

TRANSFORMATION DYNAMICS FOR URBAN FORM – A Colonial Perspective

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Abstract

Colonization has been responsible for reckless exploitation of wealth, labour and human integrity at large. The British, Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, etc. have historically been responsible for making colonies across the globe. Conquest, expeditions and thirst for more power led them to raid one nation after another. Using greed and power as two major tools for colonizations, these nations have crippled nations for centuries. As an aftermath, the spatial character of those colonies changed drastically during these colonial regimes, in terms of Architecture and Urban Planning. Initially focusing on the transformation dynamics of Urban Form in Colonial Regime, this paper elaborates on the impact of British colonialism in India. The changes in Architecture, Urban Planning and Societal scenarios are inevitably significant in India; especially in cities like Kolkata, Delhi etc. This paper shall help one to understand why and how the colonial era has shaped the spatial pattern of a colonized settlement.

Keywords:

Urban Form, Colonization, India, Kolkata, Architecture, Urban Planning

Introduction

“Not only did colonial urbanization vary through time, it also varied enormously over geographical space according to the complex mix of countries and cultures involved.....” (Drakakis 2000, pg 32)

The words give an exciting picture of an urban form that may have evolved due to mixture of two or more types of culture and tradition. Early colonization was caused mainly due to two purposes; one was to find forms of settlement and the other and the most important one was for tapping in on the economic wealth of other places. The result of the first purpose was seen as the colonization of British North America, Australia and New Zealand, French Algeria, Portuguese Brazil etc. The British India, Dutch East Indies, French India and New Caledonia were mainly colonized for economic exploitation without any significant form of settlement (Young 2001). It is believed that the Britain used her superior naval and military power to capture and exploit foreign resources. Britain established her superiority by capturing land once occupied by her European foes like Spain, Holland and France. Expansion of Germany was also checked by Britain by capturing Kenya and Uganda (Blackburne 1976). The word colonization owes its origin to the Greek concept of colony which means movement and settlement of a certain population from one country to another country (Fieldhouse 1976).

