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## Architectural History In India: A Post-Colonial Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Historiography of survey texts covering the temporal and spatial gamut of architecture in India reveals theoretical perspective rooted in colonial ideology that has outlived its relevance. The very first text written by James Fergusson was sustained on two grand myths that governed Indology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—myth of origin and related to that, myth of degeneration. This text created a framework based upon race, religion, and region that influenced subsequent writings. Reprints of nineteenth and early twentieth century texts are widely read as reported in a survey of architecture programs. It is proposed that a post-colonial perspective based upon critical regionalism, cultural landscape, and reinterpretation of medieval design treatises, guide the revision and re-writing of architectural history.

Indian history has been the subject of much contentious debate lately. The prevailing paradigm is being challenged by what has been dubbed as 'saffronisation', i.e. a search for indigenous origins of ancient Indo-Aryan culture, and reinterpretation of historic events from the Hindu point of view. The politicised climate of ideologically driven assertions and counter assertions begs a critical look at specific areas such as architectural history which may have much to contribute towards unveiling the ancient past through the study of archaeological remains (Chakrabarti, 1997). Architecture forms perhaps the most significant component of material culture and the correct decipherment of its styles and interpretation of its cultural meanings can be an important clue in solving historical puzzles in absence of textual and material evidence. This paper traces the historiography of architectural history survey texts that are assigned in the core courses in design curriculum in India.

Architectural history in India for the most part has limited itself to formal rules of composition and chronology of styles. Its writing began as a colonial enterprise in the nineteenth century, reflecting an ideology that classified the subject Indian population into races, religions, and castes and projected that categorisation into art and architecture. It constructed a view of the past set in decay, racially and culturally divided in its achievements, and inferior to the Western canon. India's architecture and her archaeological remains did not escape the scrutiny of the vast colonial enterprise of collecting, classifying, and interpreting the country's past, her languages, races, and antiquities. I explore the contested terrain of

ideas that informed architectural history as it took shape in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The birth of architectural history and closely intertwined with it the profession of architecture, reconstituted on modern lines, makes for a fascinating story.

Among the vast numbers of icons and symbols that express identity, architecture both reflects and shapes identities—personal as well as collective. To decipher the language of architectural style and interpret its meanings - syntactic as well as semantic - is the task of the historian. Often the past affords a vital clue to understanding the present and the architectural historian, therefore, not only documents old buildings but also seeks to classify them, make explicit the basis of categories, and traces the ideological meanings that shape a particular style. Although architectural history of India has its beginnings to the colonial era, design theory (though not history) can be traced to prescriptive rules in *Shilpa Shastras* written from 5<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards.

### Beginnings of Historiography

*History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* by James Fergusson, first published in 1876 should be considered hegemonic as it has had far reaching influence by virtue of being the very first comprehensive publication on the history of Indian architecture. It created a framework based upon race, religion, and region for interpreting architecture of the subcontinent and claimed to clarify Indian history using architecture as historic evidence.

Since other histories subsequently written contain few revisionist strands, displaying a conservative bent on the whole, colonial

classifications minus their rhetoric were to a large extent reproduced in the twentieth century.

Fergusson (1808-1886) was a renaissance scholar of the Victorian age whose contribution to architectural discourse in the nineteenth century far exceeded his status as an amateur. His four volume *History of Architecture in All Countries from Earliest Times to the Present Day*, was the first one to aspire to an universal architectural history. What is of interest are his writings on India of which there were quite a few, beginning with *Illustrations of the Rock-Cut Temples of India*, first published in 1845. His knowledge of the subcontinent stemmed from the years he spent in the firm of Fairlie, Fergusson, and Company of Calcutta, a family enterprise, and as an indigo planter in Bengal. His extended tour of country between 1835 and 1842 and subsequent visit to Bombay in 1845 gave him a first hand knowledge of historic monuments.<sup>1</sup>

Fergusson's publications on Gothic architecture, on the architecture of Nineveh, Jerusalem, and southern Italy, and on fortress architecture, earned him the Royal Institute of British Architect's gold medal. His writings on the theory of architecture in *An Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art, More Especially with Reference to Architecture* and *History of Modern Styles of Architecture* gave his voice immense significance as an architectural theorist and critic of the nineteenth century. His architectural theory rested upon the progressive ideas of his century that saw industrial democracy marking an evolution towards a superior state of society. He believed that architecture therefore should reflect the rational man—it should grow out of structure and be judged by its ornamental

embellishment. Historical styles should never be imitated as they were a product of archaic technologies. In this view he anticipated modernity in architectural ideology and used photography for wide dissemination of building illustrations (Winter, 1958). For him architecture evoked technic or mechanical beauty but was capable of aesthetic beauty through color and proportion and could meet the criteria for highest class of beauty—phonetic—as seen in sculpture, painting, and inscription (De Zurko, 1957).

