The Taj Mahal Hotel, Imperial, Sun'n'Sand, Oberoi, and others: the Indian chapter of the 20th-century grand hotel

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Fig. 40: New Delhi, Interior courtyard of the Oberoi Hotel in the 1970s.

The postcards showing views of luxury hotels, most of them 5-star rated, located in the cities of Mumbai, New Delhi, and Agra, are perhaps the least critical visual resources of the collection. As advertising objects, products of the mass tourism industry, these images seek only to seduce their recipient—and potential future client—with the sweet promise of an unforgettable stay. Whether shot from the front or at an angle, the images of these grand hotels give an impression of fortress architecture,

impregnable modern and generic monuments that seem to guarantee an untroubled holiday, their luxurious rooms, gourmet restaurants, and relaxation areas sealed off from the outside world. On the reverse of the cards, the desire to seduce continues: "luxurious living" "Fully air-conditioned," "Finest cuisine", "Swimming Pool," "Symbol of Luxury, Comfort and Good Living," "Overlooking the Taj Mahal." The hotels have been locations for international film productions[1] – and, in the case of the Taj Mahal and Oberoi Trident hotels, sites of terrorist incidents (in 1993 and 2008). Beyond the dramatic topography and associations with events that temporarily damaged their public image, these large hotels, built between 1902 and 1973, reflect the political and economic transformation of India in the 20th century: the ardent desire for independence embodied by the Swadeshi movement; the rise of corporations such as the steel giant Tata; and foreign covetousness towards a region of huge potential.

The grand hotels of India: urban markers of decolonization and Independence (Taj Mahal Hotel, Ashok, Oberoi, and Clarks)

An Indian project par excellence, the Taj Mahal Hotel (1903) was commissioned by the founder of the Tata group and businessman Jamshedji Tata (1839–1904) and designed by the architect Sitaram Khanderao Vaidya. Born out of one man's ambition to establish Bombay as an international financial centre, India's first grand hotel also represented a reaction against the spatial discrimination that existed around 1900 in Bombay. The city's major hotels had a discriminatory access policy that prohibited Indians from entering. Watson's Hotel and the Apollo, meccas of international cultural sociability in Bombay, were two such. As the architect Rahul Mehrotra observes: "The expansion of the city in the 1890s had led to the construction of more hotels such as the Apollo on Colaba Causeway, but most of these were open only to Europeans. It

1 The Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai appears in several scenes in Christopher Nolan's film *Tenet* (2020).

was perhaps to counter the racial prejudice of the time that Jamshedji Tata took the decision to build the Taj, where Indians of all castes and creeds could freely socialise amongst themselves and with European on neutral ground."[2] The sense of injustice felt by the limited access policy (we should emphasise the importance of closed social spaces in Bombay, and in particular the many members-only clubs) intensified in the period 1900–1920, when the hotels became cultural spaces with their own events, including jazz concerts[3] and movie screenings. Indeed, in 1896, Watson's Hotel (the first prefabricated steel structure in India, manufactured entirely in England and shipped to Bombay) presented the Lumière brothers' first films.[4] Thus, the grand hotels accelerated the process by which contemporary foreign culture—mainly European and North American—was introduced to India.

The Taj Mahal Hotel, with its neo-historical national architecture – a blend of Gothic inspiration and the traditional style of the Mughal palaces of Rajasthan – is one of the most widely reproduced motifs on postcards of Mumbai. Its location, a few metres from the most representative monument of the capital of Maharashtra, the Gateway of India (a triumphal arch separating the city from the sea), has helped it to become a national and international icon. Another card in the collection shows a model of the Taj Mahal Hotel and its contemporary counterpart, the Taj Mahal Tower, a 22-storey reinforced concrete building designed by the American architect Melton Bekker and the Swiss designer Dale Keller and completed in 1972. Its verticality mirrors that of the hotel. However, while the latter ushered in a new era of luxury palaces run by the local elite, the Tower was a different kind of milestone because it initiated a trend for building high-rises on the waterfront. This was followed by the construction of buildings on Nariman Point (a few hundred metres from

