



CALCUTTA ARCHITECTURE*

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My thanks to the British Council and Society for Preservation, Calcutta for the opportunity to place some of my views before this select gathering, and my sincerest thanks to Mr. Abhik Ray for taking the trouble of getting for me a copy of the list of heritage buildings and the 1997 amendment to Calcutta Municipal Corporation Act.

Professor Bose, Mr. Adrian Thomas, friends, let me begin by saying that my interest in architecture is aesthetic and is not based on historical association of buildings, though, admittedly, it is a very legitimate concern of conservation.

In a way I am here to celebrate the emergence of a new consciousness of our city's architectural heritage. This is marked by the official recognition of the list of heritage buildings drawn up. It is not my intention to examine critically this list, but to appreciate the fact that there is such a list now which always can be amended or added to. I must pay respects in this context to the memory of the late Professor Nisith Ranjan Ray, who had dreamt up and pioneered the move for conservation of the city's important buildings.

I have argued elsewhere that development of architecture in Calcutta reveals a familiar colonial paradigm : that of the smothering of the native idiom by an imported form with an emblematic content, i.e., a new design meant to symbolize visually the assumed cultural superiority of the colonizer. basic moral stance of all c ionizing efforts. Sikharas, domes, and minars were in turn also emblems. Even a casual look at prints of late eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Calcutta presenting the surrounds of the city beyond the White Town will show how temple sikharas dominated the skyline of old Calcutta. These were replaced by columns and round arches,

particularly columns. It all started early, in the eighteenth century with the British importing into India "a severe and rather uncouth classical style" to quote from Robert Byron, an English critic. Early in the present century. Lutyens mostly and Baker partly along with their associates pushed this idea of column as emblem with magnificent indiscrimination to the level of architectural solecism, particularly in the one-storey "bungle-ho"s in Delhi with their stuck-on columns. It was left to Lutyens again to write the Columnist Manifesto for the colonies : " why should we throw away the lovely subtlety of a Greek column for uncouth carelessness, unknowing and unseeing?"

I call it a familiar paradigm because we saw it in medieval India, when the pointed arch: deliberately pushed out the traditional lintel. And let us not forget the assumption of cultural superiority by the Aryan-speaking race, and the Hellenic contempt for the barbaric. I suppose, cultural imperialism is a dialectical process of two-way learning leading to a cultural fusion. This is how the so-called Indo-Saracenic architecture evolved, introducing a new richness to the sub-continental skyline. This is specially true of an interface of two "high cultures" this is not an effect one would readily look for in confrontations between Europe and Africa or Europe and the North American Indian culture; but even in America we still have the enduring moccasin. The story of Stout Cortez and the Aztecs is more complex. Obviously, cultural interface leading to cultural interaction is a complex phenomenon, influenced and shaped by many variables. In a cultural interface, one has to take note of the levels of the two cultures. Canning the first Viceroy was accused of being fond of Anglo-Mogul pageantry; Curzon, as is well known, shared the same weakness. Lutyens had to fight for his round arch against Hardinge's preference for the indigenous style, and finally had to make some compromise in the details of the official complex in Delhi. Lutyens bluntly puts down the imperial role of architecture: I do not believe there is any real Indian architecture or any great tradition. There are just spurts of various mushroom dynasties with as much intellect as there is in any of the art



nouveau... India has never had any real architecture, and if you may not graft the west out here, she will never have any". About Taj Mahal he observed "It is wonderful, but not architecture." "Architecture" he went on to posit, "more than any other art, represents the intellectual progress of those that are in authority."

In Bengal, despite Dhaka, Murshidabad, and Vishnupur, there was apparently no tradition of domestic urban architecture of any aesthetic significance. Indeed, the Indian tradition generally concentrated on the monumental : temples and in the Islamic period mosques and mausoleums, beside castles or fortified palaces often occupying the point of focus in a walled city. However, the point is that these indigenous traditions of temples and mosques were alive and well in eighteenth-century Calcutta, as the Nava Ratna temple of the Black Zeminder Govinda Rani Mitra testified.

Charnock's mausoleum was also in the indigenous Islamic tradition. The situation changed rapidly after 1757 with large-scale building activity centred round the construction of the New Fort. And as a fall out, hectic building activity started not only in the White Town but also in the Black Town when the collaborationist beneficiaries of the emerging new regime were resettled by the Company in Sootanooti after eviction from Govindapur, the site of the new fort. Inevitably, the style of building started to change, the indigenous styles and modes of construction began to degenerate; but what replaced them was itself ersatz: a cheap, brick-and-plaster imitation of opulent models at home, products of a lowbrow culture manufactured by military engineers, no doubt considered good enough for the colonies even if not the real thing. The stones of the Raj, as Charles D'Oyly

quipped, instead of being alabaster, were in fact brick and plaster.

