The Village and the City: Imagining and Building post-independence India

by

Ikuno Naka

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Introduction

“You want self-knowledge? You should come to America. Just as the Mahatma had to go to jail and sit behind bars to write his autobiography. Or Nehru had to go to England to discover India. Things are clear only when looked at from a distance.”
- A.K Ramanujan¹

“A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed find utterance.”
- Jawaharlal Nehru²

The story of India, of its emergence from colonial rule and its struggles since, is the story of its quest for modernity. India had seen the great triumphs of Western modernity – the state, nationalism, democracy, industrialization and economic development, and they were certainly hard to resist. After all they represented the glorious emblems of enlightenment, power, and progress that India most desired for itself. Much like the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan, and Germany, which had in just a few short years surpassed the great mechanical and industrial prowess of Britain, India too desired above all else, to transform itself from a poor agricultural society to an advanced, high-energy-consuming industrial nation. And the values of modernity, the very ideas of newness and change inherent within the very word, seemed to be the antidote for the stasis, stagnation and backwardness that had caused India to be left behind in the great march of progress and industrialization. India no longer desired to live in its past stamped by the oppression of British colonial rule and soiled by the violence and trauma of partition. The country needed to reinvent itself, to be seen as a vibrant, dynamic and unified country. And for the country’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his administration, the key to India’s reinvention was to be found in the simple value of that newness intrinsic in modernity. Newness was good in and of itself. It provided a measure of freedom for transformation; in the absence of any reminders of their shared violent past, it created a space for a new narrative and history to be spun, one that all Indians, regardless of ethnicity, religion or caste, could take ownership of. In other words, it would be under the new mantra

² Jawaharlal Nehru, Tryst with Destiny
of modernity, and its gospels of science, industrialisation and technology, that new and independent India would be built.

However, we must be wary of understanding India’s modernity as a mere emulation, some slavish importation or copy of what India saw in the “developed” West. In fact, the insistent demand of the time was for the establishment of a modernity that would be distinctly their own, one that would be different from the Western industrial modernity of their colonizers. After all, in so far as the very architecture of Indian modernity was an anticolonial and nationalist project, the nationalist leaders of new India felt a need to define and articulate their identity in such a way that would be an almost response to or a critique of Western modernity.3

Yet, intentions and practice never seem to fully coincide as hoped. For all the nationalist elite’s grandiose desires to reinvent and assert a new modernity for themselves, the hegemonic ideologies and discourses of “the modern” spawned by the West were hard to shake off. In the case of post-independence India, the transformative visions of the nationalists for their new country came to be fundamentally predicated on an internalization of the British colonial experience and a certain perception of India as having become backwards, stagnant, static and effete. Indeed, as Vikramaditya Prakash points out, of the various colonial ideologies and constructs perhaps none was more pervasive and powerful than the very image of a modern, enlightened and dynamic Britain successfully conquering and ruling an ancient, traditional, and stagnant India. Such a projection certainly created a distinct binary between East and West; if India’s past represented weakness, stagnation and decay, the West then projected all the progressive and ideal qualities of dynamism, vibrancy and creativity in dialectic opposition to what India represented. These powerful projections became internalized in the minds of Indians under colonial rule, and would in the years even after independence be hard to ignore. Indeed, for the mostly English-educated nationalist elites, whether they realized it or not, so much of their thinking was already ingrained and embedded by the

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constructs and beliefs left behind by their colonial predecessors. And as a result, in many ways, it became rather hard for the leaders of new India not to see civilization and progress in the very trajectory outlined by the Western experience.

In other words, what I am ultimately arguing here is that the modernity that came to be in India was no rejection of Western industrial modernity or negation of the British colonial operation, as had been initially demanded. But neither was it a straightforward replication of the western experience. Rather, under Nehru, the process of founding India as a modern nation-state came to resemble, perhaps unintentionally, an appropriation of the “civilizing” mission of the subcontinent that had begun under British colonial rule. However, now that civilizing mission was refashioned and disguised under their own nationalist mantra of modernity, science and technology. And it was with this rather ambiguous notion of modernity that India embarked on a large-scale mission to plan and build its spaces. Indeed, during this time, India became particularly preoccupied, obsessed even, with reconfiguring and reshaping its villages and cities. More than 300 Master Plans for new cities and villages were created, some actually realized including the building of several state capitals, and the rebuilding of thousands of rural villages. And it is these planned spaces of cities and villages of post-colonial India that illuminate perhaps more clearly the modernizing mission of new India.

Such redevelopment projects of India’s villages and cities were certainly necessitated by very practical reasons. For one, partition had resulted in millions of displaced refugees needing to be resettled and rehabilitated in India. This certainly demanded the creation of numerous spaces for settlement. But the redevelopment and building of new cities and villages was also viewed, by the nationalist elite, as a means of kick starting India’s economic and industrial growth; something felt to be particularly critical amidst fears of economic imperialism with the onset of the Cold War. Proper economic growth could

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only be achieved through the balanced development of both rural and urban areas and their respective industries; for as Nehru too recognized, “if one of them goes wrong then the whole economy is upset.”

After all, the villages of rural India were still where the majority of India’s population lived; they were the homes and sources of income for 75 percent of the country’s population; not to mention, the producers of food crops vital in sustaining the country. The cities, on the other hand, were the sites of India’s future; the economic and political hubs where modernization and industrialization would take place. In this manner, these urban and rural development projects were very much intertwined with the country’s greater program of increasing economic productivity.

However, the very dichotomy of village and city holds a deeper significance and meaning for India. Though it has always existed within Indian culture and literature, this binary gained greater political force during the mid-nineteenth century under colonial rule. Of particular importance to understand is a certain evolutionary conception between rural and urban spaces that emerged in Europe by the mid-nineteenth century, and eventually took force in the foreign and distant land of India. Indeed, the binary of rural-urban, village-city came to represent not just two socially different forms of living, but more spaces that occupied two separate historical and cultural zones. The city was associated with the future, with modernity. The congested sky-scrapping urban sprawl was a physical representation of all that technology, industrialization, science and man-kind could achieve. The village on the other hand, was a space of a different time; it recalled a more ancient and primitive form of living that harked back to the medieval villages that had once populated Europe. And as could be seen in the already developed countries of the West, with their modernization and industrialization came urbanization, the growth of cities and the simultaneous vanishing of the “tribal” communal villages. Developed countries were thus characterized as being “metropolitan”, not only because it served to be a simple description of their internal

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5 S.C Dube, *India’s Changing Villages: Human Factors in Community Development*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958); pp.3-10
6 Ibid.
7 Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); pp.129-134
8 Ibid.
development, in which the metropolitan cities had indeed become dominant; but also because the idea of being metropolitan was very much imbued and intertwined with the state of being an “advanced” “developed,” “industrialized,” and “modern” nation-state.⁹

In India, these constructs spawned in mid-nineteenth century Europe were taken much further as they were used to legitimize the establishment of British colonial rule. The British superimposed the binary of village-city to characterize the very relationship between East-West, India-Britain. Britain with its magnificent industrial cities was projected as the epitome of an urban, industrial, cosmopolitan and forward-looking country. India, on the other hand, came to represent the exact opposite; a “land of village republics” was the famous phrase used by the colonizers to describe the subcontinent. In characterizing the entirety of the subcontinent in this manner, the British had essentially imposed an indelible image of India as a land of a more primitive, ancient, backwards sort, one that was far inferior from the developed nation-states of Europe.

Certainly, India was not just a land of village republics, and neither was Britain a land of just industrial cities, but in establishing and projecting such images, the British colonizers effectively legitimized their colonial project upon the subcontinent. As the enlightened ones, the British rationalized that it was their duty to impart the principles of the Enlightenment - of liberty, equality, reason, and science, to the ignorant and unknowing India. They would educate Indians, to bring them out of their decrepit state and lead the country forwards to modernity. This was the colonial mission, romanticized later by Rudyard Kipling as the “white man’s burden.”

In India, this civilizing mission began with the reconfiguration of India’s vast territory. Voraciously, the British colonizers laid claim, most physically, to India by building their own built environments, the

⁹Raymond Williams, The Country and the City, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); p.279
cantonments and “white towns,” upon the subcontinent.\(^\text{10}\) Here in their planned cities, the British hoped to enact their colonial enterprise by establishing, to borrow William Glover’s words, “an [new] effective and socially transformative, civic milieu”; one based on a western understanding of the relationship between moral development and spatial organization, and notions of how society was supposed to inhabit a material environment.\(^\text{11}\) This impulse to build was therefore driven by a certain educating sentiment on the part of the British colonizers, that the material physical environment could condition a new superior form of society, community and citizen. For colonial officials, the material settings had the power to mold sentiments and behavior in predictable, planned and intended ways. In other words, these spaces not only embodied a material and usable space, but also an ideal space for a better kind of society. It was from that purer representation of the world, that a society of people with those more superior ideals and principles would emerge.

Such an understanding of planning and architecture was undoubtedly a powerful one. It found great resonance with the nationalist leaders of post-independent India. This colonial understanding of planning brought an important pioneering aspect to the large-scale village and city development projects that emerged post-independence. These projects were no longer just about the building and planning of the new living spaces for the millions of displaced refugees or about stimulating economic growth in these regions. These new cities and villages of post-independence India were just as much about shaping a new society, community and most importantly a new citizen. The built environments were to educate people out of their current state of underdevelopment into the modern world, as a part of a more general process of modernization. As one architect Albert Mayer involved in many of these post-independence urban and rural projects said, these projects were to penetrate “the ‘backwards’ areas, and as they filter upward into our own more advanced area,” they were to “open our minds and creative spirits.”\(^\text{12}\)

\(^\text{10}\) Prakash, Chandigarh’s Le Corbusier: The Struggle for Modernity in Postcolonial India, p.7
\(^\text{11}\) William Glover, Making Lahore Modern, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008);p.30
That American architect Albert Mayer is one central protagonist to our story here. He was not an architect of considerable international repute; nevertheless, as a New York architect, planner, advocate and designer of New Towns, Mayer was certainly very active in many areas of planning and architecture. During the 1930s, he gained some recognition for his work with Lewis Mumford, Clarence Stein, and Henry Wright, in the housing and planning programs of the New Deal. However, it was in the years after World War II, that he gained significant attention for his planning and development work in India.

His association with India first began when World War II took him to India as an officer to the United States Army Engineers. During his time there, he had a chance encounter with a western-educated Indian nationalist by the name of Jawaharlal Nehru and became drawn to his visions and vigor for a new and modern India. Nehru too became fascinated by Mayer’s western theories of urbanism. And in the subsequent years (1945-60), Nehru appointed Mayer to conduct numerous large scale urban renewal and master plan projects throughout India.13

It is two of Mayer’s planning and development projects that are the focus of my thesis here: the first, a village redevelopment project in the province of the United Provinces called the Etawah pilot development projects; the second, the new capital city of the Punjab state, Chandigarh. Built within a larger historical context of India’s post-independence, post-partition nation-building process, these large-scale planning and building projects were more than mere impressive physical designs. Both the Etawah pilot villages and Chandigarh were important sites for the expression and negotiation of visions of modernity for a new and independent nation-state. For Nehru, the ambitious leader of new India, these grand-scale projects were a means for India to dawn the garb of modernity, a way to insert itself into what he saw to be “the movement of universal history.”14

Because this thesis is primarily a study of Mayer’s work in the Etawah Project and Chandigarh, the bulk of its research comes from the Albert Mayer Papers at the Joseph Regenstein Library Special Collections of University of Chicago. The Mayer Papers are an extensive and rather eclectic collection of Mayer’s correspondences with Nehru and other government officials, his notes, drafted proposals, maps, diagrams, drawings and reports from his time working on projects throughout India. And it is through such materials gathered and left behind by Mayer that I have endeavored to piece together the very genesis and stories of Chandigarh and of the Etawah pilot villages. The use of such materials thus adds a rather interesting and unique layer to the story of the building of post-colonial, post-partition India. For we are not only able to examine modern India through the perspective and lens of India’s nationalist leaders and government officials, but through the stories told by an American architect who, upon his first arrival to India during World War II, had very little knowledge of Indian society and culture.

The thesis will consist of three chapters, the first of which will explore one of the most important figures of modern India, Jawaharlal Nehru. As India’s first Prime Minister, an intellectual, and as the physical embodiment of India’s struggle for independence, Nehru indelibly left his mark on India. Indeed, in the years immediately after independence, the discourse over the future of newly independent India came to be dominated by the visions and beliefs most closely associated with Nehru. His ideas, his thinking and his profound understanding of India’s past fundamentally shaped the creation of this new and independent country. And it is precisely for this reason that in order to fully understand the makings of modern India and these urban and rural projects, it is particularly important to also understand this man.

The second chapter will explore the Etawah Pilot Project, a rural development program embraced as a means of stimulating wide-spread economic and social rural reform across the United Provinces. Mayer saw the Etawah pilot project to be a potential solution for the impending problems of development, housing, sanitation and community that would inevitably envelop India on a tremendous scale following the country’s independence and partition. He argued that the Etawah pilot villages would become vital for
the accumulation of experience, as practical training centers, and models to be examined and replicated throughout the country.\textsuperscript{15} But the focal point of this initiative was first and foremost agriculture, the overwhelming industry of the region. It attempted to increase the agricultural productivity and small-scale cottage industries of the village by introducing all kinds of new practices, techniques and technologies for agricultural production. And in doing so, they had hoped not only to better the conditions of rural India, but to impart the very values of modernity within the minds of these “backward” peasants.\textsuperscript{16}

The final chapter of the thesis will examine the new capital city of the Punjab state, Chandigarh. Born in the wake of the Punjab province’s partition into India and Pakistan, the building of the New Capital was certainly a symbolic gesture to Indians who had been left bereft of their homeland, livelihoods, and families. It served as a means to move forward from India’s tragic past and to assert a new identity as a modern and independent nation to its citizens and to the greater international community. Chandigarh was to be the new center and stronghold for economic and political power that the state had lost in Lahore as a result of Partition. It would be from here that the Nehruvian ambition and project to modernize and develop Indian society would be scripted and broadcasted across the surrounding regions of northern India.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, in much the same way as the Etawah pilot villages, Nehru and Mayer saw Chandigarh’s architecture and theories of urbanism as a larger utopian project of changing India’s condition of underdevelopment.

But more than the socioeconomic development of these regions, Project Etawah and Chandigarh were also the making of a narrative for a new kind of society and even for a new kind of citizen. They desired, for one, to foster a certain democratic ideal and practice within an Indian society defined by cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious identities and hierarchical distinctions that seemed designed to resist such an idea of political equality. Nevertheless, through the arrangement of urban and rural space Nehru,

\textsuperscript{15} Mayer, \textit{Pilot Project India}, pp.71-74; 84-92
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., pp.5-15
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp.5-15
Mayer and his team of architects and planners alike endeavored to create a new type of living community that would allow for face-to-face interaction between the country’s various ethnic, religious and caste collectivities, and enable a more democratic ideal to penetrate into Indian society.

In Etawah, a particularly integral component of the project was what Mayer came to call the idea of “inner democratization.” Breaking down India’s “old, conservative and authoritarian” system, Mayer and Nehru endeavored to create within Etawah’s villages a culture where the task of planning and decision-making was shared by every Etawah project worker and inhabitant of the community. They encouraged the use of village-wide meetings and discussions where anybody was allowed to voice their concerns and views. In this sense, Etawah endeavored to corrode the authority of social order that had for so long been a central organizing force of village community life, and implement a new democratic idea into the Indian political imagination. In much the same way, Chandigarh too endeavored to foster a more egalitarian horizontal structure of community. In the living quarters of the city called Neighborhood Superblocks, Mayer made a conscious effort to include an intermixture of plots sizes and incomes. In creating the city in such a way, Mayer hoped that the built environment would create a community of “satisfactory interrelationships, and satisfactory individual lives and moments; a framework which will take account of groups in their corporate activity, whether in industry, in school, in political meetings, in buses, at home; and of the individual’s need for serenity, for aloofness sometimes, for facing himself.”

In making the very principles of modernity the focal point of both these urban and rural communities, Mayer endeavored to foster a new more secular identity, one that could be shared by all Indians. No longer would Indians be defined by their innumerable collectivities of Hindu castes and outcastes, by their religions, tribes or even languages and various dialects. Within this discordant hodge-podge of a

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18 Mayer, *Pilot Project India*, pp. 87-131
19 Albert Mayer, “Report on Master Plan of the New Punjab Capital”, May 12, 1950 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 18, Folder 30], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
20 Ibid.
community, the hymn of Nehruvian modernity was to be the new common basis of unity that would reconcile any such differences. The very intrinsic values of modernity – of science, technology, of democracy, were to serve as the very foundations for a more secular sovereign Indian identity, for a more inclusive collectivity. Etawah and Chandigarh, therefore, were to be a new more compelling symbol around which all Indians would unite.21

The study of urban and rural projects of post-independence India, like the Etawah pilot villages and Chandigarh, thus provides us with a unique and compelling perspective into the building of a new and independent country, society and citizen. It is indeed another means by which we can come to better understand the complex cacophony of visions, dreams and hopes harbored by the many different players involved in the story of India’s becoming. For it is in these rural and urban spaces of society that the very ideals of the new republic were played out, built and scripted most physically upon the landscape. As such, the story is riddled with tensions, paradoxes, and conflicts that perhaps never really came to be resolved. And it is precisely this that endows the study of Chandigarh and the Etawah pilot villages with significance and importance.

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21 Ibid.
Chapter I: Anxieties and Dreams

“The roots of the present day lay in the past and so I made voyages of discovery into the past ever seeking a clue in it, if any such existed to the understanding of the present.”

- Jawaharlal Nehru

1.1 Introduction

The triumph and joys of India’s newly won independence by 1947 were short-lived as the country soon found itself faced with the immense task of political, economic and social reconstruction. In the political sphere, the question on everybody’s mind was how India was going to consolidate the country’s more than 550 separate states and growing population of 357 million into a new unified modern nation-state. Complicating matters even further was the fact that only seventeen of those had been directly ruled under the British Empire. The rest, on the other hand, were controlled by indigenous princes who had been paying tributes of five percent of their gross income to the British in exchange for military protection. As such, the political consolidation of India, the integration of those feudal states and the former colonial territories, was one mammoth task that stood before India’s nationalist leaders.

Yet India faced other significant social challenges as well. The World Wars and Partition had left millions of people displaced, torn from their communities and families, without a home or a job. The sudden inflow of refugees exacerbated even further the already acute pre-war problem of housing shortage, necessitating some form of immediate and balanced resettlement plan. Yet even before the challenges that ensued from partition, the country suffered from other serious deep-rooted problems, education and public health chief among them. 14.4 percent of India’s population qualified even the most modest of criterions for literacy, possessing the ability to read and write their own name. It was estimated that only 19 percent of school-age children were actually in school and only 50 percent of these students reached

the fourth grade. General poverty and low nutritional standards also meant that India’s average life expectancy was significantly low at twenty-nine years and annual death rate high at 146 for every one thousand people.

The country’s economic situation too was none too bright. Industrialism and the use of modern technique affected only limited segments of the economy, accounting for only 12 percent of the workforce, and 25 percent of GDP. As Indian historian Saurabh Dube put it in India’s Changing Villages, India was still overwhelmingly an agricultural country of cultivators, farmers and laborers. Agriculture constituted nearly 70 percent of the country’s population, contributing close to 60 percent of India’s gross domestic product (GDP). Yet despite the country’s great dependence on agriculture, productivity remained exceedingly low; certainly not enough to sustain her growing population. In the last sixteen years under the British Empire, the country’s population grew by over 50 percent, and yet the corresponding increase in cultivated land was only 1.5 percent. The per capita availability of food grains as a result declined from an already low level of 200 kilograms per-person per-year to a mere 150.

Even with the great effort and funds exhausted through government programs to increase arable land, and national campaigns like the Grow-More-Food Campaign by 1942, the food supply situation certainly did not get any better. Indeed, the world wars deteriorated food supplies even further, and partition only added to the magnitude of the country’s food crisis by depriving the newly separated independent India close to 1 million tons of her normal staple food supplies previously available from the regions that now

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24 Planning Commission, Government of India, *First Five Year Plan*, (December 8, 1951)
26 Grow More Food Campaign – Because of the urgent need to increase food production, the Grow More Food Campaign, the first nationwide program to increase agricultural production, was launched in mid-1940s. But the campaign failed to achieve its targets. Soon after independence, the central government re-defined the objectives of the Grow-More-Food Campaign as the attainment of self-suﬃciency in food grains by 1952, and further increased the targets of other crops to meet the production shortfall from partition. [Source: S.C Dube, *India’s Changing Villages: Human Factors in Community Development*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958)]
constituted Pakistan. As a result, foreign food aid and imports of foodstuff reached startling new heights.27

With so many economic, social and political questions still unanswered, it became clear that India could not leave herself to the wills of the free enterprise, laissez-faire economy. Some form of planned economic and social development would be necessary for India to become that developed independent nation-state, she most desired to be. In 1938, the Indian National Congress formed the National Planning Committee under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru to examine the present conditions of the nation and construct plans for India’s development. In the last years of World War II, several particularly significant plans were generated; most notably the Bombay Plan and the People’s Plan. Each plan approached the impeding serious problems of the country’s future reconstruction in varying ways. The Bombay Plan, for one, stressed the development of large-scale industries. The People’s Plan, on the other hand, emphasized the speedy nationalization of production. Nevertheless, this discourse over India’s planned development became dominated by the visions and ideas of one man, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Upon Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination in January 30, 1948, Nehru became as Indian Politician and United Nations Under-Secretary General Shashi Tharoor put it “the keeper of the national flame”, the most visible embodiment of India’s struggle for freedom and independence.28 As an intellectual, Congressman, as the leader and chairman of the National Planning Committee, not to mention the country’s first prime minister, Nehru would for the next sixteen years, translate his ideas into action, leading the country forth towards his assumption of modern nationhood. For better or for worse, the policies and programs of post-independence and partition India carried Nehru’s visions and ideals. And it is for this reason that in order to fully understand the making of modern India, it is of particular importance to also understand this man.

