

Ahmadabad, 1984–87; New York, 2012

# A bifocal frame of reference

Pradeep Dalal

Anonymous, *Untitled*, undated.

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In an authoritative and sharply analytical essay on Le Corbusier's Assembly building in Chandigarh (capital of two Indian states, Punjab and Haryana), architect Charles Correa made an impassioned case for the value of modern Western ideas to architects in independent India:

One arrives at Chandigarh. One travels through the town, past the houses spread out in the dust like endless rows of confidence tricks; and down the surrealistic roads – V.1s and V.2s – running between brick walls to infinity. Chandigarh, brave new Chandigarh, born in the harsh plains of the Punjab without an umbilical cord.<sup>1</sup>

With great verve he described arriving at the capital:

One approaches closer and closer to the complex, and the bleached whiteness deepens slowly into the grey-green of the concrete, the simple outlines of the masses dissolve into an astonishing, voluptuous complexity of shadow and substance. Incredible, evocative architecture!<sup>2</sup>

When this brilliant essay was written, in the early '60s, Correa had just designed the iconic Gandhi Smarak in Ahmadabad, and Le Corbusier's architecture, especially the Assembly building – the centrepiece of the capital complex – established a set of key coordinates for his own architecture. In a partisan though not uncritical appraisal, Correa described the magical interior:

And the finest landscape of all lies within the forum in the Assembly building. Here all the major elements are self-supporting, thus necessitating a great many columns rising to a great many different heights. Yet, this articulation of the structural system never borders on mannerism, for Corb is working at a vast scale, and he knows just what he can and cannot do. The columns give rhythm and scale, rising like a great forest in the dulcet light. And it is this light, filtering from above, washing the concrete surfaces, that draws us upward into the higher reaches of the building.<sup>3</sup>

I eagerly embraced these ideas as an architecture student in the early 1980s, and embarked on a four-year study of this building, which resulted in a dissertation titled "Art of the Ensemble: Le Corbusier's Assembly building, Chandigarh".<sup>4</sup> I spent time in Chandigarh, interviewed PL Varma, the chief engineer of the capital complex, and sifted through the immense amount of published material on Le Corbusier, including the Garland archive which has every sketch and drawing of this building, and also compared the as-built drawings with the published record. I explained that a complex and exceptional architecture innovated successfully on several fronts at the same time: climate control (*brise-soleil*), construction methods, form, spatial organization, circulation and much more. Correa's incisive analysis helped set up my research:

1 Charles Correa, "The Assembly at Chandigarh", originally titled "Report from Chandigarh" in *The Architectural Review* (June 1964); reprinted in *Charles Correa, A Place in the Shade* (Penguin Books India, 2010), 7.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid. 11.

4 Pradeep Dalal, unpublished dissertation (Ahmadabad: CEPT, 1987).

Even a cursory glance will illustrate how very cunning and sensitive is Corb's handling of spaces; e.g. his continuous use of the L-shape (the leg of which forms an escape-valve to what would otherwise be a static square). By never defining the limits of this vision (the sections and plans are coordinated so that the eye can always see beyond and around the corner), the spaces remain dynamic and uncontained. As one traverses the ramps and platform levels of the forum, one builds up a series of images which are superimposed on the brain, creating an overall pattern of incredible richness. This is a fundamental technique of Corb's. The complexity of his architecture is not due to the creation of one single intricate pattern but is rather due to the creation of several different patterns which, through superimposition, generate an indescribable complexity.<sup>5</sup>

In hindsight, I too was trying to decode a complex and imaginatively designed architecture for myself. The experience gave me a set of reference points as well, and these are somewhat belatedly becoming valuable to my artwork.

#### Washington DC-New York-Kochi-Wai, 1997–2012

Many years later, while living in America, I found a counter-proposal – written about five years before Correa's essay – which made a nuanced and spirited case for the vitality of the traditional, vernacular architecture of India as a source for design inspiration and practical knowledge. This beautifully observed and elegantly written essay by William Wurster and Catherine Bauer focused on two case studies, the riverbank *ghats* in Wai and the domestic architecture in Narakkal, near Cochin (now Kochi).

