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Spanning the Rivers: Bridge Engineering in Ancient and Medieval India and Its Colonial Afterlife

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Dr Sikhasree Ray[1], Santigopal Jana[1]

[1]Department of History & Archaeology, Fakir Mohan University, Baleshwar, Odisha, India

SR 0009-0007-6479-8559, **SJ** 0009-0008-0259-1453

Correspondence: Dr Sikhasree Ray, sikhasreeray.in@gmail.com

Abstract

The history of bridge construction in India cannot be understood simply as a transition from indigenous traditional structures to modern European engineering during the colonial period. Long before the construction of large iron and steel bridges, Indian builders developed diverse techniques for crossing rivers and difficult terrain, including timber beam bridges, cantilever bridges, rope and cane suspension bridges, stone structures, masonry bridges and pontoon bridges. These technologies were closely adapted to local materials, environmental conditions and patterns of mobility. During the nineteenth century, British colonial rule introduced new engineering institutions, railway technology, iron and steel construction, mathematical design and standardised methods. However, earlier bridge-building practices did not disappear completely. Some survived, some were modified, and others interacted with emerging colonial engineering practices. This article examines the relationship between indigenous bridge-building traditions and colonial engineering through selected examples, including the Kashmir kadals, Himalayan jhula bridges, the Puri/Madhupur stone bridge, the Lansdowne Bridge and the Howrah Bridge. It argues that colonial transformation involved neither complete technological replacement nor a simple continuation of indigenous practice. Instead, it produced a layered process of technological adaptation, institutional standardisation, material transformation and selective continuity. The history of Indian bridges therefore demonstrates how indigenous knowledge, colonial engineering, Indian labour and industrial technology interacted in the making of modern infrastructure.

Keywords: Bridge Engineering, Indigenous Technology, Colonial India, Kashmir, Himalayan Bridges, Public Works Department, Railways, Lansdowne Bridge, Howrah Bridge, Technology Transfer

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Introduction

Bridges have played a fundamental role in the history of human mobility, connecting settlements, facilitating trade and enabling political and military movement. In the Indian subcontinent, the construction of bridges was closely related to the physical character of the landscape. Large rivers, seasonal floods, shifting channels, mountainous terrain and monsoon conditions created complex challenges for movement and communication. Indian bridge-building traditions therefore developed through a long process of adaptation to particular geographical and environmental conditions. The history of these traditions is considerably older than the nineteenth-century colonial engineering system and cannot be understood merely through the later introduction of iron and steel technology (Deloche, 1984; Pacey, 1990). India's relationship with bridges starts with stories before it starts to construct the stone bridge. The Ramayana tells of a causeway constructed by Rama's army to cross and reach Lanka, the Ram Setu, a series of shoals which can still be seen in satellite pictures between India and Sri Lanka, either as a natural reef or a work of folk engineering. More prosaic is the earliest technical reference, the Arthashastra by Kautilya from the Mauryan period (4th-3rd century BCE) which outlines the expectations of bridges when they are built as part of the state infrastructure, including types of material, like plaited bamboo and iron chain. When regional kingdoms were being constructed, and then the Mughals, bridge building had become an everyday aspect of state activity – it was essential to carry armies, to travel for pilgrimage, and for trade.

Early Indian textual traditions also indicate the importance of roads, waterways, crossings and communication to political administration. The *Arthashastra*, for example, contains references to roads, waterways, transport and state regulation of movement, demonstrating the relationship between infrastructure and statecraft (Kangle, 1960–1965). Literary traditions such as the *Ramayana* contain important narratives concerning large-scale river and sea crossings, although such literary accounts must be distinguished from archaeological evidence when reconstructing the history of actual bridge construction. Archaeological and historical studies instead provide evidence for a wide range of timber, stone, rope, masonry and temporary bridge technologies across different regions of India (Deloche, 1984).

