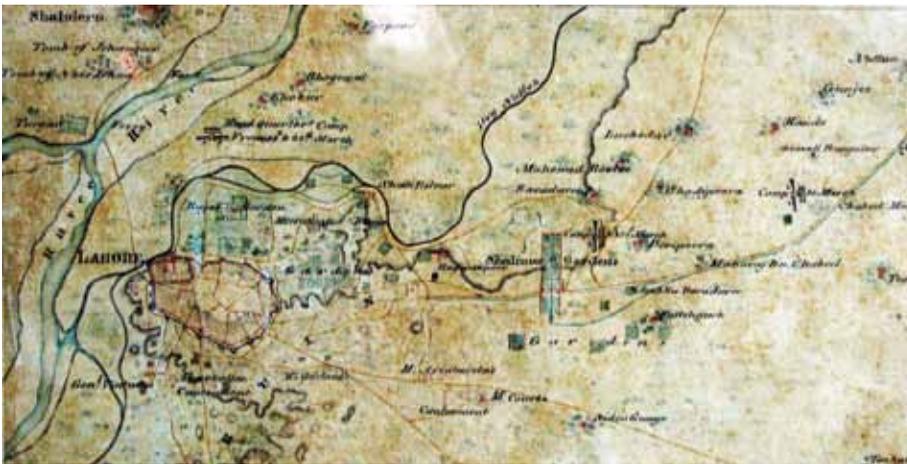


Two Rivers of Lahore

Stories of Decay and Reform

Nida Rehman

A map entitled, *A Sketch of the Fortified City of Lahore*, hangs on the wall behind *Anarkali's* sarcophagus in the quaint octagonal building housing the Punjab archives. It commemorates General Henry Fane's visit to the court of Ranjit Singh in March 1837 when the British Commander-in-Chief was invited to the Punjab for the wedding of the Maharaja's grandson and his participation in the pageantry of the Lahore *Darbar*. No doubt General Fane must have visited some of the imperial gardens in Lahore. In the 1837 map, garden estates and villages prominently dot the landscape along the River Ravi and its shifting bed. Mappings of the city by James Wescoat, drawn using extensive field studies and archival sources, show that though gardens were scattered throughout the vicinity of Lahore in the mid and late Mughal period, the most prominent sites were located along the terrace of the River Ravi.¹ These included the Shalimar Bagh northeast of the Walled City, the gardens of the Lahore Fort, Kamran's Baradari on the Ravi itself, Emperor Jahangir's tomb-garden across the river in Shahdara and the Hazuri Bagh built during Ranjit Singh's rule in 1813. The elaborate



F. 1

A sketch of the fortified city of Lahore

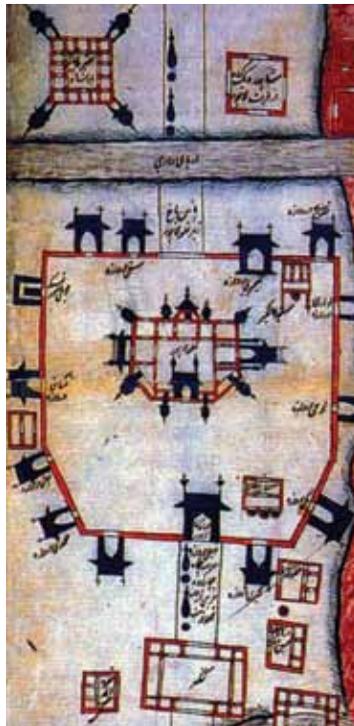
1 See James L. Wescoat, "Gardens, Urbanization and Urbanism in Mughal Lahore: 1526-1657," in *Mughal Gardens: Sources, Places, Representations, and Prospects*, eds. James L. Wescoat and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, pp.139-170 (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Colltion, 1996).