Given his Victorian upbringing and the climate of ideas that gave rise to Indology, it is not surprising that Fergusson would seek to judge Indian art and architecture negatively on the whole even though he believed it to be a living art and favorably compared the work of Indian artisan with those of his educated European counterparts. What makes his historical constructs particularly egregious is the racial determinism of architectural form. Many of his concepts were refuted within half a century but their racial tinge colored subsequent histories. The widespread and long lasting influence of the text has been because of its sweeping survey and classification system that appeared to be objective and in the scientific spirit. The fact of the matter is that the text was sustained on two grand myths that governed Indology as a whole in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - myth of origin and related to that, myth of degeneration.

#### **Origin and Degeneration Myths**

William Jones' discovery of Indo-European group of languages in 1780s on the basis of shared origin of Sanskrit with Greek, Latin, Celtic and other European languages set into

motion the racial and cultural myth of origin. Comparative philology led by Max Mueller took up the myth with gusto and extrapolated from the linguistic family a racial group - Aryans - who had in ancient times moved from their home in steppes of southern Russia to Western Europe and Northern India. Naturally, given the European dominance in the world, Aryans (Europeans) came to be regarded as superior to Semitic, black African, and Mongoloid races. The leap from linguistic affinity to biological and cultural similarities between Europeans and Indians served varied purposes (Leopold, 1974). For the British, it contributed to colonial ideology that looked for similarity and differences with the subject Indians; for the Romantic Germans, Aryan theory clarified the origin of German *volk*. For the Romantics in general, for whom art was the expression of the inner spirit of each race, the racial perspective explained uniqueness of Indian art. Racial theories received attention from scientists as well, particularly the physical anthropologists, anatomists, and phrenologists who attempted to link racial (physiognomic) characteristics with intelligence and social status.

For the colonialist, the myth of common racial origins between Europeans and Indians was problematic in its implied similarity between the two. This was unpalatable to colonial ideology that desperately needed to justify colonial rule on the basis of European supremacy in all spheres - religious, cultural, economic, technological, and racial. The acceptance of one myth necessitated the rise of another - that of racial degeneration caused by miscegenation and climate (Metcalf, 1994). It was fed by evolutionary theory that believed in continued social progress of European societies

but stagnation of Asian. What had happened to the Aryan in India? He had copulated with women of the aboriginal races and become corrupted physically, morally, and culturally. The Dravidians and *dasyus* had corrupted the purity of Aryan race and the religion of the Vedas. The intellectual superiority and philosophical depths of Vedas and Upanishads were subverted by fables, superstitions, and other absurdities practiced by local races. The intermingling resulted physically in dark skin, short stature, and the loss of Aryan features and in the social sphere it gave rise to the caste system that forbade a unified polity and civic society.

The racial degeneration was aided by the warm climate that enervated the body and caused physical and mental inertia. It nursed diseases that sapped physical strength and caused early mortality. Here the British of course were projecting their own experiences onto the Indian population. Their own fears of miscegenation, morbidity, of becoming the fatalistic native, in short assimilating with the 'other' they encountered and interacted on a daily basis, fuelled the ideas of racial degeneration that distanced them from Indians. The myth of common origin however served the useful purpose of justifying colonial rule on the grounds that improvement could be possible and desirable. The English language, British institutions, and Christianity would have an uplifting effect on the Indian society as a whole and redeem European conquest and exploitation.

It is against this background that Fergusson developed his sweeping survey of Indian architectural history. Indian architecture had been known to Europe since the visits of the early travelers in the sixteenth century. They

described temple art as monstrous, as they understood it within the medieval Christian worldview. In the next two hundred years the element of irrationality persisted in the European classification of Indian art and no doubt influenced Fergusson in his evaluation of architecture. The cult of the picturesque brought increasing number of travelers as travel became easier with British rule in India. The new category of 'sublime' in aesthetics captured their wonderment and perception of remote antiquity of cave temples and pagodas. None, however, described Indian art and architecture as beautiful in the classical sense.

