The Beauties of Lucknow: An Urdu Photographic Album

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Abstract

ʿAbbās ʿAlī of Lucknow published several volumes of photographs which were unique in being accompanied by text in English and Urdu. The Beauties of Lucknow (1874), an album of female performers and costumed actors from the Indar Sabhā, is attributed to him. Based on examination of the rare book in five archival locations, this article accounts for the variations among them. It distinguishes between the photographer’s authorial intentions and the agency of artisans, collectors, and others who altered the artifact at various stages. Comparison of the textual apparatus of the English and Urdu editions reveals the author’s mode of address to different audiences. The Urdu introduction, saturated with poetic tropes, provides insight into ways of viewing photographs as formulated among the local cognoscenti. The article proposes that ʿAbbās ʿAlī’s book was meant as a private gift, as well as a publication for wider circulation.

Keywords

History of photography – ʿAbbās ʿAlī – Lucknow – female performers – Urdu theatre and drama

1 Introduction

In 2014, a set of images from The Beauties of Lucknow, an Indian photographic album published in 1874, appeared online in Tasveer Journal from Bangalore. These photographs revived interest in early portraits of courtesans from the subcontinent, a topic of perennial fascination. The inclusion of costumed
actors from a well-known work of Urdu musical theatre, Indar Sabhā (The Assembly of King Indar), was particularly compelling. The actors’ photographs provide the first visual documentation of popular performances that began in Lucknow, traveled to Bombay and into the Parsi theatrical companies, and from there migrated to points around the world. Thus began the present inquiry into the photographic album and its accompanying prefaces in English and Urdu.

Several prior studies have treated The Beauties of Lucknow (BOL), its alleged creator, ʿAbbās Ṭāli, and its place in the history of Indian photography. Sophie Gordon emphasizes the backward-looking orientation of the album, its evocation of melancholy and longing for the glories of pre-1856 Lucknow, comparable to architectural photographs of the time. Christopher Pinney similarly cites it as “a nostalgic eulogy for Wajid Ali Shah’s court,” positing that it was addressed to an Indian male audience. Zahid Chaudhary views Beauties of Lucknow as an example of photographic portraiture based in European conventions yet embodying colonial difference. The work shows the “splendor of the Avadh court in female form.” Alka Patel too sees ʿAbbās Ṭāli’s albums as continuous with the long history of Mughal painting, in particular its collection in album format. On a different note, Veena Oldenburg attempts to historicize the female subjects as ʿṭāvāʾif, cultured courtesans who once enjoyed great wealth and status.

Set against these rather sweeping analyses, this project starts by investigating the materiality of the photographs and the manner in which the albums were assembled. Although sometimes termed cartes de visite, the photographs within Beauties—as announced on its title page—are cabinet-sized albumen prints (Figure 1). In the history of photography in India, the mass production and distribution of portraits began in the 1850s when daguerreotypes were replaced by paper prints produced from negatives. The carte de visite (cdv) was a studio portrait mounted on card stock of 2.5 × 4 in, with the image being slightly smaller. Used widely in the 1850s and 1860s in India, cdvs were supplemented by the larger but still portable cabinet cards in the 1870s. The photos in The Beauties of Lucknow in the George Eastman Museum measure 10.5 × 15 cm (4.13 × 5.9 in).

1 Hansen, “Migration of a Text.”
2 Gordon, “A Sacred Interest.”
3 Pinney, Coming of Photography, 36.
4 Chaudhary, Afterimage of Empire, 135.
5 Patel, “Photographic Albums of Abbas Ali.”
6 Oldenburg, “Sidelines” and “Lifestyle as Resistance.”
7 Dewan, Embellished Reality, 25.
THE BEAUTIES OF LUCKNOW;
CONSISTING OF
TWENTY-FOUR SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHED PORTRAITS,
CABINET SIZE, OF
THE MOST CELEBRATED AND POPULAR
LIVING HISTRIONIC SINGERS, DANCING GIRLS, AND ACTRESSES
OF THE
OU DH COURT AND OF LUCKNOW,
AS PER LIST;
WITH
A SHORT EXPLANATORY INTRODUCTION.

THE WHOLE COMPRISING
A VALUABLE ALBUM.

Calcuta:
CALCUTTA CENTRAL PRESS COMPANY, LIMITED,
5, COUNCIL HOUSE STREET.
1874.

FIGURE 1  The Beauties of Lucknow (GEM), 1874, title page
COURTESY OF THE GEORGE EASTMAN MUSEUM
The album, or some element of it, is held in at least five archives and collections, and in each instance it is somewhat different from the others. All but one of the holdings are in English. Discrepancies are noticeable in the color of cover and binding, the number of photographs, their order and size, and the captions attached to each image. This essay compares the extant versions and analyzes the variations to explore the manner of the album’s construction. The imperfect, unique character of each artifact suggests the need for distinctions.

Is the work the author’s publication in a standardized form? Is it a personally compiled scrapbook? Or is it an assortment put together by a dealer or collector? My argument is that ʿAbbās Ṭali’s Beauties of Lucknow, like the photographer’s two other published albums, should be treated as an artfully composed book—with title page, table of contents, introductory text, and illustrations presented in a definite order—not in the dismembered fashion in which it later circulated. I define the appropriate unit of study as the published volume, basing my approach on examination of the book in multiple locations.

