

# Parsi Patronage of Colonial Bombay

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*Native workmen have been as apt to learn as their confrères in Europe, and that architecture has now for the first time since the decadence of Mussulman art, a glorious future before her in India. Art can only be permanent when the knowledge of it has become indigenous, and this period in architecture is arriving.*<sup>1</sup>

—*The Bombay Times*, January 1876

During the late nineteenth century, public art and architecture flourished in Bombay due to the charitable donations of Indian elites. Furthermore, these natives reaped the benefits of a modernized infrastructure introduced by the British. Due to their economic power on the Indian subcontinent, these philanthropists formed close ties with their colonial rulers.<sup>2</sup> They saw themselves as middlemen, acting on behalf of their indigenous communities. A majority of these intermediaries were Parsi, an ethnically and religiously distinct group from their indigenous Indian counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Originally from Persia, the Parsis were followers of the Zoroastrian faith who had found religious refuge in India and prospered greatly. The Parsis were viewed by colonial rule as “almost British,” yet they saw themselves as natives in India.<sup>4</sup> Visual manifestations of the Parsis’ “nativeness” can be seen in the art and architecture they patronized throughout south Bombay. The Parsis funded many public architectural works, museums, and art schools. Their philanthropy joined Indian and British artisans, architects, curators, designers, and art educators together to create a hybrid style for a modern India.

Bombay, like Britain during this period, favored architectural eclecticism. However, the monumental architecture of nineteenth-century Bombay has an Indian flair, echoing the Victorian aesthetic ideal that architecture should reflect the culture in which it was developed.<sup>5</sup> The majority of Bombay’s Victorian structures were patronized by the Parsis and built by the Public Works Department run by native Bombayites. Today, these monuments stand as reminders of a British colonial past. This seemingly exotic colonial legacy

has prompted many British art and architectural historians to study these buildings through a strict colonial lens without regard to the massive role that the indigenous populations played.<sup>6</sup> Their scholarship acknowledged many nineteenth-century colonial structures within India and paved the way for their recognition as historical structures worth preservation—as seen in the Victoria Terminus which was designated a UNESCO world heritage site in 2004. However, there has been little research accomplished on the decorative sculpture of Bombay’s Victorian architecture. This article provides the first analysis of the importance of the patronage in Bombay’s architectural ornament. These structures were largely built and commissioned by Indian natives—specifically the Parsis.<sup>7</sup> Indian craftsmen and patrons had artistic agency during colonial rule as is revealed in the figural ornament that covers the architectural oeuvre of Bombay’s Public Works Department. This department, consisting of both British and Indian architects, outsourced the majority of the architectural ornament to Indian students of decorative sculpture at the Parsi-funded Bombay School of Art.

Decorative sculpture was crucial to the building of a modern Bombay because of its unrestricted viewership. Bombay’s Public Works Department built not only administrative buildings but much of the city’s infrastructure. Indians from all walks of life interacted with these structures on a daily basis; they could see the influence of Parsi elites on Bombay’s modernity. In addition, the longstanding tradition of architectural ornament on the Indian subcontinent would have emphasized its importance in the architectural imagery

<sup>1</sup> “The New University Buildings in Bombay: II The Library,” *The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce*, 28 January 1874.

<sup>2</sup> The British have a long history on the Indian subcontinent. The East India Company governed regions of India from 1612 to 1858, and then power shifted to the British Raj, or rule of the British Crown, which governed the Indian subcontinent (i.e. present-day Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh) until the Partition of India in 1947. For a deeper study of colonial rule in South Asia, see Douglas M. Peers and Nandini Gooptu, *India and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> “Parsi” is often alternatively spelled “Parsee,” however most historians today use the first spelling.

<sup>4</sup> Jehangir R. P. Modi, *Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy: The First Indian Knight and Baronet (1783-1859)* (Bombay: Jehangir R.P. Modi, 1959), 69.

