

Curzon's Contribution to the Indian Heritage Management: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Archaeology in India took a magnificent turn with the arrival of the new Viceroy, George Nathaniel, Marquess Curzon of Kedleston.¹ An assessment of the Viceroyalty of Curzon (1899-1905) from the perspective of Indian archaeology; the links between his vision of imperial responsibility vis-à-vis Indian monuments and the social context in Great Britain, in which it had taken shape; his achievements in the handling of several issues related to archaeology, as also the complicated and adverse implications of his policies in that sphere. Present research is based on all these important issues based on secondary literature on Curzon and needs careful investigation and analysis.

KEYWORDS : *Curzon's Contribution ; Indian Heritage; Archaeological Assessment.*

Introduction

"I cannot conceive any obligation more strictly appertaining to a Supreme Government than the conservation of the most beautiful and perfect collection of monuments in the world..." (Curzon, September 1900)

The significance of this phase has generally been acknowledged, both by Curzon's contemporaries and by subsequent scholars. Let us consider, for instance, what John Strachey had to say about this as early as 1900:

Few things in these troubles times when there has been so much to make one unhappy, have given me so much pleasure as the knowledge that India has found a Viceroy who has resolved that the British Government shall become a more faithful guardian of her 'priceless treasure-houses of art'.

In a similar vein, almost forty years later, Alfred Foucher recorded in his foreword to *Revealing India's Past*, a series of perceptive reflections on the character of archaeological conservation in this phase, which in fact, as the following citation shows, was treated by him as a watershed era:

The history of Indian archaeology can now be divided into two periods, quite distinct, though of the same duration: the one before, the other after Lord Curzon's Viceroyalty and the re-establishment of the Archaeological Survey (1902). Prior to this date, there was, as everywhere else, a 'heroic period', certainly fertile in important discoveries, yet marred by spasmodic extemporisations, unfinished excavations, clumsy restorations, and incomplete publications. Afterwards came at last the period of a well-organised service, of projects carefully prepared and brought to completion, of wisely conducted preservation work, of excavations steadily resumed year after year, of annual reports building up stately arrays on the shelves of libraries, whereby each new discovery became the common possession of students throughout the world...

Right from the beginning of his Viceroyalty, buildings and their restoration were high on Curzon's list of priorities. He admittedly articulated this concern, which was often pompous and patronizing. Curzon claimed to be "an Imperialist heart and soul". He admitted that "Imperial expansion seems to be an inevitable necessity and carries a noble and majestic obligation."² One of the important instruments for making imperial governance seem more human and which, he believed, would foreground its beneficence in India, was the restoration of her architectural heritage. The speech made by Curzon on December 5, 1899 at Brindaban, outlined his views that the restoration of monuments was one of the primary duties of the government in this country. At the same time, the preservation of Indian monuments was not simply a signifier of the "imperial burden" for him. The public articulation of this sentiment by Curzon also has to be juxtaposed with the legacy of government neglect that he inherited. One of the reasons why Curzon chose to constantly harp on the British obligation vis-à-vis archaeology was the plain necessity of generating requisite pressure on the Home Office so that more money and posts would be sanctioned by it. Appropriately, the Viceroy followed a dual policy. On the one hand, he chose to consistently reiterate in his speeches and addresses and on important occasions, the necessity of discharging the imperial government's obligations towards the conservation of "the most beautiful and perfect collection of monuments in the world." He paid special attention to the preservation and improvement of ancient monuments. On his tour, he inspected all the ancient sites in such a manner as no other Viceroy had ever done. To prove the necessity of British rule, examples were always given of the hostilities between the

Brahmins and Buddhists, the Hindus and Muslims and the Sikhs and Muslims. This attitude was the natural expression of the biased policy of the British. But Curzon seemed not to share this viewpoint and he had criticized Englishmen like William Bentick who wished to destroy the marble mausoleum of the Taj Mahal. To understand how Curzon gained popularity at the beginning of his career, it is necessary to read his speech made on February 6, 1900 (Appendix-I) at the annual meeting of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta.³ He outlined his general vision and the "duty of the Government in respect of Ancient Buildings in India."

