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SOME EXAMPLES OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN INDIA: “INTANGIBLE VOCABULARY INGRAINED IN INDIAN URBANISM” – CASE STUDY OF CHENNAI CITY

ABSTRACT

Sustainability has never been contested as an exclusive domain on the Indian canvas as it has been an integral way of life through the chronology of urban evolution. Cultural settlements fostered by the community, legacy safeguarded by power dynamics and the accommodative assimilation of building contemporary identities have been the underlying context. Heritage conservation in the Indian context has its myriad pluralities that reverberate global outlook and echo the local fervour. From preservation of built environment through the legal framework to conservation practices by the community as historical traces and its vestiges present an interesting investigation. The temporality of such history bound spaces and places strikes discernible equilibrium with urban development either as a listed group of built spaces to be preserved or precincts to be conserved. The underlying chord of community adopted conservation adapted and modified sustainable strategies from traditional wisdom need showcasing. The restoration of the past does not pertain only to ‘museumising’ the historical legacy but to its extended lineage of reviving the passage of time tested sustainable practices and tradition that captures the true essence of heritage conservation and sustainable development.

KEYWORDS:

discernible equilibrium, myriad pluralities, ‘museumising’, extended lineage

CONTEXT – “THE CITY IN THE NATION”

The Indian context presents a rare dichotomy of a legal and a communal mechanism of heritage conservation. The city of Chennai, hailed as the gateway of South India, has a traditional past, evolving present and a global future, a unique blend of cultural legacy with a contemporary vision in smart urbanism. The city which had

its founding moors in the port activities of the erstwhile Pallava dynasty had its preliminary fishing hamlets along the coast as dispersed clusters. The primary organised urban form developed as temple based settlements, followed by the colonial regime with its demarcated fort of power surrounded by the settlements of the natives, the inhabitants and the migrants.

The heritage of Chennai city is a plethora of built, as in the tangible, nature endowed spaces, landscapes and community codified ritualistic spaces that outline the intangibles.

“Chennai has been a stage for world historical change from its colonial appearance as “Madras” to its current claim to be one of India’s mega-cities”

Hancock, 2008, 207

Heritage conservation that has gained momentum has been significantly on the lines of built fabric and the intangibles are classified into cultural and folk based grouping. The scenario that many of the vibrant Indian cities present is a harmonious fusion of order and chaos that springs in the pulsating experience and heritage as in “frozen in time” has a larger connotation in the Indian panorama where temporality ordained timeless and ephemeral phenomena are synchronous.

Sustainable development in the city also has varied dimensions as that which celebrates heritage, which adapts to the urban intervention and which evolves as a hybrid. The Indian canvas has always celebrated “unity in diversity” the binding axiom which is lucidly clear and evident in the urban front with commissions for culture and folklore documentation, voluntary action for heritage conservation and the legal framework like the Urban Arts Commission. Patriotic fervour, community initiated sense of pride has also seen several instances of conservation practices. It also presents a contrasting feature of sustainable techniques being revived clearly separated from the ethnic process or the lifecycle assessment. The paradox at times also

manifests itself as in the race to global branding, rating systems and at the same front revisiting the vernacular architecture and sustainable practices in traditional systems.

BUILT HERITAGE – PROFILE STATUS

The heritage conservation legislations were triggered after the fire that brought down Moore Market, a heritage structure, followed by preservation of the Bharath Insurance building, an Indo Saracenic structure that mooted the Justice E. Padmanabhan Committee constituted in 2008 for identifying and enumerating places of historical importance/aesthetic value/popular place of worship in and around the City of Chennai. The exercise of grading and listing heritage buildings was initiated earlier when the draft Heritage Regulations/Acts were drawn up by the Town and Country Planning Department teaming with INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) in 1999 and then by the CMDA and INTACH in 2002. The second time was by the proceedings of the Justice Padmanabhan Committee of which INTACH was also a member, formed the basis of the 2010 judgement that resulted in the formation of the Heritage Conservation Committee (HCC).

