

The Railway Bungalow, a Disappearing Phenomenon: *Identity, Nostalgia and Imaginary Homelands in a Post-colonial Experience*

¹Jeremy Savio Dacruz and ²Shanthichitra

¹Department of English, SRM University, Faculty of Science and Humanities, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Department of English, SRM University, Faculty of Science and Humanities, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract: The origins of the Railway Bungalow in India lie in the early attempts of the first British military pioneers in the Eighteenth Century to designate and construct a permanent dwelling for the East India Company when the British were still traders in the subcontinent. However, the *Railway Bungalow* has always had a fixed notion of identity and has evolved over the colonial to the contemporary era which travels around nostalgia and more importantly colonial nostalgia. The Indian Railway which plays a huge part in the growth of the Indian economy has also been a phenomenon in diversifying the multicultural landscape within India. How does a community evolve into an *identity*? If this transition is possible, does this transition happen organically or does it involve a catalyst which revolves only around nostalgia? The narratives of the *Bungalow* in India have not remained that of a stylistic expression alone but have demonstrated cultural pluralism through its regional variations and architectural types. Post-colonialism has anchored itself deeply and this grounding has constructed many an experiences in India. This paper will serve as an academic platform through which narratives of the *Railway Bungalow* and the ideologies that surround this cultural synergy, has evolved into an *identity*. This will be the sole idea behind the questioning of this paper.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Identity, Railway Bungalow, Diversification

“As we construct the identity of others, others construct our identity.” Zizek



Fig. 1 Railway Bungalow 2015- F Type

Growing up in a railway family has always lead to questions asked over time in a set pattern with answers expected to revolve around travel, nostalgia and most importantly the colonial railway bungalow. Sadly, my answers have served only to be a disappointment and rude awakening to the many constructed notions of the Railway bungalow and ideologies that dominate it. *“Identities are constructed through multiple specificities: race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, myth, history”* (Bhabha-The location of culture)

Though the bungalow has its humble origins in west Bengal and is widely spread through the Asian continent, the prevailing notion of the bungalow is still assumed to be only colonial and this notion has led to construction and consumption of this borderline. Thus, anchoring the railway bungalow also in deep colonial *thought* and conceptualizing *identity* in the process.

Rank and privilege is synonymous with the railways in India, and the pinnacle of rank was followed by the bungalow, and the bungalow varied according to hierarchy in rank, as shown in the images below.



Fig. 2 Railway Bungalow 2015- H Type

The Indian railway network which plays a huge part in the growth of the Indian economy has also played a huge factor in diversifying the multicultural landscape within India. This has also been an important point of the origin of the Bungalow; the colonial era has no doubt a significant space with the bungalow and in turn lead construction of an *identity* to those communities that were associated with it. “*Keeping in mind that notions of community refer both to a demarcated space and to clusters of interaction*” (Gupta, *Beyond culture: space, identity and the politics of difference*).

The railway bungalow in a colonial period served on two levels, as accommodation and as a seat of imperial authority. The architecture was fashioned from ideas drawn from the English tea plantation houses and farm houses. These were in turn creatively transferred to the many railway colonies within the Indian subcontinent, adding to the colonial administrative-market unification. The image below is an example of how architectural grandeur was amalgamated with imperial authority to create this element of colonial zeal.



Fig. 3 Railway Bungalow- J Type

However, another dimension to this phenomenon arises during the late twentieth century; a sudden interest in postcolonial lifestyle saw young Indian elites and professionals drawn to the British bungalow lifestyle as something to emulate. Socially and culturally fostering this lifestyle into the railway bungalow as well, thus an imperial socio-cultural house concept metamorphosed in the colonial and postcolonial period was now accepted as an aesthetically rich cultural icon. Giving its owners a sense of *Identity*, just as it did with the colonizers in the past. The importance of history in any culture, community, society cannot be ignored because history retains facts, symbols and meanings that relate *Identity* with it. “*History manifests itself in the present state of culture*” (Hall, 17). This is also evident in the case of the railway bungalow, however the manifestation has not been merely architectural historical rather cultural. What began as a rudimentary tropical dwelling by railway engineers, in time has metamorphosed into an *Identity* with a strong cultural force.



Fig. 4 Officer's Quarters 2015

However the post- independent era has restricted and restructured the discourse of the bungalow and with ever increasing land value since the 1970s, the bungalow has gradually started its decline and the other housing types such as apartments have become predominant. Urbanization, another phenomenon which has lead to the gradual disappearing of the bungalow has also restructured the many discourses of the notion of the bungalow and colonial hegemonization. While the form and structure of the railway bungalow remained the same, it developed variations in response political and socio-cultural circumstances. The other changing factors were up gradation in technological and economical *thought* which brought in a new vocabulary to the existing bungalow and its expression of a cultural habitat.



Fig.5.The Officer's Bungalow 2015

The development in contemporary India, led to restructuring of cultural identities which were a combination of traditional and colonial culture which were the base of the bungalow .The first development involved a struggle against the backward elements of traditional culture, while the second stage included many colonial objectives. This ignited the gradual monitoring of the existing *Identities* and the notions that prevailed with the class of people who were associated with the bungalow; this was also the case with the railway bungalow. This was essentially a conservative reaction to the already prevailing cultural intervention.

Much of the railway bungalows explored the theme of an original home, this original home post independence was permanently lost, which worked into the imagination and myth of the *identity* of those who now continue to reside in these bungalows. The contemporary cultural situation is an amalgamation of nostalgia and tradition, which in way serves to retain a certain distinct tradition of an era gone by, within a small segment of existing railway population.

The narratives of the bungalow in India, has not remained that of a stylistic expression alone but has demonstrated cultural pluralism through its regional variations and architectural types. The many acts of borrowing, adaptation, retention, restructuring and absorbing the local terrain have enriched the cultural ethos of the railway community in India.

As we continue to live in a society of transition, we are just beginning to feel a sense of loss. This should help society reconnect with its heritage, evaluate the present, and always remain a part of the continuum.

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