

# Moulding the Red Earth

Ali Arsalan Pasha

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## Introduction

In the Punjab, the whirling *Dervish* becomes a transcendent *Malang*. British Ambassador cars become taxi-cabs and the mobile phone becomes a more common commodity than bread and salt. Thorough observations have shown that all governing dynamics of a certain region maintain a strong link with its terrain, connecting the people, as well as their motivations and aspirations, with the land. Phenomenologically speaking, since dwellers in a certain spatial construct are affected by the topological characteristics of the built forms, it can be deduced that inhabitants of a land are inadvertently influenced by the soil they walk on and the air they breathe. This paper aims to discuss the importance of understanding the geological and topographical characteristics associated with the sub-continental landmass in attempts to decipher how the inhabitants of the locale have been affected by the terrain and how they have responded to it through their art, architecture and social practice. In the case of India, the land and air represent a consistent struggle, justified in its existence as the pursuit of harmony and perfection; a struggle that has seeped into the mind-set of the native inhabitant. In India, and more appropriately the Punjab, important roots of civilization are consistently unearthed, allowing the local inhabitants to dwell in today's economical metropolises, while remaining rooted to their history, their culture and their land.

## The Root of the Root

India has preserved the unbroken thread of human story that binds us all. According to the Rig-Veda (RV 10.121), the first humans came from the cosmic egg or universal germ, namely the *Hiranyagarbha Sukta*;

Who is the deity we shall worship with offerings?  
When the mighty waters came, carrying the universal germ, producing  
the flame of life then dwelt there in harmony the One Spirit of Devas.<sup>1</sup>

Floating in darkness, once the golden egg was subjected to the creation process, energy or life was generated. Parallels have also been drawn between the golden egg and the self-luminous life-giving force of the Sun. Science tells us that anatomically modern human beings evolved from archaic *Homo Sapiens* in the Middle Palaeolithic period around 200,000 years ago in Africa. They were beachcombers and hunter gatherers, driven by chance and necessity. Despite all the later

migrations and invasions, India's gene pool has remained largely constant, being one of the unchanging roots of India. Languages and religions came only later and they are always subject to change. In 1921, British and Indian archaeologists arrived at an unobtrusive location in the Punjab; at a little halt on the railway line between Multan and Lahore - since it was here in the valley of the Indus River, where a series of amazing discoveries led to the discovery of an unknown ancient settlement, that is, the Indus Valley Civilization. Like the other great ancient civilisations in Iraq, Egypt and China, India's first cities had grown beside a river - the ruins of Harappa stood on the dried-up bed of a tributary of the River Indus but there was still evidence of industry, trade, writing and high level organisation with a substantial population. The city appeared to be the capital of a great empire, which we now know extended from the Himalayas to the Arabian Sea, being one of the largest civilisations in the ancient world.

### The Holiness of Monsoons

Punjab or *Punj ab*<sup>2</sup> literally translates to five rivers, a fertile body of land in the Northern region of the Indus Valley. Since the area sustained rich agriculture and cattle, it attracted hunter-gatherers in search of food and settlement. As an inevitable consequence of community-settlement, the hunters eventually became the farmers and began the development of civilization in the region by harnessing natural resources. Due to the high influx of migrants coming to settle in the bountiful Fertile Crescent, the land itself became a centre of culture, cultivating ideological growth, social interaction and spiritual enlightenment. The region served as an abode for a variety of religious faiths, which existed in consistent contest with each other – a contest, which rather than weakening their growth and influence resulted in strengthening and empowering them. The theological evolution of the region in its attachment to nature and natural forces indicates that inhabitants of the Subcontinent pay due homage to the Himalayan Mountains for leading to the birth of monsoon rainfalls. The monsoons, which are an economically important weather pattern and one of the most anticipated climatic phenomena every year, harbour within themselves the subtext of a historical incidence, one which dates back to the geological formation of the topography.

The incident can be observed as an act of insurgence perpetrated by a land-mass in its attempt to break free from its motherland. Around 180 million years ago, the Indian peninsula, which was once part of the southern hemispheric land-mass Gondwana (present day Africa), broke free from the eastward movement of its larger counterpart and began moving northwards. Endeavouring to attach itself with the northern hemispheric land-mass Laurasia (present day Asia), the Indian landmass, maintained a deliberate pace covering a distance of 6000 kilometres, before finally colliding with the Asian landmass. The

aforementioned collision can be explained by three major mechanisms, which either worked separately or in unison, mainly – the subduction of the Indian continental crust below Tibet, the extrusion tectonics mechanism which sees the Indian plate as an indenter squeezing the Indo-China block out of its way and a large part of the crust shortening was accommodated by thrusting and folding of the sediments of the passive Indian margin. It is the last mechanism of sedimentary folding which eventually resulted in the high topographical relief of the Himalayas. The drawing of southern hot air towards the towering Himalayas around 8 million years ago<sup>3</sup> eventually gave shape to the monsoon rainfall we experience today, subjecting the *red earth* of the Indian peninsula to more than its share of rainfall – moulding the barren wastelands into a fertile abode for civilization; terming it the Fertile Crescent.

