

ITRHD
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SHIFTING THE GAZE: CONSERVING RURAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

IN INDIA

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Today, ITRHD is celebrating World Heritage Day. The theme for World Heritage Day this year is, “Complex Pasts, Diverse Futures.” It is a rich and appropriate theme to discuss the future of India’s built heritage. Discussing the diverse future possibilities of the country’s complex past. It has the potential to reveal insights into how our society has engaged with its heritage and the dilemmas it has created which have seldom been examined by the conservation professionals. The ITRHD has an important role to play in this dialogue.

I therefore propose to talk about both World Heritage and ITRHD. I believe that by understanding the theoretical links between them we could engage with our heritage with greater authenticity and integrity. My talk will be in two parts. In the first, I will discuss the causal relation between the concept of World Heritage and the practice of conservation in India, where I argue that far from being benign, this relationship is the source of some deep-rooted issues that the conservation of the built heritage in India faces. In the second, I will discuss how the initiatives of ITRHD could contribute to resolving some of the problems that these issues have created.

On World Heritage

The concept of World Heritage is a remarkable idea. It is remarkable because heritage is after all a signifier of local cultures, valued and protected by societies that created it. So it is remarkable that on World Heritage Day, we celebrate heritage as a community of nations. This is an extraordinary conceptual leap, because it enables the idea of heritage to transcend local, regional and national boundaries and to be celebrated not only as a local but global attribute, the legacy

of humanity as a whole. It is based on the proposition that the heritage can unify societies through global cooperation to protect it for all mankind.

While that is an inspiring ideal, it also entails responsibilities, not least that we voluntarily follow global conventions and protocols to conserve our heritage. These conventions and protocols evolved largely in Europe, based on European experiences, and disseminated to the rest of the world, initially through colonialism and now globalization. It segued in 1972 to create the concept of World Heritage Sites, and in 1983 to the initiative to celebrate World Heritage Day. UNESCO and its affiliates administer it and are its official gate-keepers. They prescribe guidelines and practices that are necessary for local societies to follow so that their heritage could, in time, be recognized as World Heritage. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the official gatekeepers of the built heritage in India, follows these prescriptions, and because of the administrative and governance structure, its influence mediates quotidian practice as well. What this means is that while heritage is created locally we, at least officially, have agreed to conserve it by following globally accepted principles.

This causal relationship – between global norms of conservation and locally produced heritage – catalyses complex consequences in India regarding both, of how heritage is defined and how it is protected. But this relationship has seldom been foregrounded or discussed let alone traced to its Eurocentric roots and the idea of World Heritage. Thus we dutifully celebrate World Heritage Day every year, thereby reinforcing this relationship but remain unmindful about its consequences.

Of course, there is no compulsion to follow UNESCO prescriptions. But the genealogy of ASI and the way conservation ideology and practice in India has evolved over the last 150 years, ensures that we *want* to follow it. The ASI was established in 1861, and its objectives were formalized in 1904 with the promulgation of the so called ASI Act. This Colonial Act was notionally modified after Independence, but its substance remained intact, as did the guidelines for conserving monument under their care. Not surprisingly, even today, the purposes and protocols of their engagement with Indian monuments are rooted in colonial imperatives. The ASI has decisively transformed the cultural imagination of our

society, including what of the built heritage our society considers valuable and how to protect it. This imagination has now become deeply internalized, which is why the international canons of conservation and the protocols that the UNESCO prescribes are voluntarily adopted. This is the blind side of both the social imagination and the official conservation policy and practice in India.

It must be noted however, that alternate, local building construction and maintenance systems which have evolved from pre-colonial practices survive and continue to be practiced in the interstices of modern developments. Its persistence in the modern era constitutes a living tradition, but its significance for servicing contemporary needs of conserving the built heritage has never been valued. For all practical purposes, what our society officially considers heritage, or the efficacy of policies that ASI follows to engage with it, has never been seriously questioned.