The prelude having been set, the Chennai Urban Development Authority (CMDA) created the Heritage Conservation Committee (HCC) in 2010 as per judicial orders and then initiated the listing of heritage buildings in the city and the metropolitan area and the preliminary list had generated nearly 600 buildings of which several had been dated for more than 200 years. Of the structures/precincts on the list, 42 are government buildings that include the old engineering college of the Anna University, Madras High Court, General Post Office, Music and Dance College, Government Teacher Training Institute at Saidapet, and

King Institute of Preventive Medicine with the Theosophical Society being private premises. The list exhibits the varied dimensions of built heritage in terms of the typology and the functional usage of the buildings that have been identified as the rich treasure trove of the city. The structures were to be further categorised into three grades, namely, Grades I, II, and III. Grade I structures will be prime landmarks upon which no alterations will be permitted. While in the Grade II structures, external changes on structures would be subjected to scrutiny the buildings under Grade III may be changed for adaptive reuse with suitable internal and external changes.

The built structures having been addressed, the intangibles need a strategic methodology of listing, documentation, assessment and conservation / preservation measures. This context presents an interesting rather diversified approach in the city with several institutions in the foray holding the authority to devise the conservation measures. Institutionalisation and capacity building as an integrated approach though seems the ideal theoretical solution, the realities and practicalities of the situation has to be taken stock of, and the understanding has to surface across departments and agencies. The paper has been an attempt to study the intangibles in heritage and the conservation strategies that have evolved, been consciously devised or designed on a cause – effect basis.

The examples discussed have been categorised with reference to the following attributes as in:

1. Conserved by traditional sanctity – Acknowledged Sentiment
2. Preserved by Colonial Antiquity – Reinforcing and Imposing Architecture
3. Conserved by Community Pride – Fostered Fervour to Cultural Intangibles
4. Conserved by Ecological Concern – Natural Assets and Axes

5. Preservation: Etched by Memory – Names and Meanings
6. Preserving for Posterity – Cultural Awareness through Power Dynamics

1. Conserved by Traditional Sanctity – “Acknowledged Sentiment”

The earliest traces of the settlements that evolved around the temple as a nucleus at Mylapore, Triplicane, Thiruvanmiyur and Thiruvottiyur presents an interesting hierarchy of spaces, activities as a construct by people and a strong cultural ensemble. The settlement design at Mylapore around the temple precincts responded to the cardinal directions and adopted a grid. The focal element being the temple with the tank as the public realm organised residential development along the 4 corridors surrounding the temple. The pattern evolved from the circumambulatory rituals of the temple, with the routing of the temple car dictating the major access roads.

The socio-cultural aspects are integral to the evolution of the Indian community with everyday urbanism as a way of life. The settlement grew around the temple with a bazaar, spaces of cultural exchange, educational facilities and commercial spots that have rendered a holistic picture of development. The spatial planning evolved in almost concentric rings with a central public realm, surrounded by the bazaars or commercial zone with the outer ring of residences. The traditional group of houses open directly onto the temple, indicating the hierarchy of community and classified by occupation. (Brahmanas - priests, Vaisyas - traders, Shudras – working class). The unifying factor becomes the public realm – the openness of the tank that invites and the bazaars that surround them. The convergence to a point, beside and moving around induces kinesthetics (sense of movement) and the haptic experience (multitude of attributes – visual, sound, textures, colour) defines traditional city design sustained by the community.

The strategic focal element of the temple organises the gathering of the community, wherein the major streets that houses the commercial activity as in the variety of bazaars transforms as a social space during festivals. Eloquent displays of culture as in music, arts and dance performances at the forecourt area induces the perception of an ideal traditional neighbourhood. The traditional city design accommodates its basic sustaining infrastructure needs and allows for connectivity as it grows and merges into the new rings of development as in the case of Mylapore.

The community reverence towards the temple by chords of religion and spirituality and the acceptance and pride by the people as in the universal access to the bazaar stretch and the public realm during festivities and special occasions, has become the underlying conservation mechanism that only needed a legal framework to curb incompatible usage of land and curtail the developments along and around the precincts. The proposals to curb non-compliant uses and to promote pedestrianisation of the vital areas around the precinct is in the pipeline. The example of Mylapore exhibits conservation by sanctity, where the support to be rendered becomes peripheral and not the core. Heritage conservation has to consciously classify the modes and the strategies to devise solutions at varying scales to suit contextual similarities and variance.