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The reception of Indian antiquities to the Western eye was governed by the notion of the picturesque—ancient monuments scattered in wilderness and taken over by nature, pastoral scenes by the river with silhouettes of temple spires, minarets and domes of mosques. William Hodges and Daniells' aquatints showing buildings in the landscape displayed a romantic sensibility. Scholarly interests led to careful measurement of many monuments and work by archaeologists brought fresh discoveries to light. Fergusson's massive compilation of nearly 400 illustrations in *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* would not have been possible without these earlier efforts and use of photographs. He was heavily influenced by the picturesque aesthetic

in documenting Indian architecture, although his work ostensibly fell within the domain of 'scientific discipline' in its objective visual rendering of historic structures. His lithographic plates show the monument dominating the picture frame, framed by gnarled vegetation and surrounded by fallen ruins (Guha-Thakurtha, 2004).

In the creative leap from compilation to classification, Fergusson betrays the Victorian mindset dominated by the myth of racial degeneration and belief in ethnology as a clue to understanding art and architecture (Mitter, 1983). His three major stylistic divisions of Hindu architecture into Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, and the intermediate Chalukyan are based upon his racial interpretation of Indian history that began with the arrival of Sanskrit speaking Aryans in the upper Indus valley around 3101 BCE. Within a thousand years they had pushed their way into the Gangetic valley. Dravidians, a branch of Turanians, had their seat in the extreme south (though they too entered India across lower Indus perhaps from Babylonia or from some southern region of the Asiatic continent) and spreading northwards met the Aryans at the Vindhyan mountain range. They were of a lower intellectual status than the Aryans but great builders. Even more inferior intellectually were the Dasyus, the aboriginal race, worshippers of trees and serpents, who had once occupied the whole valley of the Ganges. Their integration into the Aryan society caused its deterioration in the spheres of art and religion, giving rise to idolatry and temple building. Of his racial theories, Fergusson says:

*"These, however, are speculations which hardly admit of proof in the present state of our knowledge, and would consequently be quite out of place here, were it not that some such theory seems indispensable to explain the phenomenon of the architectural history of India. That of the north is so essentially different from that of the south that cannot possibly belong to the same people. Neither of them certainly are Aryan; and unless we admit that the two divisions of the country were occupied by people essentially different in blood, though still belonging to the building races of mankind, we cannot possibly understand how they always practised, and to the present employ, styles so essentially different" (p. 42).*

#### **Degenerate Art, Degenerate Architecture**

Fergusson relied heavily on research on Indian antiquities published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Calcutta, and its branches in Bombay and Madras. The publications were based on the empirical tradition of careful observation of facts as they appeared. That however failed to provide the correct interpretation of meaning, particularly the cosmological significance of Hindu architecture. Fergusson was loathe to consult indigenous sources on temple architecture, the *Shilpa Shastras*. Most had not been translated but there was one source in English he did consult for a drawing, but not for its explanation - Ram Raz's *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus*, published by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1834. Based upon the *Manasara Shilpa Shastra* it contained the indigenous taxonomy of ornamentation and held the clue to deciphering the mandala prototypes used in temple building.

In absence of any conceptual understanding of why the buildings were built the way they were, Fergusson searches for explanation in races and religions of native India. The arts reflected their deterioration - his distaste grows the closer in time they are to his times. On Indian sculpture he muses:

*"Sculpture in India may fairly claim to rank, in power of expression, with medieval sculpture in Europe, and tell its tale of rise and decay with equal distinctness; but it is also interesting as having that curious Indian peculiarity of being written in decay" (p. 34).*

Buddhist art of Bodhgaya and Bharhut in 250 BCE is original and close to nature, but begin to its decline soon after, the process temporarily stemmed by the classical influence in Gandhara art. The art of Hindu temples has 'lost its aesthetic and phonetic qualities' and strives to be important by variation in size and multi-headed and multi-limbed figures. The negative tone extends to architecture, in particular Dravidian temples, built later than those of Indo-Aryan style, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Mitter, 1973). The Sanskrit speaking Aryan did not build but degenerate versions of his religion—Vishnuism and Shavism—were practiced in temple worship. Those by the speakers of the Dravidian languages had no 'higher motive' than to employ endless labor, being of 'limited intellectual status', 'no history', and 'no literature'. The elaborate and difficult ornamentation cannot be the 'manifestation of those lofty aims and noble results which constitute the merit and the greatness of true architectural art, and which generally

characterise the best works in the true styles of the western world' (p. 342).

