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Exploring the Notions of Heritage in India from the Perspective of Hinduism

Abstract: The paper reflects on the notions of heritage based on the philosophical traditions rooted in Hinduism, the predominant religion in India. Heritage (Virasat) is considered separate from tradition (Parampara). The paper deliberates on the spatial, temporal, and experiential notions of heritage. While the space is manifested through symbolic representations on macro and micro levels, tangible heritage gets created and recreated through cyclic notions of time, giving the process a much broader cultural significance than the product. The experiential dimension contributes towards linking the tangible and the intangible in various modes of comprehension, and thus materiality has much lesser significance than the spirituality of heritage. This understanding also has an implication for the traditional approach to heritage conservation that emphasizes all the rituals attached to the regeneration of a particular heritage in contrast to merely preserving the 'dead' ruins. The paper further dwells into the main challenges confronting this heritage when seen in a static manner and with a growing disconnect between the tangible and the intangible. The failure of the 'Western' conservation approaches with a focus on material preservation has therefore made us reflect on the living heritage approach for conservation that advocates enabling continuity and evolution and controlling change to protect the essence of heritage that is deeply connected to the self.
Keywords: Heritage, tradition, landscape, conservation, continuity, tangible, intangible, traditional knowledge.

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Heritage: a product and a process

The notions of heritage are as diverse as the people who are its bearers. This is also related to the fact that different societies have different views and maintain various links with their past. There has always been a prevalent debate on the difference between the Eastern and Western notions of defining 'heritage.' UNESCO describes that cultural heritage is, "in its broadest sense, both a product and a process, which provides societies with a wealth of resources that are inherited from the past, created in the present, and bestowed for the benefit of future generations" (UNESCO, 2014: 132). Deflecting slightly from the above, in the Indian context, the product and the process are given separate consideration. In Hindi, these correspond to Virasat and Parampara, which translate as 'heritage' and 'tradition', respectively. For example, in the case of traditional crafts, it is the tradition carried over generations that contribute to the making the heritage (Savyasaachi, 2017: 28). Thus, taking the example of a traditional craftsperson, the knowledge of craft would be part of their 'Virasat' (tradition) handed down from their forefathers (Parampara). These traditions also had strong roots in the societal division through caste, work, and labour.

Spatial, temporal, and experiential notions of heritage

Cultural heritage from an Eastern perspective in particular can be understood through spatial, temporal, and experiential connotations based

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on the tenets of Hinduism, the predominant religious thought processes that have dominated India.

Spatial notion

The physical dimension of space continues to be perceived through geographical extents, as this is easily comprehended by the human senses, regardless of the social, cultural, or religious context. However, in the Hindu thought process, this physical comprehension is also connected with the subconscious understanding of the form and meaning of the landscape, manifested through symbolic representations that may even include the entire cosmos at the micro level (Galtung, 1979; Vatsayan, 1994).

Quoting from Eliade's work, Singh and Parveen emphasise that, unlike the Western tradition, as per the Hindu religion, the human organization began with the creation of the world (Singh and Parveen, 2016: 1). Hence, "cosmisation of a territory or habitat is always a consecration and represents the paradigmatic work of gods" (Eliade, 1991: 32). The planning systems in most of the traditional cities, as well as those built by sovereign rulers, are based on the celestial prototype, reflecting cosmo-magical powers. This was done to have earthly cities and religious institutions in similarity to the otherworldly sphere, identified with the heavens (Gastner, 1954: 191). Singh draws a parallel to the manifestation of a "transcendental element between the macrocosmos (cosmos / heaven) and the microcosmos (temple / human body)" (Singh, 1993: 242). These two polarities are linked by the intermediating spatial-sacred structure, i.e. the mesocosmos (built environment) (Singh, 1993: 242). The city of Varanasi is one such example of mesocosmos that mediates between the microcosmos of the individual and the macrocosmos of the greater universe. Thus, these three archetypical levels are linked by the axis mundi; a communication between heaven and earth (Singh and Parveen, 2016: 1). In the case of Bhaktapur, an important historic city in Nepal, the inhabitants imagined its irregularly ovoid shape as a direct representation of the *damru*, the hourglass-shaped drum of Shiva (Hindu God). However, no rituals are attached to these iconic images that link cities to gods (Levy and Rajopadhyaya, 1991: 151). Such comprehension means that the components and processes of space are not only real in physical terms but also get constructed at various levels of consciousness, which we will elaborate on later as an experiential dimension of reality. However, our senses and instruments can only measure specific aspects of space, thereby limiting our individual ability to perceive space.

