

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WDF-11
Chandigarh: Brave New City

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New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers,

The dining room bearer in the hotel was pleased one morning to see that I was taking out a boxed lunch. "Ah," he smiled, "going to visit Taj Mahal, I think?" I said no. "Then I think Bhakra-Nangal dam?" he suggested. No, no, I replied, just going out into the countryside. He was disappointed, and I suspect he wondered why I had come to India at all.

There is a twofold pride in India now about man-made things---and the bearer has it too: pride in the old India of temples and palaces and forts, and pride in the new India of dams and factories and community development projects. Mr. Nehru has said that every one of the newly completed "nation-building" projects is, to him, another "shrine."

So the visitor who takes in the Taj, the Red Fort in Delhi, the ghats in Benares and the Buddhist caves in Ajanta is more or less expected to see Bhakra-Nangal in the Punjab, the Sindri Fertilizer and Chemical Plant in Bihar, the Chittaranjan Locomotive Works in West Bengal and some Community Development Block in Uttar Pradesh. The ladies, I should say, are exempted from the second half of the program, but "serious" male visitors are not.

One of the new "shrines" is Chandigarh, the all-new capital city of the State of Punjab. When Partition in 1947 divided the Punjab and left Lahore to Pakistan, India set up a temporary capital for East Punjab in Simla and began planning for a new capital city. The idea was to build a city of 150,000 persons in which to locate the State government, Punjab University and a modest level of industry and commerce.

Where the edge of the Punjab plain runs into the Himalayan foothills they selected a 15-square-mile plot of sugarcane-and-wheat farmland comprising 22 small villages. A temple of Chandi, the Goddess of Power, provided the name ("garh" is "fort"). With the villagers compensated and removed, work on the "Capitol Project" began in earnest in 1952. After five years, the First Phase of building, at a cost of Rs 174.4 million (\$ 36.6 million), is nearly completed. The State government has moved in, and so have 20,000 new Chandigarhis. Once the Secretariat is finished and the Assembly is constructed, the First Phase will have come to pass.

Chandigarh was designed by a committee of foreign and Indian planners and architects headed by the celebrated LeCorbusier, and it is a startling departure from other communities in India. The rational "anatomy" lay-out, the "V-7" roads, the "parasol" roof, the "Leisure Valley" park seem symbolic of the top-level, avant-garde leadership of India that with its now-we're-independent, pro-bono-publico, this-way-is-Progress attitude is bringing new ideas, institutions and techniques to the country. There

is always the insistence that imports from abroad---and the range runs from Marxism to malaria-suppressant---are tested and "adapted to Indian requirements," and the same claim is made for Chandigarh.

On the other hand, I have been reminded that town planning in India began 5000 years ago. Pre-Aryans of the third millennium BC built the orderly brick cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa in the Indus Valley. In latter times, a guiding principle of town planning was to lay out a community in the shape of the swastika (Sanskrit for "fortunate"), or in the form of Vishnu or the lotus.

Most of the Northern Indian cities I have seen, however, strike me as haphazard agglomerations, whether villages, towns or cities. And I am convinced that if the houses, shops and street drains of Harappa were excavated a little more and patched up and roofed, they would provide better accommodations than most Indian villagers have today.

Lahore, the old capital of pre-Partition Punjab and now capital of West Pakistan, is typical of many of the chief cities of Northern India, though it has some extra frills in being a capital. However far back into Indian history Lahore goes as the citadel of some regional kingdom, it did not become a great city until the Moghul Emperor Akbar enlarged the fort and surrounded the town with a wall. Lahore flourished, declined and then thrived again under the British, who pushed through some main roads and brought a touch of England (the Anglican church, the race course, the club, The Mall) to the "City" outside the walled "Old City." Their main effort, however, was to construct a new military "Cantonment" five miles away. The "Cantt," with its rectangular streets shaded by trees and lined with barracks and messes and the bungalows of officers and civil servants, was as spacious and orderly and safe as the "City" was crowded and jumbled and unhealthy, and rarely the twain did meet. In general, the story of Lahore is the story of the line of cities across the North---Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Ambala, Delhi, Agra, Kanpur, Allahabad, Lucknow, Benares, as far as I have seen.

The result is that the layout of these cities represents the hands of God, the first settlers, successive invaders, and, to some small degree, newly independent Indians. Too many hands spoil the city. The composition by now combines all the miseries of the agricultural village, the trading or administrative town, and the industrial and commercial city. There are rude huts, mazes of lanes, mucky drains and gullies, courtyards inhabited by men and beasts and, above all, the packing-in of people---into tenements, into bazars, into streets, into buses, into every spare nook and cranny---that makes a grubby, precarious, unhealthy, demoralizing life.