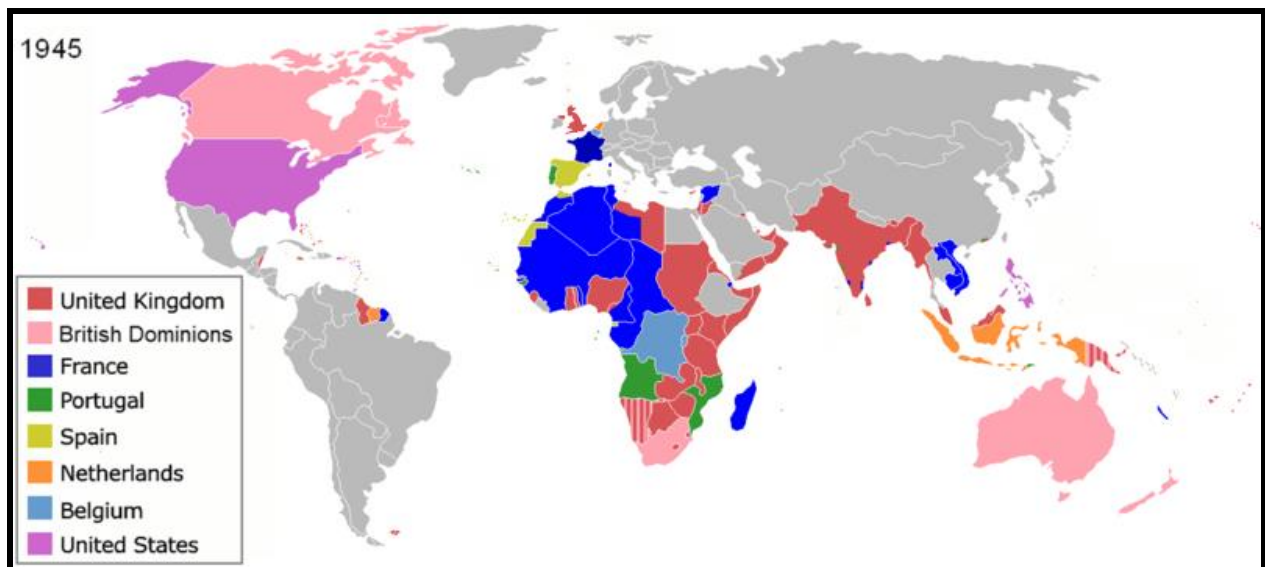


Figure 1: Global Colonization Map of 1945. The colors represent the colonies of various nations in 1945, and the colonial borders of that time. [Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_colonialism#/media/File:Colonization_1945.png]

“Colonial cities seem to have a foreign foundation, alien to the environment in which they were planted and bringing with them an entirely new kind of social system...” (Marshall 1985, pg 87).

Though these words are true but it doesn't mean that the colonized countries were devoid of any settlement forms before the arrival of the European settlers. There were substantial urban

settlements with different levels of economic and political structure. There were also areas that had traditional societies which depended mainly on agriculture. Some cities like Delhi and Beijing were considered to be more sophisticated than some European cities at those times (Drakakis 2000). Creation of cities was an important component of colonialism and was mainly created to show dominance of the superior groups over others so as to plunder and extract wealth. With improvements in transport system it also became easier to control overseas territories and societies (Home 1997).



Figure 2: British Empire at its helm. [Source: http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Territorial_evolution_of_the_British_Empire/]

Colonial Cities

Colonial cities were built on three basic ideologies. The first ideology was based on the ruler stamping its authority over the ruled either directly or through its agents. The ruling elites and the appointed heads tried to show their authority over the place by modifying the physical appearance of the place and by introducing esplanades, big public buildings and baroque avenues. This is evident from the fact that at the beginning of 19th century the physical shape of Kolkata was redesigned and then defined as a seat of European Empire. Even the city earned its name “*city of palaces*” because of the grand houses that were built by the rich Europeans to show their power and wealth (Home 1997).

The second ideology was of a capitalist view. This aimed at mostly extracting the wealth through trade and production. The Europeans had clear intentions of cutting down on public expenditure and were not really bothered about the welfare of the area and people over whom they ruled. This is justified by the fact that the then Governor General of India, Wellesly was called back in

1805 as his “*vice royal pretensions were reducing East India Company’s profit*”. It was quite true that the colonial system those days was “*a mixture of both state control and private enterprise*”.

The third ideology is defined as “*utopian*” which gave scope to the colonizers to experiment with and try new forms of social organization which was not possible in a well settled social system that they had in their own land (Home 1997).

The British adopted a particular approach to the colonial cities which they termed as “grand model”. The various components of this model were:

1. *A policy of deliberate urbanization, or town planting, in preference to dispersed settlement;*
2. *Land rights allocated in a combination of town, suburban and country lots;*
3. *The town planned and laid out in advance of settlement;*
4. *Wide streets laid out in geometric, usually grid-iron form, usually on an area of one square mile;*
5. *Public squares;*
6. *Standard sized, rectangular plots, spacious in comparison with those in British towns of the time;*
7. *Some plots reserved for public purposes; and*
8. *A physical distinction between town and country, usually by common land or an encircling green belt. (Home 1997, pg 9)*

