

The Ambivalent Legacy: The Role of British Governor-Generals in the Cultural and Temple Landscape of Colonial Bangalore (1800-1857)

Srinivasagowda K.N.

Associate Professor. Department of History, Government First Grade College, Bangarpet, Kolar.

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ABSTRACT:

The British colonial period (1800-1857) marked a transformative phase in the evolution of Bangalore’s cultural and religious landscape. As the administrative and military hub of the Mysore region, the city became a focal point for British experimentation in urban planning, architecture, and heritage policy. The Governor-Generals of the British East India Company played a crucial role not only in shaping the political and economic spheres of Bangalore but also in redefining its cultural and temple spaces. Their interventions-ranging from temple restorations and spatial reorganizations to cultural appropriations-reflected both admiration and ambivalence toward native traditions. This paper explores how the British Governor-Generals’ policies and attitudes toward temples, culture, and urban design contributed to the emergence of a hybrid colonial-modern identity in Bangalore. The study draws upon archival records, government reports, and scholarly interpretations to reveal the ambivalent legacy of colonial engagement with Bangalore’s sacred geography.

KEYWORDS:

British Governor-Generals, Colonial Bangalore, Temple Landscape, Cultural Heritage, Urban Transformation, Ambivalent Legacy.



Introduction:

The city of Bangalore, today known as Bengaluru, stands as one of India’s most dynamic urban centers. Yet, beneath its modern façade lies a deep colonial imprint shaped between 1800 and 1857. This period witnessed the consolidation of British authority in South India following the defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1799, after which the British East India Company established indirect control through the reinstated Wodeyar dynasty. The Governor-Generals of the Company, acting as the highest representatives of British power in India, played an instrumental role in

transforming Bangalore's physical and cultural environment.

The relationship between colonial administrators and the local cultural landscape was complex. On one hand, British officials saw the temples and cultural traditions of Bangalore as relics of superstition that needed reform; on the other, they admired the aesthetic and architectural grandeur of South Indian temples, often funding their preservation to reinforce their own legitimacy among local populations (Bayly, 1999). This duality—of destruction and preservation, of control and appreciation—forms the core of what this paper defines as the "ambivalent legacy" of British colonialism in Bangalore's temple and cultural history.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to:

1. Examine the policies and roles of British Governor-Generals between 1800 and 1857 in shaping Bangalore's cultural and temple landscape.
2. Analyze the nature of British interventions in temple administration, architecture, and cultural patronage.
3. Explore the concept of "ambivalence" in British attitudes—how admiration and domination coexisted in their cultural policies.
4. Assess the long-term impact of these interventions on Bangalore's urban and cultural identity.
5. Contribute to the broader discourse on colonial heritage and its continuing influence in modern Bangalore.

Literature Review:

Scholarly engagement with Bangalore's colonial history has expanded significantly over recent decades. The existing body of literature provides insight into how British administrators conceptualized and managed cultural and religious institutions in South India.

C. A. Bayly (1999), in *Empire and Information*, examined the ways colonial administrators gathered and interpreted local knowledge, arguing that this process reflected both control and dependence. His work underscores the role of cultural intelligence in British rule, particularly in understanding local traditions to enhance governance.

Nicholas Dirks (1987), through *The Hollow Crown*, analyzed the restructuring of South Indian kingship and temple politics under colonial rule. Dirks' framework helps explain how traditional forms of patronage in Bangalore's temples were replaced by bureaucratic mechanisms that prioritized administrative efficiency over religious autonomy.

Thomas Metcalf (1995), in *Ideologies of the Raj*, discussed how imperial ideologies of civilization, order, and progress influenced colonial urban and cultural policies. His analysis of architectural modernity is particularly relevant to the development of the Bangalore Cantonment.

Barbara Metcalf and Bernard Cohn (1996) emphasized the epistemological basis of colonial control through classification, documentation, and preservation. Cohn's concept of "colonial forms of knowledge" directly relates to British documentation of Bangalore's temples and festivals, turning living traditions into static heritage.

Janaki Nair (2005), in *The Promise of the Metropolis*, traced Bangalore's urban evolution and argued that colonial spatial policies created a divided city—between the native Pete and the European Cantonment—each with distinct cultural ecologies. Her insights reveal how the temple landscape was marginalized within new urban planning schemes.

Sweetman (2004) further contributed through his study of Colin Mackenzie's surveys, which recorded temple architecture across South India, including Bangalore. Mackenzie's maps and notes not only preserved local knowledge but also imposed colonial narratives of order and classification.

Despite these significant contributions, limited research has specifically examined the cultural ambivalence of British Governor-Generals in Bangalore. Most studies focus on political or architectural developments, overlooking the nuanced ways in which British administrators both preserved and redefined local temples and cultural institutions. This study seeks to fill that gap by contextualizing their interventions within broader imperial ideologies and local responses.

