PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF URBAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCHES IN INDIA

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Abstract

Urban Archaeology, the archaeological approach to a city, is becoming a thrust area of archaeological research since World War II. The application of archaeology among cities has not gained much importance in India, though there are numbers of age-old urban centers. These cities consisted of immense resources for studies relating to urban archaeology. With persistent increase in population and constant need of spaces the heritage buildings of Indian cities are in threat of demolition, especially if in dilapidation. The present paper discusses about some heritage buildings of four major metropolitans of India, namely Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai and Kolkata. This paper also emphasizes on the need of urban archaeological work in these metro cities for the revival of the recent history of mankind in India.

Key words: Urban archaeology, city, conservation, heritage

Introduction

Urban archaeology is the study of archaeology in a urban setting (Staski, 1982). Bert Salwen, who is considered as the father of archaeology, distinguished urban archaeology in two forms: – archaeology of cities and archaeology in cities. When archaeological study is executed in a specific site within a city without portraying its development, it can be called as a work of 'archaeology in cities'. When the same is done to construct the history or pre-history of the city, it can be called as a work of 'archaeology of cities' (Rothschild & Wall, 2008). Ever since scholars tend to have an idea of progress after Enlightenment and were curious about the antiquity of humankind, many historic cities have been studied. The archaeological exploration of Pompeii and Herculaneum is a perfect example of this. Though the archaeological studies executed to reconstruct the historic cities of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome falls under the sub-discipline of classical archaeology, most of them were urban archaeological works. Urban archaeology as a sub-discipline of archaeology came into existence during the twentieth century in Europe and then North America. The main aim of urban archaeology is to document as much information as possible regarding the cities that are in constant threat of destruction due to population pressure and sometimes, war. The advent of modern urban archaeology can be traced back to post-World War II when several scholars made attempts to conduct archaeological researches in cities. Bert Salwen's Archaeology in Megalopolis is one of the most influential works during the initial phase of urban archaeology (Staski, 2002).

The fields of urban archaeology, being in urban areas, demand innovative techniques of data retrieval. Desktop survey techniques like studying archived historical documents including legal documents, tax records, pictorial records and written accounts provide useful information about a particular archaeological unit. Oral history is of very special importance in cases where no physical documents are available. Exploration through maps is also vital in urban archaeological work. Excavations in urban areas are hard to do due to dense population and extensive use of land. It may only be done when a building or structure is being demolished for renovation or urban construction processes. This, too, is very costly as heavy-digging is needed to remove the upper layers of the earth and it requires heavy digging tools. Stratigraphy is also often of complex nature and requires a lot of time

for excavation. The rewarding nature of urban archaeological excavation is that common people get easy access to the sites as it happens right in the middle of the city. People also get aware of the unknown history of the urban centres they live in or commute through.Urban archaeologists also focus on different urban processes to reconstruct the history of urbanisation of a city. The ethnic composition and class composition of a city are also studied by urban archaeologists to interpret the historical migration pattern. Moreover, architectural patterns reflect the ethnic-group composition of the place. Ethnicity and architecture has always been inseparable. A church represents the existence of Christians around and so do mosques and temples for Muslims and Hindus respectively.

Histories of most urban areas in India have been written by different authors over several last decades but none of them had an urban archaeological approach. India is currently the second largest populated country in the world and 31.16% of its total population reside in urban areas.Since 2001, there has been a steep increase of urban population in India from 28.6 crore to 37.7 crore (Census of India, 2011). Availability of space for residence is becoming an issue and the land or area belonging to heritage is being used for residence (Kulshrestha, 2018). Urban archaeological studies can help documenting or recording the heritage site before it is used extensively for residential or other purposes.

Objective

The objective of the present study is to identify the problems of maintaining the cultural heritage in urban areas. The study also highlights some solutions and its role in heritage management.

Earlier studies

It can be said that urban archaeology was already taking its shape during the formative phases of the discipline of archaeology. The study of the ancient cities of Europe during the Renaissance period can be considered as the beginning of urban archaeology (Pendery, 2012). The excavations at some parts of Pompeii and Herculaneum were done systematically during the second half of the eighteenth century and considered among the first few works of urban archaeology. Excavations at the ancient mound of Hissarlik in Turkey by Heinrich Schliemann during 1880s revealed the existence of the ancient city of Troy (Schliemann, 1875). Similarly, John Marshall excavated parts of Harappa and announced the discovery of Indus Valley Civilization in 1924 (Singh, 2008). Apart from these, several other