On the other hand, he used his influential position with the Secretary of State to lobby for more money and posts for the Survey as a means of carrying out the pledge, publicly given by him. It was the Viceroy who took policy decisions while the Home Office tamely acceded to his requests. Within a few months of his arrival, Curzon, in May 1899, got George Hamilton to sanction an increase in the annual budget of the Survey from Rs. 61,000 to Rs. 88,450. This was followed on December 20, 1900 by a series of comprehensive proposals to the Secretary of State for the re-organisation of the Survey. In addition to requesting that the imperial government assume responsibility for the preservation of monuments and that a lakh of rupees be expended annually for archaeological work of special importance⁴, Curzon formally stated the urgent need for a Director:

The question of providing in a more satisfactory manner than is the case at present for the consideration of ancient remains of archaeological or historical interest has occupied our attention for some time past. We have come to the conclusion that this object can only be attained by the exercise of a larger measure of control on the part of the supreme government than has for some years been the case; and that for this purpose it will be necessary to appoint a highly qualified officer for a term of years to advise us as to the state of these monuments of antiquity, and as to the measures to be adopted for their conservation and generally to direct and control the working of the Archaeological Department in all its branches. We accordingly seek your Lordship's sanction to the creation for this purpose of an office under the title of Director General of Archaeology, for a period of five years.⁵

Curzon also used this dispatch to remind George Hamilton, Secretary of State for India, about the attacks of European scholars who had published sharply-worded critiques of the government's presumed apathy, as well as the desire

articulated in the Indian press for a more liberal imperial policy towards monuments of Indian antiquity. Hamilton gave his sanction. This came in a telegram to Curzon in May 1901. "I am willing to sanction Director General, Archaeology, experimentally for five years".⁶ Curzon had succeeded in getting the post revived. This obligation, which Curzon asserted and accepted on behalf of the government, was one of even more binding character in India than in many European countries. He said:

Abundant private wealth is available for the acquisition and conservation of monuments. Corporations, societies, endowments and trusts provide vast machinery that relieves the government of a large portion of its obligation. The historic buildings, the magnificent temples, therein inestimable works of art are invested with a publicity that to some extent saves them from the risk of discretion or the encroachments of decay. Here all is different. India is covered with the visible records of vanished dynasties of forgotten monarchs of persecuted and sometimes dishonoured creeds. These monuments are for the most part, though there are notable exceptions, in British territory and on soil belonging to the government. Many of them are in out-of-the-way places and are liable to the combined ravages of tropical climate, and exuberant flora, and very often a local and ignorant population, who see only in the ancient buildings the means of inexpensively raising a modern one for their own convenience.

All these circumstances explain the peculiar responsibility that rested upon the Government of India.⁷ Lord Curzon, the Viceroy himself, being a friend of archaeology, understood the need for a sound set-up of an Archaeological Survey which had been lacking since the time of James Burgess. The main job was to fill the post of Director General of Archaeology. The name, which was recommended by the British Museum, was of Sir John Marshall (knighted in 1914), a distinguished scholar, who had worked at archaeology for some years in Greece and Crete.⁸ It is a known fact that, even after leaving India, Curzon was always concerned about the archaeological projects started by him and took a personal interest in all matters related to them. He donated two silver lamps to be hung over the graves of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal.⁹ He was saddened by the news that the silver lamps donated by him to the tombs of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz had turned black from neglect. On April 4, 1905, he wrote to his wife Mary, that even if he had not achieved

anything else in India, his name was carved in indelible letters because of his preservation of archaeological monuments, which was enough to earn him praise and ensure his place in history. Even after his tenure as Viceroy was over, and he learnt that the Government of India wished to do away with several posts in the Archaeological Department because of a shortage of funds, he opposed the move in the London Times in October 1911. Supporting Curzon's policy, Lord Minto too wrote a letter to the Times. When Curzon took up this issue determinedly even in the House of Lords, it resulted in the decision that the post of Director General of Archaeology be retained. On December 29, 1910, in a letter to General Brarrow of the Madras Command, lamenting the state of British policy in India, he confessed that a large part of his heart would always be in India. Curzon was remembered in India in one context or another, long after he had left the country. An article in the newspaper *Chand* recalled Curzon:

