

RETHINKING HERITAGE

The Case of Heritage Conservation in Mumbai

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Abstract. In the context of Mumbai's Heritage Movement, the paper makes three arguments on relationship between historiography, heritage discourse and conservation. Firstly, it argues that conventional historiography shapes heritage discourse where heritage remains an elite aesthetic imposition and marginalizes several other stakeholders in the city's history. Secondly, a case is made for an alternative historiography based on modes of production, which is able to elaborate the definitions of heritage. Lastly, the strategy of preservation and conservation is under interrogation, where the paper argues for alternative strategies to be adopted for dealing with the heritage sites.

The paper examines the relationship between historiography, heritage discourse and conservation in the context of the Mumbai's Heritage Movement. It is based on the contention that historiography not only shapes the manner in which definitions of heritage get formed, but also the way the intervention strategy is imagined.

1. Manufactured Heritage

One of the first tasks in this paper is to explore the link between historiography and the discourse of heritage. In the Indian context, it is not difficult to presume this link, especially when the champions of heritage repeatedly use history of the "glorious past" as the primary and the only defining framework for valuing something as heritage.

"They (*the old buildings*) are very much a part of our communities even today; and have much to teach us about our glorious past" (Deobhakta, 1992).

"The British left behind many valuable legacies, like language, social customs, administrative and judicial systems... .. their architecture, which boasts of imperial splendour, is an essential part of Bombay's glorious past" (Kanga, 1994).

"Prior to its colonisation by the British, the glorious ancient culture of India dominated primarily by the Hindus, Buddhists and then the Mohammedans, was always in the process of evolution. Although on the political face it shows the usual tussle, on the cultural side, one sees a process of assimilation" (Dengle, 1992).

Kanga's celebration and Dengle's scepticism of the same colonial rule raises important questions of whose past and which past is being addressed. While serious academic history has regularly questioned this "glorious past" (Thapar, 1966 Kosambi, 1975), architectural historians still seem to make bizarre assumptions on historical narratives. It seems from such texts, that for identification of architectural heritage, the questions of history do not matter. Let us then see exactly what matters for architectural heritage. We would focus on the heritage movement in Mumbai to analyse what kind of historiography goes into manufacturing heritage as a consciousness of people.

In writing Mumbai's history, the State Gazetteer discusses chronological events in rigid classifications of the *Ancient, Medieval, Mohammedan, Colonial and Modern* eras (Chaudhari, 1986). These classifications not only exist in the history writing exercises of the country (Mujumdar, Raychaudhuri, and Datta 1978) but also have become the backbone of architectural histories (Brown, 1956 Tadgell, 1990). When architectural history adopts such a classification, a new tool of analysis is born: "*the style*". Buildings become representatives of a "period" and could be identified by how they look. Or in other words: "*In what Style?*" becomes the most important architectural history question. Heritage advocates seem to inherit an obsessive tendency for classifying buildings into styles often reinforcing them with powerful adjectives.

"The stretch of Dr. D. N. Road is dotted with finest Victorian and Edwardian architectural edifices. Ranging from Venetian Neo-Gothic style of the Victoria Terminus; the Indo-Saracenic expression of the Municipal Headquarters; Neo-Classical features of the State Bank of Indore; the Mumbai Vernacular of Badri Mahal and the flamboyant Art Deco of the Citi Bank, a veritable open air exhibition of magnificent heritage buildings can be witnessed along this route" (Lambah, 2002).

A more ambitious history by Mehrotra and Dwivedi (1995) classifies historical evidences based on chronological physical development in the city. But more importantly, this seminal work undertakes the writing of history in a very different manner: it describes events and buildings, relating them to the other contexts of the city along with discussing the cultural and architectural merits.

"In 1735, Lawjee Nuserwanji, a Parsi foreman from the Company's shipyard at Surat, was invited to build ships and modernize the Bombay Shipyard. Lawjee's arrival with his family, marks the beginning of Bombay's ultimate transformation into one of the busiest seaports in Asia... The classic Georgian style Saint Andrews was completed in 1819. An elegant spire was added in 1823... ... Next, stood a large, palatial building with a lofty porch. Initially it served as the residence of Governor Hornby, and thereafter from 1770 to 1795, as Admiralty House, residence of Commander-in-Chief of the Indian fleet. The other important building on this street was the Secretariat or Writer's building" (Dwivedi and Mehrotra, 1995).

