Bradlaugh Hall and the Political Struggle in Colonial Lahore (1900–1945)

Ahmad Husnain*

Abstract

This study examines the pivotal role of Bradlaugh Hall in Lahore as a key site of anti-colonial political activity from 1900 to 1945. I propose that Bradlaugh Hall was more than a mere architectural structure; it functioned as a dynamic and socially produced space that actively shaped political discourse, incubated diverse resistance strategies, and mobilized a broad spectrum of the populace against British colonial rule. It provided an essential platform for nationalist leaders spanning the ideological spectrum, from moderates like Gopal Krishna Gokhale to economic nationalists like Lala Lajpat Rai and revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh. The research analyses how this public space became instrumental in fostering political consciousness and uniting disparate social groups—including students, merchants, intellectuals, and workers—in the common struggle for independence. The study explores how the hall operated as a hub of defiance where revolutionary ideas were cultivated, mass movements like the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements were coordinated, and radical actions were planned. Despite intense colonial surveillance and repression, Bradlaugh Hall remained a potent symbol and practical centre of nationalist expression, linking local struggles in Lahore with the broader pan-India independence movement. This essay contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection of space, resistance, and nationalism in colonial South Asia.

Keywords: Bradlaugh Hall, Colonial Lahore, Anti-Colonialism, Indian Nationalism, Social Production of Space

* Lecturer, Intermediate Studies, Government College University, Lahore. Email: ahmadcheema0012@gmail.com
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Architecture is never neutral; it is an active participant in the ideological and political shaping of society. Public spaces, in particular—be it halls, squares, or coffee houses—have historically served as crucibles for dissent, nurturing the roots of rebellion against entrenched power. In this sense, I suggest we can speak of a 'resistance architecture', not merely as a physical construction but as a spatial embodiment of political processes and the evolution of social movements. Such spaces become protected arenas for critical thought and organized struggle against oppressive formations (Till 2009, 34-36). This role becomes profoundly imperative under colonial rule, where subjugated populations, afforded limited political agency, utilize these public domains to assemble, protest, and reclaim that agency. In the landscape of colonial India, Bradlaugh Hall in Lahore stands as an outstanding example of this phenomenon, a central stage for anti-colonial activities between 1900 and 1945.

I argue that Bradlaugh Hall, established in the early twentieth century, was one of the most crucial centres of anti-colonial struggle in Lahore. Named for Charles Bradlaugh, a British radical and advocate for Indian self-government, its very creation was a symbolic act, manifesting a physical space where intellectuals, politicians, students, and ordinary citizens could converge with the express purpose of challenging colonial domination (Jalal 2000, 192-195). Throughout this period, the hall was the nerve centre for political events, conferences, and lectures that defined the freedom movement in the Punjab. It witnessed the strategic evolution of the Indian National Congress, the rise of revolutionary ideologies, and the mobilization for mass movements. This essay proposes that Bradlaugh Hall was not a passive venue but an *active* agent in the anti-colonial narrative. It provided the physical and symbolic ground where disparate political ideologies—moderate constitutionalism, economic nationalism, and revolutionary socialism—could interact, clash, and ultimately forge a multifaceted resistance against the British Raj.

This study situates itself at the intersection of political history, social history, and postcolonial spatial studies. The historiography of political resistance in colonial India is rich, dominated for decades by the path-breaking work of the Subaltern Studies Collective. Scholars like Ranajit Guha interpret resistance not as a mere reaction to colonial oppression but as a grassroots mobilization driven by local agency and an active assertion of autonomy (Guha 1999). Similarly, Partha Chatterjee analyses resistance as the catalyst for a nationalist sentiment, forging a cohesive identity that unified diverse communities against the colonial state (Chatterjee 1993). While these scholars provide a powerful framework for understanding *who* resisted and *why*, they often place less emphasis on the *where*. The spatial dynamics of this resistance—the specific, physical locations that enabled and shaped political action—remain a fertile ground for inquiry.

