



## Chandigarh and 'Modernity': A Critical Enquiry of its Philosophical Roots

Koyal Verma

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

### ABSTRACT

*Chandigarh is connoted to be a 'modern' urban city. Nehru and Le Corbusier had predominantly influenced the planning of Chandigarh. The idea of 'Modernity' was a dominant guiding principle for Chandigarh. This article not only outlines the idea of modernity but also critically evaluates it. This article interrogates the dominant principle's of modernity. It further argues that 'modernity' act as a functional attribute for the state.*

**KEYWORDS :Urban Space, Chandigarh, Modernity**

### Introduction:

After the Partition of India in 1947, the Punjab Government had lost its capital (i.e. Lahore city) to Pakistan. It had to be therefore, temporarily be situated in Shimla, the old summer capital of the British Colony. The city's inaccessibility and extreme winter climate made it unsuitable as a permanent capital; consequently the building of a new capital city acquired an urgent need. In order to retain the lost confidence of the people, the leaders of the independent India, particularly, Jawaharlal Nehru came under the pressure to show that they could still fulfill the promises made during the freedom movement. The decision to make a new capital for Punjab was taken and the work for making Chandigarh was taken up immediately. A site for the project was selected right away. In the mid 1949, the site was changed to its present location in an 'effort' to reduce the number of people getting displaced due to the new project.

The planning of Chandigarh was a measure taken by the government of India to resettle the refugees after the partition of India and restate the lost capital of Punjab. The planning of Chandigarh was done with the vision of Nehru and the architecture of the modern French urban planner, Le Corbusier.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section will outline the idea of modernity from the perspective of Nehru, the first prime minister of India. The second section will attempt to map how the ideas of modernity were incorporated in the planning of Chandigarh. The third section will attempt to enquire whether the modern planning of Chandigarh addressed the needs of all the people or was the plan for Chandigarh, only an outcome of modernity, and just a project of the state.

### The Governing Philosophies:

Nehru and Corbusier were two main architects involved in the planning of Chandigarh. This planning was governed by certain principles and visions (Sarin 1982). These principles are outlined below.

- The new capital city would provide a suitable seat for the displaced government.
- It would become a symbol of the new national consciousness and a focus of hope and reassurance for the suffering refugees.
- The tabula rasa would spring a 'new' future, for the displaced people from Pakistan by starting afresh on land free of existing encumbrances.
- This would act to provide an opportunity of initiating a new and model approach to Indian urban planning. The new city could become a training ground for the young Indian architects and planners who would become capable of managing their future urban development and planning projects in the country.

These were the dominant philosophies that governed the planning of Chandigarh. Modernity was the dominant theme that guided the construction of Chandigarh. The next section outlines the meaning and vision of modernity according to Nehru, who was one of the main guiding factors in the planning of Chandigarh.

### Nehru, Modernity and Urban Space

The notion of modernity was to be a key element of the new capital city. It had to be one of the main defining principles of the city. Nehru

(1989) implored that modernity should be seen as something that is distinctly different from the past traditions. Just as he regarded dams to be the next temples of India, Nehru urged to the people to develop a modern consciousness and particularly, develop a consciousness for a modern town free from the traditions of the past. Nehru's idea and imagination for an urban space for India after independence was modern. He proposed that modern machinery, printing press and railways had already been introduced in India by the British. It was our next task to build on that and plan a city, which could be an expression of the future. According to him only a small group of the Indian population were influenced by the west, the rest of the population clung to the philosophic roots that held India down and backward. According to him the real impact and influence of the west was to be on the practical side of life, which was superior to the eastern way of life. He saw how the new techniques and more efficient ways of the west could not be ignored and came up against old methods of thought. He felt that the most significant change was the break up of the agrarian system and the introduction of industry.

Nehru's prescription for overcoming weakness in Indian society was the invigoration of massive state-sponsored projects of modernization. An admirer of both, United States and the Soviet Union, Nehru strove to amalgamate the best of both these in modern consciousness. On the Soviet model, he set up gigantic mining and manufacturing public-sector undertakings, and initiated the system of five-year national development plans. At the same time, Nehru was totally committed to democratic principles and valorised education as the route to emancipation. To generate new knowledge and expertise, he developed a series of scientific, educational, and cultural institutions. Modelling his state practices on Roosevelt's ideas, he ordered the construction of numerous Tennessee Valley Authority- inspired hydroelectric dam projects. The most famous of these was the Bhakra Nangal Dam, located not far from the capital city, destined not only to supply water and electricity to the city, but to be intertwined with its history. By professed ideology, however, modernization for Nehru was not just a question of style or identity, or of doing things as they were done in the West. Rather, as the antidote to stasis, it was an attitude.