2. Preserved for Colonial Antiquity – “Reinforcing and Imposing Architecture”

The British era with its distinctive architecture of Indo Saracenic structures along the Marina, NSC Bose Road and at Fort St. George deemed the colonial contributions become the secondary visual assets of the city. The colonial regime brought in vivid fusion, images of the invaders and the locals set against an architectural background. The touch of red became the “linking and

joining element” attempted consciously by the British at strategic spatial locations of the city. The style, elements and the colour were a sheer visual display of power, the stately political image within a scale of strong imposition. The Indo Saracenic architecture kept reminding and reinstating the power dynamics in the minds of the natives. The stately architecture has strongly found its way into heritage preservation with most of the built fabric being identified on the listing.

The visual tangibility and the strategic locational context has also added to the advantage as many of these find prime corridors of power, centres of administration or hub of commerce. The current use of many of these buildings also warrant conservation because of the visibility and awareness factors as in the case of Senate House in Presidency College, State Bank of India, High Court Complex, General Post office building to quote a few examples. On the contrary even buildings of the public realm as in the Victoria Public Hall that was in a state of neglect were taken up for restoration. While conscious attempts have been made to list and document, to further moot the speed of conservation faces setbacks due to delay in legal implementation. Heritage enthusiasts have been playing a major role in spreading the awareness through campaigns, talks, discussions and representations. The larger picture perceived in the conservation exercise in the city is that only the stately classics of the British

3. Conserved by the Community – “Fostered Fervour to Cultural Intangibles”

The central core of the city, George Town evolved from the neighbourhood of the native settlers to the CBD (Central Business District), houses the High Court, Central Railway station, commercial stretches, markets (bazaars) and residential areas. An eclectic fusion of tradition and heritage, culture and architecture,

“If the temple is a symbol of the community, then the temple’s builders and the officers of the temples and its events are the key agents of the community. They take responsibility for the community’s image.....Civic leadership and community go hand in hand.”

Mines, 1994, 59-64

the place created by the trading community grew to becoming the most happening economic core of Chennai city. The two strong facets of the native and the foreign (colonial)

traces are still evident in George Town, with the tangibles being conserved while the intangibles have been fostered by the migrant communities who settled much earlier. The transformation of the open spaces for rituals and festivities is manifested in the streets, turning to being the social space of the community.

The transformation in time saw the densification of the core, leading to decongestion of the commercial activities, yet the place pulsates with life and vibrancy as the cultural intangibles are being recreated by the community.

The Kandasami Temple, the identity of the Beeri Chettiars in Chennai city, stands a community preserved icon of a specific patronising group of 8 clusters (“gumbahal”) who have shouldered the responsibility and pride of a community asset through history (Mines, 1994, 59-64). The rituals that change the perspective of the street, the public realm physically, keeping the community together culturally and working to be an iconic identity has conserved the heritage structure which has yet to be perceived as a community driven conservation approach.

4. Conserved by Ecological Concern – “Natural Assets and Axes”

The Marina Beach, celebrated as the 2nd longest beach with its promenade, is the public space of Chennai city. The promenade has its origin near the lighthouse and is elaborately designed with a series of hard and soft landscape features, statues and podiums. A natural

asset and edge to the city, has become the public face protected by people’s love for nature’s open space, a space to congregate, celebrate, demonstrate freedom of expression. The significance of the administrative corridor, the stately power the stretch holds in history, the space became people’s place with the beach becoming the centre of political expression and people’s power. Culture, legacy of power dynamics, love of language found its public display along the line of statues and memorial to the political heroes of the state and the city.

The Singara Chennai project, as the name resounds beautification, has addressed the largest public realm of the city the Marina, but the conservation has to be more on the ecological front and also as a dynamic repository to the coast as a defining entity in the history of the city’ growth. The Adyar Creek Restoration and its revival as an eco-park, the Chennai River Conservation Project that addressed the eco assets of the city had a larger goal of tending to the blue and green axis of the city as the 3 major waterways (R. Adyar, R. Cooum and the Buckingham Canal) were the lifeline of Chennai. The conservation measures that have been adopted in various phases for the Pallikaranai marsh, a wetland system and habitat for rare species of flora and fauna and the potent location of recharge, aquifer and flood moderator to the city has had its share of success and failure but the process has created immense awareness and legal safeguarding.

