

Historical Images of British India Facts and Fantasies

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Abstract

When the East India Company's servants first arrived in Bengal in the beginning of the seventeenth century they portrayed themselves, what Hastings later described as 'the humble and undreaded character of trading adventurers' - their sole aim being to earn hefty profits before returning to England. They had brought with them teams of writers to record transactions of their trades as well as to write down details of their adventures in a strange land. With them also came men who would collect specimen of manufactured and agricultural products, local flora and fauna, crafts, costumes etc. They were followed by those who could draw and paint scenes of everyday life in towns and countryside, pictures of native men and women belonging to various races, tribes, professions, trades, their social and religious customs, etc, which could either be exploited for trade by their countrymen or which could be sold in the growing market of curiosities brought to England from foreign lands.

The East India Company also commissioned a number of artists who, in order to meet the growing demand for such works at home produced a large quantity of drawings and prints illustrating trades, occupations, tools and economic processes etc to illustrate the economy and technology of a traditional civilization which was fast disappearing under the onslaught of cheap and mass produced products manufactured by industrially advanced countries of Europe. The British painters were also assisted by a number of Indian artists and painters, who, working under their patronage and adapting their traditional skills to new European tastes and techniques, were able to produce a large number of paintings and drawing on similar themes.

With the steady growth of company's power and expansion of its territories, British officials also began commissioning and patronizing paintings and drawings of various important events, places as well as portraits of important personalities in India. Individual artists, travelers, and officials also added to this collection impressions of their personal

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experiences in the subcontinent. With the advent of photography these collections were greatly augmented by the works of a number of famous photographers, such as Samuel Bourne, Johnstone, Hoffman, Deen Dayal etc. In addition to all these the company officials also acquired a large number of Mughal masterpieces of the Akbar and Jahangir's period, including the famous Dara Shikoh Album as well as many important portraits of the eighteenth century rulers, famous personalities, landscapes, seascapes and battle scenes.

Specimen of such drawings, paintings, prints and photographs can be found in a large number of private collections, museums, archives, and libraries in the subcontinent, in Europe and in America - the largest single such collections being in the Prints and Drawings Section of the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library in London. For the people of the subcontinent these collections represent sometimes the only surviving record of the arts, crafts, costumes, monuments, people etc of this period, and provide glimpses of the social and cultural life their ancestors enjoyed during the 18th and early part of the 19th century. To the British public at large they provide an Aladdin's cave to arouse nostalgic memories of their imperial past.

The importance of these collections acquires extra importance when one realizes the paucity of contemporary published accounts of this bloodstained and tumultuous period of the subcontinent's history which had witnessed the final collapse of the once glorious Mughal empire and the foundation of the British empire in India. The result is that there are many aspects of our past history and details of life, character and contributions of various native rulers and individuals which remains obscure from our eyes.

This is particularly true of the period between 1700 and 1857 during which the British had achieved almost a complete domination over India. For example there is hardly any contemporary published account of the Mughal emperor Shah Alam's life by a native author.¹

¹ Jean Law De Lauriston's *Memoire de L'Empire Mogol*, Paris, 1913; A.L.H. Polier's *Shah Alam and his court*, Calcutta, 1947; K.K.Datta, *Shah Alam and the East India Company*, 1965; Michael Edward's *King of the World*, London, 1970 are a few other works which have been produced during the subsequent two hundred years. In addition one can perhaps glean some additional information on this subject from A.K. Majumdar's *Raja Rammohun Roy and the last Moguls*, Calcutta, 1939; Percieval Spear's *Twilight of the Mughals*, Cambridge, 1951, Jadunath Sarkar's *Fall of the Mughal empire* and Datta's *Later Mughals*.

Bahadur Shah II, the last of the Mughal emperors has attracted a little more attention, but with the exception of Munshi Faiz Uddin's eye-witness

The only exception being Francklin's History of the reign of Shah Aulum (London, 1798) which is based on the Persian manuscript *Shah Alam-namah, or A'in Alamshahi* by Ghulam Ali. It is, however, incomplete as it ends in 1793.

If we look for any account of the life of Shah Alam's son and successor Akbar Shah II (1806 – 1837) who ruled for nearly thirty one years there is not a single work available either in Persian or Urdu or for that matter even in English.

