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"Colonial Built Environment in Guwahati and the issues of Identity"

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ABSTRACT

The study on colonial built environment in Guwahati and the issues of identity focuses on the colonial built heritage of the city of Guwahati, the principal city of the North East Indian state of Assam. The city was designed from the mid of the 19 th century to the midst of the 20 th century when India was under the control of the British Government. With the beginning of the British administration in Assam the city was designed with buildings which resembled the structures that were constructed in Great Britain and other English colonies. These styles when mixed with the local style of construction in Assam developed an indigenous hybridised pattern known as Assam Type houses. The material world that has come down the generation defines the identity of Guwahati even when the city has become a part of the urbanised landscape. The colonial era Church, office buildings etc are landmarks and are associated with the sense of a place providing a unique visual image of a city. As individuals identifies with the built heritage of their locality or country identities are inseparable from cultural heritage. It is worth mentioning that the community of Guwahati gives priority to these heritage structures and accepts their value and beauty. Since cultural heritage and identities are intertwined the paper concludes that Guwahati must have their own policy framework guidelines for heritage protection.

Introduction:

Built Environment

The term built environment refers to the human- made surroundings that provide the setting or human activity, ranging in scale from buildings and parks or green space to neighbourhoods and cities that can often include their supporting infrastructure, such as water supply or energy networks. The built environment is a material, spatial and cultural product of human labour that combines physical elements and energy in forms for living, working and playing (Hussain, M, 2016). The concept of the built environment dates to remote antiquity. Cities were designed and beautified

according to the political requirement and the interest of the ruler of the kingdom. Built environment also means how people are associated and live within them and are influenced by the built environment. The built environment which includes the parks, monuments, etc are heritage products and they have been handed down the generation as gifts of civilisation, featuring power, religion, strength and competition including social and economic growth. Throughout the centuries, built heritage or more so the built environment has begun to address issues of urbanisation, design, construction, management of the man-made surroundings and the human activities as a whole. The built environment shapes the struggle over identity and belongingness. It leads to the creation of the sense of place and brings out the role of architecture and its relation with the present urban heritage (Yacobi, H, 2004). The paper attempts at studying the built environment of Guwahati by exploring the colonial legacy and also studies how this built environment constructs identity.

Today the decaying mansions and palaces are unique spaces of living history embodying tradition, culture and heritage that cannot be replaced (Taylor, J. 2018). Continuity of the great houses is important as they retain their history and sense of identity. Now a days the historic environment is no longer a set of iconic structures but are places significant to communities where the environment creates a sense of place and cultural identity which contributes to the quality of the environment in which people live and work. (Russel, Smith and Leverton, 2011). So far as the built environment of Guwahati is concerned, it is an expression of Assamese identity, telling us about who we are and the past that has formed us.

Identities are intertwined with the symbolic representation of the built environment (Neill et al, 2005). "I was born in the fifties, was a child in the sixties, a teenager in the seventies, married in the eighties, divorced in the nineties. The second of the twentieth century is my whole life. And you know when I go back none of the places from that part of my life exist anymore. My parent's house was bulldozed and replaced with townhouses twenty years ago. The schools I went to have both been demolished. Even the service stations where I worked part-time are gone. It's as if my life is being erased in my wake" (Schofield 2004).

This quotation describes loss, social significance and sense of place. It is a relatively commonplace description of some of the material changes experienced during a life. But it is suggesting that 'what was there has now gone' resulting in change of identity, partly of an individual and completely of a place.

Administrations in large cities are often confronted with a multitude of key problems, like high urban densities, transport, traffic congestion, energy inadequacy, unplanned development and lack of basic services, illegal construction, both within the city and in the periphery, informal real estate markets, creation of slums, poor natural hazards management in overpopulated areas, crime, water, soil and air pollution leading to environmental degradation, climate change and poor governance arrangement. With the growth of urbanisation, Guwahati city is also facing these common global problems as the city is in the cusp of urban transformation.

