish to rule and, therefore, had no business to rule³.

Calcutta 1856: The arrival of Wajid Ali Shah

A year before the dethroned Wajid Ali Shah had arrived in Calcutta in May 1856—to a 21-gun salute from a reluctant Governor General Lord Canning⁴—Anjuman-i-Islami, the first Moslem organization of India, had been launched by the city's Moslem elite. Interestingly, one of the objectives of the Anjuman was to find common cause and cultivate closeness with the British East India Company, Wajid Ali's *bete noire*. Interestingly still, as the exiled ex-Nawab was taken into custody during the Sepoy Mutiny to prevent him from becoming a rallying point for rebels⁵, many of whom were Hindu Brahmins from Awadh with deep attachment to him, the Anjuman threw its lot behind the Company⁶. As the mutiny was mercilessly crushed, killing whatever hopes Wajid Ali may have had of a restoration, the Anjuman openly celebrated

the Company's victory and even welcomed the direct takeover of the Indian colonial administration by Her Majesty the Queen in 1858 by sending her a message of felicitation. It is evident that for the Moslem elite of Calcutta in 1856-57, both Hindostani and Bengali-speaking, neither Wajid Ali Shah nor his overthrow by the British East India Company mattered much. In fact, the educated Moslems of Calcutta during that time couldn't care less about Wajid Ali Shah. As for their poor coreligionists, they hadn't even heard about him. In Calcutta, Wajid Ali Shah was a lonely man, with neither recognition nor support from any quarter of the city he made his new home, albeit reluctantly.

Evidently, the Moslem elite of Calcutta and Wajid Ali had nothing to do with each other. A king forced from his throne by the dreaded Doctrine of Lapse himself developed an administrative manual called the *Dastur-e-Wajidi* on the basis of which he ruled Awadh. Even though the *Sleeman Report* depicted widespread poverty, financial mismanagement, corruption, and plunder under Wajid Ali, there was neither discontent nor any insurrection against him within his realm. On the contrary, the subjects of Awadh, under the leadership of its landlords, were prepared to take up arms for their ruler⁷. Wajid Ali's voluntary abdication prevented a major bloodshed and a mass slaughter of Awadh's innocent yet brave and patriotic subjects. The king backed out at the last moment, choosing instead to live the rest of his life as a pensioner of the British East India Company in Calcutta, even though the Dowager Queen had appealed unsuccessfully to Queen Empress Victoria to restore her

1. General Sleeman had submitted a damaging report to Lord Dalhousie about the administration of Wajid Ali Shah which ultimately became the basis of the latter's forced abdication.
2. Wajid Ali Shah composed India's first opera, *Radha Kanhaiya ka pyar* (The Love of Radha and Kanhaiya) and regularly portrayed the role of the Hindu deity Krishna whenever it was staged. He was also the father of *thumri*, a genre of Hindustani classical music.
3. Based on a short story of the same name by Munshi Premchand.
4. Lord Canning was not responsible for Wajid Ali's removal, but he did not want to deal with him, fearing that the deposed monarch would request an audience with the new Governor General hoping for a restoration. In fact, he did not want Wajid Ali in Calcutta at all.
5. Wajid Ali was always the first choice as leader for the Sepoys. The feudal lords who sided with them wanted the Mughal scion Bahadur Shah Zafar to lead them.
6. The Anjuman neither identified with Wajid Ali nor considered him leader. In fact, it never wanted Moslems to support the mutinous sepoys.
7. The new revenue system had to a large extent dispossessed the Awadh landed gentry. More than their loyalty to Wajid Ali, this was their reason for backing the Sepoy Mutiny.

son to the throne. And it was with this pension of one hundred thousand rupees per month that he tried building a replica of his beloved Lucknow in Metiabruz.

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah brought his retinue from Lucknow, which included personal attendants, domestic servants, cooks, bodyguards, musicians (singers, nautch girls, composers, instrument players, and opera performers), storytellers, eunuchs, and prostitutes and settled down in the Garden Reach area of southwest Calcutta by the bank of the Hooghly river (a mud elevation in the area gave it the name *Matia Bruz*)⁸. This, apart from scores of exotic birds and animals, and hundreds of *mutta* wives (most of whom he got rid of over time during his stay in Metiabruz). Even though he accused his principal *nikah* wife of seeing other men of less exalted backgrounds, Wajid Ali never quite abandoned his fondness for the company of women.

