

Shimla's British heritage losing sheen

The imperial grandeur of buildings that were once institutions of power when this hill town was the summer capital of British India is slowly fading into oblivion.

Some of the monuments and buildings constructed by the British in typical Tudor style - all wooden frames and shingled eaves - have been damaged or refurbished, while others have simply vanished.

The 'Queen of Hills', as Shimla was fondly called by the British, is a picture of fallen glory, inflicted with the malaise of overpopulation, deteriorating civic amenities and haphazard construction.

'Shimla is a far from the city the British had visualised. Its glorious past is now history. So many relics, crowning the erstwhile summer capital of the British, have disappeared - either stolen or damaged,' M.R. Kaundal, an octogenarian who has been settled in Shimla since 1950, told IANS.

'The hydrants, once used to clean the famous Mall and The Ridge, are either missing or have been rendered useless. Even stately emblems, which once adorned the majestic banisters along the buildings housing government offices, have disappeared,' he pointed out.

The people here consider that the buildings not only reflect the British era but are an important part of India's own history - particularly its freedom struggle.

Vivek Mohan, a documentary film-maker settled in Mumbai, said: 'Now you can hardly see gabled cottages and half-timbered buildings. Most of the buildings have been refurbished to suit the needs of MNCs.'

'The Mall, which was once a 'British only' street meant for strolling on, now resembles a concrete jungle.'

Mohan is a frequent visitor to this town, which has a population of nearly 200,000 and hosts hundreds of tourists during the summer and weekends.

The historic Ridge, an open space just above the Mall, has also become a hub of commercial activities.

A large number of structures have come up on the Ridge after independence, tarnishing the regal magnificence of the hill town.

'Many relics of the bygone era have disappeared or are in ruins,' said James Mathew, a historian from Britain. 'The British were serious about replicating England right here. The future is not so bright for things of the past.'

Shimla's municipal commissioner A.N. Sharma told IANS: 'We are now looking for solutions not just to check haphazard constructions in and around the town. We are also faced with the task of preserving the past. We are planning to conserve some of the historical buildings like Ellerslie (housing the state secretariat), Vidhan Sabha, Peterhoff (which was completely renovated after being devastated in a fire nearly two decades ago and now serves as the state guest house), United Services Club, Town Hall, Barnes Court (housing Raj Bhavan) and Gordon Castle,' he said.

Himachal chief secretary Asha Swaroop said: 'For preserving Shimla's rich cultural and imperial heritage, we have sought special funds from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). A list of 30 historical buildings has been submitted to the ADB to provide funds for renovating and restoring their original glory.'

The town has 91 British-era heritage buildings that are in bad shape.

'Sadly, the government appears to bypass the important issue of conserving heritage buildings and that too after the 105-year-old Kalka-Shimla rail line has been chosen by Unesco as a world heritage site,' a retired bureaucrat remarked, requesting anonymity.

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