The lack of interest in this period by historians is, I believe, not due to the absence of primary sources, for there exists in the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library, as well as in various archives in India and Pakistan a vast amount of material, including original correspondence of Shah Alam, Akbar Shah and Bahadur Shah II with the British and some contemporary Persian accounts by native authors which could keep a large number of researchers occupied for years to come. I believe it is because the time has marched on and the historians find it much more rewarding to write on the freedom movement and political heroes of the immediate past than on the tragic lives of the last Mughal emperors of India. The result is that with the exception of Ghulam Husain Tabatabai's sketchy and anecdotal account of this period, *Siyar al-mutakhirin* [Calcutta, 1833] our perception and understanding of events of this period is, more or less solely based on one-sided, and often jaundiced accounts of events and personalities published by the British during the heyday of the British *raj*. Similarly, in many instances, the visual images of historical events and personalities produced during this period are based on complete ignorance, mistaken identities or simply to boost the ego of some company official in the eyes of his compatriots at home.

For example during his stay in India Lord Clive had commissioned a number of paintings of events in which he had played a leading role. This includes a well-known painting, entitled, 'Lord Clive receiving the Diwani of Bengal, Behar and Orissa from Shah Alam in August 1765'.

The painting shows Shah Alam 11, robed in gold-coloured satin with turban to match, seated on his throne under a large canopy in the Diwan-I Khas of the Red Fort at Delhi conveying the grant of Diwani, or fiscal administration of Bengal, Behar and Orissa to Lord Clive. He is

account of the social and cultural life at his court, entitled *Bazm-i Akhir*, Mahdi Hasan's *Bahadur Shah II and the War of 1857*, Rais Ahmad Jafari's *Bahadur Shah* and Burke and Quraishi's *Bahadur Shah II* almost all other works deal mainly with his life as a poet or his role in the Mutiny of 1857.

accompanied, on his right, by his second in command, General Carnac, followed by Captain Swinton, Major Pearson and other officers in full uniform. Behind these are the banners of the Mughal emperor and some elephants.

The original painting was at one time the property of Lord Plymouth and was kept at Oakley Park. A copy, painted by Benjamin West on a canvass of approximately 285 x 375 cm was presented by the First Earl of Powis and the son of Lord Clive, to the India Office in 1820.

This painting was first reproduced as an illustration in Michael Edwardes' *Plasssey: the founding of an empire* (London, 1969) and recently as a dustcover of *The British Raj: an historical review* by S. M. Burke and Salim al-Din Quraishi (Karachi, OUP, 1993).

Assuming it to be a true representation of an actual historical event a number of historians have added fanciful details to make their version of events credible. The fact of the matter is that, 'no such ceremony ever took place – the firman and the Khillat were merely dispatched to Major Carnac at Patna to be forwarded to Clive.'²

Describing it as a treaty signed between Shah Alam and Lord Clive and without citing any sources to support their assertion, some later historians have added imaginative details to prove the authenticity of their remarks.

W.H. Davenport Adams,³ for example, advocates that: the treaty was signed by Shah Alam on 'August 12, 1765, in Clive's own tent, the imperial throne being represented by a chair supported upon a couple of tables'.

Michael Edwardes⁴ adds the following details to the above account: 'On 12 August the emperor seated himself in Clive's tent on a throne made from an armchair, covered with brocade and mounted on a dining-table. He then formally handed to Clive the written allocation of the revenue. The British were now, *de jure*, a part of the Mughal empire'.

Edwardes also quotes the opinion of a contemporary Indian historian who, while commenting on the haste and ease with which this deal was concluded, declares 'at any other time [this] would have required the sending of wise ambassadors and able negotiators, as well as a deal of parley and conference with Company and the king of England, and much negotiations and contentions with the ministers, was done and

² See a note accompanying the above mentioned painting by Benjamin West in the India Office Library.

³ W.H. Davenport Adams, *The Makers of British India*, London, 1954, p.79.

⁴ Michael Edward, *King of the World*, London, 1970.

finished in a less time than would have been taken up for the sale of a jackass, or a beast of burden, or of a herd of cattle’.

