

Lahore – circa 1893: note the differences of layout of walled city and the cantonment

Colonial Lahore and Bhai Ram Singh

European interest in India goes back to at least the times of the lucrative trade between Rome and India via Egypt. The culture and wealth of India attracted pilgrims, visitors, traders and unfortunately invaders. After a long and sustained campaign spread over centuries, the British managed to turn India into their colony. The Punjab was the last major portion of the sub-continent to be captured by the colonial juggernaut in 1849.

This talk looks at the transformation of an Indian town, Lahore, into a Colonial city; changes in its urban patterns and, in particular, the role of Bhai Ram Singh in the evolutionary development of its architecture. Writings of the period ascribe almost all designs to colonial engineer- turned-architects with very little mention of contributions by natives. In Lahore there was some vague mention of Bhai Ram Singh, and that too as a helper of the colonial architects, for his name lay buried in the colonial dust. However, with a little research, we rediscovered the person, his early life, education and training and his highly significant contributions to architecture in the Punjab.

Ram Singh, born 1st August 1858¹, to the Ramgarhia Sohal family at village Rasulpur, near Batala, district Gurdaspur, India, created a remarkable set of buildings in Lahore, Amritsar and other cities of the Punjab. His education, training and achievements illustrate the colonial environment in which a native Sikh boy of genius had the tenacity to surpass his British masters. By the age of sixteen he was sufficiently accomplished as a master craftsman, carpenter, to be called upon by the Deputy Commissioner's wife to carry out the delicate and challenging work of repairing a piano. His expertise and talent was spotted by a member of the British bureaucracy, which led to his enrollment as a student in the Lahore School of Carpentry established in 1874. John Lockwood Kipling, a sculptor and painter, trained in London and working in Bombay at the time, arrived in Lahore to set up the Mayo School of Industrial Art and students of the Carpentry School were enrolled as its first class. With a remarkable clarity of vision Kipling sought to integrate European Art theory with a thorough study of the extant Indian heritage of art and architecture. Ram Singh, as Kipling's star pupil, never abandoned his traditions nor did he turn away from contemporary challenges of architecture and thus integrated the two in a creative and magnificent manner.

On completion of his studies, Bhai Ram Singh worked at the Mayo School as a teacher and also participated in all the practical work that the School was commissioned to do. His designs in woodwork won prizes in various exhibitions, and, at the young age of 28 years, he was declared a co-winner with the famous architect Col. Swinton Jacob, in an all-India competition for the design of the Aitchison College, Lahore. He was commissioned by Queen Victoria to design her Durbar Hall, and she was so delighted with his work that she asked her court artist, Rudolph Swoboda, to paint Ram Singh's portrait. The portrait now hangs in the lobby of the Durbar Hall, Osborne House. Bhai Ram Singh rose to be the first native Principal of the Mayo School in 1909, and after serving for four years retired in 1913.

Bhai Ram Singh, in face of competition from the colonial engineers/ architects, managed to put his distinctive mark on the city of Lahore fusing the rich native traditions of the region with the technological and spatial concepts of the West. This aspect of Ram Singh's creative genius, fusion of two streams, also has value in the context of present day debates on Identity and Relevance. Also, it is logical to conjecture that the cities like Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata must also have had such native geniuses who have gone unnoticed and unsung. It could be an interesting field of research for someone to pursue.

The official building activity during the colonial period ranged from the utilitarian to monumental works designed to facilitate the Raj and to proclaim the power and glory of the new rulers. Majority of the buildings served the military and the railways, including residential accommodation for the various tiers of officialdom, hospitals, schools, recreational and sports grounds. These were all based on standards laid down in handbooks and the engineer in-charge of construction could, at most, make minor modifications. For buildings of symbolic value such as residences and offices of the high colonial officials, churches, large railway stations, and other civic structures architects were engaged who

¹ The date may or may not be correct as no birth records were kept then in the towns of the Punjab, and a date of birth from memory was inscribed in official records at the time of entry to school. This date is according to the service record of Ram Singh.

were either ex-military engineers or those who came from England on short contracts. Native architects, carriers of a rich tradition were ignored. By design the colonial state is dominant in all fields of life, particularly the visible symbols. Architecture is a very potent visible symbol of authority, power and source of creativity. The colonial administration did not deign to recognize the native architects trained in the traditional style nor did they open any institutions for training of architects.¹

