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Shirin's Petition: an Enslaved Hazara Woman's Quest for Justice in the Late 19th Century

Ali Karimi | ORCID: 0009-0000-6601-7006
Department of Communication, Media and Film,
University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada
Corresponding author
ali.karimi@ucalgary.ca

Masuma Nazari | ORCID: 0000-0002-1092-9871
Independent Scholar, Viareggio, Italy
nazari.masuma@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article examines the life of an enslaved woman named Shirin, the daughter of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big, who was captured during the Afghan state's war against the Hazaras (1891–1893). While in captivity, Shirin petitioned the Afghan government regarding the circumstances under which her family's properties were seized. Drawing on documents from the National Archives of Afghanistan, colonial archives, and oral accounts, among other sources, this article reconstructs the life of Shirin and her family from the start of the war to its tragic conclusion. We argue that Shirin's petition not only highlights her legal struggles with Afghan bureaucracy but also offers a rare glimpse into the Hazara War from the perspective of an enslaved woman who, along with her family, endured immense injustices. A contribution to the history of slavery in Afghanistan, this article also presents the full texts of the petition and the Afghan amir's response to it.

Keywords

Hazara genocide – slavery – petition – Afghanistan – Shirin – Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big

Introduction: a War of Conquest

The Afghan state's war on the Hazaras (1891–1893) was not just a war of conquest but a campaign designed for the full destruction of this Shia ethnic group, who had been declared infidels by the state.¹ The campaign involved mass killings, enslavement, forced displacement, land confiscation, and widespread looting. According to some legal scholars today, the war meets the current definitions of the crime of genocide under international law.² The Afghan army, along with irregular volunteer forces, slaughtered countless Hazaras with the intent of ethnic cleansing.³ By some estimates, the state forcibly displaced approximately 400,000 Hazara families, redistributing their lands to Afghan settlers.⁴ At the same time, a significant number of Hazaras were sold into slavery. Hazara slaves became so common that even ordinary people, not just affluent government officials, would “frequently make presents of Hazaras to one another.”⁵ The majority of Hazara men, women, and children who perished or were enslaved have left no trace behind. Among the few names we do know, even fewer belong to women. Shirin, the daughter of Mir Muhammad ‘Azim Big—a prominent Hazara mir—is one of the exceptions. We know the name and fate of Shirin thanks to her bravery in speaking out against the injustices that her family endured by writing a petition to the amir.

This article traces the life of Shirin (also spelled Shereen, Sherin, and sometimes Sherin Jan) and her family from the onset of the war to their capture, enslavement, and eventual emancipation. Shirin's petition and the amir's response—transcribed and translated here—serve as central documents in this narrative, guiding our exploration. These original documents, along with a large corpus of other records related to the Hazara War, are housed in the

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- 1 Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazarah, *The History of Afghanistan: Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazarah's Siraj al-Tawarikh*, trans. Robert McChesney and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 985–986. Hereafter, *ST* will be used to refer to this edition of *Siraj al-Tawarikh*. The full name of the book will be used for the Persian edition.
 - 2 Mehdi J. Hakimi, “The Afghan State and the Hazara Genocide,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 37 (2024): 81–115; Mehdi J. Hakimi, “The Genocide of the Hazaras,” *Virginia Journal of International Law Online* 63 (2023): 19–31; “Preventing Genocide within Afghanistan with Dr. Gregory Stanton,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, October 13, 2023, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/10/13/10424/>.
 - 3 Marhum Mulla Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazarah, *Waqayi'-i Hazarajat* (Qom: Urgan-i Nasharati Sayid Jamal al-Din al-Husaini, 1372/1993): 225–30. The irregular volunteers were civilians recruited from around the country to join the war. In British colonial sources they were referred to as “tribal levies.” Hasan K. Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Abd al-Rahman Khan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979): xxiii, 56.
 - 4 Mulla Fayz Muhammad Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, vol. 4 (part 1) (Kabul: Amiri, 1390/2011): 125.
 - 5 Kakar, *Government and Society*, 175.

National Archives of Afghanistan (NAA), which have not yet been cataloged. To complement these written sources, our research also incorporates oral history accounts. The authors conducted interviews with two grandsons of Wali Muhammad Khan, Shirin's brother, who was enslaved alongside her and later freed. Additional information was gathered via email from two grandchildren of Sultan Muhammad Khan, a Chief Secretary at Amir 'Abd al-Rahman's court. While some details from these family accounts have been corroborated by written records, others have not. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of these oral histories: the interviewees were not direct witnesses to the events, and family memories of slavery—a traumatic experience—are often fragmented. For instance, Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big's descendants have retained considerable knowledge about their family's role in the war (a tragic but honorable chapter) but very little about their enslaved women (a subject often viewed as a source of shame). This article also draws on a wide array of additional sources, including documents from the NAA, British archival records, the genealogy website The Royal Ark, a fictionalized account of Shirin's life by the amir's physician Lillias Hamilton, and the works of court historian Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazara. Together, these sources can help us reconstruct the story of who Shirin was and how she sought justice despite the overwhelming odds against her.

Shirin's petition was about her family's confiscated properties and was therefore handled by the government's accounting and financial offices. While this article is not a study of government finances, a close examination of the petition and the government's response can provide valuable insights into the financial bureaucracy of the young Afghan state during the emirate of 'Abd al-Rahman Khan. One particularly remarkable aspect of the petition is its detailed inventory of the items seized from Shirin's family. Shirin meticulously listed every piece of property, which was made possible because the officials who arrested the family had tallied their belongings and provided the captives with a copy of the inventory.⁶ This inventory offers a rare glimpse into the domestic sphere of a 19th-century Hazara ruler's household, detailing the family's jewelry, clothing, bedding, weapons, ammunition, cash, and animals. This document, as a result, is more than a document about the Hazara War. It can also serve as a valuable source for those interested in social history, material culture, and women's history in Afghanistan.

In what follows, we first briefly review the relevant literature, focusing on how historians of Afghanistan have treated the topics of slavery and the Hazara War. In this section, we also address the roles of race and religion during the

6 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan of Herat, Rajab 3, 1311/January 10, 1894. National Archives of Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan (NAA, hereafter): Farman, No. 4634.

war. Next, we introduce Shirin's family and their interactions with the Afghan state, including their alliance with the amir, the events that led to the Hazara War, their capture, and their fate in captivity. Our goal is to provide an overview of the Hazara War through the lens of one family's experiences. We then present the transcripts and translations of the petition Shirin submitted to the amir while enslaved, along with the amir's response. The petition, the voice of an enslaved woman, is a rare document that can be read both for the human story it tells and the information it reveals about Hazara domestic life and the Afghan bureaucracy. In this article, we focus on the human story—particularly the family's captivity—presented in the petition, as this is a more pressing issue than the historical details it reveals about 19th-century household items or the Afghan government's accounting practices. Following the text of the petition and the amir's response, we examine the circumstances surrounding Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big's capture, the seizure of his properties, and the legal battle that ensued as a result of the petition. Next, we address an important mystery: what happened to Shirin after her enslavement? Here, we investigate two potential individuals who may have been her master. The conclusion offers an account of the lives of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big's enslaved children following the abolition of slavery. As a whole, the article serves as a biography of an enslaved woman and her family during the Hazara War, providing an account of this campaign from the point of view of the defeated.

Shirin's petition, submitted to the amir six years after her enslavement, is a significant piece of evidence pertaining to the Hazara War, offering a rare glimpse into how the family of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big was treated during the conquest. The prospect of recovering her seized properties was nonexistent—indeed, she did not even request their return. Instead, her petition sought to hold accountable those who had arrested and abused her and her family, based on their financial misconduct. Shirin was likely fully aware that her chances of success were low. It was, after all, her words—the words of a condemned Hazara slave—against the words of top government officials. Yet, despite the odds, she decided to face her enemies and seek justice in a land still soaked in the blood of her people.

Hazara Slavery in Afghan Historiography

In 1924, exactly one hundred years before the writing of this article, slavery was officially abolished in Afghanistan.⁷ However, the history of slavery in

7 *Ruydad-i Luyah Jirgah-i Dar al-Saltanah 1303* (Kabul: Vizarat-i Jalilah-i Harbiyyah, 1303/1924): 136–43. See also, Ali Karimi, "Ruz-i Laghv-i Qanun-i Bardagiy-i Hazarah-Ha," *Jumhuriy-i*

the country remains largely unknown, with few historians showing interest in the subject. Historian Hasan Kakar has produced the most extensive study of slavery in Afghanistan, which is three pages long.⁸ In contrast, there has been greater interest in Central Asian slavery, and two studies on the subject include some discussion of Afghanistan.⁹ This neglect cannot be attributed to the triviality of the topic or a lack of access to sources—slavery is far from a trivial issue, and there are plenty of documents available. Rather, the dominance of Afghan nationalism in historiography may be the main reason for this neglect. Hazara slavery does not fit within the nationalist narrative, which, like all nationalist narratives, relies on some foundational myths that few are willing to challenge. These myths include the idea that Afghanistan's history begins with the 18th-century Afghan conquest of Khurasan, or that Afghan rulers have treated their subjects benevolently, not as an occupying force. Even Western historians have largely refrained from challenging Afghan nationalist myths. There are a few exceptions, however, including Jonathan Lee, who has written two major books on Afghanistan and has not shied away from covering slavery, land grabs, massacres, and other topics that subvert the rosy image that Afghan nationalists have of the country's modern past.¹⁰

Although Hazara slavery has not yet received much attention, the Hazaras themselves have been studied for a long time, particularly by anthropologists. In 1953, Klaus Ferdinand visited the Hazara highlands as part of the Danish Scientific Mission to Afghanistan. He noticed that many Afghans lived in the area: the settled ones in fertile lands of the southern Hazara highlands and the nomadic ones almost everywhere in the region. These residents were the settlers who had occupied the Hazara lands after 'Abd al-Rahman's war of conquest. Ferdinand even met Afghans who had participated in that campaign. One of them, an Ahmadzai nomad, recounted how 'Abd al-Rahman had invited the Mohmands and Ahmadzais to join the war against the Hazaras, promising them an enticing deal: "Heads will be mine, and all property will be yours!"¹¹ Ferdinand dedicated years to studying the relationship between

Sukut, May 11, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/2011051701142/http://urozgan.org/fa-af/article/1564/>.

8 Kakar, *Government and Society*, 173–76.

9 Jeff Eden, *Slavery and Empire in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); B.D. Hopkins, "Race, Sex and Slavery: 'Forced Labour' in Central Asia and Afghanistan in the Early 19th Century," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2008): 629–71.

10 Jonathan L. Lee, *The "Ancient Supremacy": Bukhara, Afghanistan and the Battle for Balkh, 1731–1901* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Jonathan L. Lee, *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019).

11 Klaus Ferdinand, "Nomad Expansion and Commerce in Central Afghanistan: A Sketch of Some Modern Trends," *Folk*, no. 4 (1962): 128.

Afghan settlers and the Hazaras, shedding light on the enduring legacy of this conquest and its impact on the region.

In the 1960s, Robert Canfield carried out fieldwork among the Hazaras. In one important contribution, he showed how in the Hazara region—and indeed across the Islamic world—a persistent geographical pattern existed: followers of the dominant sects lived on flat and fertile lands while religious minorities, “heretics,” were often confined to mountainous areas. This settlement pattern, he argued, was dictated not by ecology but by politics: religious minorities were pushed out of flatlands by force.¹² This pattern can also be observed in Badakhshan, among other places, where Isma‘ilis live in remote hills, and in Kafiristan (now Nuristan), where Muslims neighbors pushed the indigenous kafirs into the mountains. The anthropological literature on the Hazaras is, of course, far more extensive than this brief note. For a good review of the field, the encyclopedia article by Alessandro Monsutti, himself a renowned anthropologist of the Hazaras, is a good starting point.¹³

Hazara authors have demonstrated a strong interest in documenting the history of their people. In 1989, Hassan Poladi, an immigrant in the US with a degree in agriculture, self-published a book about the Hazaras after noticing the absence of any comprehensive English-language work on their history. A significant portion of his book, which he dictated, while bedridden due to illness, to his teenage son, focuses on the Hazara War.¹⁴ A decade later, Sayed Askar Mousavi published a book based on his anthropology dissertation from the University of Oxford.¹⁵ A more recent book in English on this topic is a political analysis of the Hazara people’s relationship with the Afghan state by Niamatullah Ibrahim.¹⁶ In Persian, Husain ‘Ali “Haj Kazim” Yazdani, a cleric-turned-historian, has authored a comprehensive history of the Hazaras, with a particular emphasis on pre-modern eras.¹⁷ While other notable works exist, such as those by Husain Nayil and Muhammad ‘Isa Gharjistani, Yazdani’s book stands out due to its extensive use of Arabic and Persian sources from the pre-modern era.

12 Robert L. Canfield, “The Ecology of Rural Ethnic Groups and the Spatial Dimensions of Power,” *American Anthropologist* 75, no. 5 (1973): 1511–28.

13 Alessandro Monsutti, “HAZARA III. Ethnography and Social Organization,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, March 20, 2012, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/hazara-3>.

14 Hassan Poladi, *The Hazaras* (California: Mughal Pub. Co., 1989).

15 Sayed Askar Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1997).

16 Niamatullah Ibrahim, *The Hazaras and the Afghan State: Rebellion, Exclusion and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017).

17 Haj Kazim Yazdani, *Pazhuhishi Dar Tarikh-i Hazarah-ha* (Tehran: ‘Irfan, 1385/2006).

The indispensable source on the Hazara War, however, is *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, the official history of Afghanistan, authored by court historian Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazara. Spanning four volumes (with an incomplete and unpublished fifth volume), *Siraj* covers the history of Afghanistan from the 18th century to the early 20th century, the period in which the Afghans completed their conquest of Khurasan.¹⁸ As a court historian, Katib was instructed by Amir Habib Allah Khan to write a history of Afghan rulers based on government records. The amir and his close aides would review and censor Katib's writing before publication.¹⁹ Despite the censorship, Katib, a Hazara himself, managed to incorporate extraordinary details about the Hazara War in his book, including valuable information about the fate of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big and his family. Another significant work featuring the Hazara War and Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big's family is *'Ayn al-Waqayi'* (1906) by Muhammad Yusuf Riyazi Hiravi (1873–1912). An Abdali Afghan, Riyazi came from a family of high-level bureaucrats from Herat. In 1885, Riyazi was part of the Afghan delegation that joined the British surveyors who demarcated Afghanistan's borders. In 1892, during the Hazara War, he was still in Herat and later that year moved to Persia. Unlike Katib who cites his sources, Riyazi does not. His account of the war is possibly based on what he saw and what his sources told him. He was a professional news gatherer, with allegations suggesting he may have also served as an informant for the Russian government.²⁰

Before we recount the events of the Hazara War, a couple of issues should first be clarified. In this article, the ethnonym Afghan only refers to the Pashtuns thus reflecting the term's usage at the time. In 1939, the state issued a Citizenship Law where it applied the name Afghan to all ethnic groups, a contested experiment that is yet to gain full acceptance in the country—although in European languages everyone from the country is called Afghan.²¹ Afghan is an exonym, a name given to a people by others, but the

18 Until the late 19th century, Afghanistan was called Khurasan by the people of the country. Henry Walter Bellew, *An Inquiry Into the Ethnography of Afghanistan* (Woking, UK: Oriental Univ. Inst., 1891): 4.

19 For more on Katib's life and career, see Robert D. McChesney, "The Bottomless Inkwell: The Life and Perilous Times of Fayz Muhammad 'Katib' Hazara," in *Afghan History through Afghan Eyes*, ed. Nile Green (London: Hurst & Co., 2015).

20 Muhammad Yusuf Riyazi Hiravi, *'Ayn al-Waqayi': Tarikh-i Afghanistan Dar Sal-Hay-i 1207–1324*, ed. Muhammad Asif Fikrat Hiravi (Tehran: Mavqafat-i Duktur Afshar, 1369/1990): One-five.

21 *Usulnamah-i Tabi'iyat Dar Afghanistan* (Kabul: Riyasat-i 'Umumiy-i Matabi', 1318/1939): articles 1–3. There was a vague attempt by Amir Aman Allah, too, to call everyone in the country 'Afghan' but the wording in his Constitution was not as clear as it is in Prime Minister Muhammad Hashim Khan's aforementioned 1939 Citizenship Law. *Nizamnamah-i*

Afghans themselves—who are originally from the Sulayman Mountain areas in northwest Pakistan and the majority of whom live in that country—identify as Pashtun, Pakhtun, Pathan, and some as Rohillah.²² The Hazara War had a complex ethnic dimension. While the victims were exclusively Hazaras, the gunmen on the Afghan side were Afghans as well as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other groups in the country.²³ It was, after all, a war of conquest in which the warriors, or at least the non-Afghan ones, were incentivized by the promise of loot and pay, and not necessarily by ethnic loyalty to the leader of the conquest.

Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman also weaponized religion to rally Sunnis against the Shia Hazaras. His regular army, even with British support, lacked the strength to conquer the Hazaras on its own, making public participation essential for victory. In 1892, Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman issued a fatwa, signed by prominent muftis, declaring the Hazaras heretics and sanctioning their murder, plunder, and enslavement. This fatwa called on all Sunni Muslims to join the campaign against the Hazaras as a religious duty.²⁴ By framing his conquest as a holy war (*jihad*), the amir mobilized public support and enabled fighters to view their participation in the bloodshed as an act of religious devotion. The war further intensified the already deep-seated anti-Shia sentiment in Afghanistan. During the war, the amir took his anti-Shia policies even further by effectively banning Shi‘ism and deploying Sunni mullahs to forcibly convert Shias to Sunnism.²⁵ This state-sanctioned violence against the Hazara community set a precedent for future sectarian conflicts in Afghanistan. One could argue that all subsequent outbreaks of religious conflicts in the country, including the ongoing targeting of Shias to this day, have their roots in Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan’s war against the Hazaras.

It is important to note that, at the time, the Sunnis of Afghanistan needed little persuasion to plunder the Hazaras. The practice of enslaving Hazaras was not new, and it is a common misconception that ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan introduced Hazara slavery. Long before his campaigns, a well-established trade in Hazara slaves existed, with Turkmen, Uzbek, and Tajik raiders frequently attacking Hazara villages and capturing people to sell in the slave markets of

Asasiy-i Davlat-i Illiyah-i Afghanistan (Kabul: Matba‘-i Da‘-irah-i Tahrirat-i Majlis-i ‘Aliy-i Vuzara, 1303/1924): article 8.

22 For a short history of Afghans, see Hannah Archambault, “Afghan Circulations in the Persianate World, c. 1000–1800,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, April 19, 2023): <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.700>.

23 *ST*, 3:772.

24 *ST*, 3:770–772.

25 Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa‘d al-Din Khan of Herat, Rabi‘ al-Awwal 20, 1310/October 12, 1892. NAA. Collection no. 4636.

Bukhara.²⁶ These raiders justified enslaving Hazaras on the basis that they were infidel Shias and thus permissible to enslave. (The other victims of slavery were two other “infidel” groups: the inhabitants of Kafirstan and Isma‘ilis of Shughnan in Badakhshan.) The Hazara War boosted an already booming trade. The prospect of capturing and enslaving Hazara captives served as a significant economic incentive and was one of the primary reasons why so many people from across the country volunteered to join the war against the Hazaras.

One Family's Experience of the Hazara War

One could tell the story of the Hazara War through the story of the family of Mir Muhammad ‘Azim Big (also known as Mir ‘Azim Big, ‘Azim Big, Muhammad ‘Azim, and briefly Sardar Muhammad ‘Azim Khan). This prominent family first experienced the amir’s charm, only to later endure his treachery and brutality, which included their enslavement, dispossession, displacement, and near-total destruction. Mir Muhammad ‘Azim Big, son of ‘Ali Zahid, was a Hazara mir, from Sih Pay, an area now known as Shahrستان in today’s Daikundi province. *Mir*, short for amir (ruler), was a title of kings of petty kingdoms across Khurasan and Central Asia. The place name, Sih Pay (lit. three legs), refers to the three main tribes living in the area: Miramur, Akhi, and Khushamadi.²⁷ The story of this family can be pieced together from, among other sources, the sporadic mentions of them in *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, a four-volume book based on government records, written by court historian Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazara (c.1862–1931).²⁸ Together with documents at NAA and oral accounts of the surviving family members, there is enough evidence to show how this Hazara mir and his family—from the military battles of the father to the legal struggles of the enslaved daughter—experienced the violent conquest of the independent Hazara highlands by the Afghans.

In 1886, Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman sent a letter to independent and semi-independent Hazara rulers inviting them to pledge allegiance to him.²⁹ Among the invitees, Mir Muhammad ‘Azim Big chose to travel to Kabul in 1887 to personally express his support for the new amir. In return, the amir rewarded him with the prestigious title of *sardar* (a designation typically reserved for male members of the ruling Muhammadzai clan), gifts for his wife, and the

26 Eden, *Slavery and Empire in Central Asia*, 153.

27 Shah ‘Ali Akbar Shahrستانi, “Shahrستان,” in *Masayil-i Hazara*, ed. Husain Nayil, vol. 2 (Kabul: Bunyad-i Andishah, 1397/2018): 253.

28 *ST*. In 2016, the translators published the fourth volume of *Siraj al-Tawarikh* as well.

29 *ST*, 3:286.

governorship of his region in the Hazara highlands.³⁰ As a further measure to secure the mir's loyalty, the amir took the mir's young son, Muhammad Aslam Big, as a *ghulam bachah* (page boy).³¹ Although there were Hazara mirs who refused to submit to the Kabul ruler, a large number responded positively to the amir's call for allegiance and even agreed to provide 5,045 soldiers to the Afghan army and pay for their supplies.³² Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big took the responsibility for negotiating with the remaining independent mirs to bring them under the control of the Afghan state and even, in one instance, joined the Afghans to coerce them into submission.³³ This earned him some enemies, but he remained loyal to 'Abd al-Rahman Khan. The Kabul ruler's charm offensive was largely successful. By the end of 1880s, most Hazara mirs, and their people, became allies of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman's government—or so they thought.

Soon after pledging allegiance, things started to change for the Hazaras. The amir dispatched Afghan soldiers, tax collectors, and governors to impose his authority and colonize the region. These colonial officials were unusually brutal, engaging in extortion, torture, and the abduction of girls and women.³⁴ The mistreatment reached such extremes that some Hazara mirs decided to resist the amir's forces. By 1892, widespread resistance to Afghan oppression had erupted across Hazara territories, and Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big, too, joined the fight. In response, the amir imprisoned 'Azim Big's son, who as noted above was serving as a page boy at the Kabul court, as punishment for his father's disloyalty.³⁵ That same year, 'Azim Big aligned with several prominent Hazara leaders, including Muhammad Amir Big Ilkhani of Yakawlang, Mahdi Big Miran of Sarjantal, and others, forming a political and military coalition to oppose the Afghan invasion.³⁶ The leaders solidified their alliance by signing oaths of allegiance, presumably on a Quran. The conflict escalated into full-scale war. In 1892, Mir 'Azim Big, commanding a 4,000-strong Hazara cavalry, arrived in Timran. In one notable battle, he attacked the forces of 'Abd al-Quddus Khan, an Afghan general, and liberated forty-five Hazara girls—daughters of Hazara

30 ST, 3:386, 609. Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big was the only Hazara to ever receive the title *sardar* after Sardar Shir 'Ali Khan of Jaghuri, who received his title from his namesake, and former Afghan ruler, Amir Shir 'Ali Khan.

31 ST, 3:828.

32 ST, 3:608–609.

33 ST, 3:402–404, 694–695.

34 ST, 3:1225; Hasan Kakar, *Afghanistan: A Study in Internal Political Developments, 1880–1896* (Lahore: Punjab Educational Press, 1971): 176–77.

35 ST, 3:828.

36 ST, 3:808.

chiefs—from the general's personal harem.³⁷ On multiple fronts, Hazara forces mounted fierce defenses, successfully repelling the invading Afghan army in several engagements.

The amir in Kabul had to come up with a strategy to suppress the Hazara resistance. In May 1892, he issued, as noted earlier, a proclamation, endorsed by Sunni muftis, that declared all Hazaras to be infidels. The decree encouraged the people of Afghanistan to kill, plunder, and enslave any Shia Hazara they could find.³⁸ What followed was a genocidal campaign. In addition to the regular army, volunteer forces from across the country were mobilized, lured by the promise of plunder and the enslavement of Hazaras. Facing annihilation, the Hazaras had no choice but to resist. Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big became a central figure in the defense, moving from one front to another to engage the Afghan forces wherever possible, retreating when overwhelmed. In one of his final battles, he moved from Gizab to Shir Qal'ah in Hajaristan, located in today's Ghazni province, to confront the advancing Afghan army. Despite inflicting some losses on the Afghans, the Hazara fighters were ultimately defeated. Following their victory, the Afghan forces plundered the area and demolished all the forts in the region.³⁹ Mir 'Azim Big survived the battle and retreated to Tamazan, in present-day Daikundi, where he joined forces with two other Hazara mirs to continue the fight against the Afghan army and its allies.⁴⁰

Back in Kabul, during a *darbar* (court meeting), Brigadier Abdul Subhan, a former British army officer who had supported the Afghans on the battlefield, reported the latest developments in the Hazara War to the amir. He recounted a specific battle in which the Afghan army faced 200 Hazara cavalry and 3,000 foot soldiers, about half of whom were "unarmed."⁴¹ The Afghan forces eventually won, killing about a thousand Hazaras, whose bodies were left in the open "as an example for the people of the surrounding localities."⁴² Mir 'Azim Big's family recalls that the Hazara region was ravaged by a deadly cholera epidemic during the war, which claimed many lives among the fighters and

37 The mir then left the girls behind when he fled the area under pressure. The girls were recaptured by Afghans and moved to Churah, Uruzgan. *ST*, 3, :819, 878.

38 *ST*, 3:770–772.

39 *ST*, 3:837–838.

40 *ST*, 3:844.

41 The diary of the British agent in Kabul (KD, hereafter): October 2, 1892, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library, London, UK (BL, hereafter). IOR/L/PS/7/68, 2.

42 KD, October 2, 1892, BL, IOR/L/PS/7/68, 2.

significantly weakened the Hazara resistance.⁴³ This account is corroborated by Abdul Subhan, who reported to the amir about the cholera outbreak in the Hazara country.⁴⁴ This convergence of oral history and written records highlights that, despite the limitations of oral accounts, they can serve as valuable and reliable sources of historical information.

In the fall of 1892, after several months of fighting, cracks began to appear in the Hazara defense. Meanwhile, the amir's reinforcement armies were approaching from Afghan Turkistan, Kabul, and Herat. In Bamiyan, the army of Mir Muhammad Amir Big Ilkhani, another prominent Hazara leader, suffered a decisive defeat, though the mir himself managed to escape. Around this time, Mir 'Azim Big also decided to abandon the fight, focusing instead on saving his life and the lives of his family members.⁴⁵ The Hazara War had been devastating. Those who survived the mass killings, enslavement, and forced displacements became war refugees fleeing to India, Persia, and Russian Turkestan.⁴⁶ Mir 'Azim Big planned to join this exodus, seeking refuge in Persia. At the time, one of his wives, the daughter of Jamshid Khan, a Jaghuri chief, was in Jaghuri with her father along with her three children.⁴⁷ During Mir 'Azim Big's escape, another of his wives accompanied him, along with his brother Bunyad Big, two sons, two infants, five women, and two servants—a party of eleven riders in total.⁴⁸ While the name of the wife accompanying him is unknown, Katib specifically mentions his daughter Shirin and his brother Bunyad Big as members of the group.⁴⁹ The names of the other companions are not recorded in the available sources. The family packed a substantial amount of cash, jewelry, and weapons, as detailed in Shirin's later petition. This suggests that they were well aware of the dangers ahead—traveling as a Hazara family in a land where capturing or killing Hazaras was considered a religious duty made them prime targets. The mir was prepared to fight or bribe his way to freedom.

Once on the road, Mir 'Azim Big and his companions did not have to wait long for their first confrontation. Muhammad Yusuf Riyazi Hiravi, in his *Ayn al-Waqayi'* (1906), recounts the mir's first battle as a refugee. According to Riyazi, Afghan soldiers began pursuing the group at some point, prompting the mir to stop and fight. In the ensuing battle, the mir's fighters reportedly

43 Interview with 'Aziz Khan 'Azimi son of 'Abd al-Husain Khan son of Wali Muhammad Khan son of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big of Sih Pay by Ali Karimi, via telephone, June 12, 2024.

44 KD, October 2, 1892, BL, IOR/L/PS/7/68, 2.

45 Riyazi Hiravi, *Ayn al-Waqayi'*, 218.

46 ST, 3:1042.

47 ST, 3:895.

48 ST, 3:857; Riyazi Hiravi, *Ayn al-Waqayi'*, 219–20.

49 Katib Hazarah, *Waqayi'-i Hazarajat*, 272.

killed 32 Afghan soldiers (though this number may be exaggerated) while losing two men. Tragedy struck during the skirmish when the horse carrying the mir's eight-year-old son was shot. Startled, the horse bolted, dragging the boy with one leg caught in the stirrup. The boy eventually fell but succumbed to his injuries shortly after. Unable to give his son a proper burial, the grieving mir removed the shawl from his waist and used it as a shroud to wrap the boy's body. He then dug a shallow grave with the muzzle of his rifle and buried him there and left the area.⁵⁰ Although the family were victorious in the battle, the loss likely weighed heavily on them as they continued their journey westward, eventually reaching the vicinity of Davlatyar in Aymaq territory.

The relationship between the Aymaqs and the Hazaras, according to Riyazi, was like the relationship "between wolves and sheep."⁵¹ The Aymaqs, like other Sunni groups, regarded the Hazaras as infidels due to their Shia faith. Even before 'Abd al-Rahman Khan's war against the Hazaras, Aymaq raiders frequently plundered Hazara villages and took Hazara travelers hostage.⁵² When Mir 'Azim Big and his family reached Aymaq territory, they avoided entering the villages and decided to rest in the open fields for the night. Aqa Muhammad Khan (also known as Muhammad Khan, Muhammad Khan Davlatyari, Muhammad Jan Khan Davlatyari, and Sardar Muhammad Khan), an Aymaq chief, learned about the family's arrival and went to greet the mir and invite him to his home. Initially hesitant, the mir expressed doubts, but the chief assured him of his friendship and emphasized that it was unsafe for the family to remain outdoors. After much persuasion—and given the family's need for rest after days of fleeing and fighting—the mir reluctantly accepted the invitation. The group moved to Muhammad Khan's fort. At first, they were treated well. After being served dinner, the family retired for the night. However, under the cover of darkness, the Aymaq chief betrayed them. He ordered his gunmen to seize all of the mir's weapons and possessions and placed the family under arrest. Muhammad Khan then informed the government in Herat of his capture.⁵³ Upon learning of this treachery, two of the mir's companions managed to overpower their captors and escape. However, Mir 'Azim Big and the rest of his family remained imprisoned, stripped of their belongings and at the mercy of their captors.

The story of Mir 'Azim Big's capture is recounted differently by Katib in *Siraj al-Tawarikh*—though in another of his works, Katib corroborates Riyazi Hiravi's

50 Riyazi Hiravi, *Ayn al-Waqayi'*, 218–19.

51 Riyazi Hiravi, 219.

52 *ST*, 3:83–84.

53 Riyazi Hiravi, *Ayn al-Waqayi'*, 219–20.

version.⁵⁴ According to *Siraj*, when the family arrived in Nawah-i Kashab, three Hazara mirs—Anbiya Big, Muhammad Sharif Big, and Muhammad Hasan Big—who were not on good terms with Mir ‘Azim Big, decided to arrest him and his family and keep them all in their fort, probably hoping to hand them over to Afghans.⁵⁵ Like rulers elsewhere in the region, Hazara leaders had long-standing rivalries. Although the war had temporarily united them, some saw the arrival of the Afghans as an opportunity to ally with them against their rivals. Arrest, however, is too strong a word here because Shirin’s petition contradicts Katib’s account. The petition suggests that the family were likely guests of the three Hazara mirs and left the Hazara area freely, only to be arrested later “somewhere between Aymaq and Hazara countries” by Aqa Muhammad Khan, the Aymaq chief.⁵⁶ There is also a royal decree where the amir mentions the “arrest of the bastard ‘Azim of Sih Pay and his family by Sardar Muhammad Khan Davlatyari.”⁵⁷ This latter was the Afghan government’s man in Davlatyar and was, without a doubt, the one who arrested Mir ‘Azim Big and his family. Aqa Muhammad Khan was an Aymaq ally of Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman in Ghur since 1881, the second year of his rule.⁵⁸ According to *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, Aqa Muhammad Khan sent 400 mounted soldiers to Nawah-i Kashab and forcefully took Mir ‘Azim Big and his companions from the Hazara mirs, bringing them to his fort in Davlatyar.⁵⁹ The arrest quickly became major news in western Afghanistan, stirring excitement among officials eager to deliver the high-profile prisoner to the amir in Kabul. The governor of Farah, Mawla Dad Khan, according to Katib, became the next official who forcefully took the captives from Aqa Muhammad Khan of Davlatyar and transported them to Herat.⁶⁰

The sources may disagree slightly about the circumstances in which the mir and his family were arrested, but all agree that life for the family took a terrible turn after they fell into the hands of the Afghan government’s Aymaq ally, Sardar Aqa Muhammad Khan. Capturing Mir ‘Azim Big was a major achievement for the Aymaq chief and a milestone for the Afghan army. In recognition of his services, the amir awarded Aqa Muhammad Khan a substantial annual

54 Katib Hazarah, *Waqayyi-i Hazarajat*, 272.

55 *ST*, 3:857.

