

The death last week of Zaha Hadid saw expressions of grief from both the architectural world and the general global media. Because Hadid was not merely a highly successful architect but a 'starchitect', one of the tiny group of the world's most sought-after architects who are also global media celebrities in their own right. Along with others like Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, and Norman Foster, the Iraqi-born and London-educated Hadid was an international brand, whose prestigious projects, with their trademark gravity-defying forms, included a cultural centre in Baku, museums in Milan and Glasgow, an opera house in Guangzhou, and the London Aquatics Centre for the 2012 Olympics. A winner of the top international awards for architecture, like the Pritzker in 2004, the 2016 RIBA gold medal, and the Stirling prize (twice), she was also celebrated for being the first woman, the first Muslim, and the first person of colour in this largely white man's club.

One could question the last though, about whether Hadid's success really made any difference to most other women or Muslims or coloured people. It's like Nooyi becoming the president of Pepsi, touted in the Indian media as a victory for Indian women. But what difference does it really make if elite women, be it a Nooyi or an Indira Gandhi, reach the top? Not much; India at least still remains a terrible place for most women, especially Dalits and tribals, aspire though they might to change their lives. In fact, those who aspire often have to pay a terrible price for their dreams, like Delta Meghwal, the 17-year-old Dalit girl who also died last week. Meghwal wanted to be a teacher but was raped and killed in her own college in Rajasthan last week; the news barely merited coverage by the press.

What I want to dwell on here, however, is the criticism that Hadid faced in the global media, despite being so successful, award-winning, and well-connected. The starchitects have been accused of being exclusively concerned with aesthetics, for working for and thus giving credibility to autocratic governments, and for projects that are over-expensive, insensitive to the social context (people were forcefully evicted for the construction of Hadid's cultural centre at Baku), and exploitative of labour. As Mary Mcleod (*Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Post Modernism to Deconstruction*, 1989) put it, 'That contemporary architecture has become so much about surface, image and play, and that its content has become so ephemeral, so readily transformable and consumable, is partly a product of the

neglect of the material dimensions of architecture – programme, production and finance – that more directly invoke questions of power.’



Zaha Hadid and our Starchitect Culture

Neglect of issues of production was blatantly visible in the Gulf states, the site of many glittering new starchitect projects amidst reports of abusive labour conditions. Hadid was in the news in 2014 for a report claiming labour deaths in the construction of her new football stadium project for the World Cup 2022 in Qatar. The project was however yet to start construction at the time and she responded with defamation proceedings that won her apologies from the concerned journal. But she was still criticised for her apparent lack of concern for the problem; there had in fact been a great many deaths on other football-related construction sites in Qatar. Hadid instead declared that construction worker deaths were not her problem but that of the government. ‘It’s not my duty as an architect to take care of it’.

Her stance was in sharp contrast to the many Middle Eastern and other artists who had earlier announced a boycott of the Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi, where similar labour abuses had been reported.

It might however find some support in this part of the world. India is probably far worse than the Gulf when it comes to construction labour conditions. Laws ensuring minimum wages, weekly offs, safe working conditions, housing, and so on, are rarely if ever followed. Even here in Goa, we rarely see anything close to even the most basic safety precautions being taken on construction sites. Not surprisingly, the number of ‘accidents’ on construction sites are legion, and taken for granted. It’s only the big project disasters which cause embarrassment – like the Canacona building collapse or the recent Calcutta flyover collapse. These may lead to arrests of contractors and officials, but the basic labour conditions remain the same. Architects however rarely complain. Nor does the law see it as an issue that concerns architects.

Similarly, the criticism that Hadid faced for the displacement of people for her Baku project would never be heard here. Settlements of the poor are regularly uprooted in India for projects that will benefit others, sometimes on a huge scale like the Commonwealth Games in Delhi, or otherwise for resorts in Goa. But the architects whose designs come up on these sites are never questioned about the ethics of this system.



Despite the absence of starchitect figures like Hadid, starchitect culture is the norm here. Because that's precisely how the caste hierarchy of production works. Labourers are invisibilised, by employing them through contractors. The settlements of the poor are illegalised, and so not important. And it's never the duty of the architect to worry about either.

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