


Aesthetics of Postcoloniality: An Insight into Town Planning and Architectural Practices of Madras Under the Colonial Rule

Kaninika Singh

Department of English Literature, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received in revised form: 07 Jul 2023; Accepted: 15 Aug 2023; Available online: 23 Aug 2023</p> <p>©2023 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p>  <p>Keywords— postcolonial aesthetics, colonial town planning, colonial architecture, Madras</p>	<p><i>This research paper delves into the aesthetics of town planning and architecture during colonial rule in India, with a focus on the city of Madras. The paper explores how the British colonial project enforced segregation based on race, resulting in the creation of the ‘White Town’ and the ‘Black Town’ that fit into the scheme of ‘divide and rule.’ Examining the implications of such spaces and architecture on the treatment of the native population and the postcolonial legacy that persists to this day, the paper highlights how town planning and architectural practices in Madras were used as tools of colonial power-play, enforcing racial divides and socio-political hierarchies. The research also delves into the creation of distinct European spaces, exclusive native neighbourhoods, and caste-specific localities defining the trade of each community with its distinct aesthetic. It also discusses the appropriation of Indian architectural elements in the Indo-Saracenic style by the British, aimed at legitimizing their rule and showcasing their cultural superiority while hypocritically introducing fortifications as a means to reinforce their differences. By analyzing historical accounts, architectural features, and urban planning in Madras, the paper offers insights into how the aesthetics of segregation and appropriation shaped the colonial landscape and continue to influence contemporary perceptions and spaces. It emphasizes the resilience of native aesthetics despite colonization and highlights the complex interplay between the colonizers' control and the colonized's agency in shaping their own spaces and identities. The research concludes with reflections on the lasting impact of colonial aesthetics and the evolving narratives of postcolonial India.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

“Suddenly the magician turns his ring and new has become old, plain is coloured, solid is tumbled down, the West has been swallowed up utterly by the East. Cross but one street and you are plunged in the native town.”

(George Steevens, *In India* 9)

From the accounts of Europeans travelling across India to those of native dwellers of the state, there is ample literary proof that points to the deep divide between the colonizers and the colonized. As the colonial power, Britain retained its clutches on India for not merely its spice trade under the garb of the East India Company but also to effectively plunder the Indian soil of its riches, including those socio-cultural in nature. Upon finding its dream of industrialization booming, it comes to us as no surprise that Britain would have aimed to expand its colonial project into India and introduce, in the most benign manner, the ideas of town planning, architecture, and effective urbanized spaces. Unbeknownst to the natives, the colonial project would come at an inarguably hefty cost— one that would predestine the aesthetic as a civilization for decades to come. Similar to how George Steevens described the divide between the spaces and social compositions of port cities in the quote mentioned above, India had been pieced out into segments that celebrated an aesthetic of marginalization. The spaces produced through enforced segregation based on the hierarchical structure of the colonizer above the colonized potentially created a proliferation of residential and workplaces that ingrained the concepts of discrimination. This was why Carl Nightingale remarked that the colonies of Britain “were the biggest builders of these divided cities” (Nightingale 668) that upheld the racial divide making it seem natural to the colonial scheme of things.

Given how the scheme of things had panned out around Kipling’s phrase, “White Man’s Burden,” racial division had always been an apparent part of the colonial expansionist ideology. Edward Said called it a behavioural product of the ideology of Imperialism which in itself referred to “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center



ruling a distant territory” (*Culture and Imperialism* 7) with the idea of civilizing the non-whites. He claimed that colonialism, “which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on a distant territory” (7). Thus, a mark of the implementation of British rule in India could be witnessed through how settlements were planned in towns and constructed— in simple words, the aesthetics used in town planning and architecture.

Despite the colonial attempts to distance the Europeans from the natives, an undeniably exclusive set of appropriated aesthetics also emanated from the sheer need for mutual dependency and interaction. These spaces and architectural models stand testimony to the inevitable transgression of the rigid divisions, or as Mitter puts it, “cultural crossovers” in his *Much Maligned Monsters* (Mitter 47). The current paper will look at the aesthetics of town planning and structures created under European rule using the city of Madras as a supplement. Furthermore, the paper will examine the implications of such spaces and how these practices reiterated life under colonial rule. In conducting such an analysis, the principles that underlie the creation of a postcolonial aesthetic of India will be highlighted, and their implications on the treatment of the natives will be examined.