A taste for classical symmetry and balance and habit of seeing the centre / shrine emphasized by a spire/dome makes him shudder at the sight of temple enclosures and their gateways. Of the temple at Tiruvalur he says:

*"As an artistic design, nothing can be worse. The gateways, irregularly placed in a great blank wall, lose half their dignity from their positions; and the bathos of their decreasing in size and elaboration, as they approach the sanctuary, is a mistake which nothing can redeem. We may admire beauty of detail, and be astonished at the elaboration and evidence of labour, if they are found in such temple as this, but as an architectural design it is altogether detestable"* (p. 347).

Fergusson compliments some of the temples (Conjeveram, Chidambaram, Madura) for their picturesque effect created by irregular massing of gopuras and absence of regular layouts, but fails to see the underlying ideal prototype of *vastu purusha mandala* that generated such seeming variety. Even a nodding familiarity with Hindu cosmology would have introduced him to the significance of the square / rectangular form oriented towards cardinal directions, the gopuras mimicking the mountains rimming the cosmos, and the dark cella as the womb of creation.

His rhetoric is toned down in the discussion of Chalukyan and Indo-Aryan styles in temple architecture as they are older and less offensive to his eye. He calls the style found in northern, western, and eastern provinces as Indo-Aryan,

acknowledging that the only reason he does so is because the temples are found in a region called 'Aryavarta' by the natives! The degradation from Buddhism to Brahmanical form of worship is reflected in art and architecture. On Jagannath temple at Puri he opines:

*"It is not, however, only in the detail, but in the outline, the proportions, and the very arrangement of the temple, show that the art in this province at least had received a fatal downward impulse from which it never recovered"* (p. 430).

He is puzzled at the curvilinear forms of shikaras of temples in Orissa and the origin of the amalaka crowning ornament, attributing their function to be merely aesthetic. He is close to uncovering the secret of their meaning when he describes a sacred site in Chattisgarh in central India where temple were built in valleys of three rivers—Son, Mahanadi, and Narmada flowing from a sacred tank in the hill. But he could not understand that temples are embodiment of sacred energies of landscape and are symbolic of natural forms.

Fergusson's classification remained unchallenged for half a century until the second decade of twentieth century when Havell, Coomaraswamy, and Basham in their writings viewed Indian art and architecture in a much more favorable light. Stella Kramrisch's publication in 1946 finally solved the puzzle of the Hindu temple and laid grounds for later studies (Chandra, 1975). Fergusson's chronology and his claim to throw light on Indian history through the study of its architecture have also not stood the test of time. Yet by virtue of being the very first text representing Indian

architectural history to Europe and to Indians themselves, it has had an extraordinary influence on later scholarship.

It is easy to be critical of him in hindsight and in the midst of widely accepted relativism in aesthetic taste. An examination of what he wrote and conjectures on why he wrote the way he did does lead to some pertinent conclusions for architectural theory. One is that styles should not be explicated on the basis of outward appearances. The 'innocent eye' can deceive, inasmuch perception is an act of cognition, open to cultural conditioning. Had Fergusson relied on ethnographic rather than ethnologic evidence, he may have been closer to understanding how the concept of sacred and rituals translate into architectural form.

Architecture, like other symbolic systems, makes tangible conceptual categories that underlie the cultural understanding of the world and oneself. For the British engaged in empire building in India, architecture was one among the many tools used to understand the complex reality of India and her past, and to fashion an imperial style for their buildings. The census reified caste and religious categories, legislative assemblies allowed communal representations, the judicial system adjudicated on the basis of religious law. Architectural history, among other forms of representation, strengthened the divisive and fragmentary sense of identities that Indians were beginning to develop in response to colonialism.

### Post-Colonial Historiography

The writings of James Fergusson have been widely criticized for conflating race with architectural styles. Yet his stylistic

classification scheme exercised a far reaching influence, to the extent that new texts written a century later, have not escaped its influence altogether. E.B. Havell in his *The Ancient and Medieval Architecture of India: A Study of Indo-Aryan Civilisation* published in 1915, says:

*"But with a blindness characteristic of imitators, [Fergusson's followers] have quietly buried with his bones the one vital truth which illumines Fergusson's pages, and have only taken for their texts the fallacies which Fergusson, if he had lived in the present day, would have been first to reject—his classification of 'styles'. The history of Indian architecture has therefore remained where Fergusson left it—not a history of Indian life, but a Museum of Antiquities wrongly labelled."* (pp. xxiii-xxiv).