The work however foregrounds another important feature of history writing: the selective glorification of certain people and certain monumental buildings. It's attempts however to describe events and physical structures where data is inadequate results into gross generalisations.

"By the middle of the 18th century, more immigrants came to the Bombay region including Bhandaris from Choul, Vanjaras from the Ghat country, slaves from Madagascar, Bhatias, Baniyas and Paris and goldsmiths, ironsmiths and weavers from Gujrat. This influx was followed by a new wave of immigrants comprising potters and tile makers, kolis from across the harbour and kamathi construction workers Densely populated colonies developed at Bhuleshwar, Kalbadevi, the CP Tank area and Pydhoni, were Hindu immigrants from Gujrat, Kathiawar, Kutch and Marwar came and settled in sizable numbers" (Dwivedi and Mehrotra, 1995).

The work of Dwivedi and Mehrotra (1995) is a significant shift in writing the city's history and it lays the foundation for identification of heritage. The families of Lawjee Nuserwanji become city builders, and the buildings like the Saint Andrews, the Admiralty House and Writer's building become buildings that housed the city's history.

While this history associated with buildings is able to become the “collective memory of the city” (Dossal, 1994), it ignores millions of other contributions.

After subscribing to all the naivety, adjectives, bizarre assumptions, obsessive classification, selective glorification and gross generalisations in these histories, the heritage activists took another step of targeting new developments and rendering them as *abrupt/hazardous/insensitive/threatening* to the older environment.

“The elegant architecture of historic buildings has been defaced by incongruous air-conditioning units, poorly designed sign boards, additions of upper floors and changes to the original colour schemes and fenestration. The bustling arcades are further congested with a multitude of hawkers and street dwellers” (Lambah, 2002).

“(The Fort Area’s) highly structured physical diagram reinforced by magnificent buildings make it an incredible urban design example – especially as it is counter to the megalomaniac schemes (characterized by high rise buildings) at Nariman Point (and) Cuff Parade... (But) the transformations taking place in the Fort Precinct are dramatically altering its structure and image” (Nest and Mehrotra, 1994).

The high-rise buildings, the air-conditioning units and the hawkers all were problematic for the aesthetics subscribed by the heritage activists. With such ambiguously constructed values, supported by concocted histories, they were able to do one thing: manufacture heritage. Further they made another ambiguous move: they argued for the protection of this heritage. The reasons for this were often explained through gross simplifications or arrogant imperatives or even vague fears of loosing the past.

“(Conservation is essential) to maintain or create surroundings which enable individuals to locate their identity and derive security, despite abrupt and rapid social changes, historic continuity must be preserved in the environment... It is warranted essential by the need to retain (*heritage*) for the next generation” (Thapar, 1988)

“We have lost most of our earlier urban heritage. We are now in the process of loosing extremely rich medieval towns... Pressures of development are causing serious fractures in the historic fabric of Indian Cities” (Jain and Jain, 1992)

This romanticism for the past sees buildings out of their contexts. Colguhoun (1996), links this position of romanticism to the writing of history suggesting that such a “view of architecture is absolutist”. Colguhoun further articulates that in its concern to stress the uniqueness of each culture, this history overlooked the extent to which cultures are based on the ideas and principles of other cultures. The heritage activists were not only unable to see this relationship between cultures but also failed to realise that built environments are products of a context and the new context of the city has its own definition of urban form. A. G. K. Menon (1989) suspects the cultural orthodoxy of the heritage activists as being politically motivated especially in a time, which is “witnessing the rise of cultural fundamentalism and communalism”. Sangeet Sharma’s (1993) set of interviews with several intellectuals and politicians of Mumbai affirms Menon’s fear where everyone was ready to undertake the burden of saving the history of the city. The amount of support such romanticism could gather in the political realm is evident by the formation of the Heritage Committee and the Heritage Regulations under pressures from few intellectuals and NGOs in the city.