II. AESTHETICS OF SEGREGATION: ‘WHITE TOWN’ AND ‘BLACK TOWN’ IN MADRAS

Fraught with problems of discrimination, segregation, marginalization, and prejudices, the towns in colonial India were markers of the racial superiority of the European masters. Given the questions of aesthetics of space, domestic life was dependent on the colour and nationality of the individual. Though such a scheme of planning cities was not uncommon in other colonies, it was primarily Indian cities like Madras that officially began to designate residential and social spaces on a racial basis (Nightingale 48). In such a sense, the towns and architecture came to be viewed under the garb of

aesthetics of segregation where livelihoods and, in turn, socio-politics came to be dependent on the whims and fancies of British town planning.

The arrangement of privileged European neighbourhoods into what came to be known as “White Town” in comparison to the Indian ones, which was called “Black Town” in Madras, Nightingale called these the “colour lines” that “contrasted places sharply” (48). Many a time, these spatial divisions resulted from social control and military garrisons as protective forces for the British population, such as the emergence of Fort St. George. However, there were also instances where segregation was imposed due to sprawling economic activities, as seen in the creation of commercial spaces around the fort (Kumar 35). Irrespective of the underlying causative factors, marginalization was broadly the crux of aesthetics stemming from the spaces and architecture in the city. As Said wrote, “For all kinds of reasons, it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others” (Said 7), the colonial project of town planning produced important implications for

the native population of Madras which prevails even in the current century.

Kosambi and Brush observed the existence of a ‘Schematic Spatial Model’ in the port cities of the colonial era, and Madras was a typical example of it (Kosambi & Brush 33). In the seventeenth century, beginning from the waterfront, the White Town was planned as a “nucleus of urban settlement” demarcated by a purely European occupancy, followed by predominantly European commercial spaces, and finally, an entry into the Black Town (33-35). Within such designated European spaces, there was a “prodigality of space,” as observed by Nair (1228), as the bungalows of the British officers would be surrounded by barracks of European soldiers in order to produce segregation from the somewhat alien natives. This produced an aesthetic of postcoloniality where the town planning culminated into somewhat concentric arcs—the center being the European residential space and forts followed by an outward-going stream of Indian-occupied spaces by increasing degrees of inferiority as seen in Figure 1:

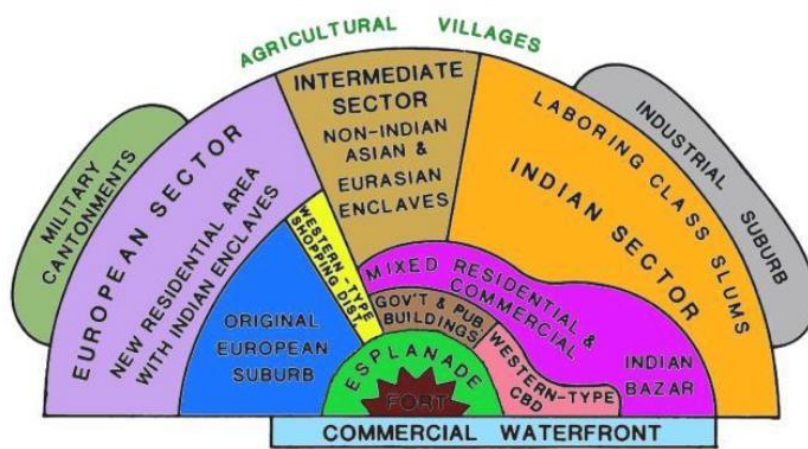


Fig.1: The aesthetics of colonial town planning in Madras

Chattopadhyay observed that drawing on a postcolonial aesthetic, the predominantly European areas consisted of sparsely distributed buildings, open spaces, and administrative, posh structures in contrast with the native dwellings, which were close-knit and centered around bazaars and temples (Chattopadhyay 155). Through such exclusively produced divisions of Madras, the aesthetic of segregated living became a testimony to postcoloniality, where the

rift between the two towns became representative of colonial discrimination.

