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Mutiny Memorial: Imperial Gothic in Victorian Delhi

Remembering is always a tricky business, for in recreating, re-membering what has lapsed, some parts of all which happened are invariably forgotten.¹ This quality of memory and remembering may be as central to memorialising, to recording what has happened, as well. “Memorial” stems from the Latin *memoria* through the Late Latin *memoriale*, meaning “memory” and “record, memory, monument,” respectively. Accordingly, a memorial may be considered a monument (an ossification) to – and/or a memory of – what is remembered or, vitally, what is recorded as an idea, or sets of ideas, of what happened. Understood in this way, a memorial not only serves as a vital reminder of that which happened and which is worth remembering, it also performs, almost by default, a violence of erasure, of choosing to remember, record, only a certain version or vision of the past – communal or individual – as history.

It is in this sense that we have chosen to frame memorials and the inherent task of selective remembering and recording in considering the Mutiny Memorial of Delhi. In a city of ruptures and anomalies, the Mutiny Memorial is an interesting, albeit forgotten, mark of architectural incongruence: it is a four-tiered, sandstone Gothic tower surmounted with a white stone cross on one of the highest summits of the hilly Northern Ridge, just down the higher eminence of Hindu Rao’s Haveli (now municipal hospital and college) and the Ashoka Pillar. However, this aesthetic incongruity with its surroundings and with much of the built environment of nineteenth-century Delhi, Indian as well as British, is what alerts us to the

ideology of a self-righteously aggressive imperialism interred in the very fabric of this memorial to the martyrs, or victims, of the 1857 Mutiny, or Great Rebellion, or First War of Independence.² The site, the choice of design, the material used, all of these express a will to rule, a system of expansionist religio-economic hegemony all but lost now in the supra-abundance of sandstone, real as well as faux, and of Gothic motifs in public and residential architecture respectively all over the city. Therefore, once the veneer of normalcy – which inevitably comes to cloak the oddities of which Delhi is constituted – is lifted, the Mutiny Memorial, in its reliance upon Gothic architectural motifs and the associated evocation of divinely sanctioned militaristic territorialism, may be read as betraying a form of beleaguered imperialism striving anxiously to allay the ghosts of politico-cultural defeat and spoliation and consolidating a self-aggrandising legacy of pietistic expansionism.

Our interest in this commentary, therefore, is to re-member the foundational principles of this curious architectural anomaly, an aberration whose existence goes only to establish the norm. Our discourse will first delve, briefly yet comprehensively, into the multifarious meanings of Gothic in mid-nineteenth-century England, highlighting the trajectories it takes in terms literary as well as architectural. We will move then to discuss the ideological contours of the built environment of urban Delhi, both before 1857 as well as immediately afterwards, focussing specifically on the ways in which the self-splintering trauma of the events of that summer altered British perceptions of and attitudes to the city and of their role in it. The Mutiny Memorial as a product of this era will then be located, with reference to the evidence of its design as well as that of available archival record, in the flux of an anxiously triumphant imperialism wherein the pietistically expansionist evocations of the architectural Gothic could also stand as a visible, near-jingoistic marker of a pervasive civilisational – religious, cultural and racial – superiority.

That the uncanny quality of empire and imperial spatiality percolated to devolve upon the built form of the Gothic as well is the concluding argument which we will expand in presenting the Mutiny Memorial as a prime example of a radically reengineered form of Imperial Gothic³.

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There is, perhaps, an inherent slippage which lies at the core of the describer “Gothic” which makes the regular illusion of a stable set of characteristics extremely difficult. The critical tradition around Gothic has tended to view this difficulty with dismay, derision as well as celebration. Like the preternatural mists and fogs from which Gothic hero-villains emerged throughout a range of nineteenth century literature, Gothic as a marker, as a post to orient identities from, has shifted shape, design and context. Even in the moment of its emergence as a cultural marker – as opposed to an ethnic one – in the late eighteenth century, Gothic signified a vital, albeit uneasy, contradiction: it was both a gloriously liberal and culturally pure past as well as a site of barbarous regression and evil. In other words, Gothic existed as a “political myth” (Botting 6) of national strength and freedom and as a symbol for and of the licentious, perverse and corrupting abundance of emotional and sexual energy. As Fred Botting, Robert Miles and others have pointed out, these connotative contradictions were symbiotic in nature, one informing the contours of the other: that is, from the vast cultural legacy – tangible as well as intangible – marked as Gothic emerged the myth of the political Gothic as well as the trope of the sensationalist Gothic, each addressing, with reference favourable or unfavourable to the other, a different set of contemporary cultural anxieties. “The Gothic mirror,” as Botting notes in “In Gothic Darkly: Heterotopia, History, Culture,” “offers a heterogeneous and conflicting reflection of the present” (Botting 8), precisely because the ambivalences of the present are refracted variously when viewed and articulated through the prism of a multifarious past.