His *Parikhana* (lit. Fairy House) in Lucknow, ostensibly constructed for promoting the performing arts, was actually a store from where the king could bring to his bed the girl or woman of his choice. Though Wajid Ali now did not have the means to construct and maintain another *Parikhana* in Metiabruz, he revived his old practice of cultivating physical intimacy with a variety of women known for both their artistic skills and sexual prowess. As long as the ex-ruler did not indulge in politics, Her Majesty's Government in India (which continued to grant Wajid Ali the pension instituted by the Company) looked the other way in the face of such widely known debauchery. Interestingly, this debauchery was highlighted in the *Sleeman Report* as a perfect ground for overthrowing Wajid Ali.

The crucial first two years

But it would be wrong to assume that Wajid Ali readily settled into a retired life, forced by British annexation of his kingdom, with a handsome pension. He refused to accept the one hundred thousand rupees per month compensation⁹ even as his representatives

(which included the Queen Mother, popularly known as *Malika-e-auliya*) appealed to Queen Empress Victoria and the British Parliament in person to convince them of the unjust nature of the annexation and get his crown and throne restored. All efforts toward this end came to a naught when the Sepoy Mutiny broke out in India, seriously threatening the roots of the Company government.

As Wajid Ali languished in confinement within Fort William, where he had been temporarily shifted to prevent him from being contacted by the mutineers, the futility of pursuing his case in London dawned on him¹⁰. The rebel Sepoys were mercilessly crushed, ending all hopes of a restoration. Wajid Ali must have thanked his stars for not getting involved with the mutineers. Otherwise he either would have been killed or have had to flee the country like his son Birjis Qadar (whom the rebel Sepoys had put on the throne in Lucknow and declared him leader of their war effort) and former wife Begum Hazrat Mahal (who fought the British alongside the Sepoys). Both mother and son escaped to Nepal, where the British could not reach them. Alternatively, Wajid Ali could well have met the fate of "Emperor" Bahadur Shah Zafar, who died a British prisoner in faraway Rangoon (now Yangon).

In fact the two years that Wajid Ali did not accept his pension were years of great financial difficulty, less for him than for his retinue. In fact, the officials who accompanied him from Lucknow and took up residence in Metiabruz, mostly in lavish and largely comfortable houses with gardens, had to bear the brunt of the acute financial distress they countenanced. Neither they nor their formerly royal employer had any regular income, nor any state revenue to fall back on. They were forced to sell their ornate belongings to Calcutta residents who could afford them, or had fine taste, or regarded possessing such royal wares as enhancing their status in culturally-refined Bengali society¹¹. But then, not many Bengalis visited Metiabruz then, just as they do not do now. Business in used household items was through

8. Actually, Wajid Ali Shah took almost his entire administration with him to Calcutta. The area where he settled and spent the rest of his life in was assigned to him by the Company. The nearby Garden Reach, on the banks of the Hooghly, once housed the official quarters of judges of the Supreme Court of Adjudication in Calcutta. Subsequently, Wajid Ali's Calcutta mansions were converted into the headquarters of the South Eastern Railway (formerly BNR, or Bengal Nagpur Railway).

9. He refused because acceptance of the pension would mean acceptance of his dethronement also.

10. Some of his aids, who included former officials of his Administration, had advised him that a restoration was not possible.

11. The main clientele for such items were the newly-rich of Calcutta who would display them in their living rooms and invent fictitious lineages to impress both British and Indian guests to the soirees they held periodically.

middlemen, who bought them from the owners for a pittance and sold them to Bengali *bhadroloks* (lit. gentlemen) at exorbitant rates.

Joining the ranks of the middlemen were small business owners of the area who had to close shop because there were more commodities on sale than people to buy them. Evidently, Metiabruz's residents were facing an acute economic depression. The area's association with shady business, thus, had started during the lifetime of Wajid Ali and was enhanced after 1947 as a hotbed of smuggling, what with the Kidderpore docks being precariously close to the neighborhood. Murders were frequent too, and Metiabruz, to put it mildly, had managed to preserve that reputation as well.

