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Chandigarh Diary



The Chandigarh of Nehru and Corbusier has almost become a curiosity for a stream of visitors from the West who continue to see him as a giant of 20th century architecture.



M.S. Gill

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The year 1947 was India's Annus Horribilis. From March that year, murder and mayhem stalked the Punjab. By autumn, Sikhs and Hindus had been cleaned out of the western districts. The great city of Lahore became a stranger to us. The giant Nilokheri Refugee Camp was the new metropolis of the distressed. A government of a kind found a few offices in Solan and Shimla bungalows. In this state of despair, Jawaharlal Nehru offered divided Punjab two dreams: the Bhakra dam and a brand new city. The Bhakra dam was started to give new hope to the Sikh peasantry. And the Punjab irrigation department began to build it with a religious fervour. There were no thoughts of PP (public-private) models then.

There were many arguments about the kind of capital Punjab should have. Timid hearts suggested a little expansion of Jalandhar or Ambala. Nehru boldly determined to give the Punjabis a new vision—a brand new city that was ultimately to be called Chandigarh. He brought in Le Corbusier, the great Swiss-French town planner and architect. Corbu collected young architects, Eulie Chaudhary, Jeet Malhotra, Balkrishna Doshi and many more. He set up an architecture school. Radical thoughts were put to Indian builders, totally at variance with Victorian architecture. Surinder Kairon, the CM, pulled the government down from the comfortable heights of Shimla and put them in temporary shelter. He was clear that to build a new city we must sit in the sand. Corbu's cousin, Jeanneret, lived in Chandigarh supervising everything, even the furniture. The whole state lived a dream.

Chandigarh came up. The world noticed. General Yahya Khan arrived, sent by General Ayub, to learn how to build Islamabad. I was part of that time. Nehru came often, whenever he wanted to recharge his tired self with a dream. Years passed. Both Nehru and Kairon left us. Chandigarh was confined within a sharp Lakshman rekha. Bhakra too found another composite personality, beyond our reach. Corbu and Jeanneret too disappeared, the latter to have his ashes dispersed in the lake he created.

He Didn't Plan This

Last week, I went to Chandigarh. To fly in a cloudy monsoon sky looking down at the consolidated land and its straight cadastral survey lines running to the north, to see the blue-grey Shivaliks

and the higher mountains in the light and shade was a joy. The land was soaked and rich in crops. As I circled over Chandigarh, I could see the original Corbu mathematics of those old Chandigarh sectors surrounded now by vast construction of every kind all around it.

The small, original Chandigarh is now squeezed in by unregulated concrete growth. Only a patch beyond the lake and the high court remains. There too beyond the hills in the new Himachal Pradesh, the whole doon from Kalka westwards is built up. The new necklace of the builders squeezes and strangles Corbu's ambitious dream. Entry from any side into the town is an adventure. The green belt, specifically kept between Chandigarh and Mani Majra, has gone. The original inhabitants of the villages have gone or are rapidly being pushed away into the hinterland and oblivion. Nobody any longer is aware of Corbu's edicts for the city. Nobody cares. The Chandigarh of Nehru and Corbusier has almost become a curiosity for a stream of visitors from the West who continue to see him as a giant of 20th century architecture.

The capital complex he designed was to have a crown in the shape of what he called the State House. It was abandoned in petty political point-scoring. The tapestries and furniture he designed for the great state buildings too have been allowed to rot away.

Check-by-Jowl City

I think of the fate of such endeavours by western architects. New Delhi was started in 1911, at a time when the motor car hardly existed. The T-Ford came in about 1915 and yet Lutyens laid out a spacious city which still takes care of 6 million cars. Chandigarh was built from 1950, and yet our own efforts in Delhi after Independence are a collection of crowded colonies, hungry for plots with narrow roads, no parks and ancient monuments hemmed in by houses. Children have no place to play and the new rich find that while they can build marble palaces, their BMWs rot in narrow lanes. Would this not describe GK-I, GK-II, Punjabi Bagh, Green Park or any other colony? How did India allow this, having New Delhi and Chandigarh before their eyes? In 1968 Raymond Allchin, a Cambridge scholar on India, complained angrily to me, "*Arrey bhai, aap ne to Dilli tabah kar diya*".

Architect of Minds

We've forgotten Corbusier but the Swiss remember him. His portrait is on their 10-franc note with the layout of Chandigarh on the back. I happened to be walking in the Saturday flea market in Zurich and spied a couple of books on him. One in French. I was desperate to buy them. The lady bargained. I said, "I'm from Chandigarh." She gave me a wonderful smile and said, "This is a gift for you. Take it."

(The writer is Union minister of youth affairs and sports.)

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