27 Dube, India’s Changing Villages, pp.3-10
28 Shashi Tharoor, Nehru: The Invention of India, (Arcade Publishing, 2003); p.x
Through this chapter I would like to first examine Nehru’s perceptions of India, which fundamentally led him to believe that the future of independent India lay in the planned social, political and economic development of the country. More specifically, his understanding of India, its past and present, were critical in forming his beliefs that the rebuilding of rural and urban environments were vital in tackling the multitude of economic, political and social challenges facing India post independence. Such projects, Nehru believed would regenerate economic activity, raise living standards, create a more balanced resettlement and rehabilitation of refugees, and educate its citizens in accordance to the new ideal of modernity. And it was for this reason that soon after independence in 1947, Nehru and the Indian government commissioned the construction of more than 300 Master Plans for new cities, some actually realized others forgotten, including the plans for several new state capitals, and the rebuilding of thousands villages by the end of the century. Finally, I will examine Nehru’s association with the American architect Albert Mayer, with whom Nehru would initiate a number of rural and urban development projects; most notably the pilot projects in the province of Etawah, the United Provinces and the new Punjab capital of Chandigarh. These urban and rural planning projects were very much intertwined with building modern Indian in accordance with the Nehruvian understanding of development and modern nation-states.

1.2: Jawaharlal Nehru: The Creative Rational Spirit and the Urge to Endeavor

Nehru had a profound understanding of India’s past and a certain philosophy of the trajectory of universal history; both of which ultimately shaped his actions. In Discovery of India, written in 1944 while still a prisoner in Ahmandnager Fort prison, Nehru endeavors to re-examine and explore India’s history; seeking among other things answers to his questions “What is India? What did she represent in the past? How

29 S.C Dube, India’s Changing Villages: Human Factors in Community Development, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958); pp.3-9
does she fit into the modern world?" In many ways, therefore, *Discovery of India* is not simply a personal and intimate journey of Nehru’s “discovery” of motherland, but more an attempt to understand India’s present in light of the country’s past, a search for the source of India’s strength as well as for her “deterioration and decay.” This quest, undertaken almost from the vantage of an “alien critic,” as Nehru would describe himself, leads him to a fundamental overarching theory: that in order for a society to be both stable and progressive, it needs to possess a “dynamic outlook” and a certain more or less “fixed foundation of principles.” For without this fixed basis of principles, society would disintegrate and destruct; without the dynamic outlook, it would likely fall to stagnation and decay. It was in the attainment, therefore, of both qualities that society could advance forward; and advancement was precisely what Nehru believed society “must do to survive.”

However, in India, Nehru no longer saw the balanced existence of these two qualities. Instead he saw a country that was over absorbed in principles and structures from her past, and progressively losing her dynamic outlook towards the future. And while there was yet vitality and amazing tenacity in the old systems and structures to which India was so obsessed, they no longer possessed the same flexibility and capacity to adapt to her changing environs. Any limited progress made seemed to always be, as Nehru said, steadfastly “tied down to and hampered by far too many relics of the past.” In other words, long-term stability and security of society had been purchased at the cost of greater national progress. In her desire to preserve “Indian-ness,” in order to maintain stability, security and “the survival of the [Indian] race,” Nehru saw India’s dynamism and creativity wane. To Nehru, therefore, India now stood stagnant, non-changing, stuck in her romanticized past, while the world around her marched on, progressing forward into modernity.

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31 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*; pp.37-40
32 Ibid. p.38
33 Ibid. p.390
34 Ibid, p. 128
In this respect then, the primary cause for India’s progressive demise, her “backwardness” and shrinking economy was not poverty, famine, illiteracy or even British colonization. For Nehru such “superficial conflicts” and issues all inherently stemmed from a deeper more fundamental and larger conflict of India’s prolonged arrested development. It was this “inner decay,” as Nehru called it, that had caused her to fall behind “in the march of technical [and scientific] progress,” and then ultimately to become “bound hand and foot to a faraway island.”

Nevertheless, to believe that Nehru wanted Indian society to rupture from its past would be rather too simplistic. In fact, he conceded that there were certain fundamentally Indian values harking from her past that were vital and should not be forgotten. For Nehru, such underlying and intrinsic elements of Indianess:

“the dreams of the Indian people through the ages, the wisdom of the ancients, the buoyant energy and love of life and nature of our forefathers, their spirit of curiosity and mental adventure, the daring of their thought, their splendid achievements in literature, art, and culture, their love of truth and beauty and freedom, the basic values that they set up, their understanding of life’s mysterious ways, their toleration of other ways than theirs, their capacity to absorb other peoples and their cultural accomplishments” were all vital for India. It was such core values that Nehru believed ultimately defined India as it was and as it would be in the future. To forget them would mean that “much that…made her [their] joy and pride [would] cease to be”; that India would no longer be India. Thus, to Nehru it was not that India needed to break from her dreams, her arts and culture, energies and spirit, rather India needed to rid herself of the archaic societal structures, the relics from her past that “twisted and petrified her spirit, set it into rigid frames, and stunted her growth.” In doing so, India could remember afresh “the core of that ancient wisdom” so that it could be adapted to the circumstances of the present age.

36 Nehru, *The Discovery of India*; p.21
37 Ibid., p. 387
38 Ibid., pp.386-287
39 Ibid., pp.386-387
40 Ibid., pp.386-388
The Indian caste system was one such archaic “social evil” that Nehru believed needed to be “done away with.”\(^{41}\) For Nehru, the growing rigidity and exclusiveness of the caste system was an impediment to Indian society’s expansion and the country’s greater project of cohesion. Rather than encouraging the greater “unity of India,” “its oneness”, he argued that the system essentially compartmentalized and separated society into functional groups to which the people gave their loyalty to.\(^{42}\) The idea of caste erected barriers against social intercourse and effectively narrowed India’s sphere of social action. A social structure in which “each man’s job was [hereditary] fixed and permanent and…had little concern with others,” Nehru feared, would prevent the creation of an “anthropomorphic conception of the [modern] nation.”\(^{43}\) Not only that, but the caste system also prevented the growth of a larger freedom. It continued to ensure that the vast majority of India permanently remained at the bottom of the social order, deprived of opportunities for development and growth. But, Nehru also observed that such a social structure fostered a tendency for people to avoid new types of work and activity and to confine themselves to old traditions and archaic ways. The rigidity of the system itself, the lack of mobility and freedom beyond the caste, subdued people into accepting what societal roles and functions imposed upon them at birth. With little chance for social mobility, social effort was pointless. There was no need to exert initiative, no need for innovation. No matter how much effort they made to better themselves, they would always ultimately be defined by their caste. As such, the spirit of innovation became repressed, allowing for a more narrow parochial outlook to set in among the Indian populace.\(^{44}\)

However, of greater concern to Nehru was India’s growing tendency to rely upon the domains of metaphysics and religion as legitimate sources of knowledge and as means of understanding life and nature. Nehru did not deny the many advancements put forth by religion. In fact, he acknowledged the

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\(^{41}\) Jawaharlal Nehru, *Nehru on Gandhi: A selection, arranged in the order of events, from writings and speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru*, (New York: The John Day Company, 1941), pp 50-64

\(^{42}\) Nehru, *The Discovery of India*; p.126-127

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p.126-127

\(^{44}\) Nehru, *Nehru on Gandhi*, pp. 50-64
importance of religion in laying down values and establishing principles, moral standards that guided human life and society. What’s more, religion, in the past, had provided a means of dealing with the “the uncharted [unknown] regions of the human experience,” of nature and of life; although uncharted, that is, by the scientific technical knowledge of that day. However, while religion brought stability to society with its values, such a belief of an unknown supreme power, Nehru argued, fundamentally surrendered the mental faculties. It subdued human inquiry and a certain vital persistent desire for “truth.” Instead of encouraging curiosity and thought, religion and spiritualism preached a philosophy of submission to the established church, to the prevailing social order, to the caste and to everything that used to be. Religion and mysticism were comfortable with “truths” from the past. It petrified now obsolete archaic truths as dogma, and applied them to the present. However, Nehru recognized that India needed to regain that curiosity of thought and desire for truth. For a society which ceased to question, to change and to move ahead would inevitably become weak.

In other words, what Nehru was effectively arguing here was that, though religiosity and spiritualism had created a framework within which India had attained a certain progress and stability in her past, they were now impediments to the country’s further development. It was an outmoded means of understanding themselves and the world around them. It had become, as Nehru most poignantly put it, “a prison….for the mind of man,” that extended its rigid grip to all aspects of Indian society. Thus, what India needed was to rid herself of that narrowing and backwards religious outlook. She needed to lessen “that obsession with the supernatural and metaphysical speculations, that loosening of the mind’s discipline in religious ceremonial and mystical emotionalism,” that were all preventing her from attaining any real understanding of the rapidly changing world in which they were situated. And she needed to regain that

45 Nehru, Nehru on Gandhi, pp.30-34
46 Nehru, The Discovery of India; p. 278
47 Ibid.; p.54
48 Ibid., p.522
curiosity and desire for knowledge, what Nehru called the “creative spirit of inquiry” and “urge to life and
endeavor,” that was so essential for India’s growth and rejuvenation.

However, Nehru believed that the most fundamental element for India’s progress was a strong and central
leadership state – an idea that harked from Nehru’s profound sense of India’s past. In his understanding of
India’s history, Nehru was perhaps most fascinated by the period as the Islamic empires that reached its
height during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. This was a period that saw the flowering of a great
civilization, “rich and vigorous, marked by some astonishing achievements in philosophy, literature,
drama, art, science and mathematics.”49 India’s economy too expanded and prospered, with increased
widespread trade and cultural contacts around the world.50 The period exhibited the existence of that
creativity and will power, those two most desired of qualities. But Nehru also identified one other quality:
the existence of strong central state leadership. Nehru saw the flourishing of Indian civilization as very
much the result of state-sponsored efforts, and perhaps even more so to the actions and efforts of one
figure, Emperor Akbar. For Nehru, Akbar was by far the most remarkable of leaders; he was “an idealist
and a dreamer but also a man of action and a leader of men who roused the passionate loyalty of his
followers.”51 And, in Nehru’s eyes, it was because of Akbar’s wise statesmanship and imaginative
patronage that he was able to unite the country politically and culturally. Nehru was convinced that to
maintain their newly won independence, Indians would have to entrust their future to a strong leader, a
strong a national state, that would be capable of guiding and directing the country forth through the
turbulent years to come. In other words, they could not leave the process of nation-building up to the free
hidden hand, laissez-faire.

50 Ibid, p.153-154
51 Ibid, p.153-154
Yet, despite all the ills Nehru saw in India, of the caste system, of purdah, of her mysticism and religion, of dharma, her “blind idolatry of her past”, there still existed within India remnants of a rational and creative spirit of inquiry and of an urge to life and endeavor. It was just a matter of reviving such instincts that had gone dormant for so long and attuning them once again to “the [new] highest ideals of [the] age.” And it was to the new modern ideals of humanism and the scientific spirit that Nehru believed India now needed to a line herself to. For it was Nehru’s adamant belief that it was such qualities that would propel her to the social progress, the modernity and economic self-sufficiency, that he so craved. And this could all ultimately be done only through the guidance of a strong, responsible and central government that had the interests of the state at its heart.

The very thing India lacked, the modern West possessed in excess. If Indian civilization had gone to seed because it was “static, self-absorbed, and inclined to narcissism,” the countries of Western Europe had progressed forward, laying the foundations for that “new civilization” towards which the rest of the world would then follow. It cared little about preserving its old out-dated social structures and customs. Instead, to Nehru, the Western countries lived in the present, actively and aggressively seeking greater power and domination. And it was for this reason that as India stood stagnant set in her old archaic ways, the Western countries advanced forward surpassing the once rich civilizations of Asia. The scientific and Industrial Revolutions and the subsequent spread of modern technology in Europe had given great economic strength and military power to the countries of Western Europe. And with this sweep of technology through the European countries came better education systems, sanitation and public health.

52 Purdah – The practice of concealing women from men
53 Nehru, The Discovery of India; p.50
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., pp.48-60
56 Ibid. p.385
57 Nehru, Nehru on Gandhi, pp.81-82
Behind the great and manifold achievements of the West, Nehru saw “the [dynamic] spirit of science and a bubbling life and spirit which displayed itself in many ways activities and in adventurous voyages of discovery.”59 The “hard thinking” logic and reasoning applied to the field of science greatly appealed to Nehru. Unlike religion, the spiritual and mysticism, this more “rationale and objective” domain of knowledge, Nehru argued, provided a more effective framework for India’s progress and development into the future. It would revitalize the important spirit of curiosity that had gone latent after centuries of India’s “condition of mental stupor and physical weariness” while also widening her boundaries of knowledge.60 There were still many mysteries, “unknown depths” in the world to understand. And it was in understanding such unknowns, in uncovering “truths” that society could move forward. This journey for truth and inquiry was something that Nehru believed to be indispensible for the development of India. Knowledge was to Nehru something that was “ever to be sought and renewed, reshaped and developed…with the growth of…thought and the development of human life” so that ultimately it could answer to the changing needs of humanity.61 Only then could it offer guidance in the present and for the future.

In other words, Nehru was convinced that his grander goals of modernization, of economic-self-sufficiency and development could be attained only through the shiny new scientific and technical ideals of the modern world. Looking at the West, the technical achievements of science were evident enough. The Western countries flourished with the discoveries of science. Science and modern technology had essentially transformed the Western economies from ones of scarcity into those of great abundance. Space-time and quantum theory changed the way by which people saw the physical world. Scientific research on the nature of matter, the structure of the atom, of electricity and light, had all in one way or another carried human knowledge further, to new heights.62 As Nehru said in 1961:

59 Nehru, The Discovery of India; p.22
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Nehru, The Discovery of India; pp.16-18
“Science alone that can solve the problems of hunger and poverty, of insanitation and illiteracy, of superstition and deadening of custom and tradition, of vast resources running waste, or a rich country inhabited by starving poor...Who indeed could afford to ignore science today? At every turn we have to seek its aid.”

As such, it was precisely science, with its rationality and inquiring spirit, India needed in order to insert herself into the competitive modern international world. Nehru most poignantly concluded that “the future belongs to science and those who make friends with science.” With a basic infrastructure for science and technology established, Nehru believed that only then would India be poised to achieve the industrialization and development she desired.

And it was this obsession with science and modern technology, and adamant desire to free India from the clutches of her “backwards” past that pulled Nehru to Architectural Modernism. Architectural Modernism of the mid-20th century offered Nehru a way of using technology and science to create a physical environment within which the Indian people could rise.

1.3: The Importance of Space: of Planning and Dreaming

The Mexican poet and Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz, who also served as the Mexican ambassador to India during Nehru’s prime ministry, described the Indian Prime Minister as a man of two traditions. While Paz is often criticized for his rather Orientalist perceptions, there is perhaps some truth to his characterization of India’s first Prime Minister. On the one hand, Nehru was of Indian aristocratic Brahmin lineage, a heritage that traced him back to his ancestors who had frequented Mughal court. On the other, Nehru was also very much a product of the western tradition. Educated in Harrow and then Cambridge, not to mention the ten years spent in her majesty’s jail, Nehru developed close links and a certain affinity to European culture and society. Nehru drew much of his inspiration from Western academia and thought. Though India was in his blood, “[he] approached her almost as an alien critic;” as Nehru reflects “[I]o

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64 Ibid.
some extent I came from her via the West and looked at her as a friendly westerner might have done.”\textsuperscript{65}

This can certainly be said true about his perception of the function of architecture and planning in building their new independent nation-state.

Nehru’s conviction of the importance of space, of architecture and town planning began during his time abroad where he became aware of the urban Utopias built in the great metropolises of the U.S. and Europe by the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century; cities that had been planned in accordance to the emergent theory of modern city planning. He was drawn to these new theories and ideals of city planning and architecture because he saw their potential to improve the conditions within India as well.

Nehru saw great beauty in India’s architectural works from the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort to the great Indian temples of the South. Yet, for all its traditional splendor and architectural work, Nehru was repelled by much of what he saw. In part this was because of his understanding of architecture as being fundamentally governed by \textit{the function} it was built to serve. And this function in turn, Nehru argued, depended “to a large extent on [the greater] function that society [was] serving.”\textsuperscript{66} In other words, for Nehru, Architecture and the built environment were means of exuding the greater visions and ideals of society and of the nation. And it was for this reason that by post-independence, Nehru became increasingly concerned not only with issue of housing, of the impending uneasy question of how to resettle the millions of displaced individuals from partition, but also by the state of India’s architecture itself. If architecture was a reflection of that greater function that society was to serve, then what did India’s old and traditional architecture say about the country’s greater vision? What kinds of thinking and lifestyles would such traditional and old buildings allow? Here again we see the resurgence of Nehru’s fear of India’s obsession with her past; the reappearance of Nehru’s fear of the static; although manifested this time in the stagnant and unchanging conditions of India’s built environs.

\textsuperscript{65} Nehru, \textit{The Discovery of India}, pp. 30-31
\textsuperscript{66} Jawaharlal Nehru, “Mr. Nehru on Architecture,” (Urban and rural planning thought, 1959); pp.46-49
If India was going to modernize, if she was going to escape the stagnant decaying state in which she was in, if she was truly going to catch up to the West, she needed to build new frameworks; ones that would encourage rationale creative thought, and be conducive to the modern era of technology and science that was to be ushered in. The past, as Nehru poignantly stated, was only good when it was the present, “but you cannot bring [the past] forward when the world has changed.” What good would it do to build, in a time of great technological advancements and progress, a monumental gothic cathedral and call it a train terminal, he asked. Building a gothic cathedral or another Taj Mahal would not be getting out of the clutches of India’s non-changing deteriorating state. No, it would only be reinforcing the past within the minds of the Indian people. Such old built environments of India did “not allow [people] to rise, they [kept people] down,” stuck in the long-gone past. India did not need to be tied down to what had been done. What India needed to do was to think in terms of the present and the future: “the functions of today, what we have to do.” Architecture and the built environment, Nehru believed ultimately needed to be with the age; it could not be isolated from “the social conditions, from the thinking, from the objectives and ideals of that particular [time].”

What India needed, in other words, was to create new built frameworks governed by ideals of a society within the new age. She needed buildings governed by the ideals of modernity, of industrialization, and perhaps above anything else, science and technology. An ideal building for Nehru, therefore, was a modern building, a building coming out of industrialism, a building that embodied all the values of the new industrial age. And it was precisely for this reason that Nehru became attracted to a form of architecture that became named Architectural Modernism.

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
With its skyscrapers, factories and buildings made of steel, glass, concrete and aluminum, modernist architecture offered unimaginable horizons for Nehru. Modernism was to Nehru, as South Asian urban historian Ravi Kalia perfectly put it in *Modernism, modernization and post-colonial India*, the “shimmering vision of escape from everything conservative, traditional and limited.” Their parsimonious expression of design, unadorned spaces, and clean-lines represented something wholly different and separate from anything that existed in India. Unlike the architectural styles of neo-Gothicism, neo-Classicism and Indo-saracenic, modernism embraced the future, the new coming age. In this sense, this new modern “international” style represented something that was free, dehistorized, built without India’s history of religiosity and colonial occupation. Rather than a reiteration, a reminder of the past, modernist planning was about the creation of a new tradition and of a new history. With its buildings fundamentally governed by principles of science, modernism was concerned with embracing whole heartedly the technologies and ideas of the future. As such, naturally such architecture was conducive to the greater project of re-inventing India’s new secular national identity.

Such modernist ideals of architecture and planning aligned too with India’s emerging urban, metropolitan and more cosmopolitan, shall we say, outlook of herself. The world around them was certainly changing with “old barriers breaking down; life [becoming] more international” and Nehru believed it important for India to be engaged with it. India needed more than ever to “play our part in this coming internationalism and for this purpose to travel, meet others, learn from them and understand them.” And the adoption of the latest architectural styles, the planning of new cities and towns certainly were the most visible expression of the country’s arrival onto the global stage; a sign that India too was capable of building great megacities that rivaled Paris, London and New York of the Western world.

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73 Khilnani; p. 416
Large-scale projects of architecture and planning were not foreign to India. In fact, India’s past was riddled with them. It could even perhaps be said that such similar planning projects became so attractive to Nehru because he had seen such projects radically transform India before. During the 19th century under British colonization, India saw construction of more than 170 cantonments, semi-independent settlements for the British army and civilian officers, throughout the country. Their site-plans varied little from one another. Built on the periphery, segregated and apart from the notoriously confusing and illegible urban layout of the old native Indian city, the British cantonments were built in a strict grid-like rectangular manner. It was the belief that such well-ordered and uniform urban environments would provide “the military, administrative and commercial needs of the new colonial province” while also fostering “more decorous modes of interracial urban existence that could not be provided within the degraded ‘native city.’” These settlements were linked by railway, roads and telegraph, which in their conglomeration created what German architect Otto Koenigsberger, working in post-independence India at that time, called a “new geography of colonial command and governance.”

Perhaps one of the greatest architectural achievements in India until the mid-twentieth century was India’s capital city, Delhi itself. Nehru himself disliked the capital city, calling the nation’s capital “un-Indian” for its architecture and conception. But, for all his distaste in India’s capital, the buildings of New Delhi presented a mega-project of unprecedented proportions, a project that was entrusted in the hands of Britain’s leading architects Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker. Very much in-line with the ideals of the City Beautiful and America’s Garden City movements, Lutyens and Baker built the Indian imperial capital spread “as a spacious kaleidoscope of broken hexagons and triangles, pivoting on large roundabouts” and broad radiating boulevards; it was something they hoped would exude the image of a great European metropolis like Paris. Much like the cantonments, the “white city” that surrounded the

74 William J. Glover, Making Lahore Modern: Constructing and Imagining a Colonial City, (University of Minnesota Press, 2008); p.59
76 Khilnani; p.121
native black city, New Delhi too was also very much about the creation of geography of colonial command and governance. In fact, the desired effect of India’s colonial capital was to first and foremost create, as Lord Stamfordham, King George V’s personal secretary explained to let the Indian “see for the first time the power of Western science, art and civilization.”

