

The colonial bungalow in India

The roots of the bungalow in India lie in the early attempts of British military engineers in the eighteenth century to design a standardised and permanent dwelling based on indigenous domestic structures for the East India Company when the British were still traders in the subcontinent. In its later version, the archetypal bungalow in the nineteenth century consisted of a low, one-storey, spacious building, internally divided, having a symmetrical layout with a veranda all around, situated in a large compound. This basic model was also adopted with modifications almost everywhere British imperial rule existed at that time.

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1: Evidence of European influence on traditional dwellings of the Bonra community in Gujarat.

CRITICALLY SPEAKING, THE BUNGALOW as a house form is a contested concept of heritage in the Indian context. It is often perceived in scholarly discourses as a building type with a strong imperial ancestry. It was a counter concept to the more or less socially-g geared, collective lifestyle that was manifest in the urban and rural dwellings of a vast number of indigenous settlements of India. At the same time, traditional house types with a resemblance to the bungalow do exist in West Bengal, Karnataka and Kerala, but the context was not similar to those belonging to British residents. Thus, anchoring the bungalow as an Indian heritage appears at first glance to be problematic.

However, there is another dimension to this phenomenon. During the late nineteenth century, Indian elites and professionals saw the British bungalow lifestyle as something to emulate. By the 1930s the bungalow had become a model that was augmented and personalised by the middle classes. Socially and politically fostering the idea of a house in the centre of a plot, this popular type got transformed in different regions of India. Thus, an imperial socio-political house concept metamorphosed in the colonial and postcolonial period into a widely popular and aesthetically rich cultural icon. It became a part of the mindset of the populace and developed many socio-cultural meanings along with spatial, stylistic and technological variations, terminating in the modernist house.

However, with increasing land pressures since the 1970s, other housing types such as apartments became more widespread. In the twenty-first century, these bungalows have become significant symbols representing a socio-cultural past that is fast disappearing as a result of rapid population growth and accelerated urbanisation. Colonial bungalows, with their staggering regional variation and expression, have yet to receive adequate recognition as valuable heritage.

In India, architectural conservation efforts and awareness are still framed by the legacy of colonial archaeology – consequently; the government’s efforts are largely limited to the classical Hindu, Indo-Islamic and Buddhist monuments. The domestic genre remains marginalised, and there is still a vast lacuna in the state of related knowledge and a lack of general awareness and sensitivity. In the recent past, colonial public buildings have been grudgingly accepted as heritage. However, the bungalow remains threatened, as it finds space in neither any discourses nor policy matters, with a few exceptions such as the imperial bungalows in New Delhi. This article attempts to frame the meaning and significance of colonial period bungalows against the state’s notion of national monuments in India, urging for a re-interpretation of the concept of heritage from an Indian as well as an Asian perspective.

Traditional urban housing in India

Differences in climate, topography and geology gave the indigenous settlements and dwellings of India a varied regional character. The majority were walled cities with a fort built during medieval times for defence. Their morphology was characterised by an organic built form where the indigenous dwelling formed the primary unit of the urban fabric. They had narrow winding streets on a pedestrian scale, a high degree of functional (private and commercial) mix, and inward looking residential clusters with courtyards which reflected India’s social norms in domestic life. There was high population density and an intensive utilisation of land with close groupings of thick-walled houses.

The community-oriented layout reflected inherited cultural identities and status based on caste, occupation and religion. These traditional dwellings and settlements still exist today, albeit in a modified form; however, they are yet to be recognised as living heritage. The early impact of colonial culture was felt on these traditional settlements and dwellings in myriad ways, especially in the facades, as seen in the Bohra houses of Gujarat (photo 1). When the bungalow was adopted as a preferred house type, the form was in sharp contrast to the traditional dwelling. “[It went]...from a one-, two- or more storeyed, courtyard type dwelling, with rooms giving inward onto the courtyard, and structurally joined to similar houses on one or more sides, to a free standing, ‘courtyard-less’, ‘outward-facing’, one- or two storeyed ‘European-style’ bungalow.”²

The colonial bungalow

Broadly speaking, there were two bungalow categories: the urban and the rural. The latter were inhabited by British residents of India such as managers of various kinds of plantations or factories. They also included the *dak* bungalows (government guest houses, usually in remote localities) and other dwelling structures that were spread all over the districts of British India.

In urban areas, large pieces of land adjacent to the city were reserved by the British for their cantonment and civil lines. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the bungalow, set in a spacious lot, was the norm as the residential house type for British military officers associated with the Indian Army, colonial administrators and business people as well as a small group of wealthy Indian elites. The early bungalows were austere, with simple volumes and a stark whitewashed finish. This basic model developed into a more European classical form in outward appearance as time passed. It was symmetrical in form and largely so in spatial organisation. It had a hall in the centre and rooms on each side of the hall, and a veranda in front facing the garden and sometimes also on both sides (photo 2). The kitchen and servants’ quarters were separate in most instances.