three-level waterworks of the Shalimar Bagh were irrigated by water drawn from the Ravi through a canal called the *Shah Nahar* or *Hansti Canal* designed by Mughal engineer Ali Mardan Khan. Additionally smaller gardens, farms, estates, and *mazars* lined the river terraces along the northern and western sides of the city. Lahore's physical proximity and orientation towards the River Ravi is also evident in numerous older sources, such as the two scroll maps depicting the road from Kandahar to Delhi, which date between 1760 and 1814, reproduced in Susan Gole's book *Indian Maps and Plans*² and a painting of Ranjit Singh with Shah Zaman with the Ravi shown in the distance along the central axis of the Shalimar Bagh. During General Fane's visit, nearing the end of Ranjit Singh's almost forty year reign, at the wane of one empire and the rise of another, Lahore was indeed a city of gardens along a river.

However, as one moves south and east of the River Ravi and the Walled City on the 1837 map, detail and texture start to diminish. A sparse network of roads appears amidst scattered villages. In bold capital letters the single word 'RUINS' inscribes a path parallel to the river just below the city walls. Like any map, this one testifies as

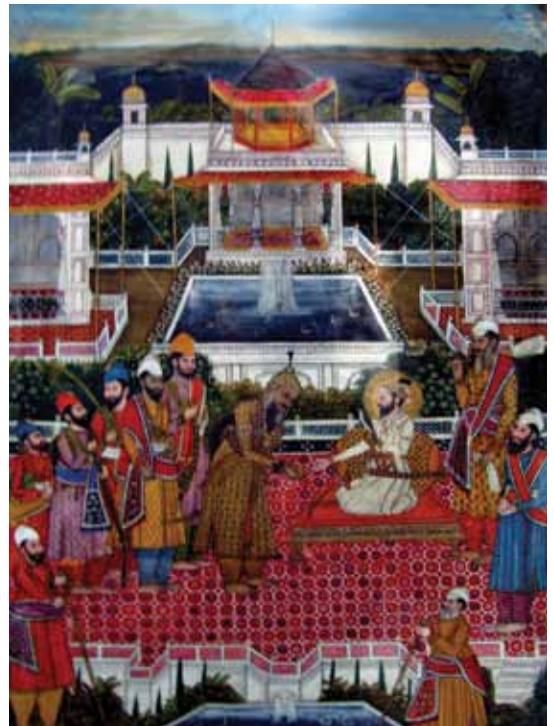
F. 2

Map showing the road from Kandahar to Delhi (between 1760 and 1814)



F. 3

A painting of Ranjit Singh with Shah Zaman in Shalimar Bagh



much to its authors' perceptions and projections as to a precise spatial condition. The idea that this area of the city was a ruined and dismal landscape is one that was shared by a number of foreign visitors to Lahore in writings about the city from the mid-nineteenth century.

Few suburban localities could be found in any province presenting such peculiar sanitary difficulties as the vicinity of Lahore. The station of Anarkali, with its adjuncts, is scattered over an area of several square miles, over which extend the ruins of not one but several successive cities of various eras and various dynasties. The surface of this extraordinary plain is diversified by mounds, kilns, bricks, stones, broken masses of masonry, decaying structures, hollows, excavations, and all the debris of habitations that have passed away. The soil is sterile, and impregnated with saltpetre, but the ground is interspersed with rank vegetation, and though generally arid, from its undulating nature, possesses an unfortunate aptitude for the accumulation of stagnant water.³

The emphasis on the words "debris" and "ruins" is indicative of the perception of landscape commonly held by visitors to Lahore in the pre-colonial period as well as the colonial administrators of the city government after formal annexation in 1849. The area is treated as a *Tabula Rasa* – not in the physical sense of a blank slate, but more specifically of a razed slate, where emptiness is caused by acts of deliberate erasure. This interpretation is in accordance with David Gissen's examination of the concept of "debris", as it was used in 18th century European architectural discourse to indicate "the total spatial transformation wrought by violence and disaster."⁴ In the descriptions such as the one quoted above, imbued with a sense of destruction and erasure, the southeastern environs of Lahore are rhetorically erased of beauty and function to set the stage for future transformations of the city.

