

Twelfth Neelan Tiruchelvam Memorial Lecture

Making South Asian Cities Habitable
A Perspective from the Past



by

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A Perspective from the Past

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I first heard of Neelan Tiruchelvam from the economist and legal scholar Ramaswamy Sudarshan. Sudarshan is, as some of you present here today know, a man of great intelligence of mind and an even greater generosity of spirit. He has a special gift for friendship, both for making friends himself, and for putting people of like interests in touch with one another. When, in the early 1990s, I was emerging out of a long (and occasionally dark) encounter with Marxism, he said he would introduce me to the finest liberal of his acquaintance. 'I will take you to Colombo to meet Neelan', he said: 'He will clear up your confusions.'

The 1990s, in India, were a decade of bitter conflict, between different castes and (especially) different religious communities. I was deeply troubled by these conflicts, as were many other Indian patriots and democrats. Sudarshan naturally thought that his young, confused friend needed the counsel of someone who had faced, and faced down, the bigotries of religion and ethnicity in his own country.

Alas, other commitments—work as well as family—supervened, and I could not come with Sudarshan to see and consult, Neelan Tiruchelvam in Colombo. But I read more about him and his work for peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. In

reflecting on his life and legacy, I am reminded of that other great Tamil-speaking democrat, Chakravarthi Rajagopalachari. Rajaji spent his entire life seeking to reconcile conflicting groups, seeking to make one party to a conflict, see the humanity of the other. At different points in his career, Rajaji tried to reconcile Hindu and Muslim, India and Pakistan, India and England, North India and South India and low caste and high caste. In a society marked by the deliberate encouragement of conflict and antagonism, his was a rocky road indeed. As Rajaji once said to a Quaker friend, 'those who are born to reconcile seem to have an unending task in this world'.

Neelan Tiruchelvam also worked tirelessly to reconcile contending or warring groups—to bring state and citizen, Tamil and Sinhala, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Christian to see the justice of the other's demands and aspirations. As with Rajaji, Neelan's reconciling work earned him the hostility of bigots, but also, a honoured and indelible place in South Asian history.

My talk today is on a subject that may, at first sight, seem somewhat removed from the concerns of Neelan Tiruchelvam. Neelan was a citizen of Sri Lanka and of the world. But before country and globe, he belonged also to a city, the city where we are meeting today. The word citizen, says the Oxford English Dictionary, has its root in the Old French *citeain*, itself based on the Latin *civitas*, or 'city'. Now Colombo is one of many South Asian cities whose rapid recent growth has placed burdens on its social and environmental fabric. The expansion of Colombo, as of New Delhi, Karachi, Kathmandu, Dhaka, raises a series of serious questions for citizens and planners alike. How can we provide safe, secure, and pleasant housing for the different social classes in the city? What forms of transport will city residents use to commute to and from their workplace? Where will the water and energy to sustain them come from? Can one reconcile

growth and development with environmental sustainability? And with aesthetics? In short, how can we make the lives of city residents more habitable, in all senses of the word?

Since I am a historian, I shall seek to answer these questions by means of a detour into the past. I shall argue that the problems of South Asian cities were studied most thoroughly by a fascinating Scotsman named Patrick Geddes. Between 1914 and 1924, Geddes travelled through many parts of British India, studying and writing about what he saw. His reports from his Indian sojourn lie in libraries in his native Scotland. Published in limited editions, they are wholly forgotten now. But, as I shall hope to show in my lecture, they speak directly to the concerns of the present, to the search for a more dignified and more humane life for the citizens of Kandy, Jaffna, Ahmednagar, Bijapur, Chittagong, Khulna, Multan, Quetta, and a hundred other towns and cities in South Asia.