The nineteenth century introduced a major transformation in the history of Indian bridge engineering. British colonial rule created new institutional structures, particularly the Public Works Department, and expanded roads, canals and railways. New materials such as iron and steel, together with engineering education, surveying, structural calculation and standardised construction methods, changed the scale and character of bridge construction (Headrick, 1988; Arnold, 2000; Kerr, 1995). Yet the transformation was not simply a replacement of indigenous technology by European technology. Indigenous methods survived in many regions, while Indian artisans and skilled workers participated in colonial construction and transferred practical knowledge between different projects (Deloche, 1994; Kerr, 2007). The history of Indian bridges is therefore best understood as a process of technological interaction involving continuity, adaptation and rupture.

Indigenous Bridge-Building Traditions in India:

Before the expansion of colonial engineering, Indian builders employed a remarkably diverse range of bridge technologies. Timber beams, stone slabs, cantilever structures, rope and cane suspension bridges, masonry arches, corbelled structures and pontoon bridges were used according to local requirements. The choice of technology depended on the size and behaviour of rivers, availability of materials, topography, cost, expected traffic and the permanence required of the crossing (Deloche, 1984).

Jean Deloche's study of Indian bridges is particularly important because it demonstrates the geographical diversity and technical sophistication of these structures. His *The Ancient Bridges of India* includes

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separate discussions of corbel-vaulting bridges in Orissa, wooden bridges, cantilever bridges, cableways, suspension bridges, stone beam bridges and Mughal arch bridges. The work therefore provides evidence that Indian bridge technology was not a single uniform tradition but a collection of regional engineering practices adapted to different environmental conditions (Deloche, 1984).

A major characteristic of many indigenous bridge traditions was their empirical basis. Knowledge was accumulated through practical experience, observation, construction, repair and adaptation. Such knowledge was frequently transmitted through craftsmen, builders and local communities rather than through formal engineering colleges or written mathematical manuals. This does not mean that indigenous bridge-builders lacked technical understanding. Rather, their engineering knowledge was embedded within craft practices and practical experience (Deloche, 1994; Pacey, 1990).

Deloche's study of nineteenth-century bridge-building is especially significant in this regard. He argues that in the Himalayan region there was little fundamental technological change in the construction of rope, cane and wooden bridges until well into the modern period, while in parts of the Indian peninsula masonry road bridges continued to depend upon older indigenous methods. These methods were subsequently improved and developed by British engineers. This evidence challenges the older assumption that modern bridge engineering simply entered India from Europe and replaced an otherwise static indigenous technology.

Kashmir *Kadals* and the Cantilever Principle:

The wooden bridges of Kashmir provide one of the most important examples of indigenous bridge engineering. Srinagar's historical bridges, popularly known as *kadals*, were constructed largely with timber and adapted to the conditions of the Jhelum River. Their construction involved substantial wooden members and forms of cantilever action that enabled builders to create crossings without relying entirely upon massive masonry structures (Deloche, 1984; Sufi, 1979).

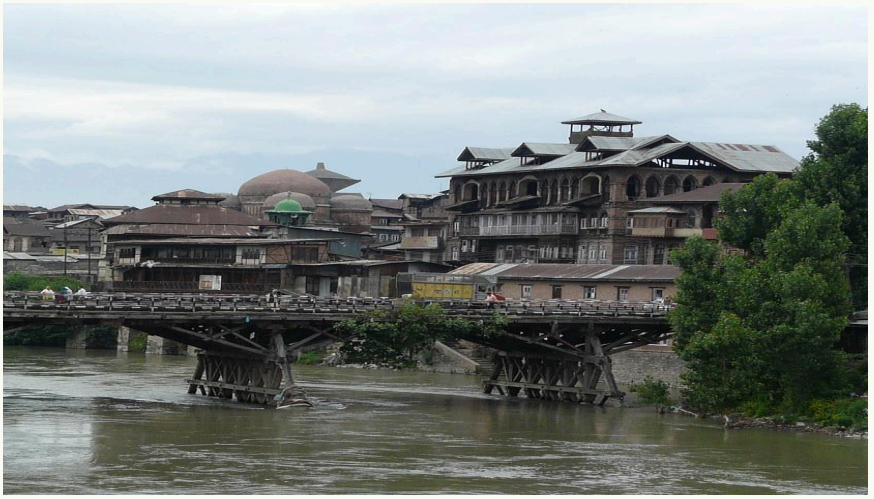


Figure 1: Zaina Kadal, Srinagar, illustrating the indigenous timber bridge-building tradition of Kashmir.