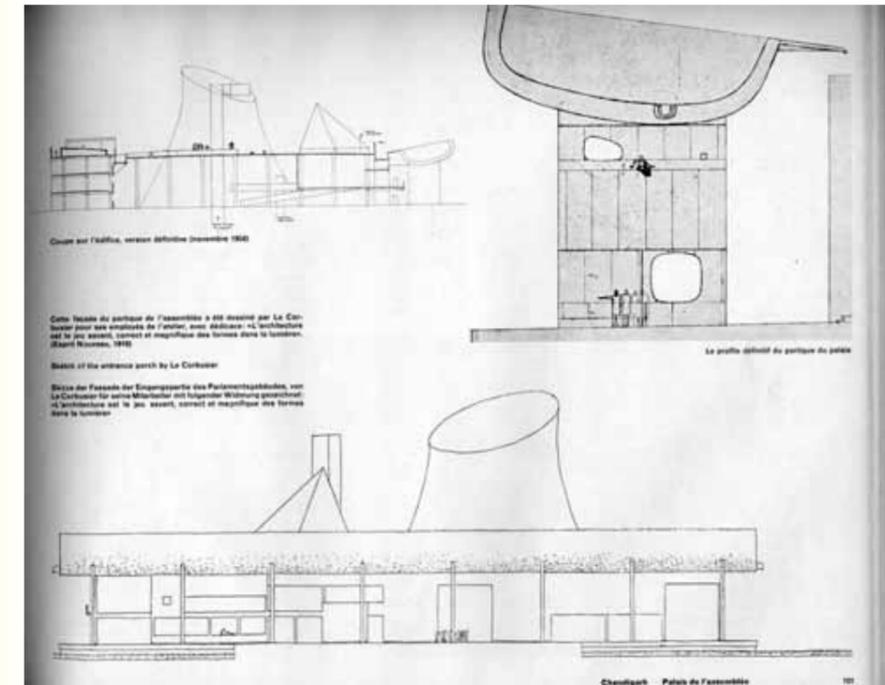
I carried this article with me when I moved to New York from Washington almost ten years ago. I knew about Kochi but had not been there, and I had never even heard of Wai. Then three years ago I visited Kochi and carried the article with me and read it while visiting the temple, palace and synagogue in Mattancheri. Later, back in New York, I re-read the essay more carefully and gradually the low-key but persuasive argument for the value of vernacular architecture to contemporary building and their photographs of the river-front steps and temples in Wai made me want to investigate further.

Wurster and Bauer describe their travel from Bombay to Wai:

The west side of India rises sharply from the narrow coastal plain and then comes a long, long gradual slope to the east coast. Poona is at 1900 feet [almost 580 metres], and from Poona to Wai there are two ranges of mountains, opening out at a higher level onto a great rough plain rather like Wyoming. The Krishna River rises in the hills above Wai and flows eastward across India for 800 miles [almost 1,300 kilometres] into the Bay of Bengal. Twenty miles up a steep road from Wai is Mahabaleshwar, a popular high-altitude resort developed by the British, but the two towns are hardly even aware of each other's existence. We came to Wai at dusk and were totally unprepared for what we saw from the bridge. Here was an entire rocky river bed which had been cut into long rows of noble steps with numerous temples

<sup>5</sup> Correa, "The Assembly at Chandigarh", 11.

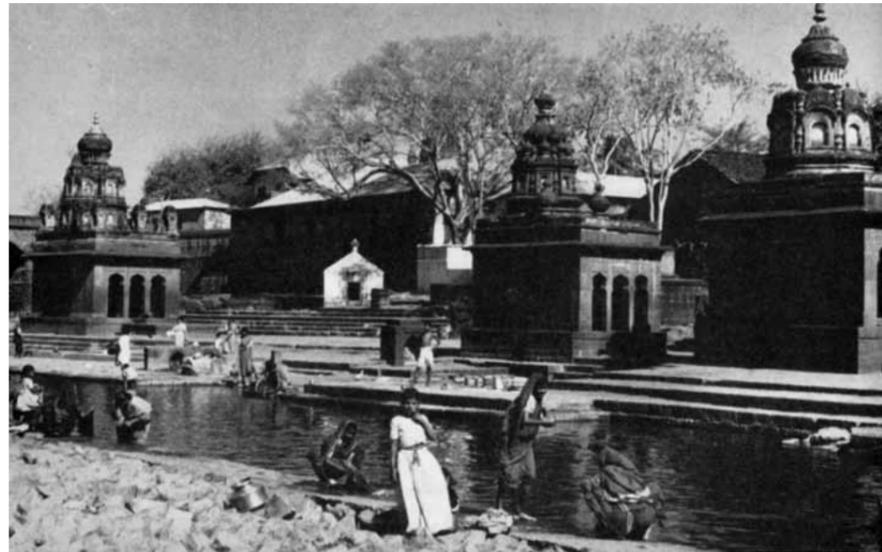
Le Corbusier's Assembly building, elevation and section.