In the words of Margaret Drabble, "The past lives on in art and memory, but it is not static: it shifts and changes as the present throw its shadows backwards. The landscape also changes, but far more slowly; it is a living link between what we were and what we have become. This is one of the reasons why we feel such a profound and disproportionate anguish when a loved landscape is altered out of

recognition; we lose not only a place, but ourselves, a continuity between the shifting phases of our life” (Drabble 1979). The city itself is the collective memory of its people and like memory it is associated with objects and places. Architecture and landscapes become part of the memory and shapes identity (Boussaa, D, 2017). Heritage plays an important role in community development, and here it is understood as a cultural construct, which – if it is to be used to create identity – needs to be more than simply conserved. Its relevance needs to be communicated in the present so that it may continue into the future. An important aspect of this is the use of heritage and its preservation for socio-economic development worldwide, an aim that is explicitly part of the World Heritage Convention (whc.unesco.org/en/series/31/).

Colonial built heritage

Colonial built heritage is an umbrella term which encompasses architecture and town plans planned and designed by a European government at the time of its reign over a foreign - mostly Asian, African or South-American country. The term colonial refers to any country or regions that were once upon a time ruled by a colonial power. ‘Colonial’ built heritage refers to any building characteristics which were specifically influenced by political, regional and social circumstances and assigned to that particular period when the colonisers had grand imperialistic designs. This architecture therefore is a tangible testimony of a world-order of a time that once existed. The building activities of the colonisers were influenced by socio economic, administrative and religious need. The colonial built heritage was a hybrid type of architecture which mixed with the indigenous style of construction.

Built heritage of the colonial period dotted the Indian landscape with Churches, Post Office buildings, Hospitals, Educational Institutions, Public Halls etc. While Gothic Revivalism, Greek Revivalism etc were the characteristic features of the building activity in Europe these were remarkably followed in India with regional variations. These architectural designs being astonishingly beautiful were associated with the social and individual identity. However, in other parts of the world the remnants of the colonial built heritage are sheer reminders of oppression and corruption that threatened the human rights of the colonised. Today these heritage sites are considered to be part and parcel of the new landscape that emerged during the colonial rule. An example of the colonial heritage of yesteryears which was significant in letting loose the reign of terror in the Indian context is the Cellular jail. The residual colonial legacy can perform a role in framing contemporary place making process involving character, place distinctiveness, heritage and identity (Neill, at al, 2005).

The Colonial Built Heritage of Guwahati

Taking the example of the city of Guwahati as a whole, it can be said that Guwahati is currently a growing metropolis and is dotted by monuments both of the medieval and colonial era. As the British started construction of the buildings according to their administrative and religious requirements the city experienced a new wave of development and the people of Guwahati began to associate themselves with this new identity. Guwahati, the “Gateway to the North East” is the oldest and the principal city of North East India. The city is situated on the south bank of the river

Brahmaputra within the latitude $26^{\circ} 11'N$, and $91^{\circ} 44'E$ longitude. The structures that were built during the colonial period in the city (1826-1947) now comprise the urbanised cultural landscape of Guwahati. A list of some heritage structures of Guwahati is given below:

- 1) Bijulee Cinema Hall;
- 2) Kelvin Cinema Hall;
- 4) Nabin Chandra Bordoloi Hall formerly Curzon Hall;
- 5) Bungalow of the Principal of Cotton College;
- 6) Cotton College;
- 7) Mahafez Khana (record room);
- 8) Kasturba Ashram (Saraniya Hill);
- 9) DC residential bungalow, Kachari;
- 10) Chief Justice's House, Kachari;
- 11) SP office building;
- 12) North Brook Gate, (Gateway of Assam);
- 13) Harisabha, Panbazar;
- 14) Panbazar Girls' High School, Panbazar; (1883)
- 15) Bura Masjid;
- 16) Handique Girls' College;
- 17) Earle Law College;
- 18) Bengali Higher Secondary School, Paltan Bazar;
- 19) The Gauhati Club;
- 20) Cotton College Library' formerly Old Curzon Hall
- 21) Shaikh Brothers;
- 22) Maharana Club;
- 23) Guwahati Baptist Church;
- 24) Christ Church;
- 25) Conference Center Complex;
- 26) Satribari Christian Hospital;
- 27) Nursing College and Hostel, Satribari Christian Hospital;
- 28) Church, Satribari Christian Hospital;
- 29) White Memorial Hostel, Satribari;

Guwahati began to develop on modern lines after the British occupation of Assam under the banner of the English East India Company. Gradually schools and colleges were established. The first school that was established in Guwahati was the Cotton Collegiate School (1835), while the first college in the entire North Eastern Region is Cotton College (1901). This was the beginning of the construction activities of the British rulers in Guwahati. Guwahati became a part of the global imperialistic designs.

