TRADITIONAL VALUES AND ARCHITECTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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Most of the settlements in India have a rich historic past. They have survived the diverse and complex pressures created by the socio-economic, commercial, industrial and other growth oriented activities of the last century. Most of them still continue to grow, but the consequences of this difficult survival have been apparent in its present conditions. Unless the process of decay of the cultural heritage, which has increased rapidly in the last 5-7 decades, is arrested, not only will the settlements lose their ecological richness and aesthetic beauty, but also the roots on which the continuity and growth of its rich cultural heritage depend. Immediate steps are required through collective responsibilities in the process of its conservation, to prevent the eventual disappearance of the rich cultural heritage of this country.

Centuries of existence under the changing influences has, on the one hand, given an enormous richness to India's heritage, while on the other hand, the complexities of such influences have imposed severe limitations on the planning and the growth of the settlements, with their ever growing infrastructural needs. This dichotomy raises the questions, "why conserve, and what constitutes the roots of such heritage". The answers obviously lie somewhere in the heritage itself. Cultural heritage of any society is, not only its major link with the past and shows the process of its development, but also represents a record of most of the historic attempts, achievements and failures. It is so deeply rooted in the lives of the people that, whether they are aware of it or not, it gives them a sense of belonging, whilst constantly influencing the conduct of their lives. The continuity of the cultural heritage also has the potential to become a major reference point, providing the basis as well as the motivation for future development of any settlement.

THE EXPOSURE

About a decade ago, the authors had the opportunity, through an offer by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) [1] to evolve policies for the conservation of Udaipur city to expose themselves and their colleagues to a treasure hitherto not experienced by them from a completely different perspective.

Their professional education and earlier exposure had barely scratched the surface of the depth of the architecture of Rajasthan. The process of understanding its complexities, richness and the causes of its present conditions, through frequent and patient walks in the walled city of Udaipur, was not only informative and educative, but also helped them realize a true direction in their architectural practice. It also became a major turning point in their professional lives.

Following the Udaipur experience, the exposure widened with the involvement in the conservation of Amber town, and its environs, Amber Palace and its gardens, Jaigadh and Nahargadh, near Jaipur city; and with their professional works in Udaipur, Jaisalmer, Jaipur, Bikaner, Gajner and some of the other cities of Rajasthan.

On a closer look at the cities and towns of Rajasthan, the elements, seemingly common to all settlements, begin to reveal their finer differences, nuances and the resultant contextualization of the built environment in the region. The relationships, between the building materials, applied technologies, craftsmanship skills of the region and, the political, socio-economic, religious and cultural fabric of the society, begin to become more transparent. It also gives a greater clarity in the understanding of the traditional decision making processes, the range of issues it encompasses, as well as the reference points of its continuing priorities.

Any historic settlement, irrespective of its scale, offers an extremely wide range of examples of the thought processes and priorities, whether at a macro or micro level, evolved over centuries. It is as if the most meticulously documented book of knowledge is made available to any visitor who wants to learn from it. One can walk through this vast treasure
of knowledge, observing, understanding, digesting and imbibing the thought processes behind these rich creations which have survived centuries of continuously changing pressures of the existence of man and society.

What is even more striking is the simplicity of the solutions, to many intricate problems, and the continuing relevance of it even in today's context. The option, to all those who visit this live documentation of the traditional decision making processes, is wide open to imbibe and implement its lessons in their present lives, works and teachings. And yet, one finds very few takers who wish to extend themselves beyond the superficial understandings of the planning and urban design principles, the scale and proportions of its street facades, and organizations of rooms around the courtyards.

It is true, that deeper enquiry for such an education necessitates a closer look at the larger area of the settlement, covering numerous buildings of varying types, scale and style, whereas the opportunity for the implementation of the learning and lessons is available to the presently practicing professionals only in isolated buildings. Added to that is the concept of the compressed time in the execution of any contemporary work. This hardly allows a detailed study of the traditional principles of design and the decision making processes at all levels. The obvious outcome is the often insensitive transplant of motifs from history, on to the buildings built with contemporary technologies. The resultant product is rarely an example of the desired continuity, or of a change that can work as a role model, for the future developments.

THE ISSUES
Much of the exchange, on the subject of the cultural heritage, its relevance in the contemporary society, the need for its conservation and its conflicts with the forces of change, whether casual, academic or scholastic, seems to bypass the understanding of the values, priorities and the resultant thought processes of our builders, which can help dilute the conflicting parameters and focus on the appropriate prioritization, even in the present context.

The authors believe, and have demonstrated through their own practice, that conservation and development do not necessarily have contradictory objectives; nor do the processes of continuity and change, or the use of traditional and contemporary technologies; provided that the underlying principles, priorities and balancing acts in the decision making processes are correctly understood.