However, what was different and perhaps even revolutionary about the new projects of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century was, as Koenigsberger observed during his time working as an architect in post-independence India, such projects were not designed for a certain privileged group of people or for the elite; they were not solely for defensive purposes or for the demonstration of power and might of a ruler. Rather, these projects were very much intertwined with the planned development of India towards that Nehruvian assumption of nationhood.

Still, perhaps the most important reason Nehru became so invested in these projects was because of that most powerful dictum of modernist urban and rural planning: “modernize your house and your life will follow.” Ideas of modernist planning and architecture were founded upon a notion that a strong central power had the ability to transform a society and its people by merely altering the built environment itself. This was certainly something that greatly appealed to Nehru, to whom the joys and triumphs of India’s now inevitable independence by 1946 were quickly becoming extinguished by the dire realities he was soon to face -- the illiteracy, poverty, housing, unemployment and disease; all realities that only intensified with the impact of World War II and then later by the violence and displacement of partition.

The daunting question now looming above his head was how he was going to effectively tackle the swarm of serious economic, political and social challenges facing India. Yet, according to this new idea of architectural modernism, by simply improving India’s built environments, improving its cities and villages, by simply “[modernizing] your house,” the multitude of political, social and economic problems

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77 Koenigsberger pp.95-96
78 Ravi Kalia, “Modernism, modernization and post-colonial India: a reflective essay,” in Planning Perspectives, (Taylor & Francis, 2006); pp.133-140
plaguing India, its condition of poverty and underdevelopment, could all be changed. It seemed simple enough. The problem of resolving the multiplicity of India’s problems became bound with the idea of planning and improving India’s built environment.

With the powerful dictum of modernist planning in mind, it became clear that if Nehru was going to raise the living standards of all Indians, to improve literacy; that to change the state of underdevelopment, poverty and food scarcity within his country, work needed to begin in both urban and rural communities. Nehru acknowledged that there needed to be the balancing of rural and urban communities and their industries, of industry and agriculture; for “if one of them goes wrong then the whole economy is upset.”\(^7^9\) He understood that like it or not city and village, urban and rural were all interdependent on one another. It was in the villages of rural India where the majority of India’s population lived. The agricultural villages of India served as homes and sources of income for 75 percent of the population. It was the villages too that supplied the staple foods so vital in sustaining the rest of the population. Yet it was in the cities of urban India where modernization and industrialization would take place; where the future of modern India lay. As a result, in the years after independence in 1947, two broad categories of planning projects were commissioned. The first were the new Indian settlements known as development towns. These projects were predominantly focused on rural India, in revitalizing the country’s villages and in training, educating those living in these areas. The second were the administrative centres like Chandigarh and Bhubaneswar. These capital cities were planned to become new economic and political hubs of their respective provinces. Out of the new rural and urban built frameworks, Nehru believed that he could be able to create a more technically advanced, developed, and politically and economically independent country.\(^8^0\)

\(^7^9\) S.C Dube, *India’s Changing Villages: Human Factors in Community Development*, pp.3-9
\(^8^0\) Ibid.
There is something to be said of this preoccupation with modernity and its ideals of scientific growth, economic development. Certainly, this obsession was in part driven by a great desire on the part of India’s new nation-state builders and Nehru to change the exceedingly low living standards and overall conditions of poverty of the country. But one could also say that it was driven by a fear of foreign aggression, and of the “the acquisitive society of today with its law that the strong must prey on the weak, and its motto that “they shall take who have the power and they shall keep who can.”  

Not yet an international power but a post-colonial developing country, India was certainly sensitive about its status within the international community; particularly so after having just experienced close to nine decades of British colonization, two world wars and now in the midst of increasing tensions between the Soviet Union and the US. The thought of losing their independence and freedom once more was too painful. If India was going to remain independent, both politically and economically, she needed to become a technically advanced economically self-sufficient country, Nehru concluded. And that meant increasing agricultural production so the country no longer needed to rely on foreign food aid and imports; bolstering military strength; and developing the country’s scientific and technical prowess. According to Nehru, “self-sufficiency of food, clothing, housing, education, sanitation etc” should be “the minimum requirement for the country and for everybody;” for it was only in acquiring such qualities, could India avoid becoming a kind of vacuum that would increase the “the acquisitive tendencies of others.”  

In other words, this mantra of self-sufficiency and scientific growth was a means to attain a certain international protectionism to secure their independence and freedom from the economic imperialism and the increasing acquisitive nature of the countries around them.

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1.4 The American Architect

There is something quite ironic in the fact that many of these urban and rural planning projects were commissioned to European and American architects. For a country that desired to exude a certain image of a vernacular Indian modernity within her very spaces, India was now seeking the assistance of western architects from the US and Europe to plan their great cities and villages, and ultimately one could say to rebuild and modernize their nation. Nehru too was concerned by this. He felt that the average American or British architect would not be able to understand the social or cultural background of India. However, Nehru also recognized that India really did not have a choice on this matter. While British colonial occupation had done much to educate Indians in the liberal arts and law, it had done little to promote technical disciplines such as engineering and architecture. It was for this reason that India neither possessed the technology, expertise nor materials necessary to completely execute such grand-scale rural development and urban planning projects on her own. As such, it soon became clear to Nehru that Modern India could not be built without western technology or knowledge.

One architect who became heavily involved in the rural and urban projects of India was an American architect by the name of Albert Mayer. Having studied engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mayer began his career as a civil engineer in New York City. However, his work on commercial buildings and apartments soon fostered an interest in architectural design and in planning. By the early 1930’s Mayer also became a registered architect and became closely associated with several eminent architects and planners such as Ebenezer Howard and historian Louis Mumford. He became greatly influenced by their works and more importantly by their concerns of the social inadequacies of modern housing and of the increasingly industrial society.

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83 Koenigsberger, pp.95-96
84 Albert Mayer, “Synthesis and sublimation: The role of the architect”, *Architectural Record* (October 1994); pp. 139-141
It was indeed true that the new and seemingly ever-advancing technologies that enabled the mastery of natural forces and improvements in agriculture gave society a *new plenty*. They fostered new conceptions of time, allowed for leisure and offered unprecedented opportunities for society. However, despite all the wonders afforded to them by technology and science, much like Mumford and Howard, Mayer too saw the concerning consequences of the new inventions of the twentieth century. While they were supposed to be diminishing tensions and providing a life “of expanded understanding and visions,” in actuality they
were in fact slowly unhinging the seams of society.\textsuperscript{85} They had created the city’s intolerable contestation “in the countryside, despoilment by unbridled road-building and by excessive anarchic scatter; in excessive distance between living, work and recreation; in family disorder and non-unity.”\textsuperscript{86} The usage of technology, to them, was getting out of hand. People needed to become “composers of a greater symphony,” not to become “victims of an uncontrolled cacophony.” There was something that needed to be done and much like Mumford and Howard, Mayer saw the answer in planning and architecture.\textsuperscript{87}

Mayer saw architecture and planning as a tool through which society could grasp that substantively better environment and moral society. As Mayer stated in his article “Synthesis and sublimation: The role of the architect”, it was a means of mastering “in moral terms…the essentially amoral new implements, choose among them with connected insight and determination.”\textsuperscript{88} In other words, he believed that the built environment, if constructed well, could help society avoid the negative consequences of technology and science. In this sense, for Mayer, what was needed was more creative ways of planning; planning that would be oriented not just to create the physical design of buildings, but to create environments conducive to community life. Having been involved in many town planning projects in New York City and Brookline in Massachusetts, Mayer had seen the real power that architecture and planning possessed on society and people. Conducive built environments had the ability to enhance the productivity of natural resources; it stimulated “social-economic awakening and development of people in their living, their resourcefulness and sense of resourcefulness.”\textsuperscript{89} In this sense, architecture and the built environment created a framework that allowed for enhancement, or in his words, “the flowering of society.”\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{86} Albert Mayer, “Architecture As Total Community: The Challenge Ahead,” \textit{Architectural Record} (March 1964) p. 137
\textsuperscript{87} Mayer, “Architecture As Total Community: The Challenge Ahead”; p. 137
\textsuperscript{88} Mayer, “Synthesis and sublimation: The role of the architect,” p. 139
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, p. 144-145
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, p. 139
One could say that Mayer’s involvement with India and its rural and urban development projects resulted from two chance events. The first was World War II, which took Mayer as an US Army engineer to India, where he was to remain even after the war. It was during this time that he became very interested in India, its people, life and culture. He was particularly intrigued by Indian rural life and its values, perhaps because they resonated so much with his antiurbanist ideals and desire to create stronger communities.

The second was his introduction in 1945 to Jawaharlal Nehru, who had recently been released from political imprisonment. Together they discussed the impending social, political and economic problems that India was likely to face following her independence. How was India going to tackle the multitude of different urban and rural problems of India? How was she to deal with the poverty, the illiteracy, disease, the corruption of the country? Drawing from his experience working in projects in the United States, he proposed to Nehru the creation of model villages as a possible means of tackling these issues.

Nehru was considerably impressed by Mayer. In a letter to Gandhi in January 14, 1946, he wrote “He has the knowledge and training for his job, knows the latest technique, and at the same time understands the background of village India.”

Mayer’s ideas of architecture and planning as something to “create an aura, a sense of pride and allegiance, a visible invitation to those within the development and beyond” found a sympathetic audience in Nehru. Nehru also took a liking to Mayer’s more interactive approach to rural development and urban planning; for Mayer believed that as an architect, it was his responsibility to “sit down with local social workers, neighborhood people, absorb as raw material their thinking and experience and outlook, sublimate their mute or latent aspirations, produce Design, Human Evocation.” And as a result, a long-lasting partnership was formed between Nehru and Mayer. From that chance encounter that fateful night at Nehru’s home in Allahabad, came Mayer’s intensive involvement in Indian village planning and master planning projects throughout India starting in 1946.

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91 Nehru in S. Gopal, Vol. 3: Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, second series (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1984); pp.479-480
93 Mayer, “Synthesis and sublimation: The role of the architect”, p. 142
Returning to India in 1946, Mayer served as a consultant on several planning projects throughout the country, including the master plan of Kanpur, Bombay and Delhi. However, his major contribution was for a rural development project in the farming villages of the province of Etawah, Uttar Pradesh. The rural development project in the region of Etawah was one of the first projects focused on the revitalization of the village community, something that would become projects of increasing focus and attention in the years to come. His second most significant project in India was Chandigarh, the creation of a completely new capital city, tabula rasa, in the foothills of the Himalayas.

1.5 Conclusion

I want to return to the idea that I began this chapter with; that Nehruvian idea that in order for a nation to develop and move forward it needed to possess a creative, rational spirit and an urge to endeavor. It was this desire to repossess such qualities in India that fundamentally propelled Nehru to acknowledge the importance of urban and rural planning in the greater project of nation building. Architecture and planning were not just about the creation of the physical built environment. They were also projects that were very much intertwined within the greater project of the modern nation-state, of modernization, and economic development. They were about the physical materialization of an ideal, creating a utopia of sorts, of the India that would be and should be. In an editorial of the inaugural 1946 issue of the Indian progressive modern architecture and urban planning publication the Modern Architectural Research Group, the journal’s editor and founder Mulk Raj Anand wrote most eloquently that “Planning is like dreaming – dreaming of a new world.”94 Anand much like Nehru and many others ultimately saw that architecture and planning were “to dream of ways to usher in the good life, to produce the blue prints of a new social order.”95

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95 Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*; pp.258-260
However, I would also argue that the master plan projects and rural development projects of post-independence India tell us much not only about the dreams of Nehru, the nationalists, and architects of modern India, but about their nightmares as well. They tell us not only about their hopes and desires for India – about what kind of nation-state they wanted India to become – but just as much about their fears: about their fears and anxieties of India’s obsession with her past; of foreign invasion during a time of increased tension and hostility between the U.S and the Soviet Union; of losing their newly won independence and freedom, of economic imperialism, of their fears of falling behind in the greater march towards technological and scientific progress; perhaps even their mistrust of that hidden free hand, laissez-faire, and of doubts of the capabilities of the Indian people in developing their own modern nation-state.

Yet, the building of Chandigarh and the Etawah pilot villages were not just local discussions of planning and imagining of modern India. What makes these projects particularly interesting is that they were inherently international discussions as well; discussions of the nation-state, nationhood and the meaning of modernity. What did it mean to be sovereign nation-state? What was Indian? What did it mean to create an Indian vernacular of modernity? Inserted into the indigenous discourse of modernity and how India should develop, were the visions and ideas of Architectural Modernism, of hegemonic Western discourses of modernity, of what it meant to be a modern nation-state and of the western architects who were involved in many of India’s projects. In this sense therefore, Project Etawah and Chandigarh present a fascinating instances of the Indian and the American, of the local and the international coming together in varied and interesting ways to create the very landscapes of modern India.
Chapter II: Reconquering the Village
The Etawah Pilot Project

“For me, India begins and ends in the villages”
- Mahatma Gandhi

“However well we may deal with the towns, the problem of the villages of India will remain for a long time and any social standards that we seek to introduce will be judged ultimately not by what happens in Delhi but in the villages of India”
- Jawaharlal Nehru

2.1 Introduction

The village, as a space, a lifestyle, as a societal unit, has always occupied an important place in India’s history. Indeed, throughout the country’s past, it has represented an important space within which India has been imagined and re-imagined. This was certainly true under the British colonial rule when colonial administrators and scholars, through their writings and thinking, imagined, constructed and essentialized India as a land of “village republics.” In representing India in this manner, the colonial administrators ascribed India to be communal, underdeveloped and primitive; qualities that were all in dialectic opposition to their modern, urban, rational and cosmopolitan selves. Such framing of India was particularly significant, for it allowed the colonial administrators to justify their own rule over the subcontinent. It endowed them with a certain responsibility that they as the enlightened civilization of the West had now a moral purpose to lead these natives out from their stagnant ancient civilization and place them on the route of progress, modernity and development. It was in this manner that the village came to be conceived in colonial western thought as the embodiment of ‘the real’ India, “the nation that needed to be recovered, conquered and transformed.”

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97 Jawaharlal Nehru
98 Surinder Jodhka, “Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar” ; pp.3343-3353
99 Ronald Inden, Imagining India, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); pp.129-134
100 Jodhka; pp.3343-3353
This ethos of recovering, conquering and transforming India’s villages certainly persisted through India’s nationalist freedom movement and into post-colonial India. From the National Planning Commission of 1938 examining the fundamental economic and social problems to the Constituent Assembly of 1946 framing a constitution for free India, the question of how to transform the village -- to improve their conditions, to find solution to the multiplicity of their problems -- became a topic debated with much passion. Once again, it was to the villages that India’s nationalist leaders looked to in defining their new and independent modern nation-state.\footnote{Gyan Prakash, “Urban Turn” in The Cities of Everyday Life, ed. Geert Lovink and Shudhabrata Sengupta. (Delhi: Sarai Media Lab, 2002); pp4-5}

Closer analysis of the writings by the leading ideologues of India’s nationalist movement reveal significant variations in the way the village was seen and understood. Nevertheless, what they all shared in common was their unhappiness with the existing realities and conditions of these rural settlements. They all professed the need for some form of change; and each had their own visions for that direction to which these village communities would progress. The Etawah pilot project is one such example of a translation of a vision for village development into practice. Commissioned by Nehru and operated under the guidance of an American architect and town planner Albert Mayer, this pioneering project was one of the first attempts at tackling the multiplicity of economic, political and social problems of India through the reconstruction of the country’s most basic unit, the village.

In this chapter, I examine the Etawah Pilot Project, which took place in the villages of the Etawah district within the greater province of United Provinces, later known as Uttar Pradesh. While the Pilot Project initially began as a program of architectural and physical planning, it soon became quite evident that such a proposal was premature, and that much more thorough rural socioeconomic development would have to precede any kind of physical restructuring of the village. It was for this reason that agriculture, the overwhelming industry in the region, became the focal point of Mayer and Nehru’s initiative. The Etawah
pilot project attempted to increase the agricultural productivity and to redevelop the small-scale cottage industries of the village. And through such concentrated efforts, they hoped not only to better the built environments of these communities but to also increase the standards of living of its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{102} Yet, it would be remiss to understand the Etawah pilot project as having been simply a village reconstruction and development programme. In its desire to achieve its objectives, the Etawah Project also, more deeply, endeavored to foster a completely new society and even perhaps shape a new citizen.

A crucial innovation of the Etawah Project was a theory-in-practice that Mayer called “inner administrative democracy.” This idea was founded on a belief that the success and lasting effects of the project depended upon the full cooperation and equal democratic participation of all those involved in the pilot project. Including lower level workers of the Etawah pilot project in the policy planning process and bringing them into social contact with higher level officials in their village and local provincial government would heighten enthusiasm and the effectiveness of the project. For the higher government officials, such up-down fluidity of interaction would keep them in touch with the happenings of the grassroots level. In this manner, the democratic practice within the pilot project organization endeavored to open new vistas of human interaction among the project workers, villagers and citizen, mobilizing vigor and initiative at all levels.\textsuperscript{103} And it was this, that vigor and initiative to demand and go after their wants and needs that Mayer desired to achieve most of all. The inhabitants of these rural villages needed to feel the need to change their environs, to increase their agricultural productivity, to better the schools and health services of their community; only then could any long-lasting improvements and progress be achieved. It was hoped that this project would stimulate villagers’ own initiative to think about their needs and act upon them, as a result bringing such self-help efforts closer to the agenda of the government.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{102} Albert Mayer, Pilot Project India, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958)
\textsuperscript{103} Mayer, Pilot Project India, pp. 71-74; 84-92
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
The very image of Indian village reconstruction projects opening up of backward regions brought an important pioneering aspect to Mayer’s village development initiatives. From the perspective of the times, the function of this project was to educate people out of a state of underdevelopment into the modern world, as a part of a more general process of modernization. It desired to transform not only the dire conditions of these villages, but also the people themselves, their wants and desires. Project Etawah was, in many ways, a crusade of sorts against the backwardness or at least that image of backwardness the British had so-long associated with the country’s villages.

In *Images of the Village Community: A study in Anglo-Indian Ideology*, historian Clive Dewey argues that in colonial India, the village community has always been a patriotic image around which “countless administrative utopias were woven; each structured on exaggerated notions of the village’s community and each foundering on the villages’ fissiparous tendencies.”105 This can certainly be said true about post-independence India as well. Here, the village in India came to constitute once again a space to be imagined and re-imagined for political purposes. The Etawah pilot project is one attempt at creating such a utopia. In transforming the village communities of Mahewa, the planners of the Etawah pilot projects etched into the villages a conception of that ideal community whose positive influences would radiate outwards, gradually but nonetheless surely, to the rest of the district, province and even country. What’s more, the Etawah pilot projects situated the villagers of Mahewa right in the middle of a greater national discourse of rural development and national reconstruction. Considerable attention was focused on the Etawah pilot project, in the media both in India and abroad, as a pioneering initiative of its time. And in the process, the Etawah pilot project incited villagers to imagine the possibilities of being part of a nation-state called India.

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2.2 The Conquest of the Village

Narratives and accounts of nineteenth-century India are dominated by descriptions of the village. To European scholars, colonial administrators and traders, India’s many villages that scattered across its expansive landscape represented a fascinating, yet strangely archaic world, and the villagers who inhabited them an odd sort of people from some long gone past. In a British Parliamentary inquiry of 1810, Sir Charles Metcalfe, then acting governor general of India wrote:

“The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds revolution…but the village community remains the same…This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has, I conceive, contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the peoples of India, through all the revolutions and changes which they have suffered.”106

Not all colonial administrators shared Metcalfe’s understanding of the village. Nonetheless, the idea of the village as the basic unit of Indian civilization endured, becoming an influential and dominant representation of what India was. Scholars and agents of Anglo-French imperial formation, as Ronald Inden points out, continued this thread of western thought, understanding the village as being an irreducible unit, the “atom” of what India was.107 In this manner India, with all her richness and vibrancy of culture and history, was thus essentialised in western thought simply as a land of “village republics;” a civilization truly rural in nature as so described by L.S.S O’Malley (1874-1941), civil servant and Census Commissioner.108

It certainly could well be that this preoccupation with the village in the Western study of India during the nineteenth century was because such communities were indeed preeminent and ubiquitous within India’s vast landscape. There is no denying that there were such archipelagos of villages scattered across India. The country was still predominantly agrarian in nature, and there are certainly many accounts of pre-

106 Sir Charles Metcalfe in William Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence of Charles Lord Metcalfe*, (London: Smith Elder and Co. 65 Cornhill, 1858)
107 Inden; pp.130-131
colonial Indian history that detail in depth the village life of the time. However, as Inden poignantly argues in *Imagining India*, this proclivity of European scholars and colonial administrators to constitute India as a rural civilization of villages was not merely descriptive, but also “the efforts of the British to *deconstitute* the Indian state.”¹⁰⁹ For in effectively reducing Indian civilization, with her many different intermediate forms and spaces of living, to simply a land of villages, the British colonizers endeavored to exude an image of India as being a primitive ancient land, needing and wanting their enlightened superior guidance. Indeed, such ethnographic works by the likes of Metcalfe and O’Malley proved extremely useful for western social scientists who developed new orientalist theories of society and history during the nineteenth and early twentieth century that allowed for the rationalization of European colonial dominance over an Indian subcontinent. Among them, Sir Henry Sumner Maine, a comparative historian on jurisprudence, became particularly influential, his work coming to constitute a “hegemonic” and authoritative source of knowledge in understanding India’s villages and society.