It was strengthened when a Deputy Commissioner of Police (Port Division), under whom came Metiabruz, was brutally hacked to death along with his bodyguard while he was pursuing a notorious criminal of the area on 18 March 1984. The bodies of the senior police officer (naked and mutilated) and his bodyguard (charred beyond recognition) were found in a gutter in one of the dirty alleys of Wajid Ali's once-beautiful township¹². Fingers of suspicion pointed to gangsters and criminals of Urdu-speaking East Pakistani origin who had found shelter in Metiabruz on having entered India illegally with the support of vote-seeking leaders on this side of the international border after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Also thrown out of business were the nautch girls from Lucknow, whom the residents of Metiabruz could not afford anymore. They took to wholesale prostitution, catering to Bengali men who could pay them¹³. Not all of these men were rich and their purchasing capacity was not the same. As they had fallen on hard times, these girls started servicing Bengali *babus* of diverse economic standing. Known widely in Lucknow with the Persian term *khangi* (used for former dancing girls who had taken to whoring over a period of time) and its Bengali corruption *khanki*, these women gave birth to an army

of worthless vagabonds for whom fraud, dacoity, and murders were commonplace. Born of unknown Bengali Hindu fathers and mothers of Lakhnawi Moslem descent, these vagabonds were the scum of society, placed neither here nor there. In Bengali society till today, *khankir chhele* (lit. son of a whore) continues to be a popular yet powerful word of profanity, used to convey, not infrequently, extreme hatred and derision. Worse still, Kidderpore (which, for all practical purposes, can be regarded an extension of Metiabruz) houses one of the bigger brothels of Calcutta.

When Wajid Ali finally agreed to accept his pension after a lapse of two years, the British government, which had taken over the colonial administration by then, refused to pay the arrears and the three hundred thousand rupees per annum that it had earlier promised to provide for payment to the former royal officials of Lucknow¹⁴. So Wajid Ali was now left to pay his retinue from his own pocket. Even though his monthly income was substantial and his life comfortable and luxurious, there is no doubt that the Crown had continued with the tradition of injustice that the Company had started with the ancestors of Wajid Ali. The British, first the Company and then the Crown, did not know that the last Nawab of Lucknow would remain alive for three decades after being removed from office. They hated Wajid Ali in Calcutta as much as Col. Sleeman detested him in Lucknow, and spread the rumor that the former monarch was perpetually in debt. Nothing could be further from truth.

Wajid Ali in Calcutta: The myth of poverty

When Nawab Wajid Ali Shah arrived in Calcutta on a hot May evening in 1856, he had no idea that he would have to spend the rest of his life in the capital of British India. In fact, he had no plan to stay in the city. Lord Dalhousie had asked him once not to come to Calcutta when rumors started floating that Wajid Ali wanted to meet the Governor General to have the annexation revoked¹⁵. Since Lord Dalhousie was working on the

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12. The gruesome murder of a top Police official shook Calcutta as never before, adding to the bad name that Metiabruz already had.
 13. Not that prostitution was new to the dancing girls from Lucknow but in Calcutta, they took to it full-time.
 14. Wajid Ali was regarded a liability by the British. To make matters worse, his wife Begum Hazrat Mahal had emerged as a symbol of resistance to the Company government during the Sepoy Mutiny.
 15. Lord Dalhousie, who always harbored a very poor opinion of Wajid Ali, would never restore him to the throne. In fact, an annexation, once done, could not be reversed.

orders of the Court of Directors of the British East India Company and, accordingly, had no powers to reverse the Company's decision on Oude, meeting Wajid Ali would be a wastage of time. More importantly, the Governor General, his mind colored by the *Sleeman Report*, hated Wajid Ali even though he had never met him in person. In fact, Lord Dalhousie was waiting to remove the "wretch at Lucknow" at the earliest available opportunity.

By the time Wajid Ali came down to Calcutta, Lord Dalhousie himself had been replaced by Lord Canning. Though the new Governor General was not enthusiastic about having the ex-king in Calcutta, he could do little to prevent his arrival. As for Wajid Ali, he had indeed come to Calcutta to meet the Governor General and have his forced abdication revoked. As he realized that he would not get from Lord Canning what he thought he deserved, he then wanted to appeal to Queen Victoria in person, accompanied by his mother, brother, and son. Prevented by his doctors on health grounds from leaving the shores of Calcutta, the royal mission left for London without him. As the mission failed with the outbreak of the Sepoy Mutiny and the Queen Mother died suddenly in Paris on her way back, Wajid Ali knew that his hope for a restoration was now a chimera.

