

The Raj versus the Republic: The Legacy of Lutyens

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The present-day Indian capital of New Delhi has served as the seat of rule for a full range of indigenous and foreign empires, from various Hindu and Muslim dynasties through the Mughals and the British. Its geographically and economically strategic location and historic importance made it the logical choice for the seat of the Republic of India upon independence in 1947. Based on the plans of the British architect Lutyens, New Delhi's architecture reflects that imperialistic heritage; as the seat of the Raj from 1911 until independence, Delhi bears a lasting impression of British imperialist rule and culture. The question of the appropriate path in India's post-Independence struggle to establish a renewed collective national identity—a struggle hampered by Partition, religious strife, linguistic and ethnic diversity, poverty, and staggering misrule—is open to debate. Several key aspects are nonetheless clear.

The commission for the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (IGNCA), the most extensive project in government architecture in the nation's history, represented a powerful opportunity to assert a post-colonial Indian identity in Lutyens' Delhi. American Ralph Lerner was awarded the prize and commission; Lerner's plan, however, designed in conscious harmony with the overall style of Lutyens, reinforced the Raj at the expense of the Republic, and elevated 150 years of foreign hegemony over 5000 years of opulent evolution. A subsequent project of equal import—Raj Rewal's Parliament Library—presents us with a fascinating counterpoint to Lerner's IGNCA. While Lerner's project is embedded in the imposing Western style of Lutyens and New Delhi, Rewal's work speaks to all eight incarnations of the ever-shifting capital of India, Delhi old and new.

India's identity must be embedded in the legacies of the rich, broad history of Indian civilizations while paying homage to the more recent forces—indigenous changes, conquest and colonization—that have shaped India. This identity must also reaffirm India's freedom from its colonial shackles, however mixed the view of those shackles. Cultural production, in all manifestations, inheres in a people; architecture in particular is a tactile, lasting expression of national identity, literally rooted in a nation's soil, tying this form of cultural production most closely to a nation's collective sense of self. This paper explores the implications of Lerner's design for the IGNCA in light of Indian history, culture, and politics, analyzing the symbolic importance of the IGNCA with respect to Indian national identity. In comparison with the designs of other recent public buildings in Delhi, most notably the Parliament Library of Raj Rewal, Lerner's IGNCA design is conspicuous principally for its reiteration of Britain's cultural stamp on India.

II. The city of 8 capitals

It would be misleading and even inflammatory to contend that Delhi somehow represents India writ large; Delhi is, nonetheless, undeniably Indian. From its birth nearly three millennia ago as the Indraprastha of the Pandavas to its 1911 designation as the new seat of the Raj, replacing Calcutta, to its near-unanimous selection as the capital of independent India in 1947, Delhi has been a showcase of power, wealth, and culture. Delhi has served nearly continuously as the cradle of empires of different stripes, whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or (largely) secular, and bears the legacy of its pivotal role in world history. Unlike Washington, D.C., however, built

specifically as the symbol of a newly-independent nation, Delhi traces its history as a capitol to the seven prior royal centers of power that comprise the city today.

III. The Imprimatur of Lutyens

The Qutub Minar, Red Fort, and Humayun's Tomb may be the most striking elements of Delhi's opulent architectural history, but an eclectic, nonetheless distinctive set of styles, lending a characteristic feel to the city, has emerged over time. Available materials certainly shaped design, but Delhi is characterized by a creative, manifestly Indian architecture, one partly inspired by forms and aesthetics of those cultures that have shaped other aspects of Indian life. The changes brought—and wrought—by the construction of earlier manifestations of Delhi, such as Ferozabad and Purana Quila, pale by comparison with those of the “New Delhi” of Lutyens and Baker. The majesty of Lutyens' plan, from the India Gate to the Rajpath, from Connaught Place to the Viceroy's Palace, was one borrowed from Paris and Versailles, Wren's London, and L'Enfant's Washington D.C., from English and Greco-Roman ideals; indigenous inspiration was slight, perfunctory, and adjunctive. The orthogonal, Western geometry of the Viceroy's Palace, Secretariat, and Parliament buildings would appear perfectly congruous in L'Enfant's Washington Mall, while the radial streets of Lutyens' design evoke the layout of Paris, with the Rajpath as the Champs Elysee. That Lutyens considered the splendor of Delhi's monumental architecture more nuisance than inspiration only lends credence to the argument that New Delhi could just as easily been built in any world city. While this does not detract from the exquisiteness of the Viceroy's house or elegance of the Rajpath, it does raise the question of whether his design is appropriate for the capital of post-colonial India, and whether subsequent public architecture in Delhi should buttress the prominence of New Delhi at the expense of its seven sisters.

