

The Meaning of Modernism in Indian Architecture: A Journey through the British Raj to the Present

Madhavi Desai

Modernism in the international context as related to the field of architecture had complex origins in the West in the nineteenth century, mainly in the industrial revolution accompanied by political and artistic transformations as well as changes in social premises. If modernism was an ideology, its dominant physical and stylistic manifestation has been identified by architectural historians as the Modern Movement. Basically, modernism is an attitude, based on the premise that change away from the past is required in order to make the future better.

The Movement originated at the turn of the nineteenth century in the West and the world is still preoccupied with it in one form or another, in spite of the rise of Postmodernism and Deconstruction. Some of its major aims were: renunciation of the old world, commitment to mass housing and exploring architectural potentials of new materials and technology.¹ Philosophically, it had a strong belief in the power of form to transform the world. Modern aesthetics sought to replace the classical order with simple geometry, rejected decoration for the sake of it, emphasized abstraction and functionalism as well as honesty of materials (Figure 1). It stressed universality and negated

*High Museum of Art:
A Modern Building in Atlanta*

By: Richard Meier

Source: Kostof, Spiro. *A History of Architecture*. N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1985.



Figure 1

cultural differences. Master architects gave dicta such as “Less is More,” “Form follows Function” and “House is a Machine to Live

in.” The following is a general description of what constitutes “modernity” in architecture:

Architecturally the term ‘modern’ has been applied to whatever contemporary ideas were regarded as good. The Modern movement, however, represented a specific set of attitudes towards design. Modern architecture responded to the need to provide for the new patterns of behavior that resulted from political and technological change in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It began with the perception that the classical order and composition do not present a universal basis for the appreciation of beauty in architecture.²

The Modern Movement’s best time was between the two World Wars. After World War II, it saw a new life, more specifically in the USA where glass and steel structures began to dominate the urban landscapes. Closely integrated with the visual arts, modernist ideas had an impact on not only architecture but also on urban design and city planning. Eventually, modernist aesthetics became the mainstream almost all over the world, along with increasing urbanization and colonization as the century progressed. India, colonized till almost the middle of the twentieth century, was also greatly affected. Though the modernist period is officially over, its effects can be perceived far and wide in India, particularly in the urban areas. According to Morse,

Modernism is simply the state of being up-to-date. The use of the term here implies changes from the past in certain structural characteristics of a society as well as the adaptiveness of sociocultural systems to change. Among the former are increasing economic specialization, physical and social mobility, the formalization of education and political structures, greater institutional differentiation, and the weakening of the political controls of a feudal aristocracy. Modernization almost invariably involves both social and physical change, and modern societies are more adaptable to change.³

This paper attempts to trace the development of modernism in Indian architecture, including its forces, influences and agents of change. The history of Indian architecture reveals internal and predominantly external forces shaping the meaning of modernism. Till today, most Indians use the word “westernization” synonymously with “modernization.” It is true that a majority of the external influences have come from the West, but simultaneously many changes have

been internally generated. The modernist phase in India can be broadly divided into two parts: pre-and post-independence periods. Two hundred years of colonial rule brought about tremendous transformations in the political, economic, technological and cultural set-up of Indian society. These transformations were reflected in the physical environment, as I strongly believe that architecture is primarily a cultural expression. Therefore, during the first phase, modernism was intertwined with imperialism. Though Indian society was subjected to foreign influences for centuries, modernism as we understand it today was linked with the advent of the colonial rulers. During the British colonial era⁴ Indians accepted new modes of thought and behaviour partially voluntarily as patterns of living and partly involuntarily as new policies were imposed on them in many spheres of life. It is important to note, however, that as a result of this process the natural evolution of Indian architecture was disrupted (except in remote rural areas) and history took an entirely new path.

