# Modern Architecture in South Asia

A post-colonial perspective

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TA: TBC

## Course Overview

The independence of the newly formed South Asian nations of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) from centuries of British rule in 1947/48 was not only a decisive historical marker for the dawn of the post-colonial period, but also a highly significant date for the global evolution of modern architecture. The newly installed (mainly democratic) governments looked at modern architecture as a means to cast their respective national projects in a progressive garb and as a counterpoint to the neo-classicism of the British. Nonetheless, as the diverging positions of Gandhi and Nehru viv-à-vis the modern project illustrate, the vision of a future India and the role of modern architecture in its imaginary was by no means uncontested.

While the influential contributions of foreign figures—such as Le Corbusier or Louis Kahn in Chandigarh, Ahmedabad and Dhaka—were indicative of a critical shift towards a local adaptation of modernism post-independence, the literal transplant of Western models of modern architecture equally provoked suspicion among some post-colonial thinkers who warned against the allegedly “universalist” claims of modernism. Instead, such voices stipulated an architecture that was equally attentive to progressivist notions of modernization and development as well as to the richness of local craft and building traditions. In the middle of this debate, a whole generation of architects from the region gave shape to a highly complex, pluralist idiom of modernism whose significance at an international level should be considered in its own right.

Modern architecture in South Asia developed within this complex field of cosmopolitan, national, regional, and vernacular vectors in which allegiances could not easily be divided into progressive and traditionalist camps. Moreover, the moment of independence in India and Pakistan was also one of great trauma, as the Partition of the colonial territory into two separate political entities (India and Pakistan) ensued one of the greatest displacement movements in human history, with millions of refugees flocking into the rapidly growing urban centers and profound spatial consequences to the present day. The violent separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in the early 1970s marked another such traumatic moment in the subcontinent’s conflicted more recent history, one that simply could not leave the development of architecture in these two regions unaffected.

This seminar proposes to examine the history of modern architecture in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka from the moment of independence to the rise of nationalism and globalization in the early 1990s. Based on a selection of exemplary case studies, the seminar will look at five arenas of architectural production: urban and territorial operations, infrastructure, institution building, housing, and imaginaries of nationhood. Among the key local protagonists to be investigated are Balkrishna Doshi, Achyut Kanvinde, Mahendra Raj, Raj Rewal, Charles, Correa, Laurie Baker, and Brinda Somaya in India; Yasmin Lari in Pakistan; Muzharul Islam in Bangladesh; as well as Valentine Gunasekara and Geoffrey Bawa in Sri Lanka. We will pair the analysis of select projects with seminal readings of major post-colonial thinkers such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as well as architectural theorists such as Arindam Dutta, Kenneth Frampton, and Vikram Prakash. We will investigate in how far key concepts such as the stereotype, interpretation, hybridity, translation, palimpsest, the nation, and cosmopolitanism can be made operative in the design of a history of modern architecture in South Asia.

This seminar is conceived in conjunction with an exhibition on a similar topic at scheduled to open at The Museum of Modern Art in 2020/21.

## Course Requirements

The course involved student-led discussion and for this reason regular attendance is required. More than two unexcused absences can lead to a failing grade. Each week, one or several readings will be assigned and made available to the class. Some of these readings will address methodological issues and will help set up a theoretical framework for discussion and analysis. Other readings will provide in-depth historical and architectural context. Students are expected to carefully read and analyze all of these readings in preparation of the classes and will be expected to engage critically and actively with these texts in our seminar discussions. Moreover, in order to hone writing skills, each student will be asked to write brief, one-page critical evaluations of two theoretical texts of their choice.

Each student will also choose one of the assigned themes/buildings to present to the class during the course of the semester. Presenting students are expected to provide a framework for group discussion by offering their own interpretation of the topic/building of their choice.

Each student is required to submit a final paper of 10-12 pages (due after the end of classes, with a one page abstract due the last week of class), which offers an opportunity to expand on the material presented in the class. Successful papers will present a clear argument that applies theoretical and methodological questions to the analysis.

Grading:

Class Participation: 30%

In-class Presentation: 30%

Final Paper Abstract: 10%

Final Paper: 30%