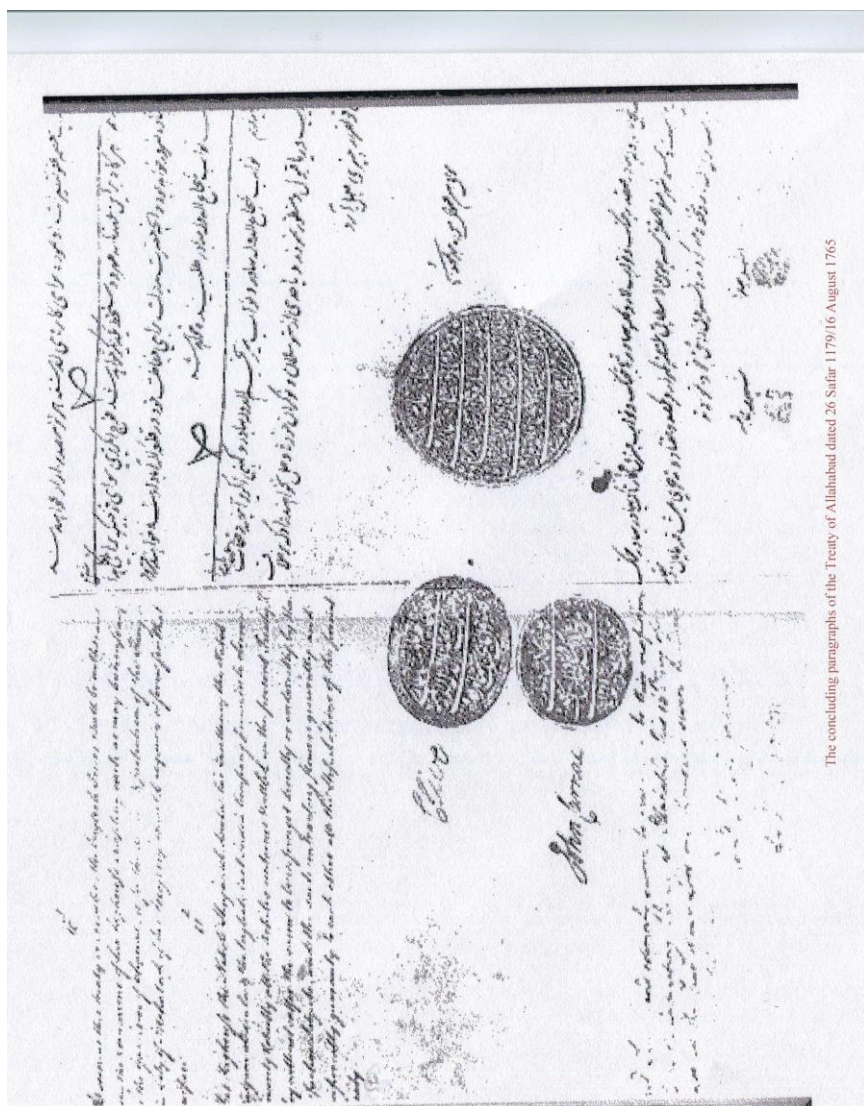
As a matter of fact the treaty of 1765 referred to above by Adams, Edwardes, Smith etc (see picture) was concluded on 26 Safar, 1179 AH/ 16 August, 1765 not between Shah Alam and Lord Clive but between Shuja al-Daulah, the estranged [The emperor had deprived Shuja al-Daulah of his office of wazir after the battle of Buxur] Nawab Wazir of Oudh, and the teen-aged Nawab Mir Najm al-Daulah, the Navab of Bengal on one hand and Lord Clive and General Carnac on the other. Shah Alam’s name is mentioned in this treaty only in clause ten where it is agreed between the two parties that the East India Company would withdraw its forces from all areas and only a small force which may be required for the personal protection of the Emperor Shah Alam, will be kept, if he so desires, in the fort of Allahabad, and that it could be recalled by Nawab Shuja al-Daulah whenever he may like to do so.

The treaty is written in English and Persian, but bears the official seals of the following signatories in Persian only:⁵

1. On the right-large round seal with the inscription: Vazir al-Mumalik, Umdat al-Mulk, Madar al-Maham, Umdat al-Daulah, Asafjah, Burhan al-mulk, Shujah al-Daulah, Abu al-Mansur Khan Bahadur Safdar Jang, Yar-I vafadar, sipah-salar, fidvi-yi Shah Alam Badshah Ghazi. [Minister of State, noble of country, chancellor of exchequer; faithful companion, commander-in-chief of the Imperial army, a servant of Shah Alam Badshah Ghazi].
2. On the left top - oblong seal with the inscription: Zubdat al-Mulk, Mansur al-Daulah Lord Clive Sabitjang Bahadur, Fidvi-yi Shah Alam Badshah Ghazi.[the cream of state, defender of state, Lord Clive, firm in war, servant of Shah Alam Badshah Ghazi].
3. On the bottom left - round seal with the inscription: Mansur al-Mulk, Rukn al-Daulah Major John Carnac Bahadur, Bahadur Jang, Fidvi-yi khas Shah Alam. [Defender of State, Pillar of State, Major John Carnac Bahadur, Valiant in war, most devoted servant of Shah Alam Badshah Ghazi].