While the arguments spurred by nostalgia remain the most powerful and simultaneously the most ambiguous in explaining the need to conserve heritage, other arguments are more articulate on the matter. Cyrus Guzder (1993) traces the origins of the heritage conservation movement as an environmental movement. His account tends to suggest that heritage was a useful tool to promote an awareness that was necessary to save the city of haphazard development, which was threatening the physical health of the city, its infrastructure as well as the liveability. The other argument floated for heritage conservation is that it protects the traditional skills and work patterns (Dilawari, 1997). The argument is articulated well in the Kanga Committee report on Urban Heritage of Mumbai (1992): “in a poor country, the case of adaptive reuse was compelling... to retain the socio-economic character of traditional areas”.

Both the above arguments contend for a version of environmental and economic sustainability that is not contextual. The coming in of hawkers in arcades, and the rise of tall buildings are functions of the economy. The arguments for environmental sustainability have been under severe critical scrutiny in recent times (Vishwanathan, 2002) generally rendering them as elite preoccupation for a clean and green landscape without hawkers and slums. On the other hand, financial sustainability through forceful preservation is fundamentally erroneous. Buildings change because it is financially better for its stakeholders. So even if it is “cheaper” to restore a building than rebuilding it, it might be more “profitable” to make a new building. If we deliberate beyond financial sustainability to economic sustainability, the concern for protecting traditional skills and work patterns, stink of an elite preoccupation for making museums out of cultures. Moreover these concerns seem ignorant of the changing context which forces traditional manner of building buildings to undergo change and articulate itself to the new economic condition. Hence no matter what heritage activists claim to be contextual and regional, they seem to be the most a-contextual practitioners.

In this section I attempted to establish links between writing histories, formation of a heritage consciousness and intervention of conservation. In the context of Mumbai, I argue that the heritage discourse is ambiguously articulated through the historiography of selective glorification. This not only imposes a certain aesthetic condition for identification of heritage, but also the strategy for intervening gets lost into questions of originality and authenticity thereby articulating a singular approach of preservation. More seriously, this history and the subsequent heritage discourse marginalize several other local environments were the backbone of the city’s development.

2. Rethinking History

The earlier section located the problems of heritage discourse in historic theorisations that have been largely dominated by tendencies of selective glorification. A distinct shift from these tendencies could be seen in the works of Meera Kosambi (1986), which adopts a socio-ecological framework to write history of Bombay. Her analysis of socio-ecological patterns is done through elaborate surveys of the changes in landuse, ownership, demographic, ethnic and earning patterns, which brings her to a different description of architecture and urbanism as compared to our heritage activists.

“The multi-family dwelling houses were spread throughout the city, with concentrations in the Market, Dhobi Talao, Sion, and Mahim sections... The shops

which usually occupied the ground floors of these buildings, as well as the apartments on the upper floors, which were often dark and stuffy since the houses stood close together, but revealed the affluence of the owners and the inhabitants... The chawls, the poorest form of multi-family housing, consisted usually of single rooms (the approximate size being 100 square feet) or occasionally two-room units. For all the variety in their appearance, construction, and size, the sole object was housing, or “warehousing”, of large numbers of labourers as cheaply as possible. It was estimated that 70 percent of the working class population in 1921 lived in chawls. In 1917-18, it was found that approximately 97 percent of the working class households in Parel were living in single rooms. In 1921 at least 135 instances were registered where a single room was occupied by six families or more” (Kosambi, 1989).

Kosambi’s research does not claim to be a history of architecture or urbanism, but effectively sets a framework to understand built form. The framework she develops is based on high contextual analysis. Distance is maintained from any kind of glorification or stylistic classifications. In fact, the focus of understanding built form seems to be on the analysis of the “type” and its relations to the socio-economic conditions instead of a blind search for style. Or more simply, while the historians of contemporary heritage activists decide to talk about elite industrial families, city officials and senior military officials, Kosambi’s history seem to focus on mill workers, their conditions of living, and their contribution to the development of the city. For the purposes of identifying built heritage, then, this history is able to elaborate beyond classical colonial buildings to include labour housing, infrastructure and even older work based settlements like the fishing villages. The importance of this elaboration is the inclusion of more people who have contributed towards building the city rather than selectively glorifying some. There is a whole issue of ‘identity and empowerment’ hidden here. Rahul Shrivastava’s (2002) ‘neighbourhood project’ on involving youth of the labour community to write a new history theorises this empowering capacity of history. Shrivastava argues that being included in the history of a place gives tremendous sense of belonging. And this sense of identity is important specifically in the current conditions of extreme economic polarity overlapped with high ethnic fundamentalism.

