The Case of Falling Walls
Politics of Demolition and Preservation in Rampur
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The city of Rampur with its rich architectural and cultural history lies in a state of deep neglect. Any plans for urban development and beautification of the city should ensure its rich heritage is preserved and not lost due to ill-conceived policies and vacuous politics.

The city that merits immediate attention of the Uttar Pradesh Urban Development and Minority Affairs Minister Azam Khan is his own hometown and constituency, Rampur. Alas, this has not been the case; instead we see newspaper headlines about Khan’s plans to demolish walls of the historic Rampur fort (Times News Network: 2013). The erstwhile cultural centre of the city now lies in a deeply neglected condition and deserves conservation, not demolition. Any plans of “beautification” should be centred on preservation of the historic character of the city.

Rampur was the last Muslim-ruled princely state in the colonial United Provinces. Nawab Hamid Ali Khan (r.1889-1930) envisaged Rampur city centred not only on the royal fort but also the adjacent Jama Masjid and the flourishing ganj (markets). All of this deserves attention of the Urban Development Minister. He may well take his cue from the rich history of his hometown than from contemporary urban development plans, which only produce ghettoisation of Muslims on the periphery of Indian cities.

Fort Complex

When Rampur was chosen as the capital by Nawab Faizullah Khan in 1774, it was surrounded by a thick forest; he laid the foundation of the Rampur fort and the city. In 1919, when Najmul Ghani Khan published his two-volume history of Rampur Akhbar-us-sanadid (Accounts of Heroes), he found Rampur a remarkably beautiful city. In his long history of the Nawabs’ rule, he pays particular attention to the architectural creations that came up during Nawab Hamid Ali Khan’s reign, which he considered a founding moment in the creation of the beautiful city. Nawab Hamid Ali Khan is also referred to as the Shah Jahan of Rampur thanks to his architectural and urban planning.
Interestingly, Hamid Ali Khan’s vision of the city was further developed by an English colonial officer, W.C. Wright, the chief engineer of the Rampur state. He used to be the executive engineer in the North Western Provinces’ services (National Archives of India: 1890). However, he chose to retire from British service in 1899 and took the post of chief engineer in Rampur and served in the state’s Public Works Department till 1913 when he died in Nainital Annual Administrative Report of Rampur State: 1913). The architecture that he developed monumentalised the aesthetic and political authority of his patron.

Appropriating the Mughal sovereign city-model, the fort complex (Qila-e-mualla) was rebuilt as the core of this urban renewal (Blake: 1991). Jahanara Habibullah has written a vivid
memoir about the Rampur fort (Habibullah: 2001). It included open spaces and gardens. The Nawab’s household occupied the Machhi Bhawan, styled like the Awadh palaces with their symbolism of the fish. Adjacent to it was the Rang Mahal, meant for poetical and musical assemblies, and a beautifully executed imambara, pointing again at the Shia cultural influence of Awadh.

The centre of the complex was the splendid mansion named Hamid Manzil decorated with sculptures, chandeliers, glasswork and other imported European curios, where the Nawab held his court. The treasury building and library were other monuments within the fort complex. The Qila-e-mualla had enough space for housing staff of various departments, a variety of artists, poets, singers, dancers, storytellers and various messengers and attendants for the entire establishment (Habibullah: 2001).

The large fort complex was the centre of the city and connected to the latter through various gates like the Hamid and Wright Gates, named after their founders. Mir Mohammed Zaki called them the “door of fortune” and the “gate of protection” (ibid, p. 38). Najmul Ghani compares this architectural creation with the fort complexes of Delhi and Agra, while Moulvi Abdul Ali Mukhlis describes fort grandeur in poetry (Rampuri: 1997, p. 456) –

“The fort that the lordship has built
The one in which light rains all the time
Its history, the servant has written thus
Well-built indeed is the fort of Rampur”.

A Hybrid City

Not far away from the fort, which became the spatial correlate of the cultural centre (markaz), stands the Jama Masjid – the religious centre of the city. It was also built by previous Nawabs, but re-developed on a much more splendid scale under Hamid Ali Khan. The Masjid, with three big domes and tall minarets ending in gold pinnacles, symbolises the grandeur of the Rohilla Nawabs. The city was dotted with various markets, which added to its beauty and contributed to the alluring sights of Rampur. The most famous of these was Meston Ganj named after James Meston, the Lieutenant-Governor (1912-18) of the United Provinces.
The traditional architecture, therefore, also embodied symbols and meanings of the changing times. Apart from maintaining Mughal and Awadh-style architectural monuments, there was increased construction of “modern buildings” like the railway station, hospital, courts, public gates, wide streets, and the canal system which symbolised progress in the so-called backward princely state.