⁵ It was reproduced in the *Journal of Indian Art* for July 1890; also in the *Relics of the Honourable East India Company* (1909). For some time it was in the possession of Sir John Kaye [see his letter in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 27th April 1875, William Foster, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Paintings, Statues etc in the India Office*, 5th ed, London, 1924, p.77.

Plate: 1



The text of the concluding paragraph of the treaty in Persian reads:

Nawab Shuja al-Daulah Bahadur, Safdar Jang va Navab Lord Clive Bahadur Sabitjang, va Navab General Carnac Bahadur, Bahadur Jang, batarikh-I bist va shashum shahr-I Safar al-Muzaffar, Sanah-i Julus-I vala, mutabiq Sanah 1179, yak hazar va yak sad va haftad va nau Hijri, bamushafihah mayan dar muqam-I Allahabad bar-in 'ahd-namah dastkhatt va muhr kardand va qasm-I din va a'in-I khud numudand. [Navab Shuja al-Daulah, Lord Clive and General Carnac concluded this agreement after their meeting in person at Allahabad on 26th Safar, 1179 Hijri, and have signed and affixed their seals on this document on that date and took oaths of their religion and laws to abide by this agreement].

This statement is followed by impressions of two small personal seals of two witnesses, Muhammad Umar and Salamat Allah. The English text is witnessed by Messer. Edmund Masculine, Archibald Swinton and George Navistar.

It is interesting to note here that on their personal seals, Clive and the other British officials proudly declare their subservience, allegiance and loyalty to the Mughal emperor and claim themselves to be the most devoted servant of Shah Alam and not that of the East India Company.

Similarly, in his correspondence with Clive, Carnac and Lord Lake the emperor addresses them as his most sincere or obedient servants. For example Major John Carnac is addressed as:

Amárat va iyálat-i martabat, Fidvi-yi khas ba-ikhlas, daulatkhvah-i bargah-i badshahi, qabil-i 'atufat va al-ihsan, hizabr arsay-yi dilavari, Mansur al-Mulk, Rukn al-Daulah Major John Carnac Bahadur, Bahadur Jang. [Commander and governor of distinction, favourite and sincere servant, well-wisher of the prosperity of the state, worthy of affection and kindness, the lion of valour].

Shah Alam, in his correspondence with Lord Clive, addresses him as:

Amárat va iyálat-i martabat, hashmat va shaukat-I manzilát, Fidvi-yi khas, Rasikh al-burhan, Umdat al-Khvanin, Buland Makan, La'iq al-'inayat va al-ihsan, Zubdat al-Mulk, Amir al-Mumalik, Nasir al-Daulah, Lord Clive Bahadur Sabitjang.

As far as the grant of Diwani by Shah Alam to Lord Clive is concerned it was 'essentially a fraud'.⁶ First of all Clive, as an officer of the Mughal empire knew very well that he owed allegiance to the Mughal emperor. He also very well knew that the emperor was not in a position do so and if he did agree it would not be valid under the scrutiny of any national or international convention or law. Vincent Smith,⁷ for example, calling it a treaty between the East India Company and the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, admits:

the titular emperor, who was not in a position to have a will of his own and was thankful to get what he could, was provided for by the treaty of Allahabad, ...so far as he could, conferred on the Company the appointment of Diwan or coadjutor to the Nawab in all matters connected with the revenue.

Clive had promised that out of the revenue collected from Bengal, Bihar and Orrisa the emperor would be paid a monthly sum of over two-and-a-half million rupees in future and would receive the territories of Allahabad and Kora which were detached from Oudh. At the same time the emperor had reminded Clive that Bengal owed the imperial treasury a considerable arrears of revenue.

In conferring the grant of Diwani to Lord Clive, Shah Alam, in his opinion, had appointed yet another British nominee as Nawab of Bengal and assigned to him the right to collect the revenue because, as far as he was concerned, the British were no more than another greedier faction in the imperial war game. He had seen French, Dutch, Italian and German soldiers of fortune training the native armies of various nawabs and kings all around him and winning victories on their behalf. He himself had earlier employed a German soldier of fortune, Reinhardt, commonly known because of his dark complexion by the name of Sombre. At one time some of Shah Alam's army was lead by an English soldier of fortune named Walker.