In the second part of the essay, I take up a close reading of the book’s introductory matter. The English-language version contains a preface and an introduction; the Urdu edition has a single introductory essay. Although some material is shared between the English and Urdu introductions, they reveal separate preoccupations. Each encodes complex messages that inform an understanding of the images and the purposes for which the albums were intended. ʿAbbās Ṭali’s Urdu introduction is a beguiling document with a poetic sensibility. While it suggests ways of viewing meant for a local audience of contemporaries, some of whom were new to photographic portraiture, it is equally valuable to those who would interpret his images today.

ʿAbbās Ṭali and Indian Photographers in Lucknow

In the history of photography in South Asia, ʿAbbās Ṭali holds a special position. He was the only Indian photographer in the nineteenth century to publish his work in book form. Although lesser known than Deen Dayal (1844–1905), court photographer for the Nizam of Hyderabad, ʿAbbās Ṭali too trained as an engineer. Both attended the Thomason Civil Engineering College in Roorkee (now IIT Roorkee) and began producing photographs in the mid-1860s.

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8 Also spelled Ubbas Alli and Abbass Allee. He is sometimes listed under his title, Darogha, Daroga, or Darogah (superintendent), and/or as Haji, thus Daroga Haji or Haji Daroga Abbas Ali.
9 Sharma, “Darogha Ubbas Alli.”
ʿAbbās ʿAlī was one of a quartet of Indian photographers working in Lucknow in the momentous period before and after the Rebellion of 1857. Whereas the work of European photographers such as Samuel Bourne, Felice Beato, and John Edward Saché had a ready-made audience and circulated widely, the Lakhnavī photographers operated within a more circumscribed network. They produced a large and diverse oeuvre, much of which is understudied. Closeness to the royal court, as well as to circles of British officialdom, marks at least three of the photographers.

Aḥmad ʿAlī Khān, known as chhoṭe miyānī, was the first of the four, active in the 1850s and early 1860s. By occupation an architect (he designed the Qaiṣar Bāgh), he was in demand as a photographer of British subjects. His formal and intimate portraits of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (Navvāb Vājid ʿAlī Shāh) and his family are extraordinary (Figure 2). He also documented the city's architectural landmarks in masterful panoramas predating the 1857–58 destruction. Although he fought against the British during the strife, he later received a pardon and joined the Bengal Photographic Society. Captain Trevor Wheler collected hundreds of his photographs, under the title Lucknow Album, in two volumes (1858).

Working in the 1860s and 1870s was Mashkūr ud-Daulah, proprietor of a well-known commercial studio in Lucknow. His celebrity as a portrait photographer is mentioned in works of Hindi and Urdu literature, as well as in the Urdu newspaper Oudh Akhbar (Avadh Aḵhār). His name, a title meaning “lauded in the realm,” was bestowed by the former sovereign. Many of his albumen prints are stamped with “Mushkoooroudowlah Photographer, Lucknow” in capital letters (Figure 3). Some of his work survives in the Lucknow State Museum.

Mashkūr ud-Daulah’s younger brother was Aṣghar Jān (also spelled Asgar or Asghur). The two brothers co-signed some photographs, and after Mashkūr ud-Daulah’s death, Aṣghar ran the business, identifying himself as “Photographer;

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10 Roy, “Biographies of the Photographers.”
12 India Office Select Materials, Visual Arts, Photo 269/1 and 269/2. Aḥmad ʿAlī’s work is also preserved in the Alkazi Collection of Photography, New Delhi.
13 Bharatendu Harishchandra mentions the photographer’s shop in a travel sketch of Lucknow in 1871 (Stark, “Hindi Publishing,” 251). Qurratulain Hyder entitles Chapter 28 of her novel River of Fire “Champabai, Chowdhrai of Lucknow, Photograph by Mashkoom-ud-Daulah, 1868.” When readers of the Urdu newspaper Oudh Akhbar sent in proposals for the regulation of prostitution, one suggested the issuing of individual certificates with photographs taken by Mashkūr ud-Daulah attached. One reader’s letter is from 1862, a possible aid in dating the start of the photographer’s activity (Oldenburg, Making of Colonial Lucknow, 139).
Figure 2 Photographic portrait titled “Nawaub Raj Begum Sahibah of Oudh,” by Aḥmad ʿAlī Ḵ̄an, c. 1855
© THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD OIOC PHOTO 500/(3)
Figure 3  Carte de visite of Nażir Jān, by Mashkūr ud-Daulah
Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum © ROM
Late Mushkoooroddoulah’s Firm, Lucknow, Kaisur Bagh.” Both photographers made many cartes de visite of courtesans, a number of which are held in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Aṣghar Jān was called as a witness in a historic lawsuit, in an unusual attempt to use photographic evidence to ascertain a woman’s reputation.

‘Abbās ‘Alī flourished and photographed between the mid-1860s and mid-1880s. His oeuvre circulated for generations in limited editions of published books. He worked for the British government and enjoyed the patronage of Sir George Couper, Lieutenant Governor of the North-Western Provinces and Chief Commissioner of Oudh. ‘Abbās ‘Alī dedicated both of his signed albums to Couper, and his signature block mentioned “His Honor the Lieutenant Governor” as his patron.

‘Abbās ‘Alī published three books of photographs, and he joined to each a descriptive text. Two of these albums were clearly credited to him. The first was The Lucknow Album, an illustrated guide to the city, published in Calcutta in 1874. From it, we learn that ‘Alī was employed as Assistant Municipal Engineer in Lucknow. The book includes a detailed map of the city, a sample of his draughtsmanship (Figure 4).

