



The Sikh Period and the Forgotten Architecture of Lahore Podcast Transcript

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In our latest podcast created with the Times of India, Shubhangi Bhadada, Mittal Institute Interfaculty Fellow, and Nadhra Khan, Associate Professor at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, discuss the pre-Partition architecture of Lahore, how it has been forgotten or ignored, and the importance of remembering such buildings.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT:

Shubhangi Bhadada: Hello and welcome to this episode of 'India in Focus' podcast jointly brought to you by the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute at Harvard University and Times of India. My name is Shubhangi Bhadada, and I am the Mittal Institute fellow.

For this episode, we are joined by Dr. Nadhra Shahbaz Khan, she is an Associate Professor of Art History at the Lahore University of Management Sciences in Lahore in Pakistan and is a specialist in the history of art and architecture of the Punjab from the 16th to the early 20th century. Her research covers the visual and material culture of this region during the Mughal, Sikh and colonial periods and her interest lies in investigating the levels of human agency behind these artifacts and architectural spaces, both as creators and consumers to understand that political religious and socio-economic ambitions at different historical intersections. Welcome Nadhra.

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan: Thank you, Shubhangi.

Shubhangi Bhadada: So, today we will be discussing pre-partition architecture and buildings in Lahore with Nadhra, and how little people know or care about them and why it is important to recognize and acknowledge them. So, Nadhra maybe you can start us off with giving us just a brief history of Lahore to situators?

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan: Absolutely. So Shubhangi, Lahore is the 2nd largest city of Pakistan and it is the capital of the Punjab province and this is an ancient and famous city that has its mythical origins connected to the deities Ram and Sita's sons Luv and Kush. And, Lahore is named after Luv and Kasur, a neighboring smaller entity, is attributed to his twin brother Kush, and from this particular name it has been referred to by several other names as well, which are again going back to its foundation by Luv and some of these names are Lohavar, Lohavur or Loharu, and if we try to understand, they may sound similar and yet they are also a little different from each other as well. But this is explained beautifully by a 19th century historian who was actually a judge by profession and a historian by choice, Syed Mohammad Latif, who wrote his very important publication on architectural heritage of Lahore which is titled 'Lahore, Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities' in 1892 and he explains that the termination of these words 'inawar' is actually a corruption of the Sanskrit word 'avarna' which means a fort, Lohavar or Lahavur, that means the fort of Luv.

I would also like to bring to your notice the fact that in Urdu we have a slightly different pronunciation for Luv, here he is known as Loh, therefore, a temple understood to have been founded by him that stands within the Lahore fort is known as '*Loh ka mandir*.' Its position is at a much lower level than the rest of the fort that speaks of its antiquity, and other than this another reference that we find of the city's connection with Luv or Loh is Amir Khusro, who is a 13th century celebrated Indian poet, he writes in his *Qiran us-Sa'dain* and refers to this city as Lahanaur. Here 'naur' appears to be a shortened form of the Deccani word 'nagar,' a town or locality. Therefore again, Luv or Loh city or nagar mentioned as Lahanoor, there's a lot more about my fascinating city that we could talk about, but of course I do understand that we cannot go into more detail in the interest of time.

Shubhangi Bhadada: That's very interesting because we would have never made that connection. How did Lahore look like pre-partition though, what was its urban landscape like?

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan: Let me first recall Lahore's recent past before Punjab's annexation by the British in 1849. For the Mughals this was their *tarikh-e-sultanat*, which literally translates as the realm of something, and it was the Lahore *darbar* or the seat of power for the Sikh Maharaja Ranjit Singh. How Lahore changed under the British rule and what it looked like by the 1940s was very different from its character and shape in earlier times. By this time, Lahore had everything a modern European city could offer in the early 20th century and a comparison between a late 19th and early 20th century map, effectively shows how local names of buildings, gardens, and roads in Mughal and Sikh times were being replaced by British names.

On the one hand were architectural structures carrying the official British stamps in their design and layouts that were springing up along the Mall Road, such as the general post office or GPO as we call it. That was laid out as the letter 'V' to celebrate Queen Victoria's golden jubilee. Then there was the Charing Cross that had a marble *baradari* which is still there, which used to carry the Queen's statue, which is now in the Lahore museum and then there were the Lawrence and Montgomery Halls in the Lawrence Gardens built in the neoclassical idiom, and part of the government college building is in the neo-Gothic style. Other than these, most of the roads in the city were named after important British personalities, so when one looks at late 19th and early 20th century map of Lahore, what you find cutting across the city running everywhere are roads named after these British personalities, some of which are still known as Napier Road, Durand Road, McLeod Road, Lake Road and so many others. Then there were large sections of the city named after some of these people and one such locality was known as the Donald Town, honoring the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, Donald McLeod.