In the BBC Documentary, *The Story of India*, the presenter, Michael Wood says, “The coming of the monsoons has an almost erotic charge. It's the giver of life itself”. The intrusion of water due to over-abundant rainfall and multiple rivers creates to a deep and spiritual bond each native of the subcontinent has with the land; to them it represents the soul of their struggle for existence. This spirit of the land embodies itself in the cultural roots of the Indian peninsula – at the crux of their art, the soul of their music and the aspiration of their buildings. The severe morphology of the African red earth is softened and made palatable by the water, inspiring a constant integration of earth and water in the arts and crafts of the time, ranging from clay figurines as symbols of religious forces, pottery in everyday use and even in the development of living spaces in practices such as mud-plastering and ornamentation. With such practices and applications of clay becoming more integrated into the social structure, the inhabitants developed a stronger bond with the terrain and endeavoured to celebrate the bountiful attributes of Mother Nature.

### The Domain of Consciousness

To comprehend the subcontinental perspective of Mother Nature and its default premise as a source of life and rebirth, one must decipher the notions attributed to its capacity as an elemental entity. In astrological studies as well as ancient philosophy, water represents fluidity and purification, while earth characterizes consistency and rootedness – the combination giving shape to *Gaia*, the mother goddess and life-giving force of nature. Fundamentally, in the space-time construct, the two forces of heaven and earth are consistently observed in their attempt to achieve balance – giving shape to the gradients of consciousness and cognition, on which all living entities are measured. Coming back to the Indian subcontinent breaking away from the African landmass, one may observe that even though Australia and Madagascar also broke

away from Eastern Africa, the latter entities to this day have remained Islands, whereas after moving eastwards, the Indian subcontinent shifted direction and moved northwards towards Asia.

This northward movement, which eventually resulted in India colliding with the Asian frontier, can be said to exhibit traits of geological consciousness, since the floating Island changed direction and moved towards the Asian continent. A purposeful movement of this sort can be perceived as an attempt to give rise to the Himalayas and eventually the monsoons; a movement which resulted in the transmutation of the very genetic fabric of the landmass. Referring to the geological and ecological developments of the time, the separation and northward movement of the subcontinent has been explained through studies of tectonic shift<sup>4</sup> which provide a substantial geographical basis for such occurrences. However, if one aims to develop a holistic understanding of natural phenomenon, rather than purely empirical, it would suffice to say that such a notable variation in the direction of movement can be construed as a conscious decision made by a living entity – in this case the Indian subcontinent landmass. Considering the fundamental practices of all systems of belief, whether it is in pagan rituals, or Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam, nature is always characterised as a living entity – in the case of the aforementioned geological shift, we may propose that the Indian subcontinent represents a living entity that has achieved consciousness.

## The Seed of Civilization

The consequences of such natural phenomenon on the inhabitants of the terrain are noteworthy, where one cannot help but draw parallels between the belief systems and social practices of the African continent and the Indian subcontinent, primarily due to the fact that they both share the same geological features. Even though we may be able to term both demographic types as ones familiar with survival and endurance<sup>5</sup>, it must be noted that a generally observed lack of water in the African continent has left the agriculture barren and fatigued. As a result of the harsh climate and living conditions, the inhabitants of the land have also evolved with a harsh resistance towards intermingling with foreign entities, inhibiting the development of variations in the gene pool. The people have managed to retain their tribal divisions, to the extent of resisting intervention by foreign countries<sup>6</sup>, as a matter of protection for survival. In comparison, the Indian peninsula has so far never exhibited any harsh resistance to foreign intervention; at many times to the detriment of their culture and society such as the cases of central Asian invasions and British colonialism. Superimposing the geographical features of the land onto the sociological systems of the community one can observe a direct correlation between the two – one which is ever apparent while drawing parallels between the two civilizations.