The causes taken for conservation need not purely be on the grounds of a large ecological open space, but by being the forum to political expression and dynamics of power to being the backdrop to the rich built heritage along the beach line. Conservation of heritage should sieve beyond the obvious layers of the built and delve deep into the facets of culture, societal iconicity and having been the catalyst to urban evolution.

5. Preservation: Etched by Memory – “Names and Meanings”

Names and the meanings that they convey has been the most innovative yet unacknowledged way of heritage preservation. The change in political regime has resulted in the revival of the traditional Tamil names, the ethnic language of the city and also the vestiges of the British legacy as a global reminder. The “puram, pettai or pettah, chery and pakkam” used to name and classify the hamlets or the settlements based on the landscapes or grouping of people have had their share of anglicised versions. While the origin etymology presents an interesting revelation of the historical evolution of place with its identity, frequent political interventions kept reviving both the Tamil and the English versions.

Names are repositories that have history frozen in time, reminiscence the past that have its Names with their meanings in the city have several connotations to it as in the community, personalities or as a pointer to the cultural landscape or the occupation. Few classic examples are Mylapore (Town of peacocks, Myil – peacock and pur – settlement), Triplicane for Thiruvallikeni (Thiru – sacred, alli – lily Keni – pond), Chintadripet (Chinna – small Thari – loom Pet – settlement or hamlet), the region where the weavers had settled, Poonamallee (Poovirundhamalee – poo- flower) where the goddess of wealth bloomed from a flower and appeared before the devotee, the area where flowers were in abundance. Neve and Donner (2007, 105-07) discuss the opulence of the Chettiaar community and the way they shaped an area called Chetpet or Chettiar Pettai or the Chettiaar place wherein the community lent its heritage flavour to the city. The names from the British regime also left strong traces largely from personalities, Adams Street in George Town, possibly after Sir Frederick Adams,

Governor of Madras from 1832-1837, Burkitt Road (T Nagar) after Harold Hamilton Burkitt, Assistant Collector & Magistrate of Madras, 1900 and several other examples. The narratives and folklore about places and their identities adds volume to the heritage content which only the tangibles cannot speak. The need to preserve them as recalled and collectively perceived by the people would greatly become the needed move in preserving the intangibles.

6. Preserving for Posterity – “Cultural Awareness through Power Dynamics”

The political scenario of the city developed its own trail of conservation by strategically earmarking locational relevance to significant events, monuments patronising leaders, movements and political fervour. The city’s institutional investment into spaces and events reverberate collective public memory has been a conscious step in preserving the rich heritage. The Marina stretch with its lining of memorials commemorating leaders and the political parties that they iconized, along with the string of statues that instil civic pride, became artefacts of memory. Conservation of public memory is a way of paving the path to the future that holds its potential not just in the past but in the present that has a classic example in Chennai city.

The cultural milieu has been revived through events as in the Sangamam (culmination) – a display of traditional arts and crafts, the Mylapore festival revisiting the festivities, celebrations held for the Madras day, laying strong foundations for remembering and acknowledging the heritage in its varied forms. Conserving landscapes as in the gardens and the greens found an unusual integration with the power dynamics and the contribution to the glorifying the Sangam era and Tamil literary prowess as in the Tholkaapiar Poonga, Semmozhi Poonga (Poonga = park) which

brought commemorative memory of great saints, poets of the classical Tamil era conserving the heritage through the literary roots, landscape and display through the public realm.

CONCLUSION

Heritage Conservation strategies need to adopt an innate, inbuilt mechanism which has been practiced by the communities and rendered successful as a time tested process. The legislative mechanism as in Acts / Commissions does support and create the framework as an organised system, but the chaotic order in several sustainable, ethnic lines of addressing and arresting the problem has to be investigated and analysed. While sustainable measures in history, as in community guarded techniques and mechanisms, traditional rituals and practices that helped preserve the culture and the spaces, need to be integrated into heritage conservation. Conservation could largely be devoted to preservation, adaptive re-use, commodification and 'museumising', but should also lay its foundation for triggering public memory, raising awareness and encouraging the community to participate and devise their self-sustaining methods to revive and restore. The challenge in taking along urban development, interventions and heritage is a matter of concern across the global arena, but while international laws could form the broader outline, the localisation of the norms has to be chalked specifically to the context.

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