In this section, I shall focus on the methodological shifts in writing alternative histories. While Kosambi (1989) develops a contextual spatio-cultural analysis and Shrivastava (2002) argues for local communities writing their own history, a third methodology developed much earlier by Damodar Kosambi (1975) becomes a backbone to understand Indian history from an alternative framework. Damodar Kosambi critiques the conventional writing of Indian history as being lost in myths and glorifications and attributes this to the unavailability of related data in literature, archaeology and anthropology. Showing a distinct Marxist leaning, this work defines history “as the presentation, in chronological order, of successive developments in the means and relations of production” to tell how people lived at any period (Kosambi, 1975). Damodar Kosambi’s work puts together a history of India as a function of the changing economy.

The above methodological shifts were adopted by the Kamla Raheja Institute for Architecture to develop a history of architecture and urbanism in Mumbai. The framework that was developed through studying various geographies of the city looked at history as changing modes of production, identifying shifts in the economy of the city and its effects on the built environment (Design Cell, 2000a, 2001). Environments

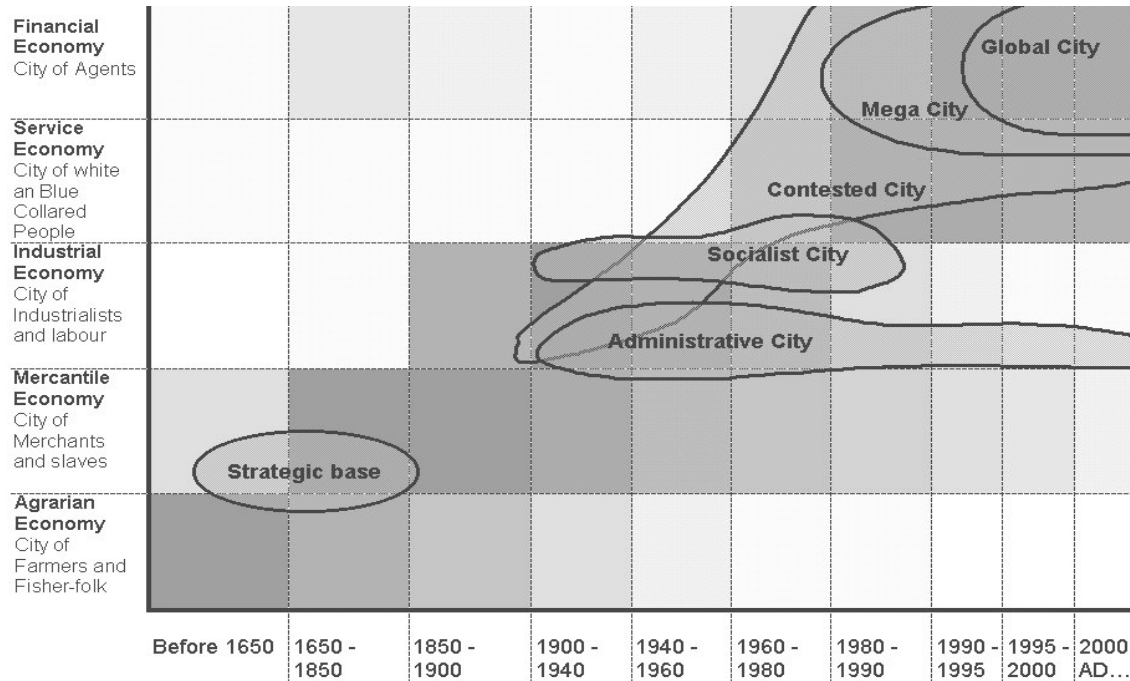


Figure 1: Framework for the Study of History of Mumbai developed by the Kamla Raheja Institute for Architecture (Source: Design Cell. KRVA)