II

I am concerned in his talk with Patrick Geddes' work in India, but a brief introduction to his other work is necessary. He was born in 1854, on 2nd October, the same day as Mahatma Gandhi, but fifteen years before him. He never read a degree at University. However, he studied for four years with the scientist T. H. Huxley (known as Darwin's bulldog). From 1880, Geddes commenced a peripatetic University career, teaching Biology at Edinburgh and Dundee. He also travelled widely in Europe and North America. He was that oxymoron, a Scottish internationalist. The main intellectual influences on Geddes were three-fold:

1. English craft Socialism, especially Ruskin and Morris. From them he learnt to view Industrialism with a critical eye;
2. French historical Geography, notably the works of Reclus and Le Play. From them he learnt to view culture and economy in their ecological context:
3. The geographical Anarchism of Kropotkin, which reinforced the ecological analysis while promoting a fear of centralization.

Geddes made important contributions to scientific debates in Economics, Sociology, Zoology, Botany and Geography. He even wrote a famous essay on art criticism. But his most enduring work was in the theory and practice of town planning. He took a historical and ecological approach, studying the rise of the modern city and its impact on the natural environment. His ideas are summarized in his book *Cities in Evolution*, which was published in 1915. Here, he drew a distinction between what he called the Paleotechnic present and a Neotechnic future. The 19th century, he argued, was an age of 'carboniferous capitalism', based on non-renewable resources and polluting in its impacts. Produced out of the exhaustion of nature and natural resources, the Paleotechnic age had seen the dominance of Man by Machine, by Finance and by Militarism. But Geddes hoped for a new Neolithic age, based on solar energy and on long lasting alloys, marked by 'its better use of resources and population, towards the betterment of man and his environment together'.

Although respectful of tradition, Geddes was not a backward looking reactionary. He was neither a nostalgic romantic nor a fervent modernizer. There is a fine passage in *Cities in Evolution* that sums up his philosophy:

‘Beauty, whether of Nature or Art, has too long been without effective defense against the ever-advancing smoke-cloud and machine-blast and slum-progress of Paleotechnic Industry. Not that her defenders have been of the very noblest witness, notably Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, with their many disciples; yet they were too largely romantics—right in their treasuring of the world’s heritage of the past, yet wrong in their reluctance, sometimes even passionate refusal, to admit the claims and needs of the present to live and labour in its turn and according to its lights, so they too in great measure had brought upon themselves that savage retort and war-cry of “Yah! Sentiment!” with which the would-be utilitarian has so often increased his recklessness towards Nature and coarsened his callousness to art. The romantics have too often been as blind in their righteous anger as were the mechanical utilitarians in their strenuous labour and their dull contentment with it. Both have failed to see, beyond the rude present, the better future now dawning—in which the Applied Physical Sciences are advancing beyond their clumsy and noisy first apprenticeship, with its wasteful and dirty beginnings, towards a finer skill, a more subtle and more economic mastery of natural energies and in which these, moreover, are increasingly supplemented by a corresponding advance of the organic sciences, with their new valuations of life, organic as well as human.’

III

Patrick Geddes was a restless internationalist, seeking friends, converts and associates in all parts of the globe. His interest in India was first sparked by a chance encounter in Paris with the Irish spiritualist, Margaret Noble, known to Indians as Sister Nivedita. She and Geddes struck up a close friendship.

Although she died suddenly in October 1906, her memory and the prospect of finding disciples in India, attracted him to the land. Immediately after finishing his opus, *Cities in Evolution*, Geddes made plans for a visit to the sub-continent. He had hoped to take his carefully put-together exhibition on urban history around the cities of British India.

Geddes arrived in Madras in the autumn of 1914. The boxes of his 'Cities and Town-Planning Exhibition' were carried by another ship which, as luck would have it, was struck by a German destroyer (the First World War had just broken out). The vessel went down into the Indian Ocean and with it, the work of half-a-lifetime. Geddes was stranded in India with no exhibition to show. Characteristically, he turned his mind instead, on gathering new material, on studying the rise, decline and transformation of the cities and towns of India. He stayed in India, on and off, between 1914 and 1924, aged sixty when he came and touching seventy when he finally left. One of his biographers, Hellen Mellor, has written that his time in India brought Geddes 'more work, more money and more enjoyment than he had ever experienced before.'