The forum of the Assembly.



William Wurster & Catherine Bauer, *Women washing at the ghats, Wai, 1959.*



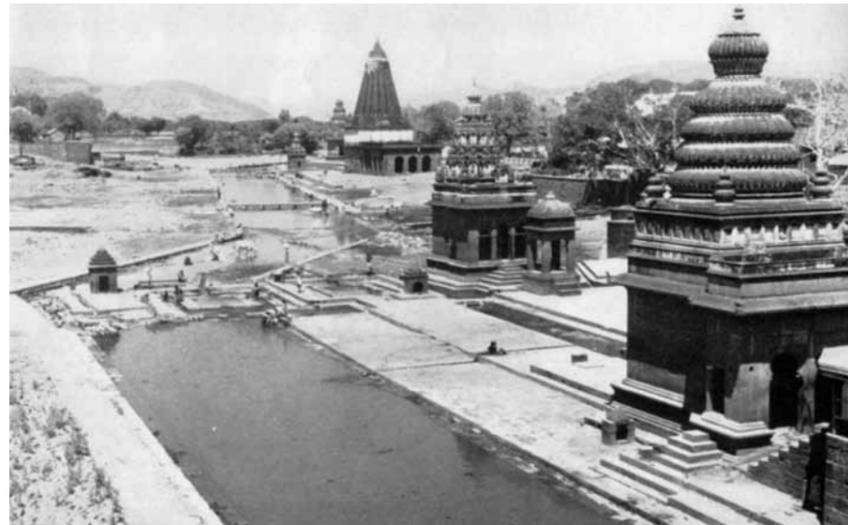
Temple and steps, Wai.



Riverbank, Wai.



William Wurster & Catherine Bauer, *Bathing ghats on the sacred Krishna river, Wai, 1959.*



River channels, Wai.



and shrines placed in orderly relation to the steps. This does not mean that they are parallel, or placed in any mechanical way. Rather there are great rhythms of steps recognizing the natural curve of the banks, with the structures placed at different levels and angles, all with a real knowledge and the feeling of inevitability that makes one recognize a great creation.<sup>6</sup>

The noble riverside steps that Wurster and Bauer described were in disrepair, much to my disappointment, when I visited in August 2011. Yet, even in this shabby state the sinuous geometry and elegant proportions of the channels and steps were evident. I had admired the superb design of the steps at Fatehpur Sikri and the sun temple at Modhera, yet I felt that the steps at Wai were exceptional in the fine balance between the organic and the manmade. I thought about what it meant to design and build something communally over 400 years, without the visionary architect or the customary swift turnaround from design to construction. And, Wurster and Bauer noticed something beautiful and valuable for themselves, something that had not previously been documented or anointed by scholars and historians.

Bombay, 1970s; Ahmadabad, 1980s

I was wary and perhaps dismissive of the word “vernacular”. In my childhood in Bombay the pejorative “vernies” was used to describe kids who went to non-English-speaking vernacular-language schools. In turn, they called me and my friends “GG” or *gori gands* (white arses) as we were glaringly Westernized – clothing, American music and only English-speaking. The fault lines between the many different cultures and classes within India should have been easy to discern, if only I had not been so blithely oblivious.

Mumbai-New York, 2012

I kicked myself for missing the two talks Arvind Krishna Mehrotra gave in November 2011 in New York to launch his new translation of the 15th-century Indian poet Kabir. Luckily, I was in Mumbai when his first collection of essays was published in early January. He has a remarkable knowledge of Western and Indian writing – insightful on both Baudelaire and Kolatkar – and writes pitch-perfect prose. He states that his essays are concerned with “the nature of the multilingual imagination and the invisible web of connections that lies beneath a literature, the stories that are hidden behind the stories we read.”<sup>7</sup>

My grandmother did not speak English but was fluent in Gujarati and Marathi; my mother is fluent in Gujarati, but somewhat less comfortable in English, Marathi and Hindi; I am fluent in English and can follow Gujarati, Marathi and Hindi. I never studied my mother tongue Gujarati in school, and was a bit embarrassed that it was only serviceable, especially when I lived with my grandmother for two years. While I sometimes wondered at the impact of my English-focused life, it was only when I read in Mehrotra’s book an argument for the multilingual artist (poet/writer) in India by the poet AK Ramanujan that I realized the price I had inadvertently paid:

6 William Wurster & Catherine Bauer, “Indian Vernacular Architecture: Wai and Cochin” in *Perspecta: The Yale architectural journal*, vol. 5 (1959), 42.