All this accumulation of centuries the planners of Chandigarh could not have duplicated if they had wanted to. For this reason alone Chandigarh should be a success.

At night, the bus made its way down the black road, through the cool avenue of trees that lined the road, passing an occasional dark village, bypassing an occasional plodding bullock-cart. Suddenly, the long low line of lights---Chandigarh---appeared.

Usually a bus has to punch its way into a city, honking and bullying pedestrians, cyclists, automobiles, cycle-rickshaws, horse-carts, bullock-carts and stray cows. Now, we drove easily along the broad, well-lighted avenue to the bus station plaza. The taxi took me along to the sparse, modern hotel, and I ate supper in a dining room with great sheets of glass windows, a canted roof, and great white polka dots painted on a bright red wall. The rice and curry seemed out of place.

In the morning, though, when the sun lit up the dark mountains to the north and the blue sky hung over the sprawling new city of sand-colored concrete and red brick and grey stone, everything seemed very much in place.

There is a lot of open space in Chandigarh, for the city is laid out in full dimension--- $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles from head to toe and five miles from side to side---although only one sector is fully built up. Still there is a lot of building and landscaping finished, and there is a lot to see.

At the "head" of the city, up against the hills, is the "Capitol Complex" with the boxy, hangar-like High Court and the long, narrow, nine-story Secretariat, still partly wrapped in scaffolding.

To the south, as "shoulders," are the houses and flats of State ministers, legislators, judges and the lawyers who have come to town. Below all this is the "trunk," the 20-odd rectangular "sectors," three-quarters of a mile long and a half-mile wide, that form the basic communities of the city.

The sectors are bounded by the gridiron of roads and surrounded by six-foot walls. Most of the sectors will be residential quarters for up to 15,000 people. The sectors will differ in layout, architectural design and population size, but the residents of each will be fairly isolated and fairly self-contained, having their own schools, recreational area and shopping and health centers.

Near the center of the city, Sector 17 is being built as a sort of intercommunity area set aside for the local government offices and the big commercial houses. On the west side of town, four colleges are already up and the university campus is being started, and far on the east side two sectors have been set aside for the Industrial Area. A lone flour mill has that area to itself right now, but "it is expected" that other industries, a tile and cement factory, a vegetable-oil plant, a rayon mill, will come to Chandigarh before long. The railroad station and the airport are out that way too---one train a day, two planes a week.

The road system consists of seven types of vias: "V-1's" are main thoroughfares that lead into and out of the city. V-2's are fast-traffic roadways, and V-3's other roads that border the sectors. V-4's are the east-west streets that run through the sectors. V-5's are curving streets that circulate to the four quarters of the sector. V-6's are lanes that lead to the houses and flats, and V-7's are sidewalks and footpaths. As yet the streets in Chandigarh have no names. One of the architects said he hoped they would be named "rationally," but he supposed "We'll have to have a 'Mahatma Gandhi Road' somewhere."

An office janitor I talked to told me that the man responsible for all this was "Panditji" (Nehru), which is always a safe answer in India.

Many living in Chandigarh spoke about "the Frenchman."

I always have trouble keeping up with the "phases" artists and architects go through, but I have been told that LeCorbusier's principle of the "mechano-centric" city ("A house is a machine to live in") has in this case moved over in favor of "sun, space and verdure, the fundamental influences which have fashioned the body and spirit of man." Then there is "union with nature," which in the Punjab is hot, windy, dusty and rainy. I venture that there was also "union with the Ministry of Finance," which wanted to hold down the cost of the project.

Most of the dwellings and shops are strung together in long, one-or-two-story, multi-unit blocks, which, like the public buildings, accentuate the "horizontal treatment" that characterises the architecture of Chandigarh. The chief building materials are steel-reinforced concrete and red brick, alleviated by grey quartzite and glass and painted concrete panels. The design of buildings leans on the use of the rectangle, with horizontal and vertical lines severely accented, diagonals and curved lines used sparingly, and no decorative frills. One feature is the liberal use of "sun-breakers," concrete fins and brick lattices that protect the "sun side" of buildings from the direct rays of the sun in summer, yet permit some warmth in winter.

As promised, sun, space and verdure have been borne in mind. The layout of the city on a northeast-southwest axis (I have been lying slightly about this "north-south" business) supposedly minimizes the blare of the summer sun. Various species of trees have been planted along roads in the knowledge that they will shield the eyes of drivers against the sun, provide shade to pedestrians, yet not block the view of buildings or of the mountains. Buildings are well-spaced from each other and separated by roads and walks and lawns, and broad meandering lanes of greensward run lengthwise through all sectors.

