

Ar. Apurva Bose Dutta

WHEN LITERARY & ARCHITECTURE STROKES INTERSECT... AN ENIGMA IS BORN



Sangeet...the name says it all. More lyrical than its English counterpart music, its influence transcends the boundaries of the fundamental potential of art. Creating equivalent impact in a gathering, as in solitude, it imbibes an inherent inexplicable magnetism in which everyone finds comfort. But it remains an enigma, and one is intrigued about its inherent process to reach that state of being. Sangeet Sir, true to his name, is that enigma! Such has been his generosity that over the years, he has accorded me the status of a friend, but for the great respect I have for him, the Sir will remain eternally. Nevertheless, I will drop it in this piece to be more literary in my approach.

My first introduction to Sangeet's family was through his father, the legendary Shiv Datt Sharma. I was in my third standard when Sharma Uncle designed a revolutionary auditorium for my alma mater, Carmel Convent in Chandigarh, the largest auditorium then in the City Beautiful. In the capacity of leading the school's parent-teacher association, my father, Prof. Dr. S. M. Bose, worked closely with Uncle on the auditorium.

A decade and a half later, in 2005, when I was keen to pursue architectural writing as a career, my parents were baffled by my choice of this unusual field I was raving about after spending five years on my architecture degree. Dad took me to Sharma Uncle's office to perhaps veer me away from this obscure career path. As luck would have it, not only Sharma uncle but his son, Sangeet, who had recently started writing books on architecture, supported my choice and indicated the field's tremendous potential.

This professional support led to my exclusive association with the family, who have been one of the biggest cheerleaders for my career choice of architectural writing, journalism, criticism, and curation. Over these years, I have had the privilege to write about Sharma Uncle and Sangeet several times. I have also engaged with them in dialogues on platforms, curated a conference on architectural journalism organised by Sangeet's A3 Foundation, and attended several of the Foundation

events whenever I happened to be in Chandigarh, my hometown. A few professional memories with them remain additionally special being the first recipient of the A3 Foundation Architectural Journalism Award in 2009, which gave me and my career a huge boost; my first book, *Architectural Voices of India*, featuring Sharma Uncle as one of the chapters and my recent book on family legacies in architecture in India, *Architectural Inheritance and Evolution in India*, with a chapter dedicated to the Sharma family.

What has changed or enhanced in these almost two decades of this association with Sangeet has been the growing inspiration I have received from him. An award-winning architect, his multi-talents and versatility as a prominent and awarded architectural literary figure and educationist and his interests in embracing music, poetry, and photography to stir souls make me gape at his multitasking abilities. In my earlier years of knowing him, he professed to work in mental shifts, with his brain integrating a biological alarm and an MCB with switch-on and off modes. His subconscious midnight flashes of designs he would wake up to record justify the mind managing this true artist. 'Detachment and a spirit of renunciation is one of the greatest characteristics of the wise man, for one of the greatest causes of suffering is our attachment to things,' he remarks, explaining the Buddhist philosophy he follows. This trait of staying detached yet so attached to his multidisciplinary endeavours is infectious.

Considering my affinity with literary pursuits in architecture, I shall keep it as the focus of this piece. Sangeet was one of the few architects in India who began to accord his literary pursuits equal significance as his architectural ones. When more than a decade back, I spearheaded India's first journal issue on architectural journalism, I invited him to write a piece where he urged for architecture to have 'specialised people who "react" to buildings to analyse, condemn, appreciate, reward, or confine it to the bulldozer.' In his eloquent articulation of these experts, he remarked, 'Like the wine tasters, whose one nod can close down the winery, we need people whose voice in the

profession can acclaim buildings or dynamite them.' Through his A3 foundation, a forum promoting art, architecture, and aesthetics, he has been pioneering in acknowledging, recognising, and encouraging architectural literature.

My personal library is adorned with Sangeet's autographed books; these are not merely his literary accomplishments but manifestos, which have built the premise for his architecture. He classifies books as his best friend and describes his approach towards book writing as an integration of his learnings of the writings of Oscar Wilde, Shakespeare, and Aurobindo. He admits, 'I write, as George Bernard Shaw said, for the same reason a cow gives milk; it's inside me, it's got to come out and, in a real sense, I would die if I couldn't. It's the way I express my reaction to the world I live in.'

Sangeet's distinct writing style displays abundant effortless where profound learnings and refreshing perspectives appear in light and artful tones, peppered with subtle humour, witty anecdotes, and steering clear of jargon, making these reads engaging and entertaining. As he once told me, 'I entertain so as to teach.' I admire his knack for penning brilliant epilogues. Behind his smiling, cheerful, and enthusiastic demeanour is a man who thinks and reflects deeply at many levels together, experiences sensitively and wholly, and expresses beautifully.