A separate group of historians, including Ayesha Jalal and William J. Glover, have indeed identified public spaces and halls as central venues for the dissemination of nationalist ideas and the organization of anti-colonial activities. Jalal notes the importance of such venues in Punjab's political landscape (Jalal 2000, 92-93), while Glover explores how architectural spaces in British India fostered a collective identity, positioning buildings as significant tools for political

mobilization (Glover 2007). Chris Moffat, in his work on Bhagat Singh, explicitly recognizes Bradlaugh Hall's architectural presence as crucial in fostering unity and encouraging political engagement (Moffat 2019, 32-34). However, while these scholars acknowledge the hall's historical significance, I find a gap in the literature regarding the *mechanisms* of this spatial influence. This essay seeks to address this gap by examining Bradlaugh Hall's unique role not just as a container for events, but as a dynamic, socially produced space that actively mediated and shaped the strategies, ideologies, and leadership of the anti-colonial movement in Lahore.

To analyse the political significance of Bradlaugh Hall, I employ an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical analysis with theoretical frameworks from human geography and sociology. Specifically, I utilize Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'the social production of space'. Lefebvre argues that space is not a passive backdrop but an active product of historical, political, and social interactions. Social spaces, he posits, reflect the dynamics of power and resistance, allowing for the creation of 'differential spaces' that actively challenge dominant structures (Lefebvre 1991, 33-35). I use this framework to understand Bradlaugh Hall as a site where nationalist movements actively contested colonial power, transforming it from a mere building into a lived, differential space of defiance against British rule.

Complementing this, I draw on Michel Foucault's concept of 'heterotopias'. Foucault describes heterotopias as 'other spaces' where conventional societal norms are suspended, subverted, or inverted, allowing for the emergence of counter-discourses and new forms of identity (Foucault 1984, 7-9). I suggest that Bradlaugh Hall functioned as a heterotopic space. Within its walls, the hierarchies and regulations of the colonial city were temporarily overturned, fostering subversion and nurturing nationalist sentiments that were suppressed in the public streets. This theoretical lens allows me to move beyond a simple narrative of events and analyse *how* the hall's spatial qualities facilitated political activities and shaped anti-colonial mobilization. My primary source base includes colonial government surveillance reports from the Punjab Police, archival records, proceedings of political parties, personal memoirs of key participants like Lala Lajpat Rai (Rai 1927), and contemporary newspaper accounts from outlets such as *The Tribune* and the *Civil and Military Gazette*.

The Genesis of a Contested Space

In the early 20th century, Lahore was a city of profound contradictions. As the administrative and political capital of the colonial Punjab, it was a showpiece of British imperial design, meticulously planned to project power and maintain order (Glover 2007, 78-79). The British imposed a new urban geography of wide roads, segregated cantonments ('Civil Lines'), and monumental administrative buildings, creating a spatial order that reflected and reinforced the racial and social hierarchies of the Raj. This colonial city was designed for surveillance and control, an architectural assertion of dominance. However, this very project of modernization and control unintentionally sowed the seeds of its own opposition. The introduction of Western-style institutions like Government College and Forman Christian College created a new, educated Indian elite, fluent in the languages of liberalism, democracy, and self-determination (Talbot 1988, 137).

This burgeoning educated class, along with established merchant and artisan communities, found themselves navigating a dual society. They were subjects of a modernizing project yet excluded from its corridors of real power. This friction created a pressing need for indigenous public spaces where anti-colonial ideas could be discussed and resistance could be organized. While parks and squares offered fleeting opportunities for assembly, they were exposed and easily suppressed. The colonial administration, deeply wary of sedition, viewed any large native gathering with suspicion (Arnold 1993, 203-210). The need for a dedicated, indoor, and Indian-controlled venue was palpable. It was in this context of rising political consciousness and spatial constraint that Bradlaugh Hall was conceived.

