

The Social and the Formal: Framing the Indian Interior

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This paper focuses on the Indian domestic interior, an arena of cross-cultural interaction during colonial India that has not been given its due in recent studies of Raj architecture and urbanism. The subject itself is partly to blame: it is not an easy task to define the lineaments of a characteristic 'Indian' interior nor even to agree upon whether the 'interior', as understood in the west, is a category that makes sense within the Indian context.

Given the shifting frames of reference, and of the ground itself, this presentation is less a definitive account of the Indian interior and more of an essay on how to 'think' about it — thinking about it, moreover, by emphasizing the doubled valency of cross-cultural encounters, and the specifics of the Indian milieu within which they took place over the last one hundred and fifty years.

THE INDIAN DOMESTIC INTERIOR AND 'MIXED SOCIETY'

The social, material, and formal registers of Indian domestic space underwent uneven yet profound changes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An entirely unprecedented material regime appeared within the Indian interior, especially in the *mardana* (the more public, and male, part of the house), distinguishing it materially from the *zenana* (the cloistered zones for women in the interiors of houses) for the first time. Like Trojan horses, these alien suites of furniture, artifacts, and their attendant rituals, appeared within Indian interiors, in the process inaugurating a new social space within which the narratives of an unprecedented 'mixed society' were played out.

The social and spatial protocols of mixed society required open commerce not only between the east and the west — between ruler, native, and native ruler — but, for the first time, between men and women of the same class as well, most of which took place within the private and domestic, rather than the public and civic, realm. The *zenana* and its *aangan's* (courtyards) and *dalaan's* (porches), the free-standing bungalow and its encircling *verandah*, the *darbar's* (halls) and salons of the feudal classes and the hybrid *haveli's* of the civil service elite, to name only a few, were all implicated in this awkward, halting, yet radically reconfiguring miscegenation.

A conventional understanding of these changes sees them as resulting from a primarily one-way transaction, as simply a change from one style to another, with the Indian domestic interior succumbing to a wave of European objects and influences. Modeling these

transformations as a complex dynamic between two cultures, not a smooth one-way flow but one full of eddies and turbulence, is both more interesting and perhaps closer to the mark.

In order to model these cross-cultural exchanges and the spaces within which they took place and in turn shaped, one needs to stake, no matter how provisionally, the social and spatial territory under consideration, in terms of its own history, use, and material culture. For the purposes of this essay, we identify three vectors that may help us in charting the Indian interior: furniture; posture; and the rise of commodity culture.

INDIAN FURNITURE: ITS RELATION TO THE BODY AND TO THE ARCHITECTURAL SHELL

European furniture's long evolution from the medieval period has resulted in the variety and the density of reference that furniture and its design in the west possess today: a blurring of physiology and aesthetics; experiments in new materials; the technical and economic constraints upon its manufacture and mass production; its commodification into the system of objects of consumer society.

In contrast, Indian furniture barely registers as a defined category within its own material culture, especially if one attempts to make sense of it in western terms. Indian furniture presents us with a limited inventory of under-differentiated objects — *charpai's*, *takht's* (divans), *peree's* (low stools), and *sandook's* (chests) — employed for multiple functions and used by all, irrespective of social station. The pieces are simple and generic; even when dressed and elaborated, the basic elements that make up a piece remain distinct and discrete.

Their portability gives them a wider compass than the more specialized objects of western furniture; they move readily from room to porch, to roof, to sidewalk and beyond. Unlike western furniture, whose evolution is marked by a complicated relation to the architectural shell (and, especially the wall), Indian furniture appears remarkably unconstrained by any relation to built enclosure and the vertical plane. Its primary relation appears to be to the horizontal surface, whether interior floor, outdoor terrace, or cultivated field. Furniture is grouped and arranged on this continuous plane to correspond to intended activity.

This lack of relation to the architectural shell, and the rather fluid (although complex) relation to the horizontal surface, eased the way for the conquest of the Indian domestic interior by 'sets' of European furniture during the Raj when western imperial rule imposed and

introduced elements of its own interior regime. The degree to which this new furniture infiltrated and altered the operations of daily life was unprecedented.

