Preservation of Cultural Heritage of India: Past and Present

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Abstract

The temples whose characteristics are still perceptible in their principal and secondary elements are to be renovated with their own materials. If they are lacking in anything or have some similar type of flaw, the sage wishing to restore, must proceed in such a way that) they regain their integrality and they are pleasantly arranged (anew); this is to be done with the dimensions—height and width—which were theirs and with decoration consisting of corner, elongated and other aediculae, without anything being added to what originally existed and always in conformity with the initial appearance of the building and with the advice of the knowledgeable An Indian vâstuúâstra on 'renovation' (anukarmavidhânam), 35.5-7

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Introduction

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Cultural heritage of India is viewed as an ensemble of both tangible and intangible remains of the past that would include intellectual cultural heritage, material cultural heritage and oral traditions. The combination of the three components can be viewed as constituting continuity between the remnants of the past and the living components of present and ensures its possible continuation as a cultural value among the communities for future. Cultural heritage is a non-renewable resource, once destroyed cannot be recovered in the original. The identity of the distinct class, cultural or ethnic group, regional community, or a nation is always associated with specific locations, regions, structures, or sometimes symbols. A sense of belonging to a place, or cultural tradition is the unique characteristic to Homo sapiens (Cleere, p. 5).

In India prior to the coming of the Occidentals there were two different cultural traditions prevalent that generated tangible and intangible forms of heritages: one had received patronage under the satraps, mahasamantas, kings and their entourage (the most of the canons of art and architecture (vastusastras and silpasastras) were composed in this tradition), the other survived in the countryside through mnemonic traditions, passed on from one generation to another. The third cultural stream added new dimension to the cultural heritage of India by constructing imposing structures embodying European spirit of superiority in the land of the colonized. The colonialists secured a complete legitimate right to interpret Indian past by calling Indian civilization ahistorical. Orientatism, as a political doctrine, willed over the Orient because 'Orient was weaker than the West' (Said, p. 3). It was a Western style of thought for 'dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said, ibid). The idea of the changelessness of Indian civilization was explained by arguing that 'the concept of time in early India was cyclic…all human activities were continually repeated in each cycle (Thapar, p. 2). Such an idea was in contrast to the linear concept of time that emerged from the European enlightenment. Romila Thapar has

demonstrated that both time concepts—cyclic and linear—were prevalent in early India (Thapar, Time as a Metaphor of History, 1996).

Cultural historians and archaeologists generally believe that the major interest in preserving India's cultural heritage including monuments originated after the birth of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784). This claim is contestable as there are scores of inscriptions and literary sources (especially vast amount of vastusastras) that are witness to a historical consciousness of a monument, and efforts were made by the issuing authorities that the monument in question was properly maintained and necessary provisions were made for its repairs so as to prolong its life. For instance, the Mandasor inscription of Kumaragupta I (AD 493-529) records the building of the temple of Sun-god by a silk-weaving guild at Dashapura in the district of Lata. The inscription states that 'part of this temple fell into despair; so now, in order to increase their own fame, the whole of this most noble house of the Sun (bhanumato griham) has been repaired again by the munificent corporation (CII, no. 18: lines 19-20, pp. 83, 87). What we learn from the Damodarpur copper-plate of Vishnugupta (AD 542-43) is that a person from Ayodhya wanted to purchase a piece of land so that he could make provisions for repairs to the temple (phutta for sphutita) of Svetavarahasvamin (Basak, 1919-20; Dikshit, 1923-4; D C Sircar, 1965, p. 348). The Nirmand copper-plate of mahasamanta and maharaja Samudrasena dated AD 612-13 stipulates that Mihiralaksmi (the mother of Samudrasena) gifted the village of Sulisagrama together with its inhabitants–for the purpose of always repairing whatever may become worn-out, broken and torn (srinna-khanda-sphutita)–at the temple of Kapaleshvara at Nirmand (CII, no. 80: 289, line 7). Citations from the technical works (vastusastras) are equally fascinating, sometimes giving an impression of a modern method of preservation. The Mayamata's chapter on 'anukarmavidhanam' is worth reading:

The temples whose characteristics are still perceptible in their principal and secondary elements are to be renovated with their own materials. If they are lacking in anything or have some similar type of flaw, the sage wishing to restore, must proceed in such a way that) they regain their integrality and they are pleasantly arranged (anew); this is to be done with the dimensions—height and width—which were theirs and with decoration consisting of corner, elongated and other aediculae, without anything being added to what originally existed and always in conformity with the initial appearance of the building and with the advice of the knowledgeable (Mayamata, 35.5-7).

Similarly, there are genuine instructions in the Visnudharmattara Purana and other Puranas how a sculpture is to be repaired and preserved (Kramrisch, 1928). On the basis of some of the epigraphical and technical treatises we can infer that the idea of preserving a monument was very much rooted among the people who were associated with the construction of a

variety of monuments. Thus ancient Indian societies were engaged in preserving the relics of the past that gave them the sense of an identity, a sense of belonging to a tradition, symbol or structure.