The architecture of Lahore of the colonial period was influenced by the debates among the British official on the appropriate style of official architecture in India. Some advocated the adoption of the European styles to underpin their conquest while others advocated a more subtle approach of appropriating the local motifs and decoration to develop what they called the Indo-Saracenic style. The debates were finally summed up by the Public Works Member of the Viceroy's Council whereby a European style was to be followed for buildings used by the Europeans and any Muslim (Indo-Saracenic) or Hindu stylistic interpretation for buildings meant for the natives. Thus in Lahore there are buildings with the 'classical' style and those with an interpretation of the 'Indo-Saracenic' style, both stylistic labels being debatable.

URBAN PATTERN

a. Cantonment

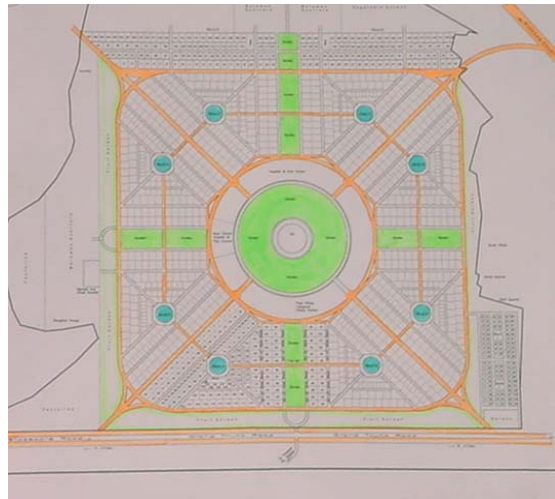
The city of Lahore had grown, flourished, suffered invasions and destruction, and yet survived through the Sultanate, the Mughal and Sikh periods with an uneven, yet unbroken, cultural evolution. The physical environment as a reflection of that culture too had a distinct character and consistency, which developed through the ages. The coming of the British, however, was a break with the past. The culture of the new rulers, their dress, language and literature, behavior, custom and religion, art, music and dance, indeed their total way of life was different. The British set about to create their own version of a city, the cantonment that was poles apart from the centuries-old tradition of Lahore. More than just a station for troops, the cantonment was a symbol of the power and uniqueness of the new rulers' culture. This was a new city built in juxtaposition to the old, highlighting the dissimilarities. Straight clean roads, bungalow-style houses and separate shopping precincts, were novel ideas that the local native elite then also sought to emulate.

The location, layout and architecture of the cantonment was based on the military strategy of mobility and concentrated firepower, as opposed to clashes of masses of army, its center point being the stationing of troops in an open and spread-out pattern, close to, but not within the cities. On the one hand, such an arrangement avoided the offering of a specific target to the enemy and, on the other, ensured the easy mobility of the government troops. The British also knew that their real enemy, in the long run, was the local population. So the strategy was to keep the Indian cities unarmed and indefensible and to keep the British forces distant from the local populace, dispersed in cantonments and ever-ready. The distance from the natives was more than physical. It was deliberately extended to the social and political spheres. Intermixing was discouraged; the army was very deliberately imbued

with a value system as being an entity superior to the civilians, with an inbuilt contempt for the natives and everything native. The canal, railway tracks and native troop barracks were located as an intervening physical barrier that separated the British areas from the native quarters. The barrier also had the elevation to act as a vantage point to monitor any movement from the city towards the Cantonment. To the native civilian of Lahore, the Cantonment area, its streets and buildings, its wide roads, footpaths, white-washed kerbs, was a world apart, an area that he could only enter with a feeling of awe and discomfort, because of the unfamiliar surroundings.

