

Perin Jamsetjee Mistri

1913 - 1989

Mumbai Legacy Project
D Ward



Born in 1913, Perin Jamsetjee Mistri was India's first professionally qualified women architect. Her architectural style predominantly embraced modernist principles that were contemporary to her era. Her genius shines through in numerous remarkable structures, such as the Khatau mills in Borivali, the extension to the Bombay Scottish School in Mahim, the Kanta building for Dr L.H. Hiranandani, the renovation of St. Elizabeth's Nursing Home in Malabar Hill, and St. Stephen's Church in Cumballa Hill (Compiled by D'souza et al. 2022, 60).

Perin grew up in a family consisting of renowned engineers and builders. Her father was Jamsetjee Mistri, an eminent architect and an engineer. He established 'Mistri and Bhedwar,' an architectural firm in 1891, later known as 'Ditchburn, Mistri, and Bhedwar' (Gangadharan, 2021). Having erected structures from Calcutta to Ceylon, the builders from Navsari gained a reputation as specialists in textile mill construction. Upon relocating to Mumbai, their company undertook notable projects such as the construction of the Colaba and Cuffe Parade Sea walls, the Taraporevala Mansion at Cuffe Parade, and the inaugural runway of the Mumbai Airport (Ganesan, 2021).



Numerous Zoroastrian women pursued education in England, and among them was Perin. She attended secondary school in Croydon, at Croydon High School, before returning to India. Although Perin initially aspired to pursue a legal profession, on her father's suggestion, she enrolled in the Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy School of Arts and completed her diploma in Architecture in 1936. Eventually, in 1937, she became a partner in her father's architectural firm (Desai 2016, 48). By the mid-1930s, the number of Indian women students at British universities had exceeded 100. These women chose subjects aligned with the needs of their country, such as medicine, education, and science, reflecting their sense of purpose and commitment to the society of the time (Gifford, 1990, 32).

Her passion and aptitude for the field led Perin to rank fourth among the 16 successful candidates out of 40 who had passed the exam. She joined her father's firm in 1937 and served as a partner for approximately fifty years. At a time when many Indian women were actively participating in the Independence movement, the field of Indian architecture achieved a significant milestone with the professional qualification of Perin J. Mistri, the first Indian woman architect (Compiled by D'souza et al. 2022, 59).

Mistri made history as the first female member of the Indian Institute of Architects, affiliated with the Royal Institute of British Architects. Within the Indian Institute of Architects, she played a significant role as a member of the Entertainment Committee, responsible for organising the influential Ideal Home Exhibition in Bombay in 1937. This exhibition left a lasting impact on architectural trends in the subsequent years. In 1935, the Indian Institute of Architects gathered the opinions of several architects on Claude Batley's lecture on "The New Architecture". Perin Mistri's perspective was particularly intriguing. She endorsed the New Architecture styles and sought to represent the women's point of view. She emphasised that if men were involved in household work, they would realise the futility of cornices, dust traps, and carved ornaments. Her fresh perspective was not considered before by male architects. Her practical viewpoint garnered praise from various eminent personalities, and her ideas were embraced and implemented by the emerging generation of architects (Gangadharan, 2021).



Among her initial projects was the delightful Shengre La building, a two-story Art Deco residence (alternatively spelt as Shangrilla or Shangrila) nestled in a quiet bylane at Carmichael Road, Cumballa Hill. St Stephen's Church, raised on pillars enabling parking beneath it, was a new concept that Perin adapted (Desai 2016, 50). The influence of Claude Batley's teachings, as well as those of her father, on the fusion of traditional Indian elements like verandahs and balconies with colonial bungalows and modern architectural styles, is evident in this structure built for her father's relative, Sir Behramji Karanjia (Woods, 2018, 25). Perin Mistri's influence extended beyond India, as she provided consultation for constructing the Metro theatre for the American Media Corporation Metro Goldwyn Mayer (Gangadharan, 2021).

Her interests extended beyond architecture. She had a keen interest in gardening, music, and snakes. She married Ardeshir Bhiwandiwalla and moved into their bungalow on Pali Hill in Bandra. Perin's son, Dosu Bhiwandiwalla, said, "Pali Hill was a jungle then. The family's wooden house had snakes in its basement. But she did not kill them. Instead, she decided to study snakes at Bombay's Haffkine's Institute because she knew that all snakes were not poisonous. She even founded the first Soroptimist club of India in Bombay. She was even interested in gardening and bought a farm for that purpose in Karjat" (Ganesan, 2021).

In the early 1900s, women pioneers were seldom heard of and were not always fortunate enough to have the support and backing they needed to grow in their careers. Women were only beginning to follow their passions and build careers, which would continue to gain impetus in the future decades. Perin Mistri passed away in 1989, leaving a legacy of impressive and enduring structures and designs. Her groundbreaking and pioneering work continues to inspire and guide those who follow in her footsteps.

References:

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