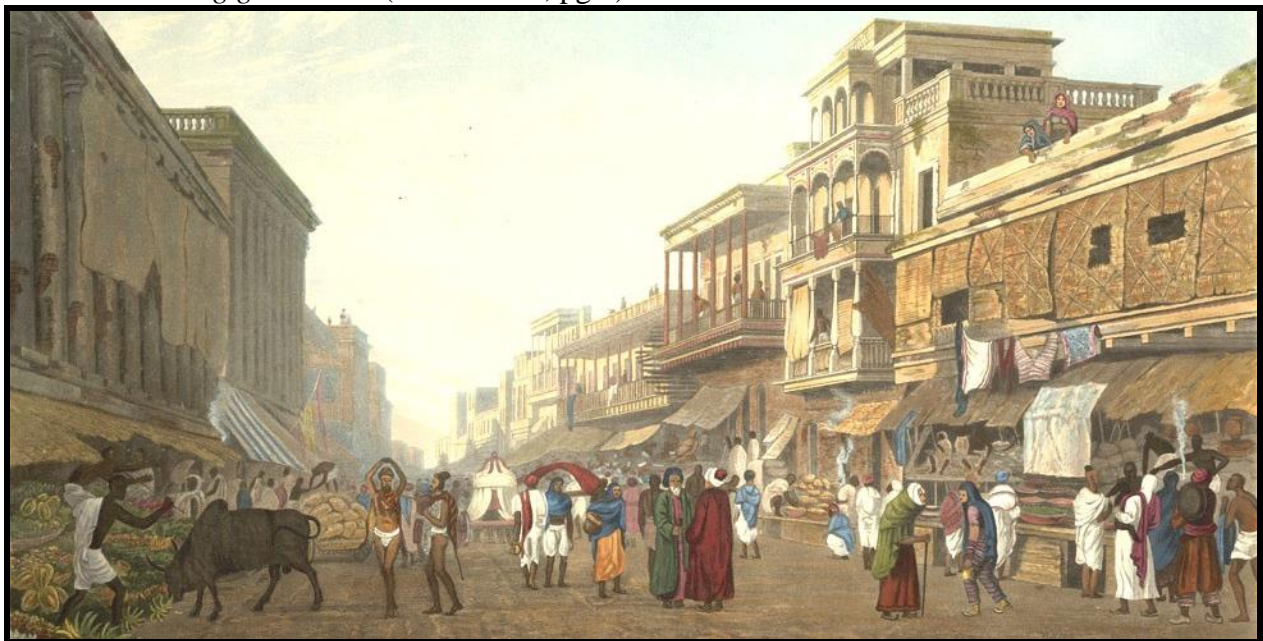


Figure 3: Painting of A Bazaar on Chitpore (Kolkata) by James Baillie Fraser in 1826
[Source: <https://medium.com/the-calcutta-blog/slaveryincalcutta-4f3eb50ec71>]



Figure 4: Painting of A View of the West Side of Tank Square Calcutta (Kolkata) by James Baillie Fraser in 1826
 [Source: <http://bankofart.blogspot.com/2013/06/james-baillie-frasers-paintings.html>]

Colonialism in India

India is country which had seen the colonial rule for nearly three hundred years with people from various countries coming and ruling from time to time, be it France, Portugal or British. This paper focuses on the effect that these colonies had on the urban form of India. Out of the three major colonizers, the British colonial regime was the most significant. The British came to India in the beginning of 17th century as traders. They quickly established trade connections with various cities in India like Surat, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. Their ambition to rule over India was affirmed by the battle of Plassey in 1757. After this battle the British were able to annex Bengal, the largest single province of India. The British Empire, slowly but strongly, started expanding in India at the expense of the Mughal Empire which was already declining after the death of Aurangzeb. India in those times had been an important constituency of the British Empire and had earned the name “Jewel in the crown”. It was because of her vast area, huge population and enormous wealth, which the British never wanted to loosen their strong hold on India (McDonough 1994).

‘Lord Curzon, the most famous Viceroy of India, once claimed that “as long as we rule India, we are the greatest power in the world. If we lose it, we shall drop straightaway to a third rate power”’ (McDonough 1994, pg 51).