<sup>5</sup> John Ruskin’s sixth lamp of architecture “memory” states that architecture should respect the culture in which it is developed in. For a

complete set of the critic’s aesthetic ideals see John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London: The Waverly Book Company Ltd., 1849), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Previous scholarship on the decorative sculpture of colonial Bombay includes: Alex G. Bremmer, “Some Imperial Institute: Architecture, Symbolism, and the Ideal of Empire in Late Victorian Britain, 1887-93,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 62, no. 1 (March 2003): 50-73; Chris Brooks, *The Gothic Revival* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999); Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Christopher W. London, *Bombay Gothic* (Mumbai: India Book House, 2002); Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India: Occidental Orientations 1850-1922* (Cambridge: University Press, 1994); Jan Morris, *Stones of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); and *The Spectacle of Empire: Style, Effect, and the Pax Britannica* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982).

<sup>7</sup> During his lifetime, Parsi Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy contributed ap-

of nineteenth-century Bombay.<sup>8</sup> Using the architectural ornament of structures built between the years 1860-1890, this article will discuss the position of the Parsis as promoters of a new and ideal culture within the colonial city.<sup>9</sup>

The history, arts, and architecture of modern Bombay are intrinsically connected to the Parsis. Beginning humbly as textile traders and spice vendors in the early-modern era, they transformed into mercantile millionaires at the head of international companies by the mid-nineteenth century. The Parsis lived comparable lives to American industrialist philanthropists of the nineteenth century. Like Rockefeller, Mellon, and Carnegie, the Parsis made charitable donations to museums, funded public building projects, and patronized the arts. They controlled Bombay's visual culture by integrating European academic art with traditional Indian design.

The Parsis are not native to India—they fled from Iran during the seventh through the tenth centuries due to religious persecution. As strong believers in Zoroastrianism, an ancient monotheistic Persian religion, they were unable to freely practice their faith in a strictly Islamic state.<sup>10</sup> Wishing to preserve their faith and heritage, the Parsis relocated across the Arabian Sea to the western coastal regions of India on the Malabar Coast. For nearly seven hundred years, they remained in India carefully preserving their religious identity and Persian culture.<sup>11</sup> They were known by the moniker "Parsi," which means Persian in Farsi. When the Mughals occupied India in the sixteenth century, they found commonalities with the Parsis in their shared Persian language and culture, and as a result, they often favored Parsis over Gujaratis and Marathas when it came to trade. Thus, the Parsis became mercantile elites and prospered greatly.

Parsi philanthropists did not limit their donations to their own communities however. The Parsis also had a strong pres-

ence within the Empire and abroad. Wealthy Parsi merchants donated to the building of public works and monuments in London, the Suez Canal in Egypt, and urban planning during the Haussmannization of Paris.<sup>12</sup> These donations suggest strong links between the Parsis and their colonial rulers in India and Britain. Thus the Parsis did not see themselves as a colonized group. They viewed the Raj as an alliance and vice versa.<sup>13</sup> Hence, they served as intermediaries between the British and the indigenous populations in Bombay. The Parsis' presence in Bombay and abroad was tremendous.

The single most influential Parsi was Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy. As a merchant and banker, Jeejeebhoy amassed his large fortune through the opium trade between England and China. Like many other Parsis, Jeejeebhoy became a valuable link in joining India and Britain together. Jeejeebhoy was considered "almost English."<sup>14</sup> As the first native of India knighted and awarded baronetcy by the British crown, he held great authority in Bombay and was recognized abroad. Over his lifetime, Jeejeebhoy donated nearly twenty-five lakhs to charities and the building of Bombay.<sup>15</sup> Even today he is known for his philanthropy, and many schools, hospitals, and libraries are named after him. Of greatest importance to this study is the fact that he was a great patron of the arts. Jeejeebhoy, like many other Parsi and British elites, commissioned portraits by European and Indian artists; he was fond of the art and design of India as well as European academic art.<sup>16</sup> In addition, he donated to museums in both London and Bombay and founded the Bombay School of Art.

As supporters of the most modern community in India, the Parsis became integrators of British and Indian culture. They ushered in the modernization of Bombay and provided the wealth and taste to do so. The visual manifestations of this modern Indian culture can be seen gracing the spires

proximately Rs. 30 lakh to the arts and architecture in Bombay and abroad. For a list of his expenditures see Appendix II in Modi, *Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy*, 142.

