

VISTARA

A NOTE ON THE SOCIOLOGY OF INDIAN ARCHITECTURE

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FROM FORTHCOMING PUBLICATION

"A SOCIAL HISTORY OF MODERN INDIAN ARCHITECTURE"

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to,

*Sonja and Pedro Iribarne,
my brave Chilean friends,
who symbolize the social
conscience of architecture.*

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VISTARA

A NOTE ON THE SOCIOLOGY OF INDIAN ARCHITECTURE

I

ORCHESTRATION

The stench of corruption and degeneration is so thick that you can cut it with a knife. We have now a well-established comprador cultural complex. As a dominant trend, it is only 41 years old. But as a sub-ordinate tendency, it was growing from 1765, when the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Northern Circars was acquired by British imperialism. Between then and 1947, the imperialist colonial trend in the arts was dominant. But the *leitmotif* of compradorism was being played by a part of the orchestra of Kalagumastas, *dubashes*, brokers, *banians*, *dastak-holders* and pimps, for the last 200 years and more. Compradorism is by now not only a well-established art tradition, but also a dependent, part-paralysed, cowardly, boot-licking, obsequious, *sycophantic* way of life. We have classic comprador cases in every field. M.F. Hussain in painting, Ravi Shankar in music, Satyajit Ray in films, Nirad Choudhari and many others in literature, and now we must add Charles Correa of *Vistara*¹ in Architecture. Not that these are the only ones, there are legions upon legions of them in every direction, in every media. This is our comprador Cultural Establishment.

In fact, the arrival of Charles Correa in the front ranks of the comprador phalanx was inevitable and long-awaited, for architecture is a medium eminently suited to project the power, pomp and profits of the ruling elite. Decisions involving architectural policy and selection of architects spell out hundreds of crores of rupees and no architectural project can be as cheap as a poem or a painting. Thus, architecture mirrors *preferentially* and pre-eminently the vulgarity, the shoddiness, the cynicism and the brutality of the power-play of the ruling classes.

1. *Vistara, the Architecture of India*, 1987, a catalogue of an exhibition organised by Festival of India Authority, shown in Moscow and Tokyo in 1988.

Under the auspices of the Festivals of India Abroad Organisation, run by Cultural Czars or "Chirkut" minions of a pre-maturely decrepit comprador establishment like Pupul Jayakar, Mani Shankar Iyer, Kapila Vatsayana, Man Singh and the like riffraffs, an Exhibition Of Indian Architecture, called **Vistara** was organised by Correa & Co., for showing specifically in the Festivals of India in U.S.S.R. and Japan in 1987-88. Naturally it was a lavishly mounted show of bankruptcy at a cost of Rs. 40 lakhs. It took two years of labour. All the labour and the money went down the drain, as is the case with all such comprador affairs, be it **Apra Utsav** (cost : 60 crores) or the International Architectural Design Competition and Project for INTACH building in New Delhi (Design Prize : Dollars 1 million; Project Cost : Around 100 crores) or any other similar gala affair. Whilst, the people strave, shelterless, in tattered clothing, lacking basic necessities, under grinding poverty, their masters are having a gala time.

Thus, **Vistara** is a part of an overall strategy of the comprador establishment to divert and to titillate and to confuse and hypnotise the masses, whilst, cruelly exploiting them to the utmost. Let **Tamashas** multiply, let sports complexes mushroom, let cultural extravaganzas beguile away the boredom of the rulers, and let the last drop of blood be extracted from the masses! That is the real banner, under which **Vistaras** are conceived and produced. Verily, they whom the Gods wish to destroy, they make them mad first.

II

ROOTLESSNESS

Vistara claims to be reflecting through its subtitle, "The Architecture of India", a very tall, a very bombastic and an utterly childish claim. It treats the architecture of India neither historically nor does it explore the borrowings by the Western world from India across historic time. It does not deal with climatological constraints

obtaining within the country. It does not treat technical-structural problems posed by materials. It is unconcerned with functions of designs and forms. It does not investigate the rise and fall of regional variations of architectural expression. It is not at all bothered with the issues of housing shortage, or the questions of mass and lowcost housing.

It flies and suars high above all such mundane historical, technological, meteorological, stylistic, functional and humanitarian considerations. It flies far, far above all such enquiries. It operates, exclusively at the astral level. It deals with **Tantric** mumbo-jumbo at its highest mystic level. It is a totally befuddled and inebriated mumbling of meaningless **mantra**s.

