

ABOUT PROFESSOR JHABVALA

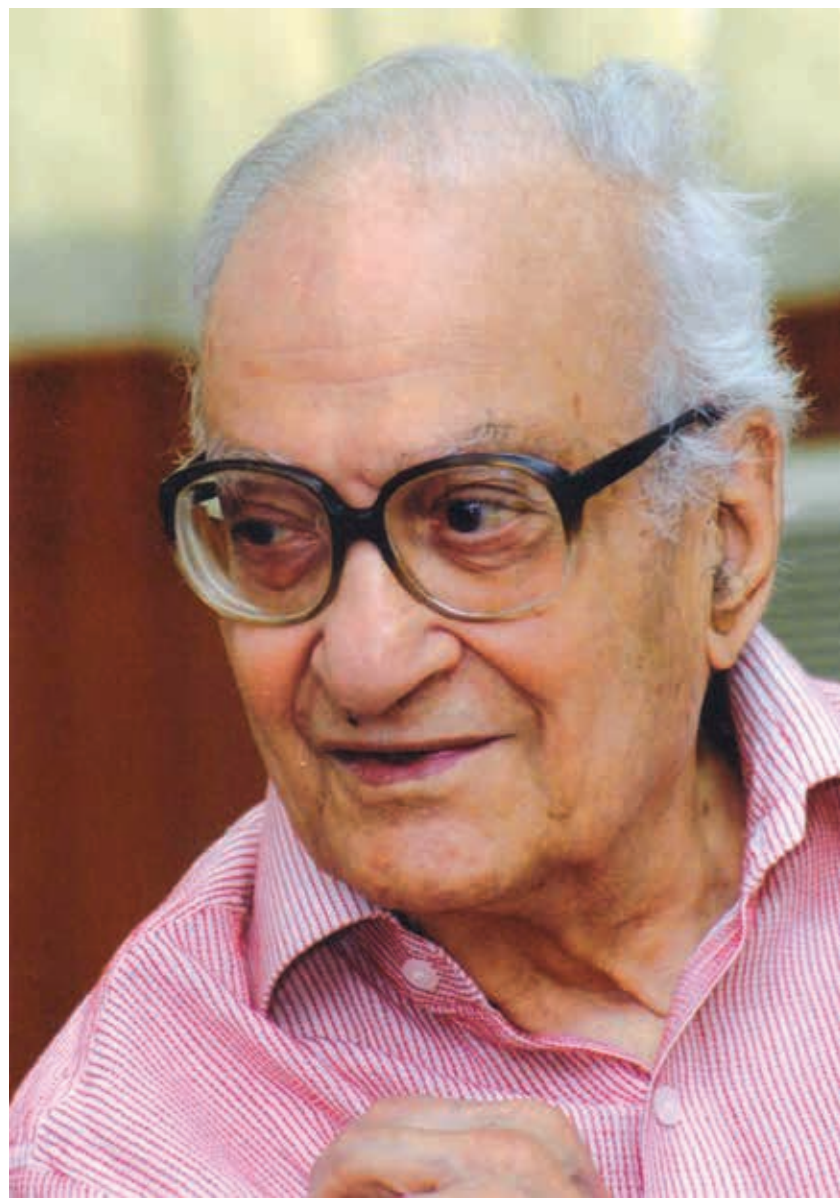


Photo courtesy: *Renana Jhabvala*

Those fortunate to have been at the Department of Architecture at New Delhi's School of Planning & Architecture in 1967 – the year that Professor Jhabvala came back to the programme where he had been teaching regularly since the early 1950's – are likely to remember that the first change he brought about was to the door of his own office. Students, teachers and administrative staff will recall how the solid wood flush door, a door like other doors on the first floor of the new architecture building was replaced in a week or so by a wood-framed fully glazed shutter.

Anyone familiar with the floor plan would understand exactly what this meant – through the new glass door the head's office commanded a view of the Department's staircase lobby and corridor, a virtual crossroads through which anyone going upstairs to the studios and classrooms inevitably had to pass. But it was far more than a monitoring device; of greater consequence was the fact everyone could also see *him* at his desk, that he was visible as he attended to work – meetings with faculty or students, visitors or staff, and easily approachable when you could actually see that he was not busy.

So, decades before the idea of administrative 'transparency' acquired fashionable buzz, this was literally an object lesson about putting it into action. It was a master-

stroke: a plainly visible physical change to show that you are accessible and involved, that you can see and connect with the everyday bustle of teaching and learning even while you attend to your own work – hence you are interested and curious about what's going on – and inspire confidence because you are *seen* to be there.

Even as students we knew: how well he looked after the Department, earning the loyalty and trust of virtually anyone who had the good fortune to cross his path in the three decades and more that he was associated with architectural education in Delhi. No doubt about it, as far as running the Department went, his administrative skills were unbeatable – he did it with charm, finesse and most importantly with humour – and a great deal of firmness, naturally. He could find the right people, and what's more persuade them to come and teach. The names of the faculty of the period in the 1960's and 70's came to represent a near who's who of the early modern movement in independent India.