Pre-Independence Period

The turning point in the expression of architecture came about when the British crown took over the control of India after the mutiny of 1857. Now the British found themselves as being politically powerful compared to being mere traders earlier. Compared to the utilitarian architecture of the East India Company, the new buildings became symbols of the imperial power. Before 1857, there were military engineers who used European pattern-books to design structures. However, afterwards, the British undertook a more determined and systematic governance of India. They completed the railway network by the 1870s and gradually introduced many new institutions for legal, administrative, commercial and recreational purposes. These changes generated a vast amount of building activities all over the country. Though many edifices were created in the classical revival style, towards the 1880s a definite shift in the British attitude was perceived as they strove to emulate the Mughals in their interpretation of imperialism. They sought to consciously incorporate Indian elements in their architecture. Out of this was born the Indo-Saracenic style (Figure 2). Here the plan organizations remained essentially European

Bombay Municipal Offices: An Indo-Sarcentic Design

By: R. F. Chisholm

Source: Metcalf, Thomas. *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj*. London: Faber & Faber, 1989.



Figure 2

while the facades were modified to include domes, arches, *chhattries*, etc. with predominantly Islamic references. Now the designers were mainly European architects and the buildings were colleges, palaces, offices, banks and museums. Bombay, however, remained largely aloof from the Sarcentic influence. It took inspiration from the contemporary Gothic revival in England for its public buildings, but they did have Indianized features such as window arches, corner domes as well as verandahs and balconies.⁵

In the British Raj, there were numerous small states that were ruled by the royals within the political framework established by the British. Princes in these native states were the elites, many of whom had been to Europe for education as well as for travel. They sought to emulate and identify with the British. In fact, they often became agents of change, particularly where the built environment was concerned. They not only built palaces in the popular styles but also went for urban design interventions in towns. They incorporated elements of European design in their building and planning enterprises. The rulers also built new cities/towns, hill stations and cantonments/civil lines where the planning was affected by European attitudes. The roots of modern town planning can be traced to this era. Thomas Metcalf comments:

As the British considered appropriate architectural styles for princely buildings, they turned, not surprisingly, to the Indo-Sarcentic. In that architecture...the British sought to incorporate their view of India's past into their own building, and so represent Britain's Raj as legitimately Indian, while at the same time constructing a modern India of railways, colleges, and law courts. This architectural style was, in the British view, equally well suited for princely buildings. With its presumed blending of "traditional" and "modern" elements, the Indo-Sarcentic exactly fitted their conception of the princes' role within the India of the Raj. Like this architectural style, the princes were meant to embody at once India's past and a vision of its future.⁶

As the twentieth century progressed, Indian architects began to be trained and to contribute to the profession through private practice and government jobs. While the government built a lot through the Public Works Department, the clientele began to include private citizens. With industrial growth came urban population increase and the need for housing followed. Though classical buildings continued to be built, the Indian urban landscape was increasingly influenced by western styles such as Art Deco and Streamline Moderne in the '30s and '40s (Figure 3). Apartments, individual houses, office buildings



Figure 3

New India Assurance Building, Mumbai

Marine Drive, Mumbai

Influence of Art Deco Style

Source : Lang Jon, et. al. *Architecture and Independence: The Search for Identity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

and particularly cinema halls were designed in this mode in almost all major urban centres of the country. In fact, the amalgamation of Art Deco style and Indian decorative patterns gave rise to what can be termed Indo-Deco.

With the introduction of the bungalow typology by the British, radical changes in the characteristics of the private dwelling came about. Compared to the traditional dwelling type, the new one brought about a significant transformation in the plan, form and structure of the building unit. The detached house within the compound preferred by the rulers became a favourite first with the rich elites who preferred it for reasons of health, sanitation and social prestige, and later with the growing middle classes. Its ramifications on neighbourhood planning and the consequent urban fabric were immense. As time passed, it was transformed from the utilitarian, simple dwelling of the British Military cantonment to a sophisticated, stylistic version with a number of regional variations which ranged from a villa or a mansion to a small house in a cooperative scheme. According to A. D. King,

The location of the bungalow-in-its-compound, away from places of Indian settlement, expressed the political and social relationship between the occupants of both. Spatial distance reflected social distance. The closely clustered houses of the Indian town or village were functional not just in terms of climate or existing technology and transport, they also expressed the basic social and economic relationship of their inhabitants....The European occupants of the bungalow, however, had neither social nor religious ties with the inhabitants of the Indian town. Their relationship was one of 'ruler and the ruled': the spatial separation of the district officer or army subaltern from the Indian town expressed a social and political divide.⁷