In India Geddes worked as a freelance town planner and then as the first Professor of Sociology and Civics of the University of Bombay. He travelled widely and interacted closely with high and low Indians. He met Mahatma Gandhi, twice, knew Annie Besant and befriended the great Bengali thinkers Rabindranath Tagore and Jagadish Chandra Bose. In his years in India, he also wrote nearly fifty town plans, some commissioned by native princes (Maharajahs), some written at the behest of colonial administrators. The towns he wrote about range from Dhaka in the East to Ahmedabad in the West, from Lahore in the North to Thanjavur in the South. Published in limited editions by obscure presses, now available only in libraries in Scotland, Geddes' Indian town plans deserve to be resurrected.

Later as a Professor of Sociology in Bombay University once remarked, his writing is full of brilliant insights, which Geddes 'threw up and flung about like sparks from a crackling fire'.

Running through Geddes's town plans are three central themes, which I shall call, Respect for Nature, Respect for Democracy and Respect for Tradition.

Let me now take these three themes in turn.

Geddes' town plans are deeply ecological in at least four respects:

Firstly, he saw the Indian city as defined by its relationship to water. Traditional India saw the River as Sacred. In this it merely anticipated the science of Geography, which also stressed what he called 'the fundamental and central River-factor of human environment'. Geddes wished to re-design the city of Indore around its rivers. Elsewhere, where there were no rivers, he stressed the renewal and revitalization of tanks.

Secondly, he was always alert to spaces, however small, that could be claimed by trees. As a skilled Botanist, he had a keen eye as to which species went with which aspect. His plans are filled with meticulously specific recommendations, for a line of cypresses to be planted here, a grove of mangoes there, pipal planted in one place, banyan in another.

Thirdly, he stressed the conservation of resources, to minimise the city's dependence on the hinterland. Particular noteworthy here is what he says about wells. These, he said, should 'be regarded as a valuable reserve to the existing water supplies, even if these be efficient.' As he continued, 'any and every water system occasionally goes out of order, and is open to accidents and injuries of very many kinds; and in these old wells we inherit an ancient policy, of life insurance, of a very real kind and one far too

valuable to be abandoned'. Geddes was here writing about Thane, but his words should be pasted above the office desks of planners working today in Chennai, Hyderabad and a dozen other cities of India.

Fourthly, he emphasized the importance of recycling. Sewage could be fruitfully used to manure gardens; as he so beautifully put it, convert 'a fetid and poisonous nuisance into a scene of order and beauty'. This might even lead to an elevation in the status of the sweepers, who would be put in charge of using night-soil to raise and cultivate gardens. One would thus redeem what Geddes termed 'one of the main historic disasters of India', namely, that the Hindu religion regarded human waste as defiling, whereas other cultures such as China and ancient Rome had 'successfully idealised and consecrated the manuring process'.

The centrality of Nature in Geddes' plans was a means to an end, the harmonising of city and country. He speaks of 'that "return to Nature" which every adequate plan involves, with pure air, water and cleanliness in surroundings again rural, so that, in Ruskin's phrase, the field gains upon the street, no longer merely the street upon the field'. Or, as he writes elsewhere, 'the problem is how to accomplish this return to the health of village life, with its beauty of surroundings and its contact with nature, upon a new spiral turning beyond the old one which, at the same time, frankly and fully incorporates the best advantages of town-life'. Respect for Nature, in all these varied aspects, is then the first major theme.

The second theme is that of Democracy. This too has several distinct aspects. The first is that of participation. Let me quote from his best-known and most exhaustive Indian plan, written for the city of Indore in Central India. 'As the Physician must make a diagnosis of the patient's case before prescribing treatment', remarked Geddes,

‘so with the planner for the city. He looks closely into the city as it is and inquires into how it has grown and suffered. And as the Physician associates the patient with his own cure, so must the planner appeal to the citizen. Hence the Indore reader should go round and look at the City for himself; and with its Plan for partial guide, he may check and amplify the diagnosis; and perhaps accelerate the treatment.’