The second album, whose short title is The Rajas and Taaluqdars of Oudh, was published in Allahabad in 1880, by which time ‘Alī was listed as Government Pensioner and Late Municipal Engineer (Figure 5). The album is a photographic gallery of 342 cartes de visite-sized prints of rulers, with notes on their family histories and a multi-chaptered history of the province of Avadh. The work is bilingual. English and Urdu letterpress are bound in the same volume, the photographs sandwiched in between (Figure 6).
THE BEAUTIES OF LUCKNOW

THE LUCKNOW ALBUM.

CONTAINING A SERIES OF
FIFTY PHOTOGRAPHIC VIEWS OF LUCKNOW
AND ITS ENVIRONS
TOGETHER WITH A LARGE Sized
PLAN OF THE CITY
EXEcutED BY
PAROGHA JUBBAS ALLI,
Assistant Municipal Engineer.

TO THE ABOVE IS ADDED
A FULL DESCRIPTION OF EACH SCENE DEPICTED.
THE WHOLE FORMING A COMPLETE
ILLUSTRATED GUIDE
TO THE CITY OF LUCKNOW
THE CAPITAL OF OUDH.

CALCUTTA:
Printed by S. J. ROUSE, BAPTIST Mission Press.
1874.

FIGURE 4  The Lucknow Album, by 'Abbās 'Ali, 1874, title page
COURTESY OF THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE AND
INTERNET ARCHIVE

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Figure 5  Illustrated Historical Album of the Rajas and Taluqdar of Oudh, by ‘Abbās ‘Alī, 1880, book cover

Note: The book cover displays the spelling taluqdar, whereas the title page uses taaluqdor. The latter spelling is adopted in bibliographies and catalogues.

COURTESY OF THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE AND INTERNET ARCHIVE
Figure 6 Sample page of *Illustrated Historical Album of the Rajas and Taaluqdars of Oudh*, by ʿAbbās ʿAlī (page 53)

courtesy of the Getty Research Institute and Internet Archive
More elusive is ‘Abbās ‘Alī’s unsigned work, The Beauties of Lucknow, published in Calcutta in 1874. The attribution to ‘Abbās ‘Alī dates to 1883, to a volume titled Pictorial Lucknow by P. C. Mookherji, himself an early Indian photographer and an archaeologist.⁰² No scholar to my knowledge has disputed the attribution or sought to justify it, and Beauties is generally catalogued under ‘Alī’s name. The album presents portraits of women characterized as “singers, dancing girls, and actresses,” as per the title page (see Fig. 1). It exists in separate editions in Urdu and English. Only the Urdu is mentioned in Mookherji.

3 Archival Holdings

The Beauties of Lucknow (BOL) is a rare book that is difficult to access. With the assistance of sympathetic curators, I examined it in four locations in 2014–16: the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (VA), the Alkazi Collection of Photography in New Delhi (ACP), the New York Public Library, Dance Division (NYPL), and the private collection of Shri Amit Ambalal in Ahmedabad (AA).

Images from several of these sources have been posted online in the past decade. NYPL has digitized and posted all of its BOL photos; they are in the public domain. Five images originally from AA are on Wikimedia Commons, and four VA images are on the museum’s website. Other locations include Tasveer Journal, where twelve images from AA appeared in 2014; this site is no longer active.²¹

Three archives hold the complete or nearly complete album. Only VA and GEM possess bound volumes, and each contains the full 24 images. The cover of the VA album is reddish orange and shows wear, with minimal decoration. The GEM cover is dark blue with gilt lettering and ornamentation (Figure 7). More is known about the provenance of the GEM book than any other holding. The signature “R. M. Adam” appears several times in the book, indicating Adam’s ownership (See Fig. 1, GEM title page). Adam was a British colonial administrator and ornithologist. While posted as Salt Inspector in Rajasthan, he conducted a survey of birds for Sir A. O. Hume, one of the founders of the Memorial Library, with digitized images available through the Internet Archive. The Urdu title is Tavârîkh ma‘-e Taṣâvvîr-e Râjâgân o Ta’âlluqdarârân-e Mulk-e Avadh and was published by Munshi Naval Kishor in Lucknow.

²⁰ Mookherji, Pictorial Lucknow, 183.
²¹ I also consulted a photocopy of an early-twentieth-century album containing copies of BOL prints in the ROM; see footnote 15. The visual resource most readily available on the internet is the PDF file of the microfilm of BOL made from the album held in the Menschel Library (GEM).
Figure 7  *The Beauties of Lucknow* (GEM), 1874, book cover

COURTESY OF THE GEORGE EASTMAN MUSEUM
Indian National Congress. Alden Scott Boyer, an American manufacturer and collector, purchased the book in 1944. Boyer was one of five major donors who created the Eastman Library. He gifted his huge collection on the history of photography to what is now the George Eastman Museum in 1951. Thus, the GEM BOL had only two owners and passed into the library without going on the market.

The GEM and VA albums contain the same title page, front matter, and introduction. In the VA album, the cabinet cards appear to be hand-pasted onto blank pages of more recent origin. Captions are typed (in one case, handwritten) on separate slips, pasted below the images. The GEM album is similar: it features original binding, with pages sewn together, photographs trimmed and mounted with paste, separate printed captions pasted below, and each plate overlaid with original bound-in tissue interleaving. The size of the GEM book is 25 × 18 cm, with photos measuring 15 × 10.5 cm. The VA volume is of the same size, but the photos are somewhat smaller, measuring 14.6 × 9.5 cm. Some of the VA photos have spots and blemishes, and overall the album is in poorer condition than the GEM book. Nothing is known about how the museum acquired the album.