Historical Background (1800–1857)

Following the fall of Srirangapatna in 1799, the British dismantled Tipu Sultan's strongholds and restructured the administrative apparatus of the Mysore region. The Wodeyars were reinstated as puppet rulers under British supervision, with Bangalore serving as a key military and administrative station (Hasan, 1970). The early 19th century saw the establishment of the Bangalore Cantonment under the direct control of the British, while the Pete area remained under the Mysore king's nominal rule. This dual governance structure produced a unique urban dichotomy—"Native Bangalore" versus "Cantonment Bangalore"—that shaped the city's cultural geography for decades.

Between 1800 and 1857, several Governor-Generals influenced the development of Bangalore, including Lord Wellesley, Lord Cornwallis, Lord William Bentinck, and Lord Dalhousie. Their policies toward temples, education, and urban order reflected broader imperial ideologies. For instance, the Wellesley administration promoted military modernity and spatial discipline, while Bentinck's tenure was characterized by early reformist tendencies and the encouragement of oriental scholarship.

British Governor-Generals and Their Cultural Engagements

1. Lord Wellesley (1798–1805): Strategic Militarism and Cultural Observation

Lord Wellesley's period marked the beginning of the British presence in Bangalore as a garrison town. The construction of the Bangalore Cantonment in 1806 was part of a broader strategy to secure southern India. Wellesley's interest in cultural observation was reflected in his establishment of the "College of Fort William" in Calcutta, where officers were trained in Indian languages and culture (Metcalf, 1995). Though not directly engaged with Bangalore's temples, his policies encouraged officers to study local traditions to aid colonial governance.

2. Lord Cornwallis and Administrative Foundations

Cornwallis's institutional reforms continued to shape governance in Bangalore well into the 19th century. The Cornwallis Code emphasized property rights and land revenue systems that indirectly affected temple endowments. Temples, which had historically depended on royal patronage and land grants, found their finances curtailed under British fiscal regulation (Dirks, 1987).

3. Lord William Bentinck (1828–1835): Reformism and Cultural Rationalization

Bentinck's tenure reflected deep ambivalence toward Indian culture. While he famously abolished Sati and discouraged "superstitious" practices, he also promoted the preservation of architectural heritage. In Bangalore, his administration surveyed major religious monuments such as the Bull Temple and the Gavi Gangadhareshwara Temple, noting their architectural uniqueness (Gazetteer of Mysore, 1870).

4. Lord Dalhousie (1848–1856): Modernization and Cultural Intervention

Dalhousie's era witnessed rapid infrastructural expansion—telegraphs, railways, and educational institutions. In Bangalore, municipal

reforms and education policies secularized temple functions. By classifying temple lands under public trusts, colonial authorities diluted religious autonomy (Heimsath, 1964).

Transformation of the Temple Landscape

The British Governor–Generals’ policies gradually reshaped the cultural and temple spaces of Bangalore. Temples that had once stood as centers of local governance and social life were subjected to new spatial and legal constraints. British engineers often drew inspiration from temple layouts for urban design, incorporating principles of symmetry, axiality, and water management into cantonment planning.

Architectural Documentation and Preservation

British surveyors and amateur archaeologists, such as Colonel Colin Mackenzie, conducted extensive documentation of South Indian temples. Mackenzie’s records of the Bangalore and Mysore regions between 1800 and 1820 serve as invaluable archives (Sweetman, 2004).

Temple Patronage and Administrative Control

While the East India Company refrained from overt temple building, it maintained control over temple management through the Board of Revenue. In 1839, a regulation allowed colonial officers to oversee temple finances in cases of alleged mismanagement (Cohn, 1996).

Cultural Encounters and Hybridization

The encounter between British colonial officials and Bangalore’s local elites produced a hybrid cultural identity. The establishment of the Bangalore Literary and Scientific Institution in the 1830s reflected this synthesis—combining Western scientific curiosity with Indian aesthetic appreciation. Festivals such as the Karaga and temple fairs attracted British curiosity, symbolizing both fascination and separation.

Ambivalent Legacy: Preservation, Appropriation, and Displacement

The legacy of British Governor–Generals in Bangalore’s cultural and temple history is ambivalent. On one hand, the British preserved and documented temples, preventing many from falling into decay. On the other, colonial policies secularized and bureaucratized religious spaces, stripping them of their communal vitality.

Conclusion

Between 1800 and 1857, the British Governor–Generals left a complex imprint on Bangalore’s cultural and temple landscape. Their engagement combined curiosity, admiration, and control. While their

documentation preserved architectural knowledge, their interventions disrupted the organic link between temple, community, and economy. The result was a cultural hybridization that set the stage for modern Bangalore—a city simultaneously rooted in tradition and molded by colonial modernity.

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