

Heritage & Progress

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<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/why-losing-this-school-building-will-leave-a-hole-in-gurgaons-heritage/articleshow/63618714.cms>

The senior medical officer's bungalow in the Civil Hospital, Gurgaon was not palatial- it had three rooms, a veranda which would be covered with thick bamboo *chicks* during the blistering summers and two outhouses for the kitchen and the toilet. The best part of the house was the large, partially paved space between the main house and the outhouses. There were two large neem trees in that space which provided some relief during the summer. The house shared a wall with the Government Higher Secondary School.

That house, where I spent my childhood, ceased to exist in the early eighties. The civil hospital, a conglomeration of old British era buildings was woefully small for the increasing population of the city. Most of the buildings were demolished and new multi-storeyed blocks came up. The neem trees were chopped down and the bungalow razed to make way for a car park.

However, the school was allowed to stay. The red coloured double story structure was as much a landmark in the old city as the "ship" building is in the new one. For a long time, it was the only government higher secondary school in the city and catered to not just the city but the surrounding villages and towns too. Generations of students had finished their schooling here.

I have no idea of the exact provenance of the structure though, one can be sure that it dates to at least the early nineteen thirties. An uncle of mine, who retired from the Government of India, had finished his matriculation from this school. This was in the early 1930s. His father, an employee of the forest department was posted to the city when the city was not much more than a small bazaar and a civil lines and my uncle had enrolled in the school for a few years. Interestingly, the notice board in the school which lists the names of the students who excel academically still has my uncle's name for topping the Matriculation examination!

The newspapers report that the civil hospital needs to expand and so the school will be shifted somewhere else and the buildings would be demolished. The school principal is reported as remonstrating feebly that the school caters to many students from nearby who would then drop out.

What no one seems to be interested in is the historical value of this colonial building. Of course a growing and increasingly demanding population needs new infrastructure. But is it absolutely necessary for us to build it at the cost of our heritage? A building which is more

than 8 decades old, has seen the Raj, independence and finally the creation of a new state can be destroyed by bureaucratic fiat without any public debate and discussion.

One sees this happening all the time. A flyover under construction in Old Delhi (after a delay in construction of nearly 2 decades) demolished a quaint colonial era building where a school was running. Never mind that the orientation of the flyover is a bit odd given that it needed to avoid demolishing some shops which were part of the compound of a religious structure. Shops, not the structure itself. Shops which are undoubtedly a sinecure for the cabal which possibly runs the religious monument. These could not be demolished without hurting religious sentiments but a monument to our heritage is easy picking.

It can be argued that the National Monuments Act gives protection to structures which have true historical value and are part of our heritage. Those which do not come under its purview are not necessarily important and since land is needed for new infrastructure, demolishing them might be inevitable. But is it really true that it is inevitable? Can we not try and find alternatives to mindless destruction of these historical monuments? For instance, in the case of the hospital, there is ample space available on the other sides of the hospital since there is a police line on one side and some government and private residences on the other side. Can we not think of using some of that land and sparing this structure which has so much history associated with it? Is our bureaucratic imagination so sterile that we cannot think of innovative solutions to such problems?

My sharpest memory of the school is of tens of students, sitting on the branches of the neem tree or on the dividing wall between our house and the school. This was in the month of April when the annual examinations would take place. They would be there, helping their friends in their exams by throwing chits and books into the classrooms whose windows had possibly last seen glass panes before independence! The picture of cheating in a Bihar school which went viral last year brought back memories of that remarkable scene from many summers ago.

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