The captions in these two albums reveal idiosyncrasies that show the handiwork of the compositor or compiler. No. 3, listed as “Mushtri” in the Index, is spelled “Mushtaree” in the caption in GEM and “Mushtari” in VA. No. 13, “Hoosainee” in the Index, becomes “Hosenee” in both albums. GEM captions include the name of the individual followed by “Dancinggirl,” running the words together (Figure 8). A further typo, “Dancingirl,” appears in GEM No. 13. The VA album consistently prints, “Dancing girl.” These variations, like flaws in a handwoven carpet, show a personal touch and highlight the role of often-overlooked artisans.

Turning to the disbound albums, NYPL owns a total of 21 photographs. A box houses the photos, each mounted on cardboard with captions on the back. No book cover, title page, or text are present. The photos and captions bear reference numbers corresponding with the bound albums. A curiosity of the NYPL captions is that each ends with the phrase, “of/from the Oudh Court of Lucknow” (e.g., No. 2, “Gowhur dancing girl of the Oudh Court of Lucknow”).

Adam published “Notes on the Birds of the Sambhur Lake and Its Vicinity” in Stray Feathers I, 1873.
Foster et al., eds., Imagining Paradise, 11–12.
Virginia Dodier (associate librarian at GEM), private correspondence, July 6, 2015.
Charles Carter (assistant curator at NYPL), private correspondence, April 24, 2020. NYPL at the time of purchase declined the three additional images on offer, since the Dance Division deemed them not directly related to dance.
Figure 8  Wazeer Dancinggirl [sic], No. 5 in The Beauties of Lucknow (GEM)  
COURTESY OF THE GEORGE EASTMAN MUSEUM
Most of the NYPL photographs are in excellent condition, showing great care in preserving them. Sadly, they reveal no marks that indicate prior ownership, and nothing is known of their provenance.

The private collection of noted painter Amit Ambalal includes twelve plates from *bol*. These were renumbered and published in *Tasveer Journal* with a brief essay by Tyga Helme.26 During a visit to Shri Ambalal’s home, I noticed the album’s fragile condition, with title page, index, introduction, and half the photos missing. Prints were mounted on pink construction paper, with captions handwritten below in pencil. Although the digital reproductions are in high resolution, some of the photos are torn, discolored, and damaged due to poor handling and storage conditions.

*ACP* is a private archive housing the largest collection of photography in India. It was started by Ebrahim Alkazi, pioneering director of modern Indian theatre, and is currently overseen by Rahaab Allana. *ACP*’s photographs of nineteenth-century India are frequently consulted by historians and reproduced in scholarly publications. The collection is invaluable for preserving pages from the *bol*’s Urdu edition. The ten-page Urdu introduction is present in its entirety. Its pages are original and bound together in a booklet. The photographic plates are captioned in Urdu in ink, handwritten directly on the sheet or backing onto which the photo is mounted (Figure 9).

In addition to the Urdu introduction, *ACP* has two sets of images attributed to ‘Abbās ʿAlī, catalogued under separate numbers.27 There are no pages with photos captioned in English, and there is no title page or Index (table of contents) in either language. A well-worn blue book cover, with the title *Beauties of Lucknow* embossed in English, is included, but all of its contents have been removed. Both cabinet-sized photos (10.5 × 15 cm) and smaller *cartes de visite* mounted on thick paper or cardboard are intermingled.

At least a dozen of the female subjects’ names are recognizable from other copies of *bol*. The images also correspond to other editions, although many are in *cdv* format. However, a number of the images are of different subjects, in varying studio settings. Several closely resemble photographs produced by Mashkūr ud-Daulah and Aṣḡhar Jān. Some prints are clearly copies of earlier photographs. Some are mounted on top of other photographs, or torn from the photographic paper rather than neatly cut.28 Many photos are faded, wrinkled, torn, or damaged.

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26 Helme, “Darogah Abbas Ali.”

27 *ACP* item #2000.17.0002.1 includes 28 images, many from the Urdu edition of *bol* published by Naval Kishor Press, Lucknow. *ACP* item #98.64.0001–0014 includes 14 *cartes de visite* attributed to ‘Abbās ʿAlī.

Figure 9  
Pukhrāj Pari of the Indar Sabhā, from the Urdu edition of The Beauties of Lucknow (ACP), 2000.17.0002.1–26

Courtesy of the Alkazi Collection of Photography
In conclusion, the archival holdings comprise two intact volumes and three sets of individual plates cut out of albums, separated from introductory material, and reassembled. The condition of these disbound sets varies, from the pristine NYPL images to the weathered collections in India. In one case, cartes de visite, copies, and photos from other studios have been boxed together with originals. This intermixture has resulted in images that were not published in BOL being associated with it and attributed to it in scholarly writing.

4 The Photographer as Author

Commercial photographers in the latter half of the nineteenth century were obliged to engage with divergent interest groups as they produced and circulated their work. The comparisons made so far show the agency of various parties—the publisher’s compositor or captioner, the dealer or auctioneer, and eventually the collector—in giving the album its present shape. We turn now to the agency of the photographer per se, to the crafting of the album by its creator. Juxtaposing images rather than albums, the intentions of the photographer as author, and the outline of a story, begin to emerge.

Alternative poses by the same subject indicate that the photographer made multiple shots or exposures of a single individual. The differences may be barely noticeable, as in the views of Gohar, No. 2, in NYPL and VA.29 The poses seem identical until the eye follows the sweep of the dupatta downward and compares the arrangements of the pleats of the skirt. In other cases, the poses are quite different. The majority of the portraits show the subject standing and propping her right elbow on the top of an upholstered chair, with her left hand on her hip. A small number picture her seated. In VA, Umrao Jan (Umrao Jan) (No. 11) stands in the usual pose. But in NYPL, GEM, and AA, she is seated, holding a fan bearing the seal of the house of Avadh, two fish or mermaids lifting a crown.30 The royal emblem brings to mind the claim on the title page that the dancing girls were “of the Oudh court.” The photographer may have inserted it in order to please a particular patron (Figures 10, 11).

