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Making Indian Cities Habitable

The Legacy of Patrick Geddes

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The social & environmental problems of a rapidly urbanising India were anticipated a century ago by the Scottish town planner Patrick Geddes. It may be time to redeem & rehabilitate Geddes' themes of respect for nature, democracy & architectural traditions.

“India lives in her villages,” said Mahatma Gandhi, and that maxim of his has been resolutely followed by Indian environmentalists. From celebrated popular struggles like the Chipko Andolan and the Narmada Bachao Andolan to quieter, more low-key work in rehabilitating village tanks and pastures, the environmental movement in India has been substantially focused on the countryside. Resisting the destructive impact of the urban-industrial economy on rural livelihoods and restoring those livelihoods on a sustainable basis have been, as it were, the twin foci of activists and thinkers.

However, India lives in her towns and cities too. This, it has always done. Our epics spoke of the fabled cities of Ayodhya and Indraprastha. Banaras claims to be the oldest living city in the world. In medieval north India, the Mughals developed the cities of Delhi, Agra, and Lahore; in medieval south India, a great empire called itself Vijayanagara, ‘the city of victory’. (Its capital, Hampi, spread itself out over miles along the Tungabhadra river, as tourists who now visit its ruins know.) Long before the British came and established the Presidency towns of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, India had been an urban civilization.

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The pace of urbanisation in India has increased dramatically in recent decades. At independence, one in six Indians lived in towns or cities; now the proportion is closer to one in three. This massive increase in our urban population has placed enormous burdens on the social and environmental fabric, raising a series of important 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 sum, how can we make the lives of city residents more habitable, in all senses of the word?

|| [Geddes' plans] speak directly to the concerns of the present, to the search for a more dignified and more humane life for the citizens of [...] the towns and cities in India.

This essay argues that many of the social and environmental problems of a rapidly urbanising India were strikingly anticipated by Patrick Geddes, a Scottish town planner who worked in the subcontinent a century ago. Between 1914 and 1924, Geddes travelled across large 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 largely (if not wholly) forgotten now. But, as I shall hope to show here, they speak directly to the concerns of the present, to the search for a more dignified and more humane life for the citizens of Ahmednagar, Bijapur, Delhi, Mumbai, Aizawl, Patiala, and a hundred other towns and cities in India.

An ecologist of the mind and the planet

This essay focuses on Patrick Geddes' work in India, but a brief introduction to his other work is necessary. He was born in 1854, on 2 October, the same day as Mahatma Gandhi, if fifteen years before him. He never took 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. The first was English craft socialism, especially the work of John Ruskin and William Morris, from whom he learnt to view industrialism with a critical eye. The second was French historical geography, notably the works of Elise Reclus and Frederic Le Play. From them he learnt to view culture and economy in their ecological context. The third influence was the geographical anarchism of Peter Kropotkin, which reinforced Geddes' ecological analysis while promoting a scepticism of centralisation.

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The words 'ecology' and 'environment' were not in common use in the late 19th century, but as the historian Murdo Macdonald observes: "Geddes must be seen as an ecologist of the mind as well as of the planet." Geddes' interest in the diversity of life-forms and his concern that modern industrial society would leave behind a landscape at once homogenised and degraded, were strikingly ahead of his time.

So was Geddes' capaciously interdisciplinary approach to learning. Thus, as Macdonald further writes, "throughout his life he resisted the fragmentation of knowledge consequent on misguided notions of specialization in education, that took as their model the production-line rather than the person." 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 summarised 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 humans by Machine, by Finance, and by Militarism. But Geddes hoped for a new, neotechnic 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."

“[Beyond] the rude present, the better future [is] now dawning—in which the applied physical sciences are advancing [...] towards a finer skill, a more subtle and more economic mastery of natural energies.”

Although respectful of tradition, Geddes was not a backward looking reactionary. He was neither a nostalgic romantic nor a fervent moderniser. 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 defence against the ever-advancing smoke-cloud and machine-blast and slum-progress of paleotechnic industry. Not but 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 that they in too great measure but 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, 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.

Geddes in India

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 with the Irish spiritualist, Margaret Noble, known to Indians as Sister Nivedita. She and

Geddes struck up a close friendship, and although she died suddenly in October 1911, 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 subcontinent. He had hoped to take his carefully put-together exhibition on urban history around the cities of British India.

|| In his years in the subcontinent, Geddes also wrote nearly fifty town plans, some commissioned by maharajahs, others written at the behest of colonial administrators.

Geddes arrived in Madras in the autumn of 1914. The boxes containing 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, off and on, for a whole decade, 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.”

