

News

Resurrected heritage, displaced legacy? The construction conundrum at Madras Law College



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The "**Additional Heritage Court Building**," a grand structure that formerly housed the renowned Madras Law College, was officially opened by the Madras High Court on October 26. This structure, which was situated in Parrys at the intersection of Esplanade Road and NSC Bose Road, was the center of legal education in South India and more than just a school.

It is noteworthy that five of the Union Finance Ministers are graduates of Madras Law College. It trained generations of judges, attorneys, and public workers for more than a century, helping to define the Bar, the Bench, and public institutions. Its hallways were extensions of justice itself, and its classrooms reverberated with arguments that eventually made their way into courtrooms.

After years of neglect and structural instability, it is really good that the structure has been repaired. However, the choice to convert it into a "**Additional Court Building**"—which is purportedly intended to accommodate criminal courts—deserves close examination. Restoring meaning is the goal of restoration, not just repairing structures. Reviving a legacy without its original intent runs the risk of turning it into a relic rather than a dynamic institution.

A legitimate heir who was displaced

It makes sense for the Government Law College to go back to its original location. Due to metro construction and safety concerns, the College was evacuated more than seven years ago. Its reintroduction would have represented continuity—the smooth exchange of knowledge and application that characterized Chennai's legal heritage.

Rather, the renovated structure is being opened as a working court facility. In actuality, an administrative move has taken the place of the Law College's homecoming. The building's body has been protected by the State and the Court, but its spirit has been moved. While history is being changed, heritage is being honored.

Relocating selectively and using selective reasoning

Spatial requirement is cited as the reason for the relocation. Indeed, the High Court is overflowing. Why just the criminal courts, though, if decongestion is the objective? Why the selective relocation? Ironically, the Madras High Court still makes room for the bar associations within its premises despite its constant awareness of space limitations.

The Bar would object if civil or commercial courts were shifted. The rationale is obvious: such a move splits the profession, causes client annoyance, and fragments practice. Here, the same reasoning holds true. The judicial ecosystem cannot function without criminal courts. They are, in fact, the most democratic aspect of the legal system, available to citizens who depend on legal assistance and cannot afford expensive litigation, as well as young attorneys

and first-generation practitioners.

The judiciary runs the risk of creating an unintended hierarchy by isolating criminal courts. While the "**prestigious**" benches of the High Court remain located in the central complex, the criminal courts, which are crucial for protecting common people, are positioned on the "**periphery**." Such spatial isolation, even when done with good intentions, compromises the equality principle that the law is supposed to protect.

The democratic aspect of advocating

Historically, the most inclusive path within the profession has been criminal practice. It is the site of the first independent arguments by young attorneys, the most direct access to justice for the underprivileged, and the daily testing of fundamental rights. The most egalitarian area of the legal system would be pushed to the periphery if this realm were moved to a different complex.

There will be more than just symbolic repercussions. Senior advocates could be reluctant to accept briefs that require them to travel between the satellite courts and the main complex. It will be difficult for juniors to appear in several courts in one day. New responsibilities are placed on clerks, customers, and government representatives who are already dealing with logistical difficulties. The outcome will probably be weariness rather than efficiency.

Stress is increased by the implementation of CISF for court security. Administrative complexity increases when there are two complexes to secure, records to convey, and judges to coordinate. Osmosis is the lifeblood of the profession; junior attorneys pick up knowledge from seeing both criminal and civil cases. Courts that divide divide that exchange.

In Before Memory Fades, Fali Nariman remembers his elder Sir Jamshedji Kanga.

"He would spend the day sitting in different courts, learning the hard art of how to argue and, more importantly, how not to argue a case—just by watching other people perform with intelligence!"

Generations of advocates are fostered by that silent apprenticeship that results from close proximity. It is diminished when courts are dispersed.

A different route

There is no denying the necessity of modernization and growth. However, advancement must not come at the expense of memory. A more honorable use for the renovated Law College building would have been as a judicial-academic complex that combined elements of a museum, training facility, moot court, and classroom. It might have developed lawyers who learn from practice rather than just textbooks by serving as a link between the bar, bench, and classroom.

A vehicle like that would respect both tradition and practicality. The apprenticeship culture that formerly characterized Chennai's legal community would be revived. Legal education is the building's real legacy.

Restitution must be a part of restoration.

The choice at hand is more than just an administrative one; it represents our perception of our institutions as either living things or remnants of the past. History is reduced to ornamentation when heritage is treated as merely a construction. Restoring purpose is the greater act of preservation. Intellectually, culturally, and symbolically, the Madras Law College was integrated within the High Court rather than merely standing next to it.

Restoring the College to its original location would have been an act of institutional integrity rather than nostalgic indulgence. In addition, a Law Museum and training programs for aspiring attorneys from various specialties might be housed on the grounds. The High Court complex, where collegiality of practice and equality of access flourish, should continue to house criminal courts.

Make cautious progress.

Both the need for infrastructure and the growth of the judiciary are unavoidable. However, without consultation, advancement runs the risk of estrangement. Dialogue, not decree, must produce decisions that impact thousands of plaintiffs and attorneys. For the student who wants to walk those ancient halls and aspire to be as good as those who formerly walked them, as well as for the junior who cannot afford two clerks, the Bar must also protect the profession's inclusivity.

Before I wrap up, let me quote Rajya Sabha MP NR Elango:

"The choice to relocate the criminal courts to the newly renovated building might

provide temporary respite, but history might not be kind to it."

The rebuilt structure is a reminder of Chennai's legal history. It would be a mistake to mistake preservation for advancement if it were just used as an overflow facility. We must preserve the heritage building without losing its significance because if we exile its soul in the name of renovation, history will not pardon us.

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