The foundation of Bradlaugh Hall in the late 19th century was a deliberate political act. Funded by local philanthropists and nationalist-minded members of the Indian National Congress, its construction was a statement of indigenous agency. The hall's very name was a stroke of strategic genius. It was named after Charles Bradlaugh, a radical British Member of Parliament and a vocal atheist who had tirelessly advocated for Indian self-government in the halls of Westminster (Bradlaugh 1889, 56-57). By invoking his name, the hall's founders aligned their local struggle with a global network of dissent and shrewdly used the legitimacy of a British parliamentarian to sanctify their anti-colonial project. This naming convention provided a thin veil of constitutional propriety, making outright suppression of the hall more politically awkward for the colonial authorities.

From its inception, Bradlaugh Hall was designed to be a multifunctional public arena. Early reports in newspapers like *The Civil and Military Gazette* detail its use for public lectures, educational seminars, and social reform meetings, including those of the Arya Samaj (Civil and Military Gazette 1895). This initial focus on social, religious, and educational reform was not apolitical. These activities were foundational to the nationalist project, aiming to build a 'modern' and 'reformed' Indian populace capable of self-rule. This broad civic purpose allowed the hall to embed itself in the city's social fabric, developing a network of patrons and attendees that would soon be mobilized for more explicitly political ends.

The colonial government was not blind to this. Despite its seemingly benign initial activities, the hall was marked as a site of potential trouble. Its independence from direct government control made it inherently suspicious. The Punjab Police Intelligence Bureau, whose reports are now housed in the National Archives of India, began monitoring the hall almost immediately. Early reports note the "character of the persons" attending meetings and the "general tone" of the speeches (Punjab Police Reports 1905). This surveillance, however, had an unintended effect. It confirmed the hall's status as a 'dangerous' space in the eyes of the nationalists, a badge of honour that only increased its magnetic pull for those committed to the anti-colonial cause. It became, from its very foundation, a contested space, a battleground of ideas and surveillance.

A Cauldron of Political Ideologies

Bradlaugh Hall's true political significance crystallized as it became the primary platform for the Indian National Congress (INC) in Lahore. In the early 1900s, the Congress was expanding its reach into the Punjab, seeking to rally public support

against British policies. The hall became the venue for its annual provincial sessions, transforming it from a local civic centre into a site of national political importance. These early Congress meetings, however, were dominated by the 'Moderate' faction of the party. These leaders did not call for outright independence but for constitutional reforms, greater Indian representation in legislative councils, and a gradual path to self-government.

This moderate vision was most eloquently articulated at Bradlaugh Hall by Gopal Krishna Gokhale. A towering figure in the INC, Gokhale believed firmly in constitutional methods and political education as the prerequisites for Indian self-government. His speeches at the hall, often reported in detail by *The Tribune*, were masterclasses in reasoned critique (The Tribune 1906). He used the platform not for fiery rhetoric, but for meticulous deconstructions of colonial economic policy and impassioned pleas for legislative reform. In a 1910 speech, he argued for the vital importance of the Morley-Minto Reforms, stating that "while the reforms may not be perfect, they are a step... and it is our duty to use them to press for more" (Nanda 1977, 232). For Gokhale, Bradlaugh Hall was a classroom, a place to educate the burgeoning middle class of Lahore in the complex arts of parliamentary procedure and responsible political engagement.

This moderate, constitutionalist approach was soon challenged within the very same walls by a more assertive form of nationalism. Lala Lajpat Rai, the 'Lion of Punjab', embodied this new spirit. While also a member of the Congress, Rai was deeply sceptical of British benevolence and advocated for a more robust strategy of self-reliance. He championed the Swadeshi Movement, which called for the boycott of British goods and the promotion of indigenous industries. For Rai, economic independence was the necessary precursor to political freedom. He transformed Bradlaugh Hall from a lecture theatre into a site of mass mobilization. His speeches, delivered with passionate intensity, resonated far beyond the educated elite, reaching merchants, students, and artisans.