The cultural landscape under the purview of study is an important example of a landscape designed in the mid-19th century to the midst of the 20th century when India was under the control of the British government. The cultural landscape and archaeological remains of Guwahati is comprised of many monuments built during different periods of history.

It was a colonial beginning for Guwahati when the English East India Company took over the administrative reign of Assam. The constructions resembled the structures

that were constructed in Great Britain and other English colonies. The buildings that have been constructed during the colonial era were either office buildings used purely for administrative purposes, public halls, churches, hospitals and bungalows. These buildings followed the local techniques of constructions. In India colonial art comprises a mixture of Portuguese, Dutch, French and English art with regional variations, besides Indo-Saracenic design was used for constructing buildings. In Assam, Assam Type houses were constructed. Assam type houses are made with timber, wood, reed (ikara) and the roofs are slanting on both sides to enable rainwater to fall off easily with gable front much like the European style houses which has slanting steep sloping roof. According to the historical records of the period the design of the houses across Guwahati in the 19th and early 20th century, was a mixture of colonial art. In Guwahati, the style of construction was predominantly English in character which was mixed with the local style of construction.

Wooden Muntins, Gothic Revival, Gable Roof, Gothic Tower, wooden fretwork, Tuscan Pillars, Cross Beam, etc are some of the remarkable characteristic features which single out all the colonial buildings in Guwahati city. These colonial buildings of yesteryears in Guwahati are an iconic symbol of an architectural style essentially British and American in character, but which has intermingled with the geographical requirement of the colonised Indian state i.e. Assam. The result of this mixed pattern of houses which took shape in Assam after the European architecture mingled with the local climatic and geographical features are the Assam Type houses. History reveals the coming of the British and American Evangelists to Guwahati and how the situations thereafter necessitated the constructions of the buildings under study.

The bungalows were residential quarters of the British officers who came to Assam. The cultural landscape of Guwahati represent the artistic and religious developments of the colonial period starting from late 19th century to the 2nd half of the 20th century integrating various cultural influences into the structures which was characteristic of the British style and testifies the intermingling of the British style with local art. Metropolitan architecture during the colonial era developed which then ushered a sense of permanence and monumentality to the city of Guwahati. The buildings of the colonial era in Guwahati city symbolises the beginning of urbanism. All the buildings were on the verge of creating a new urban environment, a landmark for the city of Guwahati

The material world that comes to us today from the past is relinquished by us to the future. In this sense the colonial monuments of Guwahati play an important role in defining her identity Though the city of Guwahati has a long written history which dates back to ancient times based on her fame as the land of the Kamakhya temple and of ancient Pragjyotishpura, nevertheless taking examples from the recent colonial history her national greatness and identity can be reinforced.

The city flourished and architecturally impressive buildings strengthened Britain's image of power (Taylor, J, 2018, p 17). Guwahati evolved as the British gradually developed the streetscapes and the buildings. The unique style of architecture began developing in Guwahati from the 19th century onwards in sprawling campuses. The buildings that evolved in Guwahati were European in style and design and from 1897 onwards the buildings developed a hybrid character when a new pattern of style took shape. This style of construction is known as Assam Type house. These

types of houses became immensely popular after the huge Gothic structures were razed to the ground when the Great Assam Earthquake shook the entire North Eastern region of India in 1897. The Assam Type houses adorned the city and the state. Cane, wood Tins, ikara (reed) were used for construction. These houses are double or single storey and have European characteristics as its architectural features.

At the dawn of the 20th century these Assam Type houses became a source of pride and most of the official buildings or Church, or hostel buildings residential houses adopted Assam Type and European designs which were built across the length and breadth of Guwahati. It also signified a show of economic and social changes when they started constructing massive houses. Massive columns, pediments, use of balusters, decorative facades in the buildings were common. Besides wrought iron, high ceilings and tiled floors were extensively used. The city was also beautified with parks.