There were ongoing debates about European art versus Indianization of artistic (as well as architectural) expressions in contemporary works. The political scene was then dominated by Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy. Though he did not directly influence the form of buildings, his thoughts and philosophy have affected attitudes to design. Parallel to the western influences, a strong nationalist movement for freedom from the colonial rule had a dominating impact on the arts and architecture of India. The idea of *swadeshi* was a far reaching one which gradually engulfed all aspects of people's life style. In architecture it took the form of revivalism as western ideas were rejected and the search was for a return to traditional styles and forms (Figure 4). The Bengal School of artistic thought, Rabindranath Tagore and Shantiniketan contributed a lot to the development of the revivalist mode of expression. The five

experimental houses built by Tagore on 'Indian' themes stand as

*The General Post Office,
Bangalore: Revivalist Design*
By : Karnataka PWD

Source : Lang, Jon, et al., op.cit.



Figure 4

symbols of successful architectural examples even today. New Delhi, designed by Lutyens, had a singular influence all over the country. In the making of New Delhi, the attempt was to respond to the art and architecture of India. The imperial design was, therefore, based on British themes and Indian elements, mostly Mughal. It also drew on some components from Buddhist architecture. The resultant form was an adornment of modern classical style (with columns, porticos and domes) along with Indian flourishes such as *chhajjas*, *chhattries* and *jalis*. The new capitol created a revivalism of sorts in the field of architecture but it did not last long. It was overshadowed by modernism in a few years as we will see.

Post-Independence Period

On the 15th of August, 1947, India stood on the threshold of two worlds, the traditional past and the modern future. This conflict was reflected in architecture also. Two strong forces could be perceived: nationalism and modernism, where nationalism was based on modern ideals such as socialism, democracy and secularism, etc. As a result of the duality, two rival streams emerged in architecture: revivalism and modernism. This was a time when the various manifestations of Modernist architectural ideas developed in Europe in early twentieth

century in urban and building design were being implemented across the world. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru admired the achievements of modern civilization. He firmly believed that science and technology would uplift the country. He made a commitment to the project of social and technological modernization. His perception of India as a modern industrialized nation required much thought in planning. Modernization, therefore, meant a number of things to this new nation state. As a result, revivalism was gradually rejected and modernism won the race. Modern architecture, representing scientific spirit and rationality, was thus wholeheartedly embraced in the first decade after Independence. In contrast to Nehru's vision was the view of Gandhi that stressed a rural-based society dependent on agrarian economy. His philosophy emphasized minimalism, simplicity, austerity and economy of means. He preferred local materials and technology as expressed in the making of his Ashrams. Unfortunately his influence remained marginal as far as architecture was concerned, while Nehru's impact was immediate and far-reaching.

One thing was clear: a lot of building activities took place after Independence in the form of factories, educational and research institutions, government offices, hospitals, private houses and many others. The exodus of refugees from Pakistan and the thrust for industrialization generated massive building activities in the early years after Independence. The Public Works Department was in charge of most of the housing and other institutions of the government.⁸ Three new state capitals were built: Chandigarh, Gandhinagar and Bhubaneswar. Chandigarh, designed as a model city by the world famous European architect Le Corbusier became a landmark of modern architecture in India and a symbol of the progressiveness of the Nehru era (Figure 5). Corbusier's buildings gave a tremendous boost to the

Figure 5

The High Court Building in Chandigarh

By: Le Corbusier

Source: Kostof, Spiro. *A History of Architecture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.



Modern architectural thought. His powerful vision and forms became a catalyst for the architects of India for decades following Chandigarh and his other projects in Ahmedabad. American, British, German and other architects were also invited to design in India. Louis Kahn, a famous American architect and the designer of Dhaka Assembly Building in the erstwhile East Pakistan, was invited in the '60s to design the Indian Institute of Management complex in Ahmedabad. Kahn's emphasis was on geometrical forms, honesty of materials, monumental scale and clarity of structure. His lessons consisted of integration of local materials and methods with the language of Modernism. The powerful aesthetics of his project created a new architectural impetus and left a lasting impression on the younger generation of Indian architects.