In Nehru's vision, money economy had a very important place; he urged to the people that, it was inevitable to avoid modern means of life. He proposed that people should cultivate a modern consciousness. He sought that this could only happen if people appreciated western science and technology. His view of development differed significantly from that of his mentor, Mahatma Gandhi. While both of them agreed that colonization had resulted in the destruction of indigenous industries and livelihoods, they differed considerably on the critical question of what was to be done next for India's future. Gandhi considered industrialization to be an evil and wanted the self-sustaining village to be fundamental economic and social unit of the new nation. Nehru wanted to pursue aggressive industrialization, controlled by a centralized welfare state, to catch up with the developments of the west. With Gandhi's death in 1948 – early in the history of the new Indian nation, the Nehruvian doctrine prevailed (Prakash 2002).

The above section outlined Nehru's idea of modernity. The next section tries to identify how the ideas of modernity were incorporated in the planning of Chandigarh.

## Chandigarh and Modernity

According to Nehru, Chandigarh had to reflect the modern aspirations of the new Indian nation. This section outlines how the idea of Modernity became the governing principle during planning.

### Modernity: A Break from the Past

Nehru sent out a clear signal that the new city was to replace the ancient city of Lahore, and there was to be no place for 'nostalgia' in Chandigarh. He did not want an existing old city to embody the new nation because he believed that oldness, with its overwhelming weight of tradition, held India down. Deeply influenced by colonial perceptions, Nehru was convinced that it was static traditional practices, which had not adequately responded to change, that had caused India's colonization. According to Nehru new symbolized freedom from India's static history which was bringing India down by the weight of its tradition and superstition.

### Modernization: As the Way Forward

According to Nehru, modernization was the main thrust of development which had potential to liberate India. According to him to be modern was to be new, and the 'new' in his perception was synonymous with 'good'. —After the violence of partition, Nehru was convinced that by focusing on modernity he could sidestep the pitfalls of ancient identities. Nehru hoped that the newly independent Indian population would sufficiently identify itself with the idea of modernity, re-invent itself, and thereby avoid the continued specter of ethnic violence. If modernism was his new religion, then newness and change were its gospel. This is the context in which Nehru proclaimed the hydroelectric projects to be the —temples of modern India. And it is this context in which we can understand Nehru's dictum for Chandigarh: —Let this be a new city unfettered by the traditions of the past, and a symbol of the nation's faith in the future. Chandigarh was not to be —unfettered by the traditions of the past and a —symbol of the nation's faith in the future; rather, the new capital was to symbolize that faith in the future by being unfettered by the traditions of the past. Furthermore, Nehru's Chandigarh was not meant to be a prophesy of the future, as was subsequently assumed by the various planners who adopted its planning principles for other cities, but was intended as an expression of faith in the future—the belief that the modern way of thinking and doing things would allow the future to emerge. His investment in modernization, in other words, was instrumental — as a catalyst for change. (Prakash 2002)

Nehru was dedicated to the precipitation of a wholly original and new vision for India that was its very own, and even better and beyond those of the outside world from which it had derived its first models. The outstanding manifestations of this Nehruvian hope was his foreign policy, where he conceived and formed the Non-aligned Movement that was designed to sidestep the destructive bipolar choices of the Cold War in favor of a third alternative. The world of the 1950s lived in constant fear of the nuclear threat, and for Nehru to propose a radical alternative from the platform of a relatively weak and defenseless country, was both courageous and supremely optimistic. Nonetheless, those were Nehru's expectations for his modernist aspirations. The transformative vision of modernism was predicted on his perception of India as being static and effete. This perception was a consequence of the internalization of the experience of colonization. Of the various stereotypes of colonial ideology, perhaps none was as pervasive, and persuasive, as the projection that it was a modern, enlightened, and dynamic West that had succeeded in colonizing and dominating an ancient and superstitious India. From the West's point of view, the colonial mission was legitimized as sharing the fruits of Enlightenment, spreading —universal principles of liberty, equality, democracy, reason, science, etc. Modernization for Nehru, thus, was mimicry of the colonial project, of the aims and aspirations of colonization, imitated and re-legitimized by the English-educated, Indian elite. Mimicry and imitation, however, did not ensure that the end product would always be identical to the original. (Prakash 2002)