Source: Deloche, J. (1984). The ancient bridges of India. Sitaram Bhartia Institute of Scientific Research.

Among these structures, Zaina Kadal is associated with Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's fifteenth-century rule. The bridge belongs to a broader tradition of timber bridge construction that shaped the urban landscape of Srinagar (Deloche, 1984; Sufi, 1979). Deloche's survey specifically identifies wooden bridges and cantilever forms in Srinagar and elsewhere in the subcontinent.

The significance of the Kashmir bridges lies partly in their use of the cantilever principle. A cantilever

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projects beyond its support and transfers loads back towards the supporting structure. Although nineteenth-century European engineers developed sophisticated mathematical and industrial applications of this principle, the basic structural logic could exist in earlier timber construction. The comparison therefore demonstrates that a structural principle may have a long history even when the materials, scale and methods of calculation change substantially (Deloche, 1984; Pacey, 1990).

It is important, however, not to transform this similarity into a claim of direct technological transmission. There is insufficient evidence to argue that nineteenth-century British steel cantilever bridges were directly copied from Kashmir's wooden *kadals*. The more defensible interpretation is that different engineering cultures independently employed similar structural solutions to the problem of spanning difficult waterways. The continuity is therefore primarily structural and conceptual, not necessarily documentary or genealogical.

Himalayan *Jhula* Bridges:

The Himalayan region developed another important bridge-building tradition based upon suspension. Rope, cane, bamboo, fibre, wood and later iron and steel were used to construct bridges across deep valleys and rapidly flowing rivers. These structures were particularly suitable for mountainous environments where the construction of heavy masonry foundations was difficult and expensive (Deloche, 1984).

Himalayan suspension bridges demonstrate how indigenous technology could be closely adapted to environmental conditions. Their flexibility allowed them to respond to movement and wind, while their light construction reduced the need for massive foundations. Different forms of suspension bridges and cableways were found across regions including Kashmir, Himachal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Assam (Deloche, 1984). Deloche's illustrations specifically document V- and U-shaped suspension bridges, cableways and wooden cantilever bridges across several Himalayan regions.

These structures also demonstrate the importance of local materials and practical knowledge. Rope, cane, bamboo and wood were available within local environments, while construction and maintenance depended upon skilled communities familiar with the behaviour of these materials. Such knowledge was not necessarily codified in formal engineering textbooks but was transmitted through practice and experience (Deloche, 1984; Pacey, 1990).

During the nineteenth century, the expansion of colonial roads gradually introduced new materials into these environments. Iron chains and steel cables increasingly supplemented or replaced traditional ropes and fibres in some suspension bridges. Yet this transition did not immediately eliminate indigenous forms. Deloche's work shows that traditional bridge-building methods remained significant even during the period of expanding colonial infrastructure (Deloche, 1979, 1994).

Stone and Masonry Bridges in Eastern India:

Indigenous bridge technology also included substantial stone and masonry traditions. These are particularly important for understanding eastern India and Odisha. Deloche's survey includes a stone beam bridge using corbel vaulting over the Madhupur Stream at Puri, based on a plan attributed to Stirling from 1825. His work also records other stone beam and masonry bridges across the subcontinent (Deloche, 1984).

The Puri/Madhupur example demonstrates that bridge construction in Odisha involved established knowledge of stone placement, supports, load distribution and local environmental conditions before the full development of colonial railway engineering. Such structures were obviously different from later steel railway bridges in terms of material, scale and structural calculation, but they represent an important

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indigenous engineering tradition that existed alongside colonial infrastructure.



Figure 2: Stone bridge over the Madhupur Stream near Puri, representing the masonry and corbel-vaulting traditions of bridge construction in Odisha.

Source: Deloche, J. (1984). The ancient bridges of India. Sitaram Bhartia Institute of Scientific Research.

