The Punjab’s Architectural Transformations:
Indo-Greek Classicism to British Colonial Neo-Classicism

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It was the year 1861, a few years after the annexation of the Punjab – one of the last sovereign states that came under the British Raj. Lahore was the seat of power, not only for the departing Sikh rulers but also for the Mughals who had preceded them. The city’s landscape resonated with architecture and gardens constructed and laid out by these two dynasties following the traditional ornamental vocabulary. Lahore’s skyline was dotted with beautiful city gates, sikharas of Hindu temples, samadhis from the Sikh period and defined by the majestic and iconic domes and minarets of the various mosques erected by its Muslim rulers (Figure 1). The incoming British Colonial government had signed off on the construction of a new building on the Lahore Mall but there was something peculiar about this new construction. It was a structure unlike any other seen before but not owing to its size or magniloquence. Rather, its significance was rooted in what this construction entailed and epitomized. It represented the turn of the tide. It was a visual representation of the changing times. The structures being referred to here are the Lawrence and Montgomery Halls, as they were then known. At the time of their construction they were a visual oddity on the landscape of an expanding Lahore. They had a new and radically different architectural vocabulary. As William Glover remarks, their purpose was to “introduce into the city a substantially new and stylistically different but carefully worked out formal and spatial landscape idea” (Glover 2010, 62).

Prior to this break from convention, the architectural milieu of the Indian subcontinent can best be termed as that of ‘respectful borrowing’. Over the course of centuries, the Indian subcontinent and the greater Punjab, since it was the gateway to other parts of the realm, experienced a harmonious marriage of various cultural practices and consequently architectural devices.

A powerful example of the tradition of respectful borrowing is the Qutub Minar. Its construction started during the reign of Qutub ud din Aibak but was completed during the reign of his successor Iltutmish. It was built primarily as a victory tower to symbolize Muslim victory over the local Hindu rajas. A closer look at the base of the Qutub Minar, constructed during the time of Qutub ud din Aibak, reveals clearly that Hindu masons worked on it, as evidenced by the expression of native Indian architectural motifs (Figures 2, 3). Deborah Swallow notes, “As the rulers of the new sultanate turned their attention to establishing a court culture of their own, they were obliged to recruit artists trained in the local tradition. The result was a syncretism, which reflected the “interpretation of Iranian styles through the prism of Indian traditions” (Swallow 1990, 43). Fatehpur Sikri, represents another example of respectful borrowing (Figure 4). Its design was heavily influenced by the great assimilationist, Emperor Akbar himself. Therefore, with new masters came new architectural practices but the emphasis was never on whole scale demolition of the old and imposition of the new. The introduction of new ideals in each era can be seen as a string of evolutionary advances in the architectural landscape of India. This came to an abrupt halt with the erection of the Lawrence and Montgomery Halls.

The Lawrence Hall, named after Lord John Lawrence, Viceroy of India, was envisaged as a societal kernel for Lahore’s European elite. It was conceived as a traditional English banqueting hall. It held many events to whet the appetite of the Englishmen, which included performances by travelling troupes from across the globe. Henry Goulding, a British resident of Lahore, provides a detailed list of the various operas, minstrels, magicians and entertainers who performed in Lahore for the pleasure of its European residents. Thus in essence, Lawrence Hall catered to the polite European society in the city, a setting for hosting
what Goulding called the earliest bids to make a “brighter Lahore” (Goulding 1976, 26). The Lawrence Hall was built chiefly from the contributions of the European community of the Punjab as a memorial to Lord Lawrence. The building was designed by G. Stone, a government civil engineer, who was the principal architect of public works in Lahore from 1860 to 1880. A few years later, in 1866, the Montgomery Hall, designed by J. Gurdon was erected from subscriptions raised from the Native Chiefs of the Punjab. However, a crucial point of divergence was that where the Lawrence Hall was the domain of the white population of Lahore, the Montgomery Hall, as Glover remarks, allowed for racial interaction between British civilians and officials and the elite of Lahori society (Glover 2008: 65).

While the Lawrence Hall had a humble porch shading its entrance, J. Gurdon went a step further and the Montgomery Hall was fronted by the grandeur of a high Greek stoa or pillared porch crowned with a pediment.

The architectural vocabulary of the Lawrence and Montgomery Halls is remarkably different from anything the locals had witnessed before (Figure 6, 7). The façades are framed by a row of columns that run the entire length of each structure. These columns are tripled at each corner to lend visual support to a massive frieze, cornice and balustrade running the length of the roofline. As S. M. Latif notes in his work, both these buildings are “frigidly classical” (Latif 1994, 310).