But Nehru's vision for the future did not take into account the existing social and spatial formations. For example, in the making of Chandigarh, twenty four villages and 9000 residents were forced to give up their land and relocate for the construction of a new city. The farmers actively protested their displacement but the project went forward, driven by the optimism and determination of the central government. The question that emerged from such an approach was what about

those who were displaced from their land to make this future. Or to be more specific, what about the farmers who had to give up their agricultural land for a new city? It is in this context, a critical theorization of modernity becomes increasingly relevant. This is outlined in the next section.

### Modernity: A Critical Overview

Does 'modernity' benefit all sections of society? If yes then how does one conceptualize the agitation, of farmers who had to give up their agricultural land and demonstrated resentment and mobilization against the establishment of Chandigarh? Who bears the cost of being Modern? It is in this context that this section refers to some scholarly writings to critically evaluate the 'idea' of modernity.

David Harvey (2003) challenges the notion of modernity, he argues, that one of the myths of modernity is that it constitutes a radical break with the past. The break is supposedly of such an order as to make it possible to see the world as a *tabula rasa*, upon which the new can be inscribed without reference to the past—or, if the past gets in the way, through its obliteration. Modernity is, therefore, always about —creative destruction, be it of the gentle and democratic, or the revolutionary, traumatic, and authoritarian kind. It is often difficult to decide if the radical break is in the style of doing or representing things in different arenas such as literature and the arts, urban planning and industrial organization, politics, lifestyle, or whatever, or whether shifts in all such arenas cluster in some crucially important places and times from whence the aggregate forces of modernity diffuse outward to engulf the rest of the world. The myth of modernity tends toward the latter interpretation (particularly through its cognate terms of modernization and development) although, when pushed, most of its advocates are usually willing to concede uneven developments that generate quite a bit of confusion in the specifics.

Scott (1998) argues that Modernism has been defined through high-modernism or high-modernist ideology which is the celebration of scientific and technical progress. He argues that it is best conceived as a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws. It originated in the West, as a by-product of unprecedented progress in science and industry. Further, Scott argues that high modernism was about 'interests' as well as faith. Its carriers, even when they were capitalist entrepreneurs, required state action to realize their plans. In most cases, they were powerful officials and heads of state. They tended to prefer certain forms of planning and social organization (such as huge dams, centralized communication and transportation hubs, large factories and farms, and grid cities), because these forms fit snugly into a high-modernist view and also answered their political interests as state officials. There was, to put it mildly, he argues, an elective affinity between high modernism and the interests of many state officials. According to him High-modernist faith had no respect for traditional political boundaries and could be particularly found among those who wanted to use state power to bring utopian changes in people's work habits, living patterns, moral conduct and world-view.

### Conclusion

The interrelationship between modernity, urban space and people can be understood with reference to Scott. He argues that modernity is reconstructed through a combination of four elements. The elements are namely; the administrative ordering of nature and society, the high modernist ideology, the authoritarian state and prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist the plan. He further states that, there are two kinds of spaces, the first one is state spaces and the other is non-state spaces. He argues that it was the nature of the state to bring the non-state spaces into its fold for appropriation and to maintain a supply of manpower for public works, war or for security and modernity as an instrument primarily benefits the state mainly through taxation and conscriptions.

**REFERENCES**

- Sarin, Madhu, (1982). *Urban planning in the Third World: The Chandigarh Experience*, London: Mansell Publishing Limited. | | Nehru, J. (1989). *The Discovery of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. | | Prakash, V. (2002). *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier: the struggle for Modernity in Postcolonial India*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd. | | Harvey, D. (2003). *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, New York: Routledge. | | Harvey, D (1985). *Consciousness and the Urban Experience*. U.K: Basil Blackwell. | | Scott, James, (1998). *Seeing Like the Sate: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. | | Sarin, M. (1982). *Urban planning in the Third World: The Chandigarh Experience*. London: Mansell Publishing Limited. |