Right now, there are something over 5000 buildings, or building units, in Chandigarh, the vast majority of them built by the Government. In the long run, half of the houses will be Government-built, but the remaining private buildings will be subject to very rigid Government requirements.

The Government dwellings are being built in 14 basic types, with the type of house one lives in depending on his salary. The Governor and the Chief Minister, for example, live in Type 1 houses, ministers live in Type 2's, cabinet secretaries live in 3's, 4's or 5's, the lesser official fry live in say 8's, 9's or 10's, clerks live in 11's, 12's or 13's, and janitors and messengers---"sweepers and peons," the terms are---live in 14's.

The house-type, and hence the salary classification, is the first thing you come across in a man's address. Say, "13D-99, Sector 22D." The "13" is the type, the "D" the designer's initial, the "99" the dwelling number, the "22D" the sector and sector-quarter. This "type" system, I gather, is generally accepted as the scheme of things, but for some it a point of irritation. A young laboratory assistant (Type 11) brought himself to a pique: "In India we are trying to do away with the four castes. In Chandigarh we are trying to create 14 new ones."

In most sectors there are at least three and as many as six different

types of dwellings, and the expectation is that dwellings and their inhabitants will get along harmoniously. The evolution of many sub-types of houses should help blur type-distinctions. I suppose that "type" will be just as important or invidious as people want to make it. Personally I'm glad to see that the peons as well as the Governor are provided with accommodation. Peons usually have to look out for themselves.

There are considerable differences in construction costs: a Type 14 unit costs about Rs 3250 (\$ 682.50), a Type 5 about Rs 40,000 (\$ 8400) and a Type 1 about Rs 150,000 (\$ 31,500). In most cases the rent is a flat ten per cent of the householder's salary, which isn't much for either a Rs 70-a-month sweeper or a Rs 700-a-month secretary. The peon's flat---two rooms, a kitchen, a water closet, a wash room and a tiny courtyard---in most cases is the best home he's ever had. And the five-room house of an upper-level official wouldn't look too bad in Huntington, L.I., and is likely to be the best house he's ever had, too.

Most of the Chandigarhis I talked to were most content with their new surroundings. But there were complaints, which, among things, proves that the city is inhabited by human beings.

"Why is food so dear here?" asked an assistant professor. (Answer: because food has to be brought in from not-so-nearby villages.)

The city is "too big," and for its present pioneer population it is. A clerk who cycles three miles each morning to work at the High Court was more amused than perturbed that "all the judges and advocates, who have cars, live close to the Court," while "hundreds of poor clerks, with only cycles, live three miles away." The bus? "That would be seven annas (\$.09) a day!"---too much.

Housewives complained that the sun-breakers are also dust-catchers.

Shop-keepers, especially the more recent arrivals, found it hard to get started.

Some men had an uneasiness about the architecture of Chandigarh. It's "not Indian." A young official waved his finger: "Look at those flats. Like some godown. Like some factory. Where are some domes, cupolas, some minarets?"---and, he could have added, "the sculptured lattices, pillars of marble, carved gates and walls and other flourishes brought down from the architecture of Indian temples, tombs and palaces." "We don't mind having a Frenchman," he said, "but he should have adapted to the Indian style." An architect in New Delhi has written a complaint about the "mechanistic glitter, golden triangles and visual passion" of the planners, who "overlooked the wide gulf of time" that lies between them and the "more earthy, perhaps slow but definitely pioneering stock of the Punjabis. Why give them a space rocket...?"

I have no idea how long it will take for people moving to Chandigarh to become attuned to their new homes, or what changes the new city will make in them. One aspect of social change in India, the breakdown of the traditional joint family, is getting a shove forward in Chandigarh: most homes are suitable for only the single family, and the parents, grandparents, uncles, brothers and widowed aunts who frequently live together in the old-style, still predominant joint family are conspicuously absent here.

I was told of the stirrings of a civic sense, the desire to begin some local self-government. Up to now, the municipal affairs have been run by an appointed Chief Administrator and an Estate Office, but an Advisory Committee of citizens has appeared and is presumed to be the forerunner of an elected municipal council.

I wonder how that will be, what leaders and followers, what conflicts and compromises. I wonder how the city will put itself together.

I find it difficult to think in terms of solutions in India. But there are chances and opportunities. I think Chandigarh is a chance, an opportunity. It seems to have everything that most other Indian cities I've seen have in insufficient portions: a rational, spacious layout; adequate roads and transport; healthful, attractive dwellings and public buildings; adequate water and electrical supply and sewerage; accessible shopping areas; convenient educational, health and recreational facilities, and a plan for fostering and controlling future growth. Physically at least, these things seem conducive to the growth of a prosperous community.