His first authored book, *Architectural Aesthetics* (2005), was published when minimal literature existed on aesthetics as a function of architecture. The book is an anthology of essays, several of which were published in journals. It highlights various aspects of architecture by illustrating examples of built forms across the globe and their relation to art, music, spirituality, and human emotions.

It would be unfair to pick a favourite of his books, but I have the most vivid memories of reading *Architecture, Life and Me* (2008). The book has remained with me to date, and I incorporated it as one of the case studies in the book writing section of my course on architectural writing. Sangeet decided to pen this semi-autobiographical memoir, a 'culmination of many years of his thoughts and musings', just after a decade into the profession. An era of confusion and his state of flux—where the multi-faceted artist in him yearned to find a niche in his father's revered legacy and figure out architecture in relation to other arts—led to this book. The book was brave because it made his implicit emotions public.

Much like his other books, this one was replete with engaging, reflective, philosophical, thought-provoking accounts obligating readers to analyse circumstances, experience his emotions, and learn with great subtlety. He admits to being an ambivert, a quality the book reflects,

where the candid experiences and the level of internalisation both walk together. Written to inspire and guide students in architecture towards practice, the book was included in the subject of Theory of Design in the curriculum of a few architectural institutions in India.

His subsequent book, *Corb's Capitol* (2009), was a tale of architects touring and analysing Chandigarh with Sangeet. Their informal conversations, egged by Sangeet's witty questions, resulted in an engaging narrative style of writing scrutinising the city's debated development. Alongside, it reflected Sangeet's in-depth observation and love for the city as a citizen and an architect who witnessed its transformation and accordingly evolved his style of architecture.

The chapter "Me" in *Corb's Capitol* hilariously describes the plight of practising architects in Chandigarh. Quoting him from one of my earlier interviews, 'Being in Chandigarh as an architectural professional is tedious and like walking on a double-edged sword.' Regardless of the design and bye-laws limitations for architects in Chandigarh, Sangeet derived inspiration from the city and opted to practice as a 'Contemporary Modernist' in a 'Cubist Modernism' style, addressing every building elevation as a cube and being attentive to its composition and materiality. 'The inspiration for this style came from a painting by Le Corbusier in my room, where Corbusier refers to Pablo Picasso, the legendary painter who created the concept of cubism,' Sangeet confessed in a conversation during my second book. Engaging in this distinctive style and bestowing upon it a name can well be aligned with his appetite for carving his niche.

In a chapter titled "Teaching Architecture" in *Architecture, Life and Me*, Sangeet reflects on the three instruments of knowledge in man: instinct, reasoning, and inspiration. His design visualisation is a product of these. He seeks to create his buildings as living entities with their mute guide: 'a silent narrator that does all the talking, that must hold your hand and take you along the journey while narrating all those violent flushes of the heart that made the architecture of that building come alive.'

The following quotes from his book further narrate his spirit of architecture.

'Architecture should become a medium for introspection and evolution...and not just revolution.'

'Architecture becomes a craft when we think of walls alone, becomes an art when we think of beautifying the walls and becomes a passion when we think of the space between the walls.'

Carrying ahead the Corbusian architecture legacy, Sangeet indulges in a maverick craft of brick and concrete, playing with asymmetrical forms and using sciography, light, and silence as artwork for his built spaces. Quoting him from another of our conversations for an article, 'A balanced composition is what I believe in. I like to play with the sun by not blocking it but by its penetration—by playing through its modes and moods. For me, the play of light and shade are cultivated in the design and need to appear as a work of art.'

Sangeet's handling of light has been inspired by master architect Louis Kahn, and this inspiration has been detailed in a chapter in Architecture: Life and Me. Referring to Kahn's IIM Ahmedabad Campus, Sangeet's words bring the project alive. 'Maybe the silence was in the movement of light, but I found that the dance of this articulated light spoke very eloquently. Perhaps the silence was in the simple and defined geometry, but that was not to be—the simple geometry was vehemently verbal. In all its thunderous dialogues the master drew silence in conclusions. It seemed that the dialogue was complete for silence to ensue.' His emotive communication aside, Sangeet's reading of buildings, their emotions, and the intangibility of light and silence defining spaces has my appreciation. His chapter on reading buildings in the same book is pertinent for those wanting to engage in critical discourse.

Archi Talks (2015), his following book, was an extension of Architectural Aesthetics, comprising revised versions of a few of his older essays. The book reflected Sangeet's grasp of architectural theory, its implementation in the built form, and acceptance of architecture's role in serving society.

Someone who has observed Sangeet closely will recognise his love for a constant potpourri of ideas and continual sense of curiosity, a trait his literary milestones unabashedly embody. His last published book, Castles in the Air (2017), a bestseller, is a rare gem. It is a hysterical take on the utterly serious practice of architecture but in a reverential, stimulating manner that makes you love the field. It is a bold book skilfully traversing the uncharted territories of the intense reality of architecture. The book enumerates events in the lives of architects as students, splendidly relying on anecdotal writing and Sangeet's droll observations. In many ways, it connects to Architecture, Life and Me, as it reflects Sangeet's life and experiences, but at a later stage, after undergoing the pains and tribulations of a full-fledged practice.