The pediment, metopes and triglyphs evinced on these halls are standard architectural configurations of Greek temples. The pediment is the crowning element of a Greek temple and perhaps its most iconic feature. Originally, pediments were decorated with beautiful sculptures, which ran across the length of the pediments and narrated a specific story pertaining to the god or goddess being housed in that particular temple. Metopes and triglyphs were rectangular, decorative architectural elements housed beneath the pediment. Usually the metopes were painted or housed high-relief works. These three architectural elements along with the design of the pillars/columns defined the ancient Greek temple architecture (Figure 8). These architectural elements of classical Greek temples have been faithfully copied by the British and implemented unaltered in the form of Lawrence and Montgomery Halls (Figures 9, 10). These characteristic features of the temple, adorned with sculptures and high-relief works, were meant to prepare the visitor for meeting the deity within the temple. However, it is important to note that in the case of Lawrence and Montgomery Halls, architectural elements that define religious symbolism have been used by the British to convey a decidedly political missive.

This gives rise to the obvious question as to why the British were so strident in establishing their own style? The answer is most apparent in the colonial dialectics of that time. T. Roger Smith, an architect practising in India, remarked before the Society of Arts in 1873, “were the British
occupation in India to terminate tomorrow, the visible tokens of our empire would survive in our canals, our railways and ports and our public works” (Smith 1873, 279). Smith’s remarks offer an insight into the minds of the characters behind the construction of the Lawrence and Montgomery Halls and their perceived rationale behind this construction.

In the public works undertaken by the British Raj, its imperial position with respect to its subjects was always made obvious. The purpose of these buildings, apart from their functional use, was to serve as visual tokens of the might and superiority of the expanding British Empire.

The 1857 War of Independence or The Mutiny, as it is referred to by the Raj, served as the watershed in transforming the British colonial mindset. Armed with the support of the Punjabi landed aristocracy, the British set forth to express their dominance more vehemently and architectural forms provided an easy and powerful idiom of expression. Their purpose was to serve as an embodiment of conquest. The Raj was fairly dismissive in its approach to the local architecture. Enter James Fergusson. He arrived in India as an indigo planter but as fate decreed, stumbled into the world of art history focusing on the understudied history of Indian arts and architecture. He went on to pen the tome entitled *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* that became, and for a long time remained, an authoritative text on all things Indian. In it he remarks, “It cannot of course be for one moment contended that India ever reached the intellectual supremacy of Greece, or the moral greatness of Rome” (Fergusson 1910, 4). This pejorative conception of Indians and their art was not limited to Fergusson. Sir William Jones, as early as 1785, in an address to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, opined that Alexander the Great was not wrong in believing that the Asians were born to be slaves and supported the assertion that “the Athenian poet seems perfectly in the right, when he represents Europe as a sovereign Princess and Asia as her Handmaid” and whose “superior advancement in all kinds of useful knowledge” was unquestioned (Jones 1784, 406).

Fergusson’s comments elucidate the musings of the Neo-classical movement, 18th Century that swept Britain and the rest of Europe. Alison Palmer describes the art produced during the Neo-classical era as simultaneously being “historical and modern” and “conservative and progressive”. This Neo-classical movement espouses the revival of classical art or its reintroduction in Europe beginning in the 1750s. Traditionally, it has been described and interpreted as some sort of a reaction against its predecessor, the Rococo style, which was characterized by elaborate ornamentation. However, after the 1750s, a series of world events helped to ferment a new assessment of classicism from ancient Rome and Greece which “came to be viewed as a style and philosophy that could offer a sense of purpose and a dignity to art, consistent with the new ‘enlightened’ thinking of the era” (Palmer 2011, 1).

The English were not immune to this wave of Neo-classical revival sweeping across Europe. The British were able to see the marvels of ancient Greece first-hand when the ‘Elgin Marbles’ – marbles removed from the Parthenon – went on public display in 1807. Lord Elgin was hailed as a saviour, for the marbles were, as Sharon Waxman remarks, “rescued from barbarism” (Waxman 2008, 229) as Greece was under Ottoman control. Events such as the exhibition of the Elgin Marbles enabled the British populace to witness and admire the art of the ancient Greeks and also reinforced the notions of the Neo-classical revivalists who alleged the superiority of the ancient Greek civilization above all others.

The British, well on their way to forging a transcontinental empire of their own, seized the theoretical grounding of the Neo-classical movement. In order to better understand the reasons behind the use of classical architectural models, the British Art Historian, Erwin Panofsky’s landmark work on Iconography offers us additional insight by providing us with a theoretical framework. He describes the intrinsic meaning or content of any art work in the following words, “It is apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work” (Panofsky 1939, 7).
Thus, the use of classical forms to express the spirit and grandeur of Imperial Britain was for the late Victorian Englishman immediately obvious and appropriate and it manifested itself in the form of the Lawrence and Montgomery Halls in Lahore. As Metcalf opines, the classical idiom harkening back to the elegance and the aesthetic beauty of Greece and the Imperial might of Rome “was the architectural medium through which the Europeans always envisioned an empire” (Metcalf 1989, 177). As the British hegemony in the Indian subcontinent expanded and deepened, they began to influence not only the lives of its inhabitants but also its historical conception. They began to view Indian art through the lens of ancient Greece. This period saw the rise of ‘amateur’ historians such as Fergusson.

