

# Inclusive spaces

An exhibition tells the story of New Delhi's tryst with modern architecture as seen through the lens of Madan Mahatta. BY AJAY ASHIRWAD MAHAPRASHASTA

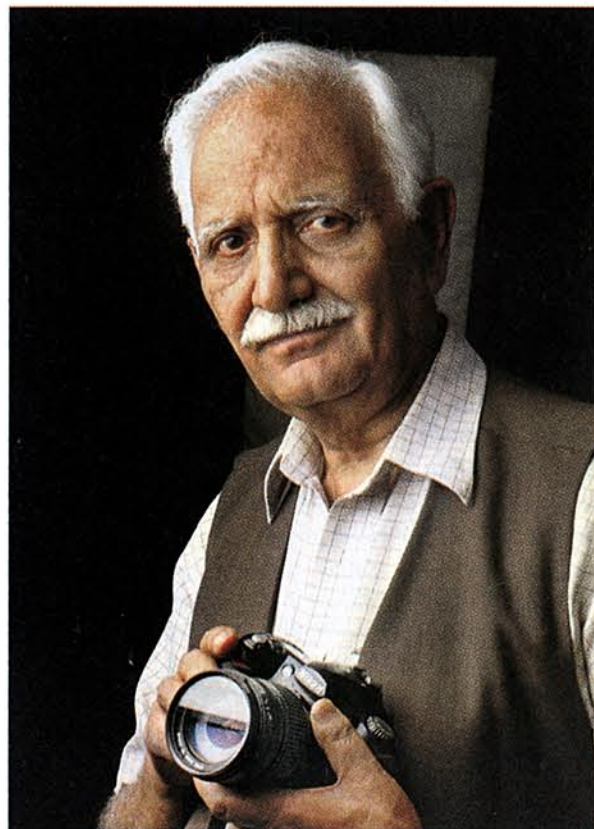
The photographs displayed not only give us a sense of history but also help recall the Nehruvian essence of nation-building. The buildings never inspired awe but led people to think that public spaces were accessible in independent India.

ON his visit to Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1949, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated a monument at the Gandhi Ghat on the river Ganga. The structure did not have any ornate design; it was an intersection of vertical and horizontal stone slabs, with the vertical slab resembling a Hindu temple with an Islamic dome and the horizontal one cutting it in an angle to form an upward arc. The formations of stone creases were such that from a distance the monument looked like a cross.

In the India that had just become independent of the Raj, the structure was a marked departure from the Victorian buildings and monuments that the British had built. It captured the Indian secular vision with strictly indigenous symbols and employed a modern language and method of design. Impressed by it, Nehru enquired Governor-General C. Rajagopalachari of its architect. It was a man called Habib Rahman.

"My father was both impressed and astonished when he heard someone asking for the 'architect'. The word architect was rarely used in India. We were happy to use the word 'civil engineer', which came as a colonial gift to us. Architecture as a discipline had not gained ground in India," recalls Ram Rahman, Habib Rahman's son.