Temporal notion

The predominant Western perspective of heritage considers it on a linear scale, where the past is separated from the present, and the existence of relics of the past determines how heritage is defined in the present. This, of course, implies that conservation interventions are primarily geared towards preserving the material traces of the past.

On the other hand, the Hindu notion of time encompasses a continuous cycle of birth and death, creation and destruction, and therefore there is no starting or ending point (Galtung, 1979; Vatsayan, 1994). When seen from this perspective, heritage does not exist in a static state from a particular period in history. Still, it is constantly recreated as a part of this endless cycle. Moreover. this cyclical process has a never-ending continuum like a cyclic loop where you re-enact and recreate but not necessarily the same heritage in material terms; there is always a sense of creativity and evolution that co-exists with continuity. This also goes well with a central tenet of Buddhism closely associated with Hinduism, according to which everything is impermanent and, therefore, one needs to put in effort to achieve salvation (Heehs, 2002). Our actions and thinking processes can alter the point of return in a way that we do return but not exactly at the same point from where we began, and thus our evolutionary processes are like that of a cyclical loop.

Another important consequence of this cyclic notion of time and the act of recreating lies in the ephemeral nature of the physical embodiment of heri-

tage and the lack of significance given to its materiality. Ganesh Chaturthi, a Hindu festival, is celebrated around the month of August in western parts of India. Every year for ten days, this festival involves creating miniature temporary settlements for the celebrations, and many neighbourhoods get transformed with special lighting and decorations. '*Pandals*', i.e. large temporary fabricated structures are created to house the idol of Ganesh. On the last day, the idol is carried by a large number of people in long processions for immersion in the sea. With Lord Ganesh also known as Vighnaharta (meaning the one who removes obstacles), the pandals and subsequent processions include a creative tableau depicting both local and global concerns, with lord Ganesh mediating the outcomes. These representations do not have any base in the ancient scriptures or religious sermons but come from the human creativity that transcends the local and the global, the historical and the contemporary.

Mehrotra uses immersion as the spectacle of the city. With the dissolving of the clay in the water, the spectacle ends for that year. This spectacle cannot be deciphered through any static or permanent mechanism. The city's memory is embedded in that entire process (Mehrotra, 2008).

Again, this perspective of time plays a critical role in our conservation approach, which strives to manage continuity and change to preserve the essence of heritage in a longitudinal time perspective. This understanding is very critical in the contemporary conservation discourse, where we have gradually shifted our focus from mere preservation to the management of change (Teutonico and Matero, 2003). While we appreciate this new perspective, we cannot discount the importance of protecting the material fabric that embodies the historic values derived from the distant past, making it unique and irreplaceable, like a chapter from a history book.

The experiential notion

Now that we are breaking boundaries between reality and construct, we would like to bring in the third dimension, which is crucial to our understanding of heritage but has often been overlooked. This experiential notion is inherently linked to our cognition levels that exist at conscious (visible), sub-conscious (hidden), and unconscious (invisible) levels. Space and time get a more comprehensive understanding when we adopt a holistic perspective that takes into consideration all three levels. Gupta (2003) explains this in another way: The visible means the tangible dimension that is primarily physical. The material wealth in this world is an illusion (*Maya*) and can be lost. The illusion leads to desires for worldly materialist aspects that take one away from God and the real experience, and thus all tangible dimensions are hardly of any significance. The tangible or physical aspects of understanding are very easily and noticed by our senses. One recognises the illusion and attempts to discover the truth at the hidden level. This is seen in nature through the belief that God's creation, even if illusionary, is greater than the physical creations of humans. In this way, the sacred aspects get associated with nature. The natural and sacred components of trees, mountains, rivers, water bodies, forests, stones, etc., may necessitate discovery and creativity when seen in this way. This hidden aspect is manifested in rituals and cultural practices. One cannot see the invisible, intangible dimension through the naked eye but can only experience it. This is indeed the true landscape where all tangible and intangible, visible and hidden dimensions lose their meaning, and one can appreciate the experiential quality without any physical attributes. The invisible dimension shows that human beings are an inherent part of this landscape, constructed within themselves and defined metaphorically but experienced spiritually. It is important to distinguish experience from perception; while experience determines deeper comprehension, perception can only form an opinion.