7 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Partial Recall: Essays on literature and literary history* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), 1.

After the nineteenth century, no significant Indian writer lacks any of the three traditions: the regional mother-tongue, the pan-Indian (Sanskritic, and in the case of Urdu and Kashmiri, the Perso-Arabic as well), and the western (mostly English). Thus Indian modernity is a response not only to contemporary events but to at least three pasts. Poetic, not necessarily scholarly assimilation of all these three resources in various individual ways seem indispensable ... The malaise and feebleness of some modern Indian poetry (in English as well as in our mother-tongues) is traceable, I believe, to the weak presence or total disconnection with one or another of these three resources. The strong presence of the three is certainly not sufficient, but it is necessary.<sup>8</sup>

This was a revelation. Ramanujan, Kolatkar and Mehrotra have all written in English and other languages, Marathi for Kolatkar and Kannada for Ramanujan. And they have also translated poems from the past, both classical and vernacular. Was the neglect of my language heritage tied to my inability to acknowledge and fully accept the many-textured traditions of India?

Another take on the issues around English-language usage in India was voiced by film-maker Louis Malle in his 1969 documentary:

... only two per cent of Indians speak English, the official language after colonization. This two per cent talks a lot, in the name of all the rest. Politicians, businessmen, intellectuals, bureaucrats – all explained their ideas to me at length, and I immediately sensed that the real questions weren't being addressed. In learning English, they also learned to think as our civilization does. Their words about their country were ordered by western symbols and logic. I'd heard them all before. I recognized them as my own. Tattered ideas, worn-out phrases ...<sup>9</sup>

More recent census figures report the percentage of English speakers in India at less than 15 per cent. Still, the imbalance remains.

#### Resetting the bifocal view

In an attempt to deepen my understanding and admiration of the artistic traditions of India and to recalibrate this knowledge within a deeply inscribed modernist aesthetic of the fragmentary and the provisional, over the past dozen years I have visited and documented many historic architectural and archaeological sites in India and Sri Lanka, including Ahmadabad, Anuradhapura, Aukana, Bodh Gaya, Bhopal, Bidar, Bijapur, Chennai, Colombo, Dakor, Hyderabad, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Kochi, Kanchipuram, Kandy, Kolkata, Lothal, Mahabalipuram, Nagaur, Nalanda, Nathdwara, Pandharpur, Patna, Polonnaruwa, Pondicherry, Pune, Rajgir, Ranakpur, Sanchi, Sarnath, Sasaram, Sigiriya, Srirangam, Thanjavur, Thrissur, Trimbak, Varanasi, Vidisha and Wai.

For example, at the archaeological site at Lothal I had hoped that something of the ancient aspect of the site, its atmosphere, would somehow rub off onto my

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 256.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Malle, *L'Inde fantôme/Phantom India*, Episode 1: "The Impossible Camera", included in Louis Malle: Documentaries (The Criterion Collection, 2007).

images. This did not happen, yet I was struck by the sense of geometrical order of the plinths, walls and streets, realizing that the basic elements of architecture were already in place 5,000 years ago. Upset by the convention of using the figure for scale in archaeological documentation – "where the scale is a human being, as is often desirable in large subjects, the individual thus honoured must remember that he is a mere accessory, just so many feet of bone and muscle"<sup>10</sup> – I made images with multiple portraits of individuals at the site facing the camera.

I was also drawn to the 15th-century fort at Bidar by the meticulous documentation of G Yazdani<sup>11</sup> and photographed the exquisite geometric order of domes, arches, courtyards and the intricate ornamentation – the mother-of-pearl inlay on the walls and the labyrinth-like geometric calligraphic designs in red, gold and black.

As a student I had spent a few weeks measuring and preparing drawings of a 12th-century temple in the southern Indian town of Trichur. I revisited the temple complex recently and recalled very little from the previous visit over 25 years ago, but was stirred by the architecture this time – the sensual form of the stone plinths, faceted columns in shades of nut brown and *kumkum* red, the clarity of the grid-like enclosure of the temple complex and the deceptively loose placement of the shrines modulating the flow of space gently, nudging not forcing. The modest grace of the devotees encircling the temple offering prayers; the practised ease with which they gather the hem of their *mundus* as they walk, climb, bow or fall prostrate; their subtle erotic charge confronting me with a troubling certainty: my inability to cross from observer to believer.

