

Architectural Anthropology in the Study of Traditional Indian Architecture

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Abstract—India is in the stage of rapid industrialization and modernization. Adapting to the international architectural practices, the country's urban landscape has gained a complete face-lift over the years. In this context, when India boasts of a rich traditional built heritage it seems unfair of the current professional practices to go about the design process with such neglect of the past. There is a need and urge for the inclusion of new critical perspectives of design by inclusion of understanding the social and cultural importance of built spaces through an anthropological approach to its study as there is a rapid depletion rate and obsolescence of the vernacular structures in the country. This paper investigates into the significance of architectural anthropology in the Indian context as well as its application in the regional contexts. Indian architecture both expresses and prescribes culture as reflections of social, political and financial aspects of a region and this parameter will influence contemporary and future understandings the built design. As such, anthropology may through its theories, approaches and methods provide comprehension into the cultural aspects that influence built forms, both in the past and in the present. A multi dimensional analytical framework could be developed for studies of architecture through anthropology in which the cultural influences and relevance of architectural expressions can be explored.

Keywords: Architectural anthropology, Culture, Tradition, Built form, India

1. INTRODUCTION

The built environment, in which we live as humans, is a subject of high interest and research that affects society and the way we live. The built landscape deeply structures our lives in and around them since time immemorial. However, architecture, as it is designed and built today in our modern-urban context, is often insensitive to various factors like social, cultural, economic, material, symbolic, ideological, etc. as determinants of built form development to the communities. Modern design process is greatly influenced by the standard history but instead should be conditioned and regulated by the social and cultural context. Hence these changes in the approach of built form design in the present modern context, creates differences in way of life, social culture and architecture. The wider human condition is often neglected in various projects of urban or domestic projects in India, and not integrated with the intangibles regional aspects of that place

and community. Human is represented as a user for whom the standardised functional need is seen as the design solution. In this context, when India boasts of a rich traditional built heritage it seems unfair of the current professional practices to go about the design process with such neglect of the past. Consequently, architectural anthropology maintains that horizons of analysis of built form have to be broadened, integrating it into anthropological parameters, including socio-cultural, political and environmental considerations.

Architecture and Anthropology have a compliant relationship, which respectively represent the analytical and the creative aspects of built spaces. Anthropology is the study of people—their origins, their development, and contemporary variations, wherever and whenever they have been found (Ferraro & Andreatta, 2014). And through its study there should be a way to establish a sequence of priorities between space and culture which is essential in the meaningful analysis of the immense built heritage of India. Traditional architecture as Powel Elior defines is a type of architecture which grows from inside the societies and accommodates itself with social, climate and technological situations over time and improves and is harmonious with the values, economy and life styles of its culture. And hence Indian architectural wealth demands for the inclusion of new critical perspectives by inclusion of understanding the social and cultural importance of built spaces through an anthropological approach to its study as there is a rapid depletion rate and obsolescence of the vernacular structures in the country. Among the most urgent and delicate aspects to which anthropo-architecture must respond is that of the diversity of dwelling forms and types in the country, even at the smallest regional scale in the various states.

2. IMPORTANCE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

India is in the stage of rapid industrialization and modernization. Adapting to the international architectural practices, the country's urban landscape has gained a complete face-lift over the years. Many new cities have taken shape along with the strong and pervasive drive of urbanization. Many new towns and cities were planned and designed and

some existing urban centres renovated for expansion and development, with much more improved infrastructure and transport systems. The building scenario has also made a bouncing leap with multiple high-rise buildings springing as part of the digital and construction boom in the country. The urban housing landscape has been taken over by the multi development housing schemes, adding new perspectives to the design domain. As a country of diversified natural conditions with the huge expanse of land and many regional states, architectural built forms, lifestyles of the people as well as socio-economic conditions are significant various between each other; and this inherent architectural heritage seems lost in the urbanization process. This fast modernization and development has issues of non-sustainability, and commercialization and uncharacteristic or insensitive architectural trends. Being insensitive to the design process is majorly a concern on the sheer neglect on socio-cultural aspects of the people of the region for which buildings are designed. Added to that, environmental pollution is also an alarming concern where water bodies, agricultural land etc that were once part of the way of life of the people are all filled and levelled to provide land for large scale developments. Open spaces and parks are also narrowing down. These adverse environmental issues affecting people and their habitats across the entire world have given way to new directions and approaches to design in the building industry – Sustainable development. India too has adapted to the new emerging trends in sustainable and green building design. However somewhere the finer aspects of life in the form of culture and traditions of the rich built heritage of the land seems to be un-noticed and not got the due investigation it requires to carry forward the lessons from the past into the future.

Architecture has always been an important way for thoroughly portray reflections of the culture of the people and its place. Be it the monuments like the Taj Mahal or the traditional dwellings like the Toda house, each built form reflects deeply the story of that time, and how the people of that time wanted to convey their culture and way of life to the future or the next generations. It also carries forward a knowledge transfer of the built traditions that is handed down to future generations. “Culture is not composed of elements which can be disassembled and re-composed: culture has to be lived, cultures mature and sediment slowly as they become fused into the context and continuity of tradition” (Pallasmaa, 2007). And Indian culture, often is labelled as an amalgamation of several various cultures, spanning across the Indian subcontinent and has been influenced and moulded by a history that is several thousand years old (Mohammada, 2007). So it is very crucial to investigate the various aspects of Indian culture through the medium of built form analysis, as there is a rapid decline in the existence of these forms as well as the knowledge transfer. Unravelling the finer principles of form and space, ornament, imagery and symbolism is essential, thereby incorporate sensitive and manifest a newer

meaningful life into the built forms of modern India. Anthropological studies will enable a holistic analysis with help in achieving an overall and synthesised view of society and culture, through architecture, to create a more liveable built society in the future.

Certain fundamental aspects relating to the functional and social use of space, customs and rituals, ways of living, religious practices etc are the aspects that need an anthropological approach of study. In India, with a multitude of cultures, there is a large scope for research through sociological and anthropological in design and planning. Drawing on the philosophy of anthropological research, this method ‘has enabled designers to gain insights into users’ activities in daily life but also keep up with the fast paced needs of commercial business practice’ and it ‘enables designers to gain access to people’s worlds and help them to understand their situation’ (Bichard & Gheerawo, 2011). The anthropological method offers a rich form of dialogue to the architectural profession and ‘the transient and ephemeral way in which artefacts, people, ambiances are encountered’ (Iacucci & Wagner, 2003).

3. LINK BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND ANTHROPOLOGY

The relationship between architecture and anthropology is that of dependency, similarity and mutual support, as in architecture, ethnography is a widely used tool of research which is also the key method of anthropology. In anthropology, ethnography is a well-established method of data collection through qualitative methods such as participant interviews and interviews. Ethnography can be used in architecture as a method of observation, data collection and visual/ graphic or statistical representation; a way of interacting with, documenting and responding to a specific people, time, place and circumstance (McGowan, 2011). Establishing a dynamic relationship between the researcher and the people of the region under study is critical here, to perceive and understand their way of life. It is generally small-scale and focuses on rich, deep data rather than broad, quantifiable facts, and it is up to the ethnographer’s discretion whether or not to consider historical and/or macro factors and engage in a critical cultural/political discourse (O’Reilly, 2009). Providing descriptive, rather than prescriptive, accounts, the anthropologist takes a cultural relativistic approach, attempting to understand the type of socio-cognitive interactions that take place within everyday life from the point of the people studies (Askland, Awad, Chambers & Chapman, 2014).

Whereas anthropology seeks to understand what it means to be a person belonging to a particular region, architecture provides conditions for being that person and responds to the condition. Various researches are happening across the world, to find how the built environment, support and be part of socio-cultural ways of life of the peoples. And most of the vast

sources of ethnographic research illustrate how architectural built forms and their various configurations represent sustained and significant repositories of knowledge and cultural meaning (McWilliams, 2005). As a discipline, anthropology is often perceived as a 'key to Culture, charged with operationalizing knowledge about culture and represents an instrument, a stepping stone, the means by which to mobilize Culture' (Reddy, 2008).

Architects need to understand those elements of culture that drive or impede cross-cultural collaboration. Interdisciplinary research signifies that place identity arises in a dialectic involving both the qualities of places and their characteristics and relations of people to their places (Steele, 1981). According to Rapoport, built forms are primarily influenced by socio-cultural factors modified by architectural responses both to climatic conditions and to limitations of materials and methods. This explains why the houses of the Naga tribe are entirely different from the Toda houses in the Nilgiris, as the regional context varies; their socio-cultural practices are also changing with climate and materials available.

4. APPLICATION OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY IN THE INDIAN BUILT FORMS.

Anthropological analysis offers a comprehensive approach in research to architecture. Like vernacular architecture, 'it favours completeness, recognizes diversity and seeks ways to [...] tell better versions of the human story' (Glassie, 2000). Standardization of built form, the erosion of distinct rural and regional landscapes, and geographic mobility are thought to devitalize physically encoded meanings of the landscape, thus weakening personal identification with locale (Buttimer 1980; Klapp 1969; Relph 1976). Be it the metro cities like Mumbai or Chennai, or the smaller cities like Jaipur, Trivandrum etc the regional built forms are rapidly being pulled down to construct the modern structures. Each of these regions has a rich building tradition which is slowly becoming obsolete. Anthropology seeks an emic understanding; that is, an understanding of the people studied on their situation and terms (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). On this note if as we analyse some of the Indian dwellings, interesting facts on their socio cultural practices, family structure, rituals etc come to light. The Wada houses of Mumbai or Maharashtra state was typically a large building of two or more storey with groups of rooms arranged around open courtyards, which evolved under the reign of Peshwas. The design of the Wada was not influenced much by the climatic factors rather it was has impacts more by the social and cultural factors, where the most significant features was the zoning of public, private and semi-private spaces. Whereas the Chettinadu courtyard houses in Tamil Nadu was planned keeping their cultural context on focus. When most of the traditions in India never had a dominating female culture, these houses depicted a unique social life, where at the apex of the family household, is the "Aachi" or the senior most woman of the house who managed the finances and the entire household matters. Rather

than having spaces with privacy for women in the household they had smaller courtyards that allowed women to socialize. There was also an exclusive woman domain in the houses, where they could go about their domestic work etc. So there was a culture of upholding the needs and comfort of the woman member in the Chettinadu built houses. There is a need for understanding these built forms on a cross cultural approach to investigate how anthropology can find deeper meanings in these dwellings. Anthropologists have been interested in the influential associations that link people to place, the way the rooms, buildings and land are endowed with emotional meaning, and the aspects of individual identity that have a desire for, memory of, and emotional attachment to, a physical setting (Hochschild, 2010). Thus architectural research links anthropological concepts of culture and social practices of a community or a region which makes it crucial to adopt these methods for a critical study of Indian built forms.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the Indian context necessitates connecting architecture and anthropology, it is important to note that, though both the disciplines support each other in motive, theory and method of work, their integration and application is subject to a lot of challenges. A major setback that would come along when an anthropological approach is introduced in a study is the fact that both the investigation into culture and ethnographic observations and field work, data analysis are all very time consuming. In India there are various organizations working towards the protection of the dwelling forms of the region. However on the majority scale, much of the structures are being pulled down, for the need to build modern structures, which hardly have any connection with the cultural past of the traditional dwellings that once stood in their place. Typically an anthropology researcher to get involved into the research work, conduct fieldwork and produce huge sets of data, consisting of interview transcripts, field notes, observations, reflections, photographs, video recordings, secondary data will consume an enormous amount of time. So the challenge for architects would be to conduct such extensive studies and analyze and develop a framework to include the neglected parameter into the design of contemporary built forms.

This initiative is necessary as the demolition and destruction of many of these traditional built forms seems almost inevitable for various reasons like lack of financial funds to maintain them or joint ownership or dismantling for purposes of sale of some of the artistic features of the buildings or the damage to the structure in itself. There is every possibility that these invaluable evidences of a way of life, of an extraordinary age in history could be erased forever. Though in some parts of India like Chettinadu the government is taking initiatives to safeguard the courtyard houses by joining in with the UNESCO Asia's "heritage passport" programme, there are other specific locations where there is immense threat to the built heritage; like in Kerala where the Ezhumavil Ilam, a prominent Naalukettu house was demolished a few years back.

So it is time initiatives are made for understanding the worth of these built forms and take lessons from the past to put meaning into the present and future.

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