In 1906, Rai convened a massive Swadeshi rally at the hall, where merchants and traders took a collective oath to boycott the import of British textiles (Sarkar 1973, 99). "Our wealth is being drained to enrich England," he declared from the hall's podium, "Swaraj begins with Swadeshi. We must learn to stand on our own feet" (Rai 1927, 84). I suggest that this was a pivotal moment. Rai skillfully used the space to link a tangible economic grievance—the decline of local industry—with the abstract political goal of self-rule. He demonstrated how the hall could be used not just to debate, but to *organize* and take direct, collective action that struck at the economic foundations of the Raj.

The hall's ideological spectrum did not end there. It also served as a crucial, if clandestine, nexus for transnational radicalism. The Ghadar Party, a revolutionary organization founded by Punjabi immigrants in North America, aimed to incite an armed rebellion against the British in India. While its main operations were abroad, its ideology and revolutionary literature found a fertile reception in the Punjab. Bradlaugh Hall, with its constant congregation of students and disaffected youth, became a key distribution point for Ghadarite pamphlets and a secret meeting place for its recruiters (Ramnath 2011, 82). This connection highlights the hall's layered nature: while moderates

debated reform on its main stage, its corridors and back rooms buzzed with whispers of armed insurrection.

This function as an incubator for radicalism grew even more pronounced. The hall became a meeting place for young revolutionaries disillusioned with the slow pace of both moderate reform and the Swadeshi movement. They saw the constitutionalists as too timid and the economic boycotts as ineffective. These young men, inspired by revolutionary terrorism in Bengal and Russia, began to discuss more violent methods (Heehs 1993). Bradlaugh Hall offered them a space to meet, exchange banned literature, and forge the personal bonds of trust that are essential for any covert organization. It was in these meetings that a young Bhagat Singh would later find his earliest political footing, listening to the debates and growing convinced that only a revolutionary shock could awaken the nation.

The Hall as a Theatre of Mass Mobilization

The political character of Bradlaugh Hall underwent a profound transformation with the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi on the national stage and the launch of the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922). This was a call for a nationwide, non-violent boycott of all British institutions: courts, schools, and councils. Bradlaugh Hall immediately became the undisputed coordinating hub for this movement in Lahore. I propose that the hall's existing infrastructure—its central location, its established reputation, and its network of student and merchant supporters—made it the perfect command centre. Leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai and Saifuddin Kitchlew used the hall to hold daily meetings, translating Gandhi's national call into a concrete local strategy.

The hall was a hive of activity. Students gathered there to plan pickets of government colleges, lawyers assembled to announce their boycott of British courts, and merchants strategized the *hartals* (strikes) that would shut down the city's bazaars (Punjab Police Reports 1921). The hall's role went beyond planning; it was a site of mobilization and morale. As Sumit Sarkar notes, the non-cooperation movement relied on sustaining popular enthusiasm (Sarkar 1983, 202). Bradlaugh Hall served this function perfectly. Its stage hosted a relentless stream of speakers who explained the principles of Satyagraha, reported on successes in other parts of India, and led the assembled crowds in patriotic songs. It became a space of collective effervescence, charging the political atmosphere of the city.

Lala Lajpat Rai's leadership during this period was crucial. Having returned from exile, he plunged into the movement, and Bradlaugh Hall was his primary platform. His speeches from this time, chronicled in his collected works, show a leader skillfully bridging the gap between Gandhian non-violence and his own more assertive brand of nationalism. He used the hall to call for the boycott of the upcoming legislative council elections, a key plank of the non-cooperation platform. "A vote for the councils is a vote for our own slavery," he thundered at a packed meeting, "We must show the British that their sham reforms hold no allure for a nation determined to be free" (Rai 1927, 134). His stature ensured that when he spoke at Bradlaugh Hall, the entire Punjab listened.