IV. Majestic Hegemony

The British Empire arguably represented the prototypical example of “Hegemony” as employed by the Italian Marxist political philosopher Antonio Gramsci. In the Gramsci developed a more nuanced, culturally dependent view of the myriad ways in which a ruling class—either in the sense of direct political or military rulers (“political society”) or intellectual or economic elites (“civil society”)—exerts power and imposes not only its will, but also its values and worldview, on subordinate groups or classes. The impossibility of governing such a huge, poly-linguistic, culturally alien, and religiously divided population against the will of the majority meant that the British rule in India could only succeed to the extent that Western ideals, technology, economic systems, language, and cultural production held allure for the Indian people. The British did not desire (and, of course, could never have achieved) the near-total extermination or expulsion of an entire indigenous population, as occurred in Australia and North America, but rather sought the political, economic, and cultural (read: racial) subordination of the Indian people. The Indian Administrative Service, the English medium school, cricket, Kipling, the Indian Railway Service, and Victoria's Jubilee each did more to further English power in India during the century preceding the establishment of New Delhi than did the British armed forces. English colonial rule in other places, from South Africa to Arabia, from the South Pacific to the Caribbean, likewise flourished only when the Empire successfully imposed its cultural hegemony—the term's irony notwithstanding—on subject peoples. Mere political and military dominance allows for at most an extractive economic relationship, as largely characterized the situation

of the Spanish Empire's South American colonies or Germany's African colonies. To govern, rather than merely rule, the British Empire successfully reshaped Indian culture and society, in no small measure through the building of New Delhi.

The principal British objectives guiding the design for New Delhi—a design that served as so much more than simple “urban planning”, indeed as a manifestation of British political and cultural hegemony over the “Jewel in the Crown”, British India—were well-served by the transformation imposed by this plan. Lutyens' intention was not to imbue the new symbol and administrative headquarters for British rule of the subcontinent with a sense of Englishness specifically, but rather to ensconce India more firmly in the long arms of European culture. The tangible, practical legacies of the nearly three centuries of British presence in India span all aspects of life in the subcontinent, from the Indian Railway Service to its near-stifling bureaucracy, from its educational system to the near-ubiquitous basic fluency in the English language among India's middle and upper classes. The utility of many of these borrowings, integral to India's present-day burgeoning economic role in the global economy, has not been lost on the Indian people.

No equivalent ancillary benefits, however, stem from the majestic yet imposed grandeur of the architecture of India's capital. New Delhi serves primarily, enduringly, as a painful, shameful reminder of India's protracted subjugation to the will of a small island nation 13,000 kilometers to the northwest, the beauty of Lutyens' masterwork evoking the stateliness of a foreign occupying power. From the time of Job Charnok's establishment of a trading post in what is now Kolkata in 1690 to the departure of Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, in 1947, British policies in India were geared toward the glory and benefit of the British Empire, with the Indians serving as second-class adjuncts to that empire at best. English rule was in fact somewhat more nobly intentioned than that of almost all other imperial powers, the United States included, if only because the English displayed a more abiding sense of long-term interest in development, rather than the simple resource extraction that characterized, for example, Iberian rule in South America. Tapping into internal divisions—Muslim versus Hindu, lighter-skinned Aryans versus darker-skinned Dravidians, higher caste versus lower caste—the British expanded their domination, whether directly or by proxy, over nearly 500 million people with a markedly small military presence, an administrative service completely dependent on indigenous labor, and a somewhat larger contingent of British merchants, professionals, dependents, and those who had simply “gone native”. None of the innumerable symbols of the subordination of the Indian people to British colonial rule carries the same psychological impact as does the towering domination of Lutyens' New Delhi over the sprawl of India's greatest city.