Earlier cultural infusions into India, of the Central Asian Muslims for example, had not significantly altered the relationship between the body and furniture: furniture, whether in the form of carpets, cushions, or low platforms, prepared and marked a place for the body to take its position. The precision and economy with which this articulated physical and social stations is illustrated in Indian miniature paintings. Prince and fakir, princess and maidservant, each pair takes its position in tableaux that frame and reframe space, architecture, and furniture, through one another. A raised dais in a room, a pavilion in a garden, or a carpet under a tree, each define a space, prepare a surface, and mark a place.

With the advent of the Europeans in the eighteenth century, the equilibrium achieved in the Indian context between furniture and its use was violently disturbed. Furniture became, as never before, both the agent of and the medium through which new power and gender relations manifested themselves. First the factors-nabobs of the East India Company and later the Lord-Sahibs of the Indian Civil Service, all used furniture as an instrument for establishing and displaying cultural difference.

One can see this in many Company paintings, genre scenes that depict the complex protocols of Raj life: The solitary missionary in “darkest” Indian, warding off the hostile environment with his mosquito net, fan, and solar topee; the scrappy young civil servant on a verandah in the mofassil (rural outposts), leaning back in his chair and smoking a cheroot, with a host of munshi’s (clerks) and supplicants perched on their haunches around him; or the civil servant’s wife managing her household, prominently seated on a chair while a retinue of servants and tradesmen take their positions, in various postures, on the floor around her.

As the culture of the Raj matured, it acculturated the Indian gentry as well as the burgeoning native professional classes. A new type of “Anglo-Indian” furniture was the result. Made of tropical hardwoods, wicker, and bamboo, the plantation chairs with extendible arms, four-poster “charpoy-beds”, and collapsible charpoy camp beds (advertised in Army and Navy catalogs for officials on tour duty) were particularly curious hybrids.

A more ambiguous phenomenon, the rise of what can be called an ethnic aesthetic, surfaced in both the west (during the 1960’s) and in the Indian sub-continent as well. Here the idea was to reclaim the handcrafted artifact and restore to it both cultural and use value. One finds instances, for example, of the charpai (bedstead) either transformed into a table or else used explicitly (charpai in quotation marks) as both sign and object. More recently, Raj nostalgia has recommodified Anglo-Indian furniture; ordering items through the British Khaki catalog, or others like it, one purchases not only ecologically-correct plantation chairs made of reclaimed teak but a bit of the plantation lifestyle itself.

POSTURE

In *Mechanization Takes Command*, Giedion identifies the existence of an “oriental manner” of sitting and of seating, a manner that reflects the degree to which the “orient has achieved postures that allow the body to find relaxation and comfort within itself” (Giedion, 260). One sees these “innate postures...where the body relaxes within and upon itself”, requiring little if any by way of extraneous support, in evidence everywhere in the Indian landscape. With the statics of the seated body fully resolved within the musculature, the body’s lines are independent of the support that western furniture is designed to provide, allowing the body the freedom to take up a position anywhere: perch by the side of a road or on top of a charpai, or within a shop stall alongside the merchandise.

There are many body positions evident in the Indian landscape, each an essay in the complementarity of body, activity, and furniture. Indian postures, while unregulated by the lines of furniture, are nonetheless highly coded, with a wide repertoire of positions, postures, and gestures indexing social station, specific activity, and even religious significance. One is more familiar with the meditative postures within Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions but even within Indian Muslim culture the seated, kneeling, and bowing body, whether alone or in a congregation, signifies individual and social relations that suffuse the everyday.

The Central Asian Turkic invasions from the eleventh century on enriched and diversified this repertoire and its attendant material culture further. The accouterments of nomadic life that they insinuated into their sedentary lives in India — a fantastic assortment of tents, canopies, and fabric dividers, along with easily portable stools, platforms, and cushions — can be seen in miniature paintings: serried ranks of platforms upon which bodies take their place, with arms propping up bodies, or legs folding back to provide a seat, while cushions, in a dizzying range of shapes and sizes and each with its own name, are deployed strategically.

The way in which furniture is occupied, and the way in which furniture itself situates and groups the individual and the collective in the Indian interior, supersedes any relation to building as such for it is itself an architectural performance. With a carpet, a curtain, or a canopy, with a grouping of stools and charpai’s, the ground plane is prepared for occupation. And individuals, alone, in pairs, or in groups arrange themselves upon and within them, in a variety of postures.

