

Diplomacies in Architecture During the British Raj

Response of “*Lahoris*” to Colonial Culture

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Introduction

Interaction between various cultures, with different distinct geographical and social setups, values, lifestyles, concepts of aesthetics and built environmental design notions, is the area of investigation in this paper. I am interested in understanding what happens when such variant cultures come together in a particular geographical plane as a result of a wide range of practices (be it commerce, politics, warfare, rebellion, travel, trade etc.). The idea is to highlight how these different cultures cope with each other, particularly when one ends up as the Ruler and the other, the Ruled. This paper attempts to present the Interaction in a cultural discourse where the Ruler acts by imposing its concepts and the Ruled tries to survive diplomatically under the shadow of the dominant culture. The expression of such attitudes in tangible heritage, that is, architectural space, is worthy of study in order to understand the relation between politics and the resulting built environment in the recipient society.

The case in point is the British Colonial Rule in India. The British Raj, according to various architects and historians, introduced new architectural theory, vocabulary and aesthetics in India.¹ The long span of the British presence (from around 1600 C.E. to 1947 C.E.), in India is seen in phases to view the extent of diplomatic negotiations between the ruling British Culture and the ruled Indian Culture. Examples from the built environment of Lahore, the capital city of the Punjab, which came under the British rule in a later phase, that is 1849, are studied. Examining history, the paper addresses and tries to answer the important question: How does a subservient culture respond to a dominant culture?

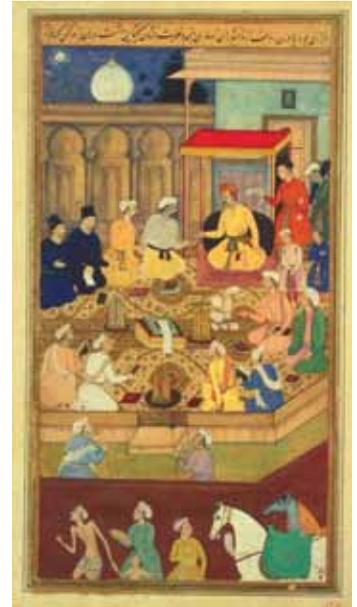
Levels of Interaction from the viewpoint of the British

The Europeans established colonies from the 16th - 20th centuries primarily for the purpose of trade. It is interesting to note that the first

F. 1

Portugese Fathers
visiting the Court
of Akbar, miniature
painting

visit of a western delegation took place in Lahore when the Portuguese Fathers came to visit the court of Akbar where the Emperor was stationed. They came as supplicants and had to wait at the pleasure of the Emperor for an opportune time to be presented at court. The early traders of the Company were 'supplicants-in-the-court', followed the dress codes and etiquette of Mughal courts and admired the magnificent monuments of India in the hope of getting trade benefits and preference over other competing European traders in India.



The attitude of the British towards local Indians, however, changed over time with the changing politics of the region. From being merely traders on Indian soil in the beginning, with aims to increase commerce, the British extended their interests in Indian society due to the weaknesses of the declining Mughal Empire in India.

Gradually the role of the British changed in society from traders to military allies and administrators as regional kingdoms started emerging from the weak central authority of the Mughals. Providing military and naval support to the local princes and kings in this transition phase of power struggle, the shift of the British loyalties to the local rulers became decisive for the victory in conflicts and wars.² Territories were thus negotiated with the local princes for the welfare of the Company, while being portrayed as being done for the good of the local princes, providing peace and order. Due to political instability, the British started governing their presidency states with an army of their own, starting from port towns to the inland cities. In these British presidency states, their interaction with locals reached beyond commerce, the interaction was more profound on the grounds of politics, judiciary, socio-cultural and architectural realms. In these states, who was once the ruler became the subject with a restricted role in society, while the one with limited and indirect impact as trader was now put in the shoes of the ruler with direct involvement in social and built environment.

Though India from the coming of European traders, appeared to be "exotic" and "inferior" to the British³, influences of such conception

were not profound on local culture; the British role in Indian society was confined mainly to commerce and thus to their factories. However, with the extended role of the British as holders of the presidency states, their deep influence can be seen not only in politics but also in socio-cultural life and the built environment. The local Indian society viewed as being ‘oriental’ in nature⁴, was reshaped according to the cultural values and visual aesthetics of the British, and not to forget, according to British ‘knowledge’ and understanding of Indian society.

Company paintings by British artists, painters and amateur officers portrayed the understanding of Indian landscape, culture and people by the British. These paintings in the absence of photographic facilities were used to record and report major events, the scenic landscape of Indian society, various aspects of Indian life and the heroic achievement of the Company soldiers to the audience back in their homeland, Britain.