At the heart of Maine’s theories lay the theory that society fit into a linear evolutionary framework of progression from collective to more individual forms of property ownership. Within this basic theory, therefore, the idea of the village as a form of land holding based on self-contained inwardly turned communal beings was a primitive ancient form of social organization. As evidenced by the already developed West, the “modern”, on the other hand, rested upon a society constituted by a group of unified “outwardly turned, competitive individuals” with contracts at its essence of association.¹¹⁰

Such scholarship was exceptionally important in how the West came to view other societies and countries. Indeed scholarship like that of Maine’s enabled British colonizers to constitute a certain distinct and hierarchical dichotomy between “the ancient” and “the modern” forms of social organization; a dichotomy that displaced, as Inden would say, a complex and rich India with an “ancient” and barbaric

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¹⁰⁹ Inden, p.132  
¹¹⁰ Inden; p. 308
polity, that would serve in opposition to the “modern” civilized British colonizers. It thus allowed the British Raj to look down upon the Indian village with a certain condescending fascination. In their eyes, the Indian villages were the equivalents of the post-tribal, agricultural village of the Germanic tribes of medieval Western Europe. The village symbolized, to borrow Dewey’s words, “the world men had lost – an ‘alternative society,’ compulsively compared with the present for signs of ‘progress’ or ‘degeneration.’” If the recognition of land ownership was the standard by which one could measure how advanced a civilization was, the lack of recognition exhibited then “a recoil to barbarism.”

The idea of “village community” therefore came to fit perfectly into the broader British colonial construction of Orientalist theory. Literary theorist Edward Said argues in his book *Orientalism* that the orientalist project “generated authoritative and essentializing statements about the East and was characterized by a mutually supporting relationship between power and knowledge.” Using Said’s concept of orientalism then, India’s villages became one such generative site for “the othering” of Indian subcontinent. While Europe was modern, urban, secular, scientific and rational, India was appropriated by her colonial rulers and scholars as being rural, collective, religious, and irrational. In this manner, this “othering” framed India, her people and society, in dialectic opposition to the “modern” represented by Europe.

This imperial construct of the village had far-reaching implications into post-independence nationalist discourse. The essentialist categories of India’s colonial past ironically continued to inhabit the thoughts of India’s nationalist leaders. This was certainly true of Nehru, whose understanding of the village and the city as spaces reveal traces of those essentialist oriental constructs of colonial ethnologies. Nehru never contested the imperialist duality of ancient, modern, village and city; he bought into them. Much like his

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111 Inden, p.132
112 Dewey; p.292
113 Dewey; p.310
115 Ibid
colonial forefathers, Nehru too saw the village as an “alternate society” in dialectic opposition with the modern industrialized societies of the West. It was here in the village that the backwardness of India, its penchant for religiosity, a certain mysticism and strict adherence to old social structures and traditions, all bred. In a letter to Gandhi, Nehru described the villages of rural India as “backwards intellectually and culturally,” inhabited by “narrow-minded” “ignorant” “foolish” and “simple folk.” And it was precisely for these reasons that Nehru disliked the villages of rural India. In fact, as he admits even in his Autobiography in 1936, Nehru never quite identified with the village, its people, culture and environment. He had always been quite self-conscious of his urban, cosmopolitan and bourgeoisie upbringing. And as such, in his eyes, India’s future lay in the country’s industrializing and cosmopolitan cities, the indispensable hub for a productive genuine modernity that would spread beyond its enclaves through to the whole society.

Gandhi, on the other hand, denounced such western frameworks of thinking altogether. Gandhi strongly believed that India’s future lay in her return to the village. To Gandhi, the colonial city was the site where colonialism had to be defeated; however, “the point of victory was not to simply move into the citadels of the departed imperial power.” Freedom and true independence for Indians meant rejecting the city and recovering their enfeebled true civilization in the sanctuary of its villages, where the true India lay. As he wrote in a letter to Nehru, if India was going to recover its lost self and attain true freedom, “then sooner or later the fact must be recognized that people will have to live in villages, not towns, in huts, not in palaces.” He believed that it was only in the simplicity of village life that the ideal dream community of truth and non-violence could be realized; two values without which, he believed, “there can be nothing but destruction of humanity.” Gandhi saw India’s villages not as they presently were, but as they could

116 Nehru, “Nehru’s reply to Gandhi,” in Anthony J. Parel, Hind Swaraj and Other Writings,(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); p.152
118 Khilnani, pp.126-127
119 Gandhi to Nehru in Parel, Hind Swaraj and Other Writings, p.150
120 Ibid.
and should be; of a community that “contained intelligent human beings” where “there [would] be neither plague, nor cholera nor smallpox” and where “men and women will be free and able to hold their own against anyone in the world.”  

His vision for India’s future wanted the construction of these harmonious and self-contained village communities, uncorrupted by the modern life of the city, by industrialization, urbanization and other ills of western technology.

This Gandhian vision for new India was not something Nehru shared. In a letter to Gandhi in 1945, he wrote “I do not understand why a village should embody truth and non-violence.”  

To return to the village would mean to return to a more “primitive” time period, he argued. Still, despite Nehru’s distaste for the village and all the backwardness and tradition it represented, Nehru’s *Discovery of India* also conveys most powerfully that Nehru too saw the village, what it had been, as an authentic symbol of the Indian country, “an organic and vital unit,” the very atom of Indian civilization. With British colonial rule came the destruction of these village communities. They had effectively become, to borrow Nehru’s words, “a derelict area, just a collection of mud huts and odd individuals.”  

The village lost its vibrancy, its organicity, and that culture of “communal undertaking and cooperative effort” that had lain at the heart of these communities. There was a need for that collectivism to be recovered, though on a much larger and higher level, the level of the nation-state. And in Nehru’s eyes, the villagers and the village community needed to be integrated into this idea. Only then could an idea of a new and independent nation-state called India be even conceivable.

There was also a practical functionality to the village that could not be denied. The village was still a vital economic unit within India’s greater economy; a critical piece that could certainly be used to answer the

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122 Ibid.
124 Ibid
many social and economic problems affecting the country.\textsuperscript{125} 82.7 percent of the country’s population lived in these villages. 73 percent of Indians were employed there. They were the country’s main suppliers of food stuff; not to mention a critical backbone to the country’s overwhelmingly agrarian economy. The villages certainly could not go ignored when thinking of the country’s greater reconstruction. If India was to reap the rewards of lasting progress, it could not simply denounce the village and invest in cities or in large-scale mechanization and industrialization, development needed to take place in the rural communities too. As Nehru later conceded “the fundamental problem of India is not Delhi or Calcutta or Bombay but the villages of India…We want to urbanise the village, not take away the people from the villages to towns.”\textsuperscript{126}

It was for these reasons that even before India acquired political independence in 1947, India’s rural villages became a main focus of the State and the primary objective of national planning. It became once again a symbol of the real India that needed to be “recovered, conquered, and transformed.” There was a need to substantially increase the country’s agricultural production, to find a way to become self-sufficient in food supply, to create a balanced refugee resettlement plan, and to raise the standard of living\textsuperscript{127} of living of the country. Politically, there was a need to somehow reunify the country; to insert the imagining of being part of a collective nation-state within the village communities. The answers to all of India’s problems lay not in the citadels of the economic and political power, but rather in the true backbone of India, her villages. If the villages of India did not dawn that much desired garb of modernity and development neither would the rest of the country.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{125} S.C Dube, \textit{India’s Changing Villages: Human Factors in Community Development}, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958); p.9
\textsuperscript{126} Ravi Kalia, Chandigarh: The Making of An Indian City (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). P.30
\textsuperscript{127} Standard of living broadly included not only the provision of adequate food, shelter, and clothing, but also such social services and civic amenities as are indispensable and integral part of modern civilized life and work.
\textsuperscript{128} Dube, pp.10-23
American architect and town planner Albert Mayer too was of the similar belief. He saw the multitude of India’s economic and social problems, not as distinct and separate, but rather as a whole with its various aspects ultimately interlinked to India’s villages. During their chance encounter in October 1945, Mayer proposed “the immediate, careful setting-up of pilot projects to accumulate experience, to serve as models to be examined, and to act as practical training settings.”129 His approach of utilizing modern technology and scientific terminology, as well as his use of an empirical outlook that called for time-tables, targets, surveys, experimentation and testing, all greatly appealed to Nehru. He was also impressed by Mayer’s humanity and deep sympathy for India when “the average American might well feel disgusted with many things in India.”130 So when India regained some political autonomy from the British in the province of the United Provinces in 1946, Nehru seized the opportunity to put their theories into action. Writing on behalf of the G.B. Pant, the premier of the United Provinces in May 1, 1946, Nehru invited Mayer to return once again to India to enact his village reconstruction plans and advise the U.P government on “various matters relating to planning, village reconstruction and the ordered development of community life more especially in our rural area.”131

The redevelopment project conceived here at the initial stages was primarily in terms of construction, spatial organization, and planning of these Indian villages. Mayer believed that the present village layouts of India “with its excessive winding roads, useless and unsanitary open areas, and malaria-breeding depressions,” were generally uneconomical and not conducive to become that much desired productive improved village.132 And it was for this reason that Mayer envisioned establishing what he called “model” villages; villages that would exhibit the exemplary qualities of good housing, sanitation, and sound village structure. The functional planning and physical rebuilding of rural community life would improve

129 Albert Mayer, Letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, December 19, 1945. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 8, Folder 1], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
130 Nehru, Letter to Albert Mayer, January 14, 1946. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 8, Folder 1], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
131 Nehru, Letter to Albert Mayer, May 1, 1946. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 8, Folder 1], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
132 Mayer, Pilot Project India, p. 27
rural India, “negatively to remove as far as possible the handicaps to proper development of the individual and the community, positively to foster such development.”\textsuperscript{133} With the building of such model villages, the hope was that the rest of the country would follow by example, through a process of “radiating demonstrations.”\textsuperscript{134}

Mayer certainly had quite an extensive list of things in mind to rebuild; perhaps more than was realistically and financially feasible. In a letter in August 1946, Mayer ambitiously wrote to Premier G.B Pant that he desired to:

“create better housing, a system of all-weather roads to a marketing centre, sewage disposal, drainage, water supply, mosquito and malaria control, irrigation, dispensary or other health service, schools, a community house for recreation, warehouse for storage of crops, possibly small building for cottage industries and for central storage of co-operatively used farm implements.”\textsuperscript{135}

It was only through such reorganization and rebuilding of the physical frame of the village, that the social life of the village too could be changed for the better. At least that is what Mayer believed to be true initially.

In late-1946, Mayer undertook a three month initial exploration of the villages of the United Provinces to see whether his envisioned pilot project would be feasible and just how to go about putting such a large-scale project into action. It was during this trip that it became quite evident and convincing that such a proposal for physical reconstruction of India’s villages was premature; that his pilot projects would not have any real roots or long-term effects if artificially pushed forth.

Significant development work, both on a district and provincial level, had already been underway by the time of Mayer’s arrival in 1946. Government sponsored initiatives like the Grow More Food campaign

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid. p. 9
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., p 6
\textsuperscript{135} Albert Mayer, “Preliminary Outline For Village Planning and Reconstruction”, December 2, 1946. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 2, Folder 17], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
instituted in 1942 endeavored to increase agricultural productivity and restore India’s self-sufficiency in food grains. In the United Province, a Department of Rural Development was established in 1938 responsible for executing a program of rural reconstruction throughout the State. Despite such significant efforts made and expenditure spent, agricultural productivity had barely increased and neither had the standards of living of rural India. Near-famine conditions were the reality in many parts of the country, and threats of famine were present in many more.

Indeed, during his time traveling in the United Provinces, Mayer saw the remnants of many of these efforts in the brick roads, latrines, and other such programs instituted; however, he also saw how many of these initiatives now lay neglected and no longer in use. In a letter in 1946, he recounts to his friends home in the US, of foot baths for cattle that had been built in one village to contain the outbreak of diseases such as hoof and mouth disease. Seven years later, villagers had no notion of what those structures were for.136 Clearly, substantial actions had been taken and efforts made in the years after independence, but there was very little conception of fitting such projects to the people living in these villages.137 This raised an important question to Mayer of how to relate the ideas and visions of the Etawah pilot project to the felt needs of the people themselves. If people didn’t know how to use or didn’t care to use the programs that had been initiated then however fine the intentions, the value of their use would be small or even negligible. It became clear to the planners of the Etawah project that above all else, what was most needed was to somehow imbed the work into the people’s minds, into their feelings, expectations and needs.138 Only then could they achieve more permanent lasting and real successes for such rural development programs; or so Mayer came to strongly believe.

136 Albert Mayer, Pilot Project India, p. 18
137 Albert Mayer, Newsletters to American Friends, December 11, 1946 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 12, Folder 19], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
Such an objective necessitated a medium, an entry point through which the ideals and importance of
development ideology could be translated into the language and symbols of the people; a means through
which the ideals of modernity and science could be accepted as the ideals too of villagers.\textsuperscript{139} Agriculture,
as the overwhelming industry and “prime concern” of those living in these communities, came to be the
project’s dominant focal point. It became a platform through which modernity and that scientific temper
could be slowly instilled within the “backwards” people of rural India. However, agriculture served
another significant purpose. Mayer believed that agriculture, as that exception of an occupation that could
be pursued by anyone irrespective of caste, would also serve to be that space of democratic discourse and
participation that could not be fostered elsewhere. In other words, therefore, Mayer and his associates
believed that agriculture would create that strong social and economic base for that much desired self-
sustaining development. It was in this manner that the initial purely architectural village planning
proposal of 1946 became replaced by a greater all-around development focused on primarily
agriculture.\textsuperscript{140}

2.3 Of Changing Wants and Desires: Mobilizing the Peasants of Etawah

The Etawah pilot projects certainly endeavored to improve agricultural productivity and the standards of
living of these villages; however such objectives should perhaps be better understood as the consequence
of the project rather than its actual aim and intent. What the project really endeavored to do, as defined by
Mayer and his associates in their final proposal approved by the United Provinces government in
September of 1948, was “to make maximum progress…in developing the people’s own capacities and
initiative…and at the same time to alert them for the future.”\textsuperscript{141} In other words, the core principle behind
the Etawah pilot project was this desire to broaden the villagers’ outlook and stimulate their desire for

\textsuperscript{139} Albert Mayer, Newsletters to American Friends, December 11, 1946 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 12, Folder
19], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

\textsuperscript{140} Albert Mayer, “Etawah Pilot Development Project: Second Interim Progress Report,” August 13, 1949 in Albert
A. Mayer Papers, [Box 2, Folder 20], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

\textsuperscript{141} Albert Mayer, “Working with the People,” Cooper Foundation Lecture, Swathmore College, February 24, 1952
in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 35, Folder 11], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago
Library.
something different and better. Only then could any form of self-sustaining positive and enduring development take place.

There is something to be said about what this most essential principle of the Etawah pilot project evokes. The image of setting these “backwards” villagers on the road to progress that is engraved and reiterated in every project proposal and plan is not so dissimilar from the moral purpose of the British, who too had endeavored to restore that “lacking” morality and civility within Indian society. With such a civilizing ethos and mission at heart, Mayer and his team of carefully selected American and Indian specialists, much like the British colonizers before them, set out into the heartland of rural India in hopes of demonstrating and instituting their conception of development and of “civilization.” And it is precisely how the planners of the Etawah pilot project, in their limited capacity, endeavored to radically change the village and the villagers – their strongly held beliefs, ideals, practices and traditions -- that I would like to further explore here.

A number of areas within the United Provinces were considered for Mayer’s Pilot Projects. However, certain important considerations had to be made in the process of site selection. First and foremost, it was important that the location chosen be an “average” district; a typical region that presented neither the worst nor the best of the conditions of rural India. Secondly, he desired a district where “the cooperatives [were] going along reasonably well, where officials and non-officials [were going to be] interested in such work.” These two qualities were especially important as they would assure a certain level of success and future replicability of the project.

Mahewa block within Etawah district, United Provinces, in this respect, presented the ideal location for the initiation of Mayer’s pilot project. There was, for one, considerable enthusiasm among the local

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142 Albert Mayer, “Proposal for Planning, Coordination and Development for Immediate Application in One District,” January 1, 1947. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 2, Folder 17], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
government officials for Mayer’s projects. But more importantly for the successful future expansion and replication of the Etawah project, Mahewa covered a cross section of physical, social, economic and human problems typical of Etawah and the United Provinces as a whole. “Not adequately intensive cultivation, covered by canals but with minor irrigation problems, inferiority of cattle, insanitary village dwelling sites, poor or impassable or nonexistent village roads” as described by Mayer and his associates in their Specific Program For Pilot Intensive Project in Planning, Development, And Development Coordination In District Etawah in September of 1948, were just some of the dire conditions that needed urgent addressing.  

Figure 2 – Map of India, Uttar Pradesh, and Etawah district where the Etawah pilot project took place

Albert Mayer, “Specific Program For Pilot Intensive Project in Planning, Development, And Development Coordination In District Etawah,” September, 1948 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 2, Folder 18], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
These villages of Mahewa were much like the rest of rural India; deeply respectful and rooted in its traditions, customs and religions.\textsuperscript{144} There, the caste system was the singular most important organizing principle, governing much of the daily village life from the organization of kinship, territorial units, and occupation, to even the everyday interactions. Graded and separated, caste groups nevertheless lived cheek-by-jowl, interlinked by well-defined expectations and obligations which integrated them into a complex and intricate village social system.\textsuperscript{145} As Ramachandra Guha observes in \textit{India After Gandhi}, “the agriculturists who made up perhaps two-thirds of the rural population depended crucially on the service and artisanal castes: on blacksmiths, barbers, scavengers and the like.”\textsuperscript{146} And these farmers, peasants, shepherds, fishermen, weavers all lived and worked as their forefathers had done; their practices and techniques honed and passed down to them from generation to generation. It was perhaps for this reason that villagers were particularly wary and reluctant to accept anything new, let alone from a complete foreigner like Albert Mayer. However, if the Etawah pilot project was to succeed and be self-sustaining, that necessitated the acceptance and adoption, on the part of villagers, of values, beliefs, new practices and techniques of the project that were very different from their own. The question was just how.

For Nehru, the answer lay in India’s religions; in what they were and how they made Indians feel. He observed how religious objects were symbolically embodied all over the country whether large, small, intimate or public in the homes, small village fairs, and temples of communities. If only the same intense emotions and allegiances that villagers seemed to hold for their traditions and religions could be transferred to more productive means; a new pseudo-religion perhaps that would be based upon the ideals of modernity, development and scientific temper. In place of its religious monuments, Nehru dreamed to erect the new temples of modern independent India; the great hydro-electric dams with their gushing waters, the huge steel plants, the fertilizer plants which enhance earth’s fertility. Tours would be

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\textsuperscript{145} Ibid
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid
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organized on a mass scale to the present-day equivalents in India, he suggested to Mayer. These great concrete and steel monuments that represented all the ingenuity and advancement of man-kind would be the new objects of veneration, pride and allegiance of the people; the sites for a new kind of pilgrimage. They too would become garlanded images in every village center, “side by side with the Shivas, the Krishnas, the Ganeshas, the familiar pictures of the Hindu pantheon.” From these new temples of India, economic and social progress made would radiate out like ripples from a stone in a pond.

It was certainly a more romantic idea than anything practical or feasible. Still, the imagery it evoked was certainly a rather attractive one. And it had resonance with Mayer who took a liking to the idea of building a new pseudo religion of development and modernity to which the people would feel great allegiance to. “Imagine what the educational, emotional and galvanizing effect could be if the scheme were executed on a determined, massive, continuous scale,” Mayer wrote of Nehru’s vision in his paper on social and economic development in India. If the ideals and ethics of their development work could take even some of the form of that affective force of religion; if such values could be translated into the feelings of India’s villagers, their work would be sure to take off on its own. And it was perhaps for this reason that the Etawah pilot project began to take on certain qualities of Nehru’s vision.

Not only did Mayer become preoccupied with changing the thinking and feelings of villagers, he became absorbed with the idea of building the ideal village, that new and modern temple shall we say, equipped with all the modern techniques and equipments. After all, to try to meet all the needs or anything remotely close, of the thousands of villages making up the United Provinces would be close to impossible; such an attempt would only dilute any positive initiatives and efforts made. The key, Mayer believed, lay instead

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147 Albert Mayer, “Social Analysis and National Economic Development in India” Pacific Affairs 35 (1962); pp.138-139
148 Albert Mayer, “Proposal for Planning, Coordination and Development for Immediate Application in One District,” January 1, 1947 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 2, Folder 17], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
149 Albert Mayer, “Social Analysis and National Economic Development in India;” pp.138-139
in the idea of selection and concentration; of attaining progress in a limited number of villages. As he saw it, concentrated efforts and success would boost village self-confidence, and lead to a realization of other needs. And in funneling all their energies into these chosen villages, Mayer envisioned making these villages into the sites for a new kind of pilgrimage; one that would showcase the benefits of their work and results, but perhaps more importantly would also enlist others to join in on their initiative. Peasants and farmers from across the province would travel to see these Pilot Project villages whose reverence and faith rested upon the new technologies and techniques for agriculture and for general community life. In seeing their practices at work, these visitors, these “pilgrims”, too would be converted to their “faith” of science and technology. They too would be moved to desire and emulate the practices and techniques of these villages. And in returning home, they would then spread what they had seen, what they had learned, and to an extent endeavor to emulate such methods in their own land, or so Mayer hoped. In other words, it would be from the Etawah project’s villages that the new sensibilities of modernity and development would radiate outwards to the rest of the country. These new villages would “lift the habits and the ‘sights’ of the villager, so that he will become accustomed to living” higher and better standards of life.150

It was for this reason that of the seventy villages making up Mahewa, only a third of these villages were selected to undergo Mayer’s development programs. The chosen villages were all of medium size, with a population of less than 1,000 people.151 But perhaps more importantly, the villages for Mayer’s pilot project had to be of two broad categories: the first were villages that were mostly of harijans152 and “other backward” classes; the second were villages predominantly inhabited by agriculturists. So it was decided that in these twenty-two villages, Mayer’s development initiatives would be focused and concentrated. And the successes of their initiatives Mayer believed would radiate and spread outwards. These would, in

150 Albert Mayer, Newsletter to Indian colleagues, August 4, 1952
151 Albert Mayer, Village Replanning Reports, undated. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 5, Folder 12], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
152 Harijans - Untouchables
Nehru’s words, be the new “temples” of modern India, the sites of veneration and pilgrimage of all peasants.