Colonial settlements were of various types such as railway towns, recreational hill stations or military cantonments, but the most important of all these were the port cities (Drakakis 2000) as these were the main entry points for the foreign settlers. The three major port towns of the present day India, namely Bombay, Madras and Calcutta were originally developed by the British settlers. These cities gained their importance due to the colonial rule (Misra 1998). Amongst the three Madras, now known as Chennai, was the first city to be developed. The British settled in Madras in the year 1639 and built a fort there. Bombay or Mumbai, as it is now

known, was the second city to be acquired by the British in the year 1668. At that time the Mumbai city was largely uninhabited. It was in 1690 that the city of Calcutta, or present day Kolkata, was founded by the British. Rapid commercialization and road and rail network changed the very face of the Indian cities which were till now been more of an inward looking and religion centric foundation. The focus of city planning then slowly started to shift from religious buildings to bigger ports, market places and railway stations. Madras was considered to be the most important port of southern India, Bombay was the busiest port of India which was connecting India to the Europe and Kolkata became the capital of the British India. Kolkata, at that time, was regarded as the most important British city next only to London (Rhoads 1996). Cities in India were more famous for their service sectors than for industry which developed originally as market places and trade points (Mohan 1996). During their rule, the British had built townships to facilitate their control and trade connection with Europe. Even though they had developed the 'grand model' for building their towns, this was never employed in any of the Indian towns. This was because they had no intentions of settling permanently at those places (Home 1997). The second ideology of capitalism prevailed in this case. As mentioned earlier, this second ideology was based on minimizing public spending and increasing profit.

Kolkata gained prominence as the centre of administration replacing Murshidabad which was till then the capital of the princely province of Bengal. Originally Kolkata was a cluster of villages which changed into an urban area after the arrival of the East India Company in 1686. As a goodwill gesture, the company was allowed to trade from a factory in the area. The British then taking advantage, started building a fortifying the factory and slowly purchased '*zamindari*' rights of some villages. This started the creation of the legendary city of Kolkata (Marshall 1985). Gradually the size of the European settlement grew and there were around five hundred solid houses sprawling over an area of six hundred yards along the river Hugli front by the end of the year 1756. The area having the concentration of the European population was termed as the 'white town' and mainly consisted of the fort built by the East India Company, some private houses, offices, churches and commercial buildings. On the periphery of the white town developed the 'black town' or the town populated by the Indians. This town consisted of traditional Indian houses and market areas. There was further segregation of this town according to ethnicity, occupation and caste of the people (Marshall 1985). The growth of the city along with the ship building yard and some new manufacturing units set up by the company gave it a linear ribbon like shape. This form spanned for over forty to fifty miles. The city grew on both sides of the river Hugli and gradually started spilling out to its interiors (Rhoads 1996). The Europeans lived very close to their forts and the natives were segregated from them. This segregation was done by green belts, commercial zones and in the later part by laying of railway tracks. This was not only in Kolkata but in all other cities. The division within the segregated natives was also rampant throughout the country. Segmented settlement type was found in Madras where the dividing line was based on the people's occupation (Lowder 1988). In case of Kolkata the natives too segregated on grounds of occupation which gave rise to creation of '*paras*' and '*tolas*' according to the business that was carried by the residents (Marshall 1985).