2 Mehrotra, Rahul; Dwivedi, Sharada, *Bombay. The Cities Within*, Eminence, Mumbai, 1995; p. 210.

3 Fernandes, Naresh, *Taj Mahal Foxtrot: The Story of Bombay's Jazz Age*, Mumbai, Roli Books, 2017.

4 Préval de, Jitka, *Camille Legrand. Opérateur Pathé sur la Route des Indes*, Paris, Riveneuve, 2022.

Apollo Bandar Boulevard, the site of the Taj Mahal), most notably the Air India building (1974, architect John Burgee) and the Trident Hotel (1973, architect P. G. Patki).

Fig. 41: New Delhi, Ashok Hotel (1956).

Following India's Independence, Prime Minister Nehru commissioned the architect E. B. Doctor to design the Ashok Hotel in New Delhi for the purpose of accommodating the members of the 9th UNESCO conference (1956). This was a common occurrence in the history of large hotels in India: they were hotspots of international political life, places where Indian and Western leaders congregated to make momentous decisions. For example, in 1946, the Imperial Hotel in New Delhi (1936) hosted a meeting in which Nehru, Gandhi, and Mohammad Ali Jinnah negotiated the partition of India and the creation of the state of Pakistan. The table around which they sat is on display in the hotel.

The Sun'n'Sand (1962) is located in the north-western suburbs of Mumbai. It is representative both of the rise of mass tourism after 1945 and the growth of the greater Bombay suburbs. Located on the waterfront, within easy reach of the international airport, the hotel maintains, in a certain sense, the local tradition of temporary waterfront accommodation (of which the Bombay Sailor's Home [1869] was a prime example).

Fig. 42: Mumbai, The Sun'n'Sand Hotel in the 1960s.

The sponsor of Mumbai's second 5-star hotel (the first being the Taj Mahal Hotel), the Indian entrepreneur Gul Advani, probably had in mind the idea of offering wealthy foreign travellers and the local elites (especially those from the affluent suburb of Bandra-West) a suitable place to relax by the sea and stage large wedding parties (which were, and are, a fundamental feature of Indian life).

The postcard showing the Oberoi Intercontinental in New Delhi (1973) is a testimony to the growth of the eponymous company (est. 1934). The first of Oberoi's many Indian hotels was the Kolkata, which was built on the site of an old theatre that burnt down in 1911, and the first building in Calcutta to be equipped with a hydraulic lift. Originally owned by an Armenian, the hotel was bought by Oberoi sometime in the 1930s. It became infamous when six people died in 1937 from typhoid fever, contracted via the hotel's pipes. The episode marked the sudden (literal) intrusion of India's unsanitary water drainage system into a space that was presented as cut off from the outside world, especially the everyday problems of Indian society. The hotel was rehabilitated and reopened in 1939 as a war hospital for British soldiers. (Many of the European and Indian hotels were requisitioned and put to various uses during the Second World War.)

Fig. 43: New Delhi, Oberoi Intercontinental Hotel.

A brochure of the Oberoi Intercontinental distributed at its opening promised an unprecedented experience of technical modernity: "Planned with painstaking care and decorated luxuriously, the hotel is designed to provide the ultimate in comfort and entertainment. Eleven storeys high, the hotel commands one of the most breath-taking views of the capital city and overlooks the Delhi Golf course and Humayun's Tomb. Seven imaginatively planned restaurants offer food for every taste and budget in a cosmopolitan atmosphere so much a part of all Oberoi hotels. A modern health club and swimming-pool, a shopping centre and a great variety of entertainment facilities make Oberoi Intercontinental the outstanding new venue for all Delhi residents."

