

Tale of two capitals

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New Delhi and Canberra echo each other in appearances. Struck by the coincidence, S. Muthiah explores the two capital cities. The first in a series of articles.

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Photos: V.V.Krishnan; Special Arrangement



Standing tall: Parliament House of India and (below) of Australia.

It was at a dinner at a friend's place in Canberra that an Australian parliamentarian told me that it was a hundred years ago this year that Australia's capital got the land on which it was to develop. It was on January 1, 1911, he said, that New South Wales handed over to the Federal Government of Australia the Canberra Valley for the development of a capital for what had become a federation of six British colonies.

Coincidences

That year, a hundred years ago this year, sounded uncannily familiar to me, but for the life of me I couldn't place it till I came home and looked up in an Indian chronology what its significance was. At first glance, what registered was that it was the year of the Delhi Durbar specially convened for the King Emperor, George V, and Queen Mary. But it wasn't long before I found a curious coincidence; it was in that same year, on December 12, that King George announced at that durbar that ancient Delhi, that had served as capital seven times in its history, would be a capital for an eighth time, replacing Calcutta as British India's capital. On December 15, he laid the foundation for the development of that capital at a spot on what became known as Kingsway. Even more curiously, both countries, whose present capitals had their beginnings in the same year, celebrate their National Days on the same day, January 26, one honouring the founding of the republic, the other remembering the landing of the first settlers.

Struck by the coincidences, I got down to following the trail of both capitals and, surprise, surprise, found other similarities. But the first similarity that struck me was how much New Delhi and Canberra echoed each other in appearance. Long distances, broad roads radiating out of circles, gardens everywhere, striking architecture including several vestiges of the colonial, and what might be called 'capitol hills'. And just as Delhi is a part of the National Capital Region, Canberra is a part of the Australian Capital Territory. Even the weather while I was in Canberra was almost as unkind as a New Delhi summer, but as cool of an evening as Delhi can get. Delhi, however, has Old Delhi and its older avatars; Canberra has no such past except that Canberra means 'meeting place' in an aboriginal tongue, giving the site vestiges of a lineage.

A more discernible past goes back to the colonisation of Australia from 1824 and New South Wales emerging as the dominant colony, an independent territory of the Crown like the other colonies that followed. Bitter rivals in the early days, the colonies had by 1851 begun to see strength in unity and talk of federation was very much in the air. It was, however, 1891 before a decision was taken to form a union of colonies with a federal legislature and executive whose roles would be defined by a constitution. The draft constitution of 1891 was the subject of bitter debate for ten more years before the Commonwealth of Australia was born on January 1, 1901. It would have been a happy day for 'The Father of the Federation', Henry Parkes of Sydney (NSW), who personally as well as through his

newspaper, the Empire, and during his five stints as Prime Minister of New South Wales and in the years out of office, campaigned relentlessly for the formation of a federation. Noteworthily, over a score of the compositors and pressmen at the Empire, more than half its machine-room were the first Anglo-Indian emigrants to Australia, all of them trained at the Madras Male Orphans' Asylum that has grown into St. George's School, Madras.

The most debated of all issues from 1851 was which town was to be the capital of the Commonwealth. New South Wales, as the 'mother colony', insisted the choice should fall on one of its towns. Victoria would have nothing of it; if it wasn't Melbourne, it would have to be another town in Victoria. A long drawn-out, acrimonious debate finally ended in 1891 with an agreement that the territory of the oldest colony (NSW) would host the Federal Capital Territory, the site would have to be at least 100 sq. miles but at least 100 miles from Sydney, and that till its infrastructure was developed Melbourne would host the Federal Parliament. This, however, was not the end of the wrangling. Various New South Wales towns then began aggressively putting forth their claims to be the territory of choice. It was 1908 before the Canberra Valley, with its vast virgin spaces, temperate climate, and plentiful water, got the nod. In the event, 900 sq. miles of the Valley about 200 miles southeast of Sydney was gifted to the Federal Government by New South Wales as 1911 dawned.



As in the case of New Delhi, an architect from abroad was commissioned to design the new capital.

Rewards

A competition was announced in March 1911 for a design for Canberra and, a year later, Walter Burley Griffin, a Chicago architect and the winner, was given the commission for Canberra. That same year, Edward Lutyens was commissioned to draw up the plans for New Delhi and work on British India's new capital began almost immediately. Work in Canberra began on February 20, 1913 – and that is the centenary Canberra plans to celebrate, not the grant of the land, my dinner companion informed me. Now I can't help but wonder whether New Delhi is planning any celebration at the end of this year or some time next year to mark the beginning of its development as modern India's capital.

Work on both capital cities proceeded at a slow pace, marked by the interruption of the Great War, debates over design, and wrangles with contractors. In the end, Canberra was inaugurated on May 9, 1927, Delhi on February 13, 1931. Delhi became a Union Territory in 1950 and a State with its own legislature in 1993. The Federal Capital Territory, re-named the Australian Capital Territory, gained self-governing status in 1988.

Delhi, however, was developed with an imperial vision. Canberra in its early days was described as "several suburbs in search of a city." It was Prime Minister Robert Menzies who in the immediate post-World War II years made it a city worthy of being a capital.

Tailpiece

Burley Griffin came to India in 1935 to design a library for the Lucknow University. He stayed on to design several other buildings in Lucknow, including the headquarters of the famed daily, The Pioneer, for which he also regularly wrote. Sadly, however, he passed away in 1937 before completing most of his assignments. He is buried in Lucknow.