Another kind of variation arises from mistaken identities. Wazeer (see Fig. 8) is tagged with three different names and placed in fourth, fifth, or sixth

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29 The Victoria and Albert Museum was shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic at press time, and licensed reproductions of Gohar (BOL No. 2) and Umrao Jan (BOL No. 11) could not be obtained for this article.

30 The Avadh seal is visible at the top of the painted border surrounding the photograph in Fig. 2.
FIGURE 10  Umrao Jan, No. 11 in The Beauties of Lucknow (NYPL)  FROM THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
position, depending on the album: Zohrah (NYPL, No. 4), Ameer Jan (VA, No. 6), and Wazeer (GEM, No. 5). Another example is that of “Ameer Jan, Biba Wali.” The same name is used for two entirely different women, in three albums (NYPL, VA, GEM) (Figures 12, 13).

Regardless of these variations and slips, Beauties of Lucknow presents a standard set of photographs, and these are “as per list,” announced on the title page. The list is the so-called Index, placed at the front of the book after the Preface and before the Introduction. Herein twenty-four photographs are identified by number and name: 1. Ferozah, 2. Gohar, etc. The label “Singer and Dancer” is

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31 The spelling of the names in the printed Index often differs from their spelling in the captions, e.g. Gohar vs. Gowhur. The Index spelling is generally closer to the Urdu, whereas the captions tend to be anglicized, e.g. Pari (Index) vs. Purree (caption).
Figure 12  Ameer Jan, No. 6 in *The Beauties of Lucknow* (NYPL)
FROM THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
FIGURE 13  Ameer Jan, No. 8 in The Beauties of Lucknow (NYPL)
FROM THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
added to each entry, except for Nos. 16–19, listed as “Of the Indur Subha.” By attaching occupations, the author conforms to the classificatory practices of colonial ethnography. Classification is a mode of knowledge, a way of containing the other while displaying an air of erudition. In both the English and Urdu introductions, the author similarly includes brief notes on class and caste. He describes the Domnis (ḍomnīs) of No. 20 as a caste of musicians, and the Sakhun (sāqan) of No. 21 as a class who purvey pān and other stimulants.\(^\text{32}\)

This list or Index provides evidence of the author’s intentionality in structuring the book. It is corroborated by the introductions; both mention the order and numbering of the photographs and explain the volume’s organization. The portraits are internally consistent as well: they are of the same size, share the same studio setting, and show common poses and props. The definitive list, in the form submitted by the author, printed, and bound in the album, is the one found in the GEM album. At one time, it was part of the front matter of each bound album, making it legible as a book. Today it stands as a touchstone for evaluating the authenticity of an album’s contents.

In addition to establishing a kind of ethnographic authority, the author-photographer adopts the attitude of the historian or chronicler. He takes pains to persuade the reader that his subjects are historically significant. They are, according to the English title page, “the most celebrated and popular living histótrionic singers, dancing girls, and actresses of the Oudh court and of Lucknow.” In the preface, he maintains that “former visitors to the court of His Majesty King Wajid Ali” would recognise some of these performers. In other words, he claims that the women in the portraits—at least some of them—were historical figures who were physically present at Wajid Ali’s court in Lucknow.\(^\text{33}\)

These assertions imply a chronology that is problematic. Beauties was published eighteen years after the British annexed Avadh. From 1856 on, the court at Lucknow was a thing of the past, although many retainers, including musicians and dancers, traveled into exile with the former ruler, regrouping at Matiya Burj (Maṭiyā Burj) in Calcutta. For a subject to have been present at court before the takeover and be photographed in the early 1870s, she had to have been very young, about fifteen, which would have made her at least thirty for the photographic sitting. The youthful figures of most of the pictured

\(^{32}\) Sharar, Lucknow: The Last Phase, 145. Sharar glosses ḍomnīs as female entertainers, and says they were great innovators who appropriated male and courtesan musicians’ repertoires and switched from instruments like āhol (a folk drum) to ūtablāh and sārangī. They danced, sang, and played only for female celebrations, and were so popular that men tried to gain admission to their entertainments.

\(^{33}\) The Urdu text, by contrast, makes no claim about a connection between the photographed subjects and the court.
women belie such a condition. The majority appear to be in their teens or early twenties.34

Likewise, the author’s claim that the women are “of Lucknow” overlooks three subjects who are listed as being from other places: Umrao Jan from Joogna, Nazir Jan from Chandarbhaga, and Ameer Jan from Biba. Cartes de visite of some of the women pictured in the BOL album, made by different photographers, point to a range of hometowns: Agra, Jaipur, Baroda, Gwalior.35 This is not surprising, since these were centers of the musical expertise required to become an accomplished singer.

ʿAlī’s representation of his subjects as contemporaries of Wajid Ali Shah and natives of Lucknow might thus be historical fiction rather than rigorous history, but his characterization should not be dismissed as inconsequential. Fully aware of the agenda of British rulers to reform Indian society by marginalizing actresses, dancers, and singers, ʿAlī used portrait photography to endow his subjects with social prestige. To rescue them from a present of moralistic censure and legal regulation, he situated them in the glorious pre-annexation past. BOL is one of the first attempts in South Asia to photograph professional performers in order to create legitimacy for their art. Resisting the denigration often directed at performing women, ʿAlī identified them with the former political regime, which still enjoyed widespread admiration.