The Etawah pilot project also rested upon a certain understanding of the Indian villager and farmer. Horace Holmes, the Agriculture Adviser to the UP Governments in the Etawah pilot project, articulated most clearly this perception of the villager during his talk given to some prospective Village Level Workers at an Etawah training camp. The farmer in every country, whether in Etawah district of India, or in the rural areas of the United States, France, or Mexico are all much the same, he said. They are all conservative; “unwilling to accept the advice of every person who comes along advising him what to do. They are not unwilling to make changes, to find improvements which will benefit them.” They do not listen to arguments, however good they may sound, because “they have found that mother nature does not listen to such arguments.” Instead of just hearing, they want to see results: they are perfectly willing to accept improvements, but they want to be shown that such “improvements” will really be improvement. From such an understanding of villagers and farmers, Mayer and his associates strongly believed that there needed to be an opportunity for villagers to see what they could accomplish. Those living in these communities needed to be convinced that the techniques and practices introduced by Mayer were better than what they already had. The technique of saturated demonstrations attempted to do just that. They served to point out to the villagers, as Mayer wrote, “their needs and demonstrating possible solutions.”

Demonstration programs were conducted by multi-purpose development agents called the Village Level Workers (VLW), who were most often villagers themselves. As the chief field workers of the Etawah

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153 Horace Holmes, “Principles of Extension Work,” a talk delivered to extension trainees at Mahewa Training Camp, February 9, 1950 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 12, Folder 18], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid.
pilot project, they worked at the ground level directly interacting with the cultivators, farmers and those living in these village communities. The VLWs received technical training before engaging in actual development work. Through a combination of lectures, practical field work, and trainee-led discussions under the guidance from various field experts, the VLWs learned simple public health measures such as vaccination, malaria control, and methods of well purification; they were instilled with the importance of the “village approach”; in the value and methods of group discussion; in the importance of following up any projects initiated. Upon receiving this technical training, the VLWs would then go out to their assigned villages to conduct their saturated demonstrations.

Work conducted under this method was primarily agricultural in nature. Mayer and his associates believed that improvements in agriculture, “which occupies the greatest area in the village economy and is the mainspring of cultural life, public health,” would also in turn lead to positive benefits in other areas of the village community as well; expanding village horizons and the participation of its people. As such, during the initial stages of the project, demonstration programs primarily focused on introducing the merits and use of new agricultural practices and techniques such as new seeds, chemical fertilizers and green manuring. With the villagers looking on, such methods were tried on sample plots as the VLWs demonstrated and explained. Limited quantities of these improved seeds and chemical fertilizers were made available at the basic seed stores for those villagers indicating interest to acquire either by loan, purchase or even exchange with their usual planting seeds. Supervision was then given to the growing fields of certified seed, and special care exercised in the harvesting, and storage to prevent damaging. Demonstration programs also introduced new farming implements and equipments, from small breaking

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157 Letter: Albert Mayer to S.S. Khera, on problems of training extension workers in Uttar Pradesh, April 1, 1953 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 2, Folder 25], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
159 Mayer, *Pilot Project India*; pp. 63-83
plows, heavy breaking plows, to chaff cutters; all of which were made available to villagers for loan for a specified period.\textsuperscript{160}

Activities under this method of demonstration were not restricted to the field of agriculture. In fact, with the gradual acceptance of the Etawah pilot project initiatives, considerable work was done in other areas as well. Capitalizing on the villagers’ good will, confidence and enthusiasm gained through the successes of the agricultural demonstration programs, the Etawah project endeavored next to pave the way for acceptance and demand for other perceived “benefits,” that were less readily understood by the villagers.\textsuperscript{161} Much still needed to be done to improve the health conditions of these villages: the acceptance of inoculations, sanitary water supply; the treatment of stagnant ponds and other sources of malarial infection; the clean-up campaigns in the villages including controlling house-hold pests; and the vaccinations against small-pox. Housing and village replanning projects too, though limited, also began to take place as the planners of Etawah found some gradual interest on the part of villagers to improve their homes.\textsuperscript{162}

However, as Mayer and his team soon found, converting and channeling the wills and efforts of the villagers and peasants was no simple task. Demonstrating the effectiveness of their techniques was one thing, mobilizing the peasants and villagers to actually adopt their new “improved” techniques and practices was a totally different matter all together. At the beginning, the project gravitated towards the wealthier villagers, those few people who could afford to be more adventurous and take the chances involved in using the project’s demonstrated techniques.\textsuperscript{163} Yet, even when peasants and villagers too began to take up such techniques, there was still the problem of sustaining such practices. In one instance,

\textsuperscript{160}Ibid., pp. 83-86
\textsuperscript{161} Albert Mayer, “Proposal for Planning, Coordination and Development for Immediate Application in One District,” January 1, 1947. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 2, Folder 17], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
\textsuperscript{162} Mayer, \textit{Pilot Project India}, p.52
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid. p.224
plans had been made to collect new and improved wheat seeds at harvest for cultivations in the following year. However, the problem was getting these cultivators to take the necessary measures to assure that the seeds used in the following year would be purely those of the new improved seed type they had introduced. The rather disgruntled Etawah planners complained in their interim reports about how even with premium payment for their trouble, the peasants stubbornly continued to also plant seeds that they had been using. As a result, the seed wheat target of the original plan to revert cultivators to using purely the new improved wheat was therefore achieved only in small fraction.164

In other areas too the Etawah planners were met with resistance. In another case described in the interim reports, preventive measures against malaria and cholera were offered in what the Etawah planners had seen to be areas that were in much need of such treatments. However, as the people there saw no need for the time and expense involved in such prophylactic measures, such programs to combat these two diseases were not pursued any further. 165

While Mayer and Nehru’s desire to fully channel some of that affective force of India’s religions into the rationale and scientific endeavors of the Etawah project may not have been fully realized, the Etawah project certainly saw its share of triumphs. At its end in 1952, average agriculture yield per acre in the project’s twenty-two villages increased by 50 to 60 percent since the project’s start. The benefits of its activities were not restricted to the field of agricultural improvement. Mayer and his team noted some marked improvements in health, literacy, and communication too. Small pox vaccinations for one became a regular job for the VLWs that they would conduct in the villages yearly.166

The idea of the Etawah pilot project was perhaps not something wholly unique. Much like other rural development programs before it, the Etawah pilot project was a village development program that

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164 Mayer, *Pilot Project India*, p. 240
165 Ibid.
166 Ibid., p.269
endeavored to better the dire conditions of rural India, to increase agricultural production and raise standards of living within these communities. In transforming the village, the Etawah pilot project endeavored to make the abstractions of Nehru’s visions for modernity and development material. However, as Elizabeth Converse too notes in her article of Mayer’s initiative in 1951, the Etawah pilot project deserves special attention because of the principles and methods of operation worked out by Mr. Mayer and his associates. In fact one of the most unique components of the project was its emphasis on its democratic practices used for the initiation of the project. And in its endeavors to institute a democratic practice within the organization of the project itself, the Etawah pilot project, in many way most ambitiously set out to change a second quality of India’s villages: its hierarchical social structures. And it is to this aspect of the Etawah pilot project that I now direct my attention to.

2.4 Inserting a Democratic Practice

Within the framework of the Etawah project also emerged a fascinating experiment of democracy. In fact, a critical component of the project came to be a principle that Mayer called “inner administrative democratization.” A considerable amount of Mayer’s numerous proposals and plans for the Etawah project are dedicated solely to this principle and just how it was going to be implemented within the project’s structure. Fundamentally, the idea was based on the importance and necessity for popular participation of people at all levels of the project’s work. From villagers, project workers, to even government officials, all those involved with the project needed to be included in the discourse whether that be in the process of its planning and implementation. If properly thought out and practiced, this idea of inner democratization, Mayer strongly believed, would open new vistas of human interaction among project workers, villagers and citizen, mobilizing vigor and initiative at all level. It would unlock hidden energies and initiatives that would allow the project to self-continue and self-propagate even after Mayer

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167 Elizabeth Converse, “Pilot Development Projects in India,” *Far Eastern Survey* 20 (1951); p.22
and his team’s departure from Mahewa.\textsuperscript{168} Nehru too shared Mayer’s belief of the importance of such democratic practices within the project’s framework. With the aim of development in mind, people needed to be more involved not only with the execution but also with the formulation of the plan, he believed. The government was to provide technical aid and financial assistance, but it was ultimately up to the people themselves to recognize their needs, and to evolve adequate leadership for their own welfare and progress.\textsuperscript{169}

In this conscious effort to insert a democratic practice within the project’s structure, among those working on the Etawah Pilot Project initiative, Mayer tried to challenge the very hierarchical social structure found in India’s government and village life. Here in the new more superior villages of the Pilot Project, people would not be defined and separated by various societal collectivities; of religion, language, dialects, caste, culture or ethnicity. Rather, there would be an intermingling of people; a certain cooperative nature that spanned across different ethnic, religious, and caste groups. And regardless of their individual identities, in Etawah, one would be free, in theory, to voice concerns, opinions and suggestions. That was the type of environment that Mayer and his team desired to achieve in Etawah.

Yet, the exercise of such democratic practices would also indelibly affect how peasants and farmers saw themselves in relation to that still amorphous concept of the nation-state. By in including these peasants, villagers and higher officials in the planning and implementation process of the project, the project endeavored to also effectively insert these communities and their inhabitants into the larger national discourse of the country’s future reconstruction and development. It proved to be, in other words, a way to convey to the majority of India’s population, peasants, that grand vision for India’s modernity and development. By involving them in the project’s planning and implanting process, those visions, ideals

\textsuperscript{168} Albert Mayer, “Proposal for Planning, Coordination and Development for Immediate Application in One District,” January 1, 1947. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 2, Folder 17], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

\textsuperscript{169} Albert Mayer, Letter to G.BV Pant, on plans for rural development in U.P, India, August 2, 1946, in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 8, Folder 12-17 ], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
and goals of the country too became their own, inscribed in their very feelings and thinking. And in doing so, the villagers were suddenly confronted with the idea that they were part of a much greater collectivity that extended beyond their local village community; a collectivity known as the independent nation-state of India.

Discussions among project workers became particularly central in the insertion and exercise of democracy. They took the form of weekly staff meetings during which time Etawah workers from Village Level Workers up were encouraged and expected to participate and discuss. In theory, every project worker was to be given a chance to be heard and have their views discussed. Decisions and targets were to be decided upon jointly, which once reached would be stuck to, unless any were found unworkable and thus changed for another agreed decision. The purpose of these meetings was for one thing to elicit from the project’s workers, information about the strength or weaknesses of the programs in order that they may improve its working and effectiveness. But for another, such democratic practice were important in creating a certain feeling of pride and allegiance for the project, its ideals and objectives. To the project’s lower level workers, social contact with higher level officials would heighten enthusiasm and vigor, as they would feel as though their presence was being valued and respected. To the higher project officials, the benefits of such democratic practices were undeniable; such up-down fluidity would keep them in touch with the happenings of the grass-roots level; allowing them also to think of more realistic goals and future plans. Out of such meetings, Mayer believed would come an atmosphere of true frankness and democracy; a safe environment where people would not fear to speak truthfully of their achievements and difficulties.

However, the project of inserting democratic practices did not end with the project’s workers themselves; the peasants living in these communities too were included in much of the discussion of the project’s

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170 Albert Mayer, Letter to K.B Bhatia on an administrative crisis at Etawah, December 24, 1951 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 2, Folder 22], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
planning and development. There was a need to listen and observe; to find out what the inhabitants of these communities were thinking and wanting; to learn from them generally; to find out what they thought of the Etawah project. For as Mayer conceded in a letter to Chief Secretary and Development Commissioner of the United Provinces, A.N Jha, “sometimes in our absorption with the positive aspects of ‘selling’ or persuading villagers to adopt our ideas, we overlook this very important aspect of learning ourselves.” As such, in addition to the staff meetings for the Etawah project workers, public opinion meetings were also set up for the peasants’ benefit. These small group public opinion meetings, Mayer believed, were of the utmost importance, not only to listen and to learn but more to further the intimate personal relationships between the project’s workers and those that lived in these villages.

![Figure 3 – Meeting among Etawah’s Project Workers](image)

171 Albert Mayer, Letters to Chief Secretary and Development Commissioner of Uttar Pradesh, A.N Jha in 1954 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 6, Folder 19], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

172 Albert Mayer, Newsletter to Indian colleagues, June 7, 1952 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 12, Folder 8], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
The conduct of such meetings was no simple affair. Strict ordinances outlined just how they were to proceed, and most importantly what and how questions were to be asked. The meetings were to be two to three hours and held in one village or each village level worker’s circle.173 The facilitators of the meeting, the investigating officer, played a key role in the smooth operation of the meeting. They had to be of “a sensitive and observant mind with deep sympathy and close understanding of people’s attitudes may devise a way to find out the real reactions of the people” as Mayer wrote in his five-page manual on how to conduct a public opinion meetings.174 Their role was not to ask long questionnaires, nor to analyze the data in a mechanical and detached manner. Rather they needed approach the people “with all humility and with an earnest desire to know.” 175 For, above all else, it was their job to discover which aspects of the work were not appealing, useful, or successful and why. They were to discover which aspects of the program were profitable to the people and which aspects attracted the most attention so that further initiative would be taken to exceed their targets.

The idea of inserting democratic practices within the villages of Mahewa was a rather ambitious and radical thought; certainly so, within a society where democratic practices were not particularly “natural” per se. In fact, as a number of political theorists like Sunil Khilnani have pointed out, constitutional democracy based on universal suffrage was not something that emerged in India by popular demand, not “wrested by the people” themselves.176 Democracy necessitated new identities and different perceptions which still had not fully developed in India. On the contrary, India was a society that was defined by its distinct social hierarchies of caste and religion. Within the village, the caste system created a vertical structure of hierarchically graded castes, kept permanently apart by complex observances related to the concept of ritual pollution. In its functioning, different castes even pursued distinctively different ways of

173 Albert Mayer, Newsletter to Indian colleagues, July 12 1953 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 12, Folder 8], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
174 Baij Nath Signh, “Public Opinion Studies,” dated from July 1952 through February 1955 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 5, Folder 17], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
175 Ibid
176 Khilnani, pp.33-34
life; for different castes have different sets of prescribed occupations, norms of conduct and expectations regarding standards of behavior. In other words, therefore, for the idea of inner democratization to fully work and function, that necessitated the creation of an individual secular identity in the first place.177

The idea of inner democratization never came to be fully actualized within the strict social structure of the village community. As Mayer would later concede in his letters to his Indian colleagues, “we do not always do as well in practice as we should.”178 For one thing, Mayer observed that the meetings were far too long with the project’s higher officials doing about 90 percent of the talking; half the time giving out instructions and “unproductively” arguing amongst themselves in the remaining time. What’s more, the higher officials generally sat together, often around a table, in a way that half of them had their backs to the Village Level Workers and villagers. Though seemingly simple, such mechanical aspects were actually highly significant; for how could the rearmost Village Level Workers feel themselves to be participants of the discussion in such a setup?

Still, this is not to say that the idea of inner democratization inserted into the Etawah project had no impact on the people. There were, in fact, significant changes in the attitudes and behaviors in the villagers of Mahewa. As Mayer recalled in a talk entitled “Working with the People,” at Swarthmore College, in the early days, the lower-level workers were extremely shy, and could scarcely believe they were expected to speak their ideas and their problems freely. Etawah’s planners nonetheless persisted and fostered this idea to the point that some wonderful discussions to which all contributed and ending in joint decisions eventually resulted. In an interim report, a specialist on cooperatives Andrew F. Braid wrote “members of different castes and groups have come more and more to sit in the educational meetings together.” During community meals, “all, high caste and low, ate together was a great step in this

177 Ibid.
178 Albert Mayer, Newsletter to Indian colleagues, July 12 1953.
direction” Braid noted. Mayer also saw significant changes in the attitudes and behaviors of the rural depressed classes. In many instances, he noted that they had become active, articulating and insisting upon their needs under their own leadership and initiative.

Among higher level officials too, Mayer noted some significant changes in their attitude and interaction with those occupationally below them. In another instance detailed in his newsletters to his American friends dated January 31, 1950, Mayer talks about a young man named Hussein, nicknamed “Mirza.”

Mirza was a gaunt, sensitive person who had worked a respectable position as the Sub-Deputy Inspector of School with large number of people under him and a reasonable degree of social respect. Normally, Mayer wrote such a man would have a retired with a pension, “he would have cut no ice with his superiors, would have made no appreciable imprint on anything.” Now, Mirza was a different man; the Etawah pilot project was a turning point, so described Mayer. He was now anxious for the ground-level real work of farming and agriculture, as well as for the close contact and interaction with diverse people. As Mirza put it, he found that power and control and hierarchy, all “hallmarks of his former career, were nothing compared with love and interest in the people, which is the prospect that his new work has opened to him.”

Nevertheless, there is a certain paradox that can be found in the Etawah project’s idea of inner democracy. For all the emphasis placed on the use of democratic practices and on the idea that work was to be done on the basis of the villagers’ initiatives and felt needs, the Etawah pilot project was in practice not as “democratic” of an enterprise as their planners had intended. Workers and villagers were certainly

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180 Albert Mayer, “Working with the People,” (Cooper Foundation Lecture, Swarthmore College, February 24, 1952). in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 35, Folder 11], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
181 Ibid
182 Albert Mayer, Newsletters to American Friends, January 31, 1950 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 12, Folder 22], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
expected to act upon “their felt needs” and to participate in the project; however, the Etawah pilot project ultimately rested upon the ideals that Nehru and other nationalist leaders saw to be fit for India. The project therefore ironically came to be more a project of mobilizing the wills and efforts of the peasants and villagers for state projects by informing them of their purpose within its framework. It would only be through mobilizing such peoples towards their project that the much desired goals of modernity and development characteristic of the First World countries be achieved in India as well.

It did not occur to Nehru, Mayer or his cohort of planners and VLWs that these villagers and peasants too had their own knowledges, skills and goals with which they endeavored to better their lives. The Etawah planners simply assumed that the villagers were inherently eager and ready to improve their lives, yet simply ignorant and uninformed of just how to do so. What Nehru and Mayer needed to do, as “the knowers”, was thus to enlighten those ignorant villagers to see what they could potentially accomplish with the right type of mind-set and technologies.¹⁸³ It was only then could they truly be lifted out of what they saw to be the morass of backwardness and underdevelopment of these village communities.

2.5 Conclusion

Albert Mayer’s work in Mahewa certainly had far-reaching implications. As a pioneer venture of its time, the Etawah project had a good deal to offer India; its successes as well as its failures had much to guide the future of India’s rural community development movement.¹⁸⁴ In years following its initiation, the Indian Government would use the Etawah Pilot Project as one of the models when the National Government decided in the country’s First Five Year Plan to emphasize rural development programs. In 1951, the Indian Government would also initiate their first nation-wide rural community development programs. They involved the initiation of fifteen pilot projects each consisting of 300 villages in the major states of India.

¹⁸³ Mayer, *Pilot Project India*, p.11
These were certainly exciting developments. However, Mayer was not particularly thrilled with the idea. He did not like the manner by which the Government was so precipitately expanding the community development projects. This rapid expansion he believed would be detrimental to the effectivity of the projects themselves. The pace at which the projects were being initiated everywhere in India far exceeded the rate at which he believed any adequate personnel could be assembled, and any relationships or real bond could be formed. To develop the human resources and community support necessary for such a large scale expansion of the Etawah pilot project initiative would require years of planning and preparation, Mayer argued.\textsuperscript{185}

Still, there is something to be said about how in the years after independence the village became the main concern of nationalist leaders, the State and of national planning programs. Certainly these village reconstruction programs like Mayer’s Etawah pilot project were initiated by a desire to change the dire conditions and realities of these communities; they stemmed from a practical and functional understanding that the village was an essential and vital social unit of India’s greater economy and society; they came out of a belief that if India’s rural villages did not develop and progress towards that Nehruvian idea of nationhood, neither would the rest of the country. However, this desire to change the village was also very much inspired by a desire to change how the village had been framed in colonial western thought by their British colonizers before them; a desire to change that image of being a land of village republics, a primate ancient civilization. I would argue therefore that the Etawah pilot project endeavored to reconstitute that “organic and vital” space that had been essentialised, devoured and imperialized by British colonizers. The Etawah pilot project was thus concerned with changing the past image of what India was and had been.

\textsuperscript{185} Mayer, *Pilot Project India*, p.312, p.330
However, it is of particular importance to point out that this focus on India’s rural villages was not out of some belief that these rural villages could possibly be the foundation upon which a new modern nation-state could be built. Indeed, underscoring these projects remained that persistent notion that villages were fundamentally backwards and primitive spaces. After all, in the minds of India’s nationalist leaders, the quality of being modern required the two pillars of urbanization and industrialisation. And so it was that they looked to the cities, to the urban spaces of India, to reinvent and refashion a new more modern identity. Chandigarh was one such city upon which that responsibility came to rest.
Chapter III: Imagining the City
The New Capital of Punjab

“I am of Chandigarh a living organ
Bred and brought up like its branch
A branch on which
Many a flower has bloomed
And in turn shed many seeds
From which new saplings take root.”
- Aditya Prakash, *Reflections on Chandigarh* 186

“Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.”
- Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 187

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I drew several parallels between how spaces of society, the dichotomy of the village and city were conceptualized in colonial and post-independence nationalist thought, to illustrate that Nehruvian India’s rejection of the colonial enterprise did not necessarily entail the rejection of those colonial impulses and ideas with which the colonizers had endeavored to change India. On the contrary, nationalist leaders of post-independence India, in many ways, appropriated the unsolicited and unintended gift of their British colonizers. They too came to understand the development of social space as a linear progression from village (*the ancient*) to urbanity and the city (*the modern*); and it was such understanding of spaces and the modern that in part served to be the driving force for large-scale village reconstruction projects like the Etawah pilot project. In understanding India’s village as a backwards and ancient form of social organization, Nehru and his cohorts too endeavored to urbanise and modernize these rural communities by imparting a new sensibility, one of science, technology and development.