The colonial response was swift and severe. The British authorities, recognizing the hall as the "hotbed of revolutionary ideas," intensified their surveillance.

Plainclothes policemen became a permanent fixture at its entrance, and the hall was subjected to numerous police raids (Punjab Police Reports 1921). This repression, however, merely confirmed the hall's importance. It became a symbol of defiance; to attend a meeting there was an open act of resistance. The hall's ability to continue functioning despite this intense pressure demonstrated the resilience of the nationalist infrastructure that had been built within its walls.

This pattern of mobilization and repression repeated with even greater intensity during the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934). Sparked by Gandhi's symbolic Salt March, the movement called for a direct and open breach of colonial laws. Once again, Bradlaugh Hall became the planning centre for the Punjab. From here, local leaders organized Lahore's own version of the salt march, manufacturing illicit salt in public to defy the British monopoly. The hall was also the coordinating point for a new, more aggressive wave of boycotts targeting foreign cloth and liquor, two major sources of colonial revenue. Judith Brown highlights the movement's success in mobilizing new social groups, particularly women, who took a leading role in picketing (Brown 1972, 112-115). Bradlaugh Hall was the space where these new activists were trained and organized.

The Epicentre of Revolutionary Action

While the hall was the public face of the Gandhian mass movements, its cellars and back rooms were simultaneously becoming the sanctuary for a new, more violent revolutionary underground. The disillusionment that had begun years earlier had now coalesced into a formidable organization: the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA). And its most charismatic leader was the young revolutionary, Bhagat Singh. For Singh and his comrades, Bradlaugh Hall was an invaluable asset. Its constant political bustle provided the perfect cover for their clandestine meetings. As Chris Moffat argues, the hall's public legitimacy allowed the revolutionaries to "hide in plain sight" (Moffat 2019, 61-64).
I suggest that the hall was instrumental in Bhagat Singh's own ideological journey. It was here he encountered the ideas of the Ghadarites and European socialists, and it was here he and his comrades—Sukhdev, Rajguru, and others—debated the core tenets of their new creed: socialism, atheism, and the necessity of "propaganda by the deed." They used the hall's library, read its newspapers, and engaged in intense discussions, forging a sophisticated political philosophy that went far beyond simple nationalist terror. The hall was their incubator, protecting them as they planned the actions that would catapult them into history (Singh 2007, 89).

The first of these actions was planned in the wake of a tragedy. In 1928, Lala Lajpat Rai led a peaceful protest against the all-white Simon Commission. The protest was brutally attacked by the police, and Rai himself was severely beaten by Superintendent James Scott. He died from his injuries a few weeks later. The nation was outraged, but for Bhagat Singh and the HSRA, grief quickly turned to a cold fury. In a secret meeting held in the recesses of Bradlaugh Hall, they vowed to avenge the 'Lion of Punjab'. Their target was James Scott. This decision, which would lead to the Lahore Conspiracy Case, was a direct product of the revolutionary environment the hall had fostered (Noorani 1996, 123).

The resulting action was a case of mistaken identity. The revolutionaries assassinated another police officer, J.P. Saunders. The city was locked down, and a massive manhunt began. Yet, Bradlaugh Hall's second, more famous act of "propaganda by the deed" was yet to come: the bombing of the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi. This act, too, was conceived in the same revolutionary milieu. The plan was not to kill, but "to make the deaf hear." After the bombing, Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt were arrested, and the Lahore Conspiracy Case trial began. This trial, I argue, transformed Bradlaugh Hall once more. It ceased to be just a meeting place and became a public symbol of the revolutionaries' defiance.