F. 2

Indian culture and people as portrayed by British artists

F. 3

Company painting by British artists

A later phase of the British presence during Direct Crown rule in India reflected the implementation of the British understanding of India on Indian soil in a most direct and inflexible manner, where the Indians were ‘civilized’ through what is termed as the ‘civilizing mission’⁵, visible in the Indian landscape through large-scale projects including the railways, canal colonies and educational institutions.

Policies of the British and the Extent of Diplomatic Negotiation

In the initial phase of the British presence in India, British policies of interacting with Indians were dominated by the theory of similarities together with orientalist notions. The transition phase of their changing role, from traders to administrators⁶ is depicted in the works of William Jones who with his linguistic research paved the way for theory of an Indo-Aryan race and thus argued for Europeans and Asians having the same racial roots. In judicial matters William Jones, however, doubted the loyalties of Muslim *Ulemas* and Hindu *Pundits*,

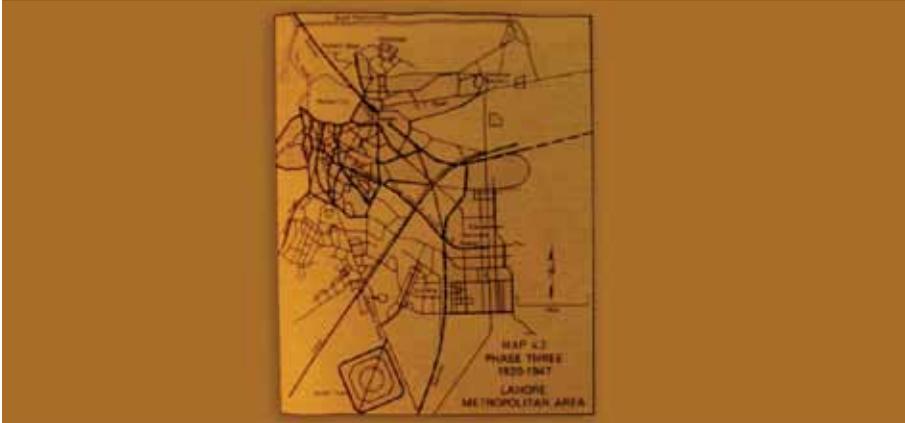
but did involve Indians in administrative matters and thus negotiated with the local gentry to implement his underlining interests. However, this involvement of locals in decision-making was more a matter of British dependency on locals due to linguistic barriers. Limits of such interaction were defined by establishing the British as an authoritative figure passing the final word, enclosing the role of local within confined boundaries in which the local was more of a spectator than a performer. In the field of architecture, the British impact in the early phase can be seen as the one bringing new visual aesthetics to the Indian soil.

However, the princely states and their architecture draw my attention. On one level, these princes, having the British military support, developed Colonial architecture to show their loyalty to the British while on the other hand, they maintained their Indian ways of living in an architectural space.

In the later phase, after the implementation of Direct Crown Rule, the British started developing their position in the Indian Sub-continent on the basis of differences, stressing the 'strangeness' of the Indians as opposed to the British; the 'inferior' Indian culture with reference to 'superior' British values, and the 'lower' artistic character of India as compared to 'higher' levels of British/Western aesthetics.⁷ This can be viewed in terms of the rising consciousness of the British as imperial rulers of India. The event of 1857, seen as the Great Mutiny of 1857 from the viewpoint of the British, strongly confronted the British to review their policies in India and change them according to their role as the rulers. Although, the story may appear much simpler, it has a great deal of complexity due to the contradictory policies of the British which sway from orientalist conceptions and the conservative Victorian thoughts to the rising liberal ideas in their homeland (Britain). In this scenario, the scholars like James Fergusson gave their understanding of Indian history based on a theory of decline, in which Indian society was viewed as heading towards its dark end, while the British were portrayed as heroes saving the Indian civilization and putting it back on the road to progress.⁸ Knowledge of India thus helped the British to fulfil their imperial vision as saviours of Indian society; this also provided them with a reasoned explanation to justify their rule of India before their liberal citizens in Britain.

In terms of interaction with locals we notice increasing cultural and spatial distinctions after 1857; the locals were restricted to lower ranks in administration/offices while in the social life of the British, the locals were not allowed to participate except for the developing Anglo-Indians under the British tutelage (Performances at Lawrence and

Montgomery Halls in Lahore during the British Raj in India). The built environment was equally affected by the location of British garrison (Cantonment), established away from the premises of the locals with their role in the cantonment as the ones providing commodities and services to the elite British rulers.