It is important to note that the initial stages of Madras’ town planning were undertaken to accommodate the Europeans into secure yet commercially firm spaces. Hence, the Black Town only developed as an aesthetic of ‘other’ to provide services and trade to their colonizers—the space occupied by Indians was never planned and emerged due to the powerplay of the British settlement. Kumar observed that

Black Town was not the original native settlement; instead, it flocked to the “neatly laid out grid patterns” beyond the White Town (Kumar 27). By planning the city of Madras with European ease in mind, the aesthetic of segregation could be viewed in the ‘othering’ of the natives— given the margins of their

settlements, the British led to the creation of an entire town unflinchingly based on their colonial ‘superiority.’

Aesthetics of the Spatial Divides: Fortifications in Madras

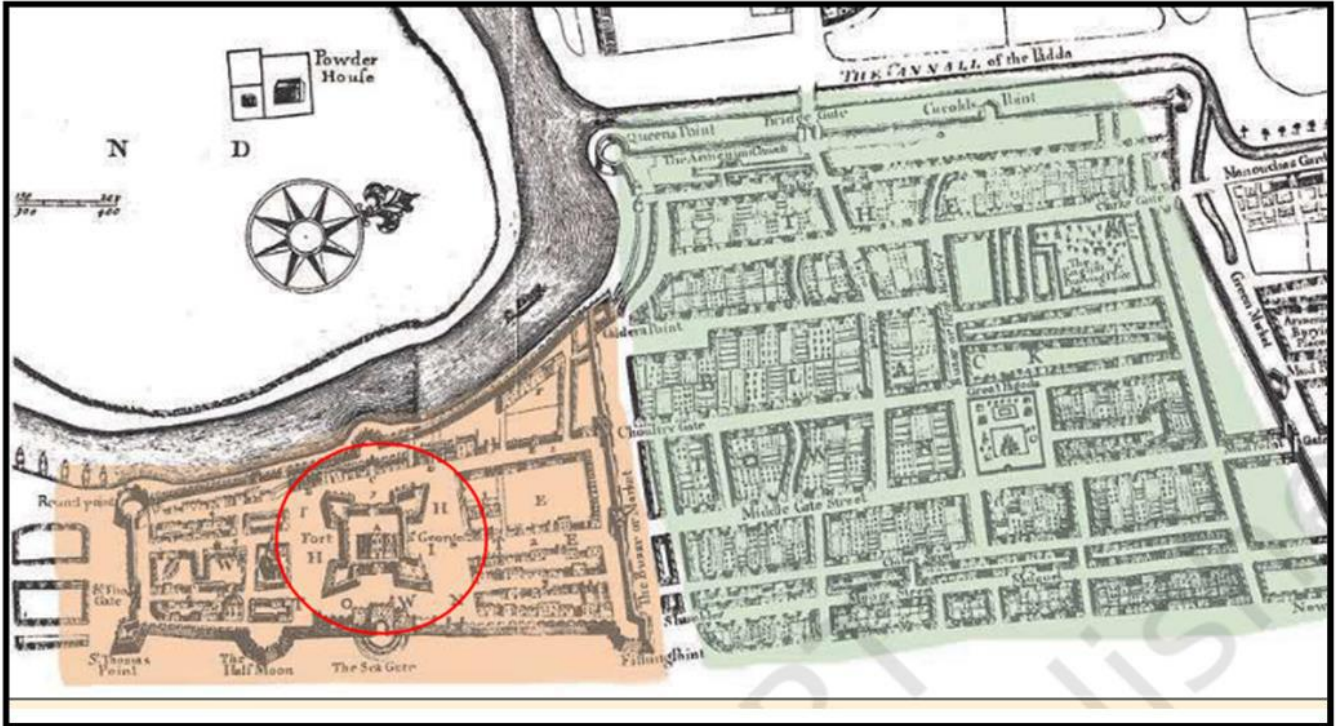


Fig.2: White Town and Black Town of Madras

Making a “move from its historical positioning of colonial complicity towards productive postcolonial spatial narrative” (Jacobs 15), Madras was fraught with various colonial manifestations in terms of town planning and architecture. The use of Fort St. George became a sprawling aesthetic of the ideology of racist boundaries— not only was the fort a figurative symbol of the towering rule of the British, but it was also a literal wall separating the European White Town from the native Black Town. The circle in Figure 2 depicts Fort St. George with the White Town on its left and the grid-like streets of the old Black Town on its right. However, it is interesting to note that the old Black town was demolished in the mid-1700s as a precautionary method of segregating the Indians from the British— an account of the aesthetic of marginalizing the natives for the sake of ‘effective town planning.’ In its place, the officially designated plan of a Black Town was

created to “balance the foreign influence of the street pattern” such that the aesthetic of the first Black town was to be “provided with a centrally located temple and market” farther from the European spaces (Love qtd. in Kumar 27).

The demolished space, as Kosambi and Brush observed, was turned into an “open esplanade” that would surround the fort as it does even today (Kosambi & Brush 33). Such an open space maintained a distance from the Indian dwellings while simultaneously producing a ‘buffer zone’ to neutralize any attack on the Europeans, thereby establishing the insecurity produced by the native population in the surrounding areas. The administrative and commercial activities centered around the fort as it provided a haven for the Europeans, while the residential spaces were formed a few miles away (34). As mentioned earlier, the white spaces were aesthetically pleasing and were sparsely populated in contrast to the native spaces, which

