

M S University Baroda
DESIGN POLICIES DURING BRITISH INDIA
Ph.D. Dissertation
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Summary

In this dissertation I focus on the period leading up to 1851, the year that marks The Great Exhibition in London, to 1886, the year when the 'Colonial and Indian Exhibition' (CIE) which took place in London to showcase the wealth of the colonies to the British citizens. I also extend my focus to the time that followed the CIE, up to 1893 when the follow-up conference on state of museums in India was held in Lahore. A number of institutions came up to streamline, document, categorize, collect, and exhibit or publish these collections of man-made objects from India. I have used the exploratory method for my study, investigating the tenuous connections between various nascent institutions and organizations. I use the term 'design policies' for the discourse created by these networks of organizations, which were temporary and at times created for specific purpose such as the CIE or institutions with a longer life cycle like art schools which institutionalized teaching of arts and publications of books, journals, and monographs which documented man-made objects created in India for consumers in the metropolitan center.

My thesis traces the historical, socio-political, ideological, and theoretical background for these 'design policies', and will show how they contributed to the overall objectification of Indian culture and appropriation of Indian wealth. This process was initiated by the British administration through employing various modalities. 'Design Policies' as I term it, is a result of convergence of various colonial processes in the 19th century to meet the British need to efficiently govern India so as to gain maximum advantage in collecting artifacts in a legal and systematic way. In order to bring out intricacies of these colonial processes,

I study various strategies that the British used to efficiently govern the colonies. Many processes that created and influenced the 'design policies' were initiated before the mid-19th century. I examine them in order to study how they brought about the objectification of Indian culture.

The British domestication of India extended in three stages; i.e., they first required to know India and its peoples, they established epistemic apparatuses for collecting and organizing data for knowing and defining India. Secondly, they formed policies for collecting objects; thus constructing or realizing their perceptions of the colony into reality. Lastly, they displayed these objects they collected in a temporary exhibition, *and later, in a permanent museum in London. Together, these three stages of perception—performance—presentation* constituted three legs of the base on which EIC erected the economic and cultural foundation of the body politic that was to become the Indian Empire. The dissertation is organized around three chapters that delineate these three stages.

The first chapter **Knowing India** examines the designs the period from the first British victory in Seringapatam till the Great Exhibition with of 1851. It discusses how collection and display of objects have a connected with the concepts of loot, war trophies and victory carnival. These characteristics were exhibited in England after the British victory in Seringapatam in 1799 was recreated in numerous Panoramas that depicted this victory for the curious British audience. The chapter next discusses how the meaning of the object changes when it is removed from its context and labeled, categorized and classified and. It also looks at the Great Exhibition various aspects of the Great Exhibition which took place in 1851. The second chapter **Constructing India** covers the period from 1857, the year which saw the revolt against the British government took place till the period leading up to the 'Colonial and Indian Exhibition' in 1886. It looks at the relationship between objects and people and the phenomenon of collecting as an interface between the two. We will also look at how the British administration tried to make collection systematic and orderly; essentially reinventing it by devising design policies. The third

chapter **Exhibiting India** focuses on various aspects of the 'Colonial and Indian Exhibition' are described in detail – the three courts – economic, art ware, and administrative, the presence of live artists who were also put on exhibition along with the objects, I also study the creation of various institutions that were created by the British for systematically collecting objects for this exhibition this exhibition and study how they evolved into disciplines and institutions. The conclusion brings together insights gained in each chapter and explains the concept of design policies.

Knowing India

In a peculiar way the British administrators were obsessively documenting everything from a stone, insects, plants, geography, geology, populations, economy, races and tribes, agriculture, crafts—even the Himalayas. I link the documentation of crafts and policies for exhibition with controlling not only the material culture but also the visual world and man-made objects that populate it. The Over-view opens up new spaces for a deeper understanding of the Design discourse during the British Empire. I have shown how the British administration formulated design policies to control and exploit crafts and design disciplines. In the process, using Macaulay's idea about for creating Brown Englishmen 'who defined and constructed a new cultural identity for the Indian elite. In due course, this Utilitarian design discourse took precedence over and replaced the perception of India as a glorious nation full of riches. Collection and categorization of objects, their display and the reports in catalogue; all—contributed to the making of a new narrative for the object and its new context. This was very crucial in constructing a new knowledge of India the British Crown could assimilate and consume, and give its feedback to the Indian Empire. The Colonial and Indian Exhibition was a major enterprise in construction of this new fiction of India as the major part of the British Empire. By acquiring Indian artifacts, the British collectors replaced production with consumption: objects were naturalized into the landscape of the collection and became —knowledge about India.

Early British Orientalists or Indologists began discovering India in the eighteenth century and modelled India's glory for the British officers in Calcutta and London. Around this

time, James Mill's *History of India* advocated a discourse projecting India as a primitive and backward entity that needed guidance and governing by the superior British rulers. Starting with the Utilitarian structure as its base, Mill's ideology provided the British rhetoric with the necessary ethos to justify the Empire and the domination of India, both to themselves and to the people of India.

The British Empire's overt noble motive of bringing light to the heart of darkness' in India concealed the covert motive of draining India of its vast resources and wealth. The British with one hand gave India her past, while taking it away from her with the other. They created monuments for enshrining their collections'. Stewart has showed us that the collection relied upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, and the seriality of shelves. The museum was determined by these bounded spaces that required to declare its essential emptiness by filling it. Ornament, decor and ultimately decorum define the boundaries of private space by emptying that space of any relevance other than that of the subject. The British collectors gained control over repetition or series by defining a finite set or by possessing the unique object. The latter object had acquired a particular poignancy after the mechanical reproduction: for example, the exquisite illustrations in the *Journal of Indian Art Industry*.