No doubt they had become very powerful and occupied a large part of the country but so was the case with Nadir Shah, Ahmad Shah Abdali/Durrani, Maharajah Sindhia, the Jats, and the Rohillas who were equally powerful at one time but had not dared to remove him from the seat of his empire.

⁶ Sir Pendere, Moon, *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*, London, 1998, p.124.

⁷ Vincent A. Smith, *The Oxford history of India*, 2nd ed. OUP, 1923, p.503.

Moreover the British officials had repeatedly assured him of their loyalty and attachment towards him. For example in a letter to Shah Alam on 8 August 1803 Lord Lake assures Shah Alam;

I am cordially disposed to render your Majesty every demonstration of my loyalty and attachment and I consider it to be a distinguished honour as well as peculiar happiness to execute your Majesty's command. And the resident was directed to use all forms of respect considered to be due to the Emperor of Hindustan.

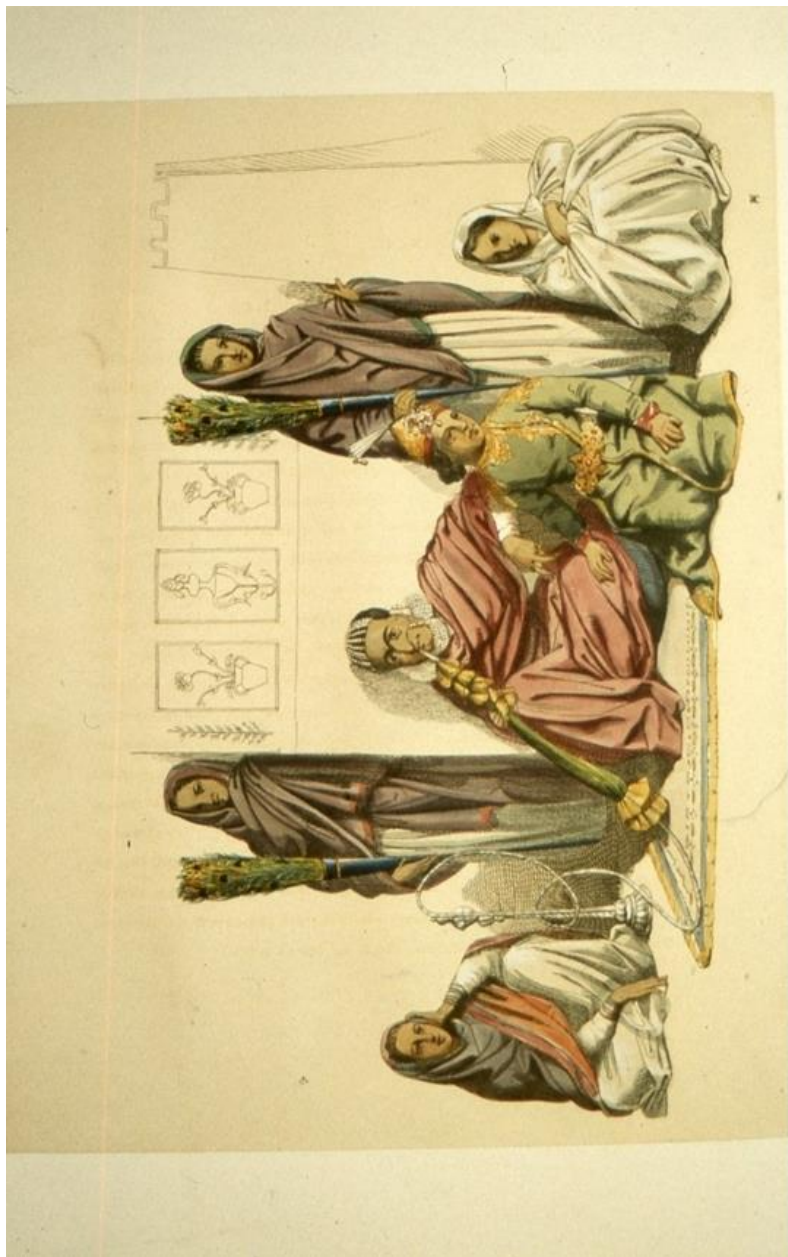
Another painting which Clive had commissioned while he was in India is entitled: 'receiving from the Nawab of Bengal [probably Nawab Najm al-Daulah, Mir Ja'far's son and successor] the Grant of the Sum of Money' [five Lacs] in 1770. The amount was used to establish the Fund for Disabled Officers and Soldiers, known as Lord Clive's Fund. The painting was commissioned to adorn the Military Fund Office created for that purpose. It is 120 cm by 180 cm and was completed by Edward Penny on 3rd February 1773. Penny was paid a handsome amount of 200 Guineas, out of the Contingent Military Fund. The picture was first reproduced in William's edition of Macauley's *Essays on Clive* (p.78) and later in Michael Edwardes' *Plasssey: the founding of an empire* (London, 1969).