of the city are considered here as a function of the changing economy. Five overlapping phases are identified in the growth of Mumbai's economy: the agrarian economy, the mercantile economy, the industrial economy, the service economy and the financial economy. Changes in City Landscape, State Policy, Built Form, Urban development practices and perceptions of the city are mapped with respect to changes in the economy. The focus of this history shifts from classifications of buildings into glorious eras to understanding economic landscapes, from identifying styles to identifying types and contexts and from narrating glorious events to documenting people's lifestyles. The framework elaborates identification of heritage from built-structures to include work conditions, living conditions and other city cultures. The most important shifts from the conventional discourse could be identified when the studies include labour housing, fishing villages, informal industries and slums as heritage of the city along with classical revivals and art deco buildings.



Figure 2: "Community Diary" Local History Developed by CRIT (Source: CRIT)

Another experiment by Collective Research Initiatives Trust (CRIT) goes ahead not only in academically articulating writing of history, but also involving communities in such writing. The formulation of a "community diary" by CRIT was one such

experiment where this history written by people and put together in form of a diary was used as a bargaining tool with the government for urban services (Shetty, 2003). This is a case demonstrating the use of history as an empowering tool.

3. Questioning Conservation

Expanding the scope of heritage identification and articulation of an alternative framework for history questions the idea of preserving and conserving heritage. The large question is if the slum, the dilapidated labour housing and the fishing village are the heritage of the city, then how do we strategise an intervention in such condition. I present here three cases of strategising interventions that were carried out based on the new heritage articulation. The first case is an instance of mobilising the community to take care of their own environments against the dominant interests of builders and politicians, the second is a case of developing a cooperative in the slum and the third an ongoing discussion on the city fringes where rapid urbanisation is threatening the livelihood of people.



Figure 3: Archival Material sourced by the Kamla Raheja Institute for manufacturing heritage consciousness (Source: Design Cell, KRVA)

The first project was undertaken by research and consultancy wing of the Kamla Raheja Institute for Architecture on the old residential district of Mumbai (Design Cell, 1998, 1999, 2000b). The infrastructure and service resources of these districts were under threat of getting appropriated by builders who were undertaking rampant development activities on account of high land prices and the proximity of the area to the business centre. Very few members of the local community were aware and

interested in the issue. The project began with an attempt at manufacturing a sense of heritage for the precinct. The study group undertook various researches and pulled out archival material to prove that the place was designed as per the garden city rules in Europe and is only one of its kinds in Asia. Presentations were made to a number of residents' groups to bring about a consciousness for heritage. The Group was successful in mobilising the community and putting pressure on the Government to declare the area as a "heritage precinct". A set of institutional and financial strategies was formulated to realign varied interests and resources to benefit the area. This project used heritage as a tactic to organise communities towards becoming active participants in the otherwise polarised processes of urban conservation in the city.

The second project was on Dharavi (the largest slum in Asia) by the students of Kamla Raheja Institute of Architecture (KRVA, 2003). Having developed a newer framework for history as discussed in the second section of this paper, the institute decided to focus on mapping work patterns in the slum and looking at history of the slum as the history of service labour in the city. The study found that this slum was much older than many



*Figure 4: Historic Leather Industry in Dharavi Slum
(Source: Design Cell, KRVI)*

of the colonial buildings in the city and harboured some of the oldest industries. This was definitely the city's heritage. The big question was however to articulate a method to deal with such a heritage especially in the context where large apartment blocks were being constructed to rehabilitate slum dwellers and clean the city of slums. The tangible form of heritage, which was the slum itself, was under threat, but protecting it would be absurd. The question the study-group asked itself was why the notion of heritage was important to the place. After extensive debate, the group articulated that it is the history of workers and their work, of small-scale industries that is the heritage of the place. The new apartment blocks were stripping the people of this traditionally developed work culture and their livelihood opportunities. Moreover, the labour intensive small industries of food, garment, leather and ceramics were under threat with the new cleanliness drive. The study group mapped labour conditions and service industry in detail towards identifying opportunities that could be taken advantage of. The slum was seen as an industry with the slum dwelling as a unit of production, and slum dweller as a unit of enterprise. The problem was that this industry has several middlemen appropriating the large profits created in these industries. As against the earlier efforts of the state to provide or facilitate the provision of housing for slum dwellers, this study proposed a formation of a cooperative so as to enhance the economy generating capabilities of the slum dwellers and expected this move to inturn address the other living conditions. This project formulated history so as to articulate heritage as a culture of work that requires protection and promotion.