had begun to overcrowd. The Black Town across the fortifications was planned using preexisting casteism where “separate streets” were allocated to different communities— a postcolonial powerplay of ‘divide and rule’ as an aesthetic. The streets lacked space and were driven by a “hectic pace, becoming more and more congested” while losing their shape to a “trapezoid-shaped crisscrossed narrow parallel streets creating a gridiron pattern” (Muthiah). Fraught with “congestion, crowds, noise, filth and total indifference to urban laws,” the Black Town found its aesthetic value in being the ‘other’— a town based on the idea of ‘lacking,’ much like its inhabitants, of being ‘civil’ (Staszak).

Gayatri Spivak viewed such a creation of division using the binaries reinstated by Fort St. George as an engagement in “consolidating the self of Europe by obliging the native to cede the space of the other on his home ground” (Spivak 253). Through the marginalized space offered beyond the fort, the Indian dwellings were anything but spacious as an undying aesthetic that does not fail to deliver itself even today. With such narrow streets, chaotic bazaars, and temple-centric residential spaces, the Black Town became a host for much more discrimination due to recurrent outbreaks of cholera epidemics since the late 1800s. Such a health hazard led to the pressure into building a division within the Black Town to allocate space for the rather wealthy merchants coming in direct contact with the British against the much more densely populated areas. Such a division manifested itself into the aesthetic of segregation with another wall, referred to as the ‘pagoda,’ that bifurcated the Indian wellings further (Nightingale 53). It is inarguably a product of postcolonial sensibilities that the Indian spaces came to be associated with more discrimination than ever now that it was validated through a ‘superior’ looking English taste. Casteist colonies of Hindu alliances, as they exist even today, were formed, and the ‘pagoda’ paved the way for the “untouchable” Pariars and Muslims to be marginalized further (54)— this not only gave rise to minuscule caste-based aesthetics within the Black Town but also defined an insurmountable economic rift that Paul Maylam labelled “fiscal segregation.” Thus, the colonial idea of

fortifications in Madras brought about a strange aesthetic pattern, one that of segregation based on race which in turn reinforced spatial segregation based on caste.