Thus, Rampur under the Nawabs developed as a hybrid city with its grand native “princely spaces” as well as suitably defined and regulated “urbane space”, which was synchronised with the colonial idea of modernity and progress. These efforts were publicised and showcased as a sign of cultural preservation and progress to visiting colonial officials and served, quite literally, as “structures of legitimacy” in the public sphere (Ernst and Pati: 2007).

The public works department was remodelled in 1888 with the objective of improving and extending public works. The most important of these was the Kosi canal which was cut from Lyallpur. The original scheme was started during the reign of Nawab Kalbe Ali Khan (r.1865-1887), but in subsequent years it was developed on a grander scale. Here the role of the chief engineer W.C. Wright is particularly significant. Public works became an important concern with Nawab Hamid Ali Khan.
Lord Curzon’s visit to Rampur in 1905 was a much publicised affair with frantic and elaborate preparation for ceremonies planned in the city (National Archives of India: 1905). The Nawab was particularly keen to show off the various monuments he had constructed in Rampur. He also commissioned a “Rampur Album” with 55 images of Rampur city photographed by Albert Jenkins and others (India Office Records).

This album was gifted to Lord Curzon and included pictures of not just the fort and the Nawab’s private palaces but also public buildings such as the library, railway station, the Kosi weir, schools, a hospital, courts and offices. The architecture of these buildings is Indo-Saracenic, which represented cultural admixture of “native tradition”, while also engaging with “colonial modernity” (Metcalf: 1989). These buildings therefore constituted “visual self-representations” of princely cultural sovereignty (Ramusack: 2004, pp. 152-153).

The annual administrative report of Rampur state also became an important site of narrating princely progress. It included references to canal projects, communication development, sanitation and water works. Orders were passed to rebuild all weak houses lying along the main road with bricks (Annual Administrative Report of the Rampur state: 1917). A health officer was appointed to inspect the sanitary conditions and cleanliness of the city. These efforts had the desired impact and were recognised by visiting colonial officers. When Lieutenant Governor Meston arrived in Rampur on 14 October 1912, he was shown all the important sights of the city and inaugurated the new grain market, now known as Meston Ganj. Referring to the progress made during the reign of Hamid Ali Khan, Meston spoke about the “beautiful palaces, widened streets and healthy markets”, which had transformed Rampur into a “model city” (Annual Administrative report of the Rampur State: 1912).

All these efforts were foundational in producing the “emotional geography” (Davidson, Bondi and Smith: 2007) of Rampur as constituted by its princely, religious and civil spaces[2]. These spaces are still nostalgically remembered and written about in the vernacular history, memoirs and autobiographical literature produced by Rampuris. This local history is defined by the emotion of love for the land (ḥubbu’l-wat̤ani) and a sense of belonging to Rampur (Rampuriyat) survives in its persistent afterlife among Rampuris in contemporary India and Pakistan, although divided by history but united through shared emotions for the city.

**Intellectual and Literary Heritage**

Rampur was a small princely state in size but contributed substantially to preserve the intellectual and literary heritage of Indo-Muslim culture and vernacular scholarship. The Raza Library of Rampur stands out as a symbol of this intellectual and cultural contribution. While preserving Indo-Muslim knowledge, the library also includes vast corpuses of literature in Sanskrit, Hindi and other Indian languages. It was due to the valuable work of preservation of library resources by Rampuris, such as Imtiaz Ahmad Arshi, and the efforts...
of professor Nurul Hasan, who was also a son-in-law of the Nawab Raza Ali Khan and a minister in the Government of India, that the library received its due recognition.

In July 1975, Rampur Raza Library was declared an Institution of National Importance through an act of Parliament. Today the entry gate of the Rampur Raza Library carries a Government of India notice board, even as outside the crumbling walls of the library premises the nation has absolved itself of its duty towards the local Muslim inhabitants who created this heritage. Unfortunately, such concern for history and cultural preservation is not shared by contemporary politicians who claim to uphold minority culture and rights. In contrast, Rampuris have historically taken the initiative to preserve their history and the Saulat Public Library, in particular, emerged as part of these conservation efforts.

Rampur Raza Library. Courtesy: Razak Khan.