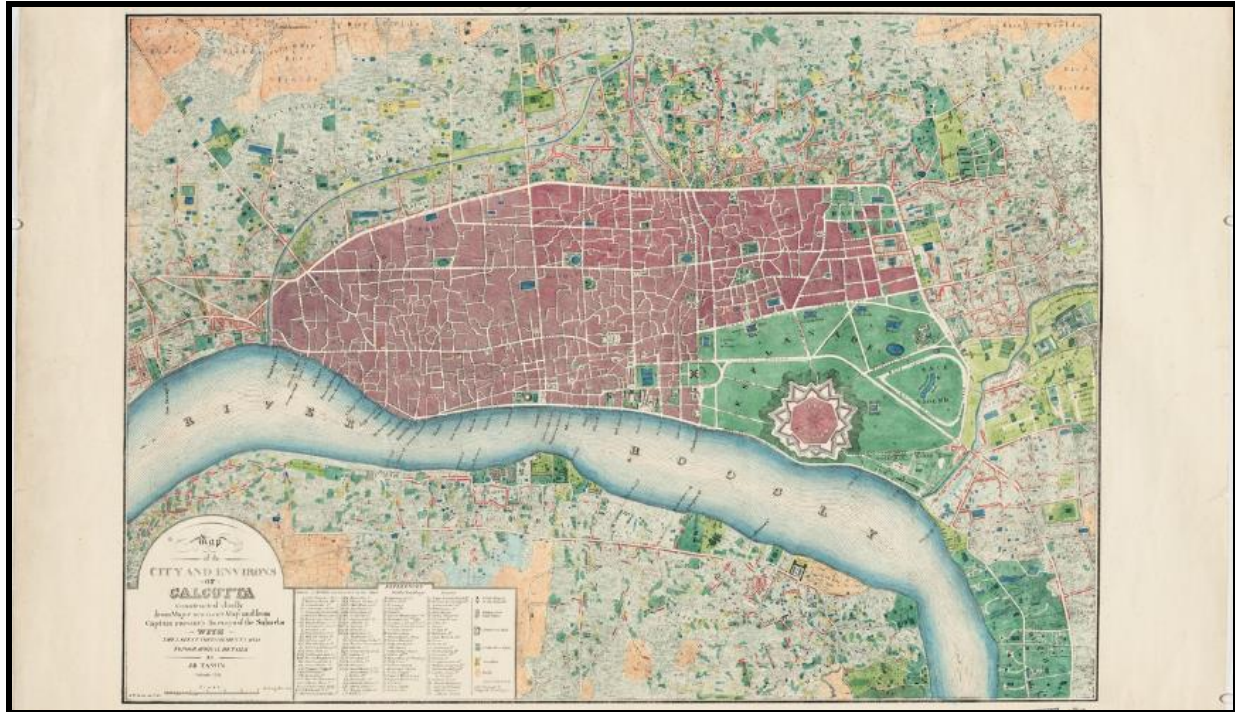


Figure 5: Map of City and Environs of Calcutta by J B Tassin in 1832

[Source: <https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/ids:16870412>]

Impact on and Architecture and Urban Planning

The Imperial rule started showing its authority by constructing huge buildings which were primarily used for the purpose of commerce and offices. These buildings served no purpose for improving the condition of the natives. These were only used by the British and were of no use for the inhabitants of the black town. Civil lines and cantonments were out of reach for the Indians. These areas were inhabited by the ruling elites, administrators and military officers (Lowder 1988). The white town in Kolkata had many attractive massive houses. The Fort William, town halls, the Writer's building and the Anglican, all graced the white town while the black town was highly neglected. There weren't even minimum provisions for health and safety of the natives in the black town. The houses of the Europeans were characterized by porticos and colonnades whereas the biggest structure found in the black town was the '*thakurbaris*' which literally meant religious building. There were only a small number of mansions which belonged to a few wealthy Indian merchants and landlords (Marshall 1985). With the growth of city the population also started to increase dramatically. The main cause for this was the migration of people who came into the rapidly urbanizing space in search of jobs. These people were the ones who got displaced due to industrialization in the countryside. There was an increase in demand for housing but not enough houses to cater to this demand. Cities started to get crowded with irregular housing on all available land (Lowder 1988).

In the year 1756, Kolkata had an estimated urban area of 704 acres and in 1794 the number stood at 3714 acres. With an inefficient administration the black town had to suffer. The white town had the Grand Juries but the black town was devoid of any such thing. The residents of the city had accepted that the place is not their permanent place of residence (Marshall 1985). At many places even the villages tended to merge with the urban space as “*there was no evidence of premeditated designs either by the East India Company or by the British community in Kolkata to use the rapidly growing city as a base for the subjugation of Bengal*” (Marshall 1985, pg 93). The British officials had the luxury to choose sites for their houses. They had houses built with huge gardens and open spaces and they made sure that their house had access to various services like roads, water and drainage (Lowder 1988).