A new colony Model Town, almost 7 kilometers away from the old part of the city was also where houses were designed as modern bungalows instead of the traditional inward-looking courtyard type houses that Lahoris were familiar with. Along with these, there definitely were some private buildings commissioned by the local elite and these were also among the city's landmarks and luckily some of these are still existent, for example, Dayal Singh Mansion and the Baba Dyinga Singh buildings along the Mall Road, then we have the Gangaram hospital, we also have the Gulab Devi hospital, commissioned by Lala Lajpat Rai in his mother's name. So, Lahore was a happening place and Lahoris did celebrate their city, they knew very well they were very aware of their city's importance and the luxuries it could offer them.

Pran Nevile in his memoirs of Lahore, 'Lahore: A Sentimental Journey' is what he calls them, quotes an old maxim that express the reluctance of Lahoris of leaving their city even to find work elsewhere and it goes like this '*khaiye kanak chahe bhogi hove, rahiye Lahore paave jhuggi hove*' and I'll translate the second part which means '*rahiye Lahore paave jhuggi hove*,' one must dwell in Lahore even if it's just a hut. And the author, Pran Nevile also recalls how he refused a position as a lecturer at the Hoshiarpur College after completing his masters because he didn't want to leave Lahore and then during partition he had to.

Shubhangi Bhadada: That was very interesting. So, you mentioned the fact that how some areas were exclusive, and the locals were not allowed or were restricted in their movement, was this something that was seen in different parts of the city or was this just only in the British areas? How is the movement in the city during the pre-partition time?

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan: So, now we are kind of jumping forward coming to let's say, again pre-partition times, from the Sikh period again to the colonial period again you know what starts emerging is the fact that areas that are named after, that are self explanatory tell us that people had started to move in clusters or were huddling together, different religious groups were probably made to feel safer. And then again, this would be a very interesting area to carry out more research, was this deliberate or were people forced or made to understand they had to live in these different clusters away from the other religious groups.

For example, again cartography is something that yields a lot of information in this regard, is what you find is, you know Krishan Nagar, Ram Gali or Ram Nagar and as opposed to this we have Mominpura or Islam Gali. And when we look at a lot of literature that was produced after partition, this nostalgia about Lahore people who were moving away or were staying back in Lahore and talking about these 'good old days' through that literature. And of course, other historical accounts also help us paint this picture of when the riots started taking place, it was very difficult or dangerous for let's say, a Muslim to pass through areas that were densely populated with Hindus and the same went for the Hindu population of Lahore, to come across or to pass by areas that were again seen as typical Muslim areas. So, how these religious identities were pitted against each other and what happened to the city and how the city was divided into different zones and these were barred for each other, is again something that emerges when one reads all of these accounts of the mostly penned after partition.

Shubhangi Bhadada: So, you mentioned these small neighborhoods or colonies that became little clusters of Hindus or Muslim communities but what would you say was the sense in terms of the public spaces in Lahore? So, were there any which were porous, where there was an intermingling which was happening in the pre-partition time as we hear of communities living together and moving together.

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan: Absolutely, so again, sometimes it becomes really difficult to imagine these pre-partition days because as we start moving closer to 1947, everything starts appearing, areas cordoned off, these zones divided into different kind of unsafe and safe areas. These malleable boundaries were hardened as partition was approaching, but if we take a few steps back in time, what does appear is easy intermingling, safe neighborhoods, people meeting and greeting each other. We have public parks and gardens, there were cinemas, I haven't really come across anything and maybe I need to look into it a little more carefully, how are people using these public spaces in terms of were they okay in sitting next to each other or were there again areas within a cinema house let's say or what does come across again as something which was more easy going.

And one account that I came across is Sheikh Abdul Shakur's essay, which is titled, again talking about what we are discussing right now, it's in Urdu and it says '*kuch ravadari ki baatein*,' which would loosely translate as some chit chats of egalitarians. And, this was published in *Nakush* and its Lahore number in 1962, where the author calls Anarkali Bazaar the heart of Lahore, and this was actually the main shopping centre where people from out of Lahore used to come and shop because the latest fashion would be available there and one wanted to be seen in Anarkali Bazaar.