So, when we talk of ,heritage buildings in Calcutta, we have to think of three kinds of heritage: temples, mosques, and Raj architecture. Most of the surviving older Calcutta temples in the terracotta style of Bengal have been heavily plastered over : for example the remaining sikhara of the navaratna temple of Govinda Ram Mitra, and the Shyamsundar Temple, both in Kumartooli. Others, so visible in the prints of old Calcutta have just disappeared.

And here comes a sad tale. In 1990 I photographed and wrote on the fine terracotta work, by Calcutta standards, that is, on four temples of the Ghosh family in Tollygunge, dated 1195 B.S. Last week when I visited the temple cluster, I was simply shocked. Practically every inch of the surrounding land had been built over. The temples were hardly visible. Moreover, they had been systematically shaved of all terracotta ornaments. I can only blame myself for drawing attention to these temples, and say peccavi and mea culpa, but all the classical phrases in the world will not bring back a single tertacotta brick or medallion.

As for mosques, I have to quarrel with the choice of the mosque at Esplanade, built by the exiled family of Tipu Sultan, and while we are about it, why not also the mosque in Tollygunge? Both are representative examples of the degeneration of the indigenous tradition of mosque architecture in the colonial regime.

One surviving example of the earlier style showing fine brick work is the eighteenth century mosque reputedly built by Reza Khan, Nawab of Chitpore as he was known, the Faujdar of Calcutta. The mosque still stands, but, alas, only just : the condition of the structure has deteriorated sharply since it was photographed in 1990. It was bad enough even then, but now one cannot even enter it, so unsafe has it become. Encroachments have sprung up everywhere. Some remains of stucco decoration still cling to the southern door. This, therefore, seems worth taking care of. The construction obviously needs the Heritage Committee's support and pressure needs to be mounted on the Wakf Board.

It is not my intention, as I stated at the beginning, to present a critique of the list of heritage buildings drawn up. Once the base is there, it can always be improved upon. What I am suggesting here is that the



choice of heritage buildings should be guided by themes, and the intention to preserve best representative examples of architectural styles and style of life : Bengal-type temple, albeit with an unholy Islamic dome inside to support the chola- type sikhara above, the Islamic, neo-Palladian, neo Greek, neo-Gothic, official Italianate, composite Victorian, French Renaissance, eclectic Anglo-Indian and so on. Kindly forgive if I sound a bit like the Player King in Hamlet; but these represent phases of Calcutta's cultural history, manifestation of the pulsating life of the city.

The second point I want to make is that it is not enough to make a list of buildings. The idea is to conserve them as they should be conserved, as they should stand before the public eye. So, determined efforts have to be made to increase the visibility of some important buildings. This will help create public awareness, without which no heritage is safe.

The most important piece of civic architecture we have is probably Wellesley's Government House, recently inducted in the heritage list. From old prints we see how it dominated the entire long stretch of the Esplanade, and the southerly aspect of the White Town. This was before the Esplanade was cut into two by the southward extension of its ground. Then came a) Vicereine, Lady Dufferin I think (this may be checked), who for privacy, had the boundary of the grounds planted up with trees to create a green screen to ward off vulgar gaze. This same good lady, if I am not mistaken, when asked where the kitchens were, replied, with a dismissive "somewhere in Calcutta"--very lady-like. And so, the landmark architectural piece in Calcutta stands obscured by trees, emulating the shy violet by the mossy stone. It was no oversight when the building was kept out of the original notification of the list of heritage buildings, it was just out of sight. Vandals have occupied this stately house before as well as after independence. One such recent act of vandalism was the construction of a single-storey bungalow with corrugated asbestos sheet roof on the southern lawns of the House, as the then principal occupant could not bear to live in a palace. The cost of the bespoke simple living was something like three lakhs of rupees when the rupee was around ten to the dollar, not counting the cost of guarding the gubernatorial goats. Without the green screen I doubt it this sort of desecration could have been perpetrated. I should, therefore, strongly urge that some of the trees and the quarters



so thoughtlessly built along the north-eastern and north-western boundaries be removed to retrieve the edifice's lost pre-eminence.

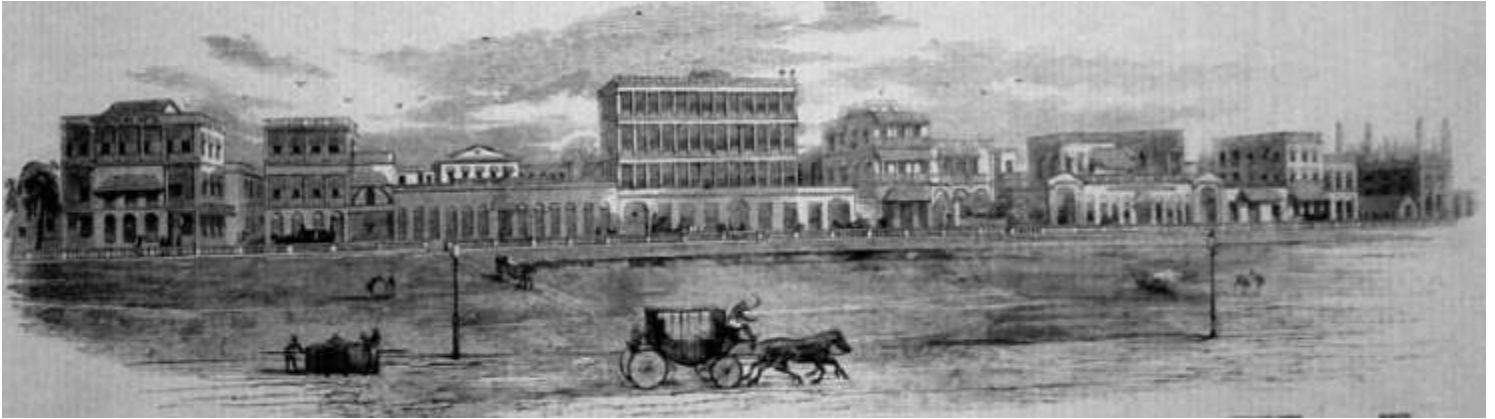
This Lady Dufferin's Disease, if we may call it so, has spread to the Assembly House across the road as well.