The experiential dimension also binds people to the landscape through narratives that give an entirely different meaning to the space, linking various natural elements like hills, water bodies, trees, etc., with stories that are woven through religious metaphors. This adds another layer of experiential dimension to the physical space and also binds culture and nature

inseparably as culture becomes as much part of nature as the other way around. Take the case of the sacred landscape of Vrajbhoomi in North India, which is linked with the stories connected with the childhood of Krishna, a Hindu deity. Every year, scores of devotees collectively experience this landscape through processional routes that connect various places linked to Krishna's childhood. This heritage place perfectly demonstrates the blurring of the boundaries between historical and mythological, cultural and natural, and tangible and intangible. The appreciation of heritage significance goes beyond visual quality or symbolism. It is no longer determined by how it is perceived and defined by others, but it becomes part of being/existence.

Jiirnodharana: the traditional approach to heritage conservation

From the perspective of Hinduism, values have traditionally been attributed to heritage for their symbolic meanings and use in everyday life. Ruins or *khandar* were considered waste and not worthy of value (Sinha, 2020: 4). Similar to growth, even decay is within the law of nature and is unavoidable. The ancient treatise of *jiirnodharana* within its text states that every object, natural or manmade, has to change. This makes *prāsāda-vastu* i.e., the building form that must also undergo change and decay. As per the ancient scriptures, no being is immortal in this universe where the processes of *Sirsti* (creation), *Sthiti* (existence), and *Samhara* (destruction) are always in continuity. Considering that a building is also understood to be a living being (*prāsāda-purusha*), the concepts of creation, existence, and destruction apply to it as well. The western concepts of preservation would ensure its preservation in its most authentic form, but as per *jiirnodharana*, the spirit of the building needs to be considered and not just the material form. There is also the concept of *punahsthapan*. As stated by Kawathekar, while "the *punahsthapan* involved the restoration of the built as per the established knowledge systems, dealing with the physical aspects of the structure, *Jiirnodharana* dealt with physical as well as metaphysical aspects of the heritage" (Kawathekar, 2020: 18). It is not the historic building that is considered worthy of restoration, but the process of its creation that gets repeated through *jiirnodharana*, so that the principles of traditional construction and associated *Kalpa* (rituals) remain immortal (Tom, 2013: 37). Conservation practice, therefore, strives to protect the authenticity of the spirit, form, and design, more than material. As per the *Mayamata*,[1] the Indian temples were to be renovated every twelve years. The treatise mentions that renovations should proceed "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" (Dagens, 2017: 335). This concept of complete dismantling and reconstruction using new wood is also part of the Japanese tradition where authenticity is "essentially attached to function, subsidiary to form, and in the act of reconstruction which employs traditional skills but by no means to material" (Labadi, 2010: 71).

The disconnect between the tangible and the intangible

Having appreciated the multifaceted characteristics of heritage understood through the Hindu philosophical perspective, let's look at some examples to understand the key challenges that confront this heritage in the present context.

Hindus revere the two holy rivers, Ganga and Yamuna located in the northern part of India. The centuries-old spiritual connection has contributed to the development of rich civilization. The sacred cultural landscape of Vrajbhumi associated with many stories of the childhood of Lord Krishna has evolved around the Yamuna river (Mason, 2009). Such landscapes were and continue to be of extraordinary architectural and ecological significance and have been maintained over time to the present date. However, the current

[1] *Mayamata*, an ancient treatise believed to have been written in the 5th century, of South Indian origin discusses in detail the architecture and iconography of the southern (Drāviḍa) temples.

state of the rivers presents a dismal picture. Most of the rituals and beliefs that are manifestations of the hidden and invisible dimensions of heritage remain as strong as ever or have even become more elaborate over time. However, the water of the rivers, which is indeed the visible aspect of heritage, is polluted to dangerous proportions since all kinds of the waste get dumped in these rivers. It seems that the rivers have been slowly but consistently disowned by their communities (Jigyasu, 2005).

Firstly, this shows that the gap between the visible and the hidden and invisible dimensions has substantially increased. Secondly, there is an increasing gap between the views of heritage professionals and the local communities, who are the true bearers of heritage. Thirdly, there is a lack of clarity about the division between 'modern' and 'traditional'. While 'modern' is largely perceived as the development of backward traditional communities, the 'traditional' is associated with either outdated knowledge or romanticized and nostalgic. On a broader level, our technological advancement seems to detach us from our inner selves (Malik, 1990; 1995). We are so driven by superficial perceptions that we don't take enough time for deeper reflection and comprehension. We no longer make an effort to develop an insight but tend to look outwards, overlooking internal strengths and contradictions. The above is reflected in our definition of disaster and efforts to reduce disaster risks. Although a disaster may be triggered by a catastrophic natural hazard, the slow and progressive factors are making us, humans, not only physically but, more importantly, psychologically more vulnerable than ever before. We are living in an age of 'confused' generations, which are neither able to capitalize on the modern nor capable of utilising old knowledge systems that have been built over time through trial and error and appear to have lost their relevance.