<sup>8</sup> In a predominately Hindu region, it can be assumed that the majority of viewers would have been familiar with the Sanskrit term *alamkara*; which references architectural ornament but carries much more than a mere aesthetic connotation, references the "validity of whatever is adorned, or enhances its effect, empowering it," in a spiritual sense. Thus Indian viewers would approach decorative sculpture with this prior knowledge. See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Ornament," *The Art Bulletin* 21, no. 4 (1939): 377-78.

<sup>9</sup> Given that the Parsis patronized architectural projects, museums, and art schools which brought together British and Indian architects, artists, and designers, my research intersects with postcolonial theory, specifically in the areas of hybridity, third-space, and imagined communities.

<sup>10</sup> John R. Hinnells, *Zoroastrianism and the Parsis* (Bombay: Zoroastrian Studies, 1996), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, they did not intermarry with Gujarati and Maharashtrian locals, which resulted in a tightly knit community. Jesse S. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 217.

<sup>12</sup> Jesse S. Palsetia, "'Honourable Machinations': The Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Baronetcy and the Indian Response to the Honours System in India" *South Asia Research* 23, no. 1 (May 2003): 56. In addition, it is interesting to note that although the Parsis consisted of only six percent of the population of Bombay, they accounted for over twenty-five percent of London's Indian student population. Shompa Lahiri, *Indians in Britain: Anglo-Indian Encounters, Race and Identity, 1880-1930* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 6, and Meera Kosambi, *Bombay in Transition: The Growth and Social Ecology of a Colonial City, 1880-1980* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1986), 87-88.

<sup>13</sup> The British Raj was the rule of Great Britain on the Indian subcontinent. The Hindi *raj* means rule or reign, therefore, the British Raj simply refers to British rule.

<sup>14</sup> Modi, *Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy*, 69.

<sup>15</sup> A lakh is one unit in the Vedic numbering system equal to 100,000. In total, Sir Jeejeebhoy donated Rs. 24,59,736 to charity. The division of funds was as follows: public works Rs 4,36,340, Catholic charities, Rs. 8,48,381, and communal charities, Rs. 11,75,015; *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>16</sup> Portraits that he had commissioned by British artists included, George Chinney (1840), Baron Marochetti (1856), Richard James Lane (1840), and D.J. Pound. Asian artists included G. K. Mahtre (1855) and Lam Qua (1860). Further emphasizing his role in arts patronage, he served on the juror committee for London's Great Exhibition of 1851.

and buttresses of the Victorian edifices throughout the colonial city. Bombay began its modern burgeoning in the mid-nineteenth century. Standing apart from other colonial cities of the subcontinent such as Madras, Calcutta, Delhi, and Lahore, Bombay was built and financed for the greater part by natives. Unlike other colonial cities, Bombay was home to some of the British Empire's wealthiest capitalists—the majority of which were Parsi. They were a unique and essential group that orchestrated the modernization of Bombay through significant charitable donations. Indeed, the Parsis transformed Bombay into a modern metropolis.

Bombay is unique among other Indian cities because of the greater role native populations played in the patronage and construction of public buildings, particularly Jeejeebhoy who wanted the Parsis be viewed as part of the native populations in addition to being associated with the British. Evidence of their identity construction is seen in the architectural reliefs on the gothic structures of Bombay. In Parsi patronized structures, Parsis are depicted alongside other Indian groups such as Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Jains. These sculptures were created by the Parsi-funded Bombay School of Art which reveals that the Parsis saw themselves as Indian.

Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy served on the board of directors for the Great Indian Peninsula Railway and donated five lakhs to the building of the Victoria Terminus. As a major donor to the Grand Peninsular Railway and founder of the Bombay School of Art, Jeejeebhoy had great authority over the pictorial elements of the terminus. As a result, he and the other nine directors are featured in large bas-reliefs on the western façade (Figure 1). Eight of the directors are of European descent and two are not.<sup>17</sup> In addition to Jeejeebhoy, Indian-born Jagannath Sunkersett is featured (Figures 2 and 3). Sunkersett was a major donor to the Victoria Terminus, and like Jeejeebhoy, he supported the arts of India. The portraits of Jeejeebhoy and Sunkersett are not displayed centrally like the Europeans; they are placed at the far reaches of either side of the façade near the circular towers, which display a relief of the different peoples of Bombay (Figures 3-5). Although some may argue that this deemphasizes their

importance, it can be said that the location of the portraits shows their desire to be the "middlemen," acting as intermediaries between the British and other Indian populations in Bombay.<sup>18</sup> The Parsis saw themselves as part of cosmopolitan Bombay, and they wished to improve their city through the patronage of government buildings.