Foreign interests: from the New Delhi Imperial to the Bombay Hilton (1936–1960s)

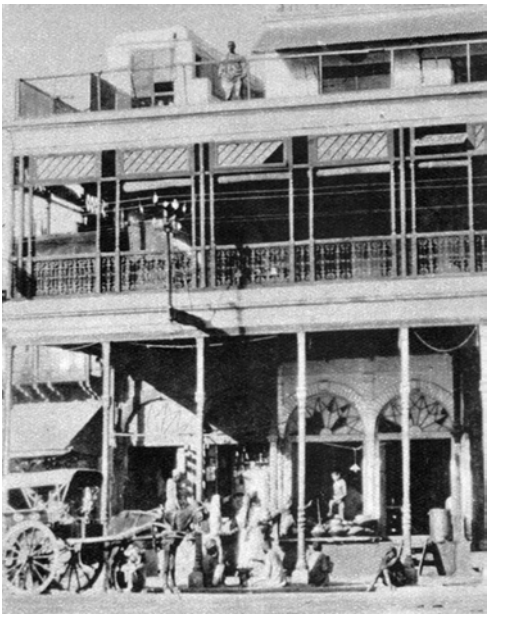
India, which was occupied by several colonial powers at the beginning of the 20th century, did not completely free itself from foreign control after 1947. Economic globalization and the desire for conquest that it engenders are partly responsible. The grand hotels reflected this reality. Some of the buildings depicted on the postcards offer their visitors an interpretation of the nation's past and local heritage, and the boundaries between hotel space and museum space are deliberately blurred.

Fig. 44: New Delhi, Hotel Imperial (1936), Pre-Independence postcard.

The Imperial Hotel (architect F. B. Blomfield), which opened its doors in 1936, is a melting pot of references to British culture and traditional colonialist imaginings of India. Although the publicity leaflets of the time promised the then-fashionable Art Deco style, this could be found only on the façade, which had the aspect of the larger New York hotels, especially the New Yorker (1929). In the numerous interior salons and courtyards, a neo-classical aesthetic inspired by ancient monuments was evident, with numerous colonnades and water basins decorated with Romanesque fountains. Far from breaking with the

surrounding city, the hotel was in keeping with the vision of Edwin Lutyens (1869–1944), New Delhi's chief architect.

Fig. 45: A 19th century hotel in old Delhi.[5]



To this day, the Imperial offers its residents a journey across cultures; the "silver tea service, tableware from London, Italian marble floors, Burma teak furniture, original Daniels and Frasers on the walls, a vision of undulating green lawns, turbaned waiters in red, all create

5 On the reverse side of the card is handwritten (in German): "hotel according to a European model". Our research did not lead us to find this building, probably destroyed today. However, it is quite similar to some of the buildings in the central avenue of Chandni Chowk.

the aura of an early 19th century English manor in the heart of Imperial Delhi."[6]

It provides a superior experience than its rivals, with a private museum consisting of three art galleries, one dedicated to Indian landscape painting, another based on the theme of "North Indians" (and whose representations of the colonial era should be analysed), and a third comprising paintings, lithographs, and watercolours from the 17th and 18th centuries by British artists in India.

Other major hotel groups blurred the boundary between grand hotel and museum in their bid to conquer the global tourism market, for example, the Hilton Hotel in Cairo (1955). The architectural historian Annabel Jane Wharton describes it thus in *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture*:

> "The interior decoration maintained the pharaonic theme. The broad entrance lobby had reception on one side and a massive reproduction of a stone relief from the Egyptian Museum on the other: a colossal pharaoh hunting the wildlife of the Nile. In the guest rooms the brass lamp stands were inspired by the lotus and the draperies were hand-blocked with a stylized version of the same flowers […] In the elite shops of the lobby mall, ancient artifacts and their reproductions were available for purchase, the ultimate form of touristic consumption."[7]

From India to Egypt, the 20th-century grand hotel was a space for the elaboration and dissemination of a discourse on a nation's culture and its past, a discourse dominated by foreign designers inspired by collections of looted objects. Conrad Hilton played a major role in defining the aesthetics of the international grand hotel after 1945 and in propagating an international style theorised as early as 1932 by American authors.