The Town Hall has recently been much of in news, yet its visibility has not been a matter of concern. A full view of the facade can be obtained only if one stands bang opposite, pressed against the protective railing of the Assembly Grounds, a tall building needs space in front for viewing. A the building now stands, the best viewing point from the corner of Council House Street and Esplanade Row, and this is how these two heritage buildings, the Town Hall and the Military Secretariat or Treasury Buildings looked on the day of Town Hall's formal inauguration in its new incarnation.

Victoria Memorial and the Ochterlony Monument have become two logos of the city. The Memorial also lies hidden behind huge trees. Whether these particular trees are necessary to arrest the corroding effect of pollution of the marble monument needs scientific study. In any case, what we need is correct choice of species: either short or small-crowned tall trees like the palm. In the bushy and eventually tall chhatim trees recently planted by the roadside all along the northern arid western side of the Memorial, we have another impenetrable green screen coming up. A well-intentioned effort which seems to have lost its way.

Architecture has volume; does not only occupy space, it is set in space and interacting with modifying space. The Victoria Memorial, after shifting out of the old jail, was set in wide expanse of space with a grand vista stretching out in front. Unlike the Taj Mahal which was meant to be seen from one angle, the main entrance, the Memorial was meant to be seen in the round.

One of the glories Of Calcutta used to be the



Maidan. Apart from general ecological and defence considerations, the wide open space in front set off the palatial buildings on the eastern side of the Chowringhee to perfection. The fact that it is still largely open notwithstanding the encroachments on the northern end, is not enough. It is not enough that large open spaces should be there, they must be seen to be there. This is where an exclusive emphasis on the preservation of buildings without taking into account their environment goes wrong. From Cathedral Road crossing to S.N. Banerjee Road, barring the opening at Park Street crossing, the view of the Maidan from the Chowringhee is now totally blocked by a veritable man-made jungle, a regrettable, however well-meaning, overcompensation for the damage caused by Metro Railway activities. More alarming news: I hear there is a proposal to create an eco-park along this stretch of the Maidan, whatever this thing may mean. I have not seen the blue-print of the project, but from what I have gathered from newspaper reports, it seems like another of those very well-intended and thoroughly misconceived notions.

Beautiful buildings are defiled by such misdirected good intentions. Stones are not in common use in Calcutta buildings of the Raj period. When they are, we have to take special notice. The two matched corner buildings opposite the north or main gate of the Government House, faced with stone and using Moorish arches of Spanish inspiration once, I understand, housed the stables of the Big House. One would be amazed to see what has been done to one of them, again from the best of intentions, mind you. Obviously, the idea of cleaning the stones to restore their texture never occurred to anyone.

Another such instance of well-intentioned but

actual folly is the Army and Navy building on Chowringhee now known as Kanak Building. Shaw's Don Juan could have said, "Hell is paved with such good intentions".

The Calcutta Municipal Corporation Amendment Act 1997 has given wide powers to Heritage Conservation Committee. The enforcement of such good intentions on the ground may, however, prove more difficult.

Let us take the Whiteway Laidlaw building, a listed structure, as a test case. Occupying the prime of the prime locations in the city, and owned by a government undertaking, neglected, dilapidated, and crumbling, it sits like an ugly wart on the city's face where it should have shone like a jewel. It has no problem with title, not much problem with finance either if you take the institution as a whole, yet it just sits waiting to be declared "unsafe" so that it can be pulled down to accommodate some realtor's dream.

I said let it be a test case and I say let it be a test case also for the Society for Preservation, Calcutta, after this new amendment and publication of the heritage list. After all it has staged successful battles before.

If I may point out, official recognition of the concept of "heritage" building and acceptance of such a list was the first necessary step, The main action to achieve the objectives of the movement still lies ahead, and it is likely to be a protracted one. It is really the spirit behind this that matters, and it is precisely here that the catch may lie, and this is where the NGOs have their role to add the right amount of fizz so that the spirit does not go flat.