The conception of a deserted and ruined wasteland in Lahore's outskirts echoes the descriptions of the inter-fluvial landscapes of the province of the Punjab in colonial administrative literature. Although the floodplains of the Punjab had been irrigated and cultivated with the use of inundation canals for centuries, during the nineteenth century the colonial government harnessed the waters of the River Indus and its tributaries into an extensive apparatus for irrigation

3 Sir John Lawrence (1852) as quoted in Syad Muhammad Latif, "*Lahore: Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities*" (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1994 c1892), p.251.

4 David Gissen, "Debris" in *AA Files* 58 (2009).

delivery transforming the previously semi-arid, interfluvial terrain or *doabs* into arable and densely settled territory. The colonial mandate, as repeatedly stated in the meticulous administration reports, was the conversion of deserts to gardens. However in colonial reports from the early periods of canal building, the lack of productivity of the land was often attributed to sustained aggression in the pre-Colonial period. Suggesting that the land was not “naturally” arid, a senior official wrote, “It appears however that in the days of the Mughals and their predecessors, these tracts were comparatively prosperous, and that they became deserted during the revolution which followed.”⁵

That the project of territorial consolidation in British Punjab sought to control and manage “nature” is consistent with the ideals of nineteenth century engineering. However it is within the rhetoric of reforming a ruined and deserted nature that the specific historical and political shades of the colonial enterprise are revealed. By emphasizing the agency of past human interventions in the destruction of the landscape, the evocation of ruin allowed speculation on a more abundant and fertile past. The descriptions of a desecrated landscape granted powerful legitimacy for the colonial enterprise: That the state had an historic mandate to revive a prior condition of fertility and abundance through irrigation technology.⁶

The narrative of a decaying landscape also underlies urban reform efforts in Lahore during colonial rule. It paved the way for the morphological transformations in Lahore at the turn of the 20th century - particularly the development of new garden suburbs and the eventual reorientation of the city away from the river and the ancient core. In his discussion on infrastructure and malaria in post-Colonial Lagos, Matthew Gandy discusses the related concepts of “partial modernities” and “historiographies of absence” to highlight the voices that are hidden or inequities that are normalized in narratives of modern infrastructural progress.⁷

By examining the technological regimes of territorial (canals) and municipal (drainage) water management within the changing form of the city and by examining administration literature, this essay explores the varied roles that water plays at the center of these

5 R. H. Davies, R. E. Egerton, R. Temple and J. H. Morris, “Report on the Revised Settlement of the Lahore District in the Lahore Division,” (Lahore, 1860), p. 16

6 Such historical appropriation is not unlike the use of the colonial indo-saracenic style of architecture which was infused with stylistic authority through the use of native/pre-colonial forms.

7 Matthew Gandy. “*Mosquitoes, Modernity and Post-Colonial Lagos.*” Newcastle University, Public Lecture. (Newcastle United Kingdom: 2011 14-02)

transformations: as a resource that is bureaucratically managed, a discursive space for social reform and a repository of cultural ideas. It uses the divergent fate of Lahore’s two “rivers” – the Ravi and the Canal - as a lens to examine the cleavages in space as well as discourse central to the project of colonial modernity.

In the decades following Ranjit Singh’s death, the formal annexation of the Punjab under the East India Company in 1849 and the subsequent installation of British Crown Rule in 1857, Lahore was subject to a series of interventions that radically altered the size and structure of the city. The outskirts of Mughal Lahore became the site of the new colonial city with an expansive program of public and private gardens. A map from 1867 shows that a neat network of roads, gardens and buildings had replaced what had been observed as a wasteland only a few decades earlier. The new Lahore with its wide boulevards, large bungalows and abundant gardens represented a modern, sanitary and ordered environment for the city’s new rulers. The transformations were lauded by British officials, such as G.C. Walker who wrote in the 1893 Lahore District Gazetteer “... the ruins and graveyards of