Other historical evidence also points to a substantial pre-colonial and early colonial bridge network in Odisha. Descriptions of bridges around Puri and other parts of the province indicate that stone and masonry structures formed an important component of regional communication networks (Toynbee, 1873; Deloche, 1984). This regional history is significant because it demonstrates that colonial engineers did not encounter an infrastructure-free landscape. They entered an environment where roads, bridges, ferries and established routes already existed and then reorganised them according to changing administrative, military and commercial requirements.

Colonial Roads and the Public Works Department:

The establishment and expansion of the Public Works Department marked an important institutional stage in the transformation of bridge engineering in India. Roads, bridges, canals and later railways became increasingly connected to the colonial state's administrative and economic objectives. Infrastructure facilitated military mobility, commercial circulation, communication and the movement of resources across the subcontinent (Headrick, 1988; Arnold, 2000).

Colonial engineers introduced systematic surveying, measurement, design, standardisation and professional engineering practices. The growing importance of engineering education also created a new technical culture in which mathematics, mechanics, surveying and materials science became central to infrastructure construction (Mandal, 2016). The development of engineering institutions and technical training helped create a professional group capable of managing increasingly large infrastructure projects (Kerr, 1995; Mandal, 2016).

Nevertheless, colonial engineering depended heavily upon Indian labour and practical expertise. Indian artisans, masons, carpenters, blacksmiths, contractors and other skilled workers participated in construction on a large scale. Knowledge was transmitted through practical work, apprenticeship and experience as well as through formal engineering institutions. Studies of colonial railway technology show that skilled Indian workers carried knowledge from earlier construction sites to later projects, creating important channels of technological transmission within India (Kerr, 2007).

This makes the colonial engineering system more complex than a simple model of European technology

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being transferred to India. British engineers supplied institutional and technical frameworks, but the actual construction process depended on Indian workers and on adaptation to local environmental conditions. The resulting infrastructure was therefore produced through interaction between imported engineering systems and existing Indian skills (Deloche, 1994; Headrick, 1988).

Railways and the Transformation of Bridge Engineering:

The expansion of railways created a particularly important technological change. Railway locomotives and rolling stock required bridges with greater load-bearing capacity, structural stability and durability than many earlier road and pedestrian bridges. Railway bridges also had to meet strict requirements concerning alignment, gauge, gradients, foundation stability and long-term maintenance (Kerr, 1995).

Iron and steel became increasingly important because they allowed engineers to construct longer spans and stronger structures. Truss, girder, suspension and cantilever designs offered possibilities that were difficult to achieve with traditional timber and rope technologies. Railway expansion consequently accelerated the introduction of industrial bridge engineering into India (Headrick, 1988; Kerr, 1995).

Yet railway technology was not simply transferred without modification. Engineers had to deal with Indian rivers, soils, floods, climate and construction conditions. Colonial engineers therefore adapted European engineering practices to the Indian environment, while Indian skilled workers contributed practical knowledge to the construction process (Kerr, 2007). This process of adaptation is consistent with Deloche's argument that indigenous bridge-building methods and European engineering interacted rather than existing as completely separate technological worlds (Deloche, 1994).

The Lansdowne Bridge over the Indus:

The Lansdowne Bridge over the Indus at Sukkur represents one of the most significant achievements of nineteenth-century colonial bridge engineering. The bridge was constructed between 1885 and 1889 to provide a railway connection across the Indus between Sukkur and Rohri. Before its construction, the railway crossing depended upon a steam ferry, which restricted the movement of trains and goods (Kerr, 1995). The Cambridge University Library record confirms that the bridge was formally opened in March 1889 and that the project was supervised by Frederick Ewart Robertson.



Figure 3: Lansdowne Bridge over the Indus at Sukkur, completed in 1889, illustrating the application of large-scale cantilever engineering to colonial railway infrastructure.

Source: Robertson, F. E. (1891). The Lansdowne Bridge over the Indus at Sukkur. Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers, 104, 125–134.