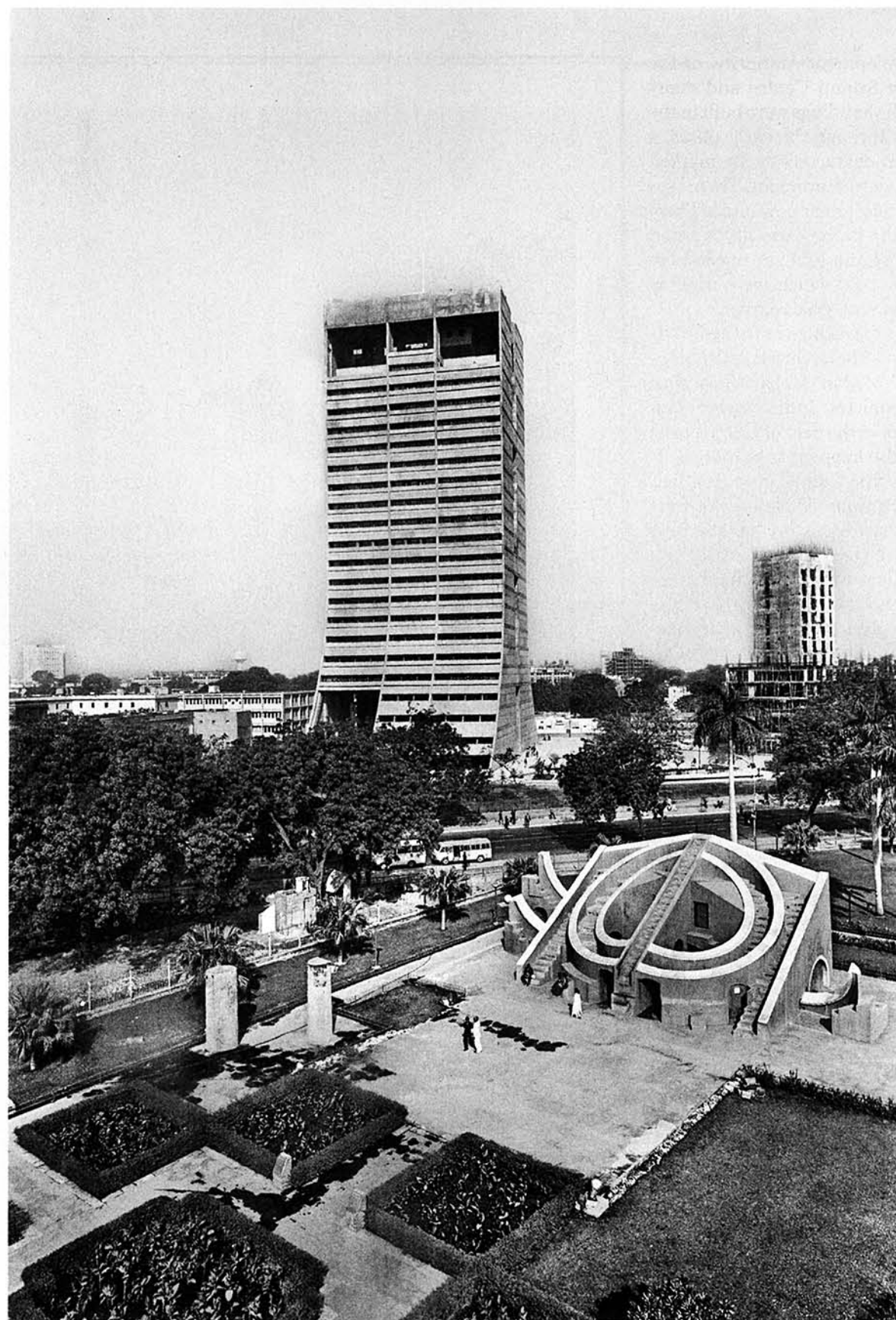
Nehru told Habib Rahman that he should be in Delhi to fulfil the vision of creating a new Delhi that symbolised an independent India. New Delhi at that time was replete with buildings designed by the British architects Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker



**MADAN MAHATTA, WHO** chronicled the evolution of the Indian style of modern architecture.

to reflect colonial power and authority. Nehru's vision was to plan and design New Delhi using an Indian yet modern idiom.

New Delhi's tryst with modern architecture began around this time. Architects such as Habib Rahman, Achyut Kanvinde, Joseph Allen Stein and Charles Correa were brought to the capital to design the cultural symbols of a country that was still struggling to cement a language of its own. Public buildings that are now an integral part of the city's architecture came up in this process. The Rabindra Bhawan (now the Lalit Kala Akademi), the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), the India International Centre (IIC), the Ford Foundation's office (now the United Nation's office), the Hall of Nations (now the Pragati Maidan), the Vikas Minar (the seat of the



**NEW DELHI MUNICIPAL** Council building/Palika Centre with Jantar Mantar in the foreground, 1983. Architect: Kuldeep Singh.

Delhi Development Authority, or the DDA), the Sriram Centre and many other public buildings were built in the late 1950s through the early 1980s, a period that characteristically marked India's modern movement. These typical designs lost their power to a "liberalised" India in the early 1990s when glass and aluminium superseded cement and steel, which were used as construction materials earlier.

An ongoing exhibition called "Delhi Modern: The architectural photographs of Madan Mahatta" in New Delhi chronicles India's tryst with modernism in the field of architecture. Mahatta also happens to be independent India's first trained photographer. The photographs displayed not only give us a sense of history but also help recall the Nehruvian essence of nation-building. Curated by Ram Rahman, a renowned photographer, the exhibition gives the viewer a vivid description of the stylistic elements inherent in modern architecture and shows its maturing over the years to take a typically "Indian shape". The exhibition is also unique in that it shows an organic link between public buildings and social policies of the state, all through the lens of Mahatta.