The democratic town planner must pay special attention to the needs of less privileged groups. I have already mentioned Geddes’ concern for the status of the untouchables. But he also stressed the rights and needs of women and children, which tend to be ignored in most plans. Hence his appreciation of courtyards and balconies, where women had their own private space and his stress on the creation of parks for children to play in. In the town of Bharuch, in present-day Gujarat, he was deeply impressed by the fact that the wells had eight or even sixteen wheels on a fixed overhead pulley, whereas in other places there was generally only a single wheel. The ordinary or common method of stooping down to lift water, put enormous pressure on the abdominal and pelvic organs. But the Bharuch method, where one stayed erect and only used the arms, was much gentler on the women. As he said, ‘I know of no simple labour and health-saving appliance which better deserves wide popularisation among Indian Municipalities’.

Another aspect of Geddes’ democratic instincts was his opposition to the mindless destruction of buildings to ‘improve’ the town or to build highways for cars to drive through. In Bharuch he found, to his dismay, that ‘sweeping clearances and vigorous demolitions seem [to be] coming fully in fashion...’ In the Changar Mohalla of Lahore, he was appalled by a scheme for re-development which planned to destroy five Mosques, two Dharamsalas, tombs and temples and shops and dwellings. It spared only one building: the Police Station. Geddes

condemned the scheme as an 'indiscriminate destruction of the whole past labour and industry of men, of all buildings good, bad and indifferent, and with these, of all their human values and associations, profane and sacred, the Police Office only excepted!' His ground rule for clearance and eviction was that 'these must in any and every case be deprecated until and unless new and adequate location is provided'—words that, in a just world, would guide the actions not only of the town planner, but of the dam engineer and missile builder as well.

This leads me, logically, to the respect for tradition, or Patrick Geddes' awareness of what is now called Heritage Preservation. After a visit to Nadiad he said the town planner must have an 'appreciation of all that is best in the old domestic architecture of Indian cities and of renewing this where it has fallen away'. It was absurd to destroy, as being 'out of date, fine old carven housefronts, which Western museums would treasure and Western artists be proud to emulate'. On a trip to Surat he spied a beautiful mosque whose view was obscured; this led him to recommend something he usually abhorred, the straight line, at the end of which would lie this mosque, now visible to all. Then, after visiting the greatest of Gujarati cities, Ahmedabad, he was inspired to recommend a civic museum that would have four or five distinct rooms:

First, a display of archaeological materials, shards of temples from the Hindu past;

Second, the showcasing of 'the rise and flowering of that marvellous [Muslim] architecture to which Ahmedabad owes its special eminence and attractiveness'.

Third, panels demonstrating how these monuments, now decaying, would be restored and placed once again amidst tree-filled parks;

Fourth, panels on the ancient city walls with suggestions on how to conserve them (at this time) these walls were being threatened by a new Ring Boulevard; Geddes lobbied, in the end unsuccessfully, against the new road);

Fifth, moving from the grand to the everyday, a display of the domestic architecture of the old neighbourhoods, the Pols, this paying special attention to the development and detail of their cavings;

Last, but definitely not the least, a room showing what Geddes called 'the intensifying deterioration and squalor of the ruder industrial age'.

In passing, Geddes offers a five word motto that those interested in Heritage Preservation must urge on every architect and town planner, namely:

'To Postpone is to Conserve'.

Geddes' overall philosophy of town planning can be captured in three quotes from his Indian reports.

First, from a plan for Dacca, where he says that

'the Town Planning movement is on this side a revolt of the peasant and the gardener, as on the other, of the citizen, and these united by the geographer, from their domination by the engineer.'