V. Lerner's Design

Ralph Lerner seemed at the time an unlikely choice for the project, as an American—rather than an Indian, or even a British, architect—of still-limited reputation. His winning plan—orthogonal, commanding, majestic, and somewhat aloof and uninviting—has won extensive praise and heavy criticism. Issues of implementation aside (Lerner was removed as the architect of record in 1993 for his excessive—even by Indian standards!—delays in delivering plans and failure to oversee the work), critics have described the work as derivative, unimaginative, and unduly conformist, while his defenders have pointed to the lush gardens he planned for the expansive

courtyards, his creative employment of materials, and his use of natural light for the interior spaces.

The architectural elements themselves are subordinate to the cultural, political, and symbolic significance of Lerner's design. Lutyens' Delhi, as the ultimate expression of British domination over India, is too much a part of Delhi—and of India—to be forsaken, but it cannot function as the central architectural motif of the new nation. There is much to like in the plan of Lerner's IGNCA; however, no architectural work—this one far more so than most—exists in a vacuum. Sociocultural, political, and symbolic concerns are paramount in public architecture; Lerner's design displays a blithe lack of awareness of the broader issues involved in this project.

VI. The Iconography of Independence

Its victory in the struggle to regain its sovereignty was the beginning, not the end, of the new nation of India's campaign to establish an autonomous, autochthonous identity. Partition and lingering communal violence, unchecked population growth (and the ever-concomitant unchecked poverty), aggressive, hostile neighbors, mercantilist economic policies, dynastic one-party rule, and staggering corruption had served until fairly recently to relegate the Republic of India to second-class status on the world stage. India's emergence from the shadows of its long history of subordination to foreign powers, whether Mughal or British, has been a laborious process. As numerous other monumental public construction projects, from the Pyramids to the Great Wall, from Brasilia to Astana, have clearly demonstrated, architecture and urban planning not only reflect, but also define, regimes and civilizations. No other person has been as thoroughly identified with post-colonial India as has Indira Gandhi—"Indira is India, India is Indira" was far more than a campaign slogan—and no other architectural undertaking has offered India the same opportunity for self-representation as has the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (IGNCA). In the words of the architect himself, the site for the IGNCA is "quite similar to the Mall in Washington D.C., in both its spatial character and national importance" (Lerner Associates website). This opportunity, however, to recast the public face of India was squandered by the endorsement of the design of American architect Ralph Lerner.

Scores of architects submitted plans for the massive undertaking, the largest public building expenditure in India's brief history, and the proposals reflected a wide range of styles and influences. The privileging of Lutyens' New Delhi over the Delhi of seven previous imperial capitals—mirroring the history of India writ large—buttressed the notion, within and outside of the country, that India's most recent colonial overlord still dominated the national psyche and shaped the country's self-image. Rather than asserting India's independent identity, the design of the IGNCA left the Republic in the long shadow of the Raj, reinforcing India's lack of national self-esteem at precisely the point in time when the Indian people ought to have been embracing their nation's evolving role on the world stage.

VII. Rewal for the Republic

The circular, jaggedly rectilinear design of Raj Rewal for the Parliament Library—a project similar in scope, though not in architect's fees, to the IGNCA—draws its understated inspiration from the geometry and attention to detail of Hindu and Muslim architecture of the past millennium, rather than from the grandiose splendor of the Lutyens' buildings that surround it. Rewal's plan draws its stature from its

landscape, while Lerner's IGNCA is built commandingly upon a commanding site. It is nonetheless impossible to overlook Rewal's library. Rewal's design demonstrates how *utilizing* geography differs from *working with it*. Internally, the spaces are warm and inviting despite the building's scale.

The message Rewal conveys, while working under the same stringent limitations that Lerner followed, is one that differs markedly from that of Lerner. Rewal's design draws upon the Delhi of Humayun and Shah Jahan, of Victoria and Indira Gandhi, of Lutyens and Baker, clearly intimating that India is indeed greater than the sum of its unequalled architectural, cultural, and political history. Rewal's plan does not deny the reality of the 250 years of British presence and rule and the Raj's lasting impact on the maddening pastiche that is India; nor, however, does it reduce India to the simple status of former colony whose significance derives largely from its Commonwealth status and whose present-day achievements stem largely from the civilizing foundation laid by benevolent English (read: "white") rule. Rewal's Parliament Library may not embody the full grandeur of Lerner's IGNCA, but it does nevertheless embody India. For such a work of monumental public architecture, the latter is infinitely more significant.

