

Capital Concerns: The Housing Crisis in New Delhi in the 1930s.

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Abstract: The announcement of the transfer of capital from Calcutta to Delhi was made at the Delhi Durbar of 1911 by George V. With this decision, the process of making the new capital was set in motion and the next 20 years would see hectic building activity leading to a transformation of barren land to a visual treat. The commanding height of the Government House and Secretariats, the wide roads lined with carefully selected trees and shrubs, the Gymkhana and Chelmsford Clubs, the offices of the bureaucracy and the homes of the officials would all come up to bring to life the new capital. This paper begins by exploring the debate on the question of Delhi being a permanent capital of the British Empire. The next issue facing the administration was that of providing housing to the government officials who would be living and working in New Delhi. This paper tries to understand the housing crisis that unfolded in New Delhi in the 1930s. The shortage of homes for officials, clerks and menials reflected the stark contrast between the theory and practice of the colonial administration. I have studied the files and documents at the National Archives of India, New Delhi to bring out this contradiction in the making of the new capital.

Keywords: capital, New Delhi, National Archives

Introduction

The plan of the Imperial Delhi Committee made provisions for residential quarters for officers and clerks, excluding Members' houses, on the scale of 70 per cent of officers and 80 per cent of clerks, and the necessary amounts for the additional quarters accordingly were provided for[1].

The building Scheme of 1923

The continuous shifting between Simla and New Delhi was a source of worry because of providing housing and accommodation to the migratory staff each year. The problem of shortage of housing was so acute that a letter was shot of by Mr. C.W. Gwynne, CIE, OBE, ICS, Joint Secretary to the Government of India to the Secretary of Department of Industries and Labour complaining about the "extent of the incontinence and annoyance to which Government servants may be put to by the present shortage of accommodation" and went on to note "that if ever the government adopts the policy of leasing private houses for their officers in New Delhi, they will do something to protect them from the indifference and cupidity of the landlord[2]." The letter dated November 1, 1929, went on to list glaring shortcomings in the house allotted to Gwynne who complained that the rent of Rs. 250 exclusive of

furniture, water rate and garden water charges, for a house of at most 'C' class accommodation. Gwynne complained that this was the smallest and the worst house that he had ever occupied in 22 years of service and that too, at the highest rent ever paid by him[3]. Such a scathing letter sent by one of the officers of the state surely puts in perspective the housing crisis even at the highest levels.

The capital was complete but there was limited space to accommodate the officials of the government. What explains this condition of housing shortage and utter mismanagement of the living arrangements for even the high ranking British officials? The so-called 1923 building scheme is the plan which governed the building of residences throughout the construction of New Delhi[4]. This plan fell considerably short on meeting the demand of housing and this is the aspect we now turn to.

The Housing Crisis Unfolds

It was initially considered that the residential buildings should be designed on the assumption that the Government of India would reside in Delhi for 7 months. This meant that the government would move from Simla to Delhi for seven months. Thus, the administration was to be in residence from October 1st, or October 15th to May 1st or May 15th.

The weather was the cause of concern and it was essential that the buildings for migratory offices should be suitable for hot weather[5].

The design and plans and estimates of homes were fundamentally subject to approval on aesthetics, style and comfort. There was a great deal of attention paid to the plan of rooms with linkages between rooms specifically laid down. The house was visualized with special reference to access to rooms; more careful consideration of verandahs with regard to the purpose they are intended to serve; breaking up of the 'nail box' type and giving some consideration to the shape of at least dining-rooms and drawing-rooms. Variation in design were also based on the rank of the officers[6].

How does one reconcile the aesthetics with privacy and controlled social interaction? There are several files that record these questions and the escalating costs of the New Delhi project. In context of the housing plans itself it increasingly became "doubtful if it will be possible to build double-storied houses at the same cost as similarly accommodation in single storey on account of the larger proportion of verandah to living accommodation. It was "also doubtful as to the expediency of building two-storied buildings in brickwork in clay, especially where earthquakes occur, and brickwork in the lime will[7]."