Historically there is no record of any such ceremony ever taking place. In fact, the warrant for the money was handed over to Lord Clive by the widow of Mir Jafar 'after much persuasion and cajoling' nearly a year later.⁸

The above-mentioned two examples are given here to show a willful effort to misrepresent history in order to boost ones own image and to impress ones compatriots. There are other paintings where the artist, out of sheer ignorance and mistaken identity has portrayed important events and personalities in a distasteful manner.

For example Mrs. Colin Mackenzie, who was the wife of Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Mackenzie, (1753–1821), Surveyor General of India, 1816 – 1821, along with her male companion, Mr. Ryley, visited the Royal Palace at Delhi on 1 January 1850 and took pictures of various people and places, including those of the Queen Zinat Mahal and her son and heir-apparent Jawan Bakht.

⁸ W. Foster, A descriptive catalogue of the paintings, statues, etc. in the India Office. 5th ed. London, 1924, p.32.

Plate: 2

Portrait of "Queen Zinat Mahal" by Mrs Mackenzie in *Life, the Mission, the Camp and the Zenana*, 1850

These were included in her *Life in the Mission, the Camp and the Zenana, or Six years in India*⁹ - a work which enjoys a special place amongst the historical and cultural chronicles of this period and is widely quoted by later historians and writers alike.

Bahadur Shah had married the young and beautiful Zinat Mahal on 19 November 1840. He was born on 24 October 1775, making him sixty-five years old at the time of his marriage. The marriage document or the *nikah namah*, of Zinat Mahal and Bahadur Shah now preserved in the Oriental and Indian Office Collections of the British Library records various other details about the bride and the bride-groom but not their ages or dates of births. However, she was reported to be in her early sixties when she died in Rangoon on 17 July 1886, making her between eighteen or twenty at the time of her marriage in 1840.

Their son, Jawan Bakht, whom they both wished to appoint as heir-apparent, died at the young age of forty in Rangoon in 1884. He must have been six or seven in 1850 when Mrs. Mackenzie visited the palace.

We have quite a detailed description of Mrs. Mackenzie's visit to the royal family which was submitted as Court Intelligence to the British Resident, Metcalfe, and recorded by him in his diary of 1851:

It was reported that a lady and a gentleman were employed in sketching views of Summan Burj. When the lady had finished sketching Bilal Ali Khan eunuch, waited on His Majesty and spoke in High terms of the lady's talent to the King and Zinat Mahal Begam. They requested a visit from the lady, who took likeness of the Prince Mirza Jawan Bakht and the Zinat Mahal Begam. The likeness not having been finished the King requested the lady to come again and finish them.

Mrs Mackenzie's own version of these events is as follows:

They introduced me to the Chief woman, Zinat Mahal Begum, or 'Ornament of the Palace' who struck me as old and ugly, and they lead me to the Kings apartment, where the old monarch was smoking his Huqqa. He is slender and feeble looking, but with a simple kindly face, though he took no notice of me when I came in, which I suppose is etiquette. His bedstead with four silver posts was with him; one old woman was rubbing his feet. No one was handsomely dressed. The old king wore a gold scull cap and a cotton

⁹ Mrs Colin Mackenzie, *Life in the Mission, the Camp and the Zenana, or Six years in India*, 2nd ed, London, 1854, Vol. 2, pp.182-84 & 194.

chapkan. ... The old king seemed pleased and asked me to draw the queen, to which I willingly agreed. She was so long in dressing herself, that it was dark soon after I began.