The major engineering difficulty was the wide Rohri channel. Its silty riverbed made the construction of conventional intermediate piers problematic. Alexander Meadows Rendel's accepted design therefore

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employed two anchored cantilevers, each approximately 310 feet long, supporting a 200-foot suspended span in the middle (Robertson, 1891; Deloche, 1994). Contemporary engineering documentation records the difficult river conditions and the specialised equipment used during construction.

The bridge illustrates the transformation of cantilever construction within an industrial engineering environment. Unlike the timber cantilever structures of Kashmir, the Lansdowne Bridge was designed for heavy railway traffic and depended upon industrial iron and steel fabrication, engineering calculations, specialised machinery and large-scale construction management (Robertson, 1891; Kerr, 1995).

The comparison between Kashmir's wooden cantilever bridges and the Lansdowne Bridge is nevertheless historically valuable. Both demonstrate the usefulness of projecting structural members beyond their supports, but they emerged from different technological contexts. There is no adequate evidence to describe the Lansdowne Bridge as a direct technological descendant of the Kashmir *kadals*. The relationship is better understood as a continuity of structural principle combined with a major transformation in materials, scale, calculation and institutional organisation (Deloche, 1984, 1994).

Howrah Bridge and the Mature Colonial Engineering System:

The Howrah Bridge represents a later phase of colonial bridge engineering in eastern India. The bridge, opened in 1943, became one of the most important crossings over the Hooghly River and formed a major part of the transport infrastructure of Calcutta and Howrah. Its engineering design represents the advanced application of the balanced cantilever principle in a large-scale steel structure (Ghoshal, 2021).

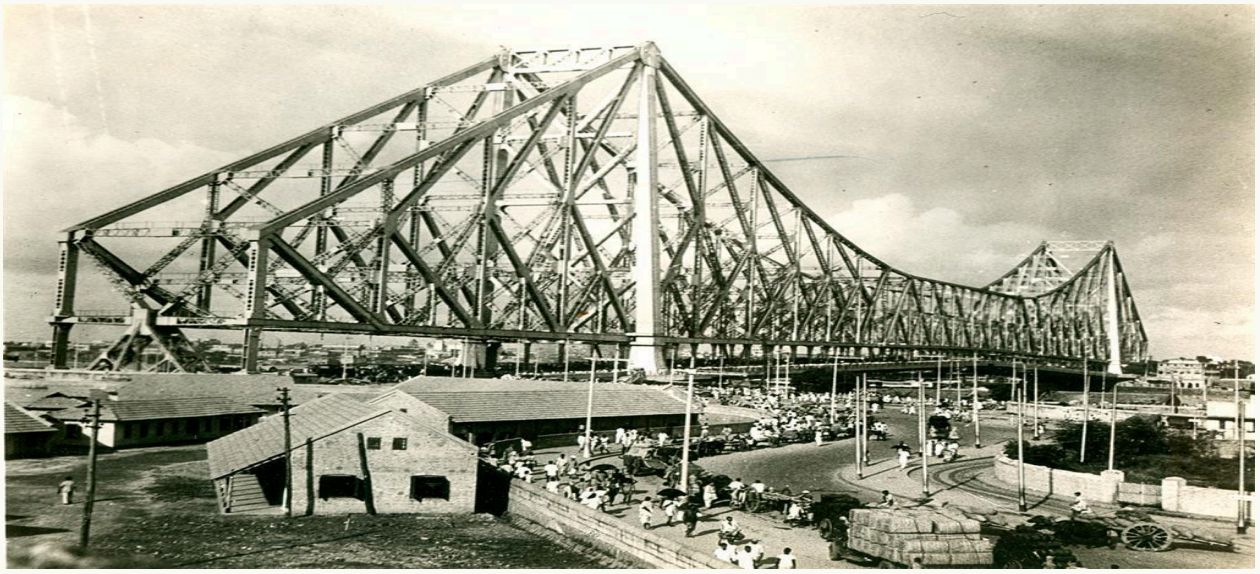


Figure-4: Howrah Bridge over the Hooghly River, Kolkata, opened in 1943, representing the mature phase of colonial steel bridge engineering in eastern India.