Havell (1913; 1915) wrote a comprehensive survey of the architectural history of the subcontinent, largely as a retort to Fergusson's text that he believed 'had the effect of preventing the collection and publication of much material which would demonstrate the fallacies of his theories'. Havell's major quarrel was with Fergusson's classification of styles that he thought to be hugely erroneous, based as it was upon racial categories. He refuted it by taking Indo-Aryan philosophy and religion as the major inspiration for all art and architectural forms in India. He attempted to decode the symbolism of many architectural motifs, tracing them to Indo-Aryan villages that he thought represented best the ethos of the Indo-Aryan culture. He railed against Fergusson's sectarian classification, dividing Hindu from Buddhist and Jain buildings,

pointing out that in reality they shared the same structural principles. His take on Islamic architecture was that it was Indian, shaped by techniques, skills, and formal traditions of the Indian craftsmen. Claims of superiority that Fergusson made for Indo-Saracenic architecture, based upon the use of arch and dome, were spurious since Indian craftsmen had employed them in regions such as Gaur (Bengal) before the arrival of Muslims in the subcontinent.

Havell, in demonstrating Fergusson's biases, did not altogether escape them. The consistent thread running through his work is the "Indo-Aryan" spirit as inspiring the best of Indian art and architecture. It stemmed from his belief in the superiority of the Indo-Aryan race, a long lost branch of the Aryan family that included Europeans. In asserting the influence of rock architecture of the Buddhist builders in Western India on Gothic cathedrals of Europe, he believed that 'the two branches of the Aryan race were joined together once more by spiritual and domestic ties for the advancement of the common cause of humanity' (Havell, 1915, p. 77).

Percy Brown's two-volume survey of Indian Architecture published in the early 1940s is a less polemical work than that of Havell and written in a more detached tone. Gone are the overt references to races and the unfavorable comparison with Western architecture. Yet there is no mistaking Fergusson's influence in the stylistic nomenclature. The 'Northern or Indo-Aryan' and 'Dravidian' style are firmly in place, as is 'Buddhist Architecture'. In addition, 'Chalukyan' style, divided into early and later periods, persists. Brown (1968, p.2) discards the term 'Saracenic', using instead 'Indo-Islamic'

since 'India produced more notable buildings than all the other countries that came under the influence of Islam'. Running through the text is an implicit criticism that with the exception of Islamic, buildings in India were not quite architecture in the true sense of the word. He does not consider the Indian builder to be an architect, only a master mason because 'he knew architecture as a fine or liberal art, but not as a mechanical art' (1968, p. 65). Fergusson's judgement that Indian architecture progressively declined through the ages is echoed by Brown (1968, pp. 1-2) in this statement:

*"But the indigenous workmen during this long period had neither invented improved methods nor acquired any scientific building procedure, their technique having remained static through persistent isolation. And, as with the mental type, inbreeding brings in its train undue uniformity and deterioration, so art under parallel conditions becomes monotonous and assumes a progressive inferiority. On the other hand the conquerors [Muslims] not only brought with them an infusion of new blood, but also innovations gained from other lands, fresh principles and practices which had proved effective under all conditions".*

Percy Brown's influence on the Indian historian Satish Grover (1980; 1981) is palpable. Grover's two-volume survey is very much on the lines of Brown with the first volume covering Buddhist and Hindu and the second, Islamic period. Grover prefers to use the names of the great monuments under dynastic categories as his chapter headings. The colonial classification

dividing temple architecture under "Indo-Aryan" and "Dravidian" persists as the underlying premise in the first volume covering Hindu and Buddhist periods. The characteristic temple towers of "Indo-Aryan" and "Dravidian" - *shikharas* and *vimanas* respectively—he believes to be derived from 'rural folk forms' and 'extant Buddhist structures'. Although he includes a small section on the *vastu purusha mandala*, he does not explain convincingly the underlying unity of the Hindu temple in its regional manifestations.