But so obsessed had he become in going back to Lucknow and resuming his rule that he even appealed to the Company government that he was ready to help the latter crush the Mutiny¹⁶. He had only one condition: he must be restored to his throne. This was a situation of supreme irony bordering on treachery: one of the reasons why the Sepoys had mutinied was the annexation of Awadh, and now it was the Nawab of Awadh, who had actually surrendered his realm without a fight, who wanted to help the Company quell the Mutiny to have his throne back. Unfortunately for him, the British refused. Wajid Ali understood that Calcutta (Metiabruz to be precise) was now his new home; he would never again go back to Lucknow in his lifetime.

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah did not come from Lucknow

empty handed. He had with him twenty five lakh rupees in gold bullion and ornaments¹⁷. And that was public knowledge. The unusually wealthy Nawab was also offered a pension commensurate with his status. Compared to it, the sum offered to other Indian princes as compensation for annexation was peanuts: Laxmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi, was slated to receive five thousand rupees per month¹⁸ in comparison to Wajid Ali's one hundred thousand. Clearly, such a man as the ex-King of Lucknow could not have fallen on hard times. Despite this, the British spread the rumor that the Nawab was perpetually in debt, the irresponsible spendthrift that he was.

That the Nawab was willing to spend any amount on music and dance recitals everyone knew. And he never refused to spend on food. The army of cooks he had brought from Lucknow was willing to continue feeding their master the exotic dishes they had presented him with back home. The Lucknow *dastarkhwan* (spread, lit. tablecloth) had relocated to Metiabruz.

But the British rumor-mongers and their Indian counterparts—who had nothing to do with Wajid Ali Shah—were working overtime. They spread word that Wajid Ali was precariously short of cash. These ingrates had chosen to forget that Wajid Ali's ancestors had lavishly funded the East India Company. Even Wajid Ali had paid every single rupee required for the salaries of the Company soldiers stationed on the frontiers of Awadh for the protection of the large Shia principality.

If the slanderers were to be believed, since Wajid Ali had very little money, his *bawarchis* (cooks) had suitably tweaked their expensive Lucknow dishes to fit his dwindling income¹⁹. In fact, they were more specific in labeling Wajid Ali a near-pauper: the formerly royal *bawarchis* had started using potato in the biryani they cooked as a cheap substitute for meat. In other words, by putting potato in the Lucknow biryani, they had literally innovated a poor man's version of the old exotic rice-and-meat dish. The cooks were forced to use potatoes,

16. Wajid Ali Shah would stop at nothing to get back his throne, and to get back to Lucknow. It was only later that he realizes that neither was possible.

17. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was among the richest native princes of India.

18. Jhansi was a much smaller principality than Oudh/Oude, yielding much less revenue. It was the revenue that decided the amount of pension offered to a deposed raja/rani/Nawab.

19. Even though Wajid Ali's pension started late, it was substantial by contemporary standards. There was no question of his income getting reduced over time.

so believed many, because Wajid Ali had no cash for buying the costly mutton required to prepare the Metiabruz version of the Lucknow biryani.

Metiabruz biryani

Since Calcutta had a sizeable Moslem presence by the time Wajid Ali Shah dropped anchor on the banks of the Hooghly at Bichali Ghat, Moslem cuisine was nothing new to the local Hindu population in May 1856. Inter-dining between Hindus and Moslems were few and far between, and only Hindu iconoclasts had no problem with eating with Moslems, even if beef was on the menu. In fact, Bengal itself was a Shia principality till 1757, when the cruel, abusive, and arrogant young Nawab, Siraj-ud-dowla, was overthrown by Lord Robert Clive at the Battle of Plassey²⁰.

The rice-and-meat dish that the royal *bawarchis* of Awadh cooked in Lucknow was not biryani but pulao, and varieties of them. Pulao was always considered a superior dish, fit for the consumption of nobility and royalty, whereas biryani was the staple of the rank and file. So what was brought to Calcutta was the tradition of the pulao for the purpose of feeding the royal household. Not that the *bawarchis* did not know how to cook biryani, but that was not what they served Wajid Ali and his family.

A lot of these cooks, trying to cope with irregular salaries during the first two years of financial difficulty, had opened eateries all over Metiabruz, selling biryani to the public²¹. They were very clear in their minds that the masses were to be fed with biryani and not pulao, which was a royal preserve. Not a single shop sold pulao. Adventurous Hindus, who jumped at every opportunity to grab Moslem food but were oblivious of the Lucknow tradition, spread the word that since the shops belonged to the royal *bawarchis*, they were actually being sold the same biryani that was served to Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. Nothing could have been farther from truth.