> "The Istanbul Hilton [1955] was a heroically scaled white slab constructed of reinforced concrete, scaled by a regular grid of balconies

6 From: https://theimperialindia.com/imperial_history/ (12.01.2023).

7 Wharton, Jane Annabel, *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004; p. 50.

> and lifted off the ground by slender white pilotis, or piers. Descriptions of the Istanbul Hilton tend to emphasize its similarities to the buildings of Le Corbusier. […] The new Hilton was a monumental structure enshrined as an elite art object by its exceptional site. The hotel was prestigiously located, positioned at the edge of the wealthiest part of Istanbul, high above Galata. […] The interior order of the Istanbul Hilton, analogous to its exterior, looked like a photograph from the handbook of American Modernism, Hitchcock, and Johnson's *The International Style*."[8]

Less well-known is the Hilton hotel project that was planned for Bombay in the early 1960s; it never went past the planning stage because the site lacked the most basic sanitation. In *Bombay imagined*, Robert Stephens describes the scene: "At first glance, the Worli Sea Face appeared to be the perfect location for Hilton's flagship hotel in Bombay. […] More than 400 luxury rooms were organized in an elongated structure wrapped in a façade of sunshades; a feature Kadria would perfect a decade later while designing the Nehru Centre. A series of low-slung, open-air pavilions at the ground floor framed views of the Arabian Sea and were ideally suited for banquets, evening drinks, or a lazy day by the pool. Hilton's dream soon turned into a nightmare when visiting foreign executives discovered a dirty little secret: the waters of Worli were flushed with raw sewage. Visions of guests lying asphyxiated under seaside pavilions, the unsuspecting victims of Bombay's effluvia, likely provoked many sleepless nights, and the project was dumped soon thereafter."[9]

The Indian grand hotels shared certain architectural (and historical) characteristics. For instance, they were all built in extraordinary locations (either by the sea or with an unobstructed view of one or more historical monuments) and they provided unique facilities (at least for India). Indeed, they endeavoured to give their guests such an experience that they would feel no desire (or need) to venture beyond. However,

8 *Ibid*.; p. 22.

9 Stephens, Robert, *Bombay Imagined. An Illustrated History of the Unbuilt City*, Mumbai, Urbsindis, 2022; p. 234–35.

albeit the hotels were cultural spaces with codes and regulations, they were also part of a tradition of similar institutions that began in the capitals of Europe (e.g., Lutetia in Paris, the Bauer in Berlin, and the Bristol in Bucharest) and its seaside resorts (e.g., the Gallia Palace in Cannes, the Hermitage in La Baule, the Riviera in Nice, and the Grand Hotel in Cabourg) and which experienced a boom during the Industrial Revolution. The fashion for grand hotels then spread throughout the world. The Pera district of Istanbul alone saw the construction of the Grand Hotel Kroecker, the Pera Palas Oteli, the Grand Hotel de Londres, and the Grand Hotel Novotny. In each of them, the foreign presence was very marked, not only amongst the guests but also the management.

Fig. 46: Mumbai, View of Marine Drive in the 1970s with the Trident Hotel on Narima Point in the background (1973).

The postcards in question, which in some cases illustrate otherwise concealed spaces and reveal the photographers' predilection for indoor swimming pools, reflect a Western way of life far removed from that of the average Indian. They are also a testament to the post-1945 modernist standardisation of contemporary architectural forms, as exemplified by the master himself, Le Corbusier. Although there is no critical intent behind these images – their purpose is simply to advertise a product – they

are nonetheless an important archival source for the modern architectural history of India and, more generally, the history of the 20th century. As such, they merit further scholarly attention.

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