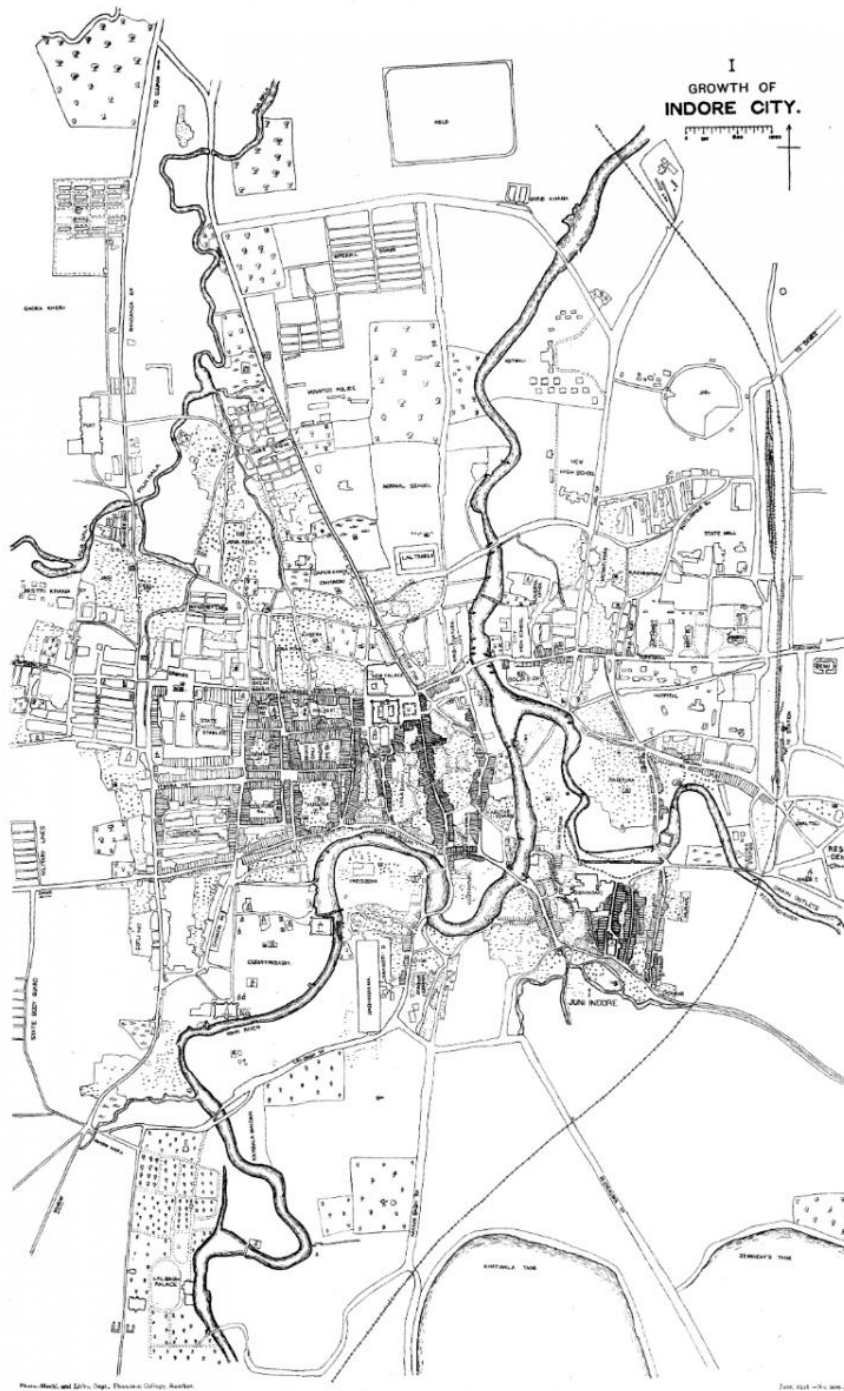
In India Geddes worked as a freelance town planner and then as the first professor of sociology and civics of the University of Bombay. He travelled widely, and interacted closely with high and low Indians. He met Mahatma Gandhi twice, knew Annie Besant, and befriended the great thinkers from Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore and Jagadish Chandra Bose. In his years in the subcontinent Geddes also wrote nearly fifty town plans, some commissioned by maharajahs, others written at the behest of colonial administrators.

|| Running through Geddes’s town plans are three central themes: respect for nature, respect for democracy, and respect for tradition.

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 and now available only in libraries in Scotland, Geddes’ Indian town plans deserve to be resurrected. As a later professor of sociology in Bombay University once remarked, Geddes’ writing was full of brilliant insights, which he “threw up and flung about like sparks from a crackling fire.”

Running through Geddes’s town plans are three central themes: respect for nature, respect for democracy, and respect for tradition. Let me take these three themes in turn.

Geddes’ town plans are deeply ecological, and in at least four respects. First, 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 environments.” Geddes wished to redesign the city of Indore around its rivers. Elsewhere, where there were no rivers, he stressed the renewal and revitalisation of tanks.



