



An Analysis of Colonial Architecture in India

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Abstract: *Whatever might be the economic and political repercussions of British rule in Indian subcontinent, as far as architecture is concerned, they made significant contribution to the enriched Indian architectural tradition. However, the architectural contribution of the British rule began after the great mutiny of 1857 when their political counterparts were finally defeated and their political authority was firmly established. In the beginning the colonial architecture was mostly in the form of country-houses, official bungalows, churches, administrative buildings, etc. which were constructed throughout the country. This elementary style represents a mixture of the ideas evolved by the British military engineers and civil architects. The architectural styles of these structures include the characteristics of Greco-Roman, Scottish and Gothic style remarkably combined with prevailing Indian architectural styles.*

Keywords: *East India Company, Mughal, Exploitation, Architecture*

I. Introduction

From the beginning of 18th century, we witness a new stage of architecture in India. As we know that five European countries viz. Dutch, Portuguese, England, France and Denmark initiated commercial relations with India in the late of 17th century or in the beginning of 18th century through establishing the East India Company of their respective nations. This process has been termed as the emergence of European Commercial Companies in India. *After the battle of Plassey, the East India Company company had occupied prestigious position in the political structure of India.*¹ However, in the process of capturing the political power, the East India Company of England² was successful in marking a long lasting impact on Indian architecture. These European nations brought with them the elements of western cultures into the art and ways of living of the people of the country.³ The Portuguese commercial company introduced the regeneration of glitzy art while the French introduced their tastes in the decorations of palaces and houses. The British brought with them the Britain style of architecture and also influenced their modes in paintings and sculptures. Some artists tried to enrich their own historic art but became only the imitators of the past.

In the beginning of the British regime, there were huge attempts of creating authority through classical prototypes, but in the later phase the colonial architecture culminated into an identified style or feature which have been termed as Indo-Saracenic architecture. It is quite remarkable that the Indo-Saracenic architecture is a unique combination of the architectural characteristics of Hindu, Islamic and western elements. The colonial architecture exhibited itself through institutional, civic and utilitarian buildings, for example official bungalows, post offices,

¹The English East India Company attracted towards Bengal with the objective of profitable and prosperous trade that it had offered. Moreover, from the mid of the eighteenth century, Bengal offered valuable commercial privileges to the English Company as freedom to export and import their goods in without having taxes, prohibition on other European commercial companies in Bengal, etc. From this time onwards, the absolute powers related with 'Dastak' were severely misused by the servants of the Company to evade taxes on their private trade. This led to a direct conflict between the Nawab of Bengal and English Company. The company's interest in conquering Bengal was two-fold, i.e., protection of its trade and control over Bengal's revenue. It was on 23rd June, 1757 that the battle of Plassey was fought between the Nawab of Bengal and East India Company. The victory in this battle paved the way not only for the British annexation of Bengal but also their conquest of the whole of India. It established the military supremacy of the English in Bengal and raised them to the status of a major contender for the Indian empire. The revenues from Bengal enabled them to organise a strong army through which the Company conquered mighty Indian political powers as Maratha, Mysore, Punjab, etc. More to this, the elimination of the French commercial Company in India was the direct consequence of conquest of Bengal.

²The English East India Company (EIC), initially known as, *Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies* or *United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies*, was an English joint-stock Company formed on December 31, 1600. Acting as a monopolistic trading body, the Company actively engaged in politics and emerged as an agent of British imperialism in India from the early eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth century.

³The buildings built by the British were not as elegant and grand as that of the Mughals, but were civic and utilitarian buildings and commemorative structures. Indo-European Architecture in India during British period closely followed the developments in their home country but also sought inspiration from existing architecture in India.

integrated courts, railway stations, rest houses and other governmental/administrative buildings. Such buildings began to be built in large numbers throughout the nation. It is right to accept that the colonial architecture in India followed developments not only from metropolis but also took inspiration from existing architecture in India. During early British rule, the architectural designs comprised colossal stone and wood structures, erected in the northern part of India. In the mid of 18th century, the British administrators, especially Robert Clive managed massive efforts to construct huge architectural wonders in the essential port cities of India. Early British architectural design composed of charts and outlined plans already erected successfully in England. This period witnessed the skill of British architects with direct motives to make Indian artistic design much like western designs.

When we profoundly observe and interpret the architectural remains of the British period, we notice that the planning and urban design policies followed certain principles. Firstly, the fear of further revolts along the lines of the Mutiny of 1857, secondly, their perceptions of the nature of the Indian city, and thirdly, the Haussmann's plan for construction and establishment. This popular principle of contemporary Europe advocated cutting or demolishing the old city centers to make space for new construction. Moreover, the construction of 18th and 19th century clearly reflects the planning techniques already in use for Britain's industrial cities. In urban design schemes, the concept of Civil Lines and Cantonments was laid with great importance, which reflects the farsightedness of the British rulers. Even today, the civil lines and the cantonments are a major evidence of the British regime and which in turn have influenced much middleclass housing development in modern India. This novel concept stems from their perception as the colonies of the elite or the important ones. The cantonments and civil lines both were generally laid out as gridiron-planned communities with central thoroughfares with tree-lined streets, regularly divided building plots and bungalows as the main housing type. Near to civil lines the Churches, clubs, golf courses and cemeteries were established for the convenience of local residents.