56 Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa’d al-Din Khan and Field Marshal Faramarz Khan of Herat, likely Muharram 19, 1317/May 30, 1899. NAA, Enclosure of Farman, No. 4629.

57 Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa’d al-Din Khan of Herat, Jamadi al-Thani 6, 1310/December 26, 1892. NAA, Farman, No. 4634.

58 Riyazi Hiravi, *Ayn al-Waqayi*, 154.

59 *ST*, 3:857.

60 *ST*, 3:857.

allowance of 1,150 qiran rupees, a stipend that continued for years and was later paid to his family after his death.⁶¹

When the captives were moved to Herat, the mir was accompanied by seven family members. In Herat, the arrival of the arrested Hazara ruler became a public spectacle. Among the captives, the mir's wife drew particular attention for being dressed in men's clothing—a uniquely Hazara tradition. In times of war, the wives of Hazara mirs would dress as men to join the fight, and in times of peace, they often assisted their husbands in governance and participated in darbars.⁶² The family was brought in chains to the public court, where the governor of Herat, Sa'd al-Din Khan, showed deliberate disrespect by removing the headscarf from the mir's wife, leaving her head unveiled. In response, Mir 'Azim Big rebuked him, saying, "You got me by treachery, not on the battlefield.

61 ST, 3:1336. It is important to understand the Aymaqs and their relationship with the Afghan ruler. In the 19th century, the Aymaqs (also known as Chahar Aymaqs,) a Persian-speaking Turkic people, identified themselves as Hazaras. Apart from their Sunni Muslim faith and predominantly nomadic lifestyle, there were few differences between them and the Shia Hazaras. Bellew, *An Inquiry Into the Ethnography of Afghanistan*, 34; James Talboys Wheeler, *Memorandum on Persian Affairs with a Supplementary Note on the Turkomans, Char Eimaks, and Seistan* (Calcutta: Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, 1871): 152. Politically, however, there were serious rivalries between the Hazaras and the Aymaqs. In Davlatyar, Aqa Muhammad Khan's family was historically a collaborator of the Afghan rulers. He held the title of Sardar, but it is unclear if it was bestowed on him because of his arrest of Mir 'Azim Big or if it predated the Hazara War. Regardless, the Afghan state granted the Aymaq chief a large tract of land for his services. After the death of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman, the Taymanis, a subgroup of the Aymaqs in Davlatyar, claimed that the Sardar's family had unlawfully taken their lands. This land dispute has persisted to the present day, with Afghan governments over the past century generally siding with their historical allies, the Sardars. (The title Sardar has evolved into a tribal name, and all members of Aqa Muhammad Khan's clan now identify as Sardars, despite being Taymanis themselves.) In August 2024, the Taliban ordered 600 Taymani families to vacate their homes in Davlatyar and relocate elsewhere. They were not permitted to take their belongings and were forced to leave the area empty-handed. In some way, one could argue, the Afghan state has been rewarding Aqa Muhammad Khan's clan to this day for his services, which included the arrest of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big. For an overview of the Sardar-Taymani land disputes in Davlatyar, and the Taliban's ruling in favor of the Sardars, see the following two articles. 'Id Muhammad 'Azizpur, "Sukhani Darbarah-i Ghayilah-i 'Sardar' va Shammah-i Az Ghamnamah-i Taymani-Hay-i Davlatyar," *Ariaye*, August 21, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120821223030/http://www.ariaye.com/dari6/siasiz/azizpor.html>; "Taliban Dastur-i Kuch-i Ijbariy-i Hudud-i 600 Khanavar Ra Dar Wuluswalyi-i Davlatyar-i Ghur Sadir Kardand," *Hasht-i Subh*, August 31, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240831150730/https://8am.media/fa/taliban-order-forced-displacement-of-about-600-families-in-dolat-yar-district-of-ghor/>.

62 L. Timurkhanov, *Tarikh-i Milliy-i Hazara*, trans. 'Aziz Tughyan (Qom: Isma'iliyan, 1372/1993): 109.

Now that my hands are tied, you insult me.”⁶³ Afghan officials searched the family’s belongings and discovered the Quran used by the Hazara mirs to seal their coalition agreement. The officials sent the Quran, along with other documents they had confiscated from Mir ‘Azim Big, to Kabul. The officials then subjected the mir and his family to public humiliation: they smeared them with mud and paraded them around the city. The people of Herat, a large part of them Shias, saw the Hazara leader and his family mounted on donkeys, facing backward, with the guts, livers, and bones of butchered animals hanging around their necks.⁶⁴ The arrest and public humiliation of Mir ‘Azim Big and his family in Herat occurred between 25 August and 22 September 1892, marking a grim episode in the Hazara War. After the public humiliation of the mir and his family, Faramarz Khan, the field marshal in Herat, sent the captives to Kabul.

On November 20, 1892, Mir ‘Azim Big was brought before the amir during a *darbar* in Paghman. He was accompanied by one son, two brothers, and two servants—none of whom are named in the British agent’s report. Presumably, the female members of the mir’s family, including Shirin, were not brought to the *darbar* that day. This was the second time the Hazara mir was meeting the Afghan ruler. Not long ago, Mir ‘Azim Big had met the amir as an honored guest, and now he stood before him as a ragged prisoner, having been forced to walk from Herat to Kabul in chains. During the *darbar*, the amir questioned the mir about why, as his ally, he had failed to “persuade the rebellious tribes to submit,” according to the British agent who was present at the meeting. Mir ‘Azim Big replied that due to the “maltreatment of Hazara women by General Farhad Khan, the disturbances were so general and severe” that it had been impossible for him to suppress them.⁶⁵ His response betrayed a tragic naiveté: he had believed that, following the political agreement with the amir, the Afghan officials would treat him and his people as political allies. Instead, they treated the Hazaras as conquered subjects whose properties and women were theirs to exploit. The amir, a perpetually suspicious man, pressed further, wanting to know if any of his top officials in Kabul had aided the Hazaras. When the mir denied this, the amir ordered his men to “torture him until he gives the required information.”⁶⁶ What happened to Mir ‘Azim Big after this point remains unclear. The report ends here, and neither historical records nor the mir’s descendants can provide further information about his fate or possible burial place.

63 Riyazi Hiravi, *Ayn al-Waqayi*, 220.

64 *ST*, 3:857; Riyazi Hiravi, 220.

65 Peshawar Confidential Diary, January 23, 1893, BL, IOR/L/PS/7/69, 737; KD, November 19 to 22, 1892, National Archives of India, New Delhi, India (NAI, hereafter). Foreign, Secret, Progs., Nos. 231-253, December 1892, PR_000001239247.

66 BL, IOR/L/PS/7/69, 737.

The arrest of the mir and his immediate family was not enough for Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan—he wanted to capture everyone connected to the mir, no matter how distant the connection. By this time, the Afghan government had also apprehended all twenty-four Hazara mirs who had signed the coalition oath on the Quran.⁶⁷ In total, 448 individuals—men, women, and children—who were extended family members of Mir 'Azim Big and other Hazara leaders were hunted down and arrested. When Mir 'Azim Big's family was sent from Herat to Kabul, the group included the mir himself, one of his wives, his brother Bunyad Big, his son, his daughter Shirin, and six servants.⁶⁸ In November 1892, the amir learned that one of Mir 'Azim Big's wives and her three children were in Jaghuri. The amir had that wife arrested and brought her, along with her children (a son and two daughters) to Kabul as war captives.⁶⁹ The amir discovered the whereabouts of this woman through a letter sent to the court by Jamshid Khan, her father.⁷⁰ The khan likely believed that turning over Mir 'Azim Big's wife would earn him favor with the amir. Or, he may have feared that someone else would report him for harboring the wife and children of an enemy of the state. Regardless of his motives, his actions did not secure him any lasting favor. About two years later, the amir had him arrested as well.⁷¹

According to Katib, by August 1893, when most of the notable Hazara captives had arrived in Kabul, the amir ordered the execution of most of the men. Almost all the women and children were either enslaved or imprisoned.⁷² Among the executed were several sons of Hazara mirs serving as page boys at the amir's court, including Mir 'Azim Big's imprisoned son, Muhammad Aslam Big.⁷³ The amir spared the life of only one the mir's children, Wali Muhammad Khan, who was too young to be executed immediately, so the amir issued a death sentence to be carried out when he reached the age of eighteen.⁷⁴ Wali Muhammad Khan was either the son who was brought to Kabul with the mir or the one later brought to Kabul from Jaghuri. Although no written sources confirm this, the mir's descendants believe that Wali Muhammad Khan was

67 *ST*, 3:857.

68 *ST*, 3:888. One of his children must have died after the family was arrested.

69 *ST*, 3:895.

70 *ST*, 3:895.

71 *ST*, 3:1159.

72 *ST*, 3:1064–65.

73 Mulla Fayz Muhammad Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, vol. 4 (part 3) (Kabul: Amiri, 1390/2011): 265.

74 Interview with Zahir Khan son of Muhammad Yar Khan son of Wali Muhammad Khan son of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big of Sih Pay by Ali Karimi, via telephone, March 7, 2024.

the son of the mir's Jaghuri wife.⁷⁵ The massacre included Mir 'Azim Big as well but it is unclear whether the mir was executed in August or at an earlier date. What is certain, however, is that, as previously noted, the amir interrogated him and ordered his torture in November 1892.⁷⁶ After Mir 'Azim Big's execution, the execution of his male family members, and the enslavement of his young children and wives, little remained of his once-prominent family. This systematic purge by Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan led to the near-total eradication of Hazara political leadership, leaving the community lost and leaderless.

In November 1893, twelve more relatives of Mir 'Azim Big—women, men, and children—were arrested and sent to Kabul. They had been on the run when officials in Chighcharan captured them and transported them to Herat as war captives.⁷⁷ In 1895, the Afghan government was still arresting surviving members of the mir's family. Remarkably, despite the government's targeted campaign, one of his sisters had managed to evade capture for a time. That year, however, she, too, was discovered and brought to Kabul from her hiding place.⁷⁸ It was probably this sister of the mir whose daughters were later enslaved and became concubines in the harem of Prince Habib Allah Khan.⁷⁹ The Afghan government had effectively eradicated nearly every male member of Mir 'Azim Big's family—sparing only Wali Muhammad Khan—and enslaved the female members to ensure the total destruction of the mir's lineage and legacy.

The Hazara War captives boasted the slave trade in Kabul. In 1892, the British agent in Kabul reported: "The Hazara prisoners are still sold by public auction. Her Highness purchased 20 boys for Rs. 300."⁸⁰ The government had even set up an enslaved women's quarter (*jariyah khanah*) where enslaved female war captives, including members of Mir 'Azim Big's family, were kept.⁸¹ On one occasion, the amir summoned eight of these women to the darbar to auction them off. According to Katib, two of them were wives of Mir 'Azim Big, identified only as "mother of Salimah" and "mother of Wasilah."⁸² Among Mir 'Azim Big's wives, only one name is known: Shah Naz "Aghah." The title *āghah*,

75 Interview with Zahir Khan.

76 BL, IOR/L/PS/7/69, 737; NAI, Foreign, Secret, Progs., Nos. 231-253, December 1892, PR_000001239247.

77 ST, 3:903.

78 ST, 3:1530.

79 ST, 3:1065.

80 KD, July 23 to 26, 1892. BL, IOR/L/PS/7/67, 3.

81 Mulla Fayz Muhammad Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, vol. 4 (part 2) (Kabul: Amiri, 1390/2011): 289. Thousands of Hazara prisoners were brought to Kabul during the war. The amir once picked "fifty beautiful girls and women" from the captives as enslaved concubines. Kakar, *Afghanistan*, 174.

82 Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, 4 (part 2):289.

derived from the Turkish *āghā*, meaning noblewoman, was commonly used for a Hazara mir's wife. However, it is unclear whether Shah Naz was one of the two wives auctioned that day or a different woman entirely.⁸³

The little girls at the auction included Hava, Salimah, Zubayr Nisa, Bakht Bibi, Maryam, and Fatimah. Among these girls, Salimah appears to have been one of the mir's daughters. (Shirin was not among them, presumably because she had already been given away.) Maryam was the mir's niece—a daughter of his sister and Muhammad Amir Big. Court officials inspected the captives, and one of them, Laʿl Gul Khan, a Tajik from Gardiz, expressed interest in Maryam. The amir gave her to him as a gift, and he took her as his slave to Gardiz. In 1902, Laʿl Gul Khan wrote to the new amir in Kabul, reporting that his slave had died and requesting another from the remaining captives in the enslaved women's quarter. The amir replied: "We have not built a personal slave house for you, such that at any time you wished we could send you one or two."⁸⁴

After Mir 'Azim Big's death, his name once again echoed through the corridors of power in Kabul. His enslaved daughter, Shirin, had submitted a petition to the government, demanding that the local officials who arrested her family and seized their properties be held accountable for potential corruption. This was an unusual request. Shirin did not ask for the return of the confiscated assets. She understood that recovering the property was impossible, as anything seized by the amir from a defeated enemy became state property. Aware of this reality, she did not request the return of her family's belongings. Instead, her petition aimed to hold the local officials accountable for financial misconduct against the state. Shirin and her family endured severe mistreatment—to put it mildly—at the hands of their captors. At the time of their arrest, they had been on the run and were not very far from safely escaping the country like many other refugees. However, their capture by the Aymaq allies of the amir irrevocably altered their fate, condemning them to a life of slavery and death.

Shirin understood that, as an enslaved Hazara girl, she had little chance of holding her captors accountable for their mistreatment of her family. After all, the amir had issued decrees explicitly ordering the persecution and killing of

83 *ST*, 3:379. In the English translation of *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, Shah Naz Aghah is recorded as the daughter of a Hazara mir named Muhammad 'Azim Big, but the Persian edition says she was the sister of the said mir. Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazara, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, vol. 3 (part 1) (Tehran: 'Irfan, 1391/2012): 463.

84 Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, 4 (part 2):289. Years later, 'Abd al-Ghani, a son of this Laʿl Gul Khan, became the security chief (Qal'ah Bigi) of the Arg, the royal palace, under Muhammad Nadir (1929–1933) and gained great notoriety as a ruthless torturer. When a Hazara student, 'Abd al-Khaliq, assassinated Nadir, he was the chief torturer who tortured 'Abd al-Khaliq and his family members to death. Mir Ghulam Muhammad Ghubar, *Afghanistan Dar Masir-i Tarikh*, vol. 2 (Peshawar: Mayvand, 1379/2000): 162–70.

Mir 'Azim Big and other Hazaras. The mistreatment of Hazaras, in other words, was effectively part of the job description for local officials during the war. However, there was one area where the amir famously showed little tolerance: financial corruption. Shirin possessed a detailed list of the properties seized from her family and suspected that some local officials in Ghur had withheld portions of these belongings instead of delivering them to the government. Amir 'Abd al-Rahman had executed people for far lesser offenses involving the mishandling of government assets. Shirin hoped that if corruption could be proven, the amir would punish the culprits, bringing some measure of justice for what had been done to her family. The officials at the government's Bureau of Audits (*daftar-i sanjish*) had to respond to her petition. Below is the text of Shirin's petition, followed by a letter from the amir to the governor of Herat requesting information about the fate of the seized properties.⁸⁵

Document 1: Shirin's Petition

(1) یاھو

(2) سیاھه

(3) نقل سیاھه قلمدادی شیرین نام، صبیّہ سردار محمدعظیم خان قوم سه پای. مضمون سیاھه اینکه مال و اسباب پدر این ضعیفۀ عاجزه، محمد عظیم خان،

(4) قوم سه پای که در حین یاغی گری هزاره جات گریخته و به طرف ملک ایماقیه رفته بودیم؛ و اینکه و مابین ملک هزاره و ایماق رسیدیم، آقا محمد

(5) خان ساکن دولت یار، ما را دستگیر نموده و مال و اسباب ما را گرفته تحویل و تسلیم بوبکرخان هراتی ایماقیه، نموده بدین قرار است:

- اسب معه زین و یراق مکمل: بیست و هفت راس / تفنگ دنباله پُرانگریزی: پنج میل /

تفنگ سه بست انگریزی: سیزده میل / تفنگچه شش تکه: دو میل

- تفنگچه توپخانه انگریزی: پنج میل / شمشیر جوهردار مصری: دو قبضه / شمشیر

جوهردار ایرانی: سه قبضه / xxx سیه نقره پوش: یک عدد

85 Numbers in the petition are written both in *siyaq* symbols and letters, but here only the letters were transcribed to avoid repetition.