If *the village* continued to pervade post-independence nationalist discourse in the image of an ancient and primitive society needing reform and development, the city conversely represented the opposite; it

187 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, (Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1972); p.44
represented the new, “the modern.” After all, cities had served as the stage for the great dramas of the recent centuries; as Gyan Prakash notes in *The Spaces of the Modern City*, “the triumphs of industrialization, capitalism, the erection of powerful state apparatus and the outbreaks of political insurrections, the exercise of colonial control and eruptions of anti-colonial movements” were all urban phenomena. Cities were the sites of innovation, improvisation, change, and development. They represented a distinctive form of civilization, the physical showpiece of the capabilities of human achievement in all its glory; of learning, communication, worldliness and ambition, all qualities in dialectic opposition from the country, “a place of backwardness, ignorance, and limitation.”

To Indian nationalist leaders like Nehru, the city thus came to represent the physical embodiment of modernity. Urbanization meant progress. And Nehru and his fellow technocrats desired that pulsating and vibrant heart of modernity. “There is the spirit and the genius of an ancient city, where history is embedded even in the dirty lanes…[I]t has a definite and positive atmosphere which you can feel in your bones,” so Nehru described Delhi. A certain fantasy of the city fabricated and spun since colonial rule therefore pervaded and persisted into post-independence India as well; the city was a space that promised new hope for people, knowledge, wealth, change and freedom. Urbanization, in other words, represented some kind of pinnacle of a nation’s social and political development. It was for this reason that in the years following independence and partition nationalist discourse became preoccupied, obsessed even with the city.

Their conviction in urbanization as a way to progress, and their confidence in planning to achieve that desired modernity all came together in a number of urban projects that took place throughout post-independence India. The country saw the expansion and redevelopment of the nation’s capital, New Delhi, and the drafting of numerous plans for industrial towns and state capitals for the new states Assam, [188 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp.2-4
189 Jawaharlal Nehru, in Sunil Khunali op. cit. pp.127-128]
Arunachal, Nagaland, and Haryana. Three completely new capital cities Gandhinagar, Bhubaneswar, and Chandigarh too were planned and built during this time as well. And it is Chandigarh the new capital of Punjab province that is of particular interest here. Conceived amid the crises and political confusion ensuing the subcontinent’s independence and partition, Chandigarh was not only designed to satisfy India’s deep-seated desires for modernity, but also to answer its practical social, economic and political problems. With the division of the Province of Punjab between India and Pakistan in 1947, the resulting allocation of several major cities including the magnificent capital city of Lahore to the new state of Pakistan, the Indian National Government soon saw a need for a new capital city for their newly separated Punjab state that would serve to be the new hub of political and economic activity in northern India.

Yet, Chandigarh’s significance goes beyond that of the provincial and even national level. In the world too, the building of this new Punjabi state capital represented an important unprecedented moment in history; the New Capital became one of the highest-profile city-building experiment of the twentieth century. And in that high-profile glittering newness of the project, Chandigarh served, to borrow Sunhil Khilnani’s words, “one of the foundational gestures through which India oriented and located itself in the modern world.” In other words, the new architecture and plan of the city created a visible and explicit image; an image that India too was a young, dynamic, and rapidly modernizing nation with an expanding economy and a growing industrial infrastructure. In post-war international world that had effectively divided into categories of First World and Third World, it was certainly a most powerful gesture for this “third world” country to make.

However, Chandigarh’s expression of modernity was no unified or singular expression of what that new society or nation was to look like. The city became more a unique and messy space where different

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visions of modernity and development came to be expressed, misunderstood, compromised and negotiated in their varying ways. Differences in visions and changes within national and local government made the planning of Chandigarh a much more complex process of collisions, collusions, and sacrifices, but such a process certainly became further complicated by Mayer and Corbusier, the architects and planner, who came to build the city itself. For they too had their own visions and desires that would not be compromised or go ignored.193

As such, Chandigarh was no clear cut singular vision of one man, but rather a hodge-podge of many, as scholars like Nihal Perera most eloquently point out in his compelling piece *Contesting Visions: The Authorship of the Chandigarh*. Nevertheless, Chandigarh has become most remembered and celebrated today, for its association with Le Corbusier, the great father of modern architecture. Very little is ever mentioned about the city’s first planner and architect, Mayer. His contributions to Chandigarh have effectively been reduced to a footnote or at best a paragraph or two. Nevertheless, it is important to consider and examine this first Master Plan of Chandigarh, not for the exceptional plan itself, but perhaps more for the fact that it was never fully executed. Rather ironically, in other words, the very significance of Mayer’s story lies in the fact that he has generally become erased in the greater narrative of Chandigarh’s becoming, overcast by his ever more famous successor.

But it is this generally forgotten narrative of Mayer’s Chandigarh that I explore here in this third chapter. Its story and implication allows us to better understand what kind of image of the new and independent Punjab state, what kind of new nation-state they desired to exude through the building of their glorious capital city. Indeed, it is my belief that, Mayer’s Chandigarh became eventually forgotten in the city’s memory and history because it was contrary to the expectations of the Punjabi officials, to whom the New Capital represented an opportunity to exude a new modern, metropolitan and cosmopolitan image for

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their country, one that would rival those of developed countries like the U.S. and Soviet Union. For Mayer, however, the idea of Chandigarh certainly took a slightly different form from the great metropolises, the New Yorks and the Londons, of the West that the Punjabi officials had admired. Indeed, Mayer’s Chandigarh was in many ways a certain rejection of everything that these sprawling congested cities, spawned by intensive industrialization and mechanization, represented. Instead, Mayer endeavored to offer an alternative new urbanism, one rooted in the almost anti-urban ideals of the Garden City Movement and a certain romanticization of the European medieval city. Chandigarh was to be a city of a beautiful, scenic and picturesque idiom; a resurrection of the village community within an urban context. And it was for this reason perhaps that Mayer’s plan was eventually abandoned, never fully realized in form. For Punjabi officials and technocrats who in many ways envisioned what urbanism was in line with the modern Western metropolises, the idea of a different form of urbanism inspired by the village community, seemed in direct opposition to what they desired to achieve in the new capital.

3.2 The New Capital – A Space for a Vernacular Modernity

Chandigarh was born out of violence. It was born from the brutal separation of the subcontinent that caused millions of refugees to cross the newly demarcated borders, and unleashed a series of bloody reprisals of “ethnic violence.” In the Punjab Province, the delicately woven social framework of its cities and villages was thus disrupted as thousands of Punjabis were killed and many others left bereft of their homelands, extended families and livelihoods. The division of Punjab Province into India and Pakistan also meant the loss of several major cities to the new state of Pakistan; most particularly, the loss of the magnificent capital of Punjab, Lahore. This economic, administrative and historical capital, the pride of all Punjabis, now belonged to Pakistan. And now without an administrative center, the government of the Indian East Punjab, later called the state of Punjab, suddenly found itself with the mammoth task of rebuilding its state. The hunt for the New Capital of Punjab thus immediately acquired great significance.

194 Norma Evenson, *Chandigarh*, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1966); pp.6-24
195 Ibid.
196 Khilnani, pp.129-130
and attention from the State and National government. After all, conceived in the midst of crisis and trauma, Indian leaders saw in this New Capital the potential for it to be a symbol of the strength and ingenuity of the newly separated Punjab state and of India as a whole.\(^{197}\)

In 1948, the government of Punjab appointed a Committee under the Chairmanship of Chief Engineer P.L Verma to evaluate the existing towns and cities to find a suitable site for the proposed capital. Initially, the quickest and perhaps most cost-effective solution was believed to be the use of an already existing city as their new capital. Many cities were proposed to this end. Amritsar was certainly the most logical of choices for the capital as it was the largest Punjabi city and the site with the revered Sikh shrine, the Golden Temple. However, the city was deemed to be too close to the Pakistani border and therefore vulnerable to attack. Patiala was another city considered, but ultimately found to be too geographically removed from the heart of Punjab state. Ambala, a relatively new British military cantonment, was another city under consideration. However, this idea was also rejected as the city was too small and insignificant to project the image of a capital worthy of replacing Lahore.\(^{198}\)

For their various reasons, therefore, no existing city in Punjab was found to be quite suitable for the task of becoming the New Punjabi Capital; none seemed to possess the necessary infrastructure to serve as the citadel of political, business and economic activity, or, as Verma argued, the “sufficient magnificence and glamour to make up for the psychological loss of Lahore.”\(^{199}\) But perhaps more importantly, this dissatisfaction with these cities stemmed from a certain ambivalence and wariness towards these already existing cities; an ambivalence that stemmed from the fact that these cities were stamped with the memory of India’s past of colonialism and partition. After all, it had been these colonial cities that had

\(^{197}\) Ibid.


\(^{199}\) P.L Verma, in Prakash op. cit. pp.37-38
served as the great stages of colonial rule under the British Raj; the sites where British colonialism had most physically and explicitly enacted their colonial enterprise onto India.

However, in so far as the city was to be Punjab’s New Capital in their new and independent country, in its very architecture and planning, the city needed to articulate an identity reflective of the modern state and society that India was to be. The building of the New Punjab Capital was, as Vikramaditya Prakash most poignantly argues, “inextricably yoked to a vision for the [country’s] future,” and the country’s modern aspirations. As such, putting his foot finally down upon the matter, Nehru made the decision that the New Capital would be built de novo. The New Capital would be a showpiece of India’s new modern identity. “Like the rising of the Phoenix from the ashes of its own fire,” Chandigarh was to be that catalyst for change and modernity in Punjab and greater India.

Neither the new industrial cities nor the great capitals of the West provided the inspiration for Nehru’s “modern city.” In searching for that Indian modernity, Nehru drew a sharp distinction between the ideas of emulation and adaption. The former suggested a certain importation or mimicry of the Western ideals that was rather superficial and shallow. However, as Nehru was keenly aware, Punjab’s capital needed to exude a modernity of its own; one that would be in their vernacular and sensibility. It could not be a simple replication of the great modern industrial cities of the West; for as Nehru stated himself:

“[t]here can be no real cultural or spiritual growth based on imitation…true culture derives its inspiration from every corner of the world, but it is home-grown and has to be based on the wide mass of the people. Art and literature remains lifeless if they are continually thinking of foreign models.”

In other words, what was needed was to learn from other cultures and to make these elements then compatible with India’s conditions and resources; to essentially “Indianize” the aspects, technologies and qualities borrowed. Just as Nehru had fused the political ideologies of communism and democracy to

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200 Prakash, p.9
201 Ibid., p.9
create democratic socialism as a means of uplifting the country from the morass of its past, Western technologies too had to be fused with Indian cultural traditions to foster a new modern sensibility and style that would fully reflect their new dynamic country. Thus, Nehru’s imagination for India’s modernity was therefore neither an expression of a purely Indian, nor simply Western idiom. Rather India’s modernity was to be located, perhaps more accurately, somewhere in between.203

In late March 1948, a site for the New Capital was finally found. Nearly 400 km north of New Delhi, Chandigarh, as the New Capital was to be called, would be built on the flat and gently sloping foothills of the Himalayas. Though desolate and barren, the location was nevertheless certainly beautiful and spectacular in its natural features. Two seasonal rivers, Patiali-ki and Sukhna Choe, some 8km apart would frame the future city. To the north-east, the third boundary of the future city was formed by the steeply rising foothills of the Himalayas. To the south-west lay the fourth boundary that opened out into the wide alluvial plains of Punjab province.204

The location for the new capital was also ideally situated in a secure and central location easily accessible from all parts of the state. In their reports from June 30, 1949, surveyors M.R Sahni and B.R.C Iyengar noted the site’s favorable conditions: its adequate water supply, the flat terrain with a slight ground slope for easy drainage, close proximity to large-scale limestone deposits for large-scale construction, suitable climate, not to mention the fact that it would involve the least amount of dislocation of existing communities.205 All of these important qualities made Chandigarh an exceptional location for the building of the new capital. Nehru certainly approved of their ultimate decision. “The site chosen is free from the existing encumbrances of old towns and old traditions. Let it be the first large expression of our creative

203 Perera, pp.180-181
204 Albert Mayer, “Appendix to the Proposals for planning the New Capital of the East Punjab,” undated. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 20, Folder 5], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
205 This still meant that roughly twenty-four villages and 9,000 residents were forced to give up their land and relocate. They actively protested their displacement, but the project went forward as it was driven by the initiative of the central government.
genius flowering on our newly earned freedom,” he would exclaim upon visiting Chandigarh for the first time.206

It was in this manner that in the immediate aftermath of partition, for reasons both practical and symbolic, Chandigarh, the New Capital of Chandigarh, was conceived. Here, the very ideals and principles for the new modern nation would be scripted most physical in the very being of the city and broadcasted throughout the country. However, as Nehru would soon find, the Punjabi officials, architects and planners involved in the project too had their own visions of modernity that would not be compromised. As a result, there came to emerge some unresolved tensions between the Western modernity on the one hand, and the desires to make a new distinctly Indian vernacular of modernity on the other. This certainly accentuated the gap between what Nehruvian India professed to be and what it actually became, making the resulting modernity a rather ambiguous one.

3.3 Mayer’s Chandigarh: Asserting an alternative form of urban living

Executing that vision for a vernacular modernity in the New Capital was a task that ultimately landed in the hands of the American architect and town planer Albert Mayer, Chandigarh’s first architect. Very little scholarship has been done on the initial Master Plan for Chandigarh that Mayer created. Much of Mayer’s work on the New Capital has now been forgotten, silenced, overshadowed in the memory of the city by the overwhelming personae that is Le Corbusier who in 1950 took over Project Chandigarh. Yet, as many scholars of Chandigarh like Nihal Perera, Ravi Kalia and Vikramditya Prakash point out, though in modified form, the basic skeletal foundations of what came to be Punjab’s New Capital came from the initial Master Plans proposed by Mayer and his eclectic team of architects and planners. But perhaps the more important and profound reason for studying Mayer’s Master Plan for the New Capital is not because it served as the basis for Corbusier’s plan but rather precisely for the fact that Mayer was never able to

206 Punjab Government, *Construction of the New Capital at Chandigarh, Project Report*, undated. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 19, Folder 22 -23], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
fully realize the plan in its complete, whole form. For we can learn just as much, if not more, about what
the new state and country the nationalist leaders desired to create, in examining what they did not want
than in what they did. And it is for this reason, that the study of Mayer’s Chandigarh becomes so
compelling and fascinating.

Initially plans had been made by Punjabi officials for an international competition to find the capital’s
new architect. For these local government officials, it was of the utmost importance that Chandigarh be a
“modern city” in line with the latest principles and ideals of European urban thought. Like A.L. Fletcher,
the Officer on Special Duty to the Punjabi government assigned solely to work on the New Capital, stated
“[w]e must be guided by the views of those who have had such experience [with the building of new
towns], and follow the practice evolved in countries that have built or are building new towns.”207 That
there could possibly be perhaps a more “Indian” or indigenous, shall we say, way of building the New
Capital did not cross their minds. That India possessed one of the oldest traditions of town planning in the
world, going as far back as the fifth and sixth centuries to the Manasara Silpa-sastras, a collection of
writings that detailed the orderly laying out of towns, was forgotten.208 After all in their rather neo-
colonial mindsets anything associated with the country’s tradition or past was perceived as being
backwards, ancient, standing in stark contrast to the modernity that Chandigarh was to represent. And it
was for this reason that they were particularly adamant to find a foreign architect who would be able to
lay groundwork for their new capital.

However, when permission was sought for Verma to be sent abroad, Prime Minister Nehru promptly
rejected the idea. Writing back to Verma, he asked: “I wonder if you have explored the possibilities of
getting the master plan made in India?” He argued that there was “too great a tendency for our people to
rush up to England and America for advice” and feared that “the average American or English town-

207 A.L. Fletcher, “Notes” in Prakash op. cit. pp. 35-39
208 Evenson, pp.7-9
planner [would] probably not know the social background of India. He will therefore be inclined to plan something which might suit England or America, but not so much India.”

Gopi Chand Bhargav, the Chief Minister of Punjab agreed with Nehru. In a short note sent to Fletcher and Verma on 11 December 1949, he too voiced similar concerns that a “Town Planner from abroad will not know the conditions in India.” It was not that Nehru did not acknowledge the need for foreign expertise on such a grand-scale project, but perhaps more that Nehru preferred to build a city nationally rooted in design, one that expressed a newness and modernity in their vernacular that lay outside the European modern. As he put it, they needed to build a city utilizing Western technology “without breaking up the old foundations” of India, and to “fit it into Indian resources and Indian conditions.”

It was then that under Nehru’s suggestion Albert Mayer came to Chandigarh. Between the neocolonial minded Punjabi leaders who desired a certain European form of modernity and Nehru who wanted a distinctly Indian form of modernity, the American architect Mayer seemed to be a happy compromise. With Mayer, the Punjab government would have someone who had the necessary high-level training and expertise of Western architectural and planning thought not yet available in India; but they would also have somebody who was quite knowledgeable about the country’s culture and people having already had extensive experience working in India. Indeed, by this time, Mayer had been involved in quite a number projects throughout the country. In addition to the Etawah pilot development project in the United Provinces, he had served as an adviser for the city of Kanpur, involved in several postwar town planning projects, and with Municipal Engineer N.V Modak prepared two study master plans for Greater Bombay. With his familiarity of India, Nehru believed that Mayer might succeed in developing that distinctly Indian yet modern city that he had imagined and dreamed of. Not everyone was as keen and excited about Mayer as Nehru was. Nevertheless, succumbing to the political pressures exerted by their Prime Minister,

the Punjab government succeeded to his proposition, hiring Mayer as the head architect of Chandigarh on December 20, 1949.

Accompanied by Chief Engineer Varma, Mayer visited the proposed site for the new state capital on January 11, 1950. He found the site to be very picturesque and was particularly impressed by the large mango groves and the very dramatic and beautiful quality of the ridges of the Himalayas that rose up in the distance. Such natural features would certainly add to the drama and the character of the new city, he believed. Promising to return to Chandigarh in early summer of 1950 with a number of different master plans for the New Capital, Mayer entrusted the task of preparing the detailed building plans and arrangements for construction to Indian architects and engineers. Upon his return to India, Mayer would review the work of the Indian architects to ensure that their work would coincide with the overall spirit and feel of his own Master Plan.212

To assist him on the project, Mayer brought together an assorted yet “exceptionally gifted and sensitive” team of urbanists, architects, planners and engineers was put together. There were of course his two associates Julian Whittlesey and Milton Glass. In addition, Mayer also recruited the expertise of James Buckley, a consultant in the field of city economics and transportation, Ralph Eberlin, an expert on utilities, roads, and site engineering, Clara Coffey, an expert in landscaping and H.E. Landsberg, a climatologist. His good friend Clarence Stein too joined the Chandigarh project as a general consultant. And later on Stein’s recommendation, Mathew Nowicki, the Siberian-born, Warsaw-educated architect, was also hired to work on the design of the government buildings.213

Project Chandigarh was certainly an exciting new venture for Mayer. It was, as he wrote in a letter to T.S.O Ram, the Second Secretary at the Embassy of India in the U.S., certainly “an unusual project, in

212 Kalia; p.32
213 Kalia; pp.31-33
fact, almost unique in its size, importance and in its starting quite freshly as an entirely new creation.”

After all, it was not too often that anyone was ever given the opportunity to build a city completely *ex nihilo*. For Mayer, the idea of building a city completely from scratch was simply an “architect’s dream.” In planning *de novo*, Mayer was in his own words now “free to formulate ideas and objectives as [the] creative spirit permit[ed];” to “call in facts and techniques as we find we need them, and in sequence with our developing thought and study.” And this process of thinking and creating Chandigarh’s design and aesthetic was certainly “proving [to be] nothing less than an exciting adventure.” As he would later recount in a speech about his experience building Chandigarh’s plan in May 10, 1950, “you can’t take anything for granted; you are on uncharted ground; you got to test everything out; you have to be really sure of what you are doing.”

For Mayer, Chandigarh also presented an irresistible chance to execute and validate those principles of urban planning and architecture that had never been fully realized in the already established and settled landscape of the West. For in a “modern advanced country – in the US if you like” Mayer said “we are so surrounded by vested achievement, by so many facts and figures and well-developed techniques, so many highly developed technical means of one kind or another, that we are almost never able to shake ourselves loose from them not able to put them out of the way while we concentrate on ends and objectives, not able to consider calmly and think completely through.” Operating within this inflexible and relatively unalterable environment, Mayer felt constrained, only being able to execute those aspects which could easily meld with the pre-existing customs and conditions. There was little opportunity to “re-shape things entirely and mold them to the heart’s desire.” However, in planning and designing a completely new city, Chandigarh presented an opportunity to “give living actuality to all those creative elements in

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214 Albert Mayer, “Letter to T.S.P Ram”, December 20 1948, in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 18, Folder 23], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
216 Ibid.
217 Ibid.
218 Ibid.
219 Ibid.
city planning and civic design which have been discovered and talked about and hoped about for the last
generation, but which no one has had the luck to be called upon to apply.” 220 Here he could put his new
urban planning thoughts and theories into actual form and in so doing, even build in India the very basis
for a new more developed and superior civilization.