Mahatta, who is originally from Srinagar, was witness to the construction of the structures. Commissioned by the architects themselves, he photographed the buildings from different angles, giving the viewer a clear sense of space and structure.

Mahatta, who is now 80, studied photography at the Guildford School of Arts and Crafts in Surrey, England, before starting his own studio in New Delhi in 1954. This was around the time when India was seeing massive changes in the design of its buildings. "The timing of his return and the fact that he started photographing architecture seriously was fortuitous," writes Ram Rahman in his introductory essay for the exhibition. Mahatta was the first person in India to use the "negative-positive" technique in his studio to develop photographs.

As Mahatta himself puts it, he was lucky to own a Linhof camera with

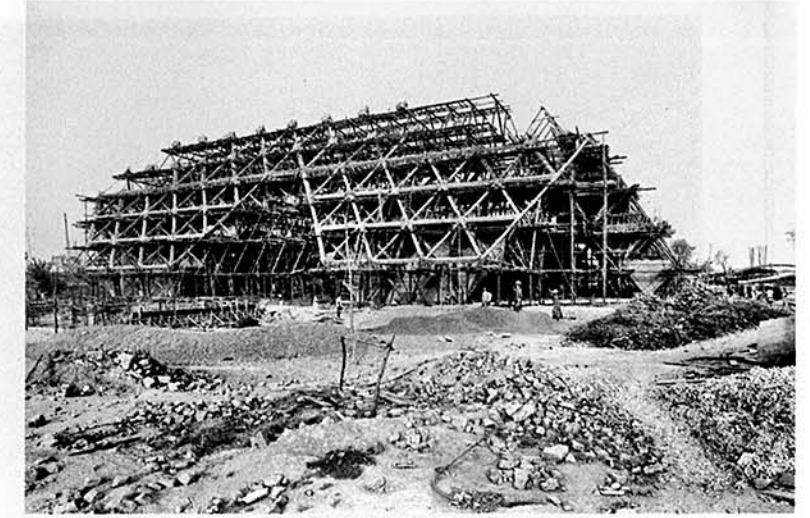


INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE, 1962. Architect: Joseph Allen Stein



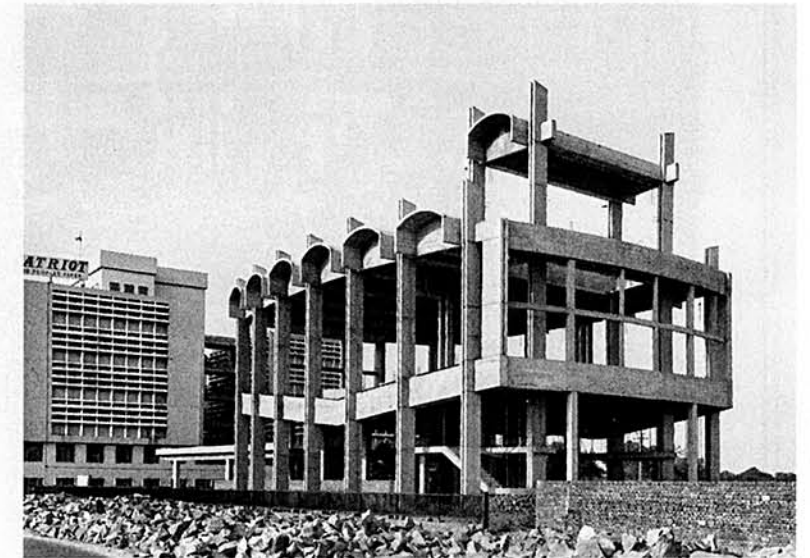
**HALL OF NATIONS**, 1985. Architect: Raj Rewal. The buildings of the 1980s by Raj Rewal, who was a second-generation modernist, seemed to incorporate Indian stylistic elements such as jharokhas and jaalis.

COURTESY MADAN MAHATTA/PHOTOINK



**HALL OF NATIONS**, 1972. Architect: Raj Rewal.

COURTESY MADAN MAHATTA/PHOTOINK



**GANDHI MEMORIAL HALL** (formerly Pyare Lal Bhawan), 1962. Architect: Kanvinde & Rai. Shaukat Rai was a partner of Kanvinde in his firm.