Second, from a plan for Balrampur, where he remarks that for the Town Planner

'the problem is not simply, as for municipalities and their engineers, today the removal of sewage or tomorrow the supply of water, at one time the removal of congestion or supply of communications; and at some other, the problems of housing or again of suburban extension. Our problem is to make the

best of all these specialisms and their advocates. ... Our attitude differs from that of the specialist, intent upon perfection in his own department, whatever be the outlays, whatever the delays to others accordingly; it is rather that of the housewife, the agriculturist or the steward, who has to make the best of a limited budget, and not sacrifice resources enough for general wellbeing to the elaboration of a single improvement.'

Third, from his great two-volume plan for Indore, where he argues that

'to be effective, action is not simply a matter of diffused science, of intellectual knowledge, as too many still think, since we were all trained at College to be intellect-idolaters. An idea has to be emotionalised to bring forth action. Emotion is the vital spark, which ignites the cold potentiality of knowledge into the flame and energy of desire, will and resolve, of purpose and deed.'

IV

I move on now to an analysis of a single plan, that which Geddes wrote for the town of Balrampur, now in Uttar Pradesh. This report started with the Palace and its grounds, suggesting that the shrubberies become less shabby by planting up gaps, with the naturalist in Geddes paying attention to species, recommending the short and large leaved Loquat in front of the tall and small-leaved Shisham. The West Lawn would be given dignity and character by the planting of a Banyan, in time to be 'a great and monumental tree'. The approach to the Palace would be a stately avenue planted with Tamarind or *Ficus refusa*.

Coming to public buildings, Geddes suggests the creation of a brand-new Library which, apart from regular periodical

and reference services and reading rooms, would also have a Juvenile Reading Room 'and some day even a Ladies room.'

Next, Geddes moves on to the improvement of old Balrampur, *mohalla* by *mohalla*, suggesting thinning of houses here, clearing of tanks there, protection and planting up of open spaces. Clearly Geddes had walked over the entire area closely, and carefully. His scheme revolved around the renewal of the town's once extensive but now decayed tank system. These once linked the *mohallas*, culminating in a grand lake in front of the Palace. Geddes wished to clean the tanks, link them and plant up their sides and bunds, so that, as he said, 'each neighbourhood and mohalla may thus speedily be brought to take pleasure and pride in its local portion of the Park System and to protect it accordingly.'

Geddes thus hoped to convert Balrampur's disused water tanks from being 'fetid ponds and [a] civic disgrace' to becoming 'pure lakes and the main ornaments of their city'. This, he argued, would be a way to recover the finest aspects of Balrampur's and India's past. 'It cannot be too often and clearly affirmed,' he claimed, 'that the old Tank Parks of so many Indian Cities are not only the glory of India, but are without rivals in Europe, since often surpassing in their beauty of mingled land and waterscapes, the glories of Versailles and Potsdam, as of Dutch and Canal Cities.'

Geddes ended his report with a stirring invocation of the sacred aspects of tanks, of what a carelessly modernising India appeared to have lost but what it might, with skilled guidance, yet reclaim. Thus Geddes says that of 'all unfavourable impressions of contemporary life and culture in India, none is more obvious and insistent than the general decline of aesthetic sense and productiveness, which till the Industrial Age was possessed by both Indians and Europeans, but is now eclipsed in both

alike—witness their fallen taste in arts and crafts, in gardening and decoration, and above all in the general deterioration of architecture, [and] the indifference to landscape appreciation.’

Geddes said this in 1917; but it remains painfully true to this day. But like him we must hope that ‘this blindness is neither historic nor permanent in either of us [Indian or European],’ and that ‘the sense of beauty is returning in nature in cities alike,’ whether in Balrampur or in a hundred other places spread across the sub-continent.

This report on Balrampur, eighty pages long, is written with love and learning. It is an encrusted little gem, but, alas, a gem cast before swine. One cannot believe the Maharaja of Balrampur ever read it. Meanwhile the Professor himself had moved on to the next town, and the next Plan.