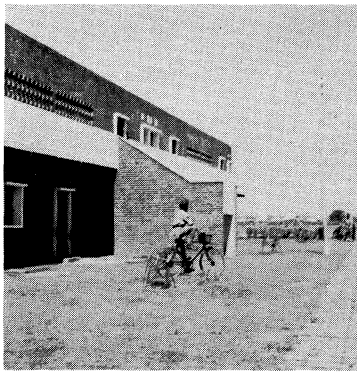
After visiting Chandigarh, I was crowing to the Director of the School of Town and Country Planning, in New Delhi, about what I had seen. He reminded me, in effect, that it is unlikely that India's 500,000 villages, 3000 towns and 75 big cities will be torn down to make room for as many more Chandigarhs.

In fact he was pessimistic about the modernization of existing cities. "The first need," he said, "is just to provide a substitute for some of the worst slums. That may be all we can do in the cities now. But in the new suburbs and new communities, that is where we can begin the right way.

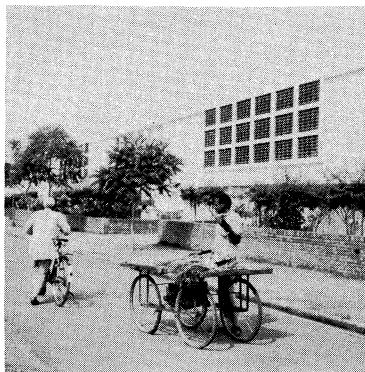
"So Chandigarh is exciting," he said, "really good. It is the right thing."

I agree. I would give LeCorbusier an "A" for Chandigarh, and India an "A+" for hiring him.

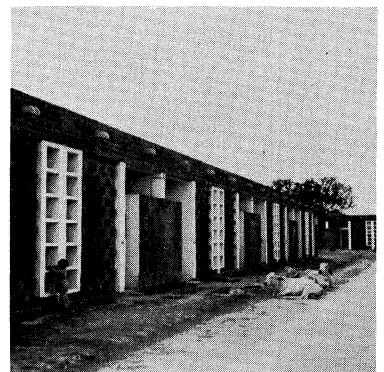
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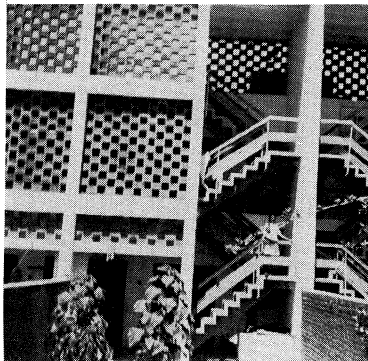
Policemen's flats



Vegetable vendor



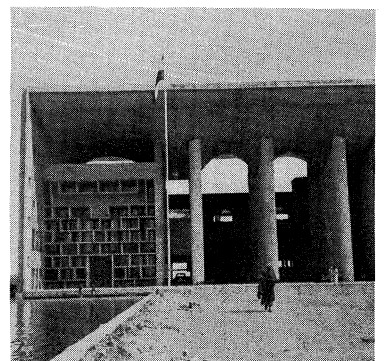
Peons' flats



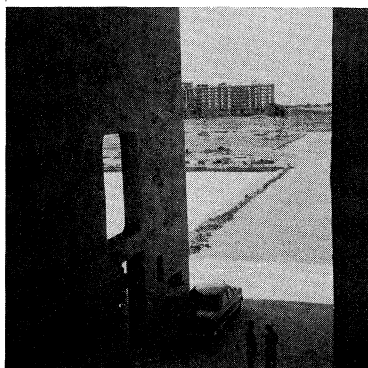
Sun-breakers



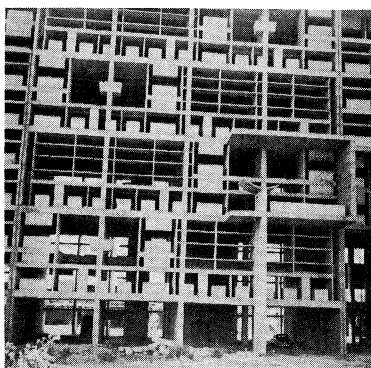
Hospital entrance



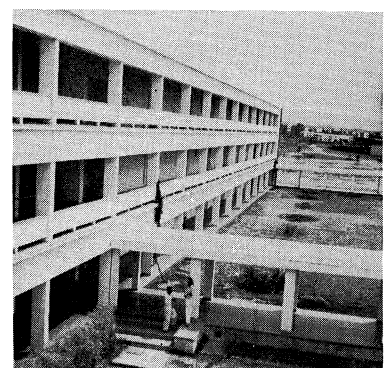
High Court



Secretariat from
High Court



Close-up of
Secretariat



Government College