
*PATRICK GEDDES IN INDIA

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PEOPLE'S ARCHITECT

By a Correspondent

For A Long Period, Municipalities have neglected their poorer quarters and these have become ever more insanitary and congested.

When the position grows quite intolerable some piecemeal sanitary improvements are undertaken. These must be maintained, and inspections and inspectors multiply. Sooner or later the inadequacy of those, methods is realized and it is decided that 'something must be done'. The Municipality moves from these weak and critical methods to the opposite extreme of sweeping demolition. The effect of the demolitions is to increase overcrowding in the surrounding areas, heighten the rents and intensify the poverty of the population. The well-meaning Municipality next sets about vast schemes of water-supply and drainage, which are sometimes questionable and sometimes unsuccessful but always very costly. Often these also involve sweeping destruction of old wells and reservoirs and too often all ordinary drainage repairs are held up until the new drainage is ready. This provides the unfortunate and impoverished citizens with a further term of years of increased deterioration and unremoved dirt.

The whole process becomes increasingly expensive and Government doles are often sought; and wasted when given".

These observations are from the pen of Patrick Geddes, an English Architect who was in India between 1915 and 1919. That was the time, when the British Imperialism was at its height. Congress Party became a people's party only in 1920s. Not only did the average English man was convinced of the superiority of his ideas and outlook and looked down upon the Indian tradition, but the Indian experts who were imitating the British were also convinced that the English culture, architecture, town planning etc. were the best in the world and had a contemptuous attitude towards everything Indian.

In such a situation Patrick Geddes showed great sympathy for the religions and social practices of the local communities and came up with town planning projects for some forty Indian cities, people friendly, economical, eco-friendly and aesthetic. In an introduction to Patrick Geddes' *book written in 1946, Lewis Mumford, an Ecologist par excellence, observes "Geddes was far in advance of his generation.. His planning challenged the idols of officialdom; it was conceived in terms of primary human needs... To use town planner's art, Geddes brought the rural virtues : not merely respect for the land and for agricultural processes; but the patience of the peasant and the sense that orderly growth is more important than order at the expense of the growth". Advocates of Special Economic Zones for Nandigram and other places, please take note.

In Geddes' words "Town-planning is not mere town planning, not even work planning. If it is to be successful it must be folk planning".

When Europeans first settled in India they found conditions in the cities so unhealthy, noisy, and otherwise distasteful, that they started independent colonies outside - 'cantonments' for the military and 'civil lines' for officials and businessmen. They did not care for the local population. Later on, when town planning started for the locals it was European model. In such a situation Geddes struck a different note.

Geddes advocates tree planting - especially fruits yielding trees and vegetable gardens as integral to town planning. "I insist that an enormous proportion of the diseases of children and of men and women-would disappear if there were a substantial increase of fresh vegetables and fruits in their diet".

Further, everyone knows that the most destructive of the diseases of India are diseases of the alimentary canal and that these diseases are communicated in two ways, by dust and by polluted water. These planting proposals would greatly diminish both the dispersal of dust and the pollution of water.

Such observations and details form part of the book. Sri Ramachandra Guha in his foreword to the 2007 edition of the book finds three central themes in Geddes' work. First is 'Respect for Nature'. His approach is deeply ecological emphasising a city's relationship to its water resources, the promotion of parks and trees, the importance of recycling, and the lessening of dependence on the resources of the hinterland. The second theme is 'Respect for Democracy'. He insisted that the residents of a city must help design plans made for them. The third theme is 'Respect for tradition', appreciation of all that is best in the old domestic architecture of Indian cities and of renewing this when it has fallen away.

There are 24 pages of beautiful black and white photographs on art paper and some drawings which have great historic value rendering this book a collector's item. □□□