During the long and dramatic trial, Bradlaugh Hall became the headquarters for the revolutionaries' defence campaign. It was where the defence committee met, where lawyers conferred with family members, and where information about the trial was disseminated to a gripped public. More importantly, it was the site of mass protests and *hartals* called in solidarity with the prisoners (The Tribune 1930). As Bhagat Singh and his comrades used the courtroom as a political stage, conducting hunger strikes and delivering defiant statements, Bradlaugh Hall mobilized the streets outside. It amplified their message, ensuring that their trial became a public referendum on the legitimacy of colonial justice itself. The hall and the courtroom became two stages of a single revolutionary performance.

The Final Stand and the End of an Era

The execution of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev in 1931 cast a long shadow over Lahore, but it did not extinguish the spirit of Bradlaugh Hall. The hall continued to be a centre for political activity throughout the 1930s, hosting leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. However, its final great act of mass mobilization came with the launch of the Quit India Movement in 1942. This was Gandhi's most radical call: an ultimatum to the British to "Do or Die." The colonial state responded with unprecedented force, arresting the entire national leadership of the Congress in a single night and declaring the party illegal. The movement was immediately driven underground.

In Lahore, Bradlaugh Hall was central to this new, clandestine phase of resistance. With all public meetings banned and the press censored, the hall's established networks became invaluable. It served as a secret meeting point for underground activists, a place to coordinate the distribution of illegal pamphlets (the 'Congress Bulletin'), and a centre for planning acts of sabotage designed to disrupt the British war effort (Talbot 1988, 135). Students from the hall organized strikes in colleges, while workers planned disruptions in the railway yards. The hall, now under constant police surveillance and subject to repeated raids, was operating on its last legs, but it remained a vital node in the underground resistance network.

The colonial government's final suppression of the Quit India movement marked the effective end of Bradlaugh Hall's role as a preeminent site of anti-colonial resistance. The political landscape of the 1940s was changing rapidly. The focus of nationalist politics shifted from mass civil disobedience against the British to the complex, high-stakes negotiations between the Congress, the Muslim League, and the colonial state over the future of a divided India (Jalal 2000, 144-146). The communal

question began to overshadow the anti-colonial one, and the new arenas of politics became the negotiating table and, tragically, the street-level communal riot. Bradlaugh Hall, a symbol of a united struggle against a common colonial enemy, found its purpose increasingly marginalized in this new, fractured political environment.

By 1945, as the sun began to set on the British Empire, the hall's golden era was over. Its story from 1900 to 1945 is a microcosm of the Indian independence movement itself. It charts the evolution of resistance from polite, constitutionalist debate to assertive economic nationalism; from the mass mobilization of non-cooperation to the secret plotting of armed revolutionaries; and finally, to the desperate underground struggle of the Quit India movement. The hall was not just a witness to this history; it was an essential catalyst, a space that gave physical form and strategic coherence to the long and multifaceted struggle for freedom.

Conclusion

I have argued that Bradlaugh Hall was far more than a passive architectural setting; it was a dynamic, socially produced space that actively shaped and was shaped by the anti-colonial struggle in Lahore. It functioned as a crucible where a spectrum of resistance strategies, from moderate constitutionalism to revolutionary violence, were forged, debated, and enacted. The hall's unique power lay in its ability to be many things at once: a classroom for political education, a stage for mass mobilization, a sanctuary for clandestine plotting, and a potent symbol of indigenous defiance. It provided the essential spatial infrastructure that connected leaders to the masses, intellectuals to activists, and local grievances to a national movement.

By examining this single, vital space, we gain a more granular understanding of the independence movement itself. The history of Bradlaugh Hall reveals that the struggle for freedom was never a monolithic enterprise. It was a complex, and often contradictory, ecosystem of competing ideologies and strategies that found common cause, and a common ground, in their opposition to colonial rule. The hall was the physical container for this complex ecosystem. Its enduring legacy is a testament to the power of public space. It demonstrates that for any political movement to succeed, it needs not only ideas and leaders, but also a 'place'—a physical, defensible, and symbolic space—from which to challenge the established order and imagine a new one.

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