

Artisans, Sufis, Shrines: Colonial Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Punjab

Author: *Hussain Ahmad Khan, London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, December 2014.
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How architecture, and its making, influences the formation of collective and individual identity is a complex topic that is not commonly encountered, nor easily studied. When situated historically, it entails the meticulous unravelling of layers of meaning buildings accrue over time, while simultaneously pulling in strands of surrounding information to weave a persuasive narrative. In his recent book, '*Artisans, Sufis, Shrines: Colonial Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Punjab*,' Dr.

Hussain Ahmed Khan, has attempted to do just that. His thesis, with which he opens his book, is that "political control does not necessarily entail control over culture." The rest of the concise, albeit substantive, book offers evidence to support that claim. He does this by first establishing vital connections between sufis, artisans and (predominantly shrine) architecture in the Punjab by tracing social, economic, spiritual, historical and cultural associations from the 17th century till the early 20th century to show the emergence of a particular muslim identity. In the second part of the book, he offers an in-depth exploration of the introduction of colonial art education, exhibitions and architecture in the 19th century, and their successes as well as 'discordant' relations with local Punjabi artisans.

There is a growing body of research that uses material culture such as, dress, monuments, paintings, sculptures and other everyday objects, to construct and re-imagine South Asian histories. This multidimensional approach, where tangible things are used as entry points around which a context is woven, is a departure from flat studies that typically invoke prominent representative monuments and their construction vis-à-vis some timeless aesthetic, engineering feat or geo-political location. To this end, Thomas Metcalf has written on the 'indo-saracenic' design of Indian buildings and how they were influenced by contemporary British thought (*An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj*, 1992), and Finbarr B. Flood has explored the role of mobility and practices of cultural translation in medieval - early 8th to early 13th centuries AD - Hindu-Muslim encounters (*Objects of Translation*, 2009). The making and imagining of the colonial city of Lahore has been explored by William Glover (*Making Lahore Modern*, 2007) and Anna Suvrova (*Lahore: Topophilia of Space and Place*, 2012). Khan joins this ensemble that argues for the social lives of buildings by picking out these traces of the past and enmeshing them with their

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materials, financing, patronage, craftsmen, aesthetics and occupants, making history through architecture.

Khan lends us the voice of the subaltern artisan expressed through his allegiances, artistic expression, and a resistance to colonial modernisation efforts. By drawing a picture of how artisans are inscribed in local folk tales, such as Raja Rasalu, he argues that a belief system that inscribes meanings on to various aspects of everyday life is embedded in the social fabric. It is this cultural *nomos* that made the sufi-artisan relationship withstand the dominant political incentives of the British, and to a lesser extent, the Sikhs. Evidence from historical records demonstrates the allegiance that the artisans across different crafts such as carpentry, weaving, pottery, metalwork, leatherwork and textile making made to particular sufi shrines. This allegiance not only gave voice to, but also augmented, a muslim identity through the creation of objects and buildings. Khan strategically supports this high- level, zoomed out view of history with a focussed case study on the shrine of Suleman Taunsvi (1789-1851) of the Chishtiya order in Taunsa, D.G. Khan.

He demonstrates how the choice of specific materials, motifs, inscriptions and architectural style is related to patronage, artisan skills, material availability, and prevalent styles, and manifests a particular muslim identity that is enmeshed in the living, local, political and social milieu. In contrast to the inextricable sufi-artisan association, the colonial architects and design-makers from the Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the twentieth century understood tradition as something valuable but imperilled. It was something that needed to be protected and perpetuated against the forces of industrialisation and urbanisation. The artisan was not seen by them as an individual designer, as Abigail McGowan points out, but as “a ‘culture-bound’ repository of enduring skills”. Khan digs deep into colonial reports and archives from the late 19th century, including the vital ““Official” Chronicle of Mayo School of Art: Formative Years Under J. L. Kipling, 1874-94,” compiled by Sameena Choonara and Nadeem O. Tarar, and offers us meticulous details of the circumstances around various industrial and cultural exhibitions, as well as the establishment of the Lahore Museum and the Mayo School of Art. What emerges from his investigation is not a well-oiled bureaucratic and administrative machine systematically acting to manipulate arts and crafts production, but a meshwork of individuals and agendas that are working on assignment, often in opposing directions, steered by ignorance of local practices and short-sighted planning. Khan offers compelling connections between various schools of thought prevalent in Victorian Britain and their influence not only on curricula and practice within the Mayo School of Art, but also on broader aspects of architectural design and planning by the Public Works Department (PWD) and Mayo School of Art. He seizes on their tensions and interweaves them with specific events and projects to highlight the fluctuations and variability that resulted.

To a reader, one consequence of a book like this that draws upon so many intellectual skeins is that it produces more questions when it has finished! Khan’s research is meticulous, and the reams of notes at the end are testimony to the painstaking research that went into this project. The notes are worth the effort to read though, as they provide rich details, and further insight into his arguments. What one also realises (again) is that the Punjab continues to be a difficult

geographical entity to study, and this gets highlighted when questions of pre-partition cultural and religious identity are implicated.