F. 4
Map of Lahore from 1867 showing a network of roads, gardens and buildings after colonial intervention

Lahore have passed under the humanizing influence of western civilization. Metalled roads have pierced the debris of former days, and bungalows and gardens have succeeded ruins and rough jungle.”⁸

At the center of this new city was a branch of the Bari Doab Canal. The Canal, excavated in 1852 was an extension and re-alignment of Ali Mardan Khan’s *Shah Nahar* irrigating the Shalimar Gardens. Entering the Lahore district near Wagah in the northeast, the canal was cut along the natural ridge south and east of the Walled City, right through the former, “debris of habitations that have passed away.” Although the Canal was part of the regional Bari Doab network irrigating farmland around the city, a number of *Rajbahs* or distributaries were diverted from it “to spread fertility toward and about the city of Lahore.”⁹

When the new military cantonment was built in the southeast of the city to accommodate officers and troops of the British Army, a watercourse was extended into the “open and exceedingly dreary plain”¹⁰ of Mian Mir to supply water to its new parks and tree-lined avenues. The splendid boulevard called the Mall crossed over the Canal to connect the Cantonment with the new civil station housing government offices, residential areas for the civilian officers and recreational spaces. The Government House Distributary, branching from the main channel towards the Mall, irrigated other prominent areas in the civil station including the gardens of Government House, the Chiefs College and the Lawrence Gardens.

Modeled on Kew Gardens in London, the Lawrence Gardens included a park, the home of the Punjab Agri-horticultural Society and the Botanic Gardens, a zoo, cricket pitches and tennis courts. It was home to botanical research, seed acclimatization, plant propagation and the display of different native and imported species of plants. Amaryllis, camellias, orchids and chrysanthemums were just a few of the varieties blooming in turn throughout the year. The plants and seeds were supplied without cost to various public institutions and individuals in the city. In his book, “*Making Lahore Modern*”, William Glover suggests that rather than “an isolated ‘island of Englishness’”, the Lawrence gardens was a complex social condenser configuring a controlled interaction of colonial and local elite.¹¹ This

8 G.C. Walker, “*Gazetteer of the Lahore District*”, (Lahore: Lahore Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1894), p.284

9 Paul W. Paustian, *Canal Irrigation in the Punjab*, “*An Economic Inquiry Relating to Certain Aspects of the Development of Canal Irrigation by the British in the Punjab*” (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), p.28.

10 G.C. Walker, “*Gazetteer of the Lahore District*”, p.309.

view is contestable on the grounds that the native “collaborating” elite constituted only a narrow segment of local society and as Markus Daechsel points out the civil station was predominantly English save for government bureaucrats and domestic servants.¹² Yet with its neo-classical architecture, the picturesque landscapes, didactic displays of botanical research and the racially heterogeneous financial patronage, the Lawrence Gardens (as well as other projects such as institutions like Chiefs College), represented the colonial aspiration to create a “class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.”¹³ In many ways Lawrence Gardens was perhaps the most emblematic project of the garden city beginning to emerge along the canal in the 1860’s.

The canal water was also distributed to suburbs built beyond the civil station after the 1900’s. While many of these new neighborhoods were developed by the government to house the growing ranks of Indians in the provincial bureaucracy,¹⁴ Model Town, a project built on land acquired south of the city with detached bungalows and spacious gardens, was conceived and built by Indians including Dewan Khem Chand and Sir Ganga Ram. Developed as a co-operative residential settlement, Model Town, whose ordered plan with eight identical segments radiating from a large central green area, based on Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City model, was also supplied water by distributaries from the Lahore Canal.