b. A Garden City in Lahore

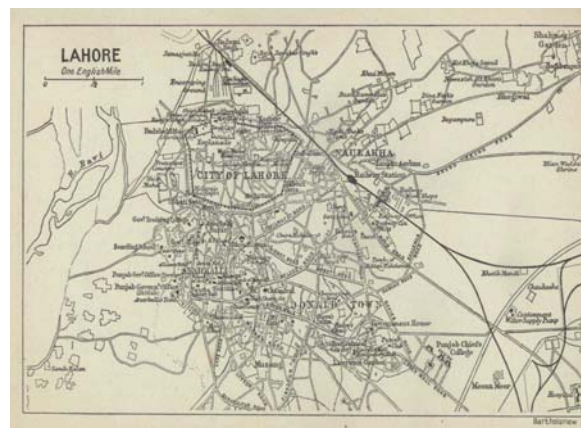
One of the lasting effects of the Raj in Lahore is the unique effort by a native, Diwan Khem Chand, a barrister, to set up a residential colony based on the western concept of the Garden City as formulated in discussions in England. The distinctive feature of Model Town, as it came to be known, is the geometric street pattern, planned as a self-contained town, with its own recreational and service areas. It is essentially a square divided into eight parts, with a great circle in the center. The eight parts are blocks ranging from A to H. Blocks, J and K, not part of the original scheme, were added after 1930. Open spaces, green parks and play areas are Town generously provided, giving a spacious look and a leafy environment. Model Town has a romance-laden geometric regularity that sets it apart from the harsh rectilinear pattern of the cantonment and the labyrinthine street pattern of the Walled City. It is a disciplined flight of imagination that is the dream of architects and town planners.



Model Town, Lahore: Plan

c. Donald Town

Yet another urban pattern evolved for the civilian part of the colonial city, which was neither the native labyrinthine nor the gridiron of the cantonment; it comprised roads that wove through or around the existing structures, mosques and tombs, interlinking the centers of power and logistical nodes, that is, the Office of the Board of Administration or the Secretariat, Governor’s House, Cantonment, or Railway Station, in the most direct manner available. However, wherever possible, existing tracks and rights-of-way were respected, broadened, lined with trees and



Lahore - 1912

turned into paved roads.

Private residences, mainly of the expatriates, along these roads were built incorporating some existing structure such as a tomb, as a central hall or, in a garden as an outdoor pavilion. 'The house in which I live is one of the few beneath which none lie buried.... every self respecting resident of Lahore has a tomb in his garden.... and a tomb would make such a pleasant summer house.'ⁱⁱ

ARCHITECTURE

a. Designs by the Colonial Engineer/Architects

The Railway Station, 1861, is a brick structure designed to be a defensible fort, with turrets and castellated parapets and a galley linking its two towers. The streets, connecting the station to the city, converge in a radial manner with a vast open space between the station and the nearest building toward the city to give play to artillery if needed. Thus the structure and the street layout express the military importance of the location.

One of the earliest constructions meant for civil use was the Lawrence Hall (1861) built to honor John Lawrence, designed by Mr G Stone, C.E.. It is a European Classic Style building set in the plains of Lahore. Nothing could contrast more with native building styles. Later, in 1866, another hall was added to honor Governor Montgomery, designed by J. Gordon, C.E.ⁱⁱⁱ. A building meant for the Punjab Club, restricted to Europeans, was constructed in a similar style. These classical style buildings stand out with clear message of the European origin of the rulers.



Lawrence and Montgomery Halls – Classical Style

Tollinton Market, 1864, is a building by the Railway engineers. The industrial exhibition building that was later converted to Tollinton Market, was put up in three months, in 1864, by Railway engineers using the features of an iron truss and verandas on the lines of standard railway buildings.

Churches too featured European Ecclesiastical architecture as in the case of the Church in the Cantonment and later, the Anglican and Roman Catholic



Tollinton Market – basically a decorated railway shed

cathedrals on the Mall. The Roman Catholics generally followed the Gothic style and others English Renaissance or any that caught their fancy.

The High Court, Town Hall, General Post Office (GPO) were structures to house newly instituted functions which the native population had not been familiar with. These followed the patterns set by the British in other parts of India. It basically revolved around the planning of rooms around a courtyard with one side open with verandas to provide protection from the sun.