Perhaps this colonial imprint that defines the cultural imagination of our society has not been questioned because today, following international norms and practices of conservation subliminally aligns with our ideas and expectations of modernization and development. Thus, international models and methods determine not only conservation policies, but also the broader strategies of urban planning and redeveloping the built environment. In this sphere of civic governance too, a decisive break in the cultural imagination could be traced to the establishment of the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) in 1853. It, or its affiliates, undertake all government projects. The CPWD systems and guidelines mediate all quotidian construction work in the country as well. Thus, almost simultaneously, about a hundred and fifty years ago, the colonial government established how new buildings and habitats would be built and how the historic ones conserved.

This simultaneous transformation of the cultural imagination is doubly destructive because as anyone familiar with Indian urbanism knows, it has not created better habitats for our society and it has also resulted in the steady attrition of much of our unprotected built heritage. This is the implication of the causal relationship between the idea of World Heritage and the management of the local built environment. The reliance on externally validated norms and protocols of both conservation and development needs to be critically examined. This examination is

particularly significant in the discipline of conservation where its consequences are felt most profoundly, because while habitats can be rebuilt, the loss of built heritage cannot be replaced.

My intent in undertaking such a critical examination is, however, not to contest or diminish the idea of World Heritage – which is indeed a remarkable idea – but to highlight some serious cultural dilemmas it creates in our society. The narrative of World Heritage is independent of the initiatives we take to define or protect our heritage, so our dilemmas are of our own making. Further, it is also not my intent to question the disciplinary objectives of World Heritage, which as I mentioned earlier, have a compelling rationale based on the European historical experience. My focus is primarily to question why the substance and nature of Indian conservation practices is yoked to the European experience. I refer to World Heritage only as a metaphor to map local conservation ideology and the fact that it continues to rationalize its work in the firm belief that following international guidelines suffices to conserve our diverse, complex and very fecund historical legacy. It is this rationale that needs to be questioned, not the objectives of World Heritage. A *prima facie* examination of the ground realities will suffice to cast doubts on this rationale.

For example, why is our rich and complex heritage almost exclusively defined by the legacy of the physical built heritage, and not the network of relationships between the tangible, intangible and natural heritage? And why only the iconic monuments? As a result we have not only flattened a rich cultural landscape, but – as far as the physical built heritage is concerned – also ignored the significance of its other manifestations that are more profuse and are equally important to define our society's cultural landscape.

This has resulted in two important elisions with respect to cultural policy that must be highlighted. One, is that the ASI officially protects only 3691 historic buildings, which are designated as Monuments of National Importance and to that number we could also add another 4-5000 monuments protected by State governments. What happens to the rest, by far the larger part of the products of our building culture? Does this elision reflect a reasonable interpretation of the built heritage that we would like to pass on to future generations? Consider the fact that the United

Kingdom has over 30,000 Grade 1 Listed sites and properties, which are equivalent to the meagre 3691 Monuments of National Importance protected by ASI. Of the 3691 Nationally Protected Monuments, about 30 are inscribed in the UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites, and given the mindset I described, the goal of ASI is to get more monuments in the UNESCO list and not expand the limited number of monuments of national importance. How this reflects the ground realities can be gauged by the fact that in Delhi the ASI protects only 174 Monuments of National Importance, whereas the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) has identified and listed over 2000 significant heritage structures that should be protected. What would better, and more truly, define Delhi's built heritage, the 174 identified by ASI or the 2000 by INTACH? Engaging with the 2000 diverse heritage buildings identified by INTACH also offers the opportunity to develop more diverse and innovative civic management strategies to redefine the physical, cultural and economic identity of the city, for both the local resident and visitors.

The second, is that to conserve these limited number of monuments, the ASI purposefully follows international standards of conservation defined by UNESCO and its Charters, which prohibit recourse to the use of traditional knowledge systems and practices that created the buildings. It privileges the views of historians in our engagement with the built heritage not the original builder's or the contemporary architect's. As a result it ignores the potential of employing the still extant living building cultures in India, which could more authentically satisfy the expectations of local societies. These building cultures are as important to define the heritage we seek to conserve as the historic buildings the ASI values to define it. In India, both the historic building and the historic ways of building define cultural heritage, so to privilege one and not the other is a travesty. The immutable nature of the travesty can be gauged by the fact that in 2012, when a National Committee was set up by ASI to celebrate its 150th Anniversary, one of the consequential agendas they set for themselves was to update their colonial conservation guidelines,. After much bureaucratic prevarications, however, the ASI decided to reiterate its colonial legacy and align with international expectations.