Biryani was cooked in *dumpukht* style, the process originally innovated to cook meat and vegetables in sealed earthen pots for laborers and soldiers in early Mughal times. For biryani, curried meat and rice were cooked separately and then steamed together. A layer of rice (already three-fourths cooked) was overlaid by a layer of meat and steamed in a pot sealed with wheat flour dough, with burning coals beneath the pot and atop its lid. Saffron is mixed in the rice in such a manner that when finally opened, the rice of the biryani came out in two colors, white and saffron²². Strictly speaking, biryani is itself not an original dish; the rice was added later to meat and then cooked in the *dumpukht* style to give rise to a unique rice and meat dish, cooked conveniently to feed scores of laborers and soldiers working for the monarchy²³. Though biryani evolved during Mughal times, it was not part of royal cuisine and was seldom cooked for members of the royal household.

Biryani's entry into the royal kitchen may have happened sometime in Lucknow, its wonderful spicy odor responsible for its eventual introduction to the Nawab's *dastarkhwan*²⁴. It actually meant an elevation of its social status as well: a dish meant for the consumption of laborers and soldiers was now being fed to the royals. In fact, the *dumpukht* style of slow oven cooking itself was proletarian, meant to serve a large number of consumers at a time. No doubt, the *bawarchis* of Wajid Ali Shah, who had opened eateries to tide over difficult times during the first two years of the exiled Nawab's stay in Calcutta, adopted the same *dumpukht* style to cook biryani for sale to the local population, with another innovation added to the proletarian yet exotic rice and meat dish: potatoes. It had nothing to do with the financial condition of Wajid Ali, nor were potatoes introduced to cheer up the crestfallen Nawab. The reason was simple: the Nawab was seldom, if at all, served with biryani. What were spread before him at his daily elaborate meals were scores

20. Ironically, Siraj-ud-dowla was painted by Indian historians as an innocent young man who became a victim of the intrigue of the British and his own high officials. Bengali literature also portrays the debauched and whore-mongering Siraj as a romantic young lover.

21. That was the first time biryani was sold in Calcutta eateries.

22. Saffron is an essential element of biryani.

23. The *dumpukht* style, the slow cooking of meat and rice in dough-sealed earthen containers, was innovated in Lucknow during the reign of Nawab Asaf-ud-dowla, an ancestor of Wajid Ali Shah. That is a belief that most experts and scholars of cuisine subscribe to.

24. Lit. spread. Actually, it meant inclusion in the royal kitchen of Lucknow.

of dishes of pulao, along with a choice of meat preparations and a variety of sweet dishes. The Nawab, hugely built with a phenomenal capacity to digest spicy food, was a frugal eater though, taking a spoonful or a morsel each of whatever was served to him.

When the Nawab breathed his last in 1887, his lavish pension also came to an end. And along with it ended the days of comfort and luxury for his officials. There was no regular monthly salary for them any more, and they had no other option but to look for alternative sources of income. In fact, many of them, especially the *bawarchis*, had opened businesses thinking of the eventuality. All of them, including the Nawab's *mutta* wives, were aware that the Awadh line of succession will come to an end with him. Wajid Ali Shah was indeed the last monarch to sit on the throne of Lucknow. Even after the annexation, he continued to be the King in the eyes of his family and unrelated dependents. In fact, the treaty of 1856 that unseated him allowed him to retain his royal title²⁵. All that came to a close with his passing.

Scores of biryani shops started coming up in Metiabruz, which was fast starting to lose its grandeur. The center of the neighborhood was Wajid Ali Shah, both culturally and economically. Now that he was gone, the life also went out of "Lucknow on the banks of the Hooghly". But Bengali Hindu consumers of that biryani considered themselves fortunate to be eating a dish originally served to Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. They were hardly aware that biryani was seldom served to him, keeping in mind the dish's proletarian roots. And owing to those roots, biryani was cooked in bulk to be sold to the public. Till date, most restaurants in India do not sell pulao, the original meat-and-rice dish served to the Awadh royalty (and before that to the Mughal household and associated nobles). The "royal" origins of the biryani they sell to Mughlai connoisseurs is actually misleading: biryani never had any royal roots.

With the passage of time, restaurants all over Calcutta, both Hindu and Moslem, started selling imitations of the biryani that was first developed in Metiabruz, with potato as a compulsory component of the dish. This biryani ultimately came to be known, and became famous, by the name of Calcutta biryani. But ideally speaking, this biryani should be called the Metiabruz biryani,

prepared as it was by the royal cooks of Awadh in the employ of the deposed Nawab Wajid Ali Shah during his stay in Metiabruz and after his death. There was no biryani in Calcutta before his arrival in the city in 1856, at least not one that was sold to the public and cooked in the *dumpukht* style with potato as its signature ingredient. The Metiabruz biryani was indeed a variant of the Awadhi biryani, but never a "royal" Awadhi cuisine.