It is also a search of the rootless for cultural moorings, almost like the search by a bastard child of his rapist father. It is an aimless, senseless search. For, along the lines that it purposes to conduct its enquiry, only a horrific deed can be discovered.

In the year following the UN - sanctified Interenational Year of Shelter for the Homeless (1987) only such a mockery and travesty of the search for shelter by one-sixth of humanity, that is **Vistara**, could have appeared in comprador India. All that is ugly and horrible alone can survive and flourish in our sad and miserable land. "Times are out of joint", say Correa & Co., "only the rotten and the rubbish is our lot, and we can only cover it up with tinsel and trash!"

III

COMPRADOR MUMBO-JUMBO

The **Vistara** catalogue released simultaneously with the preview opening of the show in Bombay, included not only interviews with architects Doshi, Baker, Mistri and Kanvinde, but also a brief outline of the audio-visual tape shown and released at the same time. Correa's name is ubiquitous. Not only did he select the exhibits,

but also he wrote the titles for them, and he part-authored the catalogue and he part-scripted the audiovisual tape. He must have laboured hard, allegedly for two years. Unfortunately, he laboured in vain, laboured out of vanity and laboured after a futile goal. The opening lines of the catalogue reflect the self-contradictory comprador world in which we live. Nay, not only self-contradictory, but instantly contradictory.

"We live in a world of manifest phenomena. Yet.... a non-manifest world ... underlies ... the one we experience every day. The principal vehicles ... of this non-manifest world are : religion, philosophy and the arts. Like these, architecture too is myth-based ... as the centuries progress the myths changed. New ones ... (give rise to) ... a new architecture. Each time ... a new area -- a **Vistara** -- opens up ... The history of Indian architecture has been a progression of such **Vistaras**".

This is pure rubbish in appropriately muddled language. Architecture is not myth-based, but is emphatically power-based and surplus-based. It does not deal with the non-manifest. It deals concretely and specifically with material reality in crystal clear manifestations. History of Indian architecture is not a succession of myth-based non-manifestations, but a logical sequence of historic concrete manifestations, arising out of the class struggles that have rent Indian society.

IV

COMPRADOR TANTRISM

The exhibition is divided into nine sections: **Manusha, Mandala, Kunda-Vapi, Islam, Manthan, Colonial, Modernity, Roots and Looking Beyond.** In the catalogue and the exhibit titles there are desultory, stray and casual references to history, climate, materials, technology, regional styles and mass housing. After all, even those architects, who consider architecture to be based on the mythical

non-manifest, have to allow reality to impinge upon their consciousness. A man may be an idealist fool and consider reality a dream, but he has to live in the material world and his day-dreams, will be disturbed when he stumbles on a rocky path. But, **Vistara** organisers have an irritating and exasperating habit of zeroising everything. A digression is occasionally made towards some real problem or issue. But this is not logically pursued. Nor is there any thematic strand made visible. On top of such digressions, everything is zeroised by invoking "deep-structures", "primordial myths", "mythic images", "age-old symbols", "cosmic order", "cosmpgraph", "bindu" "yantra" and "mandala".

In fact, Correa and colleagues have carried the mysterious mumbo-jumbo beyond the limit of logical absurdity. They have even converted a T.V. set into a myth. Consider the following statement in relation to the harsh manifestations of slums in our cities :

"Yet, even in this elemental struggle for survival surface **two opposing sets of mythic images**. The first : the expression of age-old symbols -- the tulsi plant, the wayside shrine. The second : reflecting new aspirations -- the T.V. set, the transistor, the plastic bucket, the nylon shirts". (p.28)

Correa & Co., should have their heads examined. How can a T.V. set and a transistor, and the nylon shirts and the plastic bucket from a second" set of mythic images"? The whole world is made topsy-turvy to accommodate some nonsensical notions of "mythic images". It is ridiculous even to dignify such asinine assertions with a contradiction. It is idealism, mythico-religiosity and magical Shamanism gone stark raving mad.

It is strictly not necessary to adduce more evidence of such vapid outpourings. But, the unpleasant task must be perforce performed.

"These patterns have been generated by an ageoid deep-structure of more explicit myths : the **Yantra**, the **Mandala**, the **char-bagh**" (p.8).

A **propos**, the village of Banni in Kutch :

"Faintly discernible is an underpinning of other aspirations, intimations of deeper and more primordial myths and images" (p.16).

"What is this deep-structure that surfaces time and time again?

