

British Architecture in the Four Metropolitan Cities of India -
What to Conserve and for Whom ?*

By
Narayani Gupta

OVER the last seven years India's rediscovery of herself has extended itself to the built environment, just as in the 1950s there had occurred the revival of handicrafts and the performing arts, and in the 1960s there had awakened a concern about the natural environment. This new interest has been expressed in two convictions - one, that the Archaeological Survey alone cannot have the sole responsibility for the country's architectural heritage; two, that the concept of the 'heritage' should not be confined only to structures more than a hundred years old. The Indian Heritage Society formed in 1979 was concerned to develop a relationship between the heritage and tourism, the Indian National Trust set up in 1984 aims to supplement the work of the Archaeological Survey and also to take up broader environmental issues. In some towns like Bangalore, Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi and Hyderabad local conservation societies have been formed. The story of the conservation movement in the west over the last century has shown the equal necessity of three ingredients - public involvement, sympathetic legislation, and trained personnel. In India the first has to be enlarged and sustained, and the other two have to be created. At the outset, we must understand certain specific problems and prospects for conservation in the Indian situation generally, and in the four metropolitan cities in particular.

In a country with a history as old as India's, the architectural heritage of the last two centuries is a very small part of the whole. The distant past is easier to recognize and appreciate than the recent past. It is particularly difficult to see buildings as being part of our past when they are in active use. Writers' Building in Calcutta, the Delhi Town Hall, the New Delhi Secretariat buildings, all of them testaments to the bureaucracy that most of British rule was, continue to serve as gigantic filing cabinets, and much of the original scheme of things has been ruined by the attempts to squeeze more and more accommodation out of them. Railway stations, triumphant symbols of Britain's technological conquest of India, are in highly active use. In the last few years Delhi Station has got a breathing-space for itself by giving up its wholesale offloading functions, and has removed the hoardings that disfigured its appearance. Public libraries and museums were a distinctly British innovation. These, built in the late nineteenth century, as well as Raj buildings which have been later made into libraries or museums (Belvedere in Calcutta, Jaipur House in Delhi) are better placed because of the nature of their functions and the relatively small volume of traffic they are subjected to. But since, by a variation on Parkinson's Law, buildings expand according to the space available, the settings of many of these are threatened by 'annexitis' - the zeal for building extensions. Many areas continue to be under military control. Metcalfe House, an attractive stately home of the early nineteenth century in Delhi, is owned by the Defence Ministry, which

* Illustrated by slides.

makes access difficult. Parks and public spaces have sometimes suffered in the name of progress or of simplistic patriotism (the Calcutta Maidan wrecked for the sake of installing an underground railway, the sweep of the Marina Beach in Madras broken by a row of statues of local heroes). Places of worship are the only structures in a quite pristine condition.

Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Delhi happen to have the largest clusters of colonial structures, since they were the capitals of the three British Presidencies, and Delhi from 1912 was the capital of the Indian Empire. When it is remembered that over four-fifths of India's two hundred and sixteen major towns have pedigrees going back many centuries, the three former Presidency capitals appear quite young. They developed from grants of land made by local rulers in the seventeenth century. Since then they have grown in a federated fashion, a mosaic of 'British' and 'Indian' areas and open spaces. If these cities are a little like New York, Delhi is, as it were, a Washington tacked on to Moscow. Delhi's morphology has the stamp of two imperial decisions - that of the Mughals to shift their capital from Agra to Delhi, and that of the British to move from Calcutta. Indo-British architecture is characterised by some structures which are monuments per se, many functional buildings which have a monumental character, and a large number of unpretentious though distinctive buildings. The Raj in architecture as in townplanning was a combination of bold advances in technology in certain sectors with a dogged cheeseparer in public expenditure. New Delhi was intended to be an extravaganza, but the First War and the Depression forced economies there too.

