The Red Fort - From Imperial Palace to Colonial Military Garrison*

Ms Anisha Shekhar Mukherji**

Introduction

It is a pleasure and an honour to be at the United Service Institution – of which I have known since long largely through my father, Lieutenant General Chandra Shekhar and his association with it – and to speak to its members about the Red Fort, the subject of my research and writing since more than 10 years. An instantly recognizable image of the Fort is its Lahori Gate, atop which the tricolour Indian National Flag waves. Each Independence Day, it is this view that we salute, that is telecast throughout the Country and printed on the front pages of our newspapers. An overwhelming focus on this image of the Red Fort, as a national icon, has deflected attention away from its historical background and unique conceptual design. A design which not only inspired at different times, all manner of art and architecture within and beyond the Mughal Empire but also attracted visitors and invaders alike from around the world, and earned the Fort even after its heydays the recognition of being 'the Most Magnificent Palace in the East' from the pioneering British historian, James Fergusson.

For most of us such a term is unexpected, even unwarranted. The Red Fort has transformed so much since it was established that we do not realise that even the familiar view of its ramparts from where the Prime Minister addresses the Nation, is actually the antithesis of the Fort's original design. Originally the entrance to the Lahori Gate, in the reign of the 5th Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, was straight and open to view, in keeping with Shah Jahan's actual and metaphorical accessibility to his people. If, 350 years ago, the inhabitants of Shahjahanabad stood at the Lahori Bazaar (now known as the Chandni Chowk) and looked towards the Fort, they would have been in a straight axis to their Emperor's throne in the Diwan-e-Am, the Hall of Public Audience, where, if in residence, he sat every morning and evening.

The wall in front of the Lahori Gate which we see today – as well as that in front of the other main entrance into the Fort, the Delhi Gate – was made on the orders of Shah Jahan's son, Aurangzeb, shortly after he defeated his brothers in the battle for the Mughal Throne, and imprisoned his ailing father at the Agra Fort. Shah Jahan is reported to have then written to him, "Dear Son, you have made the Fort a bride and put a veil upon her face". All representations of the Red Fort since then have been defined by this forbidding 'veil' in front of its public Gates, which was made even more opaque by the British during their takeover of the Fort in 1857, about 200 years after the founding of the Fort.

I would like to draw aside this 'veil' today to explain the Fort's original design, as well as the transformation of this design over time, especially during and after the Great War of 1857. This is not an easy task. Only about 10 per cent of the Red Fort exists within its walls today. Visualising its original form and function is, therefore, possible only by piecing together available fragments of different sources that, at best, illustrate only some parts of the vast and complex Fort – official court chronicles, Mughal miniatures, archival paintings, travelogues, photographs, drawings, etc. and most importantly the few original Mughal buildings that still exist in the Fort.

The present internal arrangement of the Fort is the result of a radical transformation effected 150 years ago by the British when they deliberately demolished more than eighty five per cent of its pavilions, colonnades, gardens, gateways and courtyards after their victory over the last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah Zafar. Barracks for the British army stationed within the Fort were constructed on the cleared areas. The few Mughal structures that escaped demolition were desecrated and looted of their valuable gilded copper domes, precious stones and carved marble panels, and used as military prisons, canteens, mess lounges, hospitals. Even after being restored in the early 20th century, to present the Fort as a showpiece to visiting British royalty, these were mere shadows of their former selves. They continue to exist today as a strange mélange of a few forlorn pavilions, whose beautiful proportions and craftsmanship are revealed only after careful examination.

What was then, the original profile and form of the Red Fort?

The Fort's original design was determined by its location in the larger area of Delhi as well as the political conditions at the time of its establishment (refer to Map 1).

Map 1: Plan of the Red Fort showing the configuration of built and open spaces before 1857, based on a 1850 Map of Shajahanabad.

It was positioned furthest away from the dip in the almost continuous Aravalli Ridge on the northwest and, therefore, from the traditional direction of invading armies. The large piece of virtually flat land chosen for the Fort and the new capital city of Shahjahanabad lay between the Ridge and the river Yamuna, and had thus, two natural defences. The Fort was planned on the eastern end of Shahjahanabad alongside the Yamuna and adjacent to Salimgarh, a 16th century island Fortress established by Salim Shah, the son of Sher Shah Sur, the Afghan ruler who had defeated Shah Jahan's great-grandfather, Emperor Humayun. Built at a node where it controlled important routes to Delhi and beyond

– the road south to Agra and the Deccan; the Grand Trunk Road northwest to Lahore and Kabul and east to Bengal;the river route towards the fertile and rich Gangetic plains – Salimgarh was of great strategic importance. This importance, recognised and used by both Humayun and Jahangir, Shah Jahan's father, was efficiently incorporated into the new Red Fort by locating it just next to Salimgarh and connecting the two through a guarded gateway, accessed from an earlier bridge constructed on the orders of Jahangir.