COURTESY MADAN MAHATTA/PHOTOINK

interchangeable lens and backs that made things easy for him. He worked on a medium-format film and mostly used a wide-angle lens for shooting architecture. "Exploiting all the tilts and shifts of the camera, he was able to make his pictures with undistorted perspective; and the wide lens enabled him to shoot in tight areas and capture the sense of space within these structures," Ram Rahman writes.

Mahatta's vision becomes clear from the frames he chose to capture the buildings. His emphasis on shooting the horizontal and vertical lines of a building is typical of a modernist.

Modern architecture took shape in Europe in the early 20th century and became the dominant style after the Second World War as a reaction to the emphasis on the eclecticism and lavish stylistic excesses of Victorian and Ed-

wardian elite ethics. The Industrial Revolution, which produced iron and steel in high volumes, drew the attention of architects to using these materials in buildings. With the growing need for public spaces, architects put "function" of a building before its "form". This was a departure from Victorian ethics as characterised by India's colonial buildings such as the present-day Rashtrapati Bhawan or

India Gate or the secretariats of New Delhi.

Simplicity and clarity of forms became modern architecture's principal virtues. The structures were built at the minimum cost. The style came from the pattern and shape that the vertical and horizontal lines constructed in a particular way rendered to the building. It was inherent in the elements of design rather than in a facade

that was made just for stylistic purposes. Architects such as Le Corbusier (who designed Chandigarh city), Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Gropius became its major proponents. The structures of the current World Health Organisation (WHO) building and the *Hindustan Times* office in New Delhi reflect this style.

India, as a nation-state, was still struggling to find its own identity after

Independence, and the language and style of modern architecture was most suited to its cash-starved economy. The style not only gave the Nehruvian welfare state concept the much-needed impetus, but also allowed architects to design public buildings that were modern, as opposed to primitive and pre-modern. It helped the Indian state to find architects such as Habib Rahman, Kanvinde and Stein who were



**INSIDE THE ESCORTS** factory, I, 1964. Architect: Joseph Allen Stein. Mahatta's depiction of the Escorts factory demonstrates how the design of the building facilitates the assembly line of production.

COURTESY MADAN MAHATTA/PHOTOINK



**A.P. KANVINDE** at home, 1966. Architect: A.P. Kanvinde.

trained in this style and who remained embedded in the Indian democratic and socialist vision of the early 1950s and the 1960s. Thus, Indian public buildings such as the Rabindra Bhawan, the IIC and the Hall of Nations were built to declare the inclusive nature of the state. These cultural symbols were built not to evoke the authority of the state, as was done during the Raj, but to invite participation

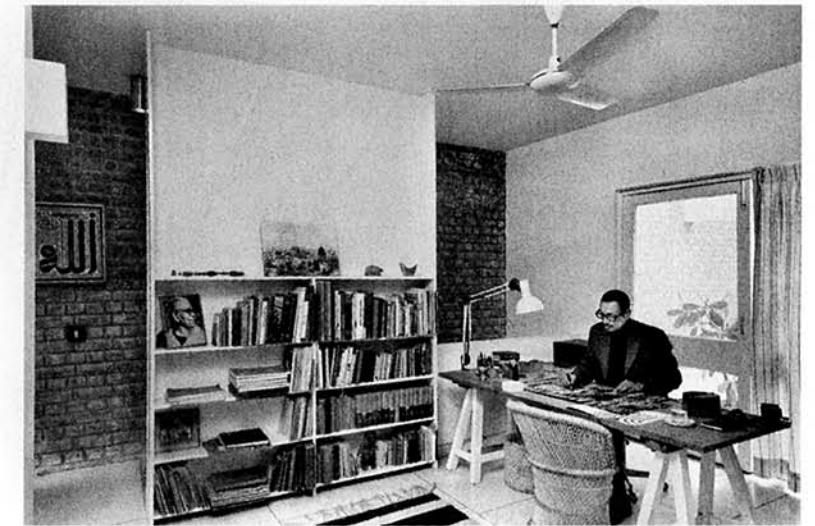
from the people in policy processes.