The relief panels on the ground floor of the two circular towers connect the wings to the main structure. The figures on the relief panel are not naturalistic like the medallions. Each panel consists of sixteen distinct profile portraits. Each man wears a different turban and has an individual facial hairstyle, alluding to his social group. Bernard S. Cohn, an anthropologist of British India, argues that the classification and organization of different ethnicities functions as a display of colonial power.<sup>19</sup> However, it can be argued that these relief panels give a voice to the many communities who inhabited the city. The Indian public who frequently utilized the Grand Peninsular Railway would view these relief panels as a positive representation of their own communities, not the elite society of the British Raj.<sup>20</sup> The contemporary viewer would be able to categorize the religion, caste, if Hindu, and inhabited district of each man simply by his headdress and facial hair. For example, the man second to the left is shown with a *mundaso* turban, a headdress worn by males of the Daivadnya Brahmin caste.<sup>21</sup> Daivadnyas were the wealthiest Brahmins in Maharashtra, who lived in the southern-most coastal region of Bombay.<sup>22</sup> This same analysis can be given to each of the figures; Muslims, Jains, Christians, and Parsis are also depicted. It is interesting to note that Parsis are grouped with the other Bombay types. Although the British did not view them as indigenous to India, the Parsis identified themselves as being native to Bombay. This again emphasizes how the Parsis saw themselves as integrators of a new culture into their Indian home.

This architectural narrative of the different cultural factions native to Bombay is not unique to the Victoria Terminus. Within the walls of the Bombay fort lies the Bombay General Hospital, completed in 1875, which also prominently features the sculptural work of students from the Bombay School of Art (Figure 6).<sup>23</sup> On three sides of the crossing

<sup>17</sup> Rahul Mehrotra, Sharada Dwivedi, and Preeti Bedi, *A City Icon: Victoria Terminus Bombay, 1887 Now Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus Mumbai* (Mumbai: Eminence Designs, 2006), 35.

<sup>18</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 98.

<sup>19</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the British Raj commissioned photographers to take portraits throughout India in attempts of develop an ethnographic classification system of the different castes of India. For the best studies on this topic read, Bernard S. Cohn, "The Past in the Present: India as Museum of Mankind," paper presented at the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies Colloquium, Museums and Collecting, Colonial and post-Colonial, April 3 and 4, 1992; and Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Basing-

stoke: Macmillan, 1988). However, the exclusion of women in these panels would be highly problematic for the contemporary female viewer.

<sup>21</sup> Jamila Brij Bhushan, *The Costumes and Textiles of India* (Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Private Ltd., 1958), 28; and also Dr. Bhau Daji Lad, Mumbai City Museum, *Mumbai (Bombay) History* exhibition, permanent collection, viewed November 23, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Christine Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India: Politics and Communities in Bombay City 1840-1885* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 132.

<sup>23</sup> The structure was funded by Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, Gokuldas Tejpal, and Arthur Crawford. See Mridula Ramanna, *Western Medicine and Public Health in Colonial Bombay, 1845-1895* (New Delhi: Baba Barkha Nath, 2002), 73.

tower, four massive human heads gaze over Bombay representing the Koli, Muslim, Christian, and Parsi classifications of nineteenth-century, cosmopolitan Bombay.<sup>24</sup> Typical of Victorian sculpture, the colossal heads are idealized leaving little room for portrait-like qualities. However, the heads can be identified again by their facial hair and headdress. Common to ethnic studies in India, the figure-heads reflect the diverse religious groups present in Bombay.<sup>25</sup> The Koli includes the original fishing peoples that were the indigenous inhabitants of Bombay and were predominately Hindu. The Muslim head represents the Bohra and Khoja clans who came to Bombay from Mughal Gujarat. The Christian head represents the Christians who had been living on the Malabar Coast for several centuries. The last head represents the Parsi population within Bombay. Here again, the Parsis are regarded by the contemporary viewer, and by themselves, as a native group in Bombay.