The bungalow was the enduring symbol of the British Raj. The term bungalow has been derived from the Bengali word *Bangla* which means a residence of an elite person. In the early phase, the bungalows inhabited by the East India Company agents were known as the *kuccha* (local) bungalows, but with the progress of time, these residences became a perfect reflection of administrative hierarchy amongst the English community. The early bungalows had long, low classical lines and other adorations of wood. The Gothic revival in England brought about an equivalent change in bungalow design viz. the spawning buildings with pitched roofs and richly carpentered features. The typical residential bungalow for the highest administrative official was set back from the road by a walled compound and the amount of land enclosed was a symbol of status.

II. Colonial Architecture and its Distinctive Characteristics

Indian architecture during British rule was extremely praiseworthy and the oriental look had appealed the western tastes of the British regime. The overwhelming participation and keen interest shown by British administrators was surprising in its inaugural monuments. The British officials even displayed such enthusiasm as to build up schools precisely for their specified purpose of colonization. Schools and exhibitions were established in the cities of Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata and Lahore. From the early 19th century, architectural developments in India by British consisted of the rise of bungalow styled architecture from an Indian styled general thatched hut. The classical Gothic style look was heavily witnessed in every British monument of this period. Moreover, hill stations started gaining momentum as the headquarters of apex administrative officials and admired outings. The economic boom of the latter half of the 19th century witnessed the frenetic building activity in India and from now onwards the application of urban design guidelines resulted in the unified character that old British settlements in India still possess. As pressure on space grew, British architecture progressed from single buildings set in open surrounding to more densely packed urban schemes, as seen in the cities of Calcutta and Bombay. Apart from the residential construction the British military monuments in India were predominated with a lone guiding factor, that being the sublime increase in military monuments. The churches of Kolkata and Chennai were the foremost cities where such buildings were constructed.

Enumerating the cultural and architectural of India, Governor General Lord Curzon (1898-1905) once commented that, "*India is the greatest galaxy of monuments in the world.*" The origin and development of this mighty heritage goes back to the pre-historic times when early humans of Indian subcontinent carved out rudimentary constructions. Some of the remains of this historical era are recovered from Bhimbetka (Madhya Pradesh). The rudimentary form of architecture developed into a full-fledged architecture towards the beginning of Christian era. The Mauryan and Gupta dynasties in Ancient Indian History had done progressively and introduced their independent styles of architecture. The Indian architecture reached its zenith during the early medieval times with temple architecture. With the dawn of the Mughal period, the culture of fine arts and architecture was patronized by the royal court. In this period, the monuments got the distinctive Muslim influence and the previous architectural styles were attempted to be merged. This architectural fusion during the reign of the mighty Mughals has been termed as 'Mughal Architecture.'

It is remarkable that before the arrival and establishment of British rule in India, the art and architecture possessed enormous importance from the social point of view and the monuments were largely the creation of spectacular

sculptural forms hewn out of stone. The sole architectural material was stone tools, chisel and hammer, and the aim of construction was glorification.

When the British Company captured the political power, the first introduction of elementary modern building construction and planning was marked in India architecture. The most significant architectural phenomenon that took place during their rule was the building of Delhi into an imperial city. The founding of New Delhi was a measure of imperial policy towards the ideal of establishing a monumental architectural expression of British imperial rule in India.⁴ The British architects tried to learn the previous impressive styles in Indian architecture and introduced the imperial architecture through mixing pretentious borrowings of Islamic pavilions, Buddhist railings and some imitation of Hindu ornaments and brackets. In this way, Sir E. Lutyens added the refinement of ancient Indian architecture to the ostentation and magnificence expressive of the British imperial majesty and power.⁵ The Central Secretariat complex, extending from the Viceregal Lodge (modern Rashtrapati Bhawan), is one of the live examples of large scale urban design for boldness of conception as well as actual realization. The architectural integrity of the whole complex, besides its harmony in scale and composition, is a tribute to its great architect. The Viceroy Lodge presents the peculiar English splendour, reflecting the 'spirit of aristocracy in the language of a dwelling.' However, after independence the architectural design of Delhi was altered with much magnitude.⁶

III. Colonial Architecture in Presidencies

After establishing their political hegemony in India, the East India Company established three Presidencies viz. Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. The idea behind the establishing the presidencies was to regulate the day-to-day administration and hence to set up the roots of colonization in the minds and hearts of Indians. In reference to the architectural developments of Calcutta (modern Kolkata), we notice an overwhelming effect in the contemporary architecture in every aspect of excellence. The fortification and construction of Calcutta during British rule was a mandatory affair, which the British had to carry out at the early stage of colonization in India. As we know that Calcutta was the erstwhile capital city in the British regime, therefore, it paved the way for architectural renovations and reconstructions in India.⁷ As per the need of the hour, several monuments were demolished to be rebuilt. In this reference, Governor General Lord Wellesley (1798-1805) and Lord Curzon (1899-1905) may be termed as the harbingers of architectural overhauling in this extremely momentous city. Hence, Calcutta was perhaps the most eventual city that was tuned into a complete colonial and westernized place.