The School was lucky that someone like Jhabvala was around at a crucial period in the Department's history – an astute administrator who could confidently (and wisely) temper the application of conventions and rules by exercis-

ing judgment and discretion – and an extraordinarily charismatic teacher who could communicate effectively with anyone at any time.

To be other than attentive in his presence was never an option. But what's fascinating is that he didn't just hold your attention only for the duration of the class – that is, just long enough to enable the transfer of information about a technique or the rudiments of an observational skill. No, in some way your attention was captured for longer, much longer than that: for the semester, for the whole five years, perhaps for the rest of your life.

A former student (now a successful architect) who graduated in 1976 proudly acknowledges that when dealing with a construction detail of any complexity his mind goes back to Jhabvala's classes forty years ago; and that's true of most people who attended those sessions. An even more successful graduate of 1960 recalls how the Professor made up for an exceptionally blistering crit by taking him for a drive in his car whilst explaining that it's not praise but honest objective evaluation and criticism that takes you towards professional maturity. Yes, he wouldn't suffer fools and could be unrelentingly harsh and pointed in his reviews, but it was always to impel students towards higher standards.

*C.S.H. Jhabvala
1920–2014*

Born in Mumbai in 1920.

Studied Architecture at Mumbai and London.

Elected as an Associate Member of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 1948, and later as its Fellow.

Set up practice in India, (Delhi) in 1949, as partner in the firm 'Anand, Apte and Jhabvala'.

His major works include large university campuses in north India, Trade Exhibition Pavilions, Health Centres, Institutional buildings etc.

Taught at the Department of Architecture, Delhi Polytechnic between 1949 to 1957.

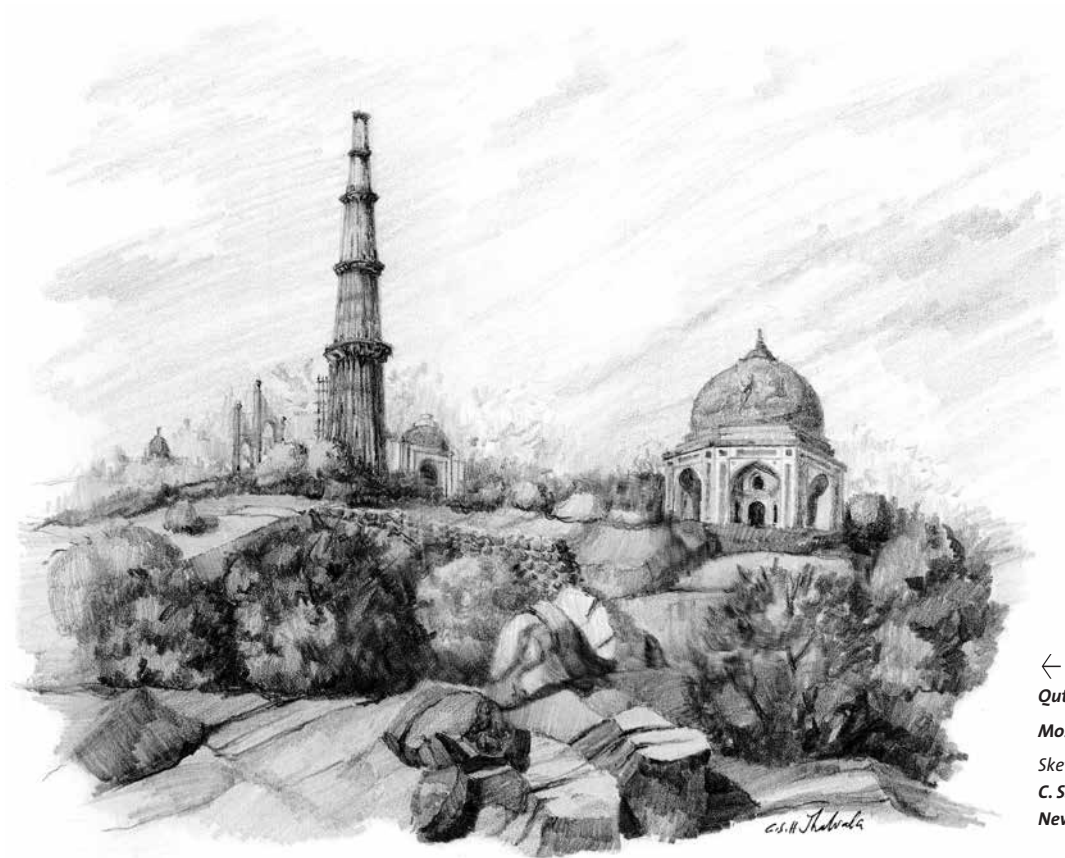
A teacher, mentor, guide and a father figure to many.