Christopher Tadgell's (1990) monumental survey of the history of architecture in India shows some fresh thinking on the subject. Though he pays tribute to Fergusson for having laid the foundations for the study of Indian architecture and reproduces several of his woodcuts, he has steered clear of division of Indian architecture under the religious categories of "Buddhist and Hindu" and "Islamic". "Indo-Aryan" and "Dravidian" do not make an appearance either, the chapter headings being chronological with religious developments (which he believes were important to all aspects of Indian life) as subtitles. The text integrates considerable amount of research on temple architecture published in the last century. Stylistic categories are based upon temple forms and are indigenous—such as Latina, Shekhari, and Bhumija types of spires. Other building types—forts and palaces—are included as well. The final chapter on "Late India" is based upon the recent spate of books on colonial architecture of churches and public buildings as well as palaces and buildings commissioned by the Indian princes in the nineteenth century. Though it does not include developments in the

twentieth century (with the exception of New Delhi), this densely written volume is far more up to date compared to earlier texts. Refreshingly based upon a post-colonial and post-orientalist framework, that does not impose stylistic categories from outside the indigenous world-view, it signals a new trend in the writing of Indian architectural history.

V.S. Pramar's volume (2005) is by no means a comprehensive survey yet is ambitious in its tracing the autochthonous roots of Indian architecture. It lays to rest any lingering speculations that stylistic classification can be exclusively based upon racial categories by showing how architectural space in stupas and temples was shaped by rituals adopted by various tribes, indigenous and foreign, that made up the polyglot cultures of ancient India. Drawing heavily from examples of housing in Gujarat, it reveals how social structure of families and communities shape space and building forms of vernacular settlements that have undergone few changes until recently. Pramar brings *Shilpa Shastras* into the discourse with a disclaimer that they were not manuals guiding building efforts of the master masons but esoteric texts prepared by Brahmins. His concluding chapter on building materials and techniques redresses the neglect by previous volumes on this subject.

It took a century and a quarter to redress Fergusson's egregious errors in reading the meaning of architectural forms, thanks in no small measure to the tremendous scholarship on temple architecture. One would think that old texts such as those of Fergusson and Brown would be gathering dust on library bookshelves, but both authors have been

reprinted, and Brown's books have gone through multiple reprints. This continued readership is a cause for concern, more so when the audience includes young and impressionable students of architecture.<sup>2</sup> Architecture faculty in India recognises the biases, when they were surveyed, describing the texts to be 'Eurocentric taking European Renaissance as the standard' and are a product of 'Orientalism, i.e. the art and architecture of Asian cultures such as that of India and China are outside history'.<sup>3</sup> Fergusson's misreading of temple architecture is recognised and the colonial enterprise of documenting monuments questioned.<sup>4</sup> Teachers and professionals see the rewriting of architectural history 'not as classification of buildings in archaeological watertight compartments according to arbitrary academic ideas of style (as Fergusson thought), but a history of national life and thought'.<sup>5</sup> A few express the need to understand the cultural and social context of a civilization in interpreting architectural history. Ashok Lall, a prominent architect in New Delhi drew attention to the 'greatest weakness of that time - absence of a theoretical base where causality of form or design can be elucidated through its ontological roots'. Historiography is seen necessary so that 'architectural history as any cultural production can then be located through a framework of recognised bias like Eurocentrism, Colonialism, Nationality, Subaltern history'.<sup>6</sup> Others call for greater attention to shape grammar, structural systems, materials, and technological achievements, integrated with philosophy, religion, and aesthetics. The monument-centered approach is seen as 'representing only one dimension of our history' and neglectful of domestic and vernacular architecture.<sup>7</sup>

### Architectural History in Design Education

The debate about 'true' history begs the question of its relevance and significance to design education and profession in general. The International style of architecture that Le

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Corbusier initiated in India with his buildings in Chandigarh and Ahmedabad effectively put an end to any lingering respect for history within the educational system and profession. The process of neglect, of course, had begun with the colonial system of education that trained Indians as draftsmen and surveyors to execute designs from European pattern books. None of the respondents in the survey however deny history a role. Design faculty approach history as precedents and exemplars they can draw upon in teaching. They want to know the regional and social context within which buildings were produced, about building materials and construction techniques and skills necessary to realize them. History provided a sourcebook of 'design typologies fashioned through the generations' and allows for an 'approach to design much more sensitive and situation specific'. It 'established our links with the past and reaffirmed our roots in a rich cultural heritage'.<sup>8</sup> It 'helps a student to locate himself in the post-industrial and post-colonial situation' and grapple with 'the question of nation, ethnicity, and identity'.<sup>9</sup> Design education based upon architectural history would 'lead to a revival in cultural continuity

and social integration'.<sup>10</sup> It would 'give tools for comparative enquiry' and 'strengthen a research foundation and application possibilities for real life situations'.<sup>11</sup>