The construction of most of the buildings showcased in the exhibition were funded by the state to create a progressive image of India and its liberal democracy and to stress that the government was for the people and by the people – a value of all post-colonial states. The simplicity and clarity of design fulfilled this dream as the buildings never inspired awe but led people

to think that public spaces were accessible in independent India.

Mahatta's photographs, too, are part of this post-colonial thought as he captures striking forms, neat lines, and curves without distorting their geometric precision. Shot in monochrome, which Mahatta says is his favourite medium, the photographs were taken over 30 years. Together they depict the evolution of the Indian

style of modern architecture. While in the 1950s architects stuck to the normative modern Bauhaus style, the buildings of the 1980s by Raj Rewal, who was a second-generation modernist, seemed to incorporate Indian stylistic elements such as *jharokhas* and *jaalis*. These symbols, which were thought of as pre-modern in an immediately post-colonial society, were accepted as Indian heritage by the 1980s.



**RITEN MAZUMDAR** AT his desk, 1974. Architect: Charles Correa. Riten Mazumdar is a modernist textile designer who also contributed to the interior designs of the India International Centre and the India Habitat Centre.

By displaying these stylistic changes in architecture, the exhibition also shows the maturing of Indian society, which had by the 1980s learnt to build newer forms of buildings using the grand narratives of India's pre-colonial past. And thus, within a Western style, the Indian ethos of traditional design merges, reflecting the higher self-esteem of an independent India.

Yet Mahatta does not claim himself to be just an architectural photographer. "My favourite subject was people. I have shot profiles of people all over the world. Architectural photography was mostly commissioned by architects whom I knew closely," Mahatta told *Frontline*.

The skills he shows in his photographs are nothing short of a connoisseur's. "He understood the importance of light as it shifted over volume and form. As the photographs on display reveal, his clean and clear modernist vision perfectly matched the modernist architecture these architects were evolving in Delhi. The city's buildings of the 1950s were simple, cheaply constructed and functional. In the early 1960s, they started getting more expressive through the use of cement and

ceramic *jaalis*, and rough granite stones (Stein's IIC and Rahman's Rabindra Bhawan). While Madan was working in all areas required by a job photographer in a studio, his natural instinct and understanding of architectural form is evident in these photographs," Ram Rahman says in the essay.

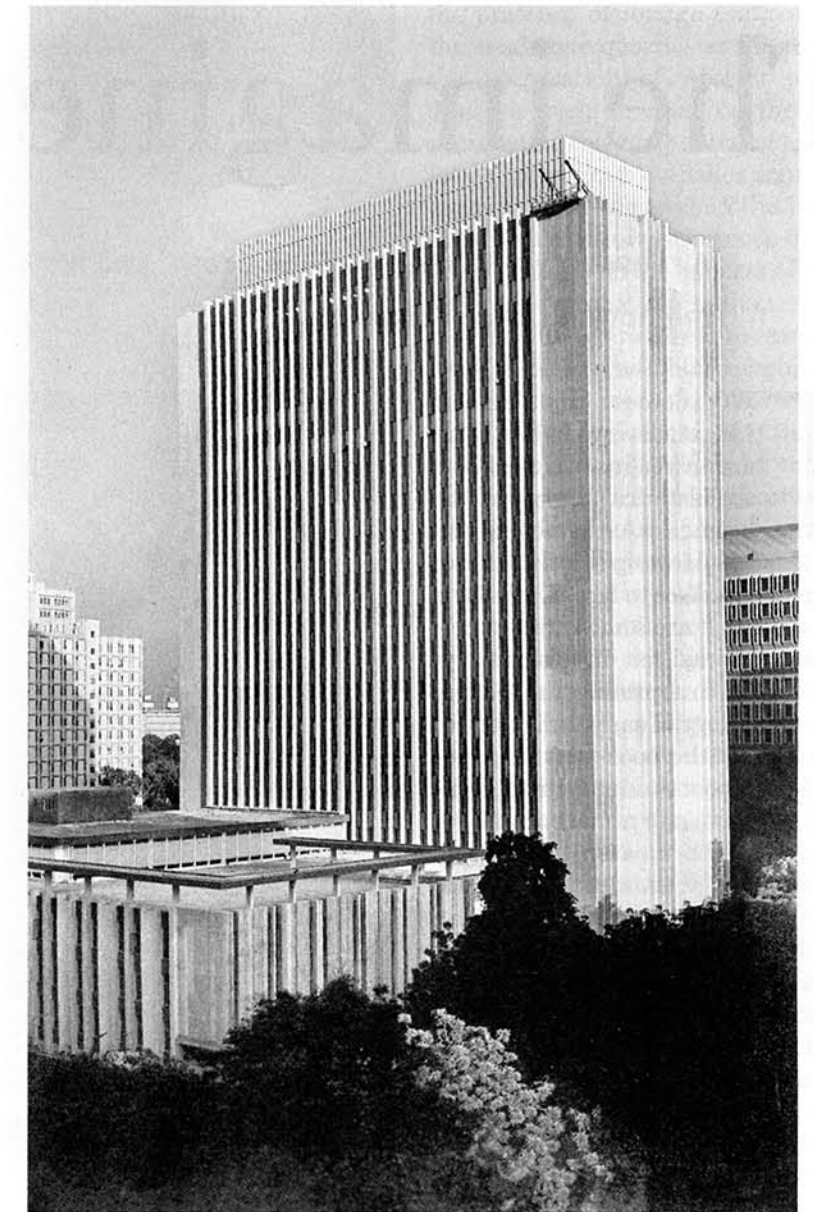
Mahatta says he used to visit a site many times before he actually went to shoot. "I followed closely what time of the day will be best suited to shoot buildings. That was the most important task in shooting buildings. I never used a flash as it would have given a completely unreal character to the buildings. I had a Linhof, and I took all the photographs on a tripod; that did not let the image distort. And I happened to be at the right place at the right time," he said.

