

A Matter of Record

Life in the Abode of Monks

By J V Narlikar

I came to Paris for a one-year visit recently. My wife and I had been warned that it would be difficult to find affordable and liveable accommodation in the city and one may have to go into distant suburbs. But a fortunate circumstance solved the problem for us in an unexpected way.

In the 17th century, a building was built in East Paris to house an order of monks who called themselves the Recollets. This was an exceptional order; for they sought and obtained permission from the Pope to isolate themselves from the mainstream so they could carry out introspection on various deep issues. The building was used by them from 1603 till the French Revolution in 1789, when it was requisitioned as a barracks and then used as a weaving mill. Later it served as a hospice until Napoleon III transferred it to the war ministry as a military hospital. The hospital closed in 1968, and the building went through several short term phases including being squatted by artists, until in the late 1990s the city of Paris decided to renovate it as accommodation for artists and scientists visiting the city.

The renovation was completed a few months ago and the city offered the apartments to various educational and cultural institutions. My host institution, the College de France, itself established in 1530 by king Francois Premier, got three apartments, and one of these was offered to us. Thus we find ourselves in an attractive part of Paris, not too far from the picturesque Canal St Martin.

The renovation itself has been carried out without violating the norms for preserving the ancient heritage. So the refurbished and freshly painted building still conveys the grandeur and simplicity of the original establishment, with its thick walls and rugged beams.

So the visiting scholars and artists are the thinkers of today, who take the place of their ancient counterparts, the Recollets.

Every city develops its own character. One indicator of it is the way its streets are named. Visit Delhi and you are left in no doubt that it is and always has been, the city of rulers and today their counterparts, the politicians. There will be a few artists and poets, but you will hardly find scientists remembered here. Move away from Delhi, and informality begins to assert itself. Pune, for example, is much less formal. Despite once being the capital city of the Maratha empire, it has a history of social reform and education which again is apparent in the naming of its streets and lanes.

Paris has had a multicultural history. It has magnificent palaces built by kings as well as the grim fate of the Bastille or the Guillotine awaiting some of them. It had

Voltaire, Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas, Monet, Renoir and the school of impressionists, and scientists like Lavoisier, Ampere, Foucault, Pasteur, Curie, etc with institutions, buildings and streets named after them. So it is not surprising that such a city should have thought of a project like the refurbishing of the old Recollets building for visiting scholars.

One wonders, how Delhi or Mumbai would have treated an old dilapidated building lying in a prime urban area. My guess is that Delhi would have demolished the building and allotted the land to our lawmakers or other VVIPs. Mumbai, with its eyes on commerce would have sought to extract the maximum cash out of the project by enhancing the FSI if necessary.

In the final analysis, it boils down to the importance we attach to our history, to our heritage. Surprisingly, a country like India which attaches much vocal importance to our ancient civilisation, has done little to preserve its links with the past. The Recollets were not a very important part of the history of Paris, but the city felt the need to preserve their building.

While reading the account of Nalanda, by Huen Tsang, the 7th century traveller from China, I could see how well-developed and sophisticated our educational system was in those days. In many ways, the university was run along the lines of some of the best universities of today. One indicator of this was the number of foreign students it attracted. Another is how difficult its selection process for admission was, so that the standard was maintained.

But what remains of it today? There are excavations giving glimpses into its distant grandeur. When I visited on a Sunday, the government tourist office was closed. There was just one guide to cater to the tourists. There were no information boards to help visitors learn of the history.

Take another example from later history, from the 17th century, the period of the Recollets. What have we done to preserve and nurture any of the historic forts which were so essential to Chhatrapati Shivaji's kingdom of Maharashtra?

It is ironical that such detailed accounts of Nalanda and other places are available largely through foreign visitors like Fa-Hsien and Huen Tsang. I do not buy the oft-repeated plea that we had excellent records but they were all destroyed by foreign invaders. Europe had many bloodier wars: But the records there have survived. My explanation for what it is worth, is that if our ancestors were as negligent about the preservation of history as we are today, then why should there be any records at all?