These houses and the British style of buildings are a constant reminder of the history of Guwahati, and her sense of identity. Today, Guwahati is part of the urban cultural landscape. Globalisation being the larger threat to the colonial built heritage, the other prominent threats is from urbanisation and development, increasing urban population, etc. They can make or mar the built heritage. As the developers figure prominently amongst the global community, they have an intrinsic influence on the future of the built heritage and the community. This is also common in a city like Guwahati which is gradually turning into a megapolis. For centuries, the people of Guwahati have come to associate themselves with the colonial built heritage which has been a harbinger of the Indian independence. Today in view of these common global threats the future of these built heritage are at stake. The developers are of the view that the colonial heritage of Guwahati is no longer compatible amidst the urban cultural landscape where steel, glass and high rise buildings have become the norm. Within the city of Guwahati many such colonial buildings are examples of survivors of an architectural style that the colonisers adopted in the colonised countries, an example which reminded them of their own homelands. Apart from the Gothic revival characteristics that were adopted by the British the other style that was widely used in Assam was the bungalow style, a style which was adopted from neighbouring Bengal.

As the city of Guwahati started expanding vertically and horizontally, many of the gracious colonial houses have come to be squeezed in between the haphazard construction and high rise buildings which now stand as an impediment to the categorically beautiful remnant of an era that was, that designed the landscape and made the city of Guwahati a truly colonised place. Today however a transition from colonial pattern to a highly urbanised style of construction is taking over as the city is marching towards the 21st century. This global building activity however tends to make the city look the same. People are beginning to shift their identity. Nevertheless the conservation of a few of these colonial remnants would indeed have a holistic impact on the visual aesthetics of the built heritage, and add to our sense of memory and history. Conservation of the built heritage should be an important part of the urban planning and development process.

It is necessary to protect these built heritages of Guwahati as they are reminders of an era that existed during the colonial rule. The people of Guwahati identify

themselves with these buildings of yesteryears. There is a sense of belongingness with these buildings. To achieve the continuity of these built heritage of Guwahati, or elsewhere the history of the establishment of the structures, the pattern of design, the materials used for construction of the structures, etc has to be studied and highlighted, while the community should be made stakeholders and guardians of the built heritage. The erstwhile colonial buildings stand as mere spectators of the rapidly urbanising city of Guwahati where there is threat to the existence of the monuments, but are nevertheless the only link with the colonial rule.

Through the use of the past which looms through the colonial built environment Guwahati can try to create her own identity. The landscape of Guwahati comprising of colonial buildings of more than two hundred years old brings in memories and facilitates the beginning of the modern period or the growth of Guwahati to an urban city.

Identity and its relation to the Built Environment

Identities can be defined as both public and private. Place and identity are bound to one another. One can create an identity by associating himself/herself with the place where they live, work, or has lived throughout their lives. In the long run people shape the place where they live, and in turn get shaped by their environment. Built environment provides a sense of belonging, construct meanings and mediate change (Jack, J at al, 2014). Built environment has got significant meaning for people, and tells why a particular place is a source of inspiration. Landmarks are associated with the aesthetic sense of a place. Places are identifiable by sight, sound, smell, touch, taste that makes it powerful as a source of memory and belongingness. This ties people to one another. This also creates place identity.

“As a result, planning is being required to preserve and promote cultural heritage, tangible and intangible, of the communities living in cities, since heritage has been recognised to have a role in shaping the city’s identity”. This statement brings about the role of regenerating cultural heritage as a way to reinforce a city’s uniqueness and distinctiveness. Identity is expressed through the use of a historic urban form, architectural style, and design solutions. Thus historic environments provide a unique visual image of the city. City identity is important as it provides a connection between constant” and “changing” elements which is how a city becomes unique (Boussaa, D, 2017). The search for identity is a universal phenomenon. Everywhere people keep searching for ways and means to establish their identity. This is more common particularly in the Third World countries where people look for opportunities to identify themselves with their roots. Therefore expression of those roots and the cultural heritage has become more important these days. At the international level also cultural heritage features prominently in cultural policies of many countries. Developing nations participate in the conservation and preservation of their cultural heritage for enhancing their cultural identity. Relics from the past as well as ethnographic and traditional works of art are sources of inspiration in the creation of a new national culture which is modern and more adapted to the demands of the modern society, but still retaining a clear link with its source - a modern national culture with an ancient identity. The preservation and conservation of ancient monuments is necessary to communicate the embodied values, ideas and beliefs of the people. Similarly the participation of the government in cultural