With the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861, Alexander Cunningham as the first archaeological surveyor to the Government of India, however, as yet 'repair and conservation' did not form part of the survey's concern. Several articles however have appeared in the pages of the Asiatick Researches on ancient relics of India and scholars such as Charles Wilkins, H. T. Colebrooke, H. H. Wilson, James Hoare, J. H. Harrington and Colin Mackenzie emphasizing their preservation (Roy, 2011, 12-22). When the activities of the ASI were revived in 1871, and the appointment of Cunningham as Central Agent for the Archaeological Survey of India—later re-designated as Director General—the archaeological investigation and conservation became part of the British policy. Professionalism in Indian archeology, however, emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century when British brought out the legislation called 'The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act 1904'. This Act was based in letter and spirit on that of the British Ancient Monuments Act of 1882. The credit for accomplishing of this Act is given to John Marshall but Lord Curzon played a seminal role in the completion of this Act. What is astounding to note in this Act is the sub-section 24 that exonerated the archaeological officials for any negligence committed by them while exercising power conferred by this Act. It is important to cite this sub-section because it has been retained in 'The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act 1958'. It says that

No suit for compensation and no criminal proceeding shall lie against any public servant in respect of any act [emphasis added] done, or in good faith intended to be done, in the exercise of any power conferred by this Act.

The spirit of this provision can be compared with the clause of 'extra-territoriality' as devised by the British and French in the 1840s and 1850s while signing treaties with China and Japan.

The guideline of conservation drafted by John Marshall in 1923 has gained the status of the bible for the ASI and the State Department of Archaeology. The Conservation Mannual, 1923 is a revised version of Conservation of Ancient Monuments, 1907. In 1984 a new agency INTACH joined the stage of conservation play to 'undertake measures for the preservation and conservation of natural resources and cultural property' (INTACH, Appendix A 3 (ii)). It is surprising to note that INTACH too follows the Guidelines for Conservation drafted by Bernard Feilden (published by INTACH in 1989). Both guidelines referred to above are examples of Western experience, sometimes totally ignoring the

Indian realities of conservation, as echoed by P. J. Ucko:

Such legislation is often conceived and implemented by those steeped in a Western tradition of archaeology with its Western conceptualization of the past, and such legislation often lacks much, or any, regard for the complexities of the views of the past held by the very people who inhabit the countries or areas concerned. (Ucko, p. xv).

Apart from these guidelines there are thousands of heritage monuments that are preserved and renovated by the village communities on indigenous conservation practices based on traditional artistic skills, knowledge, well-tested methods and material used in conservation practices. These two conflicting ideologies are based on two assumptions: the Eurocentric perspective has a 'scientific wrappings'; the indigenous is based on the belief that 'buildings live, die and are rebuilt in an organic process and its authenticity inheres in the continuously evolving integrity of the historic building for its intended use. In this view, the site (vastu) is more venerated than the building built over it. The manuals of Marshall (1923) and Feilden (1989), along with their later incarnation, the Venice Charter of 1964 (to which India is not a signatory) fixed the authenticity of a building in the distant past and the duty of the conservator is to protect it. Therefore one system of thought restores and rebuilds the fossilized ruins, while the other consolidates it by making it a living heritage, as it exists and evolves over time.

In a country like India our cultural heritage is multi-layered and grows out of the interweaving of many societies, many pasts, many communities and many cultures. This multiplicity of cultures gives a unique presence to Indian civilization. But the pressing question is what should be preserved/conserved/restored and how?

Recently the Archaeological Survey of India has drafted a 'National Conservation Policy for Monuments, Archaeological Sites and Remains Protected by ASI'. Surprisingly this draft policy is totally silent on indigenous methods of conservation that were followed in India since very early times. At least available knowledge available in Indian literary and epigraphical sources could have become part of the new conservation policy drafted by ASI.

Long-term amicable future strategies can be devised perceiving the nature of threats to the cultural heritage according to the specific climatic conditions of the area: following could be possible with the involvement of the local village communities and local crafts-people:

- Documentation and research so that some of the best specimen of extraordinary artistic and historic value be included in the list of the protected monuments of national and state importance.

- The second priority list must be prepared where demand for state and central funds could be raised.
- Comprehensive and effective legislation is a desideratum. Outdated Statutes and Acts need drastic revisions and amendments considering the changing and new threats to the cultural properties of both static and movable kinds.
- Region specific conservation strategies need to be devised so that the region-specific local material and craftsmanship be fully utilised. The use of local building material and technologies is the only possible solution to their survival because the heritage monuments were designed for a specific local climate and to be viewed in situ
- Involvement of local craftspeople and their expertise, such as barahis, luharas, sunars and citrakaras must be ensured while renovating a monument.
- Community involvement both in protected and unprotected monuments has to be ensured because actually monument belongs to them.
- To prevent fires the question of the use of electricity especially in wooden structures need to be debated. Increased fire incidents in recent years have reduced many ancient monuments and settlements to ashes.
- To check ethnic and religious fanaticism.

The function of a monument and its value as cultural heritage would have to be repeatedly explained to the new generation. Indian personality is damaged with the destruction of the cultural heritage.

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