Curiously, pulao, the original rice-and-meat royal dish, came to be regarded as a vegetarian preparation for the residents of Calcutta and elsewhere. It is still considered a dish prepared by boiling pre-soaked rice with fried vegetables and exotic spices. It is not only cooked on family occasions but widely sold in this form by restaurants all over the country. Sadly, the yakhni pulao, in which pre-soaked rice is boiled in meat (mutton/beef) stock with liberal quantities of meat (already cooked with spices while making the stock) thrown in, is very difficult to find in Indian restaurants selling Mughlai food. Even "connoisseurs" regard it as a variant of biryani but not cooked in the *dumpukht* style. That pulao, yakhni or whatever, is actually of Central Asian origin is news to many Bengalis. And it was pulao in scores of varieties that was perfected by the *bawarchis* of Awadh and served to the royal family, not biryani. There is no reason to believe that they broke with this tradition in Metiabruz where the emphasis was for everyone to maintain the continuity of the Awadh court, albeit in a faraway location.

Conclusion

There is no doubt Metiabruz biryani did not get its due. For one, what is known as Calcutta biryani is actually Metiabruz biryani. Ideally, it should have been named that. The local residents of Calcutta in the late 19th century did not innovate it; on the contrary, it was a modified version of the Lucknow Awadhi pulao, cooked with potatoes to serve a larger public clientele and not in the least because a deposed Wajid Ali Shah had fallen on hard times. Many cooks from the royal kitchen, no more in the service of the exiled Nawab, had opened eateries all over Metiabruz and the rest of Calcutta during his lifetime to serve a local clientele (mostly Bengali Hindus) with an exotic dish which they claimed to have served to him. Little did Bengalis know that Moslem royalty,

25. A similar provision was made for the Last Emperor of China, Aisin Gioro Pu Yi. But the deposed Chinese Emperor received a regular compensation for meeting the expenses incurred in maintaining the erstwhile royal household. Wajid Ali Shah received no such compensation.

especially of the Awadh clan, were seldom given biryani; it was pulao that they always ate.

The bawarchis of Lucknow in 19th century Calcutta not only introduced potatoes in their newly-innovated meat dish, but modified the cooking too: for the Nawab, they followed the pulao system, cooking meat, potato and rice together; for the public, they revived the biryani system of cooking rice and meat (along with potatoes) separately and assembling them before a final slow steaming (dum). Their local Bengali clientele was never told about this modification, nor did they know anything about Awadhi cooking; they were happy to be served a meat dish which they believed was actually a part of the Awadhi *dastarkhwan*. Curiously, Bengali babus and their families, for reasons still not clear, started believing that pulao was actually a vegetarian dish. The yellow-colored sweet *basanti* pulao was developed in Bengali households as a respectable dish meant for special occasions; it still has no parallel anywhere in India. Never were Bengalis told that pulao was in reality an exotic and highly-flavored central Asian meat dish. Accordingly, the name “meat pulao” cooked in many north Indian eateries and Moslem households, is a misnomer: the very name pulao denotes rice cooked with meat; only that Bengalis, lovers of the Calcutta biryani, was blissfully unaware of its origins.

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah left the world a little more than a decade before the 20th century set in. By that time, Calcuttans had made the biryani that originated in his Metiabruz kitchens (and later at the Moslem eateries opened all over that beleaguered part of city) their very own. It is still the only biryani in India that has potatoes as ingredients and has a distinct aroma and taste, making it the first choice of Bengalis for any occasion, big and small. Though very few eateries can boast of using the authentic recipe for cooking it, only a small segment of food connoisseurs can pronounce on the degree of authenticity. It is unlike any biryani cooked anywhere else in India, including the Awadhi, Mughlai, Hyderabad, Punjabi, Malabari, and Pakistani varieties. Nor is it a pulao anymore. Whether the Calcutta biryani in its present form could have been able to cheer up the Jan-e-alam is anyone's guess. But one thing is for sure: the sooner we start calling it Metiabruz biryani instead of Calcutta biryani, it is better. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh (and then of Metiabruz) and the biryani associated with him, deserve it.

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