These precautions were taken as a matter of course. Shah Jahan's primary reason for building his new imperial city and Fort in the mid-17th century at Delhi, the traditional capital of many earlier influential rulers of North India (as well as briefly that of his own dynasty) was to showcase the riches and skills of his extensive and stable Empire. He, thus, instructed his architects and master-craftsmen to design the Red Fort – which like the Taj Mahal was created at the peak of his unrivalled architectural patronage – as the showpiece of the Mughal Empire.

The Red Fort, far more complex than even the Taj, was therefore much more than just an imperial residence. It was additionally designed to be the cultural and urban focus of Shahjahanabad, an elaborate background to formal court ceremonies, an administrative and political core, a manufacturing centre with karkhanas, a recreational space, and a habitation for trusted attendants and soldiers – a sort of Rashtrapati Bhawan, North and South Block, Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, Cantonment, Mandi House, etc. all in one. To put this into context, we can compare the Fort with the Escorial, one of the largest palaces in Europe, constructed in the mountains above Madrid in 1563. Though its size at 204 metres by 162 metres made it closer than most other renaissance royal buildings to the scale of a small city, the Escorial was five times smaller in area than even part of the Red Fort occupied by just Shah Jahan and his family!

Shah Jahan's palaces and gardens, the actual imperial residential domain of the Fort, were at the eastern end of the Fort. Furthest away from the well-guarded high public Gates within moats, surrounded by impenetrable walls with continuous inner terraces designed for patrolling, and with an intervening area occupied by the resident military, these were made triply secure. The possibility of 'in-house' threats from disloyal family members or servants was taken care of by an elite cadre of guards, and by a complex series of buildings, courtyards and walls, which protected the Emperor. Thus, though the Emperor's Throne in the Diwan-e-Am – where he made his main public appearances – was visible from a great distance away, it was impossible to access it directly. A series of railings around the Throne and Hall prevented those standing in the assembly from coming close to the Emperor in his Throne Chamber, which was a separate elevated room within the Hall that was entered through a guarded private back route. Even the Diwan handed up petitions and gifts or received firmans from the lower level. In fact, on the one occasion that Shah Jahan decided to forgo the safety of his Throne Chamber and descend to the floor of Hall, he narrowly escaped an attempt on his life by a disaffected courtier!

The private quarters of the Emperor beyond the Diwan-e-Am were designed as buildings within two or three walled courtyards or gardens, entered through gateways barred to all except a few. Even the Emperor's family and close advisors entered only at specific times in a day or on specific occasions during the year. His adult sons were deputed to distant parts of the Empire as governors, and granted independent mansions in Shahjahanabad. His daughters, wives, and young grandchildren who were themselves vulnerable, stayed within the Fort in areas separated from the Emperor's quarters, but designed in a similar manner with walled courtyards within courtyards. How effective this maze was is evident from a story related by a Portuguese maid to Francois Bernier, a French resident of the city in Aurangzeb's reign. According to this story, a young man was brought into the pavilions of Princess Roshanara Begum, Aurangzeb's sister, but could not be safely escorted out by her attendants. Left to himself, he wandered about all night without finding his way out. Discovered in the morning by the Aurangzeb's guards, he was arrested and punished—by being thrown down to the bank from the high river-side walls of the Fort.

These banks across the Yamuna were agricultural fields with little habitation, while the entire City's riverside boundary was designed with many gardens. The Emperor's quarters and those of his family thus not only had privacy but also a better micro-climate with cool river breeze. A private gateway on the Fort's river side walls helped to safely and quickly enter or leave the Fort and City on boats; as when, Shah Jahan sailed down from Agra on the occasion of the Red Fort's inauguration. The large river bank was additionally used for spectacles such as elephant fights which the Emperor watched from a balcony in his private quarters. Every morning at sunrise, the residents of Shahjahanabad came for the darshan ceremony to the bank below this balcony, from where they offered respects to Shah Jahan. The bank between the Yamuna and the Fort was thus an important space for such activities, and also necessary because of the river's seasonal flooding each monsoon. At such times, the Yamuna served as an additional defence for the Red Fort.

Thus, despite the fact that the Fort was designed primarily for display, it worked effectively as a place for defence, a stronghold and sanctuary. Though its design made it appear that Shah Jahan was at all times accessible, in actual fact, the organisation of the spaces within the Fort, and the strict codes of entering and using these different spaces meant that there were many barriers that had to be breached if anybody actually wished to harm him.

How did the Red Fort transform over time?

