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Pondicherry, Critical Modernism, Indian Modern, Antonin Raymond

Golconde: India's First Modern Building

Smita Dalvi

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on an eponymous exhibition held between 09 February & 11 March 2016, at the lobby of Army & Navy Building, Kalaghoda, Mumbai – a collateral event with the 'State of Architecture' exhibition at the NGMA, Mumbai. The curatorial text by Smita Dalvi is based on ongoing research on the building and the early modernism in India. The drawings for the exhibition were prepared by Raj Singh and Amit Dhanawat, as documentation being means of unravelling the logic of the building.

Golconde was built in the French colony of Pondicherry, India, as a dormitory for the Aurobindo Ashram, between the late 1930s and early 1940s. Embodied in its process, product and upkeep are the philosophical precepts of Beauty as understood by the architect, clients and its eventual users. Golconde presaged 'high modernism' in India two decades before Chandigarh. Although, reinforced concrete was already in use in India, Golconde can claim to be one of the earliest 'modern' buildings in India.

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Critical Modernism

Golconde (1935 - 1945) was built in the French colony of Pondicherry, India as a dormitory for the Aurobindo Ashram, presaging the 'high modernism' that would be seen much later in India. Golconde's design, execution and subsequent life over the next seventy years reflect universalism, yet critical modernism; a notion of beauty that simultaneously is and transcends its physical presence.

Golconde is representative of an axis in the history of the subcontinent when the confluences of several strands of world culture crisscrossed throughout the country like a sea wind. At the time, imperialism internationalized the colonial space in an unprecedented manner. The narrative of Golconde was shaped by cultural forces that transcended nationality and tradition. It is, on the face of it, a babel of subcultures, and yet the building itself speaks with a clarity that belies all these backgrounds.

This paper attempts to recreate the narrative of this remarkable building, its design and construction, and contextualise its position in the history of Indian modernism while discussing its relevance in the search for criticalism in architectural responses.

A 'Beautiful Building' to House Her Children

Sri Aurobindo, educated in Britain, became a revolutionary upon his return and in 1910 took refuge in French Pondicherry. Here, he founded an international commune based on the philosophy of 'Cosmic salvation through spiritual evolution'. Mirra Alfassa, a Parisian artist and occultist joined him in

1914 and became his chief disciple. Known as 'The Mother' she had envisioned a 'beautiful building to house her children'- the ashram disciples.¹ In 1935, on the recommendation of Pavitra (Philippe St.

The Mother's brief for the dormitory consisted of living and sleeping accommodations, work and utility rooms- designed to keep the interiors comfortable without mechanical aid in the tropical heat and humidity of Pondicherry.

Hilaire), a French engineer at the Ashram, the Mother commissioned architect Antonin Raymond to design a building to fulfil this dream. Her brief for the dormitory consisted of living and sleeping accommodations, work and utility rooms- designed to keep the interiors comfortable without mechanical aid in the tropical heat and humidity of Pondicherry. An endowment of One Lakh Rupees came from Sir Akbar Hydari, Diwan of the princely state of Hyderabad and for this munificence, the dormitory was named 'Golconde'.²

An Eclectic Team: Raymond, Nakashima, Sammer

Antonin Raymond was born in Czechoslovakia and trained in Prague as an architect in the first decade of the new century. He was disillusioned with the architecture in Europe that he described as "sentimental imitation of forms long out-lived".³ He went to the US in search of the new. There, he worked with Frank Lloyd Wright briefly and accompanied him to Japan in 1919 for the Imperial Hotel Project in Tokyo. This was a turning point in Raymond's career. He stayed on, impressed with the philosophy of traditional Japanese architecture in which he found what he