Field trips to historical sites and their documentation through photographs/slides and measured drawings are part of most design curricula in India. Individual students often take up such sites as subjects of semester long study and thesis projects. Many respondents indicated that their program contributes to historic preservation and conservation of local historical monuments by holding exhibitions and preparing reports. Yet history plays a minor role in design studios - historic precedents are considered only occasionally, architectural ornamentation rarely applied, and *vastu* concepts, critically examined, if at all. One

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reason could be that few building prototypes, besides temples, mosques, tombs, and palaces are discussed in history texts and the overwhelming emphasis on religious monuments does not allow much room for connection with contemporary realities.

Practitioners too recognize the influence of history and its potential value in design practice. They mention the small but influential

group of designers who have consciously re-interpreted tradition in their work, growing popularity of *vastu* design, and efforts of various organizations in preserving architectural heritage. Traditional patterns of spatial order are implicit in what their clients require, especially in private residences, while the facades present an opportunity for pastiche of elements - Western and Indian - 'making architecture in India as Indian, even when it is imitative, though much of it is not self assured and often schizophrenic'.<sup>12</sup> The lack of a well-defined theoretical base and identity in Indian architecture 'lies in the fact that history is still taught from Western books (by and large) and there is not enough of a local or regional component'.<sup>13</sup> The role of architectural history in contemporary practice is 'to maintain continuity in tradition, to find an identity, and to make architecture belong to the place and time'.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

Since history is interpretation of the past from perspective of the present, postcolonial times have demanded a critical stance. Historiography of Indian architecture has been recently covered by Mitter (1992; 1994), Metcalfe (1989), Juneja (2001) and Hosragrahar (2002). Mitter traces the genesis of ideas shaping aesthetic perception and moral evaluation of Indian art in post-Renaissance European thinking in his comprehensive history of Indian art between 16 - 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Metcalfe deals specifically with writing of architectural history by Indologists, the acquisition of orientalist's knowledge and its application towards creation of colonial style of architecture that suited British imperialism. My own critical review of historiography aims at deconstructing ideological presuppositions (particularly

colonial biases) and argues that the architectural past plays a vital role in construction of a coherent identity of a nation state. Reactionary forces can use the hybrid nature of Indian architectural legacy (indigenous, Islamic, and colonial) to fragment the fragile sense of national identity unless social history of building traditions that share many similar features across regions is integrated with the formal grammar of shapes and forms.

To make history truly relevant to design pedagogy, it is essential that a fundamental shift take place in the construction of the historical narrative and its reception by design students. The long-standing schism between past and present enforced first by Public Works Department architecture in the nineteenth century, International Style in the mid-twentieth century, and current globalisation that has paved the way for instant acceptance of seductive Western trends, can only be bridged by a determined effort by theorists and practitioners. Current and emerging scholarship as well as trends in contemporary practice suggest that writing of Indian architectural history take the following into account: critical regionalism, rehabilitation of the role of *sthapati*, and situating buildings in their landscape and urban context.

Critical regionalism as a way of thinking and architectural style is diametrically opposite to the universal International Style. It forces sensitivity to local issues—climate, building materials and technology, and the urban context (Mehrotra, 2001). A small but influential number of Indian architects are now looking to India's rich and eclectic past in a

search for meaningful forms and iconography (Tillotson 1989; 1995). History therefore contributes towards a quest for identity but also polemicises the issue, causing one to grapple with which and whose versions of the past should be a source of inspiration. Instead of being a grab bag of forms empty of meanings to be employed whimsically, history texts in elucidating regionalism, can explain the role of the hitherto neglected contextual issues in shaping design.