Married Ruth Praver Jhabvala, an eminent writer and Oscar Award winner. They made Delhi their home in early 50's.

Joined the Department of Architecture at SPA, as its Head of the Department in mid 60's.

Retired as the Director (SPA) in 1978.

–Information courtesy Professor Neerja Tikko, School of Planning & Architecture, New Delhi



←
Qutub Minar and Tomb of Quli Khan, Delhi
Mosque in Petiwala Gali, Old Delhi →
Sketches Credit: 'Delhi Stones and Streets
C. S. H. Jhabvala', Ravi Dayal Publisher,
New Delhi, 1990

The peculiar mix of Bombay¹ patois (of the time) with Punjabi-Hindi that he reserved for the particularly pithy exchanges so often remembered quite fondly by staff and students was useful for getting his meaning across sharply and without fuss. But you also heard his voice in fragmentary snatches of more sophisticated conversations going on in the background – in casual meetings with faculty in his room, or in the studio – where one might overhear the names of the great directors of European New Wave cinema (this was 1968 or 69), for instance; another time, a vague awareness that some significant observations about culture and modernity in the Indian upper middle class were being made; or again, and with greater focus you would be introduced to the idea of 'the culture of poverty' as described in the writings of Oscar Lewis, the celebrated anthropologist.²

These are things you can say only about the best, the most outstanding teachers... where the love of explaining is supported by real knowledge, close observation and experience, without mystification or cant, and in this case further buttressed by exceptional artistic skills. About the latter we only got a glimpse – as he might draft without the aid of either t-square or set-square on some students' desk in the studio; or on a field trip perhaps, the magic of a chisel-pointed 2B deftly applied to deepen and bring to life the shadows of some historical arcade, revealed on your sketchbook.

An architecture student residing in the women's hostel at Bhagwandas Road (the premises of the All-India Women's Conference) recalls – around 1966 perhaps – an elderly and very dignified lady pausing to look at her drawings and sketches lying open in the outer veran-

dah and exclaiming: "Oh, Cyrus draws beautifully too!" or words to that effect. It was of course Mrs Meherbai S.H. Jhabvala, Professor Jhabvala's mother, who was president of the All India Women's Conference around that time.³

Professor Jhabvala's books of wonderfully detailed and crisply executed drawings and paintings of Delhi and New York, a compilation from his leisurely walks in the two cities are an exquisite revelation of his abilities as an artist. The accompanying text is 'instructive, witty and compassionate'⁴, sometimes full of deeply felt irony, as in this excerpt about the inscription over an entrance in the Secretariat complex, where indirectly we learn something about his father:

"The arch in the background leads into the North Block and around it an architrave still preaches this homily:

*'Liberty will not descend to a People.
A People must raise themselves to Liberty.
It is a blessing that must be earned before
it can be enjoyed.'*

And this at a time when the Raj in its senility was filling the jails with political prisoners. One of them was my father who, convicted of conspiracy against the King-Emperor, had four years in jail to ponder this homily on Liberty.⁵

In his architectural practice he belonged to what may correctly be called the pioneering phase of modern architecture in post-independence India; the work of his firm (Anand Apte Jhabvala) in industrial housing and office buildings was well known. He also had a deep interest in theatre set design. But for students of the 1960's – right up to the late 80's, his most admired work was that of the extensive interior display and sales area

of the old Central Cottage Industries Emporium (alas, the building was dismantled some years ago). These were something of an aesthetic and technical reference for their evocation of a truly Indian modernity, and the precision and functionality of the detailing

The Department of Architecture will complete 75 years in the next year or two. There is little doubt that in all this time, the three decades in which Professor Jhabvala taught at the School offer us the most lessons about how professional education in Architecture should be conducted.

Notes

1. Mumbai now, of course.
2. *The Children of Sanchez*, by Oscar Lewis.
3. Mrs Jhabvala is described by Dr Homi Dhalla in his essay on *Early Empowerment of Parsi Women: "Mrs. Jhabvala being the niece of Sir Pherozeshah Mehta (the uncrowned King of Bombay) was a very resolute person. For almost 30 years, she was very active in the All India Women's Conference and was elected twice as its President (1964-1966). She established the Bapnu Ghar, a home for distressed married women. As she was deeply involved in civic matters, she was a councillor of the Bombay Municipal Corporation for 4 years, of the Bandra Municipality for 12 years and was a Justice of the Peace for 12 years."* www.homidhalla.com
4. From the description of the book on the dust cover flap *Delhi Stones and Streets*, by C.S.H. Jhabvala; Ravi Dayal, Delhi 1990.
5. *Delhi Stones and Streets*, by C.S.H. Jhabvala; Plate 43; Ravi Dayal, Delhi 1990.