What the climate and populace of Africa have exhibited to lack in comparison to India, is the capacity to adapt, to revise their set of social etiquette and cultural rules and align themselves with the evolving circumstances. Such compliance can be observed in India, with the adoption of Islam as a religion by the general public, as well as the accommodation of British etiquette, language and systems as a part of the post-colonial subcontinent. In comparison, the African continent has faced invasions by the British, the French and the Dutch. Nonetheless, to this day there is a noticeable segregation between the African native inhabitants and the foreign invaders. One could observe that the fight to end apartheid by Nelson Mandela, saw the acceptance of the previously ruling Afrikaner as a part of their society; however, the adaptation to their social customs and beliefs was never accepted as a part of an independent South Africa. In comparison, the struggle for an independent India by Mahatma Gandhi, saw the attempts to oust the British colonial rule of the subcontinent, which eventually succeeded in achieving an independent nation; nonetheless, one which heavily drew reference from the systems and practices put into place by the previous ruling British. Although a more literal parallel rather than a figurative one, this flexibility in mind-set can be observed in reference to the interaction of the harsh red earth with the constant tempering influence of the monsoon rainfall, allowing the advent of malleability as a characteristic in climatic and social conditioning.

In addition, the iterative interaction with water seems to introduce an unprecedented dynamic to the aspect of spiritual growth, giving birth to exemplary individuals such as Gautama Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, Allama Iqbal, Bulleh Shah, Abdur Rahman Malang and Abdul Sattar Edhi. Even though the Islamic interventions of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century saw Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti migrate from Afghanistan to India, introducing Sufism to the subcontinent, the vital manifestation of Sufi chants and poetry took shape as *Qawwali* or *Samaa* in India and notably the Punjab, flourishing even today. Even in everyday practice of commercial and personal nature, the exploration of the divine is consistently and repeatedly expressed by urban and rural dwellers, intrinsic to their linguistic manner of communication. One can also observe a mélange of different stances on existential and metaphysical practices, where on the one hand the due respect paid by every subcontinental dweller to natural phenomenon is reminiscent of the African reverence of Gaia, while on the other hand, one also perceives the integration of East Asian Taoist philosophy regarding cosmic balance and karma. In this essence, the Indian peninsula can be characterised as a bridge between African and East Asian practices, revealing the consistent balancing between disparate ideologies and praxis.

## The Moulding of India

Such contextually induced differences in approach can be observed in matters beyond religion and psychosocial dealings, such as art, music and architecture. Indian art and culture has absorbed extraneous impacts by varying degrees and is much richer for this exposure. This cross fertilization between different art streams converging on the subcontinent, produced new forms that while retaining the essence of the past, succeeded in integrating selected elements of the new influences. The roots of Indian painting can be traced back to the days of the Indus Valley Civilization, where paintings on pottery reflect a keen sense of painting among the Indus Valley people. The paintings of the Ajanta and Ellora caves exhibit the creative genius of the artists of that period, while enduring tough weather conditions and surviving for a long period of time. Folk and tribal art in India takes on different manifestations through varied media such as pottery, painting, metalwork, paper-art, weaving and designing of objects such as jewellery and toys.

Indian architecture has evolved through centuries, as a result of socio-economic and geographical conditions, generally affected by the emergence and decay of great empires and dynasties in the subcontinent. Different types of Indian architectural styles include a mass of expressions over space and time, transformed by the forces of history specific to the subcontinent. As a result of vast diversities in demographic and ideological influences, a vast range of architectural specimens have evolved, retaining a certain amount of continuity across history. The Indus Valley Civilization is noted for its cities built of brick, roadside drainage system and multi-storied houses. Though it provided substantial evidence of extensive town planning, the beginning of noticeable architecture typology in India owes much to the advent of Buddhism in India, in examples such as the Great Stupa at Sanchi and the rock-cut caves at Ajanta. It was succeeded by different schools flourishing with the Pallava rulers of South India, Chandela rule in Central India and Nagara style of architecture in northern India; eventually to be followed by the coming of Muslim rulers, leading to the initiation of Indo-Islamic architecture, which was neither strictly Islamic nor strictly Hindu, rather an integration of both.

Though public buildings have been a common venture in town planning activities, it was the temples and mosques that have always taken precedence as the most important building typology of India. It is evident that such an inclination is due to religiously and spiritually induced communal practice and habits which serve as a consequence of the associated sanctity of the Indian land. It is this sense of holiness and purity that always embodies the built form and communal spaces of the locale, due to which the superposition of Colonial Architecture

in the milieu never managed to propagate an authentic development in practices and rituals. Where, at one time, the working class was living in mud-houses while the educated elite resided in *havelis* or mansions with a central courtyard – after the British occupation the existing habits were replaced by asymmetrical living standards which neither catered to the poor nor the rich. Even today, considering the case of Pakistan, foreign interventions ranging from The Pakistan Secretariat by Gio Ponti and The National Assembly by E. D. Stone to contemporary examples such as The Centaurus Complex by W.S. Atkins, all fail to achieve a profound sense of holiness that is inherently grasped through the milieu. The only successful example is the Shah Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, designed by Turkish Architect, Vedat Dalokay; an observation which lends more to the function and program of the building rather than the aesthetic understanding or urban typology. In this essence, it seems to make sense that the intervention of foreign architects in the subcontinent, have singled out a single name which acts as a crucial bridge between India and the rest of the world. Undoubtedly, it is the architect whose very motive was to embody the sanctity and holiness of the land in his work by designing each building as if it were a temple – Louis Kahn. In *My Architect*, the documentary filmed by his son Nathaniel Kahn, the remarkable Indian architect Balakrishna Doshi has said,

There are very few people who will talk about matter, in spiritual terms. Silence mattered to him. The enigma of light mattered to him. We call him a guru, a yogi – and that is why, for us, he was from here.