So change, if it comes, will have to be initiated from outside the ASI and government initiatives. But this is going to be difficult. As the premier agency tasked with protecting the country's built heritage, it has an exaggerated sense of its relevance and a hegemonic influence over conservation policy in India. For example, even large and independent non-government institutions like INTACH, while pursuing its otherwise diverse conservation agendas, still defers to the imprimatur of ASI in matters of how it conserves historic buildings. This is the result of the causal relation between concept of World Heritage and protection of local heritage.

I will extract four important consequences that result from this relationship. The first, is the limited definition and numbers of what is considered built heritage. The second, by focusing exclusively on the product, and not the processes that created the built heritage, it is transforming the characteristics of the cultural imagination of society – the cognitive understanding of the relevance of the cultural knowledge systems and crafts traditions, which once defined the cultural economy of our society; the third, is that conserving the built heritage is seen as a bureaucratic responsibility, where the civil society and its agents have no agency. The bureaucracy consider the protection of heritage a financial burden on the exchequer and an impediment to development. And finally, it leads to valuing one typology or class of heritage as worthy of protection over another, which contributes to privileging the construction of new buildings and reconstructing urban precincts over conserving historic buildings or neighbourhoods. The loss could be defined both as an estrangement with our past as an inability to define an appropriate future or the nature of the modernity we want. In effect, the organic continuity between the past, present and a possible future is broken.

Celebrating World Heritage Day offers an opportunity to examine these fault lines in the practices of conserving the built heritage of India.

On ITRHD

I will now highlight the objectives of ITRHD, and how they could help our society to consciously engage with the fault lines and help mitigate its consequences. Again my intent is not to stop what we are already doing, but to shift the gaze of a

part of our conservation policy, in order to pursue new strategies to conserve the built heritage. In the light of our complex past, we need diverse policies to conserve it for future generations. The official policy of ASI is one important strategy and it should continue to protect the 3671 Monuments of National Importance in its care by following international conventions and protocols, but to conserve the rest, the rest of the country needs to move on.

This can be accomplished by developing two major shifts in the prevailing conservation ideology. The first is to purposefully focus on non-monumental and non-iconic buildings, particularly in non-urban sites, and the second, to accommodate change and development as an integral component of the conservation strategy. These shifts broadly align with the current principles of adaptive reuse of less-important historic buildings, but with a distinct bias towards employing the characteristics of the heritage being conserved – traditional knowledge systems of vernacular architecture, crafts and craftspeople, and historic urbanism – as tools to improve the quality of life of society in general, but the immediate stakeholders in particular. In the process it also acknowledges the need to upgrade traditional skills and techniques of the processes that created the heritage. Heritage therefore is seen as a dynamic process, evolving to meet contemporary challenges. This shift in focus underpins the rationale for setting up the ITRHD.

This dynamic process views conservation of historic buildings and precincts in context-sensitive development terms. It will enable our society to view the past, the present and future of the habitat as an organic continuum. This shift in gaze enables policy makers to explore the potentials of more appropriate strategies of development – one that is resilient by pursuing ecologically, economically and culturally sustainable goals. This shift in gaze will also enable most heritage buildings to be seen as agents to improve the quality of life of its legatees rather than only as a record of their history. Let the maintenance and safeguarding the iconic evidences of history be ASI's responsibility, while civil society uses heritage as an instrument to improve the quality of life.

ITRHD, as its name signals, was set up to focus on non-metropolitan heritage and link it to development. This is a radical departure from the prevailing ideology of

conservation. Of course, the issues of both rural development and conserving rural heritage have been – and continues to be – the objective of several policies initiatives of the government, but the two separate objectives are not administratively linked in instrumental terms by either economists or conservation professionals. This is the insight that ITRHD brings to the table. It has the potential to simultaneously transform rural habitats and cater to rural needs and thereby contribute to alleviating the problems of urbanization. This potential needs to be exploited by not only ITRHD, but others as well..

In the short period since its inception – just ten years – it has engaged with a variety of projects.