Lahore GPO: note the incongruent central dome

b. Works of Ram Singh and their impact

i. Mayo School of Arts

The School of Arts (presently the National College of Arts) building is a brick-faced, imposing structure, fronting and set back from the Mall, opposite the Punjab University and next to the Museum. Ram Singh used his skills and knowledge of details of woodwork and carpentry to humanize the scale of the exposed brick surfaces; the building facades were subdivided into panels, and the plinth, cornice, lintel and sill levels are accentuated through intricate brick detailing using varying-sized and ornamental bricks,



Mayo School of Arts

terracotta *jalliwork*. The corners of the north wing, the main façade of the School, facing the Mall, was emphasized with turrets and *chattris*, while ornamental embellishments such as the stucco work under the eaves, lent the building grace and texture. A marble drinking fountain was specially designed for the center of the courtyard.

ii. Aitchison College

For the design of this importance, an all-India competition was organized and the Mayo School of Arts submitted an entry prepared by Ram Singh which was declared as a joint winner with Col Swinton Jacob of Jaipur.



Aitchison College 6

The Main College building comprise classrooms, a library and reading room, science laboratory, play room, Hall and offices. The composition is a three-tiered building with the central hall, like a church nave with clearstory windows, being the tallest part and the rows of classrooms forming the second level while the verandahs form the third tier. Octagonal turrets surmounted by domes marked the corners of the central block, while *chattris*, cupolas, domes and finials were used creating a highly articulated skyline. The



Aitchison College

The porch dome has smaller domes around it to control the proportioning and visual effect of the composition. The domes and *chattris* were also delineated in ornamental brickwork, reflective of the finesse of woodcarving, which was Ram Singh's forte. Eave brackets in red sandstone throughout the building, the use of red/pink marble cladding for the column and the arches with the occasional use of elaborate *jhorakas* finished in white marble details and some intricately detailed entrances bespeak of the mastery of details by the architect. The verandahs are screened with inter-lacing Moorish arches and red marble *jallis*. The interior of the Hall itself was embellished with stucco tracery details, frescos and an imposing balcony resting on sandstone brackets. The brickwork called for, and achieved, a high level of skill; the overall effect is one of a building strong in tradition yet fulfilling the then contemporary demands. Unafraid to learn from both the Indian tradition and the new European influence, Ram Singh created a unique composition and highly textured facade, which continue to be lively and charming.

iii. Lahore Museum

The Museum is an imposing building abutting the Mayo School of Arts building, with a 70 foot high dome and a 350 foot frontage along the Mall. While the scale of the building itself was impressive, the design was such that critics of the time commenting on the building referred to it as 'an ornament to the city'. The brick faced building was set back from the Mall with a red sandstone drinking fountain placed in the center of a well-manicured lawn, which now abuts the edge of the Mall due to the widening of the road. The visitor's access is through a white marble entranceway leading to a verandah which has a deodar wooden ceiling laid in a geometric pattern and a marble floor. The choice of a white



Lahore Museum: note the composition of domes

marble entrance set against the brick-faced building draws attention to the imposing building.

iv. Government College Hostel

Ram Singh designed this building by placing the cubicles and dorms around a central courtyard with a verandah running along the courtyard. The front block and its parallel part at the rear was double-storied while the two remaining sides were designed as single story structures so that the roof, accessed through an open staircase from the courtyard, could be used for the students to sleep outdoors during the summer months. A central double-height entrance was further enhanced through the use of ornamental brickwork and corners accentuated through increased heights. A balcony nestled at the upper level with terracotta *jalliwork* balustrade. The warden's quarters were placed on the upper floor.

v. Albert Victor Hospital

For the design of the Albert Victor Hospital, Ram Singh, in keeping with his style and philosophy, used the native architectural vocabulary, textured and decorative brickwork with sandstone brackets under eaves and window shades, which set it apart from the main building. The Mayo Hospital main building was designed by W. Purdon, Superintending Engineer in 1871, borrowing elements of the European architecture and semicircular arches, labeled as "Italian". It is a dull reproduction. Bhai Ram Singh's building, on the other hand, made elaborate use of ornamental and molded brick, shading devices and the vocabulary, style and details, reflecting the local culture and climate.