Defense and security apart from trade seemed to be of primary importance to the Europeans while laying out a city. Calcutta developed along a river bank and the gradual development that took place in due course of time gave it a linear form. This was because all the developments were either towards left or right of the fort and this pattern suggests that the Europeans wanted to have quick access to the sea in case of emergency (Mitter 1985). Even the creation of esplanade, which saw huge scale demolition of towns and reallocation of natives, suggests the same. In 1858 esplanades of around six hundred yards were created in Delhi and Lucknow. Forts were consolidated and cities were reshaped periodically. The whites were accommodated within the fort or close to it, and the immediate neighbourhood was cleared of all vegetation and structures to turn it into an open land or ‘*maidan*’. This open space gave clear visibility from fort to far off places. This open space was otherwise used for recreational purposes by the British. The white Bombay was differentiated from the Indian Bombay by this ‘*maidan*’ for quite a long period of time. Even in Madras, creation of ‘*maidan*’ saw many natives being reallocated far from the white town, where they had to adjust in smaller spaces (Home 1997).

Military engineers always had a say in the planning colonial cities. It was not only in India but also other places where British had their control. For example the entire city of Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, was reshaped and redesigned on pattern of the Union Jack. This not only showed the British domination on the town but it also facilitated easy movement of military forces and guns. This also enhanced the surveillance (Home 1997).

In Indian towns too, roads were widened. This was to get the pattern of the cities into grid iron system which would make it easy to construct and layout various services like drainage and water lines. For doing this the existing settlement pattern had to be surveyed and realigned so as to get the roads in a straight line. This practice was widely opposed by the natives. It was perceived by them that this practice was conducted to breach their privacy. This was also thought of as an attack on their cultural setup and beliefs of their existing society. The city authority also started collecting toll and ferry charges. Tax was levied on slaughter houses and markets. This was to cover up the cost incurred by providing these facilities (Lowder 1988).

With drastic increase in population and haphazard growth of city serious concerns were raised for health and safety. The Indian Town Planning Act was introduced in 1915. But this proved to be fruitless and was not able to bring out the results that were desired. This was solely because the act was based on the principles of land use control that were prevalent in Britain and Germany. This was against the view of Patrick Geddes, a famous planner who spent quite a lot of time in India. He advocated the need to understand the local context and prevailing problems which are associated to the natives' culture and tradition before imposing the act. The act didn't take into consideration the existing social structure of India which was not dominated by the middle class who would have liked to take up plots on the periphery of the city. Furthermore the system was more concerned with the physical pattern of the urban space rather than the individuals who inhabited the city. Lutyens tried to merge the Mughal system with the colonial class based system to structure the layout of the proposed new capital of British India in New Delhi. Here stuck to the old tradition of placing the powerful officials' quarters close to the Governor's palace. Social status and wealth was reflected by the form, size and appearance of the building (Lowder 1988).

The British obsession with imposing straight line patterns and wide roads in Indian cities that already had an existing social system was often criticized by their own planners. Patrick Geddes observed that the reshaping of the cities with straight and wide roads had a very negative impact on the people since the inhabitants had to be evicted from their place and no concern was shown for the hardships that these people had to face (Home 1997).

Archer in his work in 1994 completely wrote off the British efforts to reshape the parts of the city of Kolkata dominated by Indians. In his work he stated *"instead of building neighbourhoods in which traditional relations were embedded in the material fabric of building and street, the new paradigm... was matter of corridors, avenues, straight lines and grids. This paradigm was not just a matter of enhanced fire protection or drainage, or even augmentation of the city's imperial splendour. Rather, it was also the imposition of new means of control (through sectorization), visibility and identification (plotting holdings as position within matrix) and, more insidiously, socialization replacing tight-knit, well surveilled neighbourhoods with open corridors as places of primary contact, communication and leisure for the indigenous people..."* (as quoted in Home 1997, Of Planting and Planning, the making of British colonial cities, pg 58).

Development of the colonial cities in India was always characterized by growth of large companies which had trade links with Europe and decline in individual craftsman. With foreign invasion on the trade circle of India, the local production and craftsmanship was suppressed giving way to big firms which exploited the virgin market to extract maximum profit. In a way the trade system in India started to get westernized (Furedy 1985).