In the last forty years, the population of the four major cities has increased steadily, with the immigrants settling in the interstices of the built-up areas or, where land is available, in extensions to the cities. The regional demographic primacy that has been forced on these cities is a result of official policy, which concentrates administrative, commercial and even industrial activities there, and of their serving as magnets to draw in poorer sections of the rural population. As a result, the landscape of these cities has changed enormously. Older buildings have been hemmed in, walled in, added to and sometimes demolished.

Even so, there are sections of these cities which are distinctly 'period' - the Madras Marina, Calcutta's Dalhousie Square, Bombay's Churchgate and the Central Vista in Delhi. Even here, land-use patterns are changing. A remarkable democratization of Lutyens' imperial avenue has occurred; as against the one day in the year when an officially-sponsored cavalcade wends its way down from the President's House, there are many days when groups agitating to secure a better deal from Parliament trudge up the avenue, to shout slogans from the shade of one of the majestic trees that Lutyens planted here. Therefore even where there is no largescale outrage in the form of highrise buildings, the changing uses to which public spaces are put can lead to a metamorphosis of the area. The weary slogan-shouters need refreshment - so tea-stalls spring up around the trees. They need to be watched, in case they turn violent - so police-tents are pitched nearby. They need to be controlled - so wooden barricades are erected. The uses of these areas should be sensitively monitored and channelled in such a way as not to ruin the visual beauty of the original.

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IF we believe that the buildings of the Raj merit the same care as older ones, the issues that have to be discussed are of how to create an interest, and then how to retain it through projects of conservation funded on a longterm basis.

British architecture in India is in a sense the heritage of two countries. The 1980s, which had seen a growing interest in India in 'the heritage' has also been the period when Britain has rediscovered her imperial past. The architectural side of this 'Raj nostalgia' may be said to have been launched by Gavin Stamp's Birdwood Memorial Lecture in 1981, which marked the end of the embarrassment at the shoddiness and eclecticism of British 'Public Works Department' architecture and began the phase of appreciation. He is for Indo-British architecture what Betjeman is for Victorian Britain. This coincided with the research of other scholars. The books of Robert Irving, Jan Morris and Philip Davies, together with works on specific cities, palaces and forts, and on regional schools of architecture, add up to a fairly large body of information on recent architecture in India. These are being supplemented by reprints of earlier works and by journals - older perennials like Design, and more recent ventures like India Magazine and Architecture + Design. 'Happenings' like the Festivals of India also generate interest. All this means that today foreign scholars and tourists are well equipped to appreciate the built heritage of India, in a way that was not possible ten years ago.

All this could easily peter out, like a passing fashion. If we are serious about conserving the architecture of the recent past, a strong base has to be created in India. The average Indian, like the average anyone, is a compound of what he has been taught and what he has observed. In both areas, a great deal needs to be done.

The school curricula would benefit by the introduction of a rudimentary course on the built environment. This is particularly appropriate in a country where most people still built their own houses with skills transmitted and modified through generations, and where a sense of beauty & rhythm is apparent in inverse ratio to levels of wealth. The potential architect would gain from a school education where he learned more things related to his interest than just mathematics and physics. For the average student, such an education input will create an interest in the urban landscape as a whole, and develop an intelligent response to urban problems. This can promote a continuous dialogue between administrators and citizens, which at present occurs only sporadically at seminars. After a generation of modern architecture, we are in a position to compare it with traditional Indian architecture as well as with Indo-British buildings. Many of the latter, though they had been constructed on the cheap, are structurally sound, thermally sensible and aesthetically pleasing. In a country where cement is very expensive, the very economies of these buildings might have something to teach us.

There has been a tremendous spurt in the volume of domestic tourism in India in the last few years. Museums & memorials occupy a place on the tourist's itinerary as much as places of worship. Other buildings do not draw tourists because only necessity would take people there, not curiosity. But the much-maligned Public Works Department should be appreciated for the quiet revolution

in scale that they introduced in British India in providing premises for medical care, education and local government. Their qualities have become difficult to appreciate because they have been engrossed into larger building complexes and because their names have often been changed in a harmless if immature display of nationalist fervour. Simple guidebooks and lively guides could convey the sense of wonder in the combination of Indian skills and Western technology represented by these buildings.