In 1904, Lord Curzon passed the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act. Today there is an attempt to destroy the same law. What is said is that this call is being given in the name of an enhancement of civilisation and science. If it were physically possible, the English and the Americans would carry away the Ajanta and Ellora caves, the Taj, the *Qutub Minar*, *Adhai-din-ka-jhopda*, the Sanchi *stupa* and many other monuments. We are all familiar with the indifference of the Government of India. It was Lord Curzon's love for ancient buildings and a capable helping hand of officer John Marshall as the head of the Archaeological branch that many of the significant buildings which were on the verge of collapse were restored and given shape. The Viceroy himself toured and inspected the various ancient buildings, but the buildings, which drew his special attention, were the buildings at Agra.¹⁰

In a letter to the Secretary of State Lord Curzon himself went on to say:

I have supervised and given orders upon every single detail myself. By the time I leave India, I believe it may be said with truth that the Agra monuments will be best tended, just as they are also the most beautiful body of architectural remains in the world. In future I hope that Mr. Marshall, the Archaeologist whom you sent out to and by whom I have been quite favourably impressed, will be relieved of good deal of this labour and will supply the controlling and co-ordinating hand.¹¹

Most of the Viceroys who had been in India did not take any particular interest in this subject. Lord Curzon was perhaps the only one who was truly interested in the ancient monuments and archaeological sites in India. It was only during his tenure that the Archaeological Department made any progress at all. That he should have been the first Viceroy to visit the caves at Ajanta was indicative of the nature of British administration in India in the nineteenth century.¹²

A constant and active interaction was also established between the imperial government and various local authorities. That a dialogue with provincial administrators was sorely needed is evident from the ignorance that many British officers displayed on questions relating to archaeology, including someone as important as the Governor of Madras. This is evident from a tale recounted by Curzon in a letter (April 23, 1902) to George Hamilton, the Secretary of State: "To give you an illustration of the way in which archaeology has hitherto been regarded by local governments, I may mention that the other day I wrote to Ampthill and asked him to consult Mr. A. Rea, the Madras Official Archaeologist, as to the preservation of an Asoka inscription. He answered that neither the members of his Council nor his Chief Secretary were aware of its existence." There were many other remarkable ways in which this Viceroy of India laboured, often at great cost to his health and well-being, to successfully co-ordinate what was clearly a "monumental" task. At the same time, this policy was also part of a history that is more complex than a mere recounting of the technicalities of upkeep suggests. It is to this larger range of issues, which impinged upon and influenced the manner of conservation that I now turn.

Curzon's Conservationist Agenda: Motives and Methods

First, what were Curzon's motives in undertaking a vigorous conservation policy? Curzon's deep interest in matters pertaining to monuments is well known. Moreover, even before he became the Viceroy of India, conservation was a high on his list of priorities. As early as 1890, following his visit to Greece, he had publicly advocated and tried to persuade Gladstone to return the Parthenon marbles to their original site on the Acropolis of Athens.

In India, however, he articulated this concern for monuments in terms that were often pompous and patronising. Curzon claimed, as cited earlier as well, "I am Imperialist heart and soul. Imperial expansion seems to me to be an inevitable necessity and carries a noble and majestic obligation." But he intended to provide good administration and priority to Indian development. Good governance was also considered necessary because India was the focus of British interests and on her, Curzon believed the position of the British Empire depended in many ways, "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".¹³ One of the important instruments for making imperial governance seem more human and which, he believed, would foreground

its beneficence in India was the restoration of her architectural heritage. Curzon's speech at the temple town of Brindaban (December 5, 1899) illustrates this:

...your most ancient structure, the temple of Govind Deva, which I have seen described as the most impressive religious edifice erected by Hindu art in Northern India, also owes its restoration to the British Government, which, 25 years ago, allotted a sum of more than Rs. 30,000 to the task... it exemplifies what, in my opinion, is one of the primary duties of the government in this country.