Mismanagement of the Housing Plans

The mismanagement of the housing needs and the shortage between demand and supply of accommodation requires some detailing. Turning once again to Legg, these numbers are put in perspective. The planned provision for migratory personnel was 136 officers' bungalows and 641 clerks' quarters. Yet, the demand in 1921 was for 254 bungalows and 1,140 quarters, indicating an under-building of 46 per cent, respectively[8]. Plans to keep fewer men permanently in Simla would increase these figures to 54 and 45 per cent, respectively. The committee recommended increasing the officers' residences by 40 units, bringing under-building to 41 per cent, and the clerks' quarters by 347, bringing under-building to 15 per cent[9].

This shortage was only for one section of the residents. While the menials could be removed from the line of sight of officers, the simple matter was that they were needed to service the new city. Though, they were pushed to the ends of the city, accommodation was required for them also. By 1925, it was obvious that the number of menial quarters was also proving to be problematic. Office workers and record sorters had pointed out that the

100 provided were insufficient. However, it was decided to build just 50 more in the hope that others would not need their accommodation for some time. As Legg forcefully argues, it was this lack of precision of foresight that led to the rapid acceleration of complaints and housing crises after the New Delhi offices were fully occupied during the winter season of 1926-7[11].

The files record the acute shortfall drawing attention to the fact that officers were forced to live in hotels and even the Gymkhana Club. The practical needs took precedence over leisure as the note in 1920 reveals:

"There is practically only one place in New Delhi where officers not supplied with Government accommodation can reside, namely, the Gymkhana Club. This Club provides between 30 and 10 quarters (including those in bungalows which it rents) but some of these are occupied by non-Government servants. 58 new bungalows or quarters are necessary to accommodate even 70 per cent the number. As regards junior officers' quarters here is a paper surplus of these although here again the under-building factor is certainly too high. In any event, a surplus in this class cannot be set against the deficiency in senior officers' houses as the so called junior officers' quarters, which are intended for Superintendents and officers of corresponding rank, are unsuitable for occupation by senior officers[11]."

Reasons for the Shortage

In a file dated 1931, it was admitted that "the Government of India cannot fully meet the existing demands of their officers and staff unless additional quarters are provided for 103 officers and 858 clerks at a total cost of about Rs. 1,20,000,000[12]." The file also draws attention to "the four main causes behind this shortage. First, in the building scheme of 1923 no provision at all was made for the residential accommodation, in New Delhi, of non-migratory local staff. Secondary, the provision that was then made, with reference to the demands of the various departments at the time under consideration, took into account an under-building factor which appears to have been based on the assumption which experience has falsified, that there would be a considerable amount of building by private enterprise in New Delhi, as a result of which Government would need only to provide accommodation for 65 per cent of the staff whose requirements they were considering. Thirdly, since the 1923 building scheme was adopted, there has been a very striking increase in the demands of all departments for residential accommodation due to an increase in numbers of personnel. Fourthly, Delhi has been selected as the headquarters of various attached offices of the

Government of India without corresponding additions to the building programme[13].”

The following two extracts from a file dated succinctly describe the dilemma of the administration. The Raj was officially here in New Delhi but where would the officers live? The prospects of shared housing for officers, similar to clerks and peons loomed large in the spanking new city.

“As matter stand at present, the staff of all departments are being, and during the coming cold weather must continue to be, subjected to great difficulties in finding suitable accommodation. A large part of the clerical staff find themselves compelled to choose between finding accommodation in the already overcrowded city of Old Delhi or of sharing with those to whom it is allotted the insufficiently available accommodation in New Delhi, to an extent for in excess of that which could be adopted were they allowed reasonable freedom of choice. It may be recognized that some, particularly of the more junior clerks, would, for reasons of economy, probably not object to sharing quarters with others [14].”

“Officers are embarrassed every year by not knowing till the last moment whether they can count on finding any accommodation at all in New Delhi, while some of the highest civil and military officials are unable year after year to procure any Government residence and are compelled to reside in hotels [15].”

Conclusion

The contrast between the elaborate planning on paper and the ground reality is startling. The visualization of the Imperial capital had not taken into account the scale of housing to be provided for its officers, clerks and staff. The result being sections of the staff were residing in temporary quarters far away from the New Delhi enclave or in the congested Old City. The problems that were sought to be addressed in the new city-comfortable housing, open spaces, distance from the existing population- remained more or less unresolved. The aesthetics of planning seemed to have fallen prey to practical demands of logistics and the numbers of people to be accommodated.

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