I also realized that the plan of this temple was every bit as complex and layered as the Assembly building in Chandigarh, while the experience of the spaces was significantly more tactile and visually rewarding. And for the first time, I was able to see a sophisticated and richly nuanced sensibility within an architecture that I previously dismissed as old and irrelevant.

I can now pursue ideas about architecture intensely and with a lot more freedom as an artist than was possible in architectural practice, where the design phase is relatively short, followed by a longer period of pure pragmatics – project management and logistics in order to get the design built. And living in America may have helped my quest in a way that I never understood clearly until an insight by the writer Ralph Ellison explained it to me:

The odd juxtapositions that you get in this country of cultural forces, cultural products, high culture, popular culture, it's all mixed. For the poet, he can mix them up any way he wants. Anything and everything is there to be used, and there is this kind of irreverent reverence which Americans are apt to have for the good products of the past.<sup>12</sup>

A flashback: Every morning when I walked into Correa's studio in Mumbai in the late '80s, I would pass a beautiful cobalt-blue paper cut-out figure by Matisse. And within his office and conference room there was a large mural of a lively village scene with crisp white figures and houses on a rich cow-dung brown background, probably painted by the renowned Warli painter Jivya Soma Mashe. So, perhaps

<sup>10</sup> Mortimer Wheeler, *Archaeology from the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1956), 202.

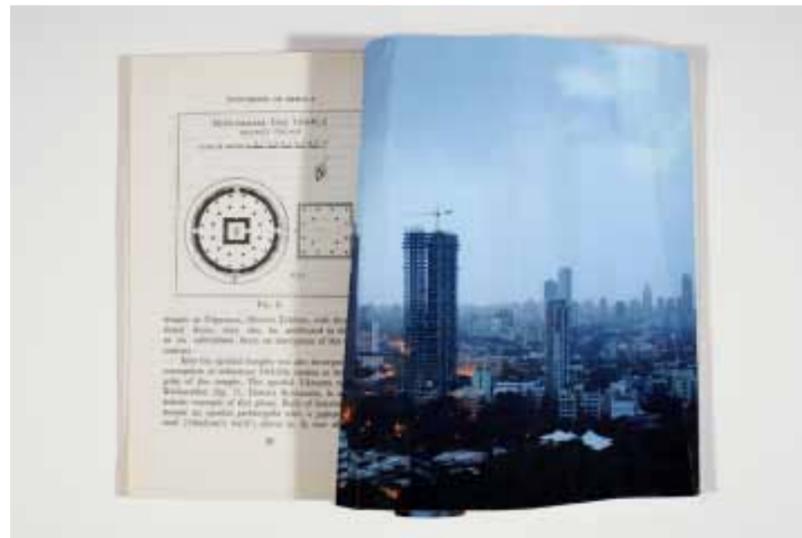
<sup>11</sup> G Yazdani, *Bidar: Its history and monuments*, published under the special authority of His Exalted Highness The Nizam (London: Oxford University Press, 1947).

<sup>12</sup> Richard Kostelanetz, "An Interview with Ralph Ellison" in Maryemma Graham & Amritjit Singh (eds.), *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995).

Measure/Vadakkunathan (Book 1 John, Thrissur), 2009.



Measure/Vadakkunathan (Book 2 GP, Mumbai), 2009.



Measure/Vadakkunathan (Book 3 PD, Trichur), 2009.



Correa already had developed a bifocal vision, keeping Chandigarh and Fatehpur Sikri, and Matisse and Mashe, in simultaneous view, and he may agree with Ellison's proposition:

I see the vernacular as a dynamic process in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-play-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves. This not only in language and literature, but in architecture and cuisine, in music, costume, and dance, and in tools and technology. In it the styles and techniques of the past are adjusted to the needs of the present, and in its integrative action the high styles of the past are democratized. From this perspective the vernacular is, no less than the styles associated with aristocracy, a gesture toward perfection.<sup>13</sup>

My wariness is melting as I continue to crisscross the 8,000-mile distance between India and America and find ways to gather in the strands of the traditional and vernacular; the lesson of the temple in Thrissur remains a powerful touchstone.

13 Ralph Ellison, "Going to the Territory" in John F Callahan (ed.), *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library, 2003).

Measure 1 (Kanchenjunga: Mumbai/Thrissur), 2009.