In a lecture at the University of Pennsylvania in 1971, Louis Kahn said,

It is important that you honour the material that you use. You can only do it if you honour the brick and glorify the brick, instead of short-changing it.<sup>7</sup>

He exemplified the theory by presenting a putative dialogue between a brick and himself, asking the brick what it wanted to construct and the brick responded as a purposeful entity itself by saying, *I like an arch*. In the fertile earth of the Punjab, this timeless quote can be observed to move towards a deeper understanding of topographical and topological circumstances – adding to the understanding of the material as a living entity as well as the nature that surrounds it. Since the people of the Punjab are intrinsically linked to the land and nature, the architect must not only merely consult nature as Kahn said but must let it guide the movement of his lines and influence the space created. The architect must conduct a dialogue with the elemental forces of nature – a dialogue in the essence of, *O' Tree!* Is this where you prefer to stand? Is this how you prefer to shade? *O' Wind!* Is this how you prefer to ventilate? And *O' mighty Sun!* Is this what you prefer to enlighten?

In considering this notion earnestly, we may observe a subtle shift in the practice of site analysis – where the site is not observed merely as a tool when constructing buildings, rather a mutually dependant entity which affects and is affected by the space created.

## Conclusion

The purpose of architecture, as a primary mode of function, should be the provision of such unity between man and God. The crux of Kahn's work was the understanding that buildings have a soul and their soul consistently converses with nature. If we are ever to do justice to this sacred land, it is our duty, or rather, our purpose, to unshackle the spirit of the people and to let ourselves be guided by divine impressions and natural forces. In our art, our architecture, our society and our nation, we must embody the unification of divinity and nature, of rainfall and red earth, as homage to the Punjab, the heart of the Indian peninsula.

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## Endnotes

1. Hiranyagarbha is the source of the creation of the manifested Universe in Indian Philosophy. It finds mention in the Rig-Vedic hymn (Chapter 10: Verse 121) referred to as the Hiranyagarbha Sukta.
2. Introduced by the Mughals in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, it combines the Persian words *punj* (five) and *ab* (water) to refer to the land of five rivers, that is, Chenab, Jhelum, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej.
3. Heating up of the Thar Desert causes a low pressure region, filled by the moisture laden winds from the Indian Ocean. Due to the dynamics between wind and land, the winds are drawn towards the Himalayan mountain range, which acts like a high wall blocking the winds from passing into central Asia and forces them to rise. This causes clouds to rise and their temperatures to drop which leads to precipitation and immense rainfall.
4. As India approached Asia, around 40 million years ago, the Tethys Sea which separated India from the Australian landmass began to shrink and its seabed slowly pushed upwards. The Tethys Sea disappeared completely around 20 million years ago and sediments rising from its seabed formed a mountain range. When India and Tibet collided, instead of descending with the plate, the relatively light sedimentary and metamorphic rock that makes up the subcontinent of India pushed against Tibet, forcing it upwards to a mountain fold.
5. Despite being referred to as the world's largest democracy, the emerging India

is still unfit to combat its inherent problems of illiteracy, extreme poverty and noticeable class-system. However, it is undeniable that the nation is becoming more and more united by the instant, finding democratic solutions to social issues. This manner of informed-collectivism, which is the true impression of democracy, is not readily observed in many parts of the world, where individualism offsets the notion of egalitarianism. On the same note, Africa undergoes its fair share of climatic, social and political upheaval. Nonetheless, the inhabitants always manage to endure the hardships and exhibit tremendous resilience in rejuvenating communities and social structures.

6. Not all resistance, for instance, European colonial rule pragmatic violence. Most was more subtle and directed toward local issues of political and economic autonomy. Struggles for maintaining control over culture created tension between the colonial administration and Africans, often leading to subtle forms of resistance as African groups sought to remove themselves from the colonial sphere of influence rather than challenge it.
7. In his lecture at the University of Pennsylvania, while talking to a Master's class, Louis Kahn said, "If you think of Brick, you say to Brick, 'What do you want, Brick?' And Brick says to you, 'I like an Arch.' And if you say to Brick, 'Look, arches are expensive, and I can use a concrete lintel over you. What do you think of that, Brick?' Brick says, 'I like an Arch'. And it's important, you see, that you honour the material that you use."

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