What would make historical surveys eminently readable are not comprehensive descriptions of monuments, but choice examples which are illustrative of a general type that is shaped by cultural concepts of ideal form (such as mandala), social and ritual practices, climatic forces, and availability of building materials and technology, *Shilpa Shastras*, so far neglected by academic historians, largely because of their abstruse vocabulary and repetitive contents, form a valuable source material awaiting better translations and critical commentaries. Equally important is the historical role of the *sthapati*, dismissed by earlier historians as the master mason who did not possess the intellectual capacity to depart from tradition and innovate. The guild system of builders, (largely extinct except in some regions such as Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu) organised on caste lines and hereditary transmission of knowledge and skills, was responsible for wonders of Indian architecture. The *sthapati* heading the guild was the rightful heir to the divine architect Vishvakarma and repository of knowledge contained in the *shastras*. His obliteration from professional system of education and erasure from history is undeserved and wrongful.<sup>15</sup>

Finally the monument centered approach serves to fragment and isolate the building from its context. It gives an incomplete narrative of how the building was located in the landscape, its place in the building ensemble, and its social use and cultural symbolism. Sacred sites have been built upon for centuries and often by more than one religious sect. Their landscapes tell the story of nature veneration, mythology, royal patronage, pilgrim circulation, settlement patterns, and evolving architectural styles. Besides religious structures, they contain other building types - forts, palaces, market centers, water structures, among others - giving us a complete picture of how life was lived there once upon a time. Historic preservation and conservation movement in India has also suffered from the monument-centered approach, giving us a partial view of the material remains of buildings, but totally neglectful in restoring or recreating what happened between them.

Architecture was extolled as a living art in India by Fergusson and his followers. Today this would sound like a dubious claim and that is a sad commentary on the price of modernisation. Yet the rise of trends such as the growing popularity of *vastu* design indicate interest in traditional knowledge systems and belief in their efficacy. Acquiring a vivid sense of history and perceiving the continuity of tradition in the vernacular landscape therefore would imbue the design student with a clear identity and sense of confidence in experimenting with ideas that may lessen the costs of inevitable social and environmental changes in Indian society. ■

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See William White's obituary of James Fergusson in *Proceedings of Sixty Third Anniversary Meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society*, May 1886.

<sup>2</sup> All were indicated as required texts in a survey done in 2000 of professional architectural programs in India. Of the 105 survey forms sent out, only 20 were returned. Of the 13 departments/colleges of Architecture that replied, 10 assigned James Fergusson's book as a required text, Percy Brown's volumes were required text for 12, and Satish Grover's for 11. Christopher Tadgell's book was assigned by 9, and E.B. Havell's by 8.

<sup>3</sup> Kaiwan N. Mehta, Academic based in Mumbai. (Formerly) Kamla Raheja Vidyaniidhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies.

<sup>4</sup> According to Brinda Somaya of Somaya & Kalappa Consultants, Mumbai: "In spite of the accurate documentation of the architectural history of India in the colonial period it missed out the very essence of the history by remaining detached from the country's past. Thus the validity of the documentation and its methods in regards to our present in now being questioned. The analysis of Fergusson describing the Temple as a false system of design goes to indicate that he had in mind a 'correct system', which ought to have been followed. If a temple in the south of India is judged by the terms of an European cathedral then the point of documenting and interpreting the architectural history of India is completely lost."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Kaiwan Mehta, Academic based in Mumbai. (Formerly) Kamla Raheja Vidyaniidhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies.

<sup>7</sup> Brinda Somaya, Somaya & Kalappa Consultants, Architects and Interior Designers, Mumbai

<sup>8</sup> I.J.S. Bakshi, Principal, Chandigarh College of Architecture

<sup>9</sup> Kaiwan Mehta, Academic based in Mumbai. (Formerly) Kamla Raheja Vidyaniidhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies.

<sup>10</sup> Harimohan Pillai, Academic based in Kerala. (Formerly) College of Architecture, Thrissur.

<sup>11</sup> Joy Sen, Department of Architecture and Regional Planning, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur.

<sup>12</sup> Ashok Lall, TVB School of Habitat Studies, New Delhi

<sup>13</sup> Madhavi Desai, School of Architecture, Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT), Ahmedabad.

<sup>14</sup> Surinder Bagha, Architect, Saakar Foundation, Chandigarh

<sup>15</sup> There have been advocates of the Indian mason/builder but no historian has so far written an in-depth social history of the how the community of builders practiced their art and the system of patronage that enabled them to develop their craft. E.B. Havell believed that the colonial system of art and architectural education and PWD architectural style had succeeded in producing a vastly inferior quality of buildings in India. During the building of New Delhi, he carried out a strident campaign to include the Indian *mistri*, but to no avail. See his chapters, "The Future of Architecture in India—The Building of the New Delhi" and "Fourteen Years After—An Imperial Object Lesson" in *Indian Architecture*, op. cit. pp. 250-269.

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