excavations of urban centres of the past were done by different archaeologists and all of them can be said to be works of urban archaeology, despite the fact that urban archaeology as a sub-discipline is recognised after the Second World War. Bert Salwen's Archaeology in Megalopolis is considered to be the ground-breaking work of urban archaeology. A lot of excavations were conducted in British towns by Guildhall Museum in London and later by Museum of London. Books like The Roman City of London (1965) by Ralph Merrifield, and articles like Excavations in the City of London (1956) and The Excavation of Roman and Mediaeval London (1968) by W. F. Grimes are the products of these excavations. W. F. Grimes conducted 63 excavations between 1946 and 1962 in the city of London (Price, 1998).The book Archaeology of Urban America: The Search for Pattern and Process (1982) edited by Roy S. Dickens contains several papers on urban archaeological work done in North America. The Buried Past: An Archaeological History of Philadelphia(1992) written by John L. Cotter, Daniel G. Roberts and Michael Parrington reveals the history of Philadelphia through urban archaeological work. Many urban archaeological researches were conducted in Australia. Tim Murray's paper Expanding Horizons in the Archaeology of the Modern City - A Tale in Six Projects discusses about the urban past of Melbourne and Sydney through six projects done in these cities. Some urban archaeological work has also been done in Russia. The small town of Novgorod in Russia yielded pottery of medieval period (Orton, 2005). There are literatures of the urban archaeological work done in Cape Town of South Africa. A cemetery was discovered under the Preswitch Street during a construction work and was studied with an urban archaeological approach. (Shepherd, 2007).There are several works done in the cities of India but none of them had an urban archaeological approach.

Methodology

For the present work data has been collected from different secondary sources like books, journals, magazines and official documents. The data collected have been analysed to identify different problems regarding the management of heritage buildings and structures in selected urban areas. This analysis in combination with the earlier works helps to identify the scopes of urban archaeological research in the country.

Heritage in four metropolitan cities in India

For the present study, different heritage centres of four metropolitan cities of India have been taken into account. Various problems faced during conservation and preservation also have been identified.

Delhi

Delhi is the capital of India since 1911. We find the reference of Delhi, by the name of 'Indraprastham' in Indian epic Mahabharata. Indraprastha is currently an area in Delhi. The present area of Delhi has been ruled by several emperors in the past and hence, this historical city comprises of lots of ancient buildings and structures. There are more than 1200 monuments present in Delhi and only 174 of them have been marked as protected by Archaeological Survey of India (Gupta, 1999). 200 monuments are recognised by State Department of Archaeology of Delhi as monuments of state-level importance (Denslagen and Gutschow, 2005).

There are two tombs namely Bade Khan Gumbad and Chhote Khan Gumbad in Kotla Mubarakpur Complex in South Delhi. These tombs were built during Lodhi period. Not far from this are another two tombs named Kale Khan Ka Gumbad and Bhure Khan Ka Gumbad that reflects the Lodhi architecture. None of these tombs were extensively studied. Now people encroached the area around the tombs and there has been no inspection so far. Apart from these, there are several other tombs in Lodhi Garden area which are still not identified or studied properly. There are even many unmarked tombs and still it is not known who are buried beneath. People not being aware of the importance of these unstudied tombs may easily encroach and ultimately destroy the structures in future.

Few years ago, Mehrauli Archaeological Park that houses hundreds of heritage monuments in about 100 acres of land had been turned into dump yard without the proper caretaking by the respected authority (Arora, 2012). Moreover, much land had been encroached upon by the people. Recently, all these issues were taken care of. Now, Mehrauli Archaeological Park is free of encroachments and garbage dumps, but the other heritage monuments might not get as lucky as this. Extensive documentation for all the monuments, small or big, is of utmost necessity as of now.

Hall of Nations, designed to commemorate 25 years of independence, was demolished by the Delhi government on April, 2017 to build an Integrated Exhibition-cum-Convention Centre. Though this hall was built in 1972, i.e. less than 60 years ago and hence cannot be considered as 'heritage', it does not mean it can be

demolished at ease. When a step like this can be taken by the authority, the future of many heritage buildings is also put to risk.

Chennai

Chennai, formerly Madras, is the fourth largest city of India and is the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu. The area was under the rule of Pallava, Chola and subsequent dynasties resulting in the establishment of many temples and palaces. Later, when British conquered the area, they established Fort St. George. This fort attracted lots of traders who settled in the area afterwards. Hence, Chennai comprises of a lot of colonial buildings.

Triplicane is one of the oldest areas in Chennai. It has some of the oldest buildings of Chennai. In the year 2012, an old building of Triplicane collapsed and resulted in the death of two persons. Due to this mishap, the corporation surveyed the area and located many other old structures that may collapse. The Corporation does not supervise buildings built before 1973 and there is no authority to look after such buildings. This is where urban archaeology can show its importance. Mylapore has always been the place to look for untouched age-old architecture. Mylapore was full of agraharam once but now, the place is devoid of it.