It was Aurangzeb, Shah Jahan's son and successor who, after a bitter and bloody fight, introduced another line of defence in the Red Fort's boundaries soon after he ascended the Throne in 1658. He blocked the straight axis into the main public Gate and made secondary gateways, as well as a triangular moat in front of a Water-gate on the Eastern face of the Fort. Aurangzeb also made some changes in the internal organisation of the Fort. His adult sons, instead of staying in mansions in Shahjahanabad, were given quarters under Aurangzeb's surveillance within the Fort's northwestern parts adjoining Salimgarh.

These additional arrangements were necessary because of Aurangzeb's alienating many inhabitants and nobles

by his actions of imprisoning his ailing father and publicly humiliating and ordering the beheading of his popular eldest brother, Dara Shikoh; as well as his use of the Red Fort and Salimgarh for imprisoning political rivals such as his younger brother Murad Baksh, and his nephew Sulaiman Shikoh, before finally getting them killed. In allowing adult sons to stay within the Fort while limiting their freedom, Aurangzeb set a precedent. Practically all the later Mughal emperors followed his example, and instead of a single, strong authority, territorial divisions were created within the Fort.

Later, Aurangzeb permanently left Delhi to battle against the Rajputs and then moved on to the Deccan. His son and successor, Bahadur Shah I, did not ever inhabit the Red Fort as Emperor. For almost 30 years, the Red Fort was a mere residence for those of the Emperor's family left behind while he was in camp—a sort of 'separated family quarters'. In this intervening period neither were there many soldiers to guard the Fort, nor were the original strict codes followed. When finally the Mughal emperors returned to Delhi to reign from here again, they did not have the authority or the foresight to enforce the rules that made the complex maze of spaces within the Fort safe. Thus, weak emperors such as Jahandar Shah and Farrukhsiyar were imprisoned with impunity within the Fort by their powerful ministers, and even murdered here.

In the reign of a later ruler such as Muhammad Shah, the entire code of spatial use inside the Fort was reversed. Nadir Shah, the King of Persia who invaded Delhi, was allowed into the innermost domains of the Fort, and invited to stay inside the Emperor's own personal quarters. Such public capitulation coupled with the already reduced standards in the recruitment of soldiers and officials, along with the shift in the Yamuna's course away from the Fort, and changes in the methods and implements of fighting, weakened the effectiveness of the Fort's original design. This is why it was possible for the Marathas and Jats in 1759 to damage the imperial quarters and bombard the Fort from the riverside with three European guns.

By the time the British East India Company established its official presence in Delhi, after its help was enlisted by the then Emperor Shah Alam II in 1803 to fight against the Marathas, the area around Shahjahanabad was frequently subject to attacks and the Red Fort was overpopulated but insufficiently protected. Shah Alam's own family comprised above 500 women and nearly 70 children, yet his guards and sons could not prevent the Rohilla rebel, Ghulam Qadir from digging up the floors of the Emperor's quarters in search of treasure, or even blinding the old Emperor on failing to find any treasure.

After their victory over the Marathas in the Battle of Delhi, the British re-titled Shah Alam II 'King of Delhi', and confined his civil and criminal jurisdiction to the boundaries of the Fort while only allowing him revenue from a portion of the territories on the Yamuna's banks. The British, after establishing themselves in important parts of Shahjahanabad, primarily along the coveted river banks and along the Ridge, later also moved into part of the Fort. Their presence here was limited to the Lahori Gate area, where a British Commandant of Guard was stationed. He was allowed in to the King's courts and gardens, though not into the quarters of the King's family. So, while the British who now controlled fiscal and administrative responsibilities, thought it worthwhile to strengthen the walls and gates of Shahjahanabad, they refused to release funds for the repair or maintenance of the Fort. Thus, the organisation, use, codes of access of the spaces and structures within the Fort, were weakened and transformed.

How did the spatial and political transformation of the Red Fort affect the events of 1857 and after?

The Red Fort as the symbol of the erstwhile power of the imperial Mughals and the seat of the then Mughal King, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was the natural focus for the soldiers from Meerut who spearheaded the fighting against the British at Delhi in 1857. These soldiers came right up to the eastern walls of the Fort after crossing the Bridge of Boats over the Yamuna, and first tried to gain entrance from the Fort's private river-gate. Bahadur Shah, however, sent word to Captain Douglas, the British Commandant of Guard stationed inside the Fort. He, from the King's private balcony, commanded the soldiers to leave. They, however entered the City's river gates and made their way in through the Lahori Gate and a gateway of Salimgarh, using the dried up moat and the decreased security around the Fort to their advantage.

After convincing the King of their cause, the soldiers first targeted the British in the Fort as well as in the administrative and judicial institutions, residences, and cantonments around – particularly in Daryaganj, Kashmiri Gate and Chandni Chowk – and barred the entrances to the Fort and Shahjahanabad. However, the onset of the monsoon coupled with the collapse of the bridge across the Yamuna made the passage of their reinforcements into the City, which arrived mainly from the east, difficult. The British reinforcements, on the other hand, came from the land routes northwest across the Ridge, and they mounted an attack from these directions. In the battle for control over Shahjahanabad, its western and northern parts were subjected to maximum damage and the Fort, positioned as it was on the eastern end, was protected to some extent by Salimgarh which commanded a wide circuit for firing on British positions north of the City walls.