F. 4

Map of Lahore,
1920-1947

In building activity (architecture), the British rulers were confronted with questions of style and aesthetics. Their contradictions in establishing a particular style of architecture in the Indian Sub-continent is clearly visible from the discussion among them in 1873, the debate which resulted in establishing two schools of thought.⁹ Nevertheless, the involvement of locals in this debate was not considered necessary by the colonial rulers.¹⁰ The British in this debate were, however, faced directly with the problem of tackling the orphaned yet strongly-rooted culture and aesthetics of the Indian Sub-continent and their own imperial vision which should be reflected in the visible display of art (architecture) in the Indian landscape. This resulted in two main streams in architectural discourse on Indian Soil: one supporting the pure western forms with total neglect of local aesthetics, while the other imitating the local Indian form.



F. 5

Jinnah Library
Lawrence Garden

With time, however, another style of architecture rose, incorporating Indian elements in western forms. This can be viewed as a negotiation from the side of the ruler serving his purpose to deal with local aesthetics and cultural heritage with his own understanding of it. Also, to legitimize their rule, showing their aesthetic supremacy over Indian art and at the same time portraying themselves as the rulers in the continual line of Indian history. The 'new' rulers established themselves as the 'White Mughals' with 'complete' knowledge of India.¹¹ In the British attempt to use architecture as a medium of propaganda¹² for their own welfare, however, the local suppressed culture found a way to survive and make an appearance in the Indian landscape under the dark shadow of the dominant ruling culture.

Local Culture, Architecture and Diplomatic Responses

To write from the viewpoint of the ruled/colonized/subject about their culture and architecture is to conjecture in loudspeaker without a script as no direct architectural narrative/literature is available or written from the side of the subject on which the British culture became dominant. However, the continuity of local culture in visible and physical forms of art can reflect on the condition in which the once dominant local culture was being affected by the new established dominant culture and vice versa. With the change in Indian politics during the mid-eighteenth century together with role the of the British in India, local culture suffered from the patronage of the ruler. Being most visible of all the arts in a society and also viewed as the ultimate expression of a society and culture, architecture is universally exploited by invaders to show their mark in history. This characteristic of architecture makes it vulnerable to be consciously developed by the ruler to portray his own supremacy in society and thus leaves a little room for continuity of the local suppressed culture. Though the British, while forging their imperial vision in India did not include the local architects directly in architectural activity, their urge to justify and legitimize their rule by showing their better understanding of India provided the negotiated situation for local culture. While the consulting architect/engineer for a building activity came to India for a short stay, some of the British in India favoured the locals. The British had to involve local craftsmen, labor and even draftsmen during the later phase in building activity. The British preconception about the architecture of the Saracens, developed from the Western forms, led to making it more likely to be useful as compared to the architecture of Hindu temples. The architecture of Saracens too, however, was strongly influenced by British understanding of its forms and elements, codified and classified by James Fergusson and Alexander Cunning to aid the

British for easy use of it in their Colonial Architecture.¹³

In administrative buildings, though the composition of an architectural form was now conceived as per British conceptions by British architects/consultants/engineers, the local architectural elements, under the influence of British understanding and their will to dominate by knowledge of India, begin to appear in facades and interiors of British-styled buildings in order to be claimed as being designed in an Indo-Saracenic style. From the subject's side three attitudes were clearly visible in the transition and later phase: one group who wanted to leave their local values and to continue with the new values of the rulers in their attempt to associate themselves closely with the rulers of the time. The other having a Contra Culture¹⁴



F. 6

High Court Lahore

condemning British values wished to give worth to their local wisdom only, while there was yet another group who recognising and respecting their local traditions wanted to learn modern British ways and develop contemporary values in continuity of their traditions. The ruling princes and local elite, for instance, wanted to live like rulers and adopted the ruling culture, their language and lifestyle, an extreme example of which in the city of Lahore is Model Town developed in 1923-24 by a local named Dewan Khem Chand. In Model Town, the suppressed culture was hard to abandon and the bungalow style was indianized to suit the requirements of the Indian elite. Similar was the attitude of the people who were inclined towards local tradition and wanted to isolate local culture from any foreign influences.