- تفنگ فلیته بست نقره: یک میل / پیش قبض غلاف نقره قبضه شیرماهی: یک قبضه / همیانی پر از روپیه کاپی: ۷ عدد فرد، یک هزار و چهارصد روپیه نقد / [کارطوس دنباله پر: یک بار اسب
- کارطوس دانی سرشانه پر از کارطوس: پنج عدد / بازوبند زنانه هزاره گی معه قطاس: وزن هر یک چهل روپیه یک جوهر فرد، هشتاد روپیه پخته / گوشواره نقره: یک جوهر فرد وزن، هفده روپیه پخته / xxx نقره: xxx جفت فرد وزن، بیست و چهار روپیه پخته
- چوری نقره: دو جفت فرد وزن، چهل روپیه پخته / انگشتری های نگین در و نقره: بیست و هفت عدد / انگشتری نگین فیروزه اعلی: حلقه xxx دو عدد فرد - نگین: دو عدد (هر عدد) سی روپیه، [مجموعاً] شصت روپیه - حلقه طلا: دو عدد دو مثقال / xxx ابریشمی و سیه کار و یعقوبی: چهار عدد
- چین ادرس زنانه هزارگی: چهار عدد / چپراسی نقره که به چین ها دوخته بود: شانزده عدد فرد وزن، چهل روپیه پخته / دکمه نقره که به هر چینی به قاعده هزاره گی ساخته و دوخته شده: یکصد و بیست دانه فرد وزن، سی روپیه پخته / گرتی برک اعلی: هفت عدد
- پطلون برک اعلی: هفت عدد / کلاه قرص: پنج عدد / بوت انگیزی: هفت جوهر / کمر بند چرمی عراقی: هفت عدد
- پوستین بره گی اعلی: یک عدد / چوخه برکی: دو عدد / لحاف چیتی و الوان و آلچه هزارگی: دوازده عدد / قالینچه: هشت عدد.

(6) به قرار شرح فوق آنچه مال و اسباب نقدی و جنسی را از روی صدق و راستی بدون کم و زیاد نوشته ام، که آقا محمدخان مذکور در حینی که ماها را

(7) xxx ← جواب بگویند. فقط. »

Document 2: Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan's Decree

(1) یا هوالرب الجلیل

(2) عالی جاهان عزت نشانان سعدالدین خان نایب الحکومه و فرامر خان سپهسالار دارالتصرت هرات را واضح خاطر باد.

(3) درین وقت شیرین نام صبیئه محمدعظیم خان طایفه سه پای دایزنگی به دقتر سنجش قلهدادی که در سرای بوستان عالی سنجش می شود، موازی یک قطعه سیاهه ظاهر نموده.

(4) که چیزی اسب و تفنگ و فقره اسباب پدر مرا در وقتی که سردار محمدخان دولت یاری محبوس نموده بود ضبط نموده، سپرد و تحویل ابوبکرخان حاکم

(5) سابقه چنچران نموده بود. اگر نامبرده به کارکنان سرکاری رسانده باشد، سند ظاهر کند و اگر در نزد آن باقی باشد بازخواست شود. به قرار

(6) قلهداد مذکور، کارکنان دقتر مذبور [مزبور] از ابوبکرخان به کتاب سؤال و جواب در صفحه ۱۸۰ الی صفحه ۱۸۱ پرسیده بود که طومار را ملاحظه نموده.

(7) جواب تحریر بدارید. نامبرده طومار را ملاحظه کرده، جواب تحریر نموده که سردار محمدخان مذکور، مطلق نامبرده را همراه مال او به من تحویل نکرده بود؛ و

(8) مگر اینقدر بود که محمدعظیم خان را محبوس نموده، در نزد من آمده؛ یک شب و یا دوشب در جای من بوده، بعد از من جهت محافظت پهره خواست. چیزی نفری از [خا]صه دارها

(9) پهره مقرر نموده ام که به هرات رسانیده. شما از محمدعظیم خان پسر سردار محمدخان جويا شوید که جواب بگوید؛ به من دخل و عرض نمی باشد. اگر پسران و برادر

(10) سردار محمدخان، اظهار نموده که تحویل ابوبکرخان نمودیم، به قرار اظهار و پا به مہری شان می رسانم. بنابراین مرقوم می شود که شمایان محمدعظیم خان

(11) و محمد اعظم پسران سردار محمد خان و آقا احمد برادر نامبرده را در نزد خودها خواسته، از قرار سیاهه جزو در نقل سیاهه قلمدادی شیرین نام، که در جوف فرمان

(12) مبارک گذاشته، ارسال شده به قرار جزو بازخواست نمائید؛ که اگر به بوبکرخان و یا دیگر کارداران سرکاری تحویل نموده باشند و سند گرفته باشند،

(13) سند او را ملاحظه نموده، نقل او را به مواهیر خودها به دفتر سنجش قلمدادی، جهت عالی جاهان زمان الدین خان و گل محمدخان و یاریگ خان غلام بچه های حضور

(14) مبارک و عالیحضرت میرزا غلام محمدخان سررشته دار دفترخانه سنجش مذکور، ارسال دارید که علم آورده شود، و اگر گفتگویی داشته باشند یک نفر

(15) خود را اگر ویکل می کردن، وکالت خط به مهر اهالی محکمه و از شایان بدهد، که یک نفرشان به دفتر مذکور آمده، به قرار حسابی جواب بگوید؛ و اگر

(16) یک نفرشان را ویکل نمی کردن [چند] نفرشان را به دفتر مذکور معه کیفیت و اظهارشان ارسال دارید که آمده به قرار حسابی جواب [بگوید]

(17) اگر قبول دار باشند که نرسانیده

(18) باشند، از نزدشان به قرار طومار وصول نموده، تحویل می نمایند و رسید

(19) آن را ارسال دارید. فقط. تحریر به تاریخ یوم دوشنبه ۱۹ شهر محرم الحرام سنه تنگوزیل سنه ۱۳۱۷.

(20) مکرراً مرقوم می شود ذریعه نقل طومار اخیر که یک طغرا می باشد، عالیشانان زمان الدین خان و یاریگ خان

(21) و گل محمدخان و میرزا غلام محمدخان فرموده اند، امر مبارک هم شده است، که ملاحظه می کنید. فقط. »

Document 1—Translation

(1) In the name of God

(2) List

(3) The copy of the list submitted by Shirin, daughter of Sardar Muhammad 'Azim Khan of Sih Pay tribe. The list details the properties and belongings of this poor woman's father, Muhammad 'Azim Khan of Sih Pay tribe:

(4) During the rebellion of the Hazaras, when my family fled toward the Aymaq country, somewhere between Aymaq and Hazara countries, Aqa Muhammad

(5) Khan, a resident of Davlatyar, arrested us and took all our properties and belongings, and delivered them to Bubakr Khan, a Herati Aymaq. The following is an inventory of the properties:

- Horses with saddles and accessories: twenty-seven / English breech-loading rifles: five / English three-groove rifles: thirteen / Six-shooter pistols: two
- English artillery pistols: five / Egyptian Damascus steel swords: two / Iranian Damascus steel swords: three / black xxx⁸⁶ with silver cover: one
- Silver musket rifle: one / Dagger with silver casing: fish-shaped handle / Seven leather money pouches full of Kabuli rupiyahs: one thousand and four hundred cash / Breech-loading cartridges: one horse load
- Shoulder cartridges pouch full of cartridges: five / Hazara woman armbands with qutas,⁸⁷ one pair, each weighing forty rupiyahs, one type, eighty rupiyahs cash / Silver earrings, one pair, one type, weighing seventeen rupiyahs cash / Silver xxx, xxx pair, weighing twenty-four rupiyahs cash
- Silver bracelets: Two pairs, one type, weighing forty rupiyahs cash / Silver rings with pearl stones: twenty-seven / Rings with high-grade turquoise stones: two xxx, one type, each thirty rupiyahs [in total] sixty rupiyahs. Gold rings: two—two *misqals* [about 8.5 grams] / Silk and blackened and Ya'qubi xxx: four

86 The symbol 'xxx' indicates a word that could not be deciphered due to damage to the document.

87 According to Shah 'Ali Akbar Shahrastani, *qutas* was a piece of Hazara women jewelry the size of a big round medal, with engraved ornamental flowers, worn on arms or chests. Shah 'Ali Akbar Shahrastani, "Ziwar-Alat-i Kuhan-i Zanan-i Hazarah," Hazara Culture, April 21, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20240325044755/https://azraculture.org/postDetail.php?post_id=92.

- Hazara women adras⁸⁸ robes: four / Silver chaprasis⁸⁹ sewed to robes: sixteen, one type, weighing of the total: forty rupiyahs cash / Silver buttons made in Hazara style and sewed to each robe: One hundred and twenty, one type, weighing of the total: thirty rupiyahs cash / High-grade wool coats: seven
- High-grade wool pants: seven / Hats inlaid with beads and ornaments: five / English boots: seven / Iraqi leather belts: seven
- High-grade wool overcoat: one / Wool overgarments: two / Hazara striped silk, multicolor, and chintz quilts: twelve / Rugs: eight

(6) I have written truthfully, no more or less, all the properties, in goods and cash, as described above, that the mentioned Muhammad Khan xxx →⁹⁰ when we were

(7) xxx must answer. Only.⁹¹

Document 2—Translation

(1) In the name of God

(2) The Honorable Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan and Field Marshal Faramarz Khan of Herat.

(3) At this time, a woman named Shirin, the daughter of Muhammad 'Azim Khan of the Sih Pay clan of Day Zangi appeared in the Bureau of Audits, which is located at Saray Bostan, and submitted a list describing

(4) the horses, guns, and silver of her father. Sardar Muhammad Khan of Davlatyar, when he imprisoned her father, seized the properties and delivered them to Abu Bakr Khan,

88 Adras is a Central Asian fabric made of silk and cotton.

89 A Hindi word for someone who wears a *chapras*, which is a metal badge "inscribed with the name of the office to which the bearer is attached." It is worn either on belts, like a belt buckle, or on robes. Here chaprasi is used to mean chapras. Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: The Anglo-Indian Dictionary* (Hertfordshire: UK: Wordsworth Reference, 1886): 220.

90 The symbol 'xxx →' indicates multiple words that could not be deciphered due to damage to the document.

91 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan and Field Marshal Faramarz Khan of Herat, likely Muharram 19, 1317/May 30, 1899. NAA, Enclosure of Farman, No. 4629.

(5) former governor of Chikhcharan. If he has submitted the properties to the government employees, he must show the receipt, and if the properties are still in his possession, he should be investigated. Based on

(6) the above-mentioned list, the staff of the Bureau of Audits asked Abu Bakr Khan, in the question-and-answer book on pages 180 to page 181, to examine the petition and

(7) to write his answer. He examined the petition and wrote that the said Sardar Muhammad Khan had absolutely not handed over the said [prisoner] along with his belongings. He

(8) had brought the imprisoned Muhammad 'Azim Khan and stayed in my place for one or two nights and then asked me for military escorts to leave. I provided

(9) him with some escorts who accompanied him to Herat. You can ask Muhammad 'Azim Khan, the son of Sardar Muhammad Khan, to give an answer. It does not concern me. [Amir addressing the Governor and the Field Marshal:] If sons and brother of

(10) Sardar Muhammad Khan would testify that they handed over the properties to Abu Bakr Khan and would attest it in writing with their seals, it is instructed that you two summon Muhammad 'Azim Khan

(11) and Muhammad A'zam, the sons of Sardar Muhammad Khan, and Aqa Ahmad, his brother, and ask them in details [about the properties,] according to the copy of the list provided by Shirin, which was sent as an enclosure of this blessed

(12) decree. If they have delivered the properties to Bubkar Khan or other government officials and have received a receipt,

(13) examine their receipt and send a copy of it, with your seals on it, to the Bureau of Audits, to the attention of honorable Zaman al-Din Khan, Gul Muhammad Khan, Yar Big Khan, His Highness's pages,

(14) and the honorable Mirza Ghulam Muhammad Khan, the manager of the aforementioned Bureau of Audits. And if they have issues with this, they should pick one person

(15) as their representative and come, with a written power of attorney sealed by the court and you, to the mentioned bureau and account for the properties. And if they

(16) did not choose one as a representative, send several of them to the said bureau along with their statements and documents to answer the questions.

(17) If they agree that the properties were not delivered [to the government],

(18) they must submit all the properties, based on the enclosed list, and the receipt

(19) should be sent [to the Bureau of Audits.] Only. Written on Monday, 19th of Muharram Year of Pig 1317. [May 30, 1899]

(20) Again, it is stressed that, according to the copy of the last scroll which is one decree [tughra,] the honorable Zaman al-Din Khan and Yar Big Khan

(21) and Gul Muhammad Khan and Mirza Ghulam Muhammad Khan have requested this matter, and His Highness has ordered it, as you can see. Only.⁹²

Discussion

Shirin's petition, as previously mentioned, presents a compelling personal narrative while also providing valuable insights into Hazara domestic life and the workings of the Afghan bureaucracy. This article, while addressing aspects of the Afghan government's accountability system, primarily focuses on the human story in Shirin's petition: her family's captivity and her courageous pursuit of justice while in captivity. In this section, we begin by recounting the fate of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big as a war refugee, his arrest, and the confiscation of his properties. Next, we examine the government's response to Shirin's petition, focusing on how the amir repeatedly pressed his officials in Herat to investigate the allegations she raised. Finally, we discuss Shirin's life in slavery, drawing on various sources to trace where she ended up as an enslaved woman and what eventually happened to her.

92 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan and Field Marshal Faramarz Khan of Herat, Muharram 19, 1317/May 30, 1899. NAA, Farman, No. 4629.

In November 1892, Shirin was enslaved. In May 1899, she petitioned the government about the seized properties of her father. We know little about her life during those six and a half years of bondage. There are at least six documents identified so far at the NAA related to her case that, put together, can offer some information about her legal claim, but not much about her life after she was enslaved in Kabul. Document 1 is a copy of the original petition made by government scribes at the Bureau of Audits. They made the copy as an enclosure of the royal decree (Document 2) addressed to the governor of Herat. The copy lists all the properties that the local officials seized from the mir's family. It is likely that the scribes copied only the list, or *siyahah*, of the petition, as it was important for the purpose of the royal decree, and they perhaps decided not to copy all the text of the original petition submitted by Shirin. We are not sure if the original petition has survived. However, the copy we have is enough to provide significant information about the legal case that Shirin presented to the Bureau of Audits. When examined alongside other archival documents, it offers a detailed account of how her family experienced the Hazara War.

A Hazara Mir on the Run

When Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big fell victim to the treachery of the Aymaq chief Sardar Muhammad Khan and was arrested in Davlatyar, he was not traveling like a typical war refugee but more like a dethroned king heading into exile. Although he carried a significant amount of belongings with him, he reportedly threw many of his possessions into the Helmand River before beginning his journey.⁹³ The inventory listed in Shirin's petition (Document 1) reflects only what he presumably considered the bare essentials. According to Shirin's list, the mir's family had twenty-seven horses—some for carrying family members and others for transporting their belongings. The group consisted of just eleven people but carried an impressive cache of weapons, including nineteen rifles, seven pistols, and one horse-load of ammunition. As a fugitive, the mir traveled with a substantial amount of arms, cash, and clothing—far more than one would expect from an ordinary refugee family on the run.