He labeled the Gandharan art as “classical” but once again his attitude was laced with condescension: “some animals such as elephants and monkeys are better represented there than in any sculptures known in any part of the world” (Fergusson 1910, 34).

The discoveries of the Ajanta Caves and of Gandharan art were highlighted and their artwork glorified because they exhibited cultural borrowings from the West. Gandharan art was a product of the interaction between the Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms and Buddhist forms. As the British envisaged Greek antiquity as the absolute measure of perfection in art, they extolled the virtues of Gandharan art because it evinced Greek influences and was therefore by its very nature superior to indigenous Indic art. For them, the locals on their own were incapable of producing art of any genuine worth. H. H. Cole remarked while talking about the Sanchi Stupa that its “exceptional excellence” suggested “Greek masons, or possibly designers, were called in to assist the great work” (Fergusson 1910, 34).

Armied with these dangerously powerful imperial notions of cultural continuity and superiority and their horrifying experience of 1857, the newly christened British Raj set out to change the architectural landscape of India. As part of the orientalist dialectics, the British neatly classified everything relating to India, including art, along communal lines because it advanced their political objectives. The early students of Indian architecture labeled all stylistic elements as either Hindu or Muslim and anything in between as a ‘blended style’. This had the effect of simplifying things for the colonial masters but in the process of doing so, the artistic variations, accrued over centuries, as either non-essential or artistically unimportant. As Metcalf notes, “if all architectural elements were defined as ‘Hindu’ or as ‘Muslim’, nothing remained unknown. What the colonial ruler explained, he of course controlled” (Metcalf 1989, 52).

Edwin Lutyens has also left an indelible imprint on the Indian landscape since he is responsible for the architecture of ‘New’ Delhi, the seat of the British Raj in India. A statement by Lutyens distills the colonial conception of empire and its lineage in a single sentence. He writes, “I do not believe there is any real Indian architecture or any great tradition. They are just spurs by various mushroom dynasties with as much intellect as there is in any other art nouveau” (Hussey 1950, 277).

In another statement he labels every Indian building, even the ethereal Taj Mahal as conceived by “childish ignorance” (Hussey 1950, 277).

Lutyens distills the essence of Indian and Mughal art in the following words, if a Hindu structure was required, “set square stones and build child-wise, but, before you erect, carve every stone differently and independently, with lace patterns and terrifying shape. On top over trabated pendentives, set – an onion... If the choice were Moghul build a vast mass of rough concrete, elephant wise, on a very simple rectangular-cum-octagonal plan, then on top of the mass put three turnips in concrete and overlay with stone or marble as before. Be very careful not to bond anything in, and don’t care a damn if it all comes to pieces” (Hussey 1950, 277).

As discussed previously and made obvious by Lutyens’ comment above, Britain and more generally the Europeans re-established cultural ties with the Greeks whom they considered the epitome of art, culture, reason and humanity in general. This re-imagination of the Greek ethos by Europe must be understood in the purview of the dark ages when they began to harken back to a bygone era and this idea took root during the Renaissance.

The Punjab has, during the course of its history, served as a political and cultural palimpsest. Successive rulers brought their own ideas, which were subsumed seamlessly into the existing milieu. The Punjab’s bout with European conquerors in the nineteenth century was not a one-off episode. Crucially, the Punjab was at one point ruled by the Greek hegemons themselves – the perceived cultural ancestors of the British. This soil had embraced them as yet another strand in its attractive and invitingly colorful cultural fabric.