This policy, it was hoped, would also help the British Raj in atoning for what was described by the Viceroy as "a century of British vandalism and crime" vis-à-vis Indian monuments. The natural and human factors involved in the despoliation of sub continental monuments were several; exuberant vegetation, illegal and unscientific excavation, indigenous as also British destruction and conversion of archaeological structures into offices and residences, lack of responsibility and of system, financial and supervisory, at the imperial and provincial levels. Curzon, however, singled out the era of "vandalism" inaugurated by the early phase of British rule in India, as being the most recent and widespread context of such despoliation. The structural and functional metamorphosis of many of India's magnificent medieval monuments into dingy governmental spaces has been vividly captured in Curzon's communications. In Lahore alone, without any apparent sense of incongruity, the *Diwan-i-Am* was serving as a hot weather dormitory for British soldiers while the *Moti Masjid* was a currency reserve treasury. The *Choti Khwabgah* was a church; Anarkali's tomb the Civil Secretariat Record Room cum library and the *Dai Anga Masjid* (also called the "Railway Mosque") the Railway Traffic Superintendent's office. Clearly, from the perspective of Viceregal policy, monuments needed to be restored and colonial desecration rolled back in order to provide a more "enlightened" face to, and a more cultured image of, British rule in India. Along with making the restoration of monuments an essential aspect of imperial beneficence, Curzon tried to make a further statement. The very enterprise of restoring historic buildings was a British responsibility and not a European one. Consequently, its sustenance could not, in any possible way, be provided by the organisation that his predecessor, Elgin, had warmly welcomed - a European association overseeing an "Indian Exploration Fund". Curzon's lack of enthusiasm for that proposal was because of his belief that continental scholars and travellers, as in the past, would use the opportunity to loot Indian antiquities for enriching the collections of European museums. This was a widely shared sentiment. In 1900, in a confidential letter, James Burgess had complained about French vandalism in the Gandhara region: "The British Museum possesses very few Gandhara sculptures, mostly presented by private individuals; in Paris, I hear, about a hundred pieces

representative of early Buddhist art from Swat and Yusufzai are to be exhibited - all brought home by a French traveller quite recently".¹⁴ More important, he used this letter to draw attention to a case of German "banditry" in Pagan, where Thomann Gillis had removed, slab by slab, the fresco paintings at the Theinmazi Pagoda and had tried to sell them to the Ethnological Museum of Berlin. Subsequently, at the instance of the Indian Government, this case of despoliation was taken up by the British ambassador at Berlin to whom the German Government admitted that Thomann Gillis had indeed offered for sale a collection of objects from Burma, including the frescoes mentioned by Burgess but "owing to the disproportionate amount of the price asked for, the offer was not accepted". A vigorous conservation policy along with the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904 would, it was hoped, help in stemming the flow of such antiquities from the subcontinent to European museums.

Secondly, which monuments came to be conserved in these years? Curzon's address on the Ancient Monuments Bill to the Legislative Council in Calcutta suggested that it was the duty of the Imperial Government to restore all "the great remains or groups of remains with which this country is studded from one end to the other". The Viceroy's noting on a Foreign Department file, however, reveals a more discriminating system. First, while the political horizon of the British government encompassed the eight provinces of India constituting British territory and the nearly 700 Native States, it was maintained, "Monuments in British territory have on the whole a prior claim to those in Native States". So, monuments came to be most systematically preserved in the 9,43,000 square miles under the direct sovereignty of the Crown, while the roughly 7,70,000 square miles falling within the expression "Native States" were relegated to a secondary position. Secondly, Curzon believed that "Monuments that are likely to be visited by large numbers of people have a prior claim to those in out of the way parts".

While he did not spell out the meaning of "visitors", this does not seem to have included worshippers at religious shrines. This is evident from the correspondence that was exchanged on the issue of restoring the Khajuraho temples. While the Director of Archaeology in India forcefully argued for a large financial outlay for conserving them, described by him as the "most famous group of Hindu temples in Northern India",¹⁵ Curzon was not very enthusiastic. This was because the Khajuraho temples did not fall within British territory nor were they visited very often - "I do not know if visitors are ever attracted to Khajuraho. I should imagine but rarely, though it is possible that the temples may attract Hindu pilgrims." Possibly, the term "visitors" only implied scholarly researchers, administrators and European travellers.¹⁶

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