One of the key reasons why the mir was not traveling light was likely his awareness of the dangers ahead—he was prepared to fight or bribe his way to freedom if necessary. Additionally, as a prominent mir, he had a wide network of acquaintances and allies, many of whom he believed could assist him with safe passage. Among these was Sardar Muhammad Khan, an Aymaq chief whom he knew personally and trusted.⁹⁴ In fact, according to family accounts,

93 Interview with Zahir Khan.

94 Katib Hazarah, *Waqayi'-i Hazarajat*, 272; Riyazi Hiravi, 'Ayn al-Waqayi', 219.

when the party reached Aymaq territory and camped in an open field, it was the mir himself who sent someone to the Aymaq chief to request food. This inadvertently revealed his presence to the Aymaqs. The mir explained to the Aymaq chief that he was on the run and could not visit his village. However, as mentioned earlier, the chief eventually persuaded him to spend the night at his fort, a decision that would prove catastrophic.⁹⁵ The mir's misplaced trust in his "friends" along the route may also explain why he was traveling with a large entourage—he likely believed that he could rely on their protection and had little reason to fear.

During the war, the Hazaras resisted the Afghans fiercely, partly thanks to their access to modern weapons. All but one of the mir's rifles, as Shirin's petition shows, were English-made, which suggests the Hazara armed forces had some access to modern firearms. These weapons may have been smuggled from India, captured from Afghan forces, or remnants from the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1879–1880). The mir also had weapons that came from Russia, Egypt, and Persia. Mir 'Azim Big's arms show that his kingdom was far from an isolated valley—it was connected through trade to distant cities and regions. This is also evident in the family's "English boots" and "Iraqi leather belts" (Document 1). The collection of weapons, jewelry, and cash reflects Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big's confidence that he could make his way to Persia. What the mir underestimated, however, was how profoundly the war had changed the position of the Hazaras in Afghanistan. The social and political landscape had shifted against them—no one wanted to risk associating with the Hazaras, let alone aiding them. Many were actively hunting Hazaras for economic gain, political favor, or promises of heavenly rewards. In 1892, it was dangerous to be a Hazara in Afghanistan.

In Document 2, new details emerge about the arrest of Mir 'Azim Big. After their capture in Davlatyar, the mir's family was moved to Chighcharan en route to Herat. The governor of Chighcharan, Abu Bakr Khan, claimed that Sardar Muhammad Khan of Davlatyar handed over the captives—but without their belongings. After a few nights, according to Abu Bakr Khan, he then sent the captives to Herat. Sardar Muhammad Khan, on the other hand, insisted that he had delivered the mir's family along with all their possessions to Abu Bakr Khan. The Bureau of Audits in Kabul intervened, requesting both parties to provide documentation, such as receipts, to substantiate their claims. The bureau further instructed them to send notarized copies of these documents to Kabul for examination. Shirin, who had initiated this entire process,

95 Interview with Zahir Khan.

had no expectation of recovering her family's confiscated assets, as discussed earlier. Instead, her goal was to prove the allegations of theft and implicate those responsible for arresting her family. This was an ingenious strategy for an enslaved girl with little power to make her formidable adversaries face scrutiny from the amir. Like a shrewd courtier, Shirin understood the mechanics of power in Afghanistan and leveraged them to her advantage.

Shirin's petition sheds light on another significant aspect of the war: the systematic and thorough nature of the looting. Among the items seized from her family were personal belongings such as a pair of earrings, two gold rings, and an armband—items that were likely being worn by captives like the mir's wife. This suggests that Afghan officials not only confiscated what the family was carrying but also stripped them of everything they had on their person. The list Shirin provided in her petition is remarkably detailed. It includes the weight of the rings, exactly counts the items, and even mentions their prices. The twenty-one kinds of personal items listed offers a glimpse into the domestic life of a Hazara mir's household in the 19th century. The goods originated not only from Hazara markets but also from across international borders, with some items identified as English, Iraqi, and Russian. The petition also reveals that the captives were issued a receipt for their seized belongings. This level of record-keeping was likely due to the prominence of the captives, the high value of their possessions, and the multiple parties involved in their transfer from Davlatyar to Herat, Qandahar, and eventually Kabul. Officials had to compile detailed inventories to protect themselves and ensure accountability in the chain of custody.

As mentioned earlier, despite Amir 'Abd al-Rahman's crackdown on corruption, his employees were still very corrupt. He did not trust anyone, including his relatives, and addressed almost all the bureaucratic cases himself. At the Bureau of Audits, three of his trusted slaves—Zaman al-Din Khan, Gul Muhammad Khan, Yar Big Khan—worked for him (Document 2), yet he remained deeply involved in their tasks, as evidenced by the numerous decrees he issued concerning Shirin's case. Stealing from defeated Hazaras during the war of conquest, appears to have been tacitly tolerated by the amir. While he was aware that officials had stolen from Mir 'Azim Big's property, there is no indication that he ever punished them. Nonetheless, Shirin's petition caused significant trouble for the officials implicated in her family's arrest and mistreatment. Shirin had sufficient access to the court to draft and pursue her petition, possibly due to the influence of her powerful master in Kabul. Though she most likely did not achieve her goals, Shirin succeeded in telling her story—and, by extension, the story of her people. Against overwhelming odds, she challenged some of the most powerful figures in the Afghan state, ensuring that her voice, and a part of her people's history, would not be forgotten.

A Legal and Bureaucratic Battle

Shirin was not the first member of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big's family to petition the government regarding the seized properties. In November 1893, according to a royal decree, the son of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big submitted a petition to the court, requesting an investigation into whether the local officials who had arrested his family had delivered all the confiscated properties to the government.⁹⁶ This petition was filed not long after the execution of the mir and other male members of his family, which occurred sometime after November 20, 1892. The decree does not name the mir's son, but it was likely Wali Muhammad Khan, the young boy whose life the amir spared. At the time, however, Wali Muhammad Khan would have been too young to write the petition himself. It was most likely Shirin who submitted the petition on his behalf, using the name of the mir's only surviving son, presumably to increase the chances of being taken seriously. Six years later, in 1899, when no action had been taken on the initial petition, Shirin submitted a new one, this time under her own name (Document 1).

In 1893, Shirin, like other women in the mir's family, was enslaved, but still had access to her brother.⁹⁷ He was the mir's only surviving son, as the others either perished in the war or were executed in captivity in Kabul. Among the mir's sons executed in Kabul, one was a former page boy who was put to death by the amir, while another was captured alongside his father and sister Shirin and met the same fate.⁹⁸ As noted earlier, the amir spared Wali Muhammad Khan, an infant at the time, due to his young age. However, he issued a conditional death sentence for the infant to be carried out when the boy turned eighteen. Wali Muhammad Khan grew up in Kabul, and through the persistent efforts of Shirin and his other sisters, the Afghan government ultimately pardoned him, sparing his life.⁹⁹ It was possibly Amir Habib Allah Khan who pardoned Wali Muhammad Khan and then recruited him as a page boy at the court.¹⁰⁰ These pages, drawn from the children of mirs and khans across the country, were well cared for and trained to become future officeholders.

In 1893, about a year after the likely execution of her father, Shirin, grieving, enraged, and in bondage, mustered the courage to prepare a petition

96 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan of Herat, Jamadi al-Awwal 3, 1311/November 12, 1893. NAA, Farman, No. 4635/122.

97 Interview with Zahir Khan.

98 *ST*, 3:888; *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, vol. 4 (part 3), 265.

99 Interview with Zahir Khan.

100 Interview with Zahir Khan. Zahir Khan does not know the title of Wali Muhammad Khan's job at the court, but we know that young sons of defeated mirs and khans were enrolled at the court as page boys (*ghulam bachah*), a position somewhere between a slave/hostage/trainee/foster child.

with her brother and pursue justice against the men in Ghur who had betrayed her family. In response to the petition, in a royal decree dated November 12, 1893, the amir asked Sa'd al-Din Khan, the governor of Herat, to investigate the claims made by the mir's son.¹⁰¹ The governor initially reported that the properties seized from the captives had been moved to government storage (*sandūq-khanah*) and reassured the amir that everything was accounted for. However, the amir ordered a detailed review to verify whether the items in the storehouse matched the inventory and directed that an affidavit be taken from Sardar Muhammad Khan's son, who was involved in handling the assets.¹⁰² That same month, the governor conducted a thorough investigation and submitted his findings. Muhammad 'Azim Khan, the son of Sardar Muhammad Khan, denied any discrepancies between the inventory list and the properties delivered to the government, asserting that he had turned over everything that he had seized from Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big.¹⁰³ In December 1893, according to another royal decree, separate affidavits were taken from Muhammad 'Azim Khan by the field marshal and the police chief of Herat. He was then brought to court, where a judge read from a prepared scroll to confirm his account. Members of the court affixed their seals to the document, which was then dispatched to the amir in Kabul. The amir finally expressed satisfaction with the investigation.¹⁰⁴

A couple of years later, in July 1896, the amir returned to this case once again. In a royal decree, he specifically raised the issue of five thousand qirans (a sum difficult to convert into today's currency) missing from the seized properties of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big. He accused officials in Ghur—including Sardar Muhammad Khan's son and Abu Bakr Khan, the governor of Chighcharan—of corruption and demanded that the governor of Herat investigate the matter.¹⁰⁵ The Herat governor did not follow through with the investigation, as the case resurfaced three years later, in 1899, prompted by Shirin's petition

101 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan of Herat, Jamadi al-Thani 9, 1311/December 18, 1893. NAA, Farman, No. 4635/135.

102 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan of Herat, Jamadi al-Thani 9, 1311/December 18, 1893. NAA, Farman, No. 4635/135.

103 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan of Herat, Rajab 3, 1311/January 10, 1894. NAA, Farman, No. 4634.

104 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan of Herat, Rajab 3, 1311/January 10, 1894. NAA, Farman, No. 4634.

105 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan of Herat, Muharram 27, 1314/July 8, 1896. NAA, Farman, No. 4628.

(Document 1).¹⁰⁶ A copy of her petition was enclosed within a royal decree (Document 2) dated May 30, 1899, in which the amir again urged the governor to investigate the allegations. Shirin's petition provided a detailed inventory of the properties seized by the Ghur officials.¹⁰⁷ However, by this point, the governor appeared to have grown weary of the case and chose to ignore the amir's orders, possibly hoping the matter would be forgotten.

The amir, who rarely forgot matters related to money, dispatched another, more strongly worded royal decree on November 20, 1899, commanding the governor to conduct a thorough investigation and submit a report.¹⁰⁸ This time, the governor complied, sending a report accompanied by a scroll listing the properties. However, in Kabul, officials were unable to locate the scroll. Either the governor had failed to enclose it, or it was misplaced along the way. Frustrated, the amir once again instructed the governor to resend the report, ensuring that the scroll was included this time.¹⁰⁹ At this point, the paper trail in the National Archives of Afghanistan concerning Mir 'Azim Big's seized properties comes to an end.

The Bureau of Audits, which handled Shirin's petition, was a powerful government office tasked with holding local officials accountable. The amir received regular reports on corruption among his officials, and this office was responsible for auditing their books and records. Punishments for those found guilty were severe, often including imprisonment and property confiscation. On one occasion, the amir even threatened clerks suspected of corruption with being blow out of a cannon.¹¹⁰ Accusing an official of corruption was a serious matter, and the stakes became even higher if the accusations were proven true. Based on the list that Shirin submitted, it was evident that local officials in Davlatyar, Chighcharan, and Herat had misappropriated parts of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big's confiscated properties. We cannot know for sure, at this point, whether the amir punished any of the people involved in stealing from the seized properties.

106 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan and Field Marshal Faramarz Khan of Herat, likely Muharram 19, 1317/May 30, 1899. NAA, Enclosure of Farman, No. 4629.

107 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan and Field Marshal Faramarz Khan of Herat, likely Muharram 19, 1317/May 30, 1899. NAA, Enclosure of Farman, No. 4629.

108 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan of Herat, Rajab 16, 1317/November 20, 1899. NAA, Farman, No. 4630.

109 Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan of Herat, Sha'ban 24, 1317/December 28, 1899. NAA, Farman, No. 4630.

110 *ST*, 3:517–518. See also, Sardar Nasr Allah Khan to Governor Sa'd al-Din Khan of Herat, Rabi' al-Thani 12, 1317/August 20, 1899. NAA, Farman, No. 4629.

Despite his love of money and hatred of those who stole from the government, the amir was pragmatic enough to show leniency toward individuals who had played key roles in securing his victories. In 1895, for example, a government clerk in Kabul named Sayyid Akbar Shah, from Waras, Bamiyan, who had assisted the Afghan side during the Hazara War, was caught forging documents to release prisoners. Under normal circumstances, this offense would have been punishable by death. However, due to his contributions during the war, the amir pardoned him and reinstated him to his position.¹¹¹ The amir's charity toward those who had helped him defeat the Hazaras showed just how significant the conquest of Hazaristan was to him. In addition to the amir's unwritten policy of pardoning his loyal servants, Shirin's status as an enslaved woman from a defeated people further diminished her chances of achieving her objectives. She was powerless compared to the bureaucrats in Ghur and Herat, who went to great lengths to defend themselves and discredit her claims. Yet, through her legal battle, Shirin made her voice heard. Her petition provides a rare glimpse into the Hazara War, the toll it took on her family, and the impact it had on countless other families like hers.

The Search for Shirin and Her Life in Slavery

Despite her relative obscurity today, Shirin played a pivotal role in the Hazara War. On October 1, 1892, during a darbar in Kabul, Brigadier Abdul Subhan Khan, a military servant of the amir, presented a report on the war to the amir. This occurred after the arrest of Mir 'Azim Big. The British agent in Kabul was also present at the darbar and documented the event in his regularly dispatched diary. The brigadier singled out Muhammad 'Askar Qazi and Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big as the main leaders of the Hazara War. The amir responded, "Kazi Askar was God, and Muhammad Azim the Prophet of the Hazaras."¹¹² The snarky comment was meant to reinforce the main line of his disinformation campaign against the Hazaras: they were unbelievers. The Brigadier then told the amir that one cause of the war was an Afghan officer who had attempted to acquire a Hazara girl named Shirin by force. The girl was the daughter of a Hazara mir, the Brigadier said, but the British agent could not recall his name: "I do not remember exactly whether she is the daughter of Kazi Askar or Muhammad Azim," he wrote in his diary.¹¹³ Upon hearing this story, the amir remarked: "*ain talkhi az sherini bud*" ("this bitterness was from

111 ST, 3:1314–1315, 1635.

112 KD, October 4, 1892. BL, IOR/L/PS/7/68, 2.

113 BL, IOR/L/PS/7/68, 2. Although the British agent's report suggests that Shirin's father was either Mir 'Azim Big or Muhammad 'Askar Qazi, the evidence presented in this article

[that] sweetness,” referring to Shirin, which means “sweet” in Persian.)¹¹⁴ The fact that an Afghan officer sent men specifically to capture her indicates that Shirin's reputation preceded her. According to oral accounts from her family, she was a prominent figure in her father's territory and even commanded men during the war.¹¹⁵

Afghan officers arriving in the Hazara villages would kick people out of their homes, plunder their belongings, and rape their women.¹¹⁶ In Jaghuri, for example, a tax assessor named Mirza Fazl al-Din Khan once raped a virgin girl who was engaged to be married.¹¹⁷ The Afghan officers could do anything they wished, with no fear of repercussion. At the time, Muhammad ‘Askar “Qazi” (judge) was a leader of Hajaristan and Mir Muhammad ‘Azim Big was a mir in Uruzgan. In fact, Mir ‘Azim Big, an ally of the amir, must have turned against him after the amir's top military commander, Colonel Farhad Khan, attempted to take his daughter by force. As mentioned earlier, this is what the Hazara mir indirectly told the amir after his arrest and also what Brigadier Abdul Subhan Khan reported to the amir.¹¹⁸ Shirin, therefore, was a significant figure in the Hazara War who unwittingly shaped a key moment in the history of this war.

The available documents do not definitively indicate where Shirin ended up after being enslaved in Kabul or who her master was—although, as shall be discussed, there are two possible candidates. We only know that her half-sister, Khayr Banu (a daughter of the mir's Jaghuri wife), was at Habib Allah Khan's harem as an enslaved concubine.¹¹⁹ According to Katib, Prince Habib Allah picked five young daughters of Hazara mirs from the captives, including Khayr Banu, and took them to the northern tower of the Arg, the royal palace, and had sex with them (or raped them, to be more accurate.) He then added them to his harem.¹²⁰ It may seem odd for the prince to engage with women in the palace instead of his own private residence, but he was used to it. In the

indicates it was the former. Historian Hasan Kakar also supports the view that the Shirin mentioned in the report was the daughter of Mir ‘Azim Big. Kakar, *Afghanistan*, 177fn85.