resources preservation could raise the awareness of the people and motivate them to be more active in the socio cultural development programmes (Seameo Project in Archaeology and Fine Arts, 1983:45). In other words, individuals identify themselves with the built heritage of their own locality, region, or country. Identity of the place is associated with the shared memory and lived experience in the particular place in matters of meanings of sites, and buildings for the community at large. Pearl S. Buck wrote “one faces the future with one’s past”. Our views of landscapes are shaped by our appreciation of our cultural resources and features. It is influenced by our societal, political, and personal needs. Thus designed landscape protection, cultural landscape protection, and historic preservation are essential to safeguard our cultural heritage. (Longstreth 2008: 182, 199).

Identity and values are inseparable from built heritage. Place identity signifies one’s attachment to a particular place where he is born grows and spends his entire life. Identity is constructed; it is individual and social. Built heritage strengthens the identity at the level of our home, neighbourhood, town, region, nation, etc. Identities keep shifting from time to time. What is important today may not be important tomorrow. In the context of the built heritage, changes may occur due to the transformation of the wishes and aspirations of the people. Heritage is a reflection of our identity, as an individual, as a nation, community, etc, which are worthy of some form of respect and protection.

Conclusion

The community of Guwahati gives priority to these heritage structures and accept that they are valuable and beautiful old buildings. Besides these assets of the built environment are the identity markers of Guwahati city. This kind of understanding is now growing popular with the government and the community who aims at maintaining the heritage in the midst of the expanding urban features. Most nations of the world now feel that it is the public duty of the government to have some policy with regards to conservation. It is to be noted that there are two primary agencies of destruction of archaeological sites and historic monuments. One is construction of roads, quarries and dams, and the other is mass tourism and looting of sites (Renfrew & Bahn 2008). In the case of Guwahati, it can be said that the growth of the city both horizontally and vertically and the increase in population seems to be the potential threat to these identity markers. As “everything in the landscape is something in particular, has a history, has a value for the imagination, played a part” (James, 1905), hence United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) espouses that heritage sites are not an impediment to development but a resource that can contribute to poverty reduction, employment generation, waste management and sanitation, environment regeneration as a whole. United States of America was the first country in the world to have used the term Cultural Resource Management (CRM) in the early 1970s. CRM helps to identify sites that may be eligible for being placed under the National Register of Historic Places; testing them for evaluation and sometimes excavating those before they are destroyed (King 2008).

Conservation of monuments in India goes back to early Christian era. By the year 1664 the visit of Dr Bernier to Kashmir Valley and also the monuments of Mughal India opened a new chapter of antiquarian interests which led to the systematic collection of antiquities and their preservation. Sir William Jones became the

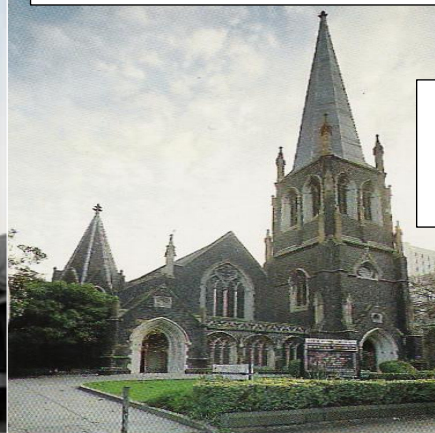
pioneer when he founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The systematic conservation of the study of antiquarian remains started in the 18th century and regular legislations about the monuments and sites were framed in the beginning of the 20th century. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is the main agency for the upkeep of the monuments and their maintenance. Heritage Resource Management programme in India can be composed of (a) site management; (b) collections management; (c) National and local legislations; (d) education; (e) networking; (f) research; (g) public involvement; (h) heritage tourism;(i) proper and effective implementation of cultural laws. This is true even for India, a country which has countless monuments, and Guwahati which is in the cusp of urbanisation need to have her own policy framework guidelines for heritage protection.

**Architectural Features in Guwahati.
Gothic Style Tower**

Guwahati Baptist Church, 1845



Wesley Church, 1858 in Melbourne, Australia. English Gothic style



White Memorial Hostel, 1937, Guwahati



Tuscan Column, Wooden Fretwork (White Memorial Hostel)



Assam Type House

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