Saulat Public Library

While the ruling class of our times is seldom known for paying attention to history, one can at least expect it to be aware of contemporary realities, especially if they come to power in the name of Muslims and their backward economic and social condition. The other falling structures of the town deserve attention of this prominent Muslim leader of Uttar Pradesh.
Not far from the walls of the fort lies now the congested market of Meston Ganj, and if one manages to pass through the crowded by lanes one reaches the bazaar of the famous Rampuri *chaku* (knife) and Rampuri *topi* (cap). At the centre of this is the old tehsil building that houses the Saulat Public Library. The library with its rich history is now in poor condition. The last monsoon heavily damaged the old building and took away one of the walls of the library. As a result, the rich collection of the library, which anyway was not in a good state of preservation due to lack of resources, is now exposed to definite destruction.

The missing wall of the Saulat Library. Courtesy: Razak Khan.

The Saulat Public Library came into existence as part of the larger public culture of politics and protest, involving greater public representation within the princely state of Rampur. The establishment of a public library in 1934 reflected the diversity and richness of Rampuri Muslim politics of the time. It served as an institution for building public opinion and education among Rampuris. Based on the contribution of Rampuris, the library soon developed a rich collection of Arabic, Persian, Urdu manuscripts and publications including the rare first edition of Mirza Ghalib’s collection of poetry (Mahawar and Kuriya: 2013, pp. 4-8). There is also a rich collection of newspapers, magazine and journals with copies of historically important newspapers like Maulana Azad’s *Al-Hilal* and Rampur’s own son of the soil Muhammad Ali’s *Comrade* (ibid, 6).

The library was founded by a group of social workers and political activists of Rampur headed by Saulat Ali Khan (1894–1969); it was managed by scholar-librarian Syed Imtiaz Husain who was supported by other distinguished scholars of Rampur who preserved it through the critical period of 1947 and after Nawab Raza Ali Khan (r. 1930–1949) also recognised its value and saved it through his support and patronage for the public.
institution. Saulat Public Library was one of the most creative public institutions developed by the people of Rampur. It remained the centre for the spread of knowledge and political consciousness.

After partition many of the library’s founding members including Saulat Ali Khan moved to Pakistan, but other Rampuris took over the task of preservation (Qadiri:1992). An important contribution was made by the Rampuri scholar Abid Raza Bedar for the preservation of the library by compiling the catalogue of the library’s collections (Bedar: 1966). Unfortunately, the library has suffered too many calamities in the past, and the present difficulty is aggravated by the lack of support for the library from both the political class and the general public.

I have been researching the history of Nawabi Rampur. On my recent visit to the city in October 2013, I tried to mobilise support for the Saulat Public library[3]. Unfortunately, the library’s affairs are entangled within issues of “administrative clearance” and lack of financial support from any institution. Whether it is the National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language (NCPUL) or the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR), all of them need to be pro-active in such cases.
The derelict condition of the Saulat Public Library. Courtesy: Razak Khan.

Other institutions like The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) or the The Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme (AKHCP) need to also expand their horizon to include preservation of monuments outside capital cities. Such responsibility cannot be left to politicians for whom this is not a vote-generating issue in election year. Contemporary communal politics of Uttar Pradesh thrives on the issue of temples or mosques; the fate of a falling library building is peripheral and does not concern such politics.

It was a political and cultural imagination in which libraries mattered more than mosques that historically shaped the Muslim politics of Rampur. It is a pity that both the family of the erstwhile Nawab and the contemporary political leadership of the city seem so uninterested in the Muslim history and politics of their own locality. Local Rampuris, including the library administration as well as civil society actors, are making efforts to mobilise funds for the library as well as for free coaching classes provided at the library for Muslim girls. It remains to be seen if they find support from their political representatives and the wider civil society. For many, the library is a veritable mosque where they find knowledge and instruction. It is time that political representatives rebuild their politics of “demolition” into a lastingly constructive one.

Notes:
[1] Another collection of photographs of princely Rampur was presented to the India Office for the Festival of Empire in November 1911. Hamid Ali Khan was one of the exhibitors at the Festival of Empire exhibition held at the Crystal Palace to mark George V’s coronation. Barbara Ramusack points that princes adopted the modern technology of photography for “new forms of visual representation”. See Ramusack (2004).


[3] I remain grateful to fellow scholars especially Amar Farooqui, Shad Naved, Daniel Majchrowicz, David Boyk, David Farris among others for discussing and suggesting possible ways of mobilising resources for library preservation. I hope more scholars will join the initiative for raising resources for the Saulat Public Library.

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