V

I would like to end this talk by sharing with you various verdicts on the life and work of Patrick Geddes. Let me begin with what was said about him by Lewis Mumford, who was in many ways Geddes’ true intellectual heir and disciple, and whose masterful books *Technics and Civilization* and *The Culture of Cities* are based on ideas and concepts derived from the Scottish Ecologist and Town Planner. Mumford wrote in 1950 that his mentor would be remembered above all as an Ecologist, as ‘the patient investigator of historic affiliations and dynamic biological and social inter-relationships.’ His work on town planning would be of lasting importance. Lewis Mumford thus remarked that ‘What Geddes’ outlook and method contribute to the planning of today, are precisely the elements that the administrator and bureaucrat, in the interests of economy or efficiency, are tempted to leave out: time, patience, loving care of detail, a watchful

inter-relation of past and future, an insistence upon the human scale and the human purpose, above all merely mechanical requirements: finally a willingness to leave an essential part of the process to those who are most intimately concerned with it: the ultimate consumers or citizens.'

Next, consider the verdicts of three great Indian nationalists. Annie Besant wrote to Geddes in January 1915 that 'you are only the second Englishman I have met who sees what India means to the world'. Rabindranath Tagore wrote to Geddes in May 1922 that 'I have often wished for my mission, the help of men like yourself who not only have a most comprehensive sympathy and imagination but a wide range of knowledge and critical acumen. It was with bewilderment of admiration that I have so often followed the architectural immensity of your vision'. Geddes died in April 1932; three years later Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to his daughter Indira about his admiration for him. Nehru described Geddes as a 'very great man', a 'genius in many fields'. Writing to his teenage daughter from his cell in Almora jail, he emphasized the Scotsman's approach to education and learning, of how he 'wanted children to grow up with a first-hand knowledge of the worlds of nature and of man and to develop an unspoiled appreciation of life [and] the beauty of nature...'. As Nehru summarized Geddes's credo for the child, it consisted not of the 3 R's but the 3 H's: Heart, Hand, Head, in that order. Those who followed the Geddesian model, said Nehru to Indira, develop 'what is called a well-integrated personality, something in harmony with life and nature, the very reverse of the quarrelsome, dissatisfied ever-complaining type that we see so often today'. The future Prime Minister of India even writes as if he is a *chela* or disciple of the Scottish Professor. 'I sometimes console myself', says Nehru to Indira, 'that I am in my own topsy-turvy way following Geddes's course and so trying to develop that integrated personality'.

Such is the esteem in which Patrick Geddes was held by those giants: Besant, Tagore, and Nehru. But listen now to an appreciation by someone who is otherwise unknown, a former student of Geddes in Bombay. In a moving obituary, Pheroze Bharucha wrote of how his teacher 'just set you on fire with love of this earth and with desire to cleanse it, to beautify and re-beautify it, to build and re-build it. That he taught us to look at life with eyes of love and reverence and wonder is to put it rather coldly. He opened up a new vision of life altogether, one which we are not accustomed to behold. A walk with him in a garden filled one with the sense of the entrancing miracle that Life is. It was not mere emotion which cools off and passes away. ... He set you on fire for practical endeavour and spoke of the futility of dreams that did not rouse the dreamer to action.'

These assessments of Patrick Geddes from Indians famous and obscure testify to the vision, the intelligence, the humanity and the precociousness of a man who is now largely forgotten but who in his time contributed greatly to Indian life and Indian debates. But to these appreciative judgments I wish, finally, to juxtapose the no less sincere and truthful verdict of the Sociologist Shiv Visvanathan. The life of Patrick Geddes, says Visvanathan, 'was a magnificent list of interesting failures'.

Geddes' work in South Asia is obscure, neglected, forgotten, and hence, in conventional terms, a failure. But there may yet be time to redeem and rehabilitate it. For social life and public policy in the cities of South Asia can be greatly improved if they were indeed to show a respect for nature, a respect for democracy, and a respect for tradition. In that noble quest we can take guidance and inspiration from the works and words of that remarkable Scottish Internationalist, Patrick Geddes.

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