If in the next few years the educational framework is thus modified, and Anglo-Indian architecture given the same status as older monuments, it will become easier to find funds to spend on their upkeep. It should be borne in mind that the objective should be democratic, not elitist. Museums, community centres, and carefully restored parks should get priority, not 'period' hotels. Since questions like traffic movement, relatedness of buildings, demolition of some later accretions, are involved, the planning agencies have to be sympathetic. That this is possible is seen by the fact that the revised Master Plan for Delhi (Delhi 2001) has earmarked areas for 'special treatment'. These include the core areas of Lutyens' New Delhi. Such a policy has been the outcome of discussions between the planning bodies and citizens. In the last two years, the listing of buildings (including recent ones) has been started in many states. This has to be made as detailed as possible, to help formulate strategies for conservation.

The legal system in India provides stimulating as well as retarding factors for conservation. The Rent Control Acts in inner cities are a disincentive for the upkeep of old buildings, and the Urban Land Ceilings Acts have led to estates being broken up. 'Stay orders' can indefinitely postpone acquisition of a building or modification of current land-use. As against this, town development acts contain provision for projects to promote conservation. Legislation in British India to 'protect' monuments began in 1861, twenty years before there was similar legislation for Britain itself. The Archaeological Survey has powers to protect structures which are over a hundred years old, but their inventories have not been updated for the last fifty years. Even when it is brought up-to-date, structures built after 1887 will remain 'unprotected'. It is now time for Indian legislation to catch up with the British example of the streamlined Heritage Law of 1979. In India, the ambivalence in the constitution between 'monuments' and 'historic buildings' has been overcome in the case of Calcutta by the West Bengal Act of 1957. This is, however, only an 'enabling' act, and has to be followed up by extending actual 'protection' to the areas or buildings to be conserved.

Much vandalism and encroachments have occurred. There have been blunders in the shape of noncompatible architecture and zigzagging skylines. It is relatively easy to check encroachments by the poor. It takes courage and determination to check the wrongdoings by the rich or by official agencies. It is here that legislative sanctions alone are not enough, and have to be supplemented by public opinion. In the past few years specific acts or proposed acts which will affect Indo-British architecture have come in for criticism from the Bombay Environmental Action Group, the Calcutta Society for the Preservation of Archival Materials and Monuments, the Save Moore Market

Committee in Madras and the Conservation Society of Delhi. A very significant episode was the protest by the Calcutta P.W.D. against the proposal by the Indian National Trust (INTACH) to build a huge complex near the Victoria Memorial Hall. They declared that they did not "wish to participate in the game of destroying this historic monument" (Telegraph, 1 July 1986). It is more than likely that on many specific issues there will be differences of opinion. But so long as there is freedom of discussion and hasty decisions are not forced, there is every possibility that we can build up a spirit of Indica Nostra, an ability to 'see (our past) steadily, and see it whole'.

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ABSTRACT

In the 1980s there is a growing concern about conserving India's built heritage, just as in the 1950s there was a movement to revive handicrafts and in the 1960s for the conservation of the natural environment. The formation of pressure-groups at the local and national level testifies to this. The conservation movement in India can learn much from the West, but there are many problems and prospects which are specific to India.

In a country with such a wealth of architectural remains, the buildings of the distant past are given more attention than those of the recent past. Very recently, there is evidence of concern about Indo-British architecture, particularly in the four metropolitan cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Delhi, where examples of these are most in evidence. These four cities continue to grow in population and in the range of activities concentrated in them, which means that conservation of colonial buildings or areas can be seen as a diversion from potential housing sites. Apart from monuments per se, some colonial buildings, built for specific functional purposes, have monumental characteristics. Some of these are in danger of being degraded because of being in use (offices and railway stations) or of having their environment spoiled by additions of annexes built in very different styles (museums, libraries) or by changing land-use patterns (boulevards). For the sake of future generations, it would be worth giving some care and effort to maintaining these structures.