Within the Red Fort, it was the Princes – residing as they were in mansions on the river-front as well as within nodal public parts of the Fort – rather than the King, who took key decisions. The King's reduced coffers also made it difficult for him to fund the expense of battle, which led to infighting and made it easy for treacherous members to tamper with the guns on the Salimgarh bastion. The British, on the other hand, with more unified control, many more resources, and steady reinforcements succeeded in advancing into the City, especially after the arrival of more aid early in September 1857.

During the last few days of battle, the King escaped with his sons from his private Gateway on the Yamuna bank through the river route to Humayun's Tomb. When finally, the victorious British blew in an opening in the Lahori Gate of the Fort on 20 September, they found the Fort without the King, and at once appropriated it for their own use. The

very next day, Delhi was declared a dependency of the British Crown, and the headquarters of General Wilson were established within the Fort. Bahadur Shah was captured from Humayun's Tomb and imprisoned in a small house inside the southern part of the Fort, before his trial was conducted at the Diwan-e-Khas in the inner part of the Fort.

Within barely two years, the British transformed its vast and complex interior completely (refer to Map 2). British soldiers, who so far had limited access to most of the Red Fort, now resided within it in tall hastily constructed barracks or in Mughal buildings altered unrecognisably for their use. The general principle of coexistence of the different kinds of people accommodated within the Fort by the Mughal Emperors was altered. Instead of it being the site of a complex range of activities, only one uniform use was made of the Fort – that of a British cantonment, insulated from and barred to the Indians in the rest of Shahjahanabad. The British continued to use the Fort as a Colonial Garrison Fortress in this manner for close to 100 years, though they later moved out of some of Shah Jahan's pavilions. They also partially restored some of these pavilions and the Fort's ceremonial imperial uses, especially when British royalty such as King George V came visiting Delhi in 1911. However, after the construction of imperial New Delhi in the 1930s, the Red Fort and Shahjahanabad were again relegated to the sidelines.

Map 2: Plan of the Red Fort showing the configuration of built and open spaces after 1857, based on present Aerial photographs.

What role does the Red Fort's symbolic value have in its conservation as a historical site in the present context?

The Red Fort today continues to be seen as a symbol of power, stemming from its links with the imperial presence of the Great Mughals in Delhi, as well as its association with 1857, often termed India's First War of Independence. Bound inseparably with the identity of India and its struggle for freedom against British rule – the focus of the 'Dilli Chalo' slogan of Subhash Chandra Bose and the Azad Hind Fauj or Indian National Army (INA), as well as the site of the trial of important nationalists by the British after the Second World War – the Fort was chosen by Pandit Nehru for the first public celebration of Independent India. It was only natural thus, that when the British Army vacated the Fort, the Indian Army moved into it.1 Meanwhile, parts of the Fort have been designated as 'monuments of national and international interest', and the presence of the Army was seen by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to be in conflict with this designation.

There is, however, no conflict between the Indian Army's presence and the historical use of the Red Fort. The Fort's original designed form, as mentioned earlier, encompassed functions and spaces that made it virtually a miniature city. The presence of the Mughal military resident within the Fort was integral to its conception and functioning as such a complex. Thus, the continued and engaged presence of the Indian Army (who vacated the Fort a few years ago) could not only have kept alive one of the historical uses of the Fort, but in partnership with the ASI could also have contributed to better security and maintenance guided by conservation norms. The insistence on viewing the Fort only as a monument with no real interaction with people is, in a sense, no different from its use by the British as a Colonial Garrison Fortress. Today paradoxically, the Red Fort, despite its symbolic value as a national icon, has no real connection with the citizens of Delhi.

We must also remember that history does not stop at an arbitrary time period or look at it as something remote and unlinked to our lives. The Indian Armed Forces are a vital part of our past and indeed our future. Their presence in historic Fort complexes can be utilised to raise awareness about the immediate history of our Nation. It can also add interest, continuity and relevance to such historical complexes, and make them living sites rather than museum pieces frozen in time. Now, I would like to end as I had begun, by bringing to your minds again the image of the tricolour Indian National Flag atop the Red Fort.

*This is an abridged text of the lecture delivered at the USI on 7 April 2010. For a more detailed discussion of the issues addressed in the lecture, readers are referred to The Red Fort of Shahjahanabad, Oxford University Press 2003, by the same author.

Ms Anisha Shekhar Mukherji, Conservation Architect and Architectural Historian, is a Visiting Faculty, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXL, No. 580, April-June 2010.