Compartmentalization of Knowledge

As stated by Jigyasu, heritage is a product of traditional or indigenous knowledge systems, which are "typically developed locally, are under local control and use low levels of technology" (Jigyasu, 2013: 6). Many are also disorganized in a bureaucratic sense. Traditional performing arts, indigenous groups, deliberate instruction (child rearing, traditional schooling, and apprenticeship), and unstructured channels like conversations at markets and in the fields, written and memorised records, and direct observation are the primary means of disseminating this knowledge. This demonstrates that traditional or indigenous knowledge encompasses the entire cultural context. Paul Sillitoe describes this knowledge as by definition interdisciplinary, where local communities perceive and manage their environment as a whole system (Sillitoe, 2006: 6). Moreover, it is based on experience characterised by trials and errors and is practical and culturally rooted, and thus holistic in its scope.

Augmentation of knowledge has led to the development of new techniques with some surviving while others going extinct or lost. Hence it is critical to question the peculiarity of the present era that led to the compartmentalisation of our existing knowledge and practices into traditional and modern. The reason for this marking is the prejudice accompanying the notion of 'traditional'. Progress is a process that transpires gradually, and it is highly possible that all spheres of any endeavours may not experience developments at the same time. But at times, this possibility of gradual transition is frustrating only due to the presumption that all 'traditional' is not worth developing. Also as Sengupta adds that till the recent past, human knowledge and productive activities have been divided into traditional and modern, with the one called 'traditional' has been condemned even before the trial (Sengupta, 2007: 22).

Confronting the colonial legacy

Heritage conservation as a formal institution was begun in India in 1861 with the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) by the British colonial government. This was preceded by an institution, the Asiatic Society of Bengal (currently named Asiatic Society), founded in 1784. This institution was focused on the textual sources of India's history

and culture. It paved the way for British colonial interest in Indian archaeology and heritage preservation while also highlighting the depth and richness of Indian history. With Alexander Cunningham, an engineer serving as the first Director General, the ASI's mandate used a very broad definition of archaeology encompassing multiple forms of custodianship of cultural heritage in the built environment. This was the time when the antiquarian remains were deemed worthy of preservation, as per the romantic sensibility and 18th-century fascination of the west for the ruins. To control the trafficking of antiquities and over-excavation, the early 20th century was focused on the preservation of ancient monuments and the protection of objects of archaeological, historical, and artistic interest (Kawathekar, 2020: 17).

Due to our colonial legacy, heritage conservation in India has largely been a state enterprise and has continued the colonial legacy in preserving monumental buildings. The monument in the archaeological park, a product of a colonial effort to preserve India's rich heritage, does not capture the breadth and vitality of living traditions and landscapes that embody them. The dissonance between colonial and indigenous ways of seeing the past and heritage necessitates going beyond the fenced-off monument.

Redefining heritage conservation

As Chapagain (2013) states, people are the key patrons behind everything that happens, including the creation, maintenance, and modification of their heritage. Today the heritage discourses have shifted from expert-driven queries of how to conserve to 'why conserve?' and then to 'for whom to conserve?' (Luxen, 2004: 5). This is all about living heritage, that which is created, maintained, and modified by people. This can also mean that we need to (re)think of heritage as a living 'thing' –just like people– *which will* require us to give up some of our preconceived notions of heritage and what we, as heritage professionals, are typically trained to do (Chapagain, 2013: 1). "Heritage is Everywhere", as Lowenthal (2003: xiii) rightly points out, and heritage gets its meaning when it goes through a cultural process (Smith, 2006: 3). Living Heritage is characterized by 'continuity', which includes continuity of original function or the purpose for which they were originally meant, continuity of cultural practices, and also that of the local community with all its connections to the tangible dimensions of heritage (Poulios, 2012: 21).

When seen this way, heritage is no longer only to be protected from threats to which it is exposed, it needs to be actively used as an anchor that drives collective social action and builds the resilience of communities. This necessitates going beyond merely making heritage an artificial construct and understanding and enduring it as a lived reality that is an eternal part of human existence.

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