IX. Metonymy versus Synecdoche

No built environment exists in a vacuum; architecture cannot be isolated from considerations of physical, material, or cultural surroundings. Ralph Lerner's IGNCA is a beautiful, elegant complex, conveying simultaneously the splendor of its geographic milieu, the majesty of nearby architectural works and the stateliness of its namesake and purpose. Lerner's design remains intrinsically troubling, though, more for what it is not than for what it is. Lerner's design blends too well with its surrounding early 20th-century government buildings, thereby identifying the New Delhi of Lutyens as India's architecture. One may argue correctly that the monumental British architecture in Delhi has become yet another aspect of the unbelievably rich built environment of India. The metonymy of equating one aspect of this varied history to the totality of Indian architecture is in itself a fatal flaw. When that one aspect happens to be the shining example of British rule in India, an India still beset by nearly insurmountable difficulties in establishing a secular, modern character independent of the long shadow of colonialism, this flaw grows to epic proportions. Architects designing private construction can sometimes safely ignore the broader cultural implications of certain design decisions. Public construction of almost any type, but especially "showcase" public spaces such as the IGNCA, must be planned from the outset with such considerations at the forefront. Lerner's Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts conveys a certain message about the state of Indian architecture and culture: it suggests that indigenous forms of architectural expression are inferior to those created by India's British colonizers, that India's national identity derives its significance in large measure from its colonial past, and that Western cultural production is inherently superior to that of India. In stark contrast, Rewal's Parliament Library, which suitably complements the adjoining Parliament Building of Lutyens, is an eclectic yet coherent work that mirrors the nation itself: proud and respectful of its history in all eras, but unafraid to embrace modern developments and sensibilities. The counterpoint that Rewal's Library represents highlights the ideological shortcomings of Lerner's IGNCA in stark relief. That Rewal is an Indian architect, while Lerner is an American, should be immaterial;

what matters is that Rewal's work acknowledges, and incorporates elements of, the rich traditions that comprise India's architectural landscape.

X. What is India?

Perhaps no nation is as impossible to characterize, to summarize in a few stock phrases, as is India. Thus, categorizing a particular architectural work—or even an entire urban scheme—as “Indian” is certainly problematic; the many streams that have washed across India are all part of Indian soil. That soil, however, has tended to break down and assimilate, over time, any foreign architectural influences. The plan of Lutyens, somewhat understandably, drew primarily upon Western styles and European tastes; that Lerner's design did so as well is less understandable. Rewal's Library does not clash with Lutyens' design, but is nevertheless far more evocative of more traditionally and historically Indian styles. While paying homage to the strong, if still foreign, British influence on Indian culture and society, as epitomized in the Viceroy's Palace, Government Square, and Rajpath, Rewal's Parliament Library smoothly blends, and harmonizes with, the architectures all the major influences on Indian culture. Rewal's design thus expresses a vision of the *Desh* that acknowledges, values, and assimilates the series of cultures that have left their marks on it. By subordinating each subsequent ruling culture under the historical umbrella of a mosaic nation, the message of the design becomes one of complexity, of continuity and cohesion within change. The problem with Lerner's work may therefore ultimately not be so much that it privileges the colonial masters over the liberated subject peoples. Rather, the fault lay in the fact that a country with as fragile a sense of national patriotism as India can only establish itself through an expressed ideology, a set of national myths and symbols, and cultural production that are as inclusive and “pan-cultural” as possible—neither Hindu nor Muslim, neither urban nor rural, neither Tamil nor Bengali nor Punjabi. Lerner's IGNCA does not reflect the multiplicity that is India and thus serves to detour the Republic of India from the staggering, Herculean task of uniting those without a common language, ethnicity, political history, religion, or lifestyle into one India. Such is the only path that holds continued promise for a country still struggling to become a nation.

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