At its root, Mayer’s beliefs and ideas of urban planning came from a certain anxiety felt towards the
chaotic sprawl that was the industrial city. He was particularly critical of what modern cities of the post-
Industrial Age had become; that noisy, polluted urban built-up emblematic of any Western metropolis of
the 1900s. The present cities, Mayer felt, were no longer valid, sustainable and healthy forms of urban
living for the future. A new "modern" urban environment was urgently needed, one that would avoid all
the negative consequences accumulated from years of large-scale industrialization and mechanization: the
chaos, pollution and congestion. It was for this reason then that he found the very principles delineated by
Ebenezer Howard in his Garden City Movement so appealing and inspiring. As reactionary responses to
the large growing industrial cities of the nineteenth century, the Garden City Movement sought to
counteract all the negative byproducts of the large industrial cities by establishing new alternative forms
of the urban living that would be more self-sufficient, restricted in size, and surrounded by parkland
called greenbelts. These new urban, in other words, sought to combine the advantages of both town and
country, providing varied employment, wholesome living conditions and perhaps most importantly an
active community life within their self-contained environs. 221

Such ideas ultimately came to influence much of his work as an architect and planner in the United States.
Indeed, before coming to India, Mayer had most notably worked with Henry Wright, Allen Kamstra,
Henry Churchill, and Clarence Stein on the design of Greenbrook (New Jersey), the fourth of the
projected Greenbelt Towns. Started by President Roosevelt’s Resettlement Administration amidst the

220 Ibid.
221 Lewis Mumford, *The City Part II*, (1939)
Great Depression, the program was a means to create jobs for the unemployed, provide affordable housing for low income workers, and be a model for future town planning in the US. Together with his work on the Los Angeles suburban superblock of Baldwin Hills (1941), these projects were all part of a new avant-garde of urban planning thought. They were in many ways reactionary responses to the industrial cities; endeavoring to invent a new form of living environment that would exist harmoniously with the heavy industrialization and mechanization of the time without suffering from its consequences; the congestion, squalor, industrial pollution and most particularly the modern menace, the automobile.222

Similarly with his previous work, Mayer’s Master Plan for the New Punjabi Capital too was a recall to the romantic picturesque tradition of civic design that had sprung from the anti-urban ideals of nineteenth and twentieth century urbanists, planners and scholars.223 In Chandigarh, in other words, Mayer endeavored to offer an alternative form of urban living; one that would not be “limited by all sorts of accidents of decades and centuries of confused and sometimes distorted growth” that he had seen in the “great” cities of the West. Quite in contrast to the hegemonic image of the industrial city, the New Capital was to be a more reposeful setting for urban life, as Chandigarh’s consultant Clarence Stein put it, a complete escape from the rush of cars, the movement of crowds and the uproar of the street characteristic of the industrial city.224 It was to be more a variant of the greenbelt towns, offering “open spaces, green spaces, good light and good view in our homes and offices.”225 Surrounding the city too would be a greenbelt discouraging any outside elements from making unauthorized encroachment into the city’s boundaries and containing any haphazard overspill of its population. “By means of its greenbelt of farms and woods,” Mayer believed the city would “achieve an integration of urban and rural life.”226 Mayer argued that these

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223 Evenson, pp. 11-24
224 Clarence Stein, Letter to Mayer and Whittlesey on the “Location of Public Building in Capital of East Punjab” February 22, 1950, in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 19, Folder 27], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
225 Kalia, p.51
Greenbelt cities, in addition to preserving rural life would also break cultural “isolation of the farmer and provide him with a direct market for his produce, while at the same time giving the urban worker immediate contact with countryside and nature.” And in doing so, this form of urban living would establish the groundwork for a much more sustainable healthier society.

In its overall street plan too, Mayer endeavored to deliberately defy the rigor, sterility and monotony of the geometric grid layout; the very symbol of the industrial city, the long favored device for city planning under the ages of rapid industrialization. The overall pattern of Mayer’s Master Plan for the New Capital instead embodied perhaps a more romantic picturesque aesthetic, assuming a certain organic and loosely curvilinear pattern; an aesthetic decision, which seems to have been in part inspired by the writings of Austrian architect Camillo Sitte. Having conducted detailed studies of medieval town plans, Sitte attacked what was then the “modern” city plan of the industrial city, with its repetitive geometric grid and widely scaled boulevards; such a monotonous system strangled the joie-de-vivre, and stifled creativity and genius. Sitte thus proposed for a return to the intimate groupings, asymmetrical space enclosures, and broken vistas that he had found in the plans of the Medieval Ages; for a return to the urban systems where networks of streets and plazas were thought out sensorily and emotionally rather than by pure functionality. An artistic and emotional aesthetic needed to be imbued once more within the current existing cities. In one of his most famous works, City Planning According to Artistic Principles (1889), he wrote of the city: “One must keep in mind that city planning in particular must allow full and complete participation to art, because it is this type of artistic endeavor, above all, that affects formatively every day and every hour the great mass of the population, where as the theater and concerts are available only the wealthier classes.”

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227 Ibid.
228 Albert Mayer, Planning Notes (Sketches), undated, in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 19, Folder 18], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
229 Camillo Sitte, City Planning According to Artistic Principles (1889), trans. George R. Collins and Christiane Craseman Collins (London: Phaidon Press, 1965); pp.91-104; 105-102
That sensory aesthetics was something that became a particular preoccupation of Mayer and Nowicki’s when thinking about Chandigarh. People’s spirits needed to be moved, to be affected when amidst the new urban environment. Such an endeavor necessitated not only a well-planned city but a beautiful, a “stimulating city, a harmonious city, a city that appeals to the senses as well as to the social and bodily requirements, and to the intellect.” As Mayer would later say in his speech at the Urban and Regional Planning Symposium, Chandigarh was first and foremost about:

> “crea[t]ing a beautiful city…Since the City Beautiful concept was thrown out fifty years ago, and the functionalists and the sociologists took over the concept of a large and compelling and beautiful unity has not been enriched by these important later additional and integral concepts, but has rather been replaced…We hope we have creatively fused them, but we are unabashedly seeking beauty.”

Yes, beauty most of all. As Clarence Stein wrote in his letter to Mayer and Whitllesay, “it [was] not enough for one to glance at and be attracted by it, one must remain long enough for its beauty to become part of one’s consciousness.” It was that kind of aesthetic that Mayer’s Chandigarh endeavored to exude here.

Indeed, just as Sitte had likened the city to a Beethoven symphony; “a great dramatic experience to walk through a sequence of urban spaces pulsating in scale on either side, mixing new with old, monuments with parks, all unfolding on a series of axes and contained vistas into exploding crescendo,” Chandigarh too desired more than anything else to affect that dramatic pulsating urban experience with its crescendos and diminuendos. As Mayer writes in his proposal for the New Capital in 1950, in Chandigarh “[i]t has been sought and should be possible to give to the inhabitant and to the visitor, elements of serenity and of excitement of homeliness and of splendor, of greatness…” This need for the built form to affect such feeling and emotion within the city’s plan was, Mayer believed, a fundamental necessity not

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230 Albert Mayer, “Report on Master Plan of the New Punjab Capital”, May 12, 1950 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 18, Folder 30], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
233 Kalia; p.57
only to fulfill a planner-architect’s passion, but also to satisfy the deep psychological needs of the city’s inhabitants as well. As Nowicki saw it, “human well being seems to depend on the emotional quality of space as much as on the sanitary factors of light and air.”

It was this, Mayer rationalized, that explained why people became so attached to the crowded and uncomfortable conditions of so many contemporary cities, remaining indifferent to other new developments of living, no matter how sanitary, efficient and superior they may be. That “emotional quality of space” offered, in other words, one of the most basic ties of community. It created a sense of unity and pride among people for their land, their city. A glittering beautiful new city that they could all take pride in would make possible that self-invention of a national and local community. And it was this precisely that Chandigarh needed above all else: a sense of community, of ties between people and land. After all, Chandigarh was to be the capital city of the newly independent Punjab state. She desperately needed to become, as Mayer wrote, a symbol of national unity for her “frustrated” Punjabis; one that would “create a sense of pride in the citizens, not only in his own city, but in India, its past and its potential imminent future.”

Breaking India’s tradition of town planning that dedicated the city’s center to administrative or religious authority; Mayer’s plan located the Capitol Complex – containing the provincial government buildings, the Assembly, the Governor’s House, and the Secretariat -- at the northern-most edge of the city. With the impressive and splendid ridges of the Himalayas at its backdrop, the Capitol’s location was certainly the most commanding and dramatic location visible from all directions within the city. From these monumental buildings that stood in homage to those democratic institutions of new and modern India, the city gently spread southwards, assuming a fan-shaped outline filling in the land between the two river beds. Near the center of the city was the large business district, where the commercial buildings and the local bazaars of the city resided. Situated close by was also the University campus, that “stimulating and

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235 Mathew Nowicki, Supplementary notes to the Architectural study of superblock L-37, undated. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 18, Folder 32], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
236 Ibid.
irreplaceable factor in enhancing the cultural life of the city.” 238 Moving gradually down the city, a curving network of main roads surrounded the residential superblocks. To the far east, was the Industrial Area where all the “suitable and reputable industries” were to be settled. Set at a distance from the greater city, divided too by a thick belt of trees, such a plan would effectively prevent the “the noise and smoke of the large-scale industries from becoming real nuisances to the population.” 239 And through it all – the city’s various districts and sectors – ran a continuous park system, “tying all parts of the city with hills, the great park, the public forum, and the capitol area.” 240

239 Ibid.
240 Ibid.
Both Evenson and Kalia trace the inspiration for Mayer’s city layout and the placement of its various districts and functions to the cosmic model in the Hindu tradition. By placing the cerebral functions of the city, its Capital Complex physically at city’s head, the Master Plan, they argue that Mayer was referencing the Indian caste structure in the story of Purusha, The Cosmic Being; a story that refers to the Hindu belief that all human beings were created in the sacrifice of the divinity Purusha: from his head was
born the Brahmin (the priest-thinker), his arms, the Kashtriya (the soldier), his thighs the Vaishya (commoner), and from his feet, the Sudra (the slave). This imagery of the parts of Purusha’s body, they argue were reciprocated in the different sectors of the city: the political, business, living, and recreation.

Though certainly a compelling and interesting idea, whether Mayer and his team intentionally endeavored to make such an allegorical reference is unclear. Regardless, what is evident is that Chandigarh was very much about the production of a certain drama. Here in Chandigarh, the stage had been set. From the alluvial Punjabi plains, “one would approach the city’s great monuments [and buildings] reverently, slowly by foot” imagined Stein. As they continued to walk, north-ward, the Capitol Complex would rise up above the low skyline of the city, the government buildings contextualized in the verdant setting, across water and at the foothills of great Himalayan mountain range. In placing the Capitol Complex in this most dynamic and picturesque of locations, visible from all points of the city, the city’s layout effectively established the direction of people’s attention, the main foci of the new planned city. In a Punjab state suffering from poverty and the immediate trauma of partition, it was this Capital Complex that served as the city’s raison-de-être. It emerged like the central temples in cities of India’s medieval past. The Capitol too was “sacred.” As Aditya Prakash, an Indian architect who worked on the New Capital too reflects, in Chandigarh the Capitol buildings were to be revered as the old Indian temples. Like the abode of the gods, it carried with it a certain symbol of faith for a coming better future, one however rooted in a reverence for the beliefs and values of modern India.

In other creative ways too, the city was infused with the richness of senses and emotions. Most interestingly perhaps was the use of sunlight within the city. In a climate of strong sunlight and hot weather, both physically and emotionally, thinking about the variations of light and shadow became a

241 Kalia; p.59
particularly important climactic consideration to make.\textsuperscript{243} As such, purposefully avoiding building the residential units in the usual monotonous repetition of parallel blocks, reminiscent of the drab appearance of refugee housing, Mayer and Nowicki endeavored to orient the buildings in such a way that the result of their relations created a frame for particularly interesting views of colors, shapes and silhouettes. The variation of street, the offsetting and breaking from narrow into wider and back as we do in some cases would all contribute to the projections of diversified patterns of shadow and sunlight throughout the city. Such considerations Stein hoped would allow people, both the city’s inhabitants and visitors, “to discover the varied beauties [of the city], as the light changes.”\textsuperscript{244}

With such use of colors, textures, terrain, nature and even sunlight, Mayer and his team endeavored to create a city that harbored excitement and imprinted a certain dramatic picturesque beauty upon the conscience of people living within the city and those just visiting through.\textsuperscript{245} Such qualities all amounted to what Nowicki called the “holiday function” of the city; the larger and more accentuated uniting force of the city. As Nowicki put it “the holiday function unites the city, becoming a graphic symbol of its plan.”\textsuperscript{246} In this case, that unifying image was that of Sitte’s metaphor of the city being a Beethoven Symphony, slowly rising up from the Punjab plains northwards, crescendo-ing to the foothills of the Himalayas where stood the Capitol Complex.

Moreover, this “holiday function” of the city made possible the self-invention of a sense of local, provincial community. After all, from colonialism and partition, the Punjab state had inherited a population of a myriad of differences: of Hindu castes and outcastes, a multitude of religions Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains and tribes; speakers of numerous languages and dialects; not to mention of ethnic and cultural communities as well. Yet within this discordant hodge-podge of a community,

\textsuperscript{243} Albert Mayer, “Letter to Mr. Fry”, February 23, 1951 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 18, Folder 25], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
\textsuperscript{244} Stein, “Letter to Mayer and Whittlesaey on the Location of Public Building in Capital of East Punjab.”
\textsuperscript{245} Albert Mayer, “What’s the matter with our site plans?,” \textit{Progressive Architecture} 5 (1942); pp.245-258
\textsuperscript{246} Mathew Nowicki, “Letter to Mayer,” March, 1950, in Evenson op cit., p.15
Mayer’s Chandigarh, this new beautiful city of feeling and emotion, was to become that new common basis of unity that would reconcile such differences. Chandigarh was to be that compelling ideological symbol around which all Punjabis, and perhaps more largely said Indians as a whole, would unite regardless of their various identities. 247

As important as the “holiday function”, was what Nowicki called the “everyday function” of the city; those facilities and spaces of living and working, that most intimate space of people’s quotidian mundane life. Mayer too believed that domestic life and livability were of the two utmost important qualities to consider in planning a town of such a scale. As Mayer would say, “In a large-scale community certainly one needs a feeling of vista, of continuity, but one requires equally a sense of intimacy, of domesticity.” 248 This philosophy behind Mayer’s plan, as Chandigarh scholars like Nihal Perera have pointed out, was certainly a more “humane ideal.” 249 Besides its romantic monumentality and its overall beauty, just as important was for Chandigarh to be a city that would be decently habitable and comfortable for all its citizens; a city that would revive a sense of communal unity among its citizens for their beautiful capital; that would foster face-to-face interaction among people, which for Mayer was the very foundations of a democratic society. As Mayer himself wrote in his Proposal for Chandigarh in 1950, he wanted an “essentially peaceful city,” “a city of satisfactory lives and moments.” 250

Within an increasingly mechanizing and industrializing world of the twentieth century, Chandigarh was therefore not meant to be an industrial city. On the contrary, Mayer’s Master Plan for Chandigarh sprang from a rather anti-urban aesthetic that romanticized the towns and villages of a certain medieval past. After all, Chandigarh was inspired by the works of urbanists like Lewis Mumford, Ebenezer Howard and Camillo Sitte, all of whom held rather antagonistic attitudes toward the sprawling industrial cities that in

247 Evenson, pp. 14-15  
248 Mayer, “What’s the matter with our site plans?”, pp.245-258  
249 Perera, pp.186-187  
250 Evenson, p.18
dominant existence in the West. Indeed, rather paradoxically, Mayer’s Chandigarh was imagined out of a certain romantic longing for past forms of human settlement; by the images of the villages of India, and European towns of the Medieval Ages. Urbanism in Chandigarh, therefore, certainly took a meaning apart from the sprawling megalopolis had by the nineteenth century become synonymous with that quality of urbanity.

However, to the cosmopolitan Punjabi officials seeking to achieve in Chandigarh the splendor and excitement that they had lost in Lahore, the idea of resurrecting village life within their New Capital seemed rather contrary to what they had desired. After all, in their well entrenched neo-colonial mindset, the village represented folk culture, handicrafts and an exotic way of life that ran contrary to their ideas of modernity. They desired a New Capital that was envisioned in line with the great monumental cities of the West. And yet what Mayer had given them was what looked like a suburban town. The Neighborhood Superblocks, with their small scale single or two-storey terrace houses, certainly did not help with creating that truly urban street façade. And it is to this most fundamental component of the city, the quarters of everyday living, to which I now direct my attention.

3.4 The Neighborhood Superblock

At the most cellular unit of the city lay Mayer’s Neighborhood Superblock. This was the basic unit upon which the greater city was to be built upon; the principal mode of dwelling, “the beehive of local life,” “the heart of the whole plan” as Mayer called it. These Neighborhood Superblocks took the form of 3,000 feet by 1,500 feet rectangular blocks that were to house some 1,150 families. Each superblock was to also be part of a larger three-block unit, the district or “urban village” as it came to be called. Containing about 3,500 families, these 3,000 feet by 4,500 feet “urban villages,” Mayer hoped would come to resemble the intimacy of a traditional Indian village neighborhood. It was that sense of

252 Ibid.
“neighborliness,” “community sentiment,” that feeling of belonging together, of communal collectivism that Mayer desired to achieve most of all within Chandigarh’s Superblocks; something that Mayer felt that the present cities in the West had lost. Yet, certainly for the New Capital city of the Punjab state, reviving such group attitudes in the wake of partition and independence seemed particularly crucial. However, in creating that ideal of “neighborly” community, the Superblock concept necessitated the creation of a new type of society and a different type of resident and citizen.253

Chandigarh’s neighborhood superblock unit was not a concept that was completely new and revolutionary. In fact, as Evenson rightly points out in Chandigarh, Mayer’s superblock stemmed from the neighborhood unit concept introduced by Clarence Perry in his residential development project in Forest Hills Gardens, Long Island (1911). Here, Perry had endeavored to realize a self-contained residential neighborhood that would foster a community centric lifestyle. Each of his imagined neighborhood unit thus contained an elementary school, parks and recreation areas, local shops and civic institutions, and an internal street system designed for specific local use.254 And in actualizing this new residential paradigm in Forest Hills Gardens, Perry desired to establish a new form of urban living that would satisfy the contemporary “social, administrative and service requirements for satisfactory urban experience,” while avoiding all the “nose of the trains, and out of sight of the smoke and ugliness of industrial plants,” emblematic of the industrializing cities of the early 20th century.255

In subsequent years, numerous variants of Perry’s Neighborhood Unit took form, some actually realized in residential development projects of Clarence Stein and Henry Wright’s Sunnyside Gardens, New York (1924) and Radburn, New Jersey (1929). Similarly Mayer too experimented with this idea of the neighborhood unit in his design for the Baldwin Hills project (1941). Together with Clarence Stein,

253 Ibid.
254 Evenson, pp.16-18
255 Clarence Stein, “Memo To Mayer and Whittlesey,” Feb. 8, 1950, in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 19, Folder 26], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
Mayer developed a superblock design for an eighty-acre tract near Los Angeles; an experience that
certainly came to great use when developing Chandigarh’s Neighborhood Superblock a decade later.256
However, even more so than in the West, Mayer felt that the concept of the neighborhood unit had
validity in India; after all, in India, villages were still the most fundamental and prevalent form of human
settlement. There were still very few sizable cities in proportion to the country’s population. And, more
importantly, as Nowicki too observed in Punjab state, “the way of life of the people of Punjab [was
fundamentally] based on its village origin.” 257 “[S]o many people are still villagers, and intimate
community people at heart” he wrote in his Supplementary notes to the Architectural study of superblock
in 1950.258 For “[t]hough [many of these villagers now] worked in the city, their roots and relatives were
in the village to which they frequently returned.”259 It was for this reason that Mayer and his team of
planners strongly felt that the Neighborhood Superblock in the city would accord well with the people’s
social habits and roots.

Indeed, Mayer held a certain deep appreciation and admiration for India’s villages, its people, traditions
and lifestyle; an appreciation that had surely developed during his time working with the rural villages of
Etawah, United Provinces. The intimate, undisturbed nature of the neighborhood, the street life and lively
sociability, “the essential richness”, the “marvelous excitement and sauntering gaiety” of the bazaar, were
all qualities he found desirable about India’s village life. And he desired to encourage and preserve such
qualities, though in “a reasonably orderly and efficiently way,” within the Neighborhood Superblocks of
the New Capital as well.260

256 Ibid.
257 Mathew Nowicki, “Supplementary notes to the Architecture study of super-block L-37”, undated in Albert A.
Mayer Papers, [Box 18, Folder 32], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
258 Ibid.
260 Ibid.
As such, very much influenced by his perception of India’s villages as these self-contained intimate communities, the superblocks too became envisioned as self-sufficient self-contained residential units with their own facilities and each linked to three of its neighboring superblocks by other shared facilities and services. Every superblock in principle offered its residents four kinds of basic services: those of commerce, child care, education, and recreation. With the housing units built around its periphery, the superblock left an open area of parkland within the block’s center where all the schools, public facilities and recreation would be located. Within this central space was also an open meeting place, a health centre, swimming pool and amphitheater, not to mention a temple. In addition to the six nursery schools, two primary schools and one middle school, the neighborhood unit provided a shopping bazaar; an area restricted to pedestrians was placed at the lower edge of the block and included a shopping center with twenty permanent shops and twenty booths. An all-purpose office building was also located in the bazaar to provide space for the administration of the neighborhood. Such shared spaces and facilities within the superblock would be the center of community life, Mayer believed, serving “very much the same as the market square of the medieval European town.” These were to be the new places for “meeting, gossiping, shopping, and listening to speeches;” all functions that had been served by the market and public squares of the old medieval European villages and towns.

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262 Ibid.
263 Ibid.
All the “positive, creative elements” of urban life safeguarded within the block’s center, Chandigarh’s superblock endeavored to insulate its residential communities further from the destructive menaces of the industrial society; from all the noise, pollution, the breakdown of communities and perhaps most
especially for Mayer, from the automobile.\textsuperscript{264} As such, the neighborhood was conceived of in such a way that it was not to be crossed by automobile roads. This was achieved by completely eliminating the conventional city block in favor of these larger units of residential living. In doing so, various forms of traffic were separated, permitting rapid high-volume motor traffic to move on widely spaced streets with few intersections around the superblocks, while local and pedestrian circulation were confined within the superblock areas.\textsuperscript{265} In planning the Neighborhood Superblock in such a way, he hoped the community life would eventually resemble that of traditional self-contained Indian villages that he had come to so cherish.