114 BL, IOR/L/PS/7/68, 2.

115 Interview with Zahir Khan.

116 ST, 3:1041,1837; Kakar, *Afghanistan*, 176–77.

117 ST, 3:1225.

118 Peshawar Confidential Diary, January 23, 1893, BL, IOR/L/PS/7/69, 737. See also, BL, IOR/L/PS/7/68, 2.

119 “The Barakzai Dynasty (Seradj, Seraj, Siraj): Genealogy,” The Royal Ark, accessed March 2, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230730094607/http://www.royalark.net/Afghanistan/barak13.htm>. See also, ST, 3:895; Katib, *Siraj Al-Tawarikh*, 2011, 4 (part 2):389.

120 The other four girls were: Hakimah daughter of Safdar ‘Ali Khan, Fatimah daughter of Muhammad Nabi Khan, Paridukht daughter of Mir Kazim Big, and Paridukht daughter of Mir ‘Ali Riza Big. Katib, *Siraj Al-Tawarikh*, 2011, 4 (part 2):389. We knew from the third

bazaar, the state had turned a caravansarai (traders' inn), into a special prison where the "unmarried and beautiful daughters of respectable people" were kept.¹²¹ At the time, the amir would jail whole families of notable men that he did not trust. This prison, however, was a place for young women only and the inmates were kept well-fed and well-clothed. Prince Habib Allah Khan and Kabul's deputy chief of police (*na'ib-i kutwal*) would regularly visit the sarai to have sex with the inmates. Because of these visits, the sarai was nicknamed *pari khanah* (house of fairies).¹²² Prince, later amir, Habib Allah was known for his sexual promiscuity and his innumerable wives and slave girls.

We know for certain where Khayr Banu ended up as an enslaved girl, but our knowledge about Shirin is very limited. The oral accounts from Mir 'Azim Big's descendants contradict written sources about the fate of Shirin after enslavement. The written sources, including her petition, show that she was alive in Kabul at least until 1899, the date of her petition, and two years before the death of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan. The family, however, based on stories told by elders in a Hazara village in Paghman, Kabul, believe that Shirin fought against the amir when she was brought to Kabul (1892) and was killed by amir's soldiers in Paghman.¹²³ This story is likely not true, as she was still alive in 1899 when she petitioned the amir.

In order to find out what happened to Shirin, we first need to identify her master. She was the daughter of a prominent mir and children of defeated mirs were typically enslaved by the royal family—the royals would not simply add a low-born commoner to their harems. This means that Shirin was most likely enslaved by a powerful man. We know from *Siraj al-Tawarikh* and The Royal Ark, a royal genealogy website, that her half-sister, Khayr Banu, was enslaved by the amir's son Sardar Habib Allah Khan. Based on sources available, there are two possible candidates for Shirin's potential master: Sardar Nasr Allah Khan, the amir's other son, and *Mir Munshi* Sultan Muhammad Khan, the amir's chief English translator, an Indian from Punjab.

The Case for Sardar Nasr Allah Khan as Shirin's Master

The case for Sardar Nasr Allah Khan as Shirin's master is mainly based on the Royal Ark's genealogical data. The Royal Ark is the most comprehensive database available on "royal genealogies of the Royal and ruling houses of Africa,

volume of *ST* that Prince Habib Allah took a daughter of the mir from his Jaghuri wife as a concubine. *ST*, 3:895. Here Katib mentions her name.

121 Kakar, *Government and Society*, 38.

122 Kakar, 38.

123 Interview with 'Aziz Khan 'Azimi.

Asia, Oceana, and the Americas.”¹²⁴ In the Barakzai Dynasty’s family tree, there is a “Hazara consort” named Shirin in the harem of Sardar Nasr Allah Khan, Amir ‘Abd al-Raman Khan’s son.¹²⁵ However, the database does not mention Shirin’s father, leaving uncertainty as to whether she was the daughter of Mir Muhammad ‘Azim Big. There is, however, a strong indication of a familial connection between this Shirin and Khayr Banu, another daughter of Mir ‘Azim Big, who was part of Sardar Habib Allah Khan’s harem. In 1910, Shirin gave birth to a boy, ‘Abd al-Ra’uf Khan, as well as two daughters, Humaira Khanum and Aminah Bigum, whose birth dates remain unknown. Her son later married Rabi’ah Bigum, a daughter of Khair Banu, who we know for sure was Shirin’s sister in Habib Allah Khan’s harem.¹²⁶ This marriage between cousins, a common practice in Afghanistan, strongly indicates a close familial tie between Shirin and Khayr Banu.

Marriage between cousins is common throughout the region. While specific statistics for 19th-century Afghanistan are unavailable, it is estimated that today approximately 40 percent of marriages in the country occur between cousins.¹²⁷ In neighboring Pakistan, this rate is around 65 percent, while in India it is 55 percent, and in Saudi Arabia approximately 50 percent.¹²⁸ This means that, even today, in conservative Muslim communities, marrying within the family—often to cousins—remains a widespread practice. The primary motivation for this tradition is typically to preserve family wealth and resources. However, in the case of two enslaved sisters arranging marriages between their children, the rationale was likely different. Rather than wealth preservation, their goal was to maintain family connections and avoid what Orlando Patterson has called “social death.”¹²⁹ Enslaved individuals often experienced social death from the moment they were captured and enslaved. According to Patterson, social death is a condition where the enslaved are forcibly excluded from their social networks and communities, leading to the loss of identity,

124 “The Royal Ark,” February 2022, <https://www.royalark.net/index.html>.

125 “The Barakzai Dynasty (Nasser-Zia, Rahmani, Ziai, Ziyai): Genealogy,” The Royal Ark, accessed March 2, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20241003024300/http://www.royalark.net/Afghanistan/barakiz.htm>.

126 “The Barakzai Dynasty (Seradj, Seraj, Siraj): Genealogy.” See also, *ST*, 3:895; Katib, *Siraj Al-Tawarikh*, 4 (part 2):389.

127 Sarosh Iqbal et al., “Consanguineous Marriages and Their Association with Women’s Reproductive Health and Fertility Behavior in Pakistan: Secondary Data Analysis from Demographic and Health Surveys, 1990–2018,” *BMC Women’s Health* 22, no. 1 (2022): 2.

128 Iqbal et al., 2.

129 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982): 5.

agency, and societal recognition. For the families of the enslaved, an enslaved relative was like a dead relative, as communication and connection with them became impossible. The master stripped the enslaved of their social ties and cultural connections and rendered them into a “genealogical isolate.”¹³⁰ At the same time that they were “not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives,” the enslaved were dissolved into the world of their master—“his community, his laws, his policemen or patrollers, and his heritage.”¹³¹ In this way, the enslaved did not die physically but experienced a profound erasure of their social existence.

The fact that Shirin’s son married Khayr Banu’s daughter—considering the marriage customs in Afghanistan and the unique circumstances of the two women in captivity—offers compelling, though circumstantial, evidence that Shirin and Khayr Banu may have been sisters. This arrangement could reflect their desire to shield their children from the social death they themselves had endured. Shirin’s grandchildren, too, married their cousins, according to the Royal Ark, but that does not necessarily establish any relationship between Shirin and Khayr Banu. The two grandchildren were ‘Abd al-Rahim Khan Nasir-Zia, son of ‘Abd al-Ra’uf Khan (son of Shirin), who married Khadijah Bigum, daughter of Aminah Bigum (daughter of Shirin).¹³² This demonstrates that Shirin prioritized keeping her children and grandchildren connected through marriage. This goal became especially important after the turbulent events of 1919, when Amir Habib Allah Khan was assassinated. His heir apparent—and Shirin’s master—Nasr Allah Khan briefly assumed the throne, only to be overthrown days later by Aman Allah Khan, who dethroned his uncle in a successful coup, and declared himself amir. Aman Allah Khan put Nasr Allah Khan in jail (where he mysteriously died), confiscated his properties, and placed his family under house arrest in a corner of the Arg, feeding them only once a day.¹³³ The family of Nasr Allah Khan became royal pariahs, and even after release from house arrest, they lived in relative poverty. Despite the risks of being associated with the deposed king, some of Nasr Allah Khan’s children and grandchildren defiantly adopted the surname Nasir-Zia—a reference to Nasr Allah Khan and his father Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan *Zia’ al-Millah*—as an assertion of their lineage and identity.

130 Patterson, 5.

131 Patterson, 5.

132 “The Barakzai Dynasty (Nasser-Zia, Rahmani, Ziai, Ziyai): Genealogy.”

133 Dr. Sherzai, *The Afghan Cinderella: The True Story of Princess Masuma and the Royal Family in 20th Century Afghanistan* (United States: VIM Books Press, 2019): 141–42.

Not much is known about Shirin's grandson 'Abd al-Rahim Khan Nasir-Zia, but we know more about her other grandson, 'Abd al-Ahad Nasir-Ziayi. Born in 1936, he grew up to become a senior official at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was once part of a delegation that visited the US and met with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.¹³⁴ The US Embassy in Kabul, before the departure of the Afghan delegates, dispatched a short biography of each member to Washington DC, where it described Nasir-Ziayi as a "friendly" person, who was "well-connected in the Ministry beyond what just his rank would indicate."¹³⁵ After the Soviet invasion in 1979, he left Afghanistan for Germany where he settled in Dusseldorf.¹³⁶

We do not know for sure whether Shirin, Nasr Allah Khan's Hazara concubine, was the daughter of Mir 'Azim Big. While the marriage patterns discussed earlier provide strong circumstantial evidence, they alone cannot conclusively prove that Shirin and Khayr Banu were sisters. However, we know that Shirin must have been with an important master to have access to sources of power, submit a petition to the amir, and expect a favorable outcome. According to oral accounts of the family of the mir, Shirin was enslaved by one of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan's sons, which enabled her to successfully advocate for her younger brother's release from prison and the repeal of his pending death sentence.¹³⁷ It is, therefore, likely that the Shirin whom we encounter at Prince Nasr Allah Khan's harem was indeed the daughter of Mir 'Azim Big. Nonetheless, while the circumstantial evidence supporting this conclusion is compelling, alternative possibilities should also be considered.

134 *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. E–8, Documents on South Asia, 1973–1976 (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2007): Document 25.

135 The full biography is as follows: "Abdul Ahad Nasser-Ziayee, Assistant Director of the Office of the Foreign Minister. (In our terms 'Deputy Chief of the Secretariat.') Nasser-Ziayee also comes from a foreign service family with close connections to both the former king and president Daoud. His father was Afghan Consul General in Bombay and Abdul Ahad received university training there. Nasser-Ziayee, 40, has been friendly in encounters with embassy officers and is well-informed and well-connected in the Ministry beyond what just his rank would indicate. Nasser-Ziayee was a member of the Afghan delegation to the United Nations between 1968 and 1971. He is married and has two sons. Speaks excellent English." "Naim Visit," Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Kabul, Afghanistan: US Embassy, May 25, 1976), https://web.archive.org/web/20241003181634/https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976KABUL03967_b.html.

136 Despite some efforts we were not able to connect with him or his family members in Germany.

137 Interview with Zahir Khan.

The Case for Mir Munshi Sultan Muhammad Khan as Shirin's Master

The case for “Mir Munshi” Sultan Muhammad Khan as Shirin's master is based solely on Lillias Hamilton's novel *A Vizier's Daughter* (1900). The novel tells the story of Gul Begum, an assertive fifteen-year-old Hazara enslaved girl, the daughter of a defeated chief, who finds herself in the harem of the amir's Chief Secretary (*mir munshi*) in Kabul.¹³⁸ Historian Hasan Kakar believes that *A Vizier's Daughter* is based on the life of Shirin, daughter of Mir Muhammad ‘Azim Big.¹³⁹ While the details of Gul Begum's story and Shirin's life do not align perfectly—perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the book is fiction—there is substantial evidence indicating that Hamilton drew inspiration from Shirin's experiences. For instance, Gul Begum is portrayed as an educated girl who could read and write, with an unwavering desire to free herself. In the novel, she is determined to petition the amir for her freedom and dreams of returning to her homeland.¹⁴⁰ This is what Shirin, the real girl, wanted: her petition against the men who abused her family was a form of resistance against her masters and, between the lines, it showed her hope of one day returning home as a free woman.

One compelling piece of evidence suggesting that the character Gul Begum in *A Vizier's Daughter* is based on Shirin lies in the striking similarities between their stories of capture. In the novel, an Afghan commander attempts to forcibly take Gul Begum, prompting her father, an ally of the Afghans, to revolt against them. This very much sounds like what happened to Shirin. We know from British intelligence reports that an Afghan military officer wanted to take Shirin, daughter of Mir ‘Azim Big, by force which caused the mir to join the fight against the Afghan amir. This, in fact, was “one of the causes of the Hazara rising.”¹⁴¹ That military officer, as noted before, was Colonel Farhad Khan, a key commander of the Afghan forces during the Hazara War.¹⁴² He was particularly infamous for enslaving the children of Hazara mirs during the campaign.¹⁴³ In the novel, the Afghan commander pursuing Gul Begum is named Colonel

138 Lillias Hamilton, *A Vizier's Daughter: A Tale of the Hazara War* (London: John Murray, 1900). The book has gained some popularity in Afghanistan in recent years. It was translated into Persian by ‘Abd Allah Muhammadi (Irfan, 1393/2014) and a Hazara playwright, Amin Najafi, has written a play largely based on the novel. Amin Najafi, *Dukhtar-i Vazir* (Tehran: Afraz, 1397/2018).

139 Kakar, *Afghanistan*, 177fn85.

140 Hamilton, *A Vizier's Daughter*, 351–52.

141 BL, IOR/L/PS/7/68, 2.

142 BL, IOR/L/PS/7/69, 737.

143 ST, 3:611, 812, 960, 1079.

Ferad Shah—a clear fictionalization of Colonel Farhad Khan.¹⁴⁴ In the story, Colonel Ferad Shah sends a soldier to the home of the Hazara leader, Vizier Ghulam Hossain (a character likely modeled on Mir 'Azim Big), to demand that the vizier hand over his daughter. The vizier, like Mir 'Azim Big, refuses to give away her daughter and that is the start of the family's troubles.¹⁴⁵

The choice of character names in *A Vizier's Daughter* further supports the idea that the novel is based on the life of Shirin, the daughter of Mir 'Azim Big. Lillias Hamilton appears to have drawn inspiration from real people in Shirin's life, assigning their names to characters modeled on different individuals. For example, the protagonist is called Gul Begum, while the name Shereen [Shirin] is given to Gul Begum's cousin. Additionally, the novel features a character named Wali Mohamed, the brother of the vizier, likely referencing Wali Muhammad, Shirin's actual brother. Another character, Halima, the vizier's wife, is presumably a reference to Halimah, the chief wife of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan. While it is almost certain that the book is based on the life of Shirin, there is real doubt that Gul Begum's master in the novel, the Chief Secretary, is based on the actual Chief Secretary—despite Hamilton's emphasis in her introduction to the book that the character of the Chief Secretary Ali Mohamed Khan was based on the actual Chief Secretary of the amir, without mentioning Sultan Muhammad Khan by name.¹⁴⁶ Despite Hamilton's implications, there is a case to be made that the Chief Secretary character is based not on Sultan Muhammad Khan but on Sardar Nasr Allah Khan. This interpretation requires some explanations.

In 1887, Sultan Muhammad Khan, a 17-year-old Jat boy from Panjab, arrived in Kabul from India accompanying Thomas Pyne, an English employee of the amir, as his interpreter.¹⁴⁷ He soon found employment as a secretary at the office of translators at the royal court, and not long after became the head of that office, earning the job title Mir Munshi, or Chief Secretary.¹⁴⁸ In 1894,

144 In the novel, Hamilton sometimes offers contextual information in the footnotes. About Colonel Ferad Shah, she writes: "I once asked an Afghan, in no way connected with this story, what sort of a man Colonel Ferad Shah had been." For answer he threw up his hands above his head and exclaimed: "Oh, that creature was not a human being at all—he was a bear. No-worse-for when a bear kills, he does it to defend himself, or to provide himself with food; but that man killed that he might have the pleasure of witnessing human terror and suffering in all its most agonising forms. He and his dogs were fit companions for one another." Hamilton, *A Vizier's Daughter*, 77fn*.

145 Hamilton, 79–87, 125–26.

146 Hamilton, *A Vizier's Daughter*, xiii.

147 R.D. McChesney and Amin Tarzi, "Translation and Transformation: The 'Autobiography' of 'Abd al-Rahman Khan, Amir of Afghanistan," *Afghanistan* 5, no. 2 (2022): 227.