Constructing India

My study I focuses on three aspects: the making of the design policies, their implementation and their reception. I see the Indian colonial state as a theatre for state experimentation where historiography, documentation, and certification of representation were all state modalities that transformed knowledge into power and made India into an object that can be known and documented. The treasures looted, pillaged, or received as —'gifts' exchanged hands, migrated to other lands, and were enshrined as heritage in the metropolitan museums and those in the colonies. These objects not only offered tangible alibi to Indian past, they in fact objectified India. They drafted design policies to ease collection of objects and established institutional networks to construct and sustain its new identity. Now India gained a past with a collectable form and became a major conduit

for raw materials, and artefacts flowing out in one direction, while through the other direction British goods flooded the subcontinent.

I argue that the *Draft Scheme* of 1881, which was implemented by individuals (Watson), Institutes (Schools of Design), Publications (JIAI), and by sustaining networks furthered the cause of design and crafts. A prominent example of this is South Kensington's mobile exhibition series and a series of local exhibitions set up in different parts of India. These were put together collaboratively by the Agriculture and Revenue Department in Calcutta. A complex administrative machinery was evolved for this purpose to coordinate institutes and schools of art and design, museums, publications, and the Crown administration at the level of residencies, and presidencies.

Exhibiting India

After they established norms for knowing and constructing India, the British administration set in motion forces to demonstrate the might and extent of their Indian Empire at home to justify the expenses on maintaining its colonies. This was also a further exercise to create archives and museums to enshrine their prized booty. I discuss the conceptual understanding of an archive, as eventually all documents and history begin and end in the archive. An object collected and exhibited is only a step away from the museum and the archive; or the oblivion. One side of the archive is memory, power; on the other side, there is dark uncertainty.

Derrida shows that the etymology of archive is from the Latin *archivum*, "residence of the magistrate," and from the Greek *arkhe*, to command or govern¹, colonial archives ordered (in both the imperative and taxonomic sense) the criteria of evidence, proof, testimony, and witnessing to construct moral narrations. In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault

¹. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 48

does not treat the archive as an institution, but “the law of what can be said,” not a library of events, but “that system that establishes statements as events and things,” that “system of their enunciabilities”.²

Apart from the writings of Foucault and Derrida many other theoretical contributions have built the archive into a major metaphor. One important contribution is by Ann Laura Stoler. She focuses on archiving as a process rather than to archives as things. For her the colonial archives are cross-sections of contested knowledge which can be considered as epistemological experiments rather than as both transparencies on which power relations were inscribed and intricate technologies of rule in themselves.³ I start by looking at various modes of cultural production discussed by Cohn to understand the “Colonial order of things”⁴ the Crown administrators were introducing in India.

The next step after these processes was the exhibition of the wealth of the colonies in form of Exhibitions that were held in different kingdoms in India at first and subsequently in London, the metropolitan capital of the empire. The purpose of these exhibitions was to exhibit the wealth of the colonies to the visitors – goods of economic value, which would form raw material for the British industries, and the artifacts from different states of India were exhibited in these colonies.

². Michel Foucault, “The Statement and the Archive”, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, especially Part III (1972), 42.

³. Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance’, *Archival Science* 2, no. 1/2 (2002): 87–109, doi:10.1023/A:1020821416870.

⁴. This term is borrowed from Ann Laura Soler, *Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance*

Indian craftsmen who were taken for the CIE show in London, were treated as exotic objects by the visitors of the exhibition.

In sharp contrast to this negative image was the wondrous wealth of the country in form of rich artifacts, textiles, and various man-made objects which challenged this image by its very grandeur and beauty, and which the British were tempted to appropriate for themselves. So, the act of decontextualizing the artifacts from their context was a strategy to deny/erase the rich heritage of the country. This cultural transformation caused a dual result —creation of amnesia of the cultural heritage and replacing the latter with memories of underdevelopment.

The British were keen to set up a New World Order in which the British Empire was to be the new Center. The Great Exhibition achieved this for London by putting it on the map of the world as the center for Industrial progress. The Colonial and Indian Exhibition achieved the same status for India as the prime Empire in the British Empire in 1886 in India, which was projected as always already static, timeless and exotic, was available not only for plunder, but was also perceived as an object of study. It is now widely believed that museums, as artefacts for colonial govern- mentality and the regulation of metropolitan cultural practices, are both products and producers of modernity. Hence, exhibitions, museums, and archives are theatres of transformations.

Overview

By formulating the Design Policies for the colonies, the British were not just creating a new aesthetics and style to reflect and consolidate their identity. Exhibiting India and displaying it in the museums completed the objectification of India. Thus we can see two movements by which this was achieved through the collection's claim of representing India: the metonymic displacement of part for whole, item for context; and second, the invention of a classification scheme which defined space and time in such a way that the world is accounted for by the elements of the collection. The British had the privilege of suppressing and redefining the original context. We can even see the logic behind the

blithe decontextualization in museum acquisitions. A gesture which results in the treasures of one culture being stored and displayed in the museums of another to create the documents / monuments, to return to Benjamin's epigraph to chapter one, to celebrate their barbaric / civilization.

My researching and collating of findings is also an act of curation that is similar to the British practice of surveying and collecting objects and displaying them in an exhibition or a museum. At best, my fragmentary compilation of these policies mirrors the fragments of colonial practices and documents.