Thus, his photographs capture flat roofs, smooth facades and cubic shapes in the buildings of the 1950s which were characteristic of the Bauhaus school of modern architecture in which India's early architects were trained. The Bauhaus style originated in Germany to provide social housing for workers. In this style the buildings



**JOSEPH ALLEN STEIN** walking up the staircase, Ford Foundation office, 1968. Architect: Joseph Allen Stein.

COURTESY MADAN MAHATTA/PHOTOINK



**HINDUSTAN TIMES BUILDING**, 1975. Architect: Habib Rahman.

COURTESY MADAN MAHATTA/PHOTOINK

were always white, grey, beige, or black. Floor plans were open and furniture was functional. Purity of function-led form and designs for a better world was its primary agenda. During the Nazi era, it had to be disbanded, and leading architects of this style, people like Walter Gropius, fled to the United States and made it a dominant style there. Habib Rahman and Kanvinde, who graduated from Massachusetts, became masters of this style.

Mahatta's depiction of the Escorts factory demonstrates how the design of the building facilitates the assembly line of production. The Escorts factory, a prism to India's early industrial production, did not have flat roofs but glass roofs that opened to form pyramid-like structures so as to allow sunlight in. The India Habitat Centre in New Delhi, designed by Stein, also demonstrates this evolution of Indian modernism in architecture.

An interesting juxtaposition is the framing of these modernist buildings against the 18th century structure, the Jantar Mantar. One of Mahatta's photographs shows the distinct attitudes of architecture where the New Delhi Municipal Council building, standing tall with geometric designs and straight lines intersected with box-like windows in horizontal and vertical designs, is separated by the adjacent medieval structure, the Jantar Mantar,

which is irregular, circular and has "unmeasured" spaces.

The notions of the modern and the "primitive" are placed in contrast in the picture, reflective of the post-colonial angst of the 1950s. In the 1980s, a debate raged over this and analysts opposed strict binaries; this got reflected in architecture too. Mahatta manages to depict this in his photograph with the similar intensity of the debate.

It took almost a year for both Ram Rahman and Mahatta to dig out these photographs, digitise them and put them together for the exhibition. The exhibition reinstates the fact that the best look at architecture comes from photographs, as Ram Rahman says in his essay echoing Le Corbusier's famous dictum: "Architecture is the masterly, correct, and magnificent play of masses brought together in light." And more importantly, the ex-

hibition showcases India's coming of age – from a nascent post-colonial polity to a mature one, all through the designs of its public monuments. □

*The exhibition Delhi Modern: The architectural photographs of Madan Mahatta will continue until August 11, 2012, at Photoink, 1, Jhandewalan, Faiz Road, New Delhi.*