The man responsible for the Greek presence in the Punjab was Alexander, King of Macedon. Although his stay was short-lived, his legacy in the form of his generals and soldiers lived on for a few more centuries. After Alexander’s death, as his empire was divided amongst his generals, Seleucus I. Nicator came to possess his most eastern possessions (Habib
2012, 1). Formal ties between the Seleucids and the Mauryas were cemented via a marriage alliance and the exchange of ambassadors. The milieu being referred to is the one created by the Indo-Greek kingdom and its many rulers – over forty rulers in all for a period of just 200 years (Habib 2012, 7). An Indo-Greek king Antialkides’ ambassador Heliodorus is responsible for an astonishing architectural structure, a large stone pillar bearing a seven line Brahmi script set up in honor of Vasudeva at Vidisha (in modern Madhya Pradesh). Tarn describes Heliodorus in the following words: “He was a Greek ambassador of a Greek king, but he does not use Greek for his inscription; he proclaims himself the adherent of an Indian creed, quotes an Indian epic and sets up his record in Brahmi” (Tarn 1966, 388). This pillar (Figures 11, 12) attests to the fact that contacts were maintained between the Greeks in the Northwest and the rulers of Central India. It also alludes to the fact that the Indian cult was strong enough to attract foreigners. “The specific cult is usually considered to be a type of proto-Vaishnavism, for one of the names of the popular Hindu god Vishnu is Vasudeva. Further Vishnu had as his vehicle the bird Garuda, which was probably represented in the now missing crowning element of this Garuda standard” (Huntington 2006, 57).

This evidence of mutual respect for both the cultural and religious traditions of each other evinces a key aspect about the ancient Indo-Greeks. Their rule was set up in a way that would not obstruct or alter the local traditions. The stability of this realm was by and large dependent upon the co-operation and assistance of the local population and consequently local organizational structures were left unchanged. Talking about Menander’s (another Indo-Greek) kingdom Tarn writes, “but his empire, it seems was essentially an empire with a small Greek ruling caste; it was not a Greek empire, as the Seleucid was meant to be but something much more in the nature of a partnership” (Tarn 1966, 260).

To those already familiar with the art traditions of South Asia, Gandhara is perhaps the most famous of the western Asiatic states. This is partly the result of the fact that many important and illuminating archaeological excavations have taken place at Gandhara and especially its capital, Taxila. The Gandharan culture epitomized the fusion of the Indic and Hellenistic idioms. Elements from the vocabularies of both cultures were fused to create art that truly represented the best of both worlds. The monument, which demonstrates a thoroughgoing fusion of Indic and Hellenistic elements, is the Shrine or Stupa of the Double-Headed Eagle at block F, Sirkap (Figure 13). All that stands today is the base of the structure. The wall surface of the basement is ornamented with reliefs of engaged-pillars and pilasters with acanthus leaf capitals between which are representations of three types of entranceways: the Indic torana, the Indic ogee-arched doorway and a classicist pedimented façade. The ogee archways bear representations of double-headed eagles; the toranas bear single-headed birds of a similar type, while the pedimented structures bear no bird motifs at all.

The torana is an import from Buddhist traditions. It is a doorway which marks the entrance into a stupa. They depict Jatakas (life stories) from Buddha’s life. They can also be seen marking the entrance of some Hindu and Jain temples. In Hellenistic and Scythian mythology, eagles are often associated with death, as transporters of the dead to heaven. Thus essentially, these three entranceways are representations of sacred spaces and represent the three different paths to salvation. Their presence, side by side, also represents a freedom of choice for the people.

This type of cultural fusion, in which non-Indic and Indic symbols are combined, demonstrates more than a simple co-existence of various cultural strands and indicates the integration and assimilation of
concepts and forms arising out of distinct traditions into new ones. The contrasting approaches to their respective reign over the Punjab can be evaluated by taking a lead from Sophiya Psarra’s concept of “architecture as an orchestration of concept in the mind” and as “a perceptual condition experienced by bodies moving in space” (Psarra 2009: xii). She narrates the inextricable link between architecture and narrative in the following words, “It concerns the semantic meaning of buildings and places and the contribution of architecture to social and cultural messages” (Psarra 2009: 2). What this entails is that architecture embodies cultural meanings and expressions and visually communicates it to the viewers. After applying this conception to the Lawrence and Montgomery Halls and the Double-Eagle shrine, the cast of mind behind their construction and in turn the obvious contrast inherent in their meaning becomes evident.

Conclusion

The buildings discussed in this essay are symbolic of imperial perceptions and of people who sanctioned these works. The Lawrence and Montgomery Halls were erected specifically to demonstrate the claimed inherent superiority of the British over their subjects. They distanced the rulers from the ruled and were meant to cater to the needs of the ‘superior’ race – the perceived descendants of the Greeks and Romans. On the other hand, historical evidence suggests that the Indo-Greek rule eroded not due to an insurrection by the locals but by a new body of foreign invaders. In the ancient Indo-Greek kingdom, the Indians and the Greeks lived side by side on good terms for if their co-existence was not harmonious, Greek rule in ancient India would never have lasted as long as it eventually did. The depiction of the three entranceways on the Double-Eagle shrine representing the three symbolic entrances and therefore means of attaining salvation gives further credence to this argument. Supremacy over one another is neither communicated nor appears to have been practised. Tarn writes, “The Greeks in India may have ultimately vanished, not because they became Eurasians, but because they became Indians.” (Tarn 1966: 391).

References