Let us return to the materiality of the artifact, noting that the photographic albums ʿAbbās ʿAlī designed were luxury goods. They were meant for gifting to special friends, for adorning drawing room tables, and for private viewing and contemplation. Cabinet-sized prints were expensive and fragile, and they had to be hand-pasted into bound volumes, such that each acquired an individual character. The album format enhanced the value of the portraits and created a market for their recirculation in the form of smaller cdv prints and copies.

I have argued that ʿAlī constructed BOL in a purposeful fashion, adding value to his photographs to make them objects of high cultural status. This is not to say that his images of women were never understood as exoticizing or exploitative.36 ʿAlī’s photographic project, notwithstanding, worked to convert the female performer into a symbol of beauty. Partially, he did this through

34 ʿAbbās ʿAlī may have encountered performing women seeking his services as photographer who claimed to be from the former Nawab’s court. Senior women were among the subjects who sat for photographic portraits. See reference to Champabai by Qurratulain Hyder, in footnote 13.

35 ROM Album of Courtesans, no. 2007.17.1.

36 Gordon, “Monumental Visions,” 195, citing Sasha Altaf, “The Orientalist Gaze,” Art India 5:2 (2000), 79. Some writers have argued that “a manipulative Englishman must have made the portraits,” interpreting them as products of the “orientalist gaze.”
photographic staging: putting his subject in a studio in elaborately patterned and draped textiles, loading her with heavy jewellery, and associating her with European furniture and architectural references. And partially, he relied on textual narrative. Through the introductory essays preceding the photographs, ‘Alī fashioned a drama that unfolded in the magical court of Wajid Ali Shah, where the transformative pleasures of sophisticated music and dance reigned.

5 The Two Introductions

Both the English and Urdu introductions state that the album was created in response to requests from Indians and Europeans for photographs of dancers and actresses. Both stress the artistic excellence of Lucknow and affiliate the performing women with the context of Lucknow’s cultural achievement. The introductions are effusive in crediting Wajid Ali Shah, the ruler of Avadh, for his role as patron of the arts. He constructed the Qaiṣar Bāgh, a pleasure garden for royal entertainments, and commissioned countless performances, most notably the Indar Sabhā. The Indar Sabhā is so important to the conception of the album that a detailed description of its characters and action occupies fully half of each introduction. Both the English and Urdu introductions narrate the plot in the same way. Both make the same point: that through role-playing on stage, Wajid Ali Shah was identified with the godly potentate Indar or Indra of Vedic lore. The Urdu text says that he enacted the part of Rājā Indar. The English has it that he “joined in with the players ... [taking] a most extraordinary part.”

The tone of the two introductions, however, is strikingly different. The Urdu text matter-of-factly describes music and dance events, performed by professionals, as characteristic of sociality in Hindustan, marking the difference from European practice. The English introduction, on the other hand, contests the assumed superiority of Western culture and counters it with “the Oriental magnificence of the entertainments,” in a bid for equivalence. The remarks, although brief, correct the mistaken notion that India lacked theatre and drama and was in need of Shakespeare and the civilizing influence of English literature. The author declares, somewhat defensively, “there are actual theatrical performances in India,” although “there are no such things as scenery [and] machinery [sic].” The comparison thinly veils a political critique.

Asserting a substantial resemblance between the “private entertainments” of India and Europe, the author implies that the palace jalsahs (sessions) were not decadent and immoral, and thus they could not be grounds for dismissal of the Nawab by the British authorities.

Next, the English text sets out to vindicate the reputation of Indian women. Whereas in the first paragraph the author’s strategy was to quote Shakespeare on the possibility of actors playing “on the floor,” here it is to cite aristocratic Englishwomen who traveled in the Orient. The paragraph begins, “Lady Mary Wortley Montague [sic] did much to divest Europeans of the idea that Indians were thick-lipped ugly creatures.” Lady Montagu was an eighteenth-century writer and explorer who travelled as wife to the British ambassador to Turkey; she never went to India. Her published letters praised the charm and beauty of Ottoman women. The text conflates her with Emily Eden, author of the epistolary collection “Up the Country” (1867), which includes a visit to Ranjit Singh’s zanānah (women’s apartments). Eden’s account too is misquoted; it does not match the passage the author attributes to Montagu. But this matters little: the Montagu/Eden persona is merely a ruse, a cover for the author. His description of the zanānah of Ranjit Singh suggests Indar’s court (sabhā), rather than the “wretched, little, low place” visited by Eden. And yet, Eden singles out two wives who “would have been beautiful anywhere” and had “immense almond-shaped black eyes.” This praise of Indian women by a foreign observer emboldens the author to pose the rhetorical question, “Who shall say now that India is destitute of beauties?” With this, he rests his case.

This passage tacitly argues against the prevalent colonial discourse on the oppression of Indian women. It sets the stage for the photographer’s famed “Lucknow beauties” (italics in the original), introduced in the next paragraph. Nothing in the English introduction is said to stigmatize these women. They are not even referenced as a separate category—only as singers, dancers, and actresses, and (in the captions) as dancing girls. The author’s concern in addressing the anglophone reader is to redeem them, to introduce them as subjects deserving of respect. The English text thus skews the association of female performers with feudal decadence and implicitly questions the civilizational narrative that justified colonial rule.