She continues details of her observations in her account of the next visit:

The Zinat Mahal Begum, or 'Ornament of the Palace' is the favourite wife of the present King of Delhi. This prince (the representative of the Great Moghal Emperors) has no authority beyond the precincts of the palace, where he vegetates on an allowance of about £130,000 from the British. The Queen, as we may call this lady, is a Hindustani and much darker than the King, whose fairer complexion testifies to his northern origin. She would by no means consent to be drawn in her usual plain attire, but changed it for one of red muslin, spotted with gold. She puts on about five pair of ear-rings, several necklaces, and an ornament of pearls like a tassel spread out upon the head. Her eyebrows were thickly painted. She seemed to spend her time in smoking, surrounded by a train of female servants, sitting on the floor and doing nothing. Two of them stood behind her with bundles of peacocks' feathers, a mark of royalty both among Hindus and Musalmans in India. Her little son, as soon as I offered to sketch him, was hurried away to change his cotton chapkan or coat, for one of green velvet, richly embroidered in gold, with an aigrette of jewels in gold cap. The old King wished to have this little prince proclaimed heir apparent to his titular royalty, but the British Government refused their consent, as he has ten or twelve sons older than this one. Except when the chief eunuch brought them to order, the noise and chattering of the assembled women were deafening; they showed no signs of respect when the King entered, but remained sitting, and jested freely with him, the Queen laughing very loudly with her mouth wide open.

This sketch was taken on New Years Day, [18]50, at the request of the King, who was much pleased with the likeness.

Fortunately, we have another picture of the King and the Queen in the shape of miniatures painted on ivory by a portrait painter of the King of Delhi in circa 1850. Marked as a 'beautiful specimen of native art' these miniatures were first reproduced in the official history of the Mutiny by Sir John Kaye.¹⁰ We also have a photograph of Zinat Mahal

¹⁰ Sir John Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War in India*, 3 Vols., London, 1870.

which was taken when she was in prison with her husband and child in Rangoon. Both these picture clearly show that the women Mrs Mackezie had painted in the palace in 1850 was not the queen, but most probably Jawan Bakht's ayah or perhaps the queen mother.

Plate: 3



Queen Zinat Mahal with the wife of the Governor of Rangoon Prison. c1858

Not being fully aware of the court etiquettes and it seems without much knowledge of Urdu, not to mention the peculiar dialect spoken by the ladies of the court, Mrs. Mackenzie's has made some other amusing comments on the court life in her work.

For example, her description of the palace guards. 'Some of H.M's Guards marched in; most of them were boys, almost children' shows her complete ignorance of the fact that adult males were not allowed in the palace harem and that the guards she saw were not young men or boys, but young women of various nationalities trained and dressed up in guard uniforms of the royal palace.

Munshi Faiz Uddin in his *Bazm-I Akhir*,¹¹ which has an introduction by Prince Muhammad Sulaiman Shah Gorgani, head of the Timurid family and son of Bahadur Shah II, gives us a detailed description of these palace guards:

After eating breakfast the king made a round of the palace. He was carried in palanquin accompanied by house guards dressed in male uniforms with turbans on their heads and scarves round their waist and lances in their hands. Then followed other African, Turkish and Indian female soldiers carrying lances.

The Munshi further on adds:

The King arrived in an open palanquin carried by female soldiers and accompanied by eunuchs holding fans and carrying hubble-bubbles. They were followed by Turkish and African female soldiers.

Similarly, without respecting the sanctity of the Dewan-I Khas, where the peacock throne used to stand and where the King would not allow even the Governor General to sit, she asks Captain Robertson, Commander of the palace guard to provide her a chair to sit. The reaction of the palace servants when the chair was brought to her is described by her in these words: 'immediately the servants of the palace were in a great fright, and begged me not to sit on it, or they would be turned off. However, they sent a message to the King on the subject, who said I might have a stool but not a chair, and according sent me a very rude little bench'.

A classic case of mistaken identity by an author in giving a wrong caption to a picture is in *Makers of British India* by W.H. Davenport Adams where the Jami Masjid or the Central Mosque in Delhi has been presented to the readers as 'The palace of Delhi'.

¹¹ Munshi Faiz Uddin, *Bazm-I akhir*, Lahore, 1965.

I am sure that there may be similar examples one may find in some other works of the artists and authors of this period but not doubt they are only a few and far between and these examples do not in any way diminish the importance of the vast collections of such material, including the records of archaeological surveys, landscapes, architecture, engineering projects, social scenes and portraits which are available to scholars in the India Office collection as well as in various other institution in the world.