More elaborate types emerged on the scene in the nineteenth century to indicate the superior social position of its British owners. The veranda also disappeared from the sides and remained only in the front and at times in the back. The bungalow with its Doric, and later Tuscan, columns on the facade holding up the roof became a symbol of not only the evolution of the Indian prototype into a European building form but also of the commercial and the military might of Britain. The labour of building the bungalows was supplied by Indian craftsmen and contractors. Therefore, the physical fabric of the bungalow remained rooted in Indian architectural traditions in spite of changes in the construction materials, technology and practices.³ The bungalow, though initially designed for an alien people, reflected the cultural bases of the Indian population among whom it was found. This type did not undergo much modification in the twentieth century. Few of these bungalows have survived in independent India, mainly in the military controlled cantonments.

Middle class adoption and regionalisation

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the bungalow as a generic building type influenced domestic architecture across the country. Its dispersed settlement pattern was considered

to be healthier and was socially preferred. Set in a compound, it was also climatically suitable as it allowed a freer circulation of the prevailing winds.

We will now discuss the regional variants of the bungalow that developed in the great colonial cities of Calcutta (now Kolkata), Madras (now Chennai), New Delhi, Bangalore (now Bengaluru), and Bombay (now Mumbai). In general, elements were borrowed from the original colonial bungalow type, the encircling veranda was modified as an informal entrance space, and a courtyard was often introduced as a traditional Indian architectural device. While most families seem to have embraced the bungalow as a new form of house, they continued to live their daily lives according to local traditional mores within its shell, as social change was slower and more difficult.

Our narrative brings to the fore some of the major developments in the house forms found in the five cities mentioned above. The few examples that remain today in the cities of India should be part of the conservation agenda as they express socio-cultural changes and are a record of the political history of Indian society in the colonial period, as the following descriptions will show.

Kolkata: Rajbaris

Kolkata served as the capital of the East India Company from 1772 to 1911 during the British Raj era. From the late eighteenth century, the local elites/petty aristocrats from among the region’s native Bengalis were courted by the British to serve as a comprador class of *zamindars* (landlords) who collected revenue on land. Their assistance to the colonial administrative system reaped rich benefits – they owned large properties and came to be known as the Great Families of Kolkata. This association generated a unique urban typology in the nineteenth century in the form of opulent residences called Rajbaris in Kolkata. These mansions were intended to compete with and match the scale and grandeur of British architecture. Located on large grounds, the Rajbari expressed British colonial ideas of siting and spatiality while simultaneously responding to the traditional life style of the *zamindars*. The building had a courtyard with the *thakur dalan*, the temple of God. It was in the colonnaded portico, the facades and the furnishings that the building showed the adaptation of British forms to Indian norms. Displaying neo-classical facades and strong European influences in their visual character, the Rajbaris were planned as twin- or multiple-courtyard houses which addressed the need for gender segregation and strict social hierarchy in a Bengali joint family. Over time, British trappings in terms of furniture and furnishing were added.⁴ The Rajbari mansion is unusual and important as a house form that has come about through historic synthesis of the local and colonial cultures. The mansions are difficult to maintain by today’s nuclear families and are being replaced or are gradually falling apart without attention and awareness and in the absence of urban conservation policies.

Chennai: Garden houses

Madras was one of the three provinces originally established by the British East India Company. In 1684, it was elevated to a Presidency which included much of southern India. Chennai was its port city and trading centre. The last quarter of the eighteenth century was a period of rapid expansion for Chennai which gave rise to an indigenous colonial model of a palatial mansion called the “garden house”.⁵ It was the

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A postcolonial cultural interpretation towards heritage¹



2 (left): A typical colonial bungalow.
3 (above): A garden house in Chennai.
4 (right): A bungalow in Bangalore.



early suburban home of the British, an exclusive residence that stood in the centre of a large landscaped plot in the picturesque tradition. While the first houses were rather plain, simple and massive, the garden house grew to be more ornate as time went by, with stylistic variations. It was an amalgam of the cantonment bungalow and the European villa (photo 3). To its rear were servants' quarters, stables and often cowsheds, while in front was a lawn with flowering shrubs and trees where garden parties were held and tennis or croquet was played. The houses were spacious and symmetrical with colonnaded verandas in the front and at the back. The porch was a commodious, major feature. Designed in Neo-Classical style, the garden house was built as a solid masonry structure in lime plaster with the use of European elements such as pediments and balustrades. These houses were later bought by the zamindars and rajahs who more or less continued the British lifestyle. In the post-Independence period, a few were modernised and renovated for contemporary functions. The garden houses, though colonial in origin, have special local and regional value as Indian heritage.