The ten-page document that accompanies Ḥasīnān-e Lakhnaʿū, the Urdu edition of the album, takes a much more lyrical approach. That this text was written for an Indian audience seems obvious, but its very “Urdu-ness” invites

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41 Ḥasīnān is the plural form of ḥasīn (beautiful, handsome) in Persian, a gender-neutral language.
us to attune our method of reading to its distinctive voice. The English introduction engaged with colonial modernity and its discourse on gender; this introduction is steeped in Urdu poetics. Not only is the reader challenged to bring to bear knowledge of Urdu literary tropes and aesthetics, but also to take seriously the ways of thinking about Lucknow and its history that circulated among Urdu speakers (Figure 14).

Unlike its English counterpart, the Urdu text is studded with rhetorical flourishes and digressions. The author—or rather, the speaker, in line with the text’s orality—repeatedly erupts with a *shi’r* (poetic couplet). There are nine *shi’rs* in the first three pages, including two by Mirzā Ǧhālib, the best-known of nineteenth-century Urdu poets. Even the prose is full of Urdu metaphors: the rose in the garden, the wine-bearer and the cup, the heart and its wounds. Without mentioning *ʿishq*, that intricate configuration of passion and desire in its metaphysical and earthly forms, the rich carpet of Indo-Muslim mystico-eroticism is spread before us.

The Urdu text makes no claim about a connection between the album’s subjects and the court. Nor does it position them in the past. Rather, it begins by stressing the continuities between pre-1856 Lucknow and the present. The city is essentially the same, even though there have been changes with the passage of time. Lucknow remains the locus of graceful and splendid sights. This, despite “thousands of ruins, *lakhs* of disasters” (*hažār tabāhī lákh barbādī*)—a momentary recollection of the damage wrought by the annexation debacle and battles of the Mutiny (p. 1).

The text declares that Lucknow is still a *paristān*, a land of captivating fairies. Its people are still given to leisure and luxury, and the city is still full of beauties who slay the hearts of their admirers with their intoxicating singing and dancing.

Here each lane and bylane arouses temptation. The very soil exudes a delicate fragrance. The breeze rains down a shower of revelry. The water intoxicates like undiluted wine. Fire burns with the flames of passion. If this city in matters of beauty and excellence is a sea of refinement, then in flirtatiousness and coquetry it is the end of the world. (p. 2)

Continuing in this vein, the author boasts that Lucknow’s attractions are world-famous. They serve as examples to people in foreign lands, who are eager to learn from them. Here he states his current objective as that of educating the uninformed about the city’s entertainments, a lead-in to the description of its principal pastime, the *Indar Sabhā*: “For the amusement, pleasure, and information of those who are uninformed, some details of the functions
FIGURE 14  Urdu introduction to Hasinān-e Lakhnaū, page 1
COURTESY OF THE ALKAZI COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY
here should certainly be published, and the world should become acquainted with them” (p. 3).

But before proceeding, the album-maker gives his thoughts on pictures (tašvīr) and their value. He addresses his contemporaries, possibly his benefactors, who may be unfamiliar with photographic albums. These ruminations have almost a mystical quality. They elaborate on the virtues of portrait photography and the desirability of collecting photographs and circulating them in album form. The pivot of this passage is the word mulāqāt: a meeting, encounter, or visit. “Through the medium of the photograph, a meeting occurs. Seeing someone’s picture is like seeing that person.” (Fotogirāf ya’ni tašvīr ki vasātāt se mulāqāt hoṭī hai. Jiskī tašvīr ko dekhā goyā usko dekhā.) (p. 3) In Urdu poetry, a mulāqāt is more than a random encounter or momentary connection. The actors in a mulāqāt are themselves ennobled: one is the ideal lover or seeker (the ʿāshiq); the other is the beloved (maʿshūq), whether a beautiful person, a spiritual guide, an angel, a pari (fairy), or God. Their coming together is a long-deferred occasion, a union that eclipses a lifetime of separation and striving.

Photographs, the introduction explains, enable presence, beholding, such that one comes face to face with those not even seen in dreams. (Jo dil-fareb šurateņ kabhi khvāb meņ bhī nahīn naẓar ātiņ vuh tašvīr ke žarī’e se mushāhadah ho saktī hai.) Pictures give pleasure, although less than actual interaction. They are comparable to letters that contain news, or in another phrasing, they enable a “half-beholding” of those who are desired. Nonetheless, they satisfy the longing to see another.

The effects of viewing a photograph are therapeutic. Photographs elevate the spirit and cure men of melancholy. No matter how sorely troubled a person may be (ḡham meņ mubtalā ho), his sorrow will be dispelled, and he will be gladdened by viewing a fine portrait (tašvīr ... ḡham ḡhalat karne væli chīž hai ... insān kisī ḥālat meņ ho ‘undah tašvīr dekh kar khvush ho jātā hai). Chris Pinney has spoken of photography in colonial India as a “cure,” meaning a representational solution to the dilemmas the British faced in knowing and ruling over India. Our author also proposes photography as a cure, but for a different disease. His concern is with the sickness of the heart and the lover’s seemingly endless quest for ‘īlāj or davāʾi, the remedy that will relieve inner suffering.

Amidst this meditation, ‘Abbās ‘Ali refers to the melancholia induced by great distance. He describes the viewer as one “sitting hundreds of miles away” (hazāroņ kos se baṭhā hu’ā). This is an extraordinary turn of phrase, and it is repeated several times for emphasis. Without naming the exiled Wajid Ali

42 A kos is equal to one-eighth of a mile.
Shah, the author conjures up the last king of Avadh and his courtiers sitting in Matiya Burj, longing for the former capital and its pleasures. The former ruler and the displaced nobility of Lucknow may well be the viewers ‘Ali has in mind when he speaks of photography as delectation for the soul (lażżat-e rūḥānī).