The Rajabai Clock Tower, finished in 1862, is another example of the inclusion of Parsis as Bombay natives in architectural sculpture (Figure 7). As one of the most expensive neo-gothic projects commissioned by the Bombay Public Works Administration, the University of Bombay has a large amount of relief sculpture inside and out. The exterior sculpture in a purely governmental building is most revealing regarding attitudes toward Parsis.<sup>26</sup> The clock tower is lined with columns and the capitals display Indian animals such as tigers, peacocks, and chital. Most significant, however, are the sculptures within the porticos where native peoples of Bombay are displayed (Figure 8). Like the relief panels on the Victoria Terminus, the various nuances of dress signify distinct cultural groups. At the left is a Parsi in traditional garb. He wears a stiff *dabhoi* turban—the headpiece reserved for wealthy Parsis. He also wears the *jama*, a robe-like costume that was first introduced by the Mughals. Here, Parsis are seen alongside Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

The High Court of Bombay was a building used by British government officials—even more frequently than the Victoria Terminus and the Bombay General Hospital. It was a structure that enforced the laws and regulations of the British Empire. In this judicial sphere, the Parsis were seen by colonial rule as “almost British”—however, they are still included with the Bombay types.<sup>27</sup> The Parsis had a foot in both cultures and were able to best integrate British habits into multicultural Bombay. By straddling British, Indian, and Parsi cultures, they created a new space and culture that could freely interact with all societies.<sup>28</sup> The Parsi community functioned in the “third space” which resulted in the group being the middlemen chosen to represent India at home in Bombay and abroad.

The architectural ornament of Bombay’s public buildings is evidence of ideals of progress and modern civilization held by Indians and British alike. The Parsis represented themselves as natives of India through the public art they patronized. Thus, they revealed their own attitudes towards colonization, and viewed themselves a part of modern India while acting as middlemen between the British and Indian populations. Nevertheless, they wanted their countrymen to be taught in the European academic style. Their solution was a school of the arts that praised both academic and decorative sculpture influenced by native Indian forms. The Bombay School of Art paved the way for modern sculptors to visually express the desires of a revolutionary and independent India. The Parsis, however, did not enjoy the same fate as the monuments they patronized. In an independent India, they no longer received bureaucratic appointments as they had during British rule. Indeed, today they have almost disappeared from Bombay’s bustling streets, leaving only echoes of their influence through British colonial architecture.

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<sup>24</sup> Preet Chopra, *A Joint Enterprise Indian Elites and the Making of British Bombay* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 59. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 60. See also the report of the direction of public instruction in the Bombay presidency for the year 1873-74, 52.

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996), 37.

<sup>26</sup> Rahul Mehrotra, Sharada Dwivedi, and Y.V. Chandrachud, *The Bombay High Court: The Story of the Building, 1878-2003* (Bombay: Eminence, 2004), 42.

<sup>27</sup> Parsis enjoyed many more economic, political, and religious rights than their indigenous Indian counterparts. See Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India*, 174.

<sup>28</sup> Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question” and “Of Mimicry and Man” in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 94-131.

► Figure 1. [facing page, top left] Students at the Bombay School of Art Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, Italian Marble, 1880-1886. West Façade, Victoria Terminus, Mumbai, India.

► Figure 2. [facing page, top right] Students at the Bombay School of Art Jagannath Sunkersett, Italian Marble, 1880-1886. West Façade, Victoria Terminus, Mumbai, India.

► Figures 3-4. [facing page, bottom] Students at the Bombay School of Art, *Bombay Types Relief*, Italian Marble, 1880-1886. Victoria Terminus, Mumbai, India.





Figure 5. Frederick William Stevens, *Victoria Terminus*, 1880-1886. Note the two circular towers where the reliefs of the different peoples of Bombay appear with the nearby portraits of Jeejeebhoy and Sunkersett. Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, Mumbai, India. Photo credit: Anoop Ravi.