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New Delhi: Imperial bungalows

The capital of the British Raj shifted from Kolkata to Delhi in 1911 and an extensive urban design addition (called New Delhi) was constructed between 1913 and 1930. A range of bungalows were built here, located on tree-lined roads in what is known as the Lutyens' Bungalow Zone after Sir Edwin Lutyens, the principal architect of the new capital. While earlier bungalows were built of stone by local masons, New Delhi's bungalows were mostly built of brick and lime mortar and plastered. By the 1930s, many were built on vast pieces of virgin land for British legislators and civil servants, others for the Indian nobility, professionals and senior officials in the colonial administration and the legal system. The size and characteristics of each bungalow were commensurate with the occupant's position in the imperial community's socio-economic and political hierarchy. Most bungalows were of only one storey with a porch in front, and had tall columns and arches. They also had elaborate fireplaces and finely-crafted colonial furniture. A few bungalows that belonged to elite Indians included a courtyard as an exception. The facade was treated in a simple classical manner—Tuscan rather than Romantic Revival was in vogue at the time. Classical columns became symbols of the European heritage and of good taste. Today, the top government officials and politicians in power have chosen to live almost the same lifestyle. These imperial bungalows from the late colonial period have become the carriers of a socio-political mindset that has endured to the present time.

Bengaluru: Carpenter Gothic bungalows

Bengaluru was the largest military cantonment town of the British Raj in Southern India and was part of the Madras Presidency region. It was founded in the early nineteenth century; later the town flourished as a military station as well

as an administrative and residential centre.⁶ Around 1883, the cantonment was enlarged by the addition of Richmond Town, Benson Town and Cleveland Town where a number of bungalows were built for military officers or for retired Britons. Many bungalow designs in Bengaluru were inspired by what was going on in Europe and the Americas, as the Carpenter Gothic style began to influence public buildings and institutions there. From the 1880s to the 1930s these bungalows became taller and assumed a Romantic expression, with steeply pitched roofs whether or not they were required for climatic reasons. Most examples possessed symmetrical plans that invariably had a central hall. The facades received maximum attention. Cast iron were used for railings, brackets and pillars. The porches of the bungalows were prominent with sloping roofs and fretwork infill (photo 4). Gradually, the Carpenter Gothic style was adapted by the locals as the town grew. The Bengaluru Monkey-Tops, as the bungalows are popularly known, are a record of not just socio-cultural but also craft history which is unique to the region. With the rapid growth in the twenty-first century of Bengaluru as the Silicon Valley of India, these fine examples are threatened by real estate speculation and city redevelopment plans as urban land prices soar.

Mumbai: Suburban Art Deco bungalows

The trading centre of Mumbai became an important port town after the takeover by the British Crown in 1858, growing into a leading metropolis by the time of Independence in 1947. In the late nineteenth century, wealthier classes built garden city type bungalows in up-market areas of South Mumbai. By the mid-1930s, the city expanded extensively into newly developed suburbs.⁷ Their infrastructural network prompted rapid residential growth where the bungalow (and even a villa-type house) became a popular choice of the middle class. Though earlier bungalows were somewhat similar to the ones in Bangalore, Art Deco became the preferred style towards the 1940s and flat roofs, made possible by reinforced concrete, began to be associated with modernity. The Art Deco style was featured on facades and in interior details. Curved balconies, bay windows, decorative surfaces, vertical and horizontal mouldings and patterned floorings gave them the ambience and modern language of that time.⁸ The remaining Art Deco bungalows in Mumbai—arguably superior to the examples found in Miami, Florida—are excellent examples of craftsmanship and early modernist principles and require an urgent conservation awareness and policy in view of the fast growth of this megacity.

Standard bungalows

Other cities and towns of India were likewise dotted with regional variations of bungalows, large and small. During the twentieth century, these went through stylistic and technological transformations while responding to socio-economic changes. Internal forces, such as the nationalistic fervour arising from the long drawn-out freedom struggle against British colonial rule and the making of New Delhi, affected their design. In addition, stylistic influences from continental Europe and America resulted in the adoption of Art Deco and Streamline Moderne features, followed by the International Style. With the arrival of Le Corbusier, the principles of the Modern Movement dominated the post-Independence era and the bungalow became a favourite 'modern' option for the individual homeowner. Thus, the simple cantonment bungalow finally terminated in the modernist house.

Heritage value

Thus, bungalows constitute a very special and unique typology in India, with a strong cultural/historic position as representatives of a by-gone era. Historically they symbolise the individualisation of private property, a concept new to the collective lifestyle of traditional societies in India. Over a period of time they were absorbed into Indian society, the imperial roots long forgotten. The bungalow faces many problems of survival in the twenty-first century. For example, the maintenance and upkeep of the buildings and gardens have become the most nagging problem for the owners, and the law of inheritance and division of properties is causing socio-political confusion and fracture among the families.

An analysis of the transition between the colonial and postcolonial periods, using the bungalow as a phenomenon, would provide an excellent opportunity to investigate a number of questions regarding the built environment and its relation to society. In the Indian context, the failure to understand the bungalow's origins and evolution with its deeper social and cultural connections has brought about weak descriptions of its position in urban geography. In the twenty-first century, in view of the forces of globalisation and market economy, indigenous insights into the understanding and preservation/adaptation of this heritage will assist in meeting the contemporary challenges of not only filling the housing needs of the country but also issues of urban design and planning from a local or Asian perspective.

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Notes

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