

## *Vanu Bhuta - the designer of Rajghat*



**M. P. V. Sheno**

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The year was 1956. I had graduated in Civil Engineering in 1955 from National Institute of Engineering, Mysore. I wanted to appear in the Combined Engineering Services Exams, which recruited engineers for Central Government departments like Railways, Central Public Works Department, Military Engineer Services, Telecom services, etc. The Exams were conducted by the Union Public Service Commission, India. All young Engineering graduates who were ambitious aimed at appearing in this selection examination, which was considered prestigious. If you got selected, you would have a steady career. Moreover, Government was the largest construction agency in those days.

But, I had not applied to take the Exams. Instead, I had begun working for a private firm in Mysore. I had also registered myself with the Employment Exchange in Mysore. After working for a few months, I got a call from the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) in New Delhi for a job interview.

I jumped at the opportunity, and proceeded to New Delhi with some borrowed money. I appeared in the interview, and was offered the job of Section Officer, based in Delhi itself. Importantly, it was an office job in the planning and design of structures. That was an incentive for me, as it would help me in preparing myself for appearing in the Exams.

Initially, I worked on the design of multi-storey buildings. Within six months of my joining, our division got an assignment to check the proposals submitted by various aspirants, architects, and others for the Mahatma Gandhi Samadhi on the banks of Yamuna, where he was cremated. I am not sure whether it was called Rajghat then.

Rajghat, which means "Built up stepped embankment along the river meant for use by King", is located on the banks of the Holy Yamuna River on Mahatma Gandhi Ring Road in Delhi. It is officially named after Mahatma Gandhi, the 'Father of the Nation,' one of India's greatest Leaders and freedom fighters, who got us freedom by nonviolent agitation.

He was shot dead by a Hindu *Rastrawadi* (one who believes in Hindu empire) who disliked Gandhiji's policy of appeasement towards Muslims and Pakistan in spite of the country going through riots and a large number of Hindus and Sikhs being killed and uprooted in the newly formed Pakistan.

Gandhiji was cremated on 31st January 1948, and the major portion of the ashes was buried there on the cremation site. Hence, that site became his final resting place.

The Government of India had invited proposals from people/professionals for the design of a memorial at that site. After a preliminary elimination, about twenty proposals had been selected for further consideration. I was not in a position to know what the selection process was but had heard that Panditji (Jawahar Lal Nehru, India's Prime Minister) had taken a keen interest in the project.

Mr Habibur Rehman, husband of Indrani Rehman, the noted Bharatnatyam dancer, was the Chief Architect of CPWD then. He and Mr T.S. Vedagiri, the Executive Engineer, Central Zone were perhaps asked to scrutinize and submit their views about their technical feasibility and approximate cost of construction. Mr. Habibur Rehman was an MIT graduate, trained under modernist architects like Lawrence Anderson and Walter Gropius. Like many of his contemporaries, Mr Rehman was a liberal socialist, and believed in simple functional structures with clear lines.

The proposals were varied. At one end, there was a replica of South Indian temple. There were one or two with Gandhiji seated either with or without charka. There were also some modelled on traditional European obelisks. One of the proposals came from Architect Vanu G Bhuta, who was working in Delhi in a well-known architectural firm – Master, Sathe and Bhuta.

Mr Bhuta's proposal was quite a departure from others. He proposed a square sunken garden surrounded by rampart like walls, which would serve as viewing platforms. In the centre of a small lawn, there was a raised black marble slab decorated only by engraved words "हे राम (Hey Ram)", supposed to be the last words of Gandhiji before he succumbed to bullet wounds. And a black stone lantern with eternal flame enclosed in a glass enclosure at the centre of one of the edges. There was to be red earth surrounding all this, with some grass lawn here and there.



Source: <http://energeticseiors.tripod.com/id26.html>

The enclosed brief said it reflected profound austerity, love for nature, and living with nature Gandhiji loved. I was not impressed by it, because I was not mature enough and also not exposed modern functional architecture. However, we later learnt that this was the design Panditji liked, and hence it was selected. I do not know what was the contribution of Mr Rehman in the selection, but his western education might have also made him prefer this proposal. The design proposed by Mr Bhuta was quite novel and original for India in those times.

Panditji, we were told, wanted to have a landscaped vast expanse of land surrounding it. The landscaping and planting of the memorial was performed by Sydney Percy-Lancaster, the Secretary of the Agri-Horticultural Society of India, and the last Englishman to hold the post of Superintendent of Horticultural Operations, Government of India. In the course of time, Rajghat has seen many trees of different species planted by visiting dignitaries.

### **Epilogue**

Recently, when some one of my fellow walkers in the park in Bangalore went to New Delhi and visited Rajghat, this topic came up. He wondered what the black granite slab and lamp conveyed, and who the architect was. I tried to find out more about Mr Bhuta from the Internet. How did he come up with this idea? What was his complete brief? I have not been able to find out.

I wonder whether CPWD has kept all those proposals in its archives. May be it contains complete brief which came along with Mr Bhuta's proposal. If it is there, and if it is made public, it may create a lot of interest.

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