Indeed, in observing India’s villages, Mayer and Nowicki became particularly inspired by the diversity and intermixture of people that he saw within these communities, of how “income and the standard of life alone did not seem to decide one’s neighbors.”\textsuperscript{266} In their supplementary notes concerning the planning for the residential superblocks, he wrote about how in Punjab’s villages “[p]eople preferred to live in small compact groups often of mixed income, preserving the privacy of their family life, but welcoming a bond of common space with a selected group of others…. other ties of blood or friendship were even more important.”\textsuperscript{267} This character of the village community, Mayer believed, certainly seemed worthwhile to preserve and continue within the Neighborhood Superblock. Chandigarh’s residential block too needed to contain “a sufficient diversity in housing form and density;” to reflect the socioeconomic diversity of an Indian city. After all, “[t]he feeling of the Punjab people and of ourselves was that we would seek a wide range of income levels in our neighborhood community units – particularly in view of the strength of the “village” concepts and tradition.”\textsuperscript{268} Chandigarh needed to be, as Mayer put it, “a city

\textsuperscript{264} Nowicki, “Supplementary notes to the Architecture study of supler-block L-37”
\textsuperscript{265} Evenson, pp.16-18
\textsuperscript{267} Nowicki, “Supplementary notes to the Architecture study of supler-block L-37”
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid.
where the various kinds of people with their various habits and methods find themselves at home;” indeed that was one of the most basic and fundamental objectives of Mayer’s Master Plan.269

While complete intermixture of plots sizes and incomes seemed impracticable to Mayer and Nowicki as the inclusion of these “violently different size plots would make producing an orderly block” an impossible task; a compromise was made.270 Three types of superblocks, graded according to L (lower), M (middle,) and U (upper) income groups, with population densities of seventy-five, fifty and twenty five persons per acre, respectively were created.271 However, to avoid any rigid and complete social and economic stratification, each superblock was organized in such a way that low income group housing would be in the middle with slightly better income housing on the outside; lower-income blocks would contain some middle income housing; the M-superblocks, some lower and upper groups, and the U-superblock would also include some middle groups. In some cases, Nowicki and Mayer proposed that the M and U blocks be connected to the L-blocks to form a district they would have to share common facilities and schools.272 Mayer and his team of architects and planners hoped that this would add up to creating a city of “satisfactory interrelationships, and satisfactory individual lives and moments; a framework which will take account of groups in their corporate activity, whether in industry, in school, in political meetings, in buses, at home; and of the individual’s need for serenity, for aloofness sometimes, for facing himself.”273

Markedly absent from these plans for the Neighborhood Superblock was any consideration for how ethnicity, language, caste and religion would fit into the whole framework the city’s residential districts; something that is particularly surprising seeing as these factors were one of the most fundamental organizing forces within Indian cities. After all, the Indian city, though mixed in terms of class, was for

269 Ibid.
271 Ibid.
272 Ibid.
the most part separated into homogeneous enclaves of language, religion or ethnicity, each with their own networks and associations. Whether or not they consciously left these elements out of the frameworks of the city is unclear. But it is hard to believe that Mayer, who had by this time worked with Etawah’s village communities throughout India for over five years, would completely forget to consider such deeply imbedded traditions of Indian society. Rather it is my strong belief that they chose to ignore them. After all, it was these qualities of Indian society that Nehru had most disliked. If India was to truly move forward into modernity, to that Nehruvian vision of modern nationhood, they needed to leave behind such archaic traditions. Here in the New Capital, Punjabi residents would assume completely new sovereign identities; a new identity that would be free from encumbrances of religion and caste that had for so long segregated people into a strict and impenetrable hierarchical order.

Thus, here within the Neighborhood Superblocks we see an attempt at reducing expressions of individual status and personality to communicate instead a more egalitarian, and rational, shall we say, social order. Whereas India’s cityscape, like those of Bombay or New Delhi, could often be separated into distinct homogeneous spaces of collectivities each with their own networks, services and facilities, the point of Mayer’s Superblocks were to be diverse. Such would guarantee a sufficient degree of face-to-face interaction and intermingling of people from different social and economic backgrounds. This would become the basis for encouraging a sense of communal unity across different collectivities. In the New Capital, the services and facilities were collective, in the sense that all residents would have equal rights of use by virtue of their status as superblock residents and regardless of their individual disparities in income, education, social background, and the like. The city was, thus, to stand as a symbol of collective living and of integrated social relationships. By focusing and intensifying group activity, the city was a theater for greater and direct participation in a common life and in the collective social drama. And the

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actors of this collective drama would not be the Sikhs, Aroras, or the Khatris, but rather individuals, the residents of Punjab.

This new sovereign identity was further reinforced in the very housing residential units of the New Capital, those most intimate and private spaces of quotidian life, as well. The housing units of Mayer’s Chandigarh were all kept bare and minimal; no elaborate bungalow-type houses for the well-to-do were ever proposed to be built for the new city. In fact, as Nowicki put it, Mayer’s Master Plan for Chandigarh assumed an almost dormitory-like character; the predominant type of housing being low-cost one or two-storey terrace units, and arranged in short blocks or crescents of 6 to 12 houses. India’s “traditional way of living” would be best served, they thought, by these small terrace houses with private outdoor courtyards and open sleeping verandas. There were very few variations from these standard small terrace houses. A few units of several houses grouped together around a common courtyard were also proposed; an alternative form of residential living that was inspired by that lingering tradition of the joint family in India. However, the majority of Chandigarh’s housing units were made up of the small one or two-story brick houses, houses that were built to be inhabited by single nuclear families.

275 The predominant ethnic communities existing in Punjab
276 P.L Varma, Secretary to Government Punjab; “Letter to Messrs Mayer & Whittlesey” Feb 15, 1950 in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 20, Folder 2], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
277 Chatterjee, pp.131-135
Figure 6 – Sketches of some housing units in Chandigarh

Here within Chandigarh’s residential housing too existed that same desire to reduce expressions of collective identities. Mayer’s plans for the residential units transformed the very nature of the family not only as a unit of socialization, but also as a unit of the domestic economy and politics as well.²⁷⁹ By eliminating the complicated multiplicity of societal groups in India – groups of caste, religion, ethnicity and language – they endeavored to accentuate a more clear-cut binary distinction between ghare, the

home-inside, and the bhaire, the park-outside. In other words, the very architecture and spaces of these residential blocks seems to suggest a certain attempt at redefining and restructuring the relationship between individual and the greater extended family. The large joint-Indian families of Indian society still existed, but within the very architecture of quotidian life, the family was to become successively broken down and atomized; replaced by a relationship more and more resembling those of a bourgeois society where relationships were more contractual, rather than one genuinely expressing kinship and a certain familial care for one generation to one another. As such, here within the very frameworks of the Chandigarh’s spaces of living the beginnings of a certain bourgeois public life emerged.

3.5 Conclusion

There is a certain tragedy to the story of Mayer and his involvement with this grand project of building the New Capital of Punjab. With Nowicki’s death in August 1950 suddenly brought about by an airplane crash and the American dollar’s increasing value, Mayer would soon find himself, in the subsequent years, slowly being elbowed out of the project. In fact, much to Nehru’s displeasure, considerable discussion among Punjabi officials had already been brewing over the possibility of traveling to Europe to find an alternative planner and architect for the New Capital even before Nowicki’s death. The relationship between Mayer and the Punjab government had become rather tenuous by this time. And with the untimely death of Chandigarh’s central architect, the Punjabi government suddenly found themselves with an opportunity, amidst the most unfortunate of circumstances, to search for another architect. On November 5, 1950, Thapar and Verma set off on a four-week trip to the United Kingdom, Holland, France, Italy, Sweden, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, to interview potential architects for their capital city. The new architect needed to fulfill two specific demands: first that he would be willing to move to India for a period of three years. Second that he would work for a yearly salary not exceeding 3,000 pounds sterling. 

280 Kaviraj, p.95
281 Kalia, pp.69-72
Chandigarh’s new architect eventually came in the form of Le Corbusier, the great pioneer and father of modern architecture. Initially the arrangement was that Mayer and Corbusier would work together on Chandigarh: Mayer the city’s plan, and Corbusier, its architecture and buildings. But this eventually became quite difficult to do. For Mayer, he saw a clear-cut distinction between their respective roles as the architect and planner: the planner was supposed to create the framework of the city, the architect, it’s buildings. Corbusier and his team of architects, on the other hand, did not see such distinctions. For them, a city’s plan and architecture had to be thought in conjunction with one another; they were one and the same. Thus, much to his great distaste and frustration, in the subsequent years of planning, Mayer increasingly became alienated from the core discussions over the New Capital’s plan. Indeed in one letter addressed to Maxwell Fry in August 29, 1951, an architect who was part of Corbusier’s team, Mayer exclaimed out of frustration from the exclusion of some of his ideas:

“I see no reason why this cannot be done in the present first city, as you suggest on Page 3 of your letter. I feel it is purely a question of your putting yourself into the frame of mind of wanting to do it. Nor do I feel that you can in seriousness contend that ‘the plan for this is fixed as agreed to and signed by all and we cannot now go back on it’…In the last analysis it is a moral, spiritual and ethical question as I’ve said. I feel you owe it fully as much to your own professional standards as to me, to reconsider this question fully and sympathetically.”

There are some contesting accounts about what became of Mayer and his involvement with Chandigarh. Some scholars write that he was fired unceremoniously soon after Le Corbusier came on board with the project; others say that he remained on board as a consultant till the project’s end. Nevertheless, what is clear is that by 1951, Mayer was no longer directly involved in the project with Le Corbusier and his team.

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282 P.N Tharpar, “Letter to Albert Mayer”, Jan 8, 1951, in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 19, Folder 28], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
283 Albert Mayer, “Letter to Mr. Fry,” Feb. 23, 1951, in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 18, Folder 25], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
284 E. Maxwell Fry, “Letter to Albert Mayer,” Aug. 18, 1951. in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 18, Folder 26], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
285 Albert Mayer, “Letter to Mr. Fry,” Aug. 29, 1951, in Albert A. Mayer Papers, [Box 18, Folder 26], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
effectively taking over the main planning of the city. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that remnants of Mayer’s original plan unmistakably exist within Chandigarh. The idea of the Neighborhood Superblock and the basic organization of the city were used and modified by Corbusier and his team; he straightened Mayer’s curved roads into a rigid orthogonal grid, enlarged the Superblocks and did away with the whole idea of social inclusion and integration by making the city’s living quarters highly segregated by rank, income and social class. As such, from that humane emotional sensibility of Mayer’s New Capital emerged Corbusier’s imagining; a new more definitively mechanical city.

Yet despite Mayer’s considerable contribution to Corbusier’s plan, today, Chandigarh is celebrated today principally as the work of the great modernist architect Le Corbusier. Indeed, Mayer and Nowicki’s involvement have been excluded from this narrative; for, to borrow Perera notes, “as they talk, they create and shape the Corbusier Plan as a unified and uncontested creation.” As I have endeavored to illustrate through this chapter, the exclusion of the stories of Mayer’s ultimate departure and this first original Master Plan’s exclusion from the very memory and history of Chandigarh was perhaps in part because of what Chandigarh, the new capital and its story, was meant to stand for; what the city meant to represent in post-colonial independent India.

Chandigarh was to be the expression of what the new Republic of India was going to be; a showcase of a confident new nation based upon new sensibilities and principles. In this sense, Chandigarh was also a moral assertion of sorts; for it entailed the claim that this New Capital city’s represented a world that was better, purer and closer to some ultimate objective to which the whole of India was to progress to. However, in the case of Mayer’s Chandigarh that moral assertion fundamentally rested upon an anti-urban ideal, rooted in a certain fear of the highly industrialized, mechanized, and automobile-centered

287 Kalia, pp.69-72
289 Perera, p. 178
societies of the West. Influenced by the works of great urbanists like Ebenezer Howard, Camillo Sitte, and Clarence Stein, in Chandigarh, Mayer imagined a community that would be a return to the idea of the village community. Like Gandhi, who had proposed that India create a new form of civilization based on self-sufficient village communities, Mayer too went against the grain of hegemonic western thought; a thought that placed the idea of urbanism synonymous with modernity and the future, the village with tradition and the past. He had indelibly built, in accordance to Nehru’s wishes, a New Capital “strongly Indian in feel and function, as well as modern.” Yet, in doing so, he had also effectively offered a new form of urbanism that was decisively unique and foreign to the West. He too had gone against the current of hegemonic western thought that placed industrial urbanism at the epitome of developed, modern and progressive society, and the rural village-based society conversely as the image of a traditional, archaic and ancient one.

To the Punjabi government that had imagined Chandigarh in that flashy urban built-up emblematic of the Western metropolis, Mayer’s original Master Plan was not met with the enthusiastic reception that had been hoped. A city inspired by Indian villages and medieval European towns seemed to be a step back and away from the industrial modernized image of a country that they had wanted to exude. Chandigarh was to be a new city, a newness that would retain a certain Indianess, but would nonetheless be accepted as modern in the western urban experience. And it was perhaps for this reason most of all that all mention of Albert Mayer and his original Master Plan have mostly disappeared in the stories told of Chandigarh.

290 Ibid.
Space - the very word seems to denote some free and unoccupied expanse of land. But spaces are rarely ever just voids, wanting to be filled or inhabited. They are, in many ways, already occupied, imbued with certain ideas, high hopes, desires, prejudices and even anxieties. This was certainly true of Chandigarh and the Etawah pilot villages, where Nehru, his fellow nationalist leaders and technocrats sought to inscribe the very foundations of modern India upon the country’s urban and rural landscape. For these urban and rural projects of post-independence post-partition India were more than just the building of new cities and villages. They were the physical realization of ideals, of the creation or imagination of a utopia, of the India that could be and should be. After all, as the editor and founder of *Modern Architectural Research Group* (MARG) Mulk Raj Anand said, architecture and planning were like dreaming, “dreaming of a new world.”

That dream took the form of a vernacular modernity, one distinctively different from the hegemonic form of Western modernity of the United States and the Soviet Union. India’s modernity would not be any slavish imitation of the West, but rather a unique adoption of their technologies and scientific prowess into the conditions and cultures of India. In doing so, Nehru desired to create a modernity that would be distinctly

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Indian. Neither an imitation of the West nor a return to that mythic and traditional self, this new Indian modernity, Nehru thought, would be of its own kind, incorporating an indefinable Indianness and a certain vitality that had gone silent under decades of colonialism. And here within Etawah and Chandigarh, that Nehruvian mantra of modernity and its gospels of science, industrialization and technology would be scripted and broadcasted across the country. From the very urban and rural spaces of the Punjabi capital and the Etawah pilot villages, a new more modern society, community and even citizen would be conditioned, or so Nehru and his technocrats adamantly believed.

However, that idea of modernity was not quite realized in the fashion that Nehru had planned and hoped for. Rather, an indelible tension emerged within the spaces of Chandigarh and the Etawah pilot villages; a tension between the desire to create and exude a modernity uniquely Indian on the one hand, and a desire to exude the trappings of Western modernity on the other. And for all the nationalist elite’s grandiose and radical claims to reinvent and assert a new modernity that would be a critique of the Western establishments, the hegemonic ideologies, prejudices and discourses of “the modern” spawned by Europe were much too coercive and seductive to resist. They pulled India’s projects of rural and urban redevelopment in other directions; in directions that, in many ways, followed the decisive footsteps of the Western experience. As a result, that pure Nehruvian desire for a vernacular Indian modernity became thwarted. Ambiguous and confused, India’s modernity emerged in the very spaces of Chandigarh and Etawah: built with the intention of being different, nonetheless inspired by the very images and prejudices of the West.

In Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias, Michel Foucault writes that “the great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and suspension, of crisis and cycle,
themes of ever accumulating past.”

Modernity and development came to be the objects of that great obsession; the glowing beacons of civilization to which all societies aspired to reach. Yet, these ideas of “development” and “modernity” themselves were subjected to a certain structure of power that cannot be denied. For as historian Dipesh Chakrabarty poignantly points out, to think of the modern or the nation-state was to think of a narrative whose theoretical subject was Europe. After all it was their history, “the history of Europe,” of the Enlightenment and thereafter, that had effectively laid out the victorious march of the nation-state, of industrialization, and of technology and science for the rest of the world.

Mahatma Gandhi realized this as early as 1909 in his writing of Hind Swaraj. He saw in the Indian nationalists, their insatiable love for concrete, demands for more steel plants and railroads, and in their calls for mechanization and industrialization, the peculiar way in which all other histories tended to become variants of the greater master narrative of “European history.” It was as if India was becoming English or, as Gandhi put it in Hind Swaraj, to have “English rule without the Englishman.”

Gandhi thus offered to India a completely different imagining of the modern. Advocating for economic and political decentralization, he called for Indians to return to the villages of rural India, and to create self-sufficient village republics. India’s future lay in her return to the village, he adamantly asserted. For freedom and true independence meant rejecting urbanization and industrialization, and instead recovering their enfeebled civilization in the sanctuary of the village, where the true India lay. As he wrote in a letter to Nehru, if India was going to recover its lost self and attain true freedom, “then sooner or later the fact must be recognized that people will have to live in villages, not towns, in huts, not in palaces.” He believed that it was only in the simplicity of village life that the ideal dream community of truth and non-

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296 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?,” Representatio, 37, (Winter, 1992); pp.3-16

297 Gandhi in Chakrabarty op. cit, p.7-10.

298 Gandhi to Nehru in Parel, Hind Swaraj and Other Writings, p.150
violence could be realized; two values without which, he believed, “there can be nothing but destruction of humanity.” Gandhi saw India’s villages not as they presently were, but as they could and should be, of a community that “contained intelligent human beings” where “men and women will be free and able to hold their own against anyone in the world.” For Gandhi, the village, in other words, presented a different design, a way of life, which could be an alternative from the corrupting and polluting city-based and technology driven capitalist West.

Such an idea certainly proved to be a different imagining of modern and independent India that was certainly anti-colonial, a critique of Western modernity through and through. After all, in a modern world that had unquestioningly equated the very qualities of urbanity and cosmopolitanism with the ideas of modernity, Gandhi challenged those very ideas. Indeed, he had effectively problematized the very hegemonic narratives of Western histories and development that people had taken for granted. Urbanization did not necessarily represent modernity or some pinnacle of economic and social development, and neither did villages signify underdevelopment or backwardness. On the contrary, Gandhi asserted that villages too could be modern; that it too could be a legitimate means for the country’s future development and transformation.

However, this Gandhian vision for modern India was rejected. Nehru and his fellow English-educated nationalist leaders scoffed at the very thought that villages could be the foundation upon which a modern nation-state could be built upon. Undoubtedly, such Gandhian thought proved much too radical, unthinkable even in their minds. The very idea was not only too far removed from dominant Western images of modernity and development, but it had effectively gone against the linear trajectory of development from rurality to urbanity outlined by the Western experience. That modernity could mean anything other than intense mechanization, industrialization and urbanization did not even occur to them.

299 Ibid.
Certainly, rural development projects like Mayer’s Etawah were some of the first initiatives taken by the National Government in their rebuilding of India. However, these projects were not initiated out of some Gandhian belief that these villages could potentially be the foundation for a new modern nation-state. Rather, these projects began almost out of necessity. After all, there was no denying that villages were where the majority of Indians lived and worked. If India was going to develop economically, politically and socially, reform needed to begin in rural India first and foremost. It was with this fundamental idea that the Mayer and Nehru began their work in Etawah, attempting to increase the agricultural productivity and to redevelop the small-scale cottage industries of the village. And through such concentrated efforts, they had hoped not only to better the conditions of rural India, but to impart the very values of modernity within the minds of these “backward” peasants. The Etawah pilot project was therefore simply a cog within the country’s greater quest to acquire a certain more Western modernity, a quest which Gandhi had so disliked.

The building of Chandigarh proved to be another instance of the irresistibility of the Western experience. In Chandigarh, Mayer proposed a different form of urbanity, one that recalled the romantic picturesque tradition of civic design that had sprung from the anti-urban ideals of nineteenth century urbanists, planners and scholars. Indeed, Mayer’s Chandigarh challenged and rebelled against the very qualities – the congestion, automobiles, the orthogonal grid of the city’s plan, the skyscrapers and such – that made the sprawling industrial cities what they were. And in a rather similar way that Gandhi had, in Chandigarh Mayer called for a certain resurrection of the village community within the urban context. Yet, this proposal for the new Punjabi capital too was abandoned in the end. After all, for the Punjabi officials, the qualities of urbanity meant the Londons and New Yorks of the world, and an imagining of a city inspired

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301 Albert Mayer, Pilot Project India, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958); pp.13-20
302 Norma Evenson, Chandigarh, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1966); pp.6-24
by India’s villages and Europe’s medieval towns was not something that completely fit within that image.303

There is something to be said about how such alternative forms of “the modern” were found to be inconceivable or unsuitable, in the eyes of India’s nationalist leaders, for the simple fact that they did not conform to the hegemonic Western experience. The inability to conceive of possibilities outside and beyond the boundaries of the Western experience, this was perhaps the indelible legacy of British colonialism. The “emancipation” from their medieval and colonial past that Nehru and other Indian nationalist leaders sought in the rebuilding of their new and independent country was not quite the radical transformation that they had made it out to be. Indeed, their representations and imaginings of the modern nation became sublimated by the paradises and utopias that figured in the visions of their European colonizers.

For centuries now, European scholars have shaped the nature of academia and most particularly of the field of social science, producing concepts and theories that embrace the whole of humanity. Indeed, these theories have been produced in relative and sometimes absolute ignorance particularly of non-Western cultures; however, the irony of it all lies in the very fact that these essentializing theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of “the other,” eminently shape “the other” as well.304 For they invariably leave behind ways of feelings and thinking that unconsciously invade and structure the way we see and understand ourselves and the world around us.305 To this day, we are continually obsessed with idea of modernity and development, of walking forward on that evolutionary Western historiography that began with Enlightenment. However, such ways of thinking about development and modernity invariably allow other variants, possibly even better paradigms of development, to become effectively silenced. And it is perhaps this more than anything else that makes history a rather powerful and dangerous force. But the

303 Ibid.
304 Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?,” pp.3-16
305 Khilnani, The Idea of India; pp. 129-130
question remains: will we ever be able to return the gaze? To turn around and define, for ourselves, a truly
new and better paradigm of the modern to which all societies can walk towards? That is something that
we need to begin to consider for ourselves.
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