There was a building boom in the post-Independence era, particularly in the major metro cities and other urban areas. Many Indian architects had worked with Modern Masters mostly in America and some in Europe. These foreign educated Indian architects returned to India and took over designing from the 1960s onwards, including Achyut Kanvinde, Charles Correa, Balkrishna Doshi, Anant Raje and others. They used the language of the International style as well as Brutalism in their early designs, their buildings representing modern technology and the machine age. Their approaches ranged from picking up the formal aspects of Modernism to developing a Modernist attitude towards the process of design (Figure 6). Now private companies were

*Asian Games Village, New Delhi:
A Modern Building*

By: Raj Rewal

Source: Taylor, Brian. *Raj Rewal*.

Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing

Pvt. Ltd., 1992.



Figure 6

increasingly replaced by Government agencies due to the socialist leanings of the government. Gradually modernism began to reach the masses. There were two predominant expressions: designer built and

popular. Though this paper predominantly refers to the milestones in the designer category, influence of modernist principles did reach far and wide, if not in its pure form. India also kept up with modern technologies and materials to some extent. Industrially-based steel and reinforced concrete helped the designers to keep pace with the modern vocabulary. Modern building materials became rather popular even as the utilitarian work of the Public Works Department continued. Added to these were materials like glass, aluminium and other finishes. The overall expression, somehow, failed to develop a focus based on the Indian context.

Towards the end of the '70s, Indian architects also discovered the limitations of the modernist ideology along with the rest of the world. They emerged from the shadows of the foreign Masters, including the form and images of architecture derived from the modernist paradigm. Slowly moving away from the Corbusieran idiom, several streams of alternative architectural expressions could be perceived all over the country. Still there was the question, what form should modern buildings take? Brian Taylor has these comments:

...Modern building prototypes, based on industrial techniques, for commercial exploitation and developed for cold climates, seem inadequate and sterile. At the same time, the traditional designs based on a hand-crafted methodology, which have stood the test of time for centuries, seem unable to cope with either the new realities of mass migration from village to city and resulting mass consumption, or with the infrastructure required for a modern industrializing nation.⁹

There is a socialist undertone to the Modernist ethic; therefore planning is often seen as an active agent of change which is how state-directed planning was conceived in India. There was a Master Plan oriented western approach that treated the society as homogeneous while Indian society has always been pluralistic, more so in the modern period. In the immediate decades after Independence, the major metropolises became centres of attraction for the vast number of rural population and they faced pressure on the land as well as the services. The demand on building construction steadily increased due to urbanization and industrial growth. As the urban land began to be heavily built upon, its value increased in proportion to its unavailability and an architecture of economic functionalism began to take over. Thus, the commercial

centres of the metropolises had an enormous amount of building activities going on with their eyes on profit. In addition, new towns and townships were created particularly for industrial activities. Large public housing schemes were undertaken all over the country. The impact of Modernism was direct and obvious.

Though a lot of work was being done in the simplified Modernist format, certain changes were perceived in the eighties. While the basic modernist doctrine continued to influence, one could find more pluralism in the architects' approach after the '70s. As the stigma of colonialism began to disappear after 50 odd years of freedom, there was an appreciation of the pomp and splendour of the Raj. As a result, plenty of references to British buildings in the contemporary design subscribing to post-Modern historicism began to appear. There was also a strong search for the regional character in architecture based on the spiritual, vernacular and craft heritage of Indian traditions in response to the growing international concern for regionalism (Figure 7). This school of thinking had the Indian architects looking

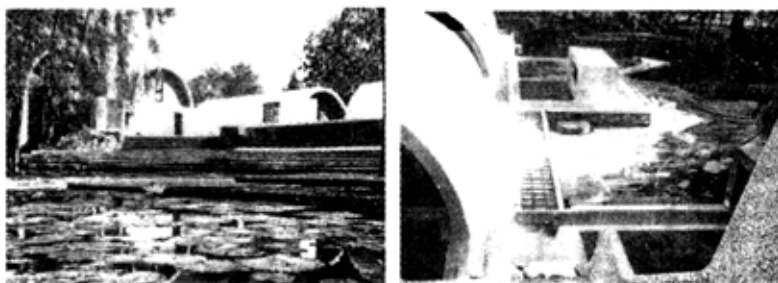


Figure 7

Sangath Office Building : Turning to Indian Roots

By: B. V. Doshi

Source: Bhatt, Vikram & Peter Scriver. *After the Masters: Contemporary Indian Architecture*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 1990.

confidently into their own milieu, searching for the reinterpretations of traditional form, social patterns and imagery. Therefore, the Modern Indian vernacular became one form of the post-Modern interpretation. Looking for an Indian expression, using a blend of old and new aesthetics, understanding the indigenous traditions and technology, reinterpreting social patterns in regional idioms, use of traditional

components such as the courtyard, verandahs and other open spaces in the contemporary design were some of the other manifestations of the changing attitudes to building design at the tail-end of the modernist paradigm (Figure 8).