The transformed green landscape of the civil station and the new suburbs, linked with distributaries to the canal as its spine, formed a site of prestige occupying a large swath of the new center of the city. With its marriage of utilitarian engineering and the poetics of English gardens, this landscape represented the ordered and sanitary spatial structure desired by colonial administrators and social reformers. In cultural terms, it marked for some a new beginning for the city of gardens: “Lahore”, wrote Muhammad Latif a government official in 1893, “was not ever a garden as it is now.”¹⁵

11 William J. Glover, *Making Lahore Modern: Constructing and Imagining a Colonial City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

12 See Markus Daechsel, “Between Suburb and World Politics: Middle-class Identities and the Refashioning of Space in Late Imperial Lahore, c 1920-1950,” in, *Beyond Representation: Colonial and Post Colonial Constructions of Indian Identity*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.273.

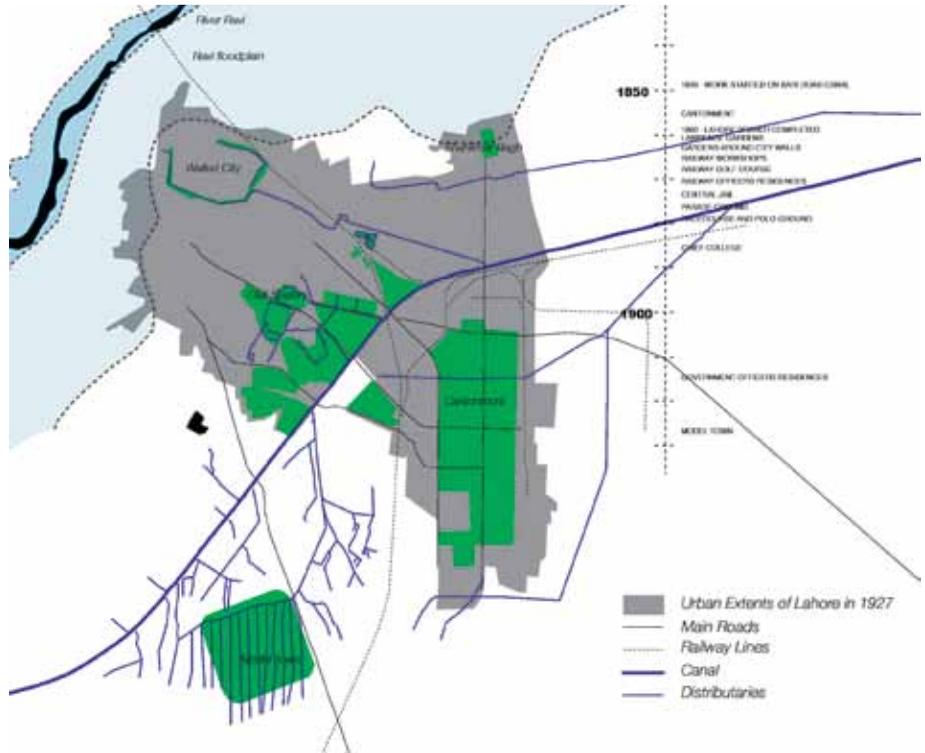
13 Lord Maculay’s famous pronouncement from his Minute on Education in 1835.

14 Daechsel gives a detailed explication of Lahore’s changing middle-class, its identity and lifestyle, during the late colonial period.

15 Syad Muhammad Latif, *Lahore: Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1994 c1892) page xiii.

F. 5

Map of Lahore from 1927 showing the canal and its distributaries



However if we trace our steps back along the geographies of water distribution in the city, from the Canal back to the River Ravi, discontinuities within these notions of order and beauty are revealed. As the Lahore Canal cut through the rhetorically emptied “ruins and graveyards”¹⁶ to cultivate gardens and a modern sanitary culture of living, the River Ravi and its adjoining urban areas became the unfortunate site of neglect and decay.