Sangeet's unfiltered disclosure about architecture's parallel reality, where it can be beautiful as a passion, but as a profession, its practice can be hell, summarises the book's main agenda. Several years back, when I wrote on one of his projects, he confidently divulged that the nature of architectural aspirations would never alter. This would

improve the public image of the architect over the years, who would continue to remain the messiah of the profession. In a bid to protect this 'architect', Castles in the Air culminates in an intense epilogue urging everyone 'not to kill the architect in them' because architects are 'here to stay'. He thoughtfully writes, 'An architect is a reflection of God. The feeling of fulfilment is far greater than the feeling of achievement in architecture. The difference between the two is only of the extent of spiritual satisfaction.'

Each book over these almost two decades marks an evolution of the writer in him mediating between technical, analytical, narrative, and satirical writing. Sangeet's proficiency in sculpting wordplay and fiction writing in architecture is exceptional. His prolific sketches add value to his narrations in these books and are inserted as engaging props.

Sangeet's architecture and literary intersection have also given birth to a passionate educator in him who engages with students in diverse ways—through the A3 Foundation engaging students and honouring them and through his motivational and persuasive talks that have, over the years, held the audience captive. Recently, at an international conference where I was one of the keynote speakers along with him, I saw him anxious before his talk. I laughingly remarked on this being an unexpected conduct, given his numerous talks on various platforms and his dabbling in poetry from the age of ten. But that nervousness was a mark of someone who understands the significance of prior preparations and values his achievements yet stays humble and committed to investing constant effort.

Sangeet's literary highlights and architectural accomplishments must be seen in the context of the legacies he has been endowed with. This realisation became more pronounced during my conversations with him for Architectural Inheritance and Evolution in India. For Sangeet, these were his pillars of inspiration and gravitated him towards the path he followed.

Establishing himself professionally in a city like Chandigarh wasn't easy, a city preceded by its architectural reputation and conceived by his father as one of the experts. I remember his simile about him and Chandigarh growing up together. Over the years, this love for Chandigarh has taken the form of a passion for passing on the knowledge of the city to architectural students from across the country. Making a mark in a city with Le Corbusier's stamp was also a task. Such was Le Corbusier's impact that by observing the master's sketches, Sangeet learnt to design uniquely in 3D in mind. Today, he visualises his buildings in his mind in one go, only after which he puts them on paper.

The biggest legacy he inherited was that of his father, one of India's

most revered architects. Growing up in that environment, architecture defined large parts of his life. Sangeet was fascinated and entirely inspired by his father's tryst with architecture: he remembers watching him sharpen his pencils and sketch, bundling and throwing away tracing papers. The ubiquitous inspiration from all directions almost compelled Sangeet to take up architecture as a career path. Though he has been honest about the initial challenging years he was trying to carve an identity, he started enjoying architecture and its spirit along the way. Fuelled by a desire to step out of the shadows of his various inspirations and yet remain relevant, he was driven to dabble in the many other fields he did.

An inward unrest can become the drive to achieve something substantial in life. Directing that unrest to an inner child that still wonders, a calm exterior, and a smiling and exuberant demeanour and translating it to exceptional achievements are the hallmarks of a blessed personality. Between being a professional and an individual carving out his identity in a world that could be prejudiced towards his inherited legacy, what Sangeet also emerged as, per his wife, Purnima, and their son, Shivansh, was a husband who supported his wife completely, and a doting father, who gave his children the freedom to make choices, while safeguarding them.

Going by the loads of energy, enthusiasm, drive, and youthfulness Sangeet continues to have, I am yet to come to terms with the fact that he became a grandfather four years ago. In one of our recent meetings, he confided about the 12 personality types he embraces per need and circumstance. As I sat wonderstruck, he explained how every personality type comes by as per the mood and engagement he is investing in.

This monograph might glimpse into his architectural and literary endeavours; for me, the fascination is far greater to unravel through them the varying levels and degrees of the making, meaning, and madness of the man himself; unravel the enigma that Sangeet Sir will always be!

Apurva Bose Dutta

*Author-Architectural Journalist-Curator-Editor-Educator, Bengaluru
Jan' 24*

Bengaluru-based Ar. Apurva Bose Dutta (www.apurvabose.com) is an award-winning architectural journalist, author, curator, editor, and educator. With 19 years of global collaborations with architecture-design multimedia publication houses, firms, organisations, and institutions, Apurva works at the intersection of architectural design writing, curation, critique, discourse, communications and thinking.

PUBLISHED BOOKS BY AR. SANGEET SHARMA