There are several cases of encroachments identified by Archaeological Survey of India among the different megalithic sites of Chennai. Encroachments have also been observed in Fort St. George by ASI. Even the famous site of Pallavaram has also been encroached as notified by ASI.

Mumbai

Mumbai (formerly Bombay) was originally an area of seven islands separated by swamps. The archipelago of seven islands was inhabited by Koli tribesmen and had been a centre of sea trade since 1st millennium BCE. The dynasties that were in control of this area were (chronologically) Mauryan, Satvahanas, Abhiras, Vakatakas, Kalachuris, Chalukyas, Rashtrakuta, Silhara, Yadava, Khalji and so on until the year 1526, when Portugese captured the area and settled there. From the year 1661, British were in possession of Bombay. In 1784, these seven islands were merged into one landmass by Hornby Vellard. This short history of Mumbai gives a picture of the number of heritage structures that can be present in the city.

The D ward of Mumbai includes more than 120 heritage sites, structures and precincts like Gamdevi, Khotachiwadi, Mahalaxmi temple and Opera House. The boundary of this ward reportedly shrunk by up to 50% since last decade. Sky rise buildings for the provision of space to new settlers is not new in Mumbai. Watson's Hotel, one of the earliest surviving cast-iron architecture, was built by British in the year 1860s and closed in the 1960s. Since then, it is being used as residences and commercial spaces. A portion of the building has already collapsed and the cast iron structure is still falling. It is currently in the list of "100 World Endangered Monuments" by the World Monuments Fund. Buckley Court Hotel was one of the few remaining Indo-Saracenic architecture in Mumbai. Buckley Court was rebuilt into a residential building keeping only the façade intact. Taraporewala Mansion was a heritage bungalow with elegant 19th century architecture but it was demolished to build a high rise building named Mittal Grandeur. There are several other heritage buildings in Mumbai which are now on the verge of demolition for mainly one reason – making high rise to accommodate population thrust.

Kolkata

Kolkata, formerly Calcutta, has always been a place of attraction for the traders due to the presence of river Hooghly and its ports. The adjacent areas to Kolkata e.g. Saptagram, Chinsura, Chandernagore and Serampore had seen the arrival of foreign traders like Portugese, French and Dutch during 17th and 18th century. It was the arrival of the British that changed Kolkata from a simple port town to a colonial city. On 24th August, 1686, Job Charnock selected the area of three villages namely Govindpur, Sutanuti and Kalikata, which is now known as Kolkata. Kolkata was the capital of British India from 1772 to 1911. Presently, the city of Kolkata has increased its space from 185 sq. kms. to 1886.67 sq. kms. Present city included the newly redeveloped suburbs. Redevelopment of Kolkata has proved to be a reason for renovating heritage buildings. Writers' Building was built in the year 1780 by Sir Warren Hastings as an office for the writers (clerks) of the British India Company. It has a Greco-Roman architecture. The roof of the building has several statues of Greek gods and goddesses. This building experienced several phases of addition of structures every one or two decades but the main structure remained the same. In 2013, this building went under renovation. The proper conservation of the heritage structures was taken care of. Even then, some parts of the heritage zone were damaged while demolishing the non-heritage parts of the building (Konar, 2015).

Currency Building, an Italian architecture with large brick arches and intricately designed Venetian windows, was built in the year 1833 and had been used as a place to store currency notes since 1869 until it was closed for renovation. It started to be demolished since 1990s by the CPWD. Much of the building has been destroyed. In 1998, it was notified as heritage and has been handed over to Archaeological Survey of India. After that, it was renovated to its original form. The destroyed part is kept as it is. Great Eastern Hotel was built in the year 1840 and served as one of the premier hotels during the rule of British in the eastern India. During Naxalite movements in the 1970s, its decline started and it was taken over by the State government. It remained closed for a number of years until 2005, when it was sold to a private company. This great architecture had been renovated extensively and lost its colonial essence when it was re-opened in the year 2013. The northern zone and central zone of Kolkata are full of old buildings that are marked as dangerous. There are also some buildings which have already faced destruction due to negligence. The Ghats along the river Hooghly are very important considering the heritage of Kolkata. Princep Ghat was built in the year 1841. Babu Ghat which was built in 1830, is even older. These Ghats undergo slight to massive destruction every year due to river activities.

The above examples collected from different secondary sources are mere reflection of what actually is the picture of the heritage structures in some of the major cities of India and that too, of only four metropolitans. A general history of all the major cities has been published by different scholars at different times. But what the studies lack is an urban archaeological perspective. During the demolition of any structure, a grid can be laid out and a proper archaeological excavation can lead to the discovery of unknown facts. History does not always exist above the earth but under the earth too. Once an unstudied structure is demolished, the entire information and the heritage get destroyed. No one in the future would know of the place where they live. If a person lacks the historical knowledge of the place he resides, he would never have the sentiment needed for social cohesion in a neighborhood. So, it is of utmost necessity that the cities in India be studied with an urban archaeological standpoint.

