



**The  
Phantom  
Lady  
Strikes  
Again**

## India Moderna / Delhi Modern

*by The Phantom Lady*

*The Phantom Lady ruminates on the heritage of modernism in India after seeing a show of Madan Mahatta's architectural photographs curated by Ram Rahman in Delhi.*

I just saw a fabulous exhibition of Madan Mahatta's architectural photographs from the 1950s to the '80s curated by Ram Rahman at Photoink in Delhi. Ram has selected the images within his own constructivist aesthetic and Madan Mahatta's photography with its intense graphic quality and dark gritty textures, is visually stunning. Many of the small size photographs are actually portraits of the architects in the domestic architecture of their own homes with furniture designed by them. Nasreen Mohamedi would have been delighted to see these images! Mahatta's photographs cover the important period of Nehruvian high modernism, a record of the creation of the New Delhi and the urban monuments of the new nation, most of them commissioned by Nehru himself. Coming from a family which owned the biggest and most reputed photo studios in North India, Mahatta worked closely with two generations of India's best known modern architects including Charles Correa, Habib Rahman, Jasbir Sawhney, J.K. Choudhury, Joseph Allen Stein, Achyut Kanvinde, Ajoy Choudhury, Kuldip Singh, Raj Rewal, Ram Sharma, Ranjit Sabikhi and designers Mini Boga and Riten Mozumdar. (In fact, I had no idea that there was such a thing as modern Indian furniture design till I heard about Mini Boga's work, which unfortunately, is not known outside Delhi).

As far as I know, there has been no great International style architecture in the South, (though Laurie Baker's low cost architectural work can be considered modernist in terms of his truth to materials and

functionalism). However, a kind of provincial modern architecture spread rapidly all over through government buildings. Curt Gambit, an architect who has been researching on Bangalore, thinks ideas of modern architecture spread through pictures in cement catalogues, a new material just introduced in the period, from which Public Works Department (PWD) engineers took inspiration. International style architecture seems to have existed basically in Delhi, Chandigarh (commissioned by the government) and in Ahmedabad, by industrial families such as the Sarabhais. In fact, Gujarat was at the forefront of modernism in every way, which seems to have completely collapsed. Chandigarh itself, a new city designed by Corbusier

on the invitation of Nehru, has been criticised for its mechanical inhumanity and lack of sensitivity to Indian ways of life, yet it is an important part of our modern heritage. It appears that the Corbusier buildings are in a sorry state, with the original furniture designed by him either gone missing or vandalized.

Though there has been a lot of interest in recovering the history of Indian photography for some time, much of the research is on the pre-colonial era, written about by scholars like Christopher Pinney, and in which Rahaab Allana of the Alkazi Archive has been very active. But the history of post-independence photography, which documents the building of the new nation and which defines our immediate



New Delhi Municipal Council building, Palika Center, 1983, Courtesy: Madan Mahatta/Photoink.

past within which we can contextualize ourselves, is less known. Ram in fact, has been lecturing widely on the history of contemporary Indian photography, and has curated a retrospective show of the work of the Marxist photographer Sunil Janah. Filmmaker/ scholar Sabeena Gadihoke has researched on women photographers and her recent show of the life work of the first Indian woman press photographer Homai Vyarawala has just travelled through the National Galleries of Modern Art in India. Some years ago, Nafesa Ali exhibited her father Ahmed Ali's photographs widely and Pablo Bartholomew has been printing and exhibiting the photographs taken by his father, the late critic Richard Bartholomew. While the photographers mentioned above mainly did press or commercial photography, Richard Bartholomew's images are more domestic and personal, documenting family life and pictures of the studios of his artist friends who belonged to the Delhi Shilpi Chakra or the Progressive Group. They have an aesthetic of clean

bare rooms with little furniture and informal living, parents and children curled up napping on the ground in the heat. The Modernist aesthetic for interiors in India seemed to have been a mixture of Gandhian simplicity and austerity combined with Nehruvian socialism with bare and unfussy spaces, handloom fabrics, natural weaves and vegetable prints.

The "modern" in India is closely associated with the Left and perhaps this is why it is so discredited today, with the rise of right wing thinking. SAHMAT, the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, had a major conference on the Progressive movement in Delhi some months ago covering theatre, literature, film and art. The Progressives, a Marxist cultural movement, formed the avant-garde of modern India over the 1930s, 40s and 50s, and had a profound influence. Progressive ideas again surfaced during the 1970s when there was a burst of creative activity in all the arts and creative thinking. This was a highly influential time politically

and artistically which has not been studied enough. Unfortunately a deep conservatism has set in with the Left which sees the Progressive moment as belonging to a vanished era and a particular style, and ignores the avant-garde critical work done today, (a critique made by Geeta Kapur in the conference), which has only impoverished Left thinking. The feminist, caste and gay critiques of a universal monolithic modernism are seen as divisive and splintering. Rather than re-thinking and including these critiques and discourses, there is a tendency to dismiss them. The fall of the Soviet Union itself can be seen as the collapse of an extreme form of modernism and universalism, which was insensitive to differences in pursuing a general Utopian ideal. The closed thinking of the Progressives isolates them from us and makes the movement seem distant. Left intellectuals now pride themselves on their philistinism.

Today, there is a widespread notion that India

has gone straight from the pre-modern to the post-modern, and is in fact a kind of quintessentially post-modern country, successful in "infotech" while seamlessly adhering to its "ancient" traditions. I end by quoting film theorist M. Madhava Prasad who writes in his essay *The Last Remake of Indian Modernity*; that dominant Indian cultural discourse has been about essential and unchanging identity that refuses to accept the sharp break from the past, which defines the modern condition in which we live:

"The discourse of Indian culture is replete with the jargon of *being and belonging*, and within it art is assigned an expressive function tied to this phantasmic essence, figured as besieged by a modernity that threatens to banish it into oblivion. In such a conception, time has only one axis of articulation: there is a past rudely interrupted which awaits the restoration of its line of continuity, and the present, which is an interregnum of alienation. In this scenario, modernity has no temporal depth, no ruptures or transitions internal to its time. It is posed as eternally in conflict with its other – tradition – in a space bracketed out of time.

Such a stubborn disavowal of the contemporary is of course easily explained by reference to the difficult historic struggle for cultural survival after the devastating impact of colonial rule. But today we can and must pose against this nationalist imperative the necessity of not only coming to terms with, but also of embracing without reserve, the actuality of loss, rupture, ungrounding. It is only

through such a gesture of recognizing that the only position of enunciation available to us is located in the modern, that we can emerge from the stalemate of the politics of being. The nationalist discourse has glossed the freedom won by our ancestors as the freedom to go back to being what one always was (itself a fantasy construction), thus inaugurating the politics of being. If modernity continues to appear to us as an external imposition, it is only because we have not rallied to its cause, letting it instead only *befall* us. Against this constricting definition of freedom which imprisons us once again, we should strive to reopen the closed pathways to alienation, to the freedom of becoming."



A.P. Kanvinde at home, 1966, Courtesy: Madan Mahatta/Photoink.