In the last few years, the 'Raj nostalgia' has created an informed interest in colonial architecture in India among English-speaking people. To make this permanent, and not just a passing fashion, it is necessary to take some long-term measures. School curricula should be modified so as to generate an interest in the built environment, and enable students to evaluate colonial architecture against pre-colonial and modern. It can also be woven into the itineraries of domestic tourists. Once this interest is generated, local administrative bodies will be prepared to invest in conservation. At the present moment prospects are far brighter than they were five years ago, because both pressure-groups and development agencies have become aware of the opportunities afforded by the constitution and by the legal system for promoting conservation through the town planning mechanism. Ultimately, it is hoped, the 'heritage' will be taken care of not just by the Archaeological Survey, but by developmental authorities working with architects, archaeologists and citizens' groups.

* Illustrated with slides.

L'Architecture anglaise dans les quatre villes métropolitaines de l'Inde-
Que préserver.... pour qui?

par
Narayani Gupta

RÉSUMÉ

Les années quatre-vingt ont vu un intérêt grandissant dans l'héritage architectural de l'Inde, comme pendant les années cinquantes il y eut un mouvement pour ressusciter l'artisanat et une décennie plus tard, pour conserver l'environnement naturel. Ceci est affirmé par l'apparition des groupes de pression aux niveaux local et national. Le mouvement de conservation en Inde a beaucoup à apprendre de l'Ouest, mais il y a aussi des problèmes et perspectives spécifiques à l'Inde.

Dans un pays avec un héritage architectural si riche, les bâtiments du temps ancien reçoivent plus d'attention que ceux du temps récent. Tout dernièrement, un intérêt se manifeste dans l'architecture Indo-Anglaise, surtout dans les villes urbaines de Bombay, Calcutta, Madras et Delhi. La population de ces quatre villes ne cesse pas d'augmenter. Parallèlement, les champs d'activités et d'expression s'étendent. Donc, la préservation de bâtiments ou endroits coloniaux peut être vue comme un divertissement des problèmes de logement urbain. Les bâtiments coloniaux sont de deux catégories - les monuments proprement dit, et les bâtiments fonctionnels. Quelques-uns de ceux-ci sont en danger de dégradation à cause d'une utilisation constante (comme bureaux et gares) ou à cause d'une destruction de leur environnement. En effet, l'apparence des annexes (musées et bibliothèques) des styles très différents, ou encore les changements dans l'entourage (boulevards) n'ont réussi qu'à gâcher l'effet. Pour les générations à venir, il vaut de la peine de préserver et de s'occuper de ces structures.

Il y a quelques années, la nostalgie de la 'Raj' a évoqué un intérêt parmi les Anglophones dans l'architecture coloniale. Que ceci ne soit pas une mode, il est nécessaire de prendre quelques mesures au long terme. Les curriculum scolaires devraient être modifiés afin de créer un intérêt dans l'environnement constant. Ceci permettra aux étudiants d'évaluer et d'apprécier l'architecture Indienne dans ses phases successives. Le tourisme domestique a considérablement augmenté dans ces dernières années. L'architecture coloniale a un rôle important à jouer dans ce domaine. Avec la création de cet intérêt, les corps administratifs locaux seront prêts à investir dans la préservation des monuments. Au moment actuel, les perspectives sont mieux qu'il y a cinq ans. Les groupes de pression et les agences de développement sont plus conscients des occasions données par la constitution et par le système légal pour promouvoir la conservation à travers le mécanisme de l'aménagement urbain. Eventuellement, on espère que 'l'héritage' sera préservé par le 'Archaeological Survey' ainsi que par les autorités concernées en coopération avec architectes, archéologues et groupes de citoyens.