With the advent of large-scale perennial irrigation in the Punjab, the waters of the Ravi were diminished as they entered the vicinity of the city of Lahore. Whereas rivers are fed by tributaries that gather in volume as they flow downstream, canals disperse river waters by branching into successively smaller channels or distributaries. The withdrawal of water for distribution over a large area logically reduces river water levels. The canal system, with its reservoirs and weirs, ensured a year long water supply to the land and in doing so also created a reduction in the natural water levels of the rivers. As early as 1865, Leslie Saunders, a settlement officer, attributed the recession of the Ravi River and the ensuing adverse effects to the villages located along it, to

“the absorption of its waters for the purposes of the Bari Doab Canal”. It was also observed in the Punjab Gazetteer in 1908 that “at Madhopur, the head-works of the Bari Doab Canal draw off a large portion of the waters. Thenceforth the banks sink in height, and the river assumes the usual character of the Punjab streams, flowing in the centre of an alluvial valley, with high outer banks at some distance from its present bed.”¹⁷

The desirability of the Ravi as an urban artery would also have diminished when it became the unfortunate beneficiary of the city’s refuse. Drainage works, completed in 1881, discharged the city’s waste right into the river just five miles south of the old center. In a letter discussing the planning of the drainage system, the President of the Municipal Committee pre-empted controversy about the proximity to the city and contamination to the river by explaining in facile but utilitarian terms that, “the discharge takes place some miles below the City and away from human habitations? also that the sewage has been already discharging into the river for the past twenty-five years, and no perceptible contamination has resulted.”¹⁸ That a location on the River Ravi only five miles from the old center was chosen for a substantial discharge of urban waste and its effects considered innocuous for the inhabitants of the growing city, indicates that the Ravi and its surrounding environs were becoming increasingly peripheral in the imagination of colonial planning.

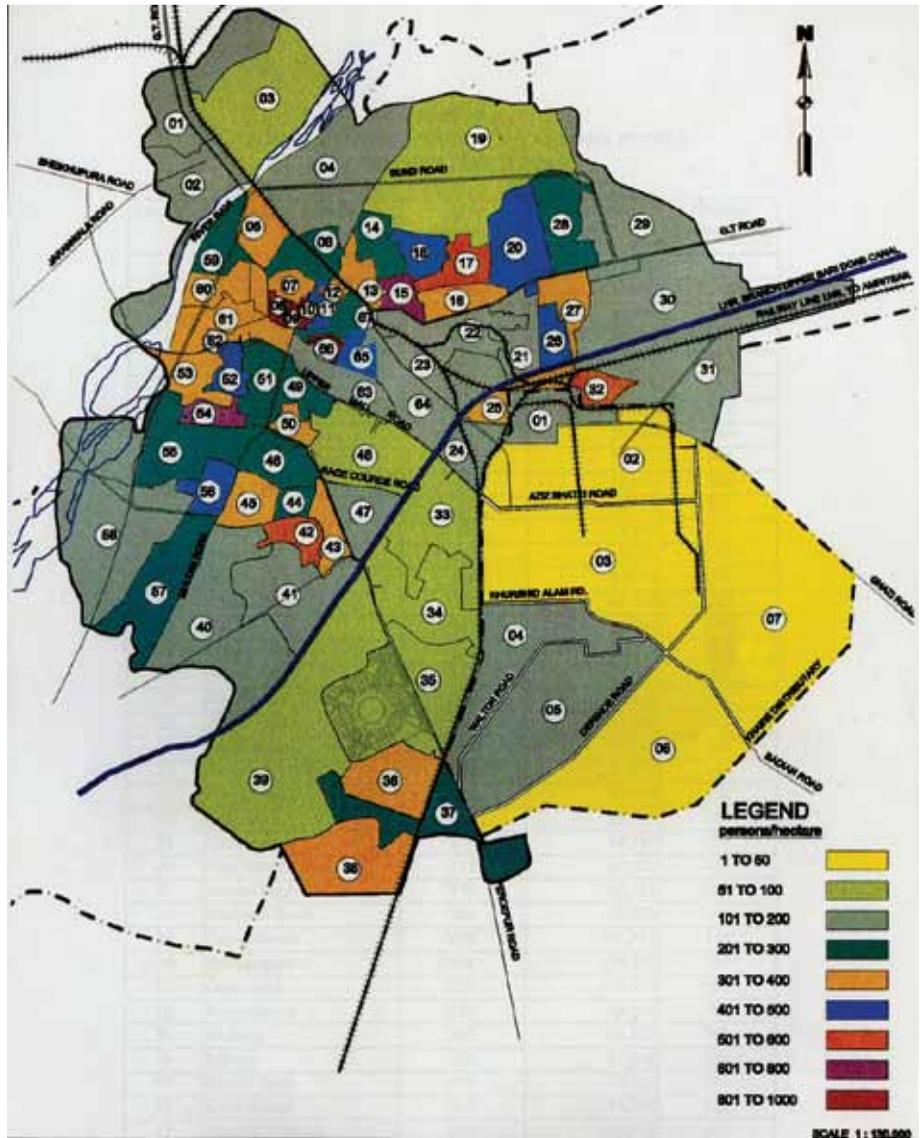
The Walled City of Lahore, or the *Anderoon Shehr* where a majority of Lahore’s local residents lived, also remained isolated from the planning developments across the city. With its tightly packed houses, narrow, winding streets, heterogeneous social structure and complex familial arrangements, the old city of Lahore, like many pre-colonial cities, presented at the same time a space of fascination and also of danger to the popular colonial imagination as evident in literature, paintings and administrative writings from the period. Its social as well as spatial complexity eluded the tools for rational analysis such as census data collection and enumeration. While the development of the suburbs, invested in utilitarian and aesthetic agendas, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the older, pre-colonial neighborhoods of Lahore – within and around the ancient walls -