The problems that may arise while doing archaeological work in urban areas of India are discussed below:

- Excavation in urban areas is very difficult to do. The first difficulty regarding excavation in urban areas is that it is time consuming. To reach the

desired strata, one has to remove thick layers from the ground, like a concrete street or the rubble of bricks. This process requires slow digging and eventually a lot of time. Moreover, the removal of dirt may require time as space is scarce in a city. The second difficulty is the access to fund. Urban archaeological work is generally more costly than archaeological excavation in an open air site. Removing concrete layers from the urban areas requires special equipment and heavy digging tools and all of them are costly. The wages of the labor in urban areas are more than in rural areas. As removing layers from the city grounds requires much time, the labor cost becomes expensive.

- An archaeologist excavating in urban areas has to deal with a lot more people than one who excavates in a rural area. The landowners and the contractors working on the site have to be made aware about the utility of the work done and this seems to be a pretty hard work. The police needs to be informed. If there are any sewage systems, water distribution systems or electricity distribution systems under the ground, permissions are required from all the respective authorities. The contractors are always in a hurry to complete the construction of a building. Slowing them up is the hardest job for an urban archaeologist. The people passing by the site may get curious and crowd may form around the site creating an interruption in the work. Municipal officials do not recognize the utility of archaeology in a city and hence shows a lethargic co-operation. The excavation in urban areas may hazard the city life for a long period of time.
- In urban areas, the premises of any heritage building, irrespective of its recognized status, is encroached upon by the residents of the city. Studying a heritage in its totality poses a problem for a researcher when the encroached parts of the heritage are dealt with. Encroachers do not always allow a researcher to study the parts of heritage they call their home or do business in. It becomes problematic to convince them about the neutrality of the study and make them understand that they will not be harmed. People who are aware of their encroachment may feel that they are tricked and may be removed from the property.
- Lack of proper knowledge regarding the history of a city, especially the site itself can create loopholes in the analysis of the material artifacts excavated from the site. The analysis of excavated material should be done with expertise. Hence a multidisciplinary approach is needed.

Discussion and future prospect

New laws should be amended to protect the heritage in urban areas. The non-compliance with the law should be notified to the competent authority for their perusal. An old building which is not considered as heritage can be demolished easily. What we overlook is that any old building has its own story to tell. All old buildings should be documented before it vanishes in the new trend of public construction projects. History of a city hides inside these old buildings, often unnoticed for their simplicity. Moreover, historical documents are often not found chronologically. To create history of a city, one must dedicate himself to the work and find every available resource to build a chronology of incidents.

There are departments of Archaeology in almost all the major universities in India. Teachers and students of a city should take notice of their endangered material surroundings and try to document them through major scholarly projects, dissertations and research theses. More organizations like Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) should be formed, who will deal with the proper preservation and conservation of a structure. Last but not least, there should be a trend of excavating urban areas archaeologically whenever a land is available, after the demolition of an existing building and before the construction of a new building.

Awareness for heritage is of special importance to this cause because people often find it unnecessary to spend time on reconstruction of the history. Residents in and around a heritage building may not know the importance of the structure they are associated with and hence negligence towards the same is possible. If ethno-history of an urban area is created through the existing material remains, the solidarity among the residents will definitely increase resulting in the reduction of feuding.

The main problem that may emerge is the availability of time and space in an urban context. The constructions done in an urban or peri-urban area is always in haste. It is not possible to gain access for extensive excavation in an urban area. Geological stratification in urban areas may be very confusing and must be studied in minute detail, which in turn requires a lot of time. Moreover, open area excavation is also not possible due to constraints of space. So, excavation should be done in small phases over a small amount of land. This also makes it time consuming. So, it is a challenge for an urban archaeologist to study a city or parts of it in his own time and manner.

India is still considered as a land of developing city. Hence, most of the cities in India are undergoing makeover to meet the needs of the new generation. Construction of

buildings through big residential projects is in progress in almost all parts of city. Taking advantage of this situation, urban archaeology can be used as a tool to gain good knowledge about the undiscovered history of a city, which otherwise will be lost forever in due course of time. The use of urban space in India and the characteristics of the urban life associating with it can be well understood. The urban processes involved in the past and the present can be discovered. The archaeological study of cities in India can discover how the cities formed and developed. It also increases awareness of local people about the heritage. Accumulation of all the knowledge gathered from a city through urban archaeological approach will lead us to the future directions of how a city changes with global processes.

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