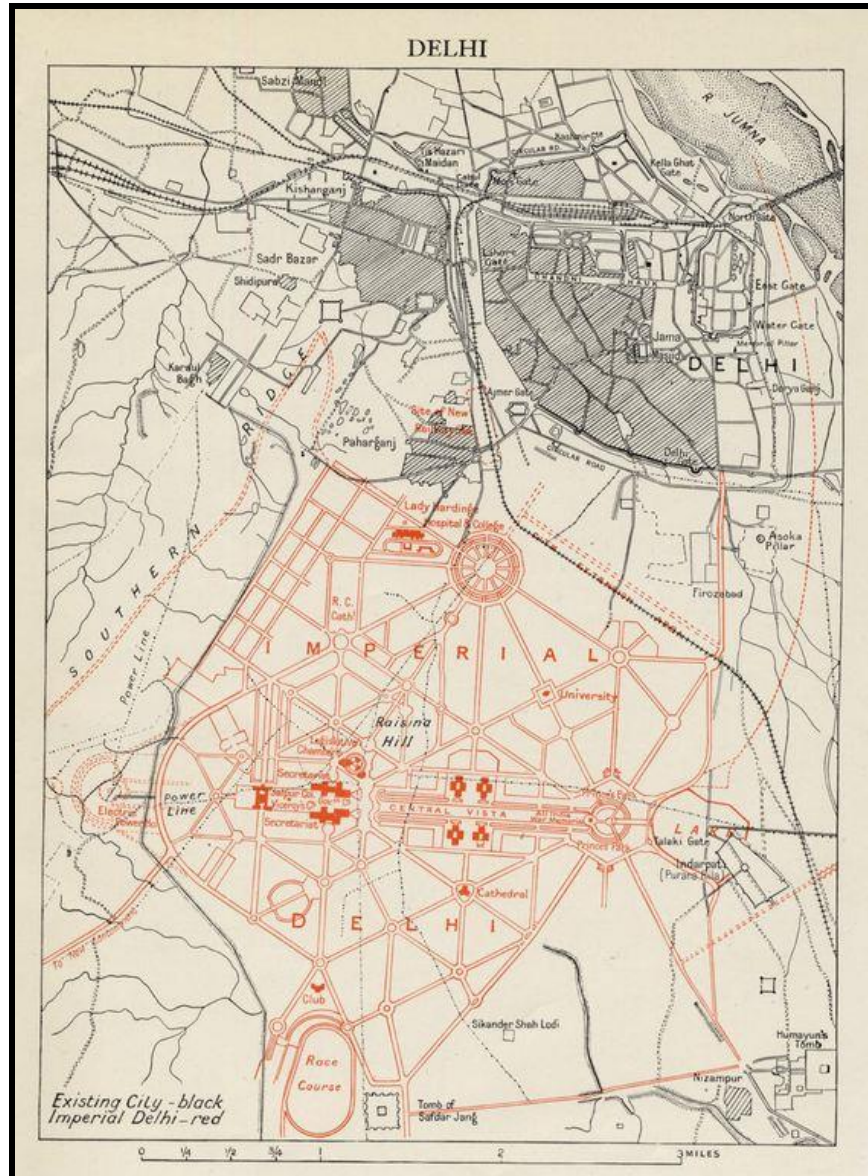


Figure 6: Plan of New Delhi by Lutyens and Baker in 1910 [Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/271764158747316466/visual-search/?x=16&y=16&w=530&h=671>]