Figure 8

School for Mobile Creches, Delhi: A Search for Indianization

By: Revathi & Vasant Kamath

Source: Kagal, Carmen (Ed). *Vistara*.

Mumbai: The Festival of India, 1986.

Conclusion

The idea of the modern was, thus, connected to the colonial era even though Modernism as we understand it today is predominantly a 20th century phenomenon. In the immediate post-Independence period one can perceive an anxiety to “belong,” to become a part of the free world, which resulted in almost a blind copying of the tenets of Modern Movement. Today, Modernism is officially dead but unofficially it seems like a never-ending phenomenon, perhaps the most important

outcome of the 20th century, the 'modern' century. Modernism in architecture rejected theories based on the elimination of differences and contradiction and the concept of efficiency as a precondition for comfort. It was, typically, a western idea and was accepted in India as a cultural paradigm. After being wholeheartedly adopted in the field of architecture, it became the cause of a bulk of ubiquitous products. For Indian architecture, it had tremendous ramifications. It was closely connected with the process of uncontrolled urbanization. The absence of urban design controls played havoc with the city cores. At the same time, one can surmise that the design policy of the Modern Movement was relatively democratic in its approach. A large number of people had shelter provided for, everyone had open spaces, transport system, urban facilities to share and the institutions too. Public buildings like railway stations, housing, shopping centres, office buildings, etc. would have been impossible otherwise. The masses were benefitted like never before.

However, the reality is that even when we have some excellent examples of contemporary modern buildings designed by accomplished designers, a vast majority of the cities and small towns of the country have buildings that poorly represent the principles of the Modern Movement. Their monotony, ubiquity and repetitive nature have degraded our built environments, if contrasted with the medieval ambience of the urban centres. Though a lot has been achieved through modernism, certain fundamental weaknesses have also been there with the Modernist architectural ideas such as lack of real concern with the climate, use of high energy materials like steel and concrete, typological building design rather than designs based on socio-cultural patterns, segregation of activities through zoning, etc.

However, all is not lost as we have begun to respond to the forces of post-Modernism, going beyond Modernism, as the rest of the world: its rejection of unitary world view and focus on local, regional and ethnic differences. Indian architects are affected to a great extent by the global trends, forces and ideologies. At the same time, a majority of them are attempting to address architectural problems within their own cultural ethos. They have expressed indigenous interpretations of Post-modernism, through preference for regional references and an attempt for incorporating Indianness in contemporary architecture. After a lot of struggle, Indian architecture is beginning

to achieve an independent identity and an interpretation of Modernism/post-Modernism that represents the pluralism of India. One can perceive a growing self-confidence that was not there earlier. There is a sense of vitality of the Modernist paradigm in Indian building design. The hope now lies in the maturity and confidence seen in the present and coming generation of architects to hold on to their own style of expression in a fast globalizing world.

NOTES

1. Diane Ghirardo, *Architecture After Modernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), p.8.
2. Jon Lang, Madhavi Desai & Miki Desai, *Architecture and Independence: The Search for Identity, India—1880 to 1980* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.15.
3. Chandler Morse (ed.), *Modernization by Design* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), quoted by Lang, *et al*, op. cit., p.14.
4. Though there were the French, the Dutch and Portuguese as other foreign powers, the British are referred to as dominant colonial rulers.
5. Thomas Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), p.95.
6. *Ibid.*, p.106.
7. A. D. King, *The Bungalow: The Production of a Global Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p.35.
8. Vikram Bhatt & Peter Scriver, *After the Masters: Contemporary Indian Architecture* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 1990), p.175.
9. Brian Taylor, *Raj Rewal* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 1992), p. 26.