The in-patient block, the main building of the Albert Victor Hospital, and its infectious diseases building are connected with a double-arched bridge connecting the upper floors and serving as entrance porches for both. It is a richly textured structure reflecting Ram Singh's ability to convert even a mundane utility structure into a piece of art with a clear architectural statement. The multifunctional structure, working as the entrance, porch and a bridge, fully conveys, to the visitor, the quality of architecture to be expected, as he might move from one building to another. The massive exposed brick facades have been brought to a human scale using ornamental and molded bricks at the cornice, sill and parapet levels. A lofty and noble dome, in serrated brickwork, sits atop the inner lobby of the in-patient block.

vi. University Senate Hall

The University Senate Hall was meant to hold examinations and for convocations. A balcony was provided, which could be used by the women attending the functions. Bhai Ram Singh used the vocabulary developed in the main building of Khalsa College, Amritsar i.e. a highly articulated and textured brick surface



SENATE HOUSE, LAHORE.

Punjab University, Lahore

achieved through the use of different sized bricks and ornamental bricks, terracotta *jallis* in the multi-foiled arched openings of the verandah, and wooden balustrades. The entrances are accentuated with increased height and use of *jarokhas* supported on sandstone brackets, while the corners were emphasized by placing the spiral staircase at each corner of the verandah surrounding the building. Cupolas and domes on the roof of the building gave a varied, lyrical and confident skyline.

By the end of the Raj, Lahore, the capital city of the Mughal emperor Akbar, the center of the Sikh Kingdom, stood transformed with a dual-faced identity. On the one hand was the old city with spillovers onto the areas adjacent to the Walled City and the Circular Road, and on the other, were the colonial additions of the Cantonment and the Civil Lines. The contrast was stark not only in the relative hygiene of the areas, but also the urban pattern, the house design, shopping habits, living styles, and cultural ethos. The two aspects met at a fault line that ran from the Railway Station southward along the McLeod Road, turning east along Gowalmandi, skirting the Mayo Hospital and meeting the Circular Road near the Mazar of Data Gunj Baksh. The areas west of this line were the colonial city with the cantonment located further west. The focal point of this colonial city became the precinct of Anarkali with the Mall as an arterial connection with the cantonment. Anarkali and its surrounds housed the British administration, centers of education, viz, Government College, Mayo School of Arts, Punjab University, Public Library, Museum, centers of commerce, like the Tollinton Market and the Commercial Building, health facilities of hospitals and colleges, both for humans and animals, Banks, Post and Telegraph offices, the likes of which the people of Lahore had never seen before. The imprint of the colonial was thus clearly distinguishable with the imposing institutional buildings; however, the nearby Anarkali Bazaar, the old 'Sudder', with its tall temple and the shrine of Abdul Razak Makai of Sabzwar with its attached mosque known as the *Nila Gumbad* (Blue Dome) ensured that the city laid claim to being an Indian City. Traces of the pleasure gardens of Wazir Khan were by now obliterated, however the Baradari still existed as a silent reminder of bygone days.

Bhai Ram Singh passed away in 1916. His impact on the architecture of the Punjab, and Lahore in particular, can be gauged by the fact that all buildings of the first half of 20th Century carry echoes of his design. Ram Singh's buildings, Aitchison College, the Mayo School of Arts, the Lahore Museum, the Punjab University Hall, the boarding house of the Government College, the Albert Victor Hospital and other buildings in the Medical College complex show an integrity of design with a masterly handling of the details of construction, in proportion, texture and rhythm. Whether it is the mundane feature of the Albert Victor Hospital porch, or the soaring tower of the Punjab University, the lofty domes of the Museum, or the grandeur of Aitchison College, Ram Singh imparts to his building that touch of genius that differentiates the ordinary from the truly inspired works of art. His use of the rope motif, the stylized animals, the variation in levels to play with the strong sun of Lahore and the resultant chiaroscuro effects of light and shade, give his walls a life of their own. The walls change with the sun, now shining with strong light and later brooding in the setting sun, they convey messages so typically Indian in their complexity of emotions strongly attached to nature and its vagaries.

ⁱ School of architecture started with bifurcation of the J. J. School of Arts, Bombay in 1947

ⁱⁱ Stratton, Alfred William, *Letters From India* first published 1908, reprint 1977, Al Biruni, Lahore p 72

ⁱⁱⁱ Gordon who came to have the reputation of an expert of the Grecian Style was later called upon by the Viceroy to submit a design for the Mayo College at Ajmer.

Picture of Punjab University Senate Hall is taken from Government of India, Department of Education, Calcutta 1911, *Educational Buildings in India, Occasional Reports No 6*,

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