"The forms and events of the perceived world are significant only to the extent that they help us understand the non-manifest layers that lie underneath Magic diagrams, called **Yantras**, explain that nature of cosmos. Of these, the **Vastu Purusha Mandal** forms the basis of architecture." (p.33)

I think it is impossible to go on piling up absurdities upon absurdities. No magic **Mandala** can form the basis of architecture. The needs of man for shelter, his struggle to obtain climatological protection, his manipulation of materials and technologies, the power-based projections of his exploiters, the display of pomp and glory by chiefs, princelings, kings, emperors, militarists, popes, priests, capitalists, and dictators determine the contours of architectural history. In fact, Correa & Co., have created without any knowledge of philosophy a Hegelian world image. Everything is upside down. Myths and magical diagrams do not form the basis of architecture, but on the basis of real architecture, myths and magical diagrams have been created and have to be explained. By calling a pole or a wall the abode of a deity, the pole or the wall neither gets established by the deity, nor does its fall cause the fall of the deity. The wall is built and the pole is placed in position by human hands at labour. If they fall, the "resident **gotra-deva**" will not reconstruct it. It will have to be patiently and labouriously rebuilt by human beings. You may build a temple whilst chanting **mantras**, but even if you did not chant the **mantras**, the temple will be built and will be as strong as your labour and your choice of materials have made it. The chanting of **mantras** is done simply in order that the priest may receive his fees, the king obtain necessary obeisance and the people stand hypnotised

and in awe. These **mantras** and magical diagrams are ideologised constructs to serve the pure function of extracting surplus from the masses and to keep them subdued and exploited.

Consciousness does not determine existence, but the material and social existence of men determines their consciousness. In the course of living and extracting a living, men enter into social relations with each other. These production relations are made to subserve their class interests. The class interests of haves and havenots, of the rulers and the ruled, of the exploited and the exploiters, of the oppressed and their oppressors, are necessarily divergent and conflicting. In the course of class struggles that arise inevitably from these conflicts of interests, men combat each other sometimes with ideologised constructs, which are wielded as weapons, and at other times by the weapons themselves.

The **mantras** and the magical diagrams are such ideological weapons evolved in the course of class struggles, which inform the arena of history. **Vistara, bindu or yantra** does not underline the history of architecture, but the history of architecture underlies the concepts of the **Yantra**, the **mantra** and the **mandala**. Heaven and Hell are conceived by men, they do not perceive men and prescribe cosmograms to living and labouring men.

V

CONCLUSION

Correa and colleagues might have followed the humble and simple task of tracing an outline of a history of Indian architecture. Since this was an exhibition designed for display abroad, in Moscow and in Tokyo, they could have simply and easily traced the history of the transformation of the **Chaitya** into the western **Church**, of the metamorphosis of the **Stupa** into the **Pagoda** of the East and the translation and the transmission of the elementary structural Hindu temple into Indonesian, Indo-Chinese,

Burmese, Malaysian, Thai and Cambodian, temple complexes. Coming down to the recent past, they could have presented the bungalow in its ramified transformations in England, in Continental Europe, in Canada, in U.S.A., in the West Indies, in South, West and East Africa, Australia and New Zealand.²

Or, they could have woven the exhibits around the thematic strand of regional diversification. And related these regional expressions to the climatological differences obtaining in the country and the availability of local materials. After all India is a sub-continent with almost every possible meteorological and topographical variation packed within its frontiers. That apart, it has had a distinct culture for over five millenia. Apart from China, there is no country in the world where regional contrasts are so great and, which have had such a long period in which to evolve.

Or another theme could have been picked up and developed. That of quality and quantity of housing for the ordinary citizens across the centuries and the problems of mass housing today.

But, in characteristic compradorist, spiritualist manner, **Vistara** avoids all consistency and logic. Flitting from one topic to another, arbitrarily hovering over some side issue (a disproportionate amount of space has been devoted to **vavs** and **kunds**, i.e. underground wells and reservoirs), jumping over major monuments (no mention of Western Indian cave temples like Karle, or major Indo-Saracenic structures like the Bijapur Gol Gumbaz, and innumerable similar omissions). The **Vistara** exhibition in reality sheds a sad light on the mental and intellectual abilities of the organisers, especially on the bankruptcy of ideas on the part of Charles Correa and his comprador masters.

2. The task lengthily but inadequately performed by Anthony King in the "Bungalow, the Production of a Global Culture", 1984.

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