Source: Ghoshal, A. (2021). Engineering aspects of Howrah Bridge at Kolkata (1943). CRC Press.

According to Amitabha Ghoshal's detailed engineering study, the bridge has a central span of 457 metres and used approximately 26,500 tons of high-grade steel. The entire structure was fabricated at Kolkata with a high degree of precision and assembled as a riveted structure (Ghoshal, 2021).

The bridge demonstrates the maturity of the colonial engineering system by the early twentieth century. Structural design, foundation engineering, steel fabrication, transportation, riveting and erection had become part of a highly organised technological process. At the same time, the project cannot be separated from Indian industrial development. The fabrication of major components in Kolkata and the participation of Indian industrial capacity demonstrate that colonial infrastructure increasingly depended upon technical

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and industrial capabilities located within India itself (Ghoshal, 2021; Arnold, 2000).

Howrah Bridge should therefore not be understood simply as a foreign technological object imposed upon India. It emerged from a global engineering tradition but was designed, fabricated and constructed within an Indian industrial and labour environment. Its history illustrates the increasing hybridity of colonial infrastructure during the twentieth century.

Indigenous Knowledge and the Colonial Afterlife:

The history of Indian bridge-building demonstrates that indigenous technology survived the arrival of colonial engineering in several different forms. Himalayan rope, cane and wooden bridges continued to serve local communities; masonry techniques remained important in road construction; and traditional knowledge of foundations, materials and environmental conditions continued to influence practical construction (Deloche, 1984, 1994).

The interaction between indigenous and colonial technology was therefore neither entirely harmonious nor entirely oppositional. Colonial rule imposed new institutional priorities and often reorganised infrastructure according to military, administrative and commercial objectives (Headrick, 1988). Nevertheless, the construction of this infrastructure required Indian labour and knowledge. British engineers had to adapt their designs to local rivers, soils, climate and construction conditions, while Indian workers acquired and circulated new technical skills (Kerr, 1995; Kerr, 2007).

This process can be understood through the broader history of technology. David Edgerton has argued that technological history should not focus only on new inventions, because older technologies frequently remain in use and are adapted to new circumstances (Edgerton, 2007). Indian bridge history illustrates this clearly. Traditional rope bridges and timber structures did not become irrelevant simply because steel bridges appeared. Instead, different technologies continued to be selected according to their environmental suitability, cost, purpose and available resources.

The colonial period consequently created a layered technological landscape. At one level, traditional structures continued to exist; at another, colonial engineers introduced new forms of professional engineering; and at a third, Indian industrial enterprises increasingly participated in the production of modern infrastructure. The result was not a simple replacement of indigenous engineering but a complex technological transformation involving continuity, adaptation, standardisation and rupture (Arnold, 2000; Deloche, 1994; Edgerton, 2007).

Conclusion:

The history of bridge engineering in India reveals a long interaction between indigenous knowledge, environmental adaptation and colonial technological transformation. From the timber *kadals* of Kashmir and the rope and cane *jhula* bridges of the Himalayas to the stone and masonry traditions represented by the Puri/Madhupur bridge, Indian builders developed diverse and technically effective solutions to the problem of crossing rivers and difficult terrain. The nineteenth century introduced major changes through the Public Works Department, engineering education, railways, iron and steel, structural calculation and standardised construction, but these developments did not simply erase existing Indian practices.The Lansdowne Bridge demonstrated the application of large-scale industrial cantilever engineering to railway transport, while the Howrah Bridge represented a highly developed balanced-cantilever steel structure within the late colonial industrial environment. These structures should not be presented as direct technological descendants of earlier Indian bridges without documentary evidence; rather, they reveal how similar structural principles could be transformed through new materials, engineering institutions, industrial production and changing transportation requirements. The colonial afterlife of indigenous bridge

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technology was therefore characterised by selective continuity, adaptation, technological coexistence and institutional transformation. Indian bridge history is consequently best understood not as a linear movement from "traditional" to "modern," but as a layered history in which indigenous empiricism, colonial engineering, Indian labour, industrial technology and environmental knowledge interacted in the making of modern infrastructure.

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