Map of Indore designed around its rivers, from Geddes' report on the town (1918) | [archive.org](https://www.archive.org)

Second, he was always alert to spaces, however small, that could be claimed by trees. As a skilled botanist, he had a keen eye for 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.

Third, he stressed the conservation of resources, to minimise the city's dependence on the hinterland. Particularly 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."

[Geddes'] words should be pasted above the office desks of planners working today in Chennai, Hyderabad, and a dozen other cities of India.

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.

Fourth, he emphasised the importance of recycling. Sewage could be fruitfully used to manure gardens, to, 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.”

|| “As the physician associates the patient with his own cure, so must the planner appeal to the citizen.”

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 and 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.”

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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, that 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 enquires 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 depressed castes. 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.

|| Another aspect of Geddes’ democratic instinct was his opposition to the mindless destruction of buildings to ‘improve’ the town or to build highways for cars to drive through.

In the town of Bharuch, in present-day Gujarat, Geddes was deeply impressed by the fact that the wells had eight or even 16 wheels on a fixed overhead pulley, whereas in other places there was generally only a single wheel. The more 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 instinct 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 redevelopment which planned to destroy five mosques, two dharamsalas, tombs and temples, and shops and dwellings. It spared only one building: the police station.

|| [For Geddes] 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.”

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, 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, in present-day Gujarat, he observed 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.

Geddes offers a five-word motto that those interested in Heritage Preservation must urge on every architect and town planner: “To Postpone is to Conserve.”

Then, after visiting the greatest of Gujarati cities, Ahmedabad, he was inspired to recommend a civic museum that would have at least six distinct rooms. The first, displaying archaeological materials and shards of temples from the Hindu past. The second, to showcase of “the rise and flower of that marvellous [Muslim] architecture to which Ahmedabad owes its special eminence and attractiveness.” The third, with panels demonstrating how these monuments, now decaying, would be restored and placed once again amidst tree-filled parks.

The fourth room would have panels on the ancient city walls, with suggestions on how to conserve them. (At the time Geddes was writing this, these walls were being threatened by a new ring boulevard. Geddes lobbied, in the end unsuccessfully, against the new road.)

Moving from the grand to the everyday, the fifth room would have a display of the domestic architecture of the old neighbourhoods, the *pols*, this paying special attention to the development and detail of their carvings. Last, and definitely the least, there would be 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: “To Postpone is to Conserve.”

Geddes’ overall philosophy of town planning can be captured in three quotes from his South Asian reports. First, from a plan for Dhaka, 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.

Revitalising Balrampur

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 be made less shabby by planting up gaps. The naturalist in Geddes paid 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 with *Ficus retusa*, the Indian laurel.

|| Geddes’ scheme revolved around the renewal of the town’s once extensive but now decayed tank system [...] This, he argued, would be a way to recover the finest aspects of Balrampur’s and India’s past.

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 children’s 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, and the protection and planting up of open spaces someplace else. Clearly he had walked over the entire area closely and carefully.

Geddes’ scheme revolved around the renewal of the town’s once extensive but now decayed tank system. These had formerly linked the *mohallas*, culminating in a grand lake in front of the palace. Geddes wished to clean the tanks, link them afresh, 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.”

|| This report on Balrampur [...] is an encrusted little gem, but, alas, a gem cast before swine. It is unlikely that the maharaja of Balrampur ever read it.

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 esthetic sense and productiveness, which till the Industrial Age was possessed by both Indian and European, 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 or 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 subcontinent.

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. It is unlikely that the maharaja of Balrampur ever read it. Meanwhile the professor himself had moved on to the next town and the next plan.

A magnificent list of interesting failures

I end my essay with some 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 magisterial works *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 filiations and dynamic biological and social interrelationships.” His work on town planning would be of lasting importance. Lewis Mumford thus remarked that:

What Geddes’s 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 a bewilderment of admiration that I have so often followed the architectural immensity of your vision.”

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.”

Geddes died in April 1932, and three years later Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to his daughter Indira about his admiration for Geddes: a “very great man” and a “genius in many fields.” Writing to his teenage daughter from his cell in Almora jail, Nehru emphasised 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 three R’s but the three H’s: heart, hand, and 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 rebeautify it, to build and rebuild 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.”

Geddes’ work in the Indian subcontinent is now obscure, neglected, forgotten, and hence, in conventional terms, a failure. But there may yet be time to redeem and rehabilitate it.

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 judgements 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 the Indian subcontinent is now obscure, neglected, forgotten, and hence, in conventional terms, a failure. But there may yet be time to redeem and rehabilitate it. For, social life in the cities of India can surely be greatly enhanced if public policies

were to show a greater respect for nature, a deeper regard for democracy, and a more careful appreciation of architectural tradition.

This essay draws upon two lecture presentations made by the author: one at the Urban Design Research Institute in Mumbai, the other at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo. The author can be contacted at ramguha@gmail.com