So, what he mentions is very interesting, he talks about two important shops here, one was known as the Karnal shop and the other one was the Sardar Jagat Singh Kawanra's shop. Now, the first one was owned by a Muslim but what the author tells us is that this was mostly patronized by a large number of Hindus and Sikhs. And then these authors also talk about several doctors who were probably either Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs who were selflessly serving all communities, all religious groups, and had a long list of patients that were cured by them. So, things were pretty good if we take a few steps away from the actual ten years, the last decade before partition where things became painful and making each community the other for the other. This is what I have come across through studying these buildings is that if we take a few steps further back is that particular vantage point gives us broader view of what different communities were doing, how things were so beautiful in the city and it kind of enhances our understanding of this notion of living together in harmony.

Shubhangi Bhadada: Absolutely. So, let's focus on maybe a few buildings that you think encapsulate this period for Lahore and give us the sense of what was pre-partition Lahore, if you think of any such buildings that come to your mind when you think of this period in Lahore and what it represented per, all of South Asia really, with Lahore being such a central city at that point.

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan: Absolutely. That's a great question Shubhangi, one building that comes to mind is the Bradley Hall. This was built to honor Charles Bradley, who was a free thinker, who was a political activist, and this is a beautiful, imposing, triple storied red brick building and this was actually designed as a multi-purpose space where both political and cultural events were held. Plays were held here, mushairas or poetry recitals, dance performances, as well as political meetings and rallies. So, this place was catering to all of this and bringing people together, giving them a place and a space where they could express themselves artistically or vent out their feelings, anti-colonial sentiments. So, Bradley Hall was one of the most important buildings, as far as I am concerned in Lahore, that now stands neglected. People generally don't know about it, I don't know about it, I knew very little about it and heard about it, but I did not know what a significant role this building was playing in these pre-partition days.

On the one hand, this is a place where people are coming for a good time and on the other hand, this was a place or a building that was also being used as the national college where Bhagat Singh used to study. And again, this was again a base which was used to hold rallies and where these slogans must have been chanted of 'Inqalab Zindabad' or the revolutionaries must have gathered there, irrespective of their religious affinities, where they were together in this movement for independence, where they wanted their land to be freed of the colonial rule. And that is what warms my heart, because that is the point I wanted to celebrate more because that is how I frame it for my students, I want them to understand that partition is something that created two countries.

Other than the Bradley Hall, Shubhangi, there is another very important building that I had great difficulty in identifying. So, while I was studying the Bradley Hall and Bhagat Singh, another building sprang up in these

documents I was looking at. And this was the Lajpat Rai Bhavan and of course, I did not know anything about Lajpat Rai Bhavan, I'd never heard about it and I did not, I am sorry to admit this, but I did not even know about Lala Lajpat Rai. I had no clue that this extremely important freedom fighter used to live in Lahore, he died because he was heading a rally against the Simon Commission and he was baton charged, he was a heart patient, he could not survive this assault and died. And how Bhagat Singh and whatever he did for independence, part of it was avenging Lala Lajpat Rai's death and his killing.

So, this is what I find fascinating about buildings, so far my research career has been focusing on buildings. Buildings that when I start of I literally did not know anything about and then finally they let me into understanding not only people but their cultures and so many other things and you know they bridged huge gaps for me. So, Lala Lajpat Rai Bhavan was something that was built in honor of Lala Lajpat Rai but again, this building was extremely important during the independence movement because this was also a space where members of Congress used to reside. And one important text that actually gave me a lot of information that was Manorma Diwan's memoirs and the title of her memoir is 'Inqalab Zindabad' and there she talks about the Lala Lajpat Rai Bhavan and how she spent her childhood days there and how her father Lala Chabil Das was the principal of that national college that was housed in the Bradley hall where Bhagat Singh was a student, and where Bhagat Singh stayed in hiding for quite a long time.