148 McChesney and Tarzi, 227.

an English doctor, our afore-mentioned novelist Lillias Hamilton, arrived in Kabul. She was recruited by the amir to spend time, according to herself, in the harem “to tell the ladies something of our Western life & to show them something of our Western accomplishments,” an odd job for a doctor that she gladly accepted because it offered a “grand opportunity of studying Eastern women.”¹⁴⁹ Hamilton in this capacity gained an intimate knowledge of the harem. She ended up treating patients, too, but spent much of her time with the wives of the amir and his sons and the countless concubines and slave girls that roamed around in royal residences. She also met Sultan Muhammad and became good friends with the Indian courtier.¹⁵⁰

The job of translating English for the amir brought Sultan Muhammad very close to his inner circle. The amir found him a Muhammadzai wife, Sayir Jan, who was his own niece, a sign that he wished to keep the Indian man around. Two years later, that wife died and left behind a girl, Bibi Gul. Sultan Muhammad had other wives (some were possibly slave girls) in his Kabul home.¹⁵¹ In 1895, when Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan sent his son Sardar Nasr Allah Khan to England for an official visit, he assigned Sultan Muhammad and Lillias Hamilton to accompany him.¹⁵² After they returned from the European trip, things quickly started to change for Sultan Muhammad. In January 1896, British agents in Kabul reported that Sultan Muhammad had “fallen under His Highness’s displeasure” and he “has been deprived of the post of translator of English correspondence.”¹⁵³ In 1897, he secretly fled Kabul to India leaving his wives, concubines, and children behind. He did not stay in India and almost immediately headed to London. We now know that his “escape” was planned by the amir who wanted to plant him as a spy in England.¹⁵⁴ In the same year, Hamilton, too, left Kabul and returned to England. The two reunited in London and stayed in contact until the former left the city a few years later.

149 “Papers of Lillias Hamilton,” Wellcome Collection, London, UK (WC, hereafter). PP/HAM/A.22, 8.

150 McChesney and Tarzi, “Translation and Transformation,” 227.

151 Ludmila Vasilieva, *Parvarish-i Lavh va Qalam*, trans. Usamah Faruqi and Ludmila Vassilieva (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007): 6; Zaheer Ali, *Romancing with Revolution: Life and Works of Faiz Ahmed Faiz* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2020), 25.

152 For more on this trip, see R.D. McChesney, *An Afghan Prince in Victorian England: Race, Class, and Gender in an Afghan-Anglo Imperial Encounter* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024).

153 The National Archives, London, UK (TNA, hereafter), FO/65/1528, 202.

154 Kakar, *Afghanistan*, 218; McChesney and Tarzi, “Translation and Transformation,” 229. The amir went as far as confiscating and auctioning off his properties—apparently slaves not included—to create the appearance that the mir munshi’s “escape” was genuine. TNA, FO 106/1, 124.

Lillias Hamilton was an observant and curious woman with some literary ambitions. As a witness to the scale of slavery in Kabul, she decided to write a book about it when she returned to England, and she did. Gul Begum, her protagonist in *A Vizier's Daughter*, was captured during the Hazara War and brought to Kabul where the amir's Chief Secretary purchased her. In the book's introduction, Hamilton explained that every character in *A Vizier's Daughter* was "drawn from a model, and should therefore, as far as it goes, give an accurate description of one phase, at any rate, of Afghan life."¹⁵⁵ When she finished the book, Sultan Muhammad was in London. She gave him the manuscript to read, and he apparently had no objection to how he was depicted there.¹⁵⁶ Hamilton also met the girl who was a model for Gul Begum, the protagonist, which means she met Shirin, daughter of Mir 'Azim Big: "I write of what I saw and heard, and of persons whom I knew as intimately as one can ever know a people so far removed from us in thought and education. Gul Begum told me much, the Hakim a good deal, but far more is what actually passed before my own eyes."¹⁵⁷

In her introduction, Hamilton explains that she initially wanted to write a memoir but found it difficult to put on paper all the things she had seen in Afghanistan. She also wrote that for "obvious reasons" she could not write a truthful memoir about her life in Kabul.¹⁵⁸ (She likely meant that she did not want to portray Afghan rulers, who were clients of the Empire, in a negative way.) In any case, she decided to use the liberties that fiction offered to write a novel instead. She used Gul Begum as a model to illustrate the lives of all Hazara enslaved girls in Kabul.¹⁵⁹ We already know that Hamilton spoke Persian and had no difficulty conversing with women of the harem. At the court, when the interpreter would translate her simple words with the amir into complicated courtly Persian, she would interfere and address the amir directly in plain Persian. The terrified interpreter would try to assist her with flowery language, but the amir would say "leave her alone."¹⁶⁰ Because of her language abilities, Hamilton collected raw data for her novel directly from the enslaved. The final product, though not a remarkable literary achievement,

155 Hamilton, xii.

156 Hamilton, xii–xiii.

157 Hamilton, xii.

158 The full statement: "An autobiography of my sojourn in the capital of Afghanistan would therefore necessarily entail many explanations that for very obvious reasons it is better not to enter into. They are best forgotten." Hamilton, xi.

159 Hamilton, xii.

160 WC, PP/HAM/A.19, 6.

offers plenty of information about slavery and the domestic lives of enslaved women in Kabul.¹⁶¹

We do not know what Shirin looked like and no photograph of her, if one ever existed, has survived.¹⁶² Luckily, Hamilton, who had met her, describes Gul Begum in *A Vizier's Daughter*, which can help us picture what she may have looked like. Hamilton writes:

Her dress was exactly similar to theirs, her hair black, her mould distinctly powerful, but there the resemblance ceased, for she was tall—full head and shoulders taller than any other girl present. Moreover, she had fair, smooth skin and a bright complexion, large intelligent eyes, a nose instead of a knob in the centre of her face, a well-shaped head placed on a well-shaped neck, long, well-shaped feet and hands, and a step as elastic as a deer's, carriage erect and dignified. This was Gul Begum, the pride and beauty of her tribe, her father's hope and joy, the object of many an ill-natured remark from the less well-favoured of her sex. Alas! That it should be so.¹⁶³

161 It should also be noted that the book is a typical colonial novel and the author remains loyal to the genre of Victorian colonial novels by depicting Afghanistan as a backward place in need of saving by the Empire. William Sherman, among others, has explored the complex relationship between the colonial novel and the British imperial ideology in India. However, considering the scarcity of works on the history of slavery in Afghanistan, Hamilton's book, despite its shortcomings, is a valuable historical document. On colonial novels see, William E.B. Sherman, "Romance on the Afghan Frontier: Desire in the Literature of the Church Missionary Society of Peshawar," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 49, no. 6 (2021): 1021–46.

162 During her time in Kabul, Hamilton captured numerous photographs, including landscapes and portraits of individuals from the royal harem. Her photographs, along with her papers, are preserved at the Wellcome Collection in London. One of these photographs features a well-dressed young woman standing beside an older woman, with the younger woman flashing a mild smile. Some Hazaras have speculated that this could be the Hazara girl whose story inspired the character of Gul Begum in Hamilton's novel, due to her Asian features, which resemble those of a Hazara. However, the photograph's caption complicates this interpretation. The cataloger who digitized the image labeled it as "Two women in Turkoman dress." The original caption, likely written by Hamilton herself, provides more context, identifying the subjects as "Ladies from the extreme north of Afghanistan." This description clearly excludes Gul Begum, who was from central Afghanistan. Based on captions, it is unlikely that the young woman in the photograph is Shirin, the daughter of Mir 'Azim Big, who inspired the character of Gul Begum. We thank Victoria Webb, Librarian at the Wellcome Collection, for providing information about this photograph and its captions. WC, PP/HAM/A.31/2, L38142, also available online: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/nkryrm2h/images?id=g8bv2hvu>.

163 Hamilton, *A Vizier's Daughter*, 6–7.

In 1900, the year *A Vizier's Daughter* was published, Sultan Muhammad had already left London.¹⁶⁴ He had returned to India, where he married a local Punjabi woman, settled in Sialkot, and started a law practice. In 1901, following the death of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan and the ascension of his son, Habib Allah Khan, to the throne, the new amir sent Sultan Muhammad's family—who had been abandoned in Kabul—to join him in Sialkot. The group included his wives, enslaved women, and children, all of whom were daughters. Among these women, at least one was of Hazara origin.¹⁶⁵ In 1911, Sultan Muhammad's Punjabi wife gave birth to a son—the first for Sultan Muhammad, who had previously fathered only daughters with his Kabuli wives and concubines.¹⁶⁶ The son was cared for by a nanny from Kabul, known to the family as Nana Jan. She had previously served as the nanny for Bibi Gul, the mir munshi's daughter from his late Afghan wife.¹⁶⁷ This son, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, would go on to become one of Urdu's most celebrated poets and a committed communist. In 1941, Faiz married Alys George (later Alys Faiz), a fellow communist who had moved from England to India for political activism. Alys Faiz lived with her husband's large family in Sialkot for a while and her account of the domestic life of the family, to be found in her book *Over My Shoulder*, is a valuable source to trace the fate of the enslaved women who had been moved from Kabul to India.¹⁶⁸

Among the women sent from Kabul, one was called bhari amma (“elder mother”) by the children, indicating she was likely Sultan Muhammad's eldest wife or concubine.¹⁶⁹ Tuberculosis was endemic in the family and several of the Kabuli women died from the disease; one who survived, was a Hazara woman named Banu.¹⁷⁰ Banu gave birth to Sultan Muhammad's last child, a daughter, born just six months before his death.¹⁷¹ Sultan Muhammad's date of death is not certain, but it was most likely either in 1931 or 1933.¹⁷² This means the Hazara woman who gave birth to his last child must have been very young

164 McChesney and Tarzi, “Translation and Transformation,” 229.

165 Nadia Aqdas daughter of “Bali” Salma Iqbal daughter of Sultan Muhammad Khan and his Hazara concubine Banu, email communication with Ali Karimi (September 30, 2024).

166 Alys Faiz, *Over My Shoulder* (Lahore: Frontier Post Publications, 1993): 304.

167 Ali, *Romancing with Revolution*, 50. Later, Bibi Gul married an army officer, Shujauddin, and settled in Dharamshala, India, according to this source.

168 Faiz, *Over My Shoulder*.

169 Vasilieva, *Parvarish-i Lavh va Qalam*, 7.

170 Salima Hashmi daughter of Faiz Ahmad Faiz son of Sultan Muhammad Khan and his Punjabi wife Sultan Fatima, email communication with Ali Karimi (September 29, 2024).

171 Nadia Aqdas.

172 Sarfaraz Khan and Noor Ul Amin, “Mir Munshi Aala Sultan Muhammad Khan and His Services to Afghanistan,” *Central Asia Journal*, no. 72 (2013): 31; McChesney and Tarzi, “Translation and Transformation,” 231. In British sources, there is a memo, dated

when she arrived from Kabul to Sialkot. Not much is known about her except for her name, Banu (a common Hazara name, short for either Khayr Banu or Shahr Banu). Faiz Ahmad Faiz used to call her “aapa Bano.”¹⁷³ Banu’s daughter, Salma Iqbal (known in the family as Bali), however, would call her mother “ayah” which is a Hazara term for mother.¹⁷⁴ After the mir munshi’s death, Banu married another man, Fath Muhammad. Banu was tight-lipped about her past and, according to her daughter, “all through her life in Pakistan she would hide her identity and wouldn’t share anything related to her past with anybody including her two children.”¹⁷⁵

Sultan Muhammad’s Punjabi wife, Sultan Fatima, was the matriarch of the family. She viewed her marriage to Sultan Muhammad as monogamous, according to Alys Faiz.¹⁷⁶ This means the family considered the Kabuli “wives” of the mir munshi as enslaved domestic servants, with whom the master could sleep, according to Islamic law, without needing to marry them. Sultan Muhammad was a strict man who had his women live in the women’s quarters only, and did not allow them to leave the house.¹⁷⁷ This treatment further demonstrates that the Kabuli women were effectively kept in bondage. In 1941, Alys observed that the large household in Sialkot “was staggering under the burden of nieces and nephews orphaned.”¹⁷⁸ She noticed that the Kabuli women were mostly in the kitchen and the dishes they made were cuisines from Afghanistan and India. Persian was the dominant language of the household, though the Kabuli women spoke Urdu with a strong accent.¹⁷⁹ Alys, Faiz, and other members of the family shared close and affectionate relationships with the Kabuli women and their offspring, but they did not view them as equals. (Alys never mentions them by name in her book and the mir munshi’s descendants do not remember any of their names except for Banu.) Alys and Faiz, for example, had Banu’s teenage daughter, Salma Iqbal, as a servant at their home. “In a manner nothing short of a miracle,” she writes, Salma Iqbal “ran our house month after month.”¹⁸⁰

Was Shirin among the women enslaved in Sultan Muhammad’s harem, as suggested in Lillias Hamilton’s novel? Of the several women who are believed

August 1904, that refers to Sultan Muhammad as “the late Mir Munshi, Sultan Muhammad.” TNA, FO/106/9, 80. This must be a mistake because he was alive at the time.

173 Nadia Aqdas.

174 Faiz, *Over My Shoulder*, 30.

175 Nadia Aqdas.

176 Faiz, *Over My Shoulder*, 303.

177 Vasilieva, *Parvarish-i Lavh va Qalam*, 7.

178 Faiz, *Over My Shoulder*, 112.

179 Faiz, 303.

180 Faiz, 46. For a photo of “Bali” Salma Iqbal see, archive.is/wldAU.

to have been moved from Kabul to Sialkot, only one, Banu, was certainly a Hazara. This does not mean that she was the only one. Alys Faiz describes the Kabuli women as “minor princesses from Kabul,” which here does not mean they were princesses from the Afghan ruling family but daughters of defeated minor kings—the Hazara mirs and other mirs from Afghanistan.¹⁸¹ Children of mirs were usually given to royals and high-level officials as slaves and it is perfectly reasonable to assume that a daughter of a defeated mir could end up in Sultan Muhammad's harem. But was Shirin, daughter of Mir 'Azim Big, among them? We can rule out Banu as a possible candidate because she was too young compared to Shirin. It is plausible that the Hazara slave girls in the mir munshi's household, or at least some of them, were daughters of Hazara mirs. However, there is no definitive evidence to confirm that Shirin was among them.

The Case for Sardar Nasr Allah Khan as Shirin's Master, Reconsidered

Lillias Hamilton's novel contains several clues suggesting that Shirin's master was Nasr Allah Khan and not Mir Munshi Sultan Muhammad. Hamilton may have chosen to depict Sultan Muhammad as Gul Begum's master to avoid portraying the amir's son negatively. Understanding this choice requires examining Lillias Hamilton's position as a writer on Afghanistan. She was more than just a physician or a teacher for the women of the harem. She was likely sent to Kabul on an official mission because “the costs of her road expenses were all covered by the Indian government.”¹⁸² She viewed herself as a government official or, at the very least, a proponent of British policy on Afghanistan. In her unpublished works, she was more critical of the amir, but in her lectures and published writings, Hamilton made every effort “to justify and reinforce official government policy towards Afghanistan, and to fend off criticism of the Amir.”¹⁸³ Therefore, she simply could not portray the amir's son as a slave master in her book. She picked the mir munshi as a character, instead, because he was her friend and he had already cut all his ties to Afghanistan, living a comfortable life in London. Additionally, for plausible deniability, Sultan Muhammad is not mentioned by name anywhere in the novel.

There is enough evidence to support this hypothesis. In the novel, the mir munshi's harem includes a maid named Sardaro, described as “the children's

181 Faiz, 303.

182 Jonathan L. Lee, “Abd al-Rahmān Khān and the ‘Maraz ul-Mulūk,’” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1, no. 2 (1991): 219fn69.

183 Lee, 237. See also, Namatullah Kadrie, “‘Pen and Tongue’ Untied: Lillias Hamilton's Uncensored View of ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan,’” *Afghanistan* 3, no. 1 (2020): 1–26.

nurse, a woman of the royal tribe sent specially by the Ameer for this purpose."¹⁸⁴ Members of the royal tribe—who received monthly government allowances simply for being Muhammadzai—were at the top of the social hierarchy in Kabul. It is hard to imagine one of them serving as a babysitter for a court munshi. However, it is entirely plausible that the amir would send a woman of royal tribe to his son's harem to care for his grandchildren. In fact, he likely did. A woman named Sardaru was a long-serving harem manager under both Halimah, the chief wife of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan, and Sarwar Sultan, the chief wife of Amir Habib Allah Khan. The slave girls and concubines in the harem were terrified of her. She would dress like a man and would usually act like a man.¹⁸⁵ Thus, the character Sardaru in the novel is likely based on the real Sardaru. This alludes to the fact that the Gul Begum was probably at Nasr Allah Khan's harem, not Sultan Muhammad's.