III. THE AESTHETICS OF BLACK TOWN

The existence of two broad caste categories was found in Black Town, namely the Right-Hand castes and the Left-Hand castes— the former was related to agriculture and trading agrarian commodities, and the latter was associated with artisanal or workmanship trades. The colonial narrative strengthened the rift between the two using the aesthetic of segregation catalyzing forts, walls, and separate streets. As Kumar observed, “The greater the degree of segmentation, the more conspicuous [was] the persistence of dual divisions in the Black town” (Kumar 38)— it became a colonial policy to induce not just racial divides between themselves and the Indians but also to propagate casteist divisions to deviate tension away from the White Town.

Within the Black Town, the aesthetic became highly polarized between the two communities, where using plaster on exterior walls as an architectural element became an issue of social respectability and economic stature (37). This was derived from the colonial practice of literally ‘whitening’ the White Town to produce the aesthetic of being superior to the natives. As noted by Nightingale, the European houses were plastered with ‘*chunam*’ made from mollusc shells to make the dwellings brighter and more elegant (Nightingale 55). Such an architectural element produced an aesthetic of viewing white as a representation of higher stature and thus was mimicked by the upper castes in the Black Town as well. In addition to this, the whitening agent gave the British houses an air of marble finishing, a trend that followed for a long time in the creation of architectural ventures in Madras such as the Ripon Building or the Zion Church— an aesthetic of colonial superiority of the whites over the natives.

Within the Black Town, various caste-specific aesthetics came up in abundance: the areas granted to the dyers and bleachers called ‘Washermanpet’ as well as ‘Chetpet,’ the area of the boatmen called ‘Royapuram,’ or the area of

the weavers called 'Chintadripet.' The town planning brought about caste-specific divisions to "ensure continuity in their commercial ventures of profit-making" for the colonizers (Kumar 39). Elaborating on how the town space was planned and architecture created, Chintadripet is perhaps a vivid example. As seen in Figure 3, the idea of Black Town being constructed in a grid pattern becomes more explicit, along with which the specific aesthetic of Chintadripet can be viewed in the architecture. Open rooms supported by narrow pillars in continuation were a trademark of the area. The

aesthetic came from the community's requirements to weave, requiring a specific block of space for the same. Similarly, in Figure 4, there is a representation of the weavers in c. 1860, where the town planning to create open spaces for spinning and weaving was taken into consideration. Kumar called this a colonial attempt "which provided opportunities for the indigenous population to advance both their individual interest and that of their caste" (39) while maintaining ample profits for the British coffers.



Fig.3: Chintadripet Architecture
(Picture from The Hindu Archive)



Fig.4: Open Spaces in Town Planning for Weavers of Chintadripet
(Picture curated by penbugs.com)

In a similar vein, the aesthetic of the areas designated by the British as 'Dhoby

Khanas' was suited to its community. As seen in Figure 5, Chetpet, one of the largest colonies of

washermen to offer laundry services to the British, had a peculiar style of planning and architecture. Under the command of Sir George Moore, the area's aesthetic consisted of sloping structures that acted as washing stones, parallel-running drains, small square segments for each washerman to work, and open spaces running with clotheslines for drying. The area only experienced a renovation in the early 1980s when the government allocated more space to them in the form of rooms and terraces (Parthasarthy). As seen in Figure 5, the cramped spaces allocated for the washermen to work were immediately followed by residential dwellings. In the aesthetic of such colonies where overcrowding and dirt became a part, the natives became the service providers to the colonizers and dependent on being the 'other' who would engage in manual labour. Makhijani observed this as a construct that "served to reinforce a system of subjugation" (Makhijani 274) which led to the legitimization of a socio-political hierarchy of the British over the natives, thereby viewing Indians as 'inferior' subjects in the postcolonial discourse.