17 Imperial Gazetteer of India. Provincial Series - Punjab. Vol. I: The Province, Mountains, Rivers, Canals, Historic areas, and Delhi and Jullundur Divisions. Vol. II: Lahore, Rawalpindi & Multan Divisions and Native States. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1908 (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1998) .190.

18 R. P. Nisbet, “Letter from the President Municipal Committee, Lahore, To The Commissioner and Superintendent, Lahore Division, On the Subject of Water-Supply and Drainage of Lahore 1876” (1876). 5.

F. 6

Map of Lahore showing the direction of colonial planning away from the Ravi



were largely left out of the planning regimen and fell into disrepair.

These three aspects – the reduction of water levels in the river, the untreated discharge of sewage and the continued neglect of Lahore’s pre-colonial urban spaces - were some of the factors in the eventual decline of Lahore’s medieval core and its decreasing spatial affinity to the river. The Canal, with its adjacent roadways became the ordering mechanism for the growth of Lahore, nurturing the new neighborhoods which developed beside it. This process has largely continued in the

present, with the city expanding towards the south and west, while the older areas remain disproportionately under-serviced, resulting in a definitive bifurcation of the city along lines of density and development.

As a city subject to successive imperial regimes, William Glover notes that, Lahore grew and shrank many times in its history and that the decaying landscapes outside Lahore's walls witnessed by the new colonial rulers in the mid-nineteenth century, as described in the beginning of this essay, were an instance of that continual process. The continued degradation of the river terraces – once the preferred site for Lahore's abundant gardens - can perhaps be seen as part of this layered process of destruction, revival and growth that Glover discusses. Yet, his metaphor of a "Mughal palimpsest", as "a generative principle of spatial arrangement" under colonial rule,¹⁹ fails to capture the agentive political will underlying the city's changing morphology in that period – both the aggressive development of the debris-laden environs into a new colonial city and disregard for its older and primarily local northern sector. It is a neglect that, as Markus Daechsel notes, amounts to a concerted "refusal to acknowledge that India could take on distinctly and authentically urban forms".²⁰

By shifting the lens from the chronological or layered view of Lahore's development to a geographical understanding of its integration into a larger territorial project of irrigation development and social reform, sites such as the degraded landscapes of the Ravi are revealed not as the historical accidents of continuous urban change but as ruptures across the rationalized terrain of modern planning.

19 See Glover. xxvi.

20 Daechsel. 273.

Endnotes

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