Allied Societal Influences

With all the adversaries that the colonial rule brought with it, there were many positive impacts also. For example introduction of English language which became the global language of communication. The colonial regime was also instrumental in eradicating many blind beliefs and social evils that were associated with certain illiterate sections and was the cause of suffering for millions of people throughout the globe (Blackburne 1976). But Blackburne, in his work, does admit that the British granted independence to most countries in haste and the independent countries were not totally prepared for self governance, which was a mistake. With the

introduction of the railway network, transport system enhanced in a great way. Though initially it was implemented for the selfish interest of the colonizers, this can be attributed to be a European contribution. The British developed a systematic planning system in terms land use and zoning which advocated separate zones for residence and work place. This system still forms the base of most modern cities today (Drakakis 2000). The colonial reign and its urban form left a lasting impact on the Indian or in that case most colonial countries, cities. Even if there is no segregation in terms of race any more but social division still exists in most cities. The modern Indian society still has discrimination in terms of class, caste and sex. Even in some cases the migrants are segregated from the natives. There is also segregation of the modern society from the traditional society. This concept of social division is seen as a direct outcome of the hundreds of years of British domination which still plays in the psychology of independent India society. The urban form introduced by the British during their rule, like the grid iron pattern, low density housing pattern and fan shape layout for ease in surveillance still exists (Home 1997). The British rule also had a telling impact on the country in economical terms. Since the Europeans were more concerned with extracting wealth, their development plans was always centered on the coastal port cities which were important in terms of wealth. This caused few cities to grow rapidly and develop. As a consequence present day India is seeing an imbalanced economic structure throughout the country. Some cities are highly urbanized with good economy whereas other parts are still poor.

“In terms of urbanization levels, India’s states span the range of fifty or so countries from the least developed up to the lower middle income range of about \$ 500 per capita...” (Mohan 1996, pg 107).

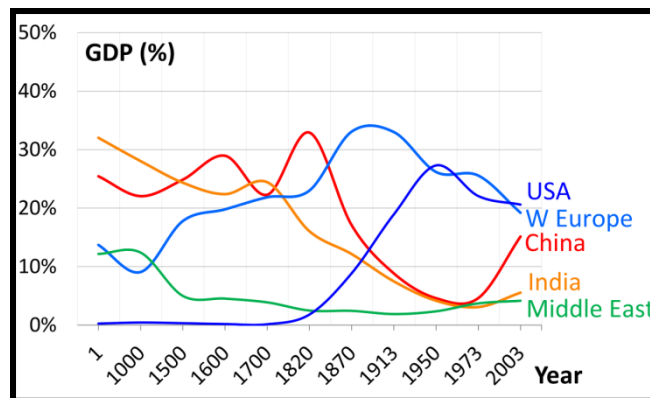


Figure 7: Economy of India and its drop during British era

[Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_India_under_the_British_Raj]

Conclusion

As R.P Misra puts it in his book ‘Urbanization in India- Challenges and Opportunities’, India has had a rich history in its urban form but its heritage has been dampened in over the last two centuries. The haphazard growths of the cities, lacking any proper direction, plan and designs

have been the root cause of many problems. He also points out that independence has not really changed the scenario of the urban form. He is critical about the policy makers and planners and says that they didn't have a vision. The result of all these, he says, is that big cities are in distress. He aptly summarizes the state of the cities when he says that "*the city of 'cultures' has given way to the city of 'vultures'*" (Misra 1998, pg 67). In present age of globalization Indian cities are undergoing transition from the old pattern to a new form. Even if most of the cities are still urbanizing uncontrollably without a proper plan still then certain cities like Jamshedpur, Rourkela and Chandigarh etc which are seen as a new face of modern Indian cities (Brush 1974). Globalization has changed the factor affecting the planning of a city. Today the market forces are given more importance while forming the spatial form of a city instead of the colonial spatial planning (Grant, Nijman, 2003). A group of independent princely states was converted into a single nation only due to the colonial rule. After a century of struggle for freedom and sixty years of independence it remains an interesting proposition to see how the independent Indian city shapes up to face the challenges of the new global era. After undergoing rigorous changes through different time periods and through different rulers, still Indian cities have not lost their true cultural identity. These roots can still be felt when walking through the streets of Chandni Chowk of Old Delhi, or the Chowringhee lane of Kolkata.



Figure 8: Chandni Chowk, Delhi

Kolkata

[Source: mouthshut.com]

Wikipedia.org]



Figure 9: Chowringhee,

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