Fig.5: The Chetpet Colony in Madras
(Picture by Rajagopalan Sarangapani)

IV. AESTHETICS OF APPROPRIATION: INDO-SARACENIC ARCHITECTURE

Contemporarily known for its Indo-Saracenic architecture, Madras emerged as an aesthetic space of not just segregation but also the inevitable hybridity of cultures during the colonial era. Ashcroft argued that creating such an amalgamation of cultures is found "within the contact zone produced by colonization" (Ashcroft 118). Such a unique composition of Hindu and Mughal architecture and construction was

combined to produce important places of heritage by the colonizers. The reason behind such a benign idea was not to cater to the indigenous aesthetics but to establish themselves as legitimate rulers of the land (Sheeba et al. 1737). Given the multicultural context of India, a ubiquitous mixture of aesthetics was inevitable. First used in the nineteenth century, the style of Indo-Saracenic architecture was born out of the Mughal-Turkish aesthetic of beams, arches, and minarets in proportion with the Hindu aesthetic of *chattris* and *jaalis*. However, the idea of such an amalgamation was conceived by the British architects as a means of appropriation, who pursued the aesthetic with the use of an advanced English style of engineering using iron bars, steel, and concrete (1737).

Elaborating on their stance on the 'White Man's Burden,' the British used native elements of the architectural aesthetic and combined them with what was assumed to be 'advanced' and 'Western' in order to create structures for government and official purposes. In doing so, the colonizers established the apparent "mediocrity" sensed in the South Indian architecture and often emphasized their own "perfection" and "racial pedigree" in creating an aesthetic (Panicker 27). In an account by James Fergusson, the postcolonial mentality of superiority can be observed:

In some parts of north, matters have not sunk so low as in the Madras Presidency, but in the south, civil architecture as a fine art is quite extinct, and though sacred architecture still survives in a certain queer, quaint form of temple-building, it is of so low a type that it would hardly be a matter of regret if it, too, ceased to exist, and the curtain dropped over the graves of both, as they are arts that practically have become extinct. (*The History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* 385)

As is evident from Fergusson's writings, the British Raj did not find a potential aesthetic value in the monuments and architectural

practices of the Indians. Nevertheless, to one's surprise, we come across the facade of the Indo-Saracenic style of construction being propagated by them. The belief that "everything great in architecture had already been established" was perpetuated, undermining the Indian aesthetic (Panicker 30). However, creating an Indo-Saracenic style of architecture promised power to an empire that was waning. Hence, appropriating the local culture to legitimize the Crown's rule was what brought about the aesthetic. Looking at Figures 6 and 7 of the Chepauk Palace and Madras High Court, one can establish the Indianness of the appropriated aesthetic—the architectural features like the domes, minarets, *jaalis*, and arched gateways accompanied by the European use of lime plaster as in the White Town, steel, poured concrete, and iron bars (Sheeba et al. 1737). Such was the aesthetic of appropriation where the colonizers marginalized and 'othered' the natives yet used their socio-religious principles of architectural designs to legitimize colonialism.



Fig.6: Chepauk Palace in Madras



Fig.7: Madras High Court

Referred to as an 'eclectic' style of architecture, the Indo-Saracenic aesthetic reflected the might of its benefactor, the British. Upon witnessing the multiple uprisings in 1857, the colonial government sought to make it appear that the British were indeed the rulers for which perpetuating the image of the empire's strength had become critical. Architectural aesthetics came to their aid when it became representative of the authenticity of the colonial empire by relating itself to the legacies of previous rulers such as the Mughals or being viewed with a majoritarian religion such as the Hindus (Jeyraj 113). Through appropriating significant features of the two, the British Empire brought forth an apparently 'advanced' style of architectural aesthetic which not simply justified their dominance as colonizers to the natives but also connected them to the rulers of the past. Such an appropriation led to the reinvention of India's architectural aesthetics. It paved the way for the narrative where the colonizers 'othered' the native style yet reproduced it with a colonial 'correctness' associated with an Imperial ideology. By bringing forth modernism subtly disguised in India's own aesthetic, the British made their style more palatable for the colonized subjects.