Publications

Publications are a potent tool to spread awareness of rural heritage and ITRHD brings out two types of publications. One, is a series dealing with specific themes relating to rural culture or way of life. This has included: Traditional Cuisines; Rural Sports; Tribal Culture; Myths, Legends and Folk Lore; and Traditional Healing Systems in India.

The other publication, Explore Rural India, carries articles by specialists on eclectic aspects relating to the rural sector in India and other countries. The underlying idea being to share experiences and learn from each other.

Conservation and Development of Architectural Heritage

ITRHD has projects related to rural heritage spread over eight States. These relate to conservation of architectural heritage, promotion and sustainable preservation of living traditions in music and crafts, cultural heritage and documentation of rural architectural heritage. A major objective in these projects is to link preservation and enhancement of rural heritage assets with overall rural development, including primary education with emphasis on gender and social inclusiveness, promotion of rural tourism, women's empowerment, youth involvement, skill development, and awareness programmes through seminars, meetings and waste management.

ITRHD is closely involved with INTO (International Organization of National Trusts) and its activities across the globe.

Some architectural conservation projects that ITRHD has engaged with are:

- Reconstruction of the 700 years old Sheik Musa's Dargah in Nuh, Haryana;
- Restoration of 62, 18th and 19th century terracotta temples in the village of Maluti, Jharkhand, to promote tourism by tapping into the market generated by the nearby, enormously popular Tarapeeth pilgrimage site. A Training-cum-Management Institute is proposed to be set up to upgrade local skills and job opportunities;
- Conservation of the historic Birsa Munda Jail in Ranch to be reused as the Birsa Munda Museum;
- Relocation of the eight surviving but submerged temples at Bilaspur, built between 8th and 19th century in the erstwhile capital of the Kahloo State in modern Himachal Pradesh, and developing it as a pilgrim-cum-tourist centre;
- Restoration of the historic wells in the villages of Kaunt and Gujrani in the Bhiwani District of Haryana;
- Documenting and preparing DPRs for about 350 historic temples sites and setting up a small museum in Pithoragarh in Uttarakhand.
- Promoting vernacular architecture by organizing a national conference with the School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal, and The Museum of Man, Bhopal.

Education, Training and Documentation

- Creating and setting up an ITRHD Rural Conservation and Development Institute in New Delhi, initially in the campus of the prestigious Asian Transport Institute in Dwarka. It is proposed to begin by focusing on Buddhist Heritage by organizing an international conference on Buddhist heritage;
- Detailed documentation and subsequent conservation of heritage resources in rural areas throughout the country. The UP government has agreed to partner in a phased basis, while in Kerala, ITRHD with its own funds and the logistic

support of the Kerala government, has undertaken a pilot project in the Munnar area, focusing on villages that have the possibilities of becoming major tourist destinations.

Living Traditions

- One of the objectives of ITRHD is to promote and preserve living heritage. One of the earliest, and still most important projects, involves a “Creative Cluster of three extraordinary villages in UP’s Azamgarh District. Hariharpur is a village of classical musicians, Nizamabad has an unusual tradition of black pottery, and Mubarakpur has a several hundred year old tradition of fine silk handloom weaving. Beside undertaking local initiatives to improve the quality of life, including incorporating them as a tourist circuit for Varanasi, ITRHD regularly convenes an Azamgarh Festival in Delhi and Lucknow to show case the heritage;
- Conserving and promoting the living traditions of Barmer, Rajasthan;
- Documenting and conserving through sustainable agricultural practices the Royal Gardens of Rajnager, adjacent to Khajuraho. This project is being undertaken by the newly set up ITRHD Chapter in Belgium

Conclusion

What ITRHD has been able to demonstrate is that it is still possible, by shifting the gaze of the profession, to remedy some of the enduring fault lines in Indian conservation ideology. This is possible in India, because of the continued relevance of a ‘living’ tradition in our contemporary society.

It is still possible to imagine conservation as a creative discipline in India and develop the diverse futures of our habitats by upgrading and modernizing it rather than erasing it and developing a globalized version of ‘New India’ by mimicking models and practices from other cultures. This is the potential of conserving Indian heritage that we can reflect upon on World Heritage Day.

The built heritage can be the foundations of an indigenous modernity. This perspective guides the vision of ITRHD. It seeks to transform the habitat, where our contemporary and future society will feel “at home in the world.”