Any decision represents a series of balancing acts between the issues relevant to the design and the desired prioritization, based on the reference points inherent in the objectives of the design, as well as the contexts of such scenarios. Some of these, as they have been understood by the authors, are covered here in their essence.

Vision :
Every settlement that has grown to be a town, no matter how small, is the result of the vision of its rulers or leaders, who recognized their responsibilities as extending far beyond their own generation, in terms of the impact of their decisions. Visionary thinking was never restricted by the limitations of the capabilities, but was demonstrative of the aspirations which stretched the capabilities to their extended limits.   The water in the lakes of Udaipur was trapped with a ½ km long wall, for a population not exceeding 10,000, more than four centuries ago.

Subsequent additions of other lakes, with a foolproof system to prevent flooding of any part of the settlement, shows the vision of the leader, far beyond the generation for which it was built. It is a testimony to this vision that the lakes, even today, are a source of water supply to a city of more than 400,000 people with an annual floating population exceeding 600,000. It is also a sad reflection on part of the current decision makers that no lakes have been added in the region since independence, despite the suitable terrain and the frequent water shortages.

Freedom and Responsibilities:
Historically, the notion of freedom was always tied with the notion of responsibility. One did not exist in the absence of the other, at any scale of decision making. The presence of a vision with a sense of responsibilities can be seen in any historic settlement even today, quite in contrast with the cities and their growth in the last century, which are marked by the lack of it.

Also significant was the concept of collective responsibility in any decision making. With the increasing importance of the individual in the last century, variety in architecture has been integral to the development of the urban fabric. Present designers, at all levels, are stretching the limits of their creativity as well as the imagination to come up with solutions which are unique and stand out, within its context. The historic architecture, with its congruent look, despite the span of its development over the centuries, even today, stands testimony to the principles of collective responsibilities as practiced by the master builders, without sacrificing either their freedom for creativity or their responsibility to the context.

Creativity with Common Sense:

The most common denominator of the traditional decision making processes appears to be the sieve of commonsense. One hardly comes across a situation where elements of any historic monument, or for that matter any other building, defies commonsense application. The end product, at any scale, demonstrates a balance between the availability of resources and their judicious consumption, between the potential of the material and its limitations, between the commonsense application and the aesthetic sensitivity. Designs of the buildings emerged out of a traditional order established by the ancient scriptures, the contents of which were common knowledge to all craftsmen. And yet, unlike today, there were always opportunities for creative inputs at all levels of implementation. A craftsman working on a column was rarely given a specific image of the Lotus flower to be carved on the column. He had the freedom to creatively carve out the Lotus flowers on all faces of the column, which vary from each other, but remained within the boundaries established by the higher order in the size, scale and the proportions of the column. The Jain Temple Complex at Ranakpur has 1044 pillars of which no two pillars are alike, and yet they do not deviate from the overall order of the scale, proportions, or the need for congruence.

Continuity and Growth:

An often discussed and debated issue among the current professionals, of "what constitutes continuity" and "how to bring about change", has been dealt with by the master builders very smoothly, in their stride, probably because they saw it as an issue of continuity and growth, rather than change. In any settlement, it is easy to experience the delineation between the historic continuity of many centuries, and the incongruent change forced by the pace of development, as well as the attitude of the professionals, in the past half a century. The balancing act between "A continuity with the past, without fossilizing it, and a change for the future, without making that change incongruent with its contextual surroundings" [2], seems to have been performed admirably well, probably because continuity was seen as the collective responsibility of the designers, or because the personalities of the designers were not attempted to be reflected in the design, nor were the changes attempted to stand apart conspicuously from their context. The complexities arising from the pace of development of the past century and the political scenario are also the major causes for the absence of the notion of collective responsibility.

Nevertheless, anywhere in the region, a walk through the historic areas, compared to the recent developments, is a far more pleasant, aesthetic experience.

Problem Solving and Creativity:

Throughout history, built environment has been a response to the changing human needs, which are complex and dynamic, demanding a deeper understanding of its resources, constraints and the problem itself. Its inherent contradictions need to be addressed and resolved through a series of balanced decisions. Quite often, and particularly in the present scenario, these contradictions as well as problems are seen as severe constraints to the creativity and the creative inputs of the designers.

Observations of situations in the traditional settlements demonstrate that the end product has often been a creative solution to a real problem, showing a better understanding of the problem in the long term perspective. It has survived for centuries and is still relevant as a solution to similar problems.   The range of such problem solving responses also reveal, that application of creativity was with a reference point which, often was a well defined problem. Efficient but simpler solutions almost always optimized the use of human, material, and financial resources.

In contrast, many of the contemporary solutions appear to be application of pre-conceived notions of solutions to not so well understood problems. Our settlements teach us that problem solving is not a constraint to the creativity of any individual, provided one explores the potentials offered by the situations to evolve an imaginative, and yet appropriate, solution.