The third group however, in my opinion, tried to cope with the needs of the time while also keeping in mind their cultural roots. Throughout India, there are two examples of such sorts: one type of such buildings were designed by European consulting architects/engineers. Their effort to incorporate local traditions in the built environment was to fulfil the will of the ruler who needed to incorporate Indian architectural elements in order to accomplish imperial vision. While the other also came out of the need of the ruler to incorporate Indian forms in Industrial art which were in demand in the global market as a result of the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, which led to establishing Schools of Industrial Arts in the later phase of British rule in India.¹⁵The courses in these schools were purely of western aesthetic standards, however, certain individuals/teachers in these schools could not neglect the rich local culture and aesthetics. In the case of Lahore, the outcome of such as individual's effort is worth mentioning. Individuals like the Principal of the Mayo School of Arts at Lahore, John Lockwood Kipling, included local gentry in art training at the School and stressed that local aesthetics be studied as part of the education of the artists. Under Kipling's tutelage, the artist/architect Bhai Ram Singh received training which influenced built environment of Lahore by giving the city its major architectural master-pieces. Negotiating with the interests of the rulers, Bhai Ram Singh is one of the locals who managed to secure his culture while also incorporating new demands of society. The buildings of Bhai Ram Singh reflect the struggle of local culture to cope with the foreign influences in such a way as to incorporate both the western and eastern visual vocabulary in a harmonious and beautiful manner. Lahore Museum, Punjab University (old campus building) and Aitchison College, though following the British standards of site layout, have the building style and aesthetics which mingle beautifully and proportionately with the dominant Western ruling aesthetics while also giving equal respect and understanding to local Indian aesthetics in a single structure.

Conclusion

The built environment of India was greatly influenced by the ruling culture of the British which left little room for the local subservient culture to manoeuvre. People living in older quarters of the Walled City throughout the British times were affected by changing elite areas of the city, adopting the new/modern ways of living in bungalows. The secondary culture continued to be practised by the local elite who at one level wanted to live like their rulers and on the other level were confined within their traditional lives; examples of such negotiated attitude is the change of dress for males only due to their corporate interactions with the rulers, while the women continued to follow their traditional dresses during the British Raj. Local elite in their attempt to show their loyalties to the British rulers practiced Indo-Saracenic Architectural styles as the British rulers in their later phase gave it preference.

Other than the ruler's will to portray themselves as a part of the Indian ruling lineage providing an outlet for the continuity of local aesthetical elements in colonial structures, the struggling Indian tradition and aesthetics continued to be of emotional value for the locals; nostalgia about the Mughal monuments of Lahore, for instance, remain even in post-colonial times in Pakistan. Further, the local building tradition constantly appears in religious buildings such as Mosques and Shrines and even in the houses of the lower classes of society (Mozang, Icchra).

The survival of local culture and aesthetics continued throughout British times either under the tutelage of the British rulers with their diplomatic policies to strengthen their interests or by the local gentry to cope with the new ways of the times in their traditional settings. The levels of diplomatic negotiations in interaction between dominant and suppressed cultures act as a means to link the dissimilar and distinctly rooted cultures in a common social and built environment. These are however dictated mainly by the ruler's aspirations and manage to continue the subject's desires to adopt new living ways while at the same time being linked with their own rich traditions.

Endnotes

- 1 Prof. Dr. Thomas R. Metcalf, in his book "An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj" published in 1989 describes the introduction of new building forms and aesthetic conceptions in Indian Sub-continent during the British Raj in India. Prof. Pervaiz Vandal and Prof. Sajida Vandal in their book "The Raj, Lahore, and Bhai Ram Singh" published in 2006, stressed the importance of the British Raj as one of the main historic periods in Indian Sub-continent history, to define new concepts in built environment from what was prevalent before in this region.
- 2 Vandal, Pervaiz., Vandal, Sajida. 2006. p 17.
- 3 Partha Mitter in her book "Much Maligned Monsters" published in 1992, describes the accounts of the early travellers and traders in India and their interpretation of Indian Art.
- 4 Said, W. Edward. "Orientalism". 1978.
- 5 Mann, Michael., Fischer-Tine, Harald. '*Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India*'. London: Anthem Press; 2004.
- 6 Prof. Thomas Metcalf in his book 'Ideologies of the Raj' points to ward the changing policies of the British in India from initial to later phase.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Prof. Dr. Thomas. R. Metcalfin his book '*Forging the Raj: Essays on British India in the Heyday of the Empire*'. published in 2005, describes Fergusson's claim to give India its first proper history.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Vandal, Pervaiz., Vandal, Sajida. 2006
- 11 William Dalrymple in his book "White Mughals" used the term 'White Mughals' for the British in India.
- 12 Prof. Pervaiz Vandal and Prof. Sajida Vandal used this term 'Architecture as a medium of propaganda' by the ruler.
- 13 Swinton Jacobs, Jeypore Portfolio of Architectural Details.
- 14 Term 'Contra Culture' was used by Prof. Pervaiz Vandal in his unpublished PhD thesis for opposing cultures.
- 15 The Great Exhibition of 1851, was held in London in which the most successful stall was that of Indian handicrafts.