The novel also depicts part of the Chief Secretary's role as handling petitions from the public: "Thirty guests, from how many different tribes? with all their petitions to attend to"¹⁸⁶ Such tasks were typically handled by Sardar Nasr Allah Khan, not a munshi in the translation office. Hamilton, who was well-acquainted with the workings of the court, would have certainly known this. In fact, Hamilton's caption for a portrait photograph she took of the mir munshi clarifies his role: "The Indian Punjabi Mir Munshi Sultan Mohammad, head of the English department of the secretariat of Emir Abd or-Rahman."¹⁸⁷ This shows that the mir munshi was not the amir's Chief Secretary but rather the chief translator responsible for handling English correspondence in the secretariat. In the novel, Hamilton seems to have elevated his job title to suggest he was a more significant figure at court than he actually was. These clues, put together, support the hypothesis that Gul Begum's master was Sardar Nasr Allah Khan rather than the mir munshi, but Hamilton appears to have deliberately opted for the less politically sensitive choice of the mir munshi.

The search for the fate of Shirin and other enslaved women of the Hazara War is a challenging endeavor. The investigation reveals the dehumanizing impact of slavery and shows how closely Orlando Patterson's concept of "social death" resembles real death.¹⁸⁸ Enslaved individuals were severed from their previous lives so completely that tracing their existence after enslavement often becomes impossible. Their former identities were effectively erased, and their

184 Hamilton, *A Vizier's Daughter*, 283.

185 Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, 4 (part 3):607–8.

186 Hamilton, *A Vizier's Daughter*, 288.

187 WC, PP/HAM/A.31/1, L25000.

188 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5.

enslaved bodies were denied recognition and treated as less than fully human. The story told in *A Vizier's Daughter* was not at all unique because thousands of Hazara girls endured the same fate. They witnessed their families massacred and were then taken by their killers as sex slaves. If they had children, these children were often required to abandon their Shia faith and sever connections to their ancestral lands and communities, assimilating fully into the master's family—a vivid embodiment of “social death.” A recently published memoir provides an example, albeit a less extreme one, of this phenomenon. It recounts the story of Ma'sumah, a six-year-old Hazara girl and granddaughter of a Bihsud chief, who lost her entire family in the Hazara War and ended up in the household of Prince Nasr Allah Khan. The author, a granddaughter of Ma'sumah, argues that she was not enslaved but was instead taken in as an orphan and raised as a foster child by the prince. (The Royal Ark, however, records her as a “Behsudi Consort,” which suggests that she was, indeed, an enslaved girl.) Ma'sumah grew up as a Sunni and served as a maid to the prince's daughter, Sardar Begum. Still a teenager, she was married to the prince's son, ‘Aziz Allah Khan “Qatil,” as his second wife. Ma'sumah lived a long life, passing away in 1969, leaving behind a large family of children and grandchildren. One of her sons, ‘Abd al-Hakim Khan Ziyayi, served as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and another son, ‘Abd al-Rahim Khan Ziyayi, served as the Director of the Kabul Museum—both during the reign of Muhammad Zahir.¹⁸⁹

It should be noted that the most famous Shirin associated with the Afghan state's war against the Hazaras is not Shirin, the daughter of Mir Muhammad ‘Azim Big, but a semi-legendary figure who has become a folk heroine. The origins of this legend may lie in an event described in *Ayn al-Waqayi'*. According to this story, when Afghan forces captured Sangdih, a Hazara village in Uruzgan, residents fled into the mountains to save their lives. Among them, 47 women and girls from the families of chieftains sought refuge in a cave. The Afghan forces noticed them and went after the women.¹⁹⁰ The group headed further up the mountain until they reached a cliff. There, with no way out, they collectively decided to jump to their death instead of surrendering to the Afghans. This tragic story was recounted by Riyazi Hiravi, who composed a long poem describing the dramatic episode. In the poem, Hiravi compares their act of

189 Dr. Sherzai, *The Afghan Cinderella*, 2–18, 52–87, 304; “The Barakzai Dynasty (Nasser-Zia, Rahmani, Ziai, Ziyai): Genealogy.”

190 This part of the story can be corroborated by other sources. During the war, according to Katib, soldiers were ordered “to go into the mountain valleys where the Zawuli, Pik, Pashah-i, and Shayr Dagh people lived and search for the Hazarachs who had fled and taken refuge in the mountains.” *ST*, 3:840.

suicide to that of the “famous Shirin” from Nizami Ganjavi’s *Khusraw va Shirin*, who takes her own life after the death of her lover.¹⁹¹

Over time, the public somehow altered Riyazi Hiravi’s story by adding a character named Shirin as the leader of the group, and the number of women and girls was also reduced to 40 girls—*chihil dukhtaran*.¹⁹² The original event may well be true, as it is plausible that some Hazara women, facing the immense violence and atrocities inflicted during the war, might have chosen death over the horrors awaiting them if captured. In Mir Adinah, Malistan, for example, three young Hazara women taken by Colonel Farhad Khan are known to have committed collective suicide in captivity to escape their fate.¹⁹³ Shirin has since become a symbol of resistance in Hazara folklore. In Nili, the capital of Daikundi, a small statue of “Shirin Hazara” was erected in the city’s women’s garden. However, in late August 2021, less than two weeks after returning to power, the Taliban demolished the statue.¹⁹⁴

The story of Shirin, the daughter of Mir Muhammad ‘Azim Big, bears striking similarities to the story of Pocahontas, the teenage daughter of a prominent Powhatan chief, a Native American tribe in what is now Virginia, USA. In 1613, colonial settlers captured her, imprisoned her, converted her to Christianity, and gave her in marriage, at the age of around 17, to a tobacco planter, with whom she had a son. In 1616, her husband took her to England where she became a popular attraction. Not long after, she died of mysterious causes in London. She was around 20 at the time. Although Hollywood has turned Pocahontas’s story into a love story, she was a victim, a war captive, whose family, people, culture, religion, and eventually life, were taken from her by European settlers.¹⁹⁵ The similarities between the stories of Shirin and Pocahontas demonstrate how the violent methods settlers use to subjugate conquered people are the same, no matter where they take place.

191 Muhammad Yusuf Riyazi Hiravi, “‘Ayn al-Waqayi,’” in *Bahr al-Fawa’id: Kulliyat-i Riyazi* (Mashhad: Dar al-Taba’at-i Astanah-i Muqaddasah, 1324 AH/1906): 260. In 1990, Muhammad Asif Fikrat Hiravi edited and republished *‘Ayn al-Waqayi’*. But for some unexplained reason, he omitted this story from the book. Riyazi Hiravi, *‘Ayn al-Waqayi’*.

192 Duktur Hafiz Allah Shari’ati Sahar, “Chihil Dukhtarn-i Hazara (Waqi’iyyat ya Afsanah):” Hazara International, June 27, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231128131345/https://www.hazarainternational.com/fa/?p=13089>. There is also a self-published novel, written by a Hazara author in English, about the story. John Yunus Salehi, *Chihil Dukhtaran* (United States: John Y Salehi, 2013).

193 *ST*, 3:939.

194 “Taliban Tandis-i Shirin-i Hazara ra dar Daikundi Takhrab Kardand,” Shafqna, August 28, 2021, <https://af.shafaqna.com/FA/474431>.

195 Camilla Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005).

Conclusion: Emancipation

After Amir 'Abd al-Rahman died in 1901, his son and successor, Amir Habib Allah Khan, relaxed the persecution of the Hazaras—at least on paper. At the royal court, the children of Hazara mirs who had been spared execution and kept as captives had grown up, and the new amir formed a military unit out of them. Called “Mir Aspur,” this unit served as his personal bodyguards, particularly during his travels within Afghanistan.¹⁹⁶ Wali Muhammad Khan, Mir 'Azim Big's son, was part of this military unit at the royal palace.¹⁹⁷ In a proclamation, the amir promised to return the lands of Hazara mirs to their sons. However, in practice, this promise was not fulfilled, leaving many mirs' sons displaced and scattered across the country with no place to call home.¹⁹⁸ Wali Muhammad Khan was more fortunate. He managed to reclaim a portion of his father's estate in Ishkarabad (also spelled Ashkarabad), which was still under government control. The family's larger, more fertile land in Gizab—described by Zahir Khan, one of Wali Muhammad Khan's grandsons, as so vast that “it would take from sunrise to sunset to walk from one end to the other”—had already been redistributed to Afghan settlers and could not be returned. His success in regaining even part of the estate may have been due to the persistence and advocacy of his sister, Shirin. During Amir Habib Allah's reign, Wali Muhammad Khan remained in Kabul despite having access to his father's land.¹⁹⁹ He was a free man. He even traveled outside the country once to India and made friends with 'Ali Dust Khan, a refugee of the Hazara War from Uruzgan who had risen to the rank of a captain in the British Army.²⁰⁰

Meanwhile, in the harem, Khayr Banu, Shirin's half-sister, was well-established at the residence of the amir's Afghan wife Mahbubah Bigum ('Aliyah Jinab, Nur al-Haram), daughter of Sardar Yusuf Khan (and brother of Muhammad Nadir, a future king).²⁰¹ In 1918, Khayr Banu, along with some other concubines and wives, received lofty Arabic titles from the amir. Hers was “Najm al-Sarari” (Star of the Concubines) and she, along with two other concubines, was in charge of the amir's bathing.²⁰² Khayr Banu had only one daughter, Rabi'ah, with Amir Habib Allah Khan.²⁰³ Life seemed normal—as normal as it could be

196 Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, 4 (part 3):137.

197 Interview with Zahir Khan; Katib, 4 (part 3):253.

198 Katib, 4 (part 3):137.

199 Interview with Zahir Khan.

200 Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, 4 (part 3):253.

201 Katib, 4 (part 3):553–54.

202 Katib, 4 (part 3):613.

203 “The Barakzai Dynasty (Seradj, Seraj, Siraj): Genealogy.”

for an enslaved woman. However, this fragile normalcy was disrupted in 1919 when the amir was assassinated in Jalalabad. Wali Muhammad Khan, as one of his Mir Aspur bodyguards, was there with him at the time.²⁰⁴

The assassination of the amir and the accession of his son, Aman Allah Khan, brought significant political and social changes, particularly impacting the lives of those in the royal harem. Aman Allah Khan was strongly opposed to slavery. The assassination effectively liberated the late amir's numerous enslaved concubines and left his many wives widowed. A few years later, Aman Allah Khan took an even more transformative step in this direction. In 1924, he issued a constitution that formally emancipated all slaves and banned slavery throughout Afghanistan.²⁰⁵ This act earned him the lasting gratitude and loyalty of the Hazara people, who viewed Amir Aman Allah Khan as a liberator and remained devoted to him until his final days on the throne.

Sometime after the amir's assassination, Wali Muhammad Khan returned to Ishkarabad with two of his sisters. The current descendants of Wali Muhammad Khan do not remember many details about the women, other than the fact they were known as "Aghah-i Kalan" (senior *aghah*) and "Aghah-i Khurd" (junior *aghah*) and neither of them was Shirin.²⁰⁶ One of them, they remember, was called Najmah. We know this must be Khayr Banu "Najm al-Sarari," who was called by her royal title in the harem until, slowly, the name was shortened to Najmah—a common female name. The other woman, the descendants of Wali Muhammad Khan believe, was a younger sister of Khayr Banu who married a Khalaj Khan. This is corroborated by Katib, who says that a Khalaj Hazara, Aqa Riza son of Muhammad Isma'il Khan—who was also a nephew of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big—married one of the mir's daughters and moved to Ishkarabad with Muhammad Wali Khan during the reign of Amir Aman Allah Khan.²⁰⁷

As enslaved women, they did not have custody of their children. They must have left them in Kabul. Aghah-i Kalan did not marry again. When people in Ishkarabad asked why she had no children, she would explain that jealous women in the harem had cast a spell on her to prevent her from becoming pregnant.²⁰⁸ The family remembers Aghah-i Kalan to be the main ruler of the estate. She managed the property, oversaw the staff, handled paperwork and taxes, and defended her territory. Once the local governor sent men to

204 Interview with Zahir Khan.

205 *Nizamamah-i Asasi*, Article 10.

206 Interview with 'Aziz Khan 'Azimi.

207 Katib, *Siraj al-Tawarikh*, 2011, 4 (part 3):252–53.

208 Interview with Zahir Khan.

extort her, she reportedly tied their legs together and instructed her workers to beat them with sticks before sending them back to the governor's office. She exemplified the strength and confidence of a Hazara *aghah*. Her brother, Wali Muhammad Khan, whose name was on the land deeds, was less involved in estate management. A "city boy" at heart, he preferred life in Kabul, where he had been raised, and showed little interest in the responsibilities of a village chief.²⁰⁹

The fate of Shirin remains unknown. Wali Muhammad Khan's family does not have any information about what became of her. If it is true that neither of the two women who returned to Ishkarabad after emancipation was Shirin, then what happened to her? Did she prefer to stay in Kabul? Did she die sometime before emancipation? There are no clear answers.

In 1929, a civil war erupted in Kabul, forcing Amir Aman Allah Khan to flee the capital after being overthrown by Habib Allah Kalakani, a Tajik rebel commonly known as "Bachah-i Saqqa" (Son of the Water Carrier). During Aman Allah Khan's final days in power, the Hazaras were among the few groups that fought to restore his rule. In June 1929, Kalakani sent a messenger to Wali Muhammad Khan with royal decrees offering significant concessions: Hazaras would be allowed to hold high-ranking positions in both civil administration (up to governorship) and the military (up to deputy chief of the army) in exchange for Wali Muhammad Khan's support.²¹⁰ Despite the tempting offer, Wali Muhammad Khan, who owed his freedom to Aman Allah Khan, remained loyal and refused to switch sides. Wali Muhammad Khan's decision soon proved prudent, as Kalakani's reign was short-lived. Later that same year, he was overthrown by Muhammad Nadir, who ascended to the throne as the new king.

Aghah-i Kalan and Aghah-i Khurd lived the rest of their lives on their estate in Ishkarabad and died there sometime in the first half of the century. On April 12, 1959, Wali Muhammad Khan also passed away and was buried in Ishkarabad, according to his tombstone.²¹¹ He was the sole surviving son of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big, and his death—and the deaths of his sisters—marked

209 Interview with Zahir Khan.

210 Mulla Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazara, *Tazakkur al-Inqilab*, ed. 'Ali Amiri (Koln: Kavah, 1392/2013): 246.

211 We thank his grandson, Zahir Khan, for sending us a photo of his tombstone. The inscription states that Wali Muhammad Khan was born in 1247 SH (1868–1869), but this appears to be inaccurate. He was likely born at least a decade or more later, as it would have been impossible for him to be a twenty-five-year-old man in 1892—the year his family was brought to Kabul as war captives. Had he been that age, Amir 'Abd al-Rahman would almost certainly not have spared his life.

the end of an era. Despite the Afghan amir's brutal campaign of killings, destruction, and displacement, he failed to erase Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big's name from history or uproot his family entirely from the Hazara region. While the amir came very close to achieving their annihilation, the resilience, bravery, and determination of the mir's enslaved daughter Shirin—and her sisters—ensured the survival of her brother and, with him, their father's legacy. With the help of her sisters, Wali Muhammad Khan managed to reclaim part of his father's lands and restore his family in Sih Pay. He married six women and left behind seventeen children—eleven sons and six daughters: Bakhtiyar Khan, Shahyar Khan, Allah Yar Khan, Muhammad Yar Khan, Karim Khan, Ghafur Khan, Wahhab Khan, 'Abd al-Husain Khan, 'Abd al-Hakim Khan, Qadir Khan, Ghulam Hasan Khan, Siddiqah, Kawkabah, Shafiqah, 'Aqilah, Rahimah, Tahirah, Sayirah, and Hamidah.²¹²

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- PP/HAM/A.31/1, L25000.
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- Interview with 'Aziz Khan 'Azimi son of 'Abd al-Husain Khan son of Wali Muhammad Khan son of Mir Muhammad 'Azim Big of Sih Pay by Ali Karimi, via telephone, June 12, 2024.

Nadia Aqdas daughter of “Bali” Salma Iqbal daughter of Sultan Muhammad Khan and his Hazara concubine Banu, email communication with Ali Karimi, September 30, 2024.

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