This characteristic independence of activity, furniture, and architectural shell is still evident in everyday India in spite of the formalization of spaces and the specialization of furniture. The charpai for example, is an object type of the Indian physical and emotional landscape, its reduced morphology and simple, lightweight construction giving it a remarkable compositional facility. Like a conjurer’s prop it is constantly put to use: a watchman’s charpai outside a bungalow, with an assortment of underemployed men; a grid of charpai’s, each with its own watercooler, at a roadside truckstop; a stack of charpai’s leaning against a wall with laundry set out upon them to dry; charpai’s carried out to the sidewalk, into a winter courtyard, or onto the roof, signifying the possibility of occupation. The list is endless.

Understanding the charpai as the basic unit of the Indian landscape, one that works in an open-ended way, keeps one from misunderstanding even the most over-stuffed Indian interior as simply a copy, or travesty, of western interiors. Even as European influences initiate different social and material arrangements, the charpai and its uses remind us of older, and more local, protocols and relations still in play.

COMMODITY CULTURE

In less than a hundred years, the Indian interior has gone from being a rather sparse set of spaces with a few multi-functional objects to one filled with the bric-a-brac that mass production provides. The presence of these objects index significant trajectories in the evolution of Indian material culture: the effects of industrialization, modernization, and colonization; the rise of a middle class and increased prosperity in general; and the development of a new vernacular based on the consumption of both local and imported, handcrafted and manufactured, objects.

Ismail Merchant, the film producer known in both the west and in India for his carefully observed comedies of manner, captures the sweep of this change in his preface to *Indian Style*, a rather remarkable compendium of domestic interiors, especially given the general vacuousness of books of this genre.

Merchant recalls the small apartment in a Memon (a trading community) neighborhood in colonial Bombay where he grew up:

Until my older sisters were married, nine of us lived in two rooms, not counting the kitchen and the bath. One of them was my parents' bedroom [where] for furniture there was a double bed and a big clothes cupboard, called an almirah (a Portuguese word), and some small trunks along the walls and under the bed. The other room — the living room (in Bombay this room is called the "hall") — was where my sisters and I usually slept, on seven thin mattresses laid out on the floor. During the day these were rolled up and stored away. There was a sofa covered in leather, a sort of club sofa [and] my mother's glass-fronted cabinet of small treasures.... We did not go in much for pictures and things like that.... There was a framed view of the durgah (shrine) at Ajmer.... There was also, of course, a picture of the Ka'aba at Mecca. When I think of how today my own walls are jammed with all sorts of pictures I hardly bother to glance at, and my rooms filled with useless furniture, I wonder how this could have happened. When I see Bombay apartments now and compare them with the one I grew up in... I am struck by the buying mania of middle-class Indians.... Our rooms were full of people rather than things. (Slesin x)

In her novel *Sunlight On a Broken Column*, Attia Hosain, traces this transformation through the cross-cultural negotiation carried on by three generations of a feudal Muslim family (from the late-nineteenth century to the years just after India's independence in 1947). Located between the social protocols of the zenana and the "western trappings" of her Cambridge-educated uncle's milieu, her account manifests the tensions of her generation and her gender, as well as those of her uncle's, as both negotiate the social and spatial protocols of different cultures, each attempting to find their own balance.

In sketching out the process of becoming modern while remaining traditional, Hosain provides vivid examples of its affect on the domestic sphere and, especially, on women. While the material texture of the domestic domain changed with the sometimes abrupt accommodation of new fashions of dress, furniture, and architecture, the proprieties and rites of mixed society were not as easily assimilated.

Hosain describes the "gossip of women whose minds remained smothered in the veils they had outwardly discarded, and the men who met women socially but mentally relegated them to harems and zenana's (Hosain, 207). She describes the desire of husbands to bring their wives out of purdah and groomed by English lady companions, a transformation of "dutiful purdah girls" into "perfect modern wives" that literally reconfigures their bodies: "No more loose shapeless clothes, no more stooping and hunching of shoulders to deny one's body" (Hosain, 141).

These transformations also brought with them different domestic and material regimes. Hosain describes the changes in the main house after the arrival of her 'modern' Aunt Saira: different furnishings, a new corps of servants (lady's ayahs, valets, butlers, instead of maid-servants sent in from the village), new rituals (tea in the living room, formal sit-down dinners at dining tables instead of the nomadic dastarkhan's — floor-spreads — of the zenana), and a different hierarchy of public and private space (the sanctity of her uncle's study, the privacy afforded individual bedrooms as opposed to the flexible, common, and non-function-specific territory of the zenana).