So, Lajpat Rai Bhavan is now used as the office of a daily newspaper but finding it was, it was right in front of me as you enter there are plaques in marble, foundation stones, one is at the foundation stone that was laid at the time of course when it was commenced and the other one commemorates its opening by Mahatma Gandhi. But of course, that would have only been visible had I entered the building, I used to pass by it not knowing that this was the bhavan that I was so frantically looking for and then a very kind person in the evacuee trust property board led me to it and I am eternally grateful to him for this. But this is the magic of buildings, you start reading buildings and then they open up to you, they start narrating their stories to you. But of course, the condition is that you approach them, and you ask them to allow them to do that.

Shubhangi Bhadada: So, it sounds like Nadhra, that in some ways these buildings are almost lost, that we have forgotten about them in our collective memories. And, in your research, how many such buildings would you say have been lost and can we recall them now is it worth remembering and revisiting them now, 73 years after the fact?

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan: Shubhangi, I've just started looking at these pre-partition buildings. I started my research career with Maharaja Ranjit Singh's funereally monument, his Samadhi. Again, as I said earlier, I knew nothing about the building, I could not find any literature about the building in Lahore. I was fortunate that I could come to India several times and I made friends and every person that I met went out of their ways to help me understand the building, help me collect information in whatever was within their capacity and sometimes beyond that.

One building brought me closer to so many people and losing these buildings mean that we lose on connections that can forge priceless references and contacts and friendships that you would never be able to do if these buildings were erased and their memories were lost because we're not taking care of them. And we have already lost a lot because of this neglect and losing a building to me absolutely means that we have lost a major chapter of history. And, if we are studying history and we have a chapter of two and of course we have lost more than one or two buildings, we have lost countless buildings. If we keep losing these chapters of history, how are we going back and how will we be able to understand history without a break? We have to have a continuity, losing such monuments is something that we cannot afford, we need to start picking up pieces before it is too late.

Partition Survivors' Archives were started a bit too late in the day. A lot of people, we have lost a lot of voices, but I am happy and everyone who's involved in this and who's been following this is happy that it did get started. And, they have been, whoever has been involved in this in Pakistan, in India, out of these two countries, have collected priceless archives and priceless data that is going to help us understand what happened, how it happened and what it meant to individuals and the same goes for these buildings. If we don't start right now and today, tomorrow probably is going to be too late.

Shubhangi Bhadada: That is very true and I think that is something that we on both sides of the border have to realize soon before we start losing memories we have of our independence and all that went before it, and all these people from all sides who came together to help us get the independence.

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan: Exactly, well this was a joint activity, a joint movement, everyone was in it and we have to celebrate that because independence would not have been possible if just one community was fighting for it. It would have taken probably another 50 years for that community to, this was a joint effort everyone was in it irrespective of their caste, their creed, their age, whether they were men or women or children.

Anyone who cares to look into these archives or the literature that was produced or the historical documents, they tell us jails were stuffed with young children, men, women, they were tortured, they were killed. Why they wanted independence, not only for themselves, for the entire country? And we did get that, but it would be unfair to not look back and express our gratitude to these people. And part of their lives are connected to a lot of buildings that we are neglecting because these buildings are mnemonic devices of these absent people, they are still standing recalling their names. We have to take a step forward, walk towards them and try to preserve them, and then of course study them and teach our younger generation about it.

Shubhangi Bhadada: Absolutely. I think these buildings are in some ways our last living monuments for all these sacrifices that were made. So Nadhra, before we wrap up, it would be great if you talked about this connection between buildings and memories that you've been building and how they feed into each other?

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan: Thank you, Shubhangi. That's a great question and it highlights what we're trying to bring into focus by looking at these buildings. What I would like to say as a final note is that we are forgetting one of the solutions to resolve these agonizing memories. Conserving and preserving these buildings could actually help us heal some of our wounds. Because in spite of the morality of spaces and places and their occupants, their connection between people and places does not perish. And when the separation between the two takes place, it is the realm of memory that grants longevity and in some cases perpetuity to this association.

And, I would like to bring in John Ruskin, the 19th century art critic, who wrote his seven lamps of architecture, and Ruskin dedicated an entire chapter, calling it the lamp of memory because he felt this deep connection between places and memory. And I would quote Ruskin, he said that, "Architecture is to be regarded by us with the most serious thought, we may live without her and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her." So, this is something that I would like my audience to think about as food for thought, as they say.

Shubhangi Bhadada: Thank you so much, Nadhra. This was absolutely fascinating and deeply enlightening. So, thank you for sharing your time with us and for this great discussion.

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan: It was a pleasure.