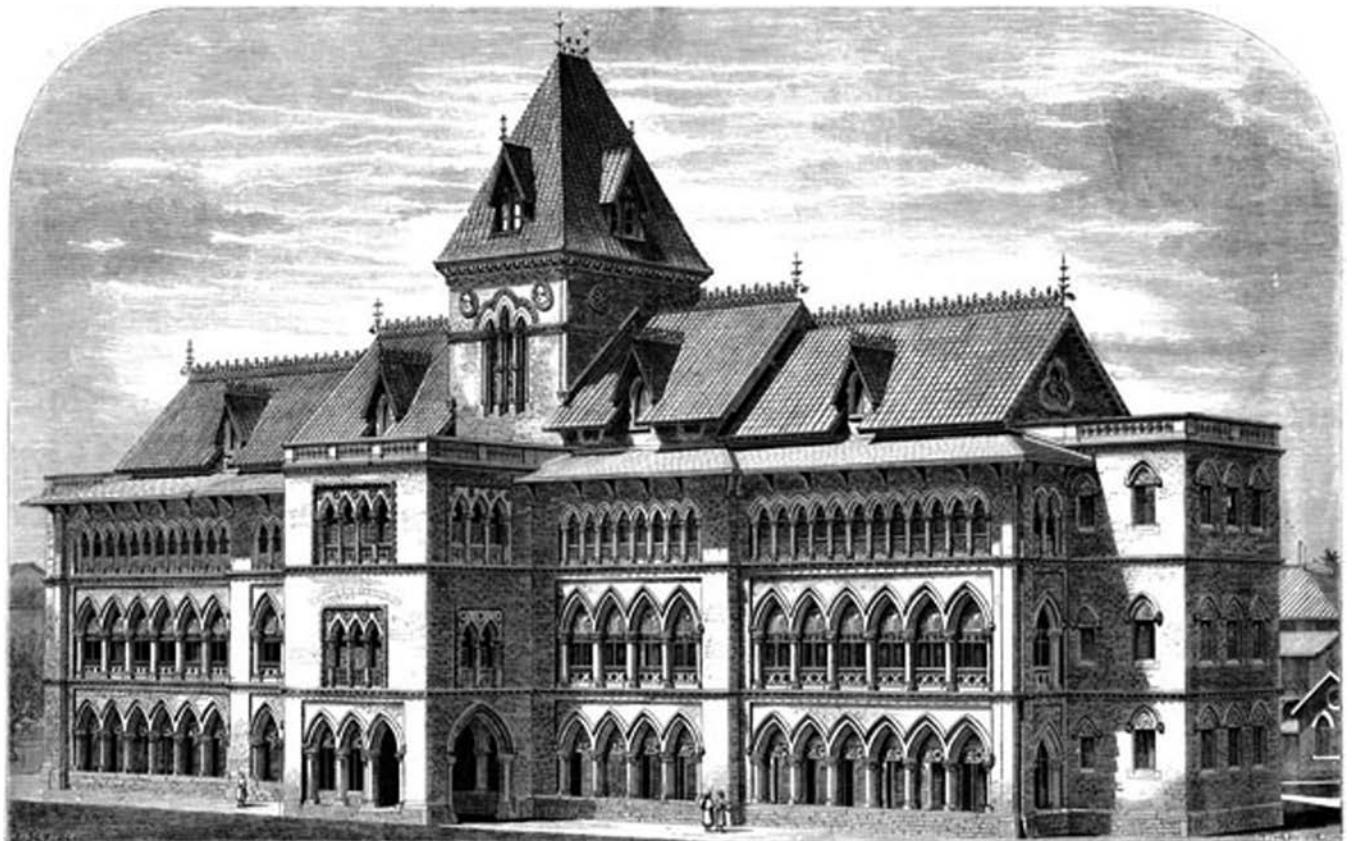


Figure 6. Col. J. A. Fuller, *Native General Hospital*, (From the London Illustrated News), Print, 1875. Gokuldas Tejpal Hospital, Mumbai, India.

Figure 7. Col J. A. Fuller, *Rajabai Clock Tower*, Italian Marble, Indian Limestone, and Sandstone, 1869-78. University of Bombay, Mumbai, India.



Figure 8. Students of the Bombay School of Art, *Rajabai Clock Tower Castes of India*, Italian Marble, 1869-78. University of Bombay, Mumbai, India.