The shifting valencies that attach to material objects in cross-cultural commerce are illustrated in Hosain's descriptions of the 'taste' in furniture across three generations: her grandfather's, her aunt's, and her own. Where her grandfather's rooms displayed an indiscriminate inventory of European objects in the spirit of a big-game hunter displaying hunting trophies, Aunt Saira's rooms were tasteful copies of contemporary English homes: velvet curtains, crystal, and tasteful prints — Raphael's Madonna, Dante and Beatrice, etc.

And the traveled and progressive 'smart set' among Hosain's own generation live in houses in New Delhi that are "very modern in appearance and convenience, very Indian and ancient in decoration"

(Hosain, 295). Here the initial consumption, and later co-option, of western objects and styles by the previous generations has been substituted by a western 'eye', with tradition transliterated according to a European aesthetics of recuperation. Tradition is reappropriated as heritage, setting into motion the process of its commodification as ethnic style, similar perhaps in look to its western counterpart but very different in intention and reception.

THE INDIAN INTERIOR AND THE SPACE OF REPRESENTATION

A critical reading of a recent book, *Salon Indien*, provides another opportunity to reconstruct the two-way flow of cultural exchange that marks the evolution and transformation of the Indian interior over the last one hundred and fifty years. *Salon Indien* is a photographic compendium of twenty palaces, their interiors recorded in sumptuous color photography that behooves its sponsors, the manufacturers of Baccarat crystal, while the exteriors are shot in somber duotone, documenting the physical and political wear and tear that these palaces have undergone.

From its production it is clear the publishers had in mind one more coffee table book that would feed the demand, in the west, for the exotic opulence of India, especially the 'princely India' of the British Raj when numerous Indian kingdoms, under the protective eye of British Residents, spent energetically and bought themselves a place in European society. The title of its English translation, *Maharajah's Palaces*, confirms this; the photographs record the palaces as exotic emporia filled to capacity with fanciful inventory.

The French title, however, gives us pause, for the ambiguity it wraps within itself, especially for the English reader. What is the title referring to? To salons in the Indian manner, exemplifying the appropriation of one more exotic style for the decoration of European public rooms? Or does it refer to Indian salons, to examples of an appropriation by Indians of the particular cultural and social space encompassed by the salon?

Or, to continue with this unraveling, is the salon of the title an attempt to translate, by analogy, the space and the institution of the darbar, the ceremonial space of appearance within which the Indian ruler presented himself? The word darbar had early on entered the vocabulary of the Raj, in reference to imperial events of the highest order (the various Darbars held to commemorate Queen Victoria and assorted viceroys) as well as in the form of the awkward but telling conflation 'darbar-hall' used to describe the 'great halls' of Indian gentry.

It is at this point that it might be possible to think of the interiors documented in this book, and of Indian interiors from the colonial period on, not just as simple spaces of representation where one culture represents itself to another but more as a hall of mirrors, a complex inter-cultural discursive space.

In the development of the European interior, the French salon was a highly codified space. As the front room of private domicile, it was a space that foregrounded representation, where a way of life not only took place but was seen to take place as well. Like the chinoiseries and salons in the Indian manner (the work of turn-of-the-century artists/architects like Lockwood de Forrest, the Brighton Pavilion, for example) which were full of Indian-crafted Indian artifacts, this book also serves as a 'salon' that brings exotic India to a western readership.

Like these salons, the book promises a trip to India but the India shown is the India of the prince's trip to Europe: the trophy bric-a-brac, the crystal bedsteads, the chaise longues upholstered in tiger skin. For the western reader, the India on show is an Indian version of the spoils of Europe; the experience is no longer one of simply seeing a vision of exotic India but of seeing yourself not just reflected but distorted through the eyes of the other; the objects add up to an Indian representation of Europe.

As a record of the Indian appropriation of the salon, the book can be seen as documenting the ways in which the Indian nobles brought the idea of the salon into the Indian social gambit; on their own terms, within the constructs of the baithak (sitting-room) and the darbar, and within the context of their on-going and changing relationship with the colonial political and social structure.

While the photographs may be read as an account of despotic conspicuous consumption, or simply as an inventory of bad taste, with no evidence of discernment or connoisseurship regarding the artifacts and objects on display, they can also be read as a testament to the complexity of inter-cultural exchange. The interiors on show in this book map multiple appropriations, appropriations that can best be understood in terms of the culture of those doing the appropriating and not in terms of the culture of origin.

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