

# INDIA'S FIRST WORLD HERITAGE LISTED CITY

## HERITAGE MATTERS



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(Professor Dr. Amarewar Galla, an unhyphenated Indo Danish Australian, is the editor and producer of World Heritage: Benefits Beyond Borders, Cambridge University Press & UNESCO Publishing, 2012/2013)

India is undergoing amazing and inspirational transformations. The good, bad and the ugly. I always liked the chime of Incredible India even if it smacked of orientalism and exotica. It is the longest surviving manifesto for any tourism agency in the world. But cowboy or ad hoc tourism, irresponsible building projects and DPR expert companies that plagiarise/cut and paste from overseas are the bane of the industry.

In this climate of change and rapid urban growth, the inscription of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, on the World Heritage List by UNESCO in 2017 is much appreciated. The walled city of Ahmadabad is the World Heritage property. It was founded by Sultan Ahmad Shah in the 15th century on the eastern bank of the Sabarmati river. The nomination process, inscription and the contingent responsibilities evoked much discussion and debate. The whole discourse of heritage conservation found a new life in India with animated seminars, conferences and focus for research agendas.

It is not surprising that Ahmedabad itself is the place for a lot of the intellectual and professional engagement. Where else in India would you find such a concentration of higher educational institutions concerned with cultural and heritage conservation? Centre for Heritage Management at the University of Ahmedabad along with CEPT, NID, IIM, IIT, MICA, Gujarat National Law University and a host of other educational institutions.

International Council for Monuments and Sites recommended the inscription on the World Heritage list with the following:

The walled city of Ahmadabad is rich with Sultanate period historic buildings, distinctive of Gujarat and a prototype for later architectural developments; and is significant for the fusion of the architectural traditions of two highly distinctive cultures and religions: Islamic architectural tra-

ditions brought by the rulers and founders of the city, and the Hindu-Jain tradition of construction and crafts of the local community.

- The urban structure of the historic city of Ahmadabad is distinctive due to its puras (neighbourhoods), pols (residential streets), and khadki (inner entrances to pols), which are closely connected to the dynamics of the communities and their organisational networks.

- The timber historic residential architecture, with its elaborately decorated wooden facades, reflects symbols and myths connected with their inhabitants. The wooden houses of the historic city of Ahmadabad are a significant contribution to arts, crafts and design in the Indian sub-continent.

- The historic city of Ahmadabad is a unique example of multicultural coexistence as followers of Hinduism, Islam, Jainism and Christianity are present in the city.

- Ahmadabad's noble families patronised modern masters of art and architecture, which enriched the city's culture.

Ahmedabad heritage city offers many lessons to be learnt for India and especially Andhra Pradesh. One of the most important ones is the urgent need to foster applied heritage scholarship, almost non-existent now, that draws on evidence-based understanding of the rich and diverse arts, culture and heritage of the Andhra people. This could be achieved through partnerships and mentoring as was recently initiated through the inputs of the Pune Deccan College, a premier institution for archaeological heritage in South Asia.

The very notion of heritage needs to be debated and contextualised in Andhra with interdisciplinary scholarship. Working in isolation with archaic approaches does not serve the new state well. Integrated methods and applications bringing together tangible and intangible, movable and im-

movable, cultural and environmental dimensions are critical for a holistic and total appreciation of heritage and for pursuing effective conservation.

Leadership needs to be informed by scholarship. The recent debates in the world on who makes a good museum or heritage director - manager or specialist - have firmly underlined that specialists are critical for conservation. Specialists with deep professional knowledge and skills could be sourced nationally and brought to assist the desperately needed transformative process for initiating state of the art conservation in the state.

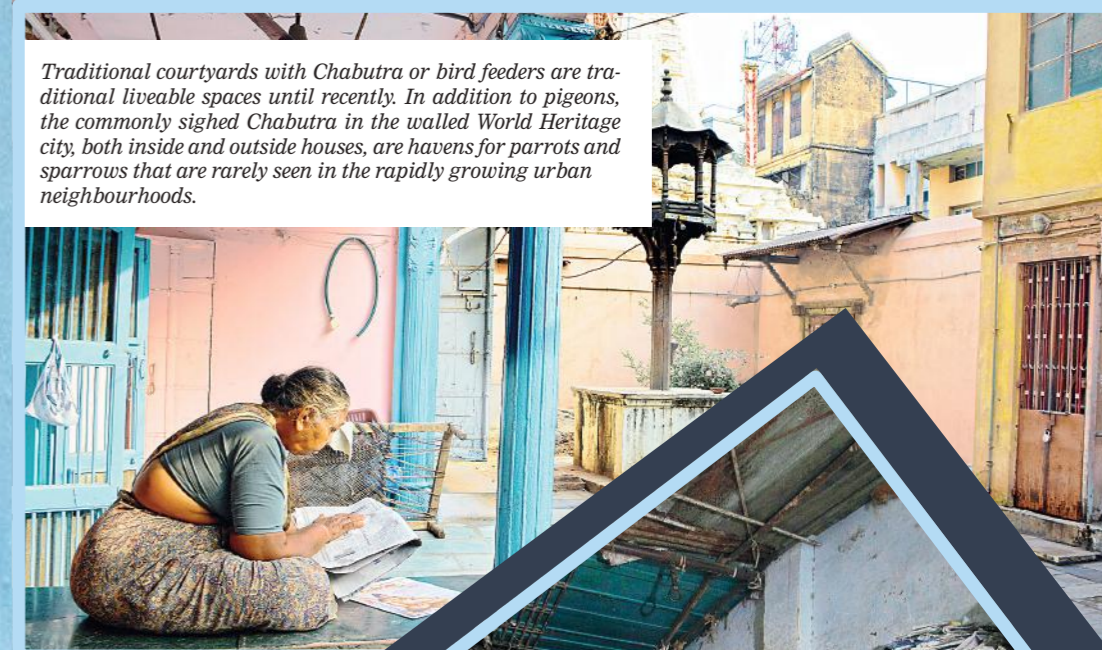
Many parts of the world have succumbed to ad hoc approaches that are neither efficient nor effective, in short not sustainable. Appropriate legislative frameworks, consultative mechanisms, proactive policies, responsible strategies are needed. Demonstration projects or pilots to scope and assess possibilities could help in India, one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse countries in the world. However, when such initiatives are undertaken there need to be relevant capacity building and accountabilities. For instance, most heritage projects fail as the implementing agencies are well meaning agencies but without skills and competencies to deliver to conservation requirements.

There are very few seminars, conferences and forums that are specialized for practitioners to share and learn from each other the nuances, demonstration projects and innovative practices. These need to go beyond the usual show and tell events and photo opportunities in the media. More cultural exchanges and interrogations of methods needs to take place within the country itself. A country that is internationally famous for its digital affordances has lagged in serving its cultural and heritage sectors. VR/AR and 3 D projection mapping are seen as the salvation. But

hardly anyone of the tenders on line or projects under implementation are guided by informed scripts that are well researched. Heritage scripting for digital engagement need to be taught and promoted before crores of rupees are wasted on unsustainable projects.

India has some of the best experts on disaster preparedness. Much needed as was evident in the devastations of the past month. But these experts are sought overseas with minimal appreciation at home. How many museums and heritage places in India have plans and capacity for disaster mitigation. You could count them on the fingers of one hand.