In conclusion, it is evident that the utilization of town planning and architectural practices held a strongly postcolonial sentiment, one that we experience to date. By taking the pan-Indian aesthetic for granted, the colonial rule created a sense of segregation, marginalization, and an 'othered' state of identity for the native subjects. However, irrespective of the imposition of colonial rule, Indian spaces like the Black Town flourished in their aesthetics and held their prominence even in the current era. The use of fortifications, walls, and segregated town planning ought to have created an unflinching rift between the colonizers and the colonized. However, it also forged the natives' collective struggles for the power to create their own legitimate and prevalent aesthetics of perception and spaces. Despite the attempt at appropriating the previously loathed style of Indian architecture, the colonizers succumbed to the taste of the Indian aesthetic, perhaps a

postcolonial win aiding India's gradual independence.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ashcroft, B., G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- [2] Jacobs, J.M. *Edge of Empire: postcolonialism and the city*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- [3] Jeyraj, George. "Indo Saracenic Architecture in Chennai." Chennai: Hindustan University.
- [4] John, Haritha. "Kochi's Historic Dhobi Khana, Run by Tamils, May Be Hung out Dry." *The Quint*, 11 June 2016, <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/kochis-historic-dhobi-khana-run-by-tamils-may-be-hung-out-dry>.
- [5] Kosambi, Meera and Brush, John E. "Three Colonial Port Cities in India." *Geographical Review*, Vol. 78, No. 1, 1988, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/214304>.
- [6] Kumar, M. Satish. *Idioms, Symbolism and Divisions: Beyond the Black and White Towns in Madras*, 2006.
- [7] Love, Henry Davidson. *Vestiges of Old Madras 1640-1800*, Vol 2, 1913.
- [8] Makhijani, Anshika. "The Colonial Otherness in E.M. Forster's A Passage to India." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)*, 4(2), 2019, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.4.2.13>
- [9] Mitter, Partha. *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.
- [10] Muthiah, S. "Forgotten George Town." *Return to Frontpage*, The Hindu, 19 May 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/society/forgotten-george-town/article5764328.ece>.
- [11] Nair, Janaki. "Past Perfect: Architecture and Public Life in Bangalore." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 4, 2002.
- [12] Nightingale, Carl. "The Transnational Contexts of Early Twentieth-Century American Urban Segregation." *Journal of Social History*, Vol.39, no.3, 2006.
- [13] Panicker, Shaji. 'Indian Architecture' and the Production of a Postcolonial Discourse: A Study of *Architecture + Design* (1984-1992), University of Adelaide, 2008.
- [14] Parthasarthy, Anusha. "Survivors of Time: Chetpet Dhobikhana - the Century-Old Dhobi Ghat." *Return to Frontpage*, The Hindu, 3 Apr. 2012, [https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/history-and-culture/survivors-of-time-](https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/history-and-culture/survivors-of-time-chetpet-dhobikhana-the-century-old-dhobi-ghat/article3276981.ece)
- [15] Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, 1994, https://monoskop.org/images/f/f9/Said_Edward_Culture_and_Imperialism.pdf
- [16] Sheeba, J, and John T Mesiah Dhas. "A STUDY ON INDO-SARACENIC ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE." *International Journal of Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 118(22), 2018, <https://www.acadpubl.eu/hub/2018-118-22/articles/22c/32.pdf>.
- [17] Shekhar, Laasya, et al. "World's First Indo-Saracenic Building, Right Here in Chennai, Set to Regain Old Glory." *Citizen Matters, Chennai*, 25 July 2021, <https://chennai.citizenmatters.in/restoration-of-humayun-mahal-photos-12459>.
- [18] Spivak, G. C. "The Rani of Sirmur: an essay in reading the archives." *History and Theory*, 24 (3), 1985.
- [19] Staszak, Jean-François. "Other/Otherness." *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Elsevier, 2008, <https://www.unige.ch/sciences-societe/geo/files/3214/4464/7634/OtherOtherness.pdf>.
- [20] Stevens, George. *In India*, Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1899, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40007297?seq=1&cid=pdf->
- [21] Thirumalai, Venkatarangan. "Heritage Walk to Chintadripet, Chennai." *Venkatarangan Blog*, 24 Apr. 2020, <https://venkatarangan.com/blog/2014/03/heritage-walk-to-chintadripet-chennai/>.
- [22] V, Mahesh, et al. "Photos: Exploring Chennai's Forgotten Heritage in Chintadripet." *Citizen Matters, Chennai*, 25 July 2021, <https://chennai.citizenmatters.in/chintadripet-heritage-walk-and-history-14535>.