The architectural monuments of Bombay (Modern Mumbai), during British rule in India were significant, standing tall in their regal and neo-classical look. The Churches, town halls and several other structures, bearing resemblance with England counterparts paved a fresh way for Bombay and hence, Bombay presidency was completely metamorphosed into a polished city, much to intimidate Kolkata. The distinctive architecture style recommended by Sir Gilbert Scott for Bombay University proved accommodating in making the colonial architecture look more Indian. Perhaps this was the beginning of a truly imperial style that reached its apex at New Delhi. The lavish public building constructed in Bombay during the second half of the 19th century gave boost to the imperial architecture. In this phase Sir Gilbert Scott's buildings occupies significant position. Other remarkable landmarks produced during this phase were William Emerson's Crawford Market, the Bombay high court and the Victoria terminus (Chhatrapati Shivaji terminus). The Victoria Terminus, once the headquarters of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway (GIPR), was the culminating masterpiece of this phase. It was increasingly hybrid in style and construction. The Classical and Baroque style furthered the innovation in architecture. Its best exponent was Walter Carnville's Calcutta General Post Office. This unique architectural form may be termed as

⁴In December 1911, King George V proclaimed the transfer of the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi. In 1912, Lord Harding deputed Sir E. Lutyens to select a site for the central buildings. The team recommended the Raisina Hill, a slight elevation in south of Delhi, as the ideal site. In 1913, Sir Herbert Baker joined Lutyens as collaborator and was made responsible for the Legislative Council building and the Secretariat, while Lutyens concentrated on the Viceroy's house.

⁵This was an anachronism of the highest order, because, while at that time contemporary Europeans were engaged in most progressive thinking in architecture, Sir Edward Lutyens was a masterpiece in high renaissance architecture, the result of a way of thinking typical of the early nineteenth century in Europe.

⁶With the building of New Delhi there came to an end of the most magnificent era of British architecture. Many official, residential and places of utility services such as hospitals, institutions, police stations, circuit houses, and post offices etc. were built during the succeeding years on a new colonial pattern. However, they lacked architectural elegance and were more or less replicas of the building constructed earlier.

⁷In 1833, Calcutta became the capital of British India, remaining so until 1912, when New Delhi was made the capital because of its more central location. The English merchant named Job Charnock founded Calcutta on insalubrious mud flats beside the river Hooghly in 1690. Calcutta had a grandeur past which gave it the status for a time, of being the second largest city of the British Empire after London. The buildings and precincts of the era were not only notable for their thoughts, institutions and events but also for their architectural heritage. In its heyday, it was called the 'city of palaces' and it still retains a fine heritage of the past.

Indo-Saracenic hybridization that was being increasingly employed at different places like St. John's College (Agra) and the Madras High Court (Madras).

In Southern India, Madras (modern Chennai) was the first important settlement of the East India Company. Francis Day founded it in 1639 on the territory ceded by the Raja of Chandragiri. In 1644, a small fort was erected from which the city grew steadily and until the emergence of Calcutta, it remained the nerve-centre of English influence in the East and eastern coast of India. Like Bombay, the architectural developments of Madras comprised a massive overhaul in every Christian architectural creation that was present in the port city. The construction of Churches was primarily given importance, giving them a clear British look, deriving inspiration from their European counterpart. Even bungalows were rebuilt in certain areas to suit the high-flying style. Massive banquet halls came into being for official evening functions, every nook emoting out a classical feel. The Madras clubhouse, a well-known club in the city has also the colonial legacy of Madras is apparent in the vicinity of the Madras port. The Presidency College was built in 1840, the Royapuram station dates from 1856, the central stadium dates from 1873 and the south railway headquarters was built in 1922. Many of the colonial era buildings are designed in the Indo-Saracenic style. The Madras high court (the largest judicial building in the world after the courts of London), the government museum, the senate house of the Madras University and the college of Engineering are some of the live illustrations of Indo-Saracenic style of architecture.

IV. Conclusion

Indian architecture was essentially a creation of the soil; however, it got a novel touch or form with the successive phases in political history of India. With the advent of the colonial era, Indian architecture saw the arrival of diverse European styles, whether of churches or of secular. The European came to India from the route of the sea. First to come were the Portuguese traders, then subsequently came the British, the French and the Dutch. The British were the most successful in regulating the political and cultural configuration of India. The fruition and expansion of British architecture in India can be observed from the cities of Delhi, Calcutta (modern Kolkata), Madras (modern Chennai) and Bombay (modern Mumbai). The contributions made by the British led to the creation of a composite architectural style imbibing European, Indian and Mughal elements and was broadly termed as the colonial architecture. The colonial regime lasted until 1947 and introduced British and European architectural styles that included extended roof overhangs and free standing pavilions. Government buildings, railway systems and roadways predominantly represent the basic characteristics of colonial architecture. Rastrapathi Bhavan located in New Delhi represents an example of the merged designs.

V. References

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