Aesthetic Aspirations and Construction Technologies:
Aesthetic appearance in the present times, assume significant importance in almost all contemporary buildings, not that it was any less important in the traditional buildings. However, a major difference between the decision making processes of the two eras is that, in the current process, aesthetics is often the starting point of the design, and demands the construction technology to make the aesthetical aspirations happen.   The traditional processes seem to demonstrate that both ends need to respect each other, with the construction technology often being the starting point. Aesthetics, in addition to its own objectives, was also used to take the focus away from the limitations of the materials and the technology, through extremely creative interventions which, in the end, contributed significantly, to the overall aesthetic language of the buildings.   Such interventions were always within a broad but established order of aesthetics, which allowed variations, as well as options, for individual creative inputs, without necessarily reflecting the personality of its creator.

Seemingly similar motifs, icons and elements, on closer look, reveal minor but sensitive deviations in an order which made the historic buildings a far more interesting experience in comparison to the current variety-oriented experiments, without either a reference point, or an established aesthetic order.   The quality of timelessness represented by the traditional aesthetic order, which is not very difficult to follow, needs to be understood and applied to contemporary designs and decision making processes, for better balance between continuity and growth.

Crafts, Craftsmanship and Continuity:
Craftsmanship skills of India in many walks of life, and particularly of Rajasthan, need no introduction. The decorative craftsmanship of the region, in particular, has made inroads into many buildings in India as well as abroad as balconies, doorways, screens, furniture and other miscellaneous pieces. Consequently, the craftsmanship base in such skills has survived and even flourished over the years. However the

same cannot be said of the construction craftsmanship base, which has suffered primarily on account of the lack of its demand.

The construction craftsmanship of Rajasthan represents the knowledge and wisdom of centuries, which ranges from the selection of the type of stone, the manner of their use with the other materials, the detailing of their assembly to last centuries and the sequence of the constructions in the overall process. This rich and all encompassing knowledge, instrumental in making our heritage as rich as it is, is passed on from one generation to the other and represents the "Genetically Inherited Skills" [3]. Its continuity is through its use and not through any documentation, and the principles of its use can begin from something as simple as the selection of the appropriate stone piece for the specific area or junction, and extend to the highest levels of aesthetic decisions. The entire body of the knowledge, not only of only the skills, is in danger of being extinct, primarily because of the decreasing demand for its use, arising out of lack of familiarity and low comfort levels in using them amongst the current professionals.

Whilst it is necessary to concentrate the efforts, energies and resources in the preserving and conserving the large body of the historic monuments, it is also equally, or maybe more, essential to invest them in the conservation of the craft itself, by increasing the demand for it. For the crafts to survive, it becomes the responsibility of the Indian designers to maximize the use of the local crafts and the craftsmanship in all their works so as to increase the demand for the Genetically Inherited Skills and provide them with sustained employment in its use. This is likely to ensure that their offspring do not seek other means of earning their livelihood when they have this rich body of knowledge within themselves.

SUMMARY
The basic understanding of the traditional values and the resultant decisions and end-products, can be broadly summarized as follows:
- Maximum deterioration of the cultural heritage has occurred in the 20th century, because of a change in the value system of the society which associated "progress" with rejection of anything connected with the past.
- Most traditional buildings are very respectful of the land and the surroundings they are set in, and have proven to be much more durable than the contemporary counterparts.
- The traditional craftsmen are the principal carriers of the body of the skills and the knowledge required to use the traditional materials & technologies.
- Contrary to the general impression, they are still available, but there are not enough owners/designers generating demand for their skills.
- The traditional design and construction processes offered opportunities for creative inputs at all levels of implementation, and were not restricted to the design studios of the designers' offices.
- Simple looking, time tested solutions are better in the long term, than the variety oriented experiments, without innovative approaches.

- New buildings in historic areas must attempt to balance between the continuity with the past, without fossilizing it, and a change for the future, without it being incongruent to its contextual surrounding.
- Responsible architecture evolves by contextualising the design in all respects.
- The strength of Indian Architecture lies in the anonymity of its designer.

Two decades of exposure of the authors in Gujarat and Rajasthan has hardly scratched the surface of what the heritage of built environment has to offer. So many doors have opened up to so much of learning. The process of exposure, understanding and application in the present context is limitless.

NOTES

1. Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) is a public voluntary organization which was established in 1983 and is responsible for spearheading the Conservation Movement through its more than 175 Chapters, across the country.

2. The authors use this as a "sieve" in all their design decisions for their professional work in historic settlements.

3. A term used by the authors to differentiate between the craftsmen possessing the knowledge through the traditional process, from those who have acquired it through the contemporary systems.