6 A Private Audience

Although ‘Ali begins the Urdu introduction by bragging about the superior beauty of the women of Lucknow, he never uses the Urdu equivalents for “woman,” “courtesan,” or even “beloved.” These words would be too vulgar. Rather, Lucknow is called a paristān, a land of fairies, with all the artifice and veiling typical of Urdu style. The figure of the parī encodes an unearthly femininity. Parīs—delicate, enchanting, and sometimes overpowering supernatural beings—were prominent in Persian, Central Asian, and South Asian mythology for centuries. Wajid Ali Shah reanimated the concept after he ascended the throne in 1847. He employed the word parī for the women he personally desired and acquired, mainly from the lower classes and courtesans’ quarters in the city. They were enrolled in his parī-khānah (house of fairies), where music and dance were taught. He gave them names like Mahak Parī, “Fragrant Fairy,” and Yāsmin Parī, “Jasmine Fairy.” These two women, in fact, were historical entertainers whom the king married and made his mutʿah or temporary wives according to Shi‘a law. Each one later graduated to the status of queen (maḥal) after giving birth. Mahak Parī became Ḥaẓrat Maḥal, a heroine of legend.

Together with dozens of other women, their stories are narrated in Wajid Ali’s autobiographical work, Parī-khānah. Their painted images appear in the magnificent illuminated manuscript, ‘Ishq-nāmah, held in Windsor Castle Library.

Most of Lucknow’s residents knew of the Nawab’s parī-khānah only by hearsay, but they could have actually witnessed performances of Indar Sabhā, the famous drama composed by Aḡḥā Ḥasan ‘Alī “Amānāt” in 1853. The phrase indar sabhā refers to the mythic scene of Indra, the king of heaven in Vedic lore, surrounded by his apsarās, or dancing girls. In Amānāt’s retelling of several earlier masnāvis, four parīs are its central characters, named for gemstones (Pukhrāj Parī [Topaz Fairy], La’l Parī [Ruby Fairy], etc.). Amānāt’s play was first

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43 Ḥaẓrat Maḥal went on to lead a militia against the British during the Mutiny. She is sometimes mistakenly identified with Pyari, No. 10 of BOL.
performed in Wajid Ali Shah’s palace, but it had a larger life among the people and was rapidly adapted by popular troupes.\(^{44}\)

In the opening act of the theatrical performance, one by one each parī presents herself before the king, displaying her finery. As she sings and dances, she seduces the king and attempts to become his favorite. BOL includes four photographs of actors from the Indar Sabhā in costume. Unlike the “dancing girl” subjects in the album, these performers are identified only by their stage roles, not by their names. Three are girls or young women (see Pukhrāj Pari, Fig. 9). The most imposing is the tall, dusky Sabz Parī (Emerald Fairy). The protagonist of the second part of the Indar Sabhā, she is a renegade immortal who smuggles Gulfām, an earthling, into the heavens. After King Indar expels him, she becomes a mendicant (jogin) and roams the world, searching for her lost love. In the photograph, the actress’s long matted locks and hand-held bīn, a reed instrument favored by snake charmers, signify her jogin aspect. She lacks wings: Indar had clipped them as punishment. Yet, strangely, she wears a crown. Her brocaded robe and oversized shoes match those of her sister parīs in the album (Figure 15).

The fourth actor from the Indar Sabhā plays the king, accompanied by two of his demon attendants (devs). This photo is an anomaly: it is the only one in the album that represents a male subject. Whether by accident or design, it is missing from the VA version, but it is present in GEM and NYPL. The actor seems hastily costumed for the part. He wears no makeup or jewellery, and his long hair is undressed. The two bodyguards at his feet wear repulsive masks. Between them is a puppet or dummy of a white man. This unusual “character” has a trimmed goatee, wispy moustache, and bald head. His nose looks to be cut or sliced off—a common trope for humiliation or dishonor. This curious mannequin suggests that comic scenes based on mockery of Europeans were interpolated in performances of the Indar Sabhā. The photograph may well have been staged with subversive intent, to communicate loyalty to the bygone monarch and resistance to the British Raj (Figure 16).

These actors’ portraits, while somewhat out of keeping with the rest of the album, document cultural happenings at the court and in Lucknow’s public spaces. They illustrate another side of the Nawab’s connoisseurship of the arts. They may also have been included for a more private purpose, as a personal tribute to the patron who promoted Avadh’s cultural innovations. The portrait of Raja Indar could have been made as a special gift to the exiled king. With its sly insertion of a disfigured white man, crouching among demons at the feet of the ruler, the photographer created an homage.

\(^{44}\) Hansen, “Indar Sabha Phenomenon.”
FIGURE 15  Sabz Pari, No. 18 in The Beauties of Lucknow (NYPL)
FROM THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
FIGURE 16 Raja Indar, No. 19 in *The Beauties of Lucknow* (NYPL)
FROM THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
The BOL, especially the Urdu edition, can therefore be conceived as a kind of Festschrift, an offering in words and pictures, to Wajid Ali Shah. In it, ʿAbbās ʿAli used the medium of photography to author a new Parī-khānah. Through viewing the album, through the intercession of the photograph, the former ruler could experience a “meeting,” a beholding of those beauties of Lucknow who were so hard to reach from far-off Calcutta. Whether or not the album was ever delivered to the former king, it surely resonated among those gentry and associates who shared his sorrow. In the face of the annexation of his kingdom, his exile, and his loss of power, ʿAbbās ʿAli provided a cure.

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