The third project is undertaken by the Collective Research Initiatives Trust on the Vasai-Virar sub region, which is the northern periphery of Mumbai city. The region has an agrarian economy with a number of tribal, agricultural and fishing communities. The pressures of urbanisation has been immense in the recent years with the builders' lobby trying to appropriate maximum land and the state seeing the whole region as a dump-yard of Mumbai city. The development plan proposed by the state makes extensive reservations for cattle sheds, garbage dumps and slum rehabilitation schemes in the area. While we see that there is a tremendous external pressure for change, there is also an internal pressure: of the youth aspiring to discontinue the rural economy and settle in an urban landscape. The whole scenario seems to threaten tangible and intangible heritage of buildings, institutions, natural environment and local cultures. The Study Group adopted a position that local aspirations are not eternal, but are constructs that can be changed. Hence the myth of urban services in the minds of the youth had to be offset with providing high yielding economic opportunities along with good services. The Study group decided to file an objection with the government on the development plan on behalf of the community aiming to get environmental protection norms into the development plan. The Study Group further undertook a study of identifying heritage buildings and precincts in the area, so as to get them listed and protected and hence

target the builder lobby's aspiration of extensive development. Currently, the Study Group is working towards developing three village strategy plans as pilot projects for an agricultural village, a fishing village and a tribal settlement. The aim here is not only to make communities participate in the planning process, but to strengthen local capacity for economic development. The surveys here focus on capacity and opportunity. The project has several components with history writing as one of the main components. The history perhaps has to be written with several objectives: to identify heritage, to identify trajectories in socio-economic landscapes and also to make a case of neglect and appropriation of the area. The project again uses heritage as a tactic essentially to mobilise communities and argue with the government.

4. Conclusions: Alternative Histories And Multiple Heritage

The critique of historiography and the conventional heritage discourse in the first section along with the description of a alternative history in the second section perhaps is able to identify many environments in the city that are of significant heritage value, but, which seem to escape the conventional definitions of heritage. The first and second sections attribute this problem to the methods of historiography. In this section I shall briefly revisit the issue of conventional heritage to consider its validity in the city of Mumbai.

The relation between tourism and heritage has been frequently explored (Orbasli, 2003). Quite often, the heritage sought for the consumption of tourists is of the nature that our heritage activists were championing to save (the conventional heritage). A slum or labour housing has yet to become objects for aesthetic consumption (though recently there is a rising demand for this, specifically with some adventure tourists or anxious intellectuals). With demands of tourism for a certain aesthetic, it is natural that steps are taken to protect buildings in the city that would satisfy such demands. On the other hand, we also observe (through the quotations earlier) that there is a pride to claim a European legacy and an aspiration for living in a European environment without hawkers in the arcades and air-conditioners on building facades. Though conventional heritage remains not so original and authentic as it claims, such heritage satisfies some aspirations and brings some money into the city. And for these reasons, perhaps it is relevant to conserve such a heritage, unless, this conservation threatens livelihoods and rights of others who hold stakes in such heritage. Hence the conservation strategy requires a protection and rehabilitation not only for the buildings, but also for the people who hold stakes in it. Perhaps then, even coffee table histories discussing architectural styles could be rendered relevant as they create and substantiate the demand for the heritage aesthetic.

But as discussed in the third section, history and heritage not only have a value for consumption, but also for the purposes of identity and empowerment. It is for these values that alternative histories are required. Moreover the third section also describes the uses of branding environments as heritage where heritage becomes an important tool with immense power to mobilise communities, gather support and organise sectors. Hence I want to conclude with suggesting that while the mainstream heritage activists continue doing with what they have been doing, we need theorists and practitioners to undertake writings of many alternative histories which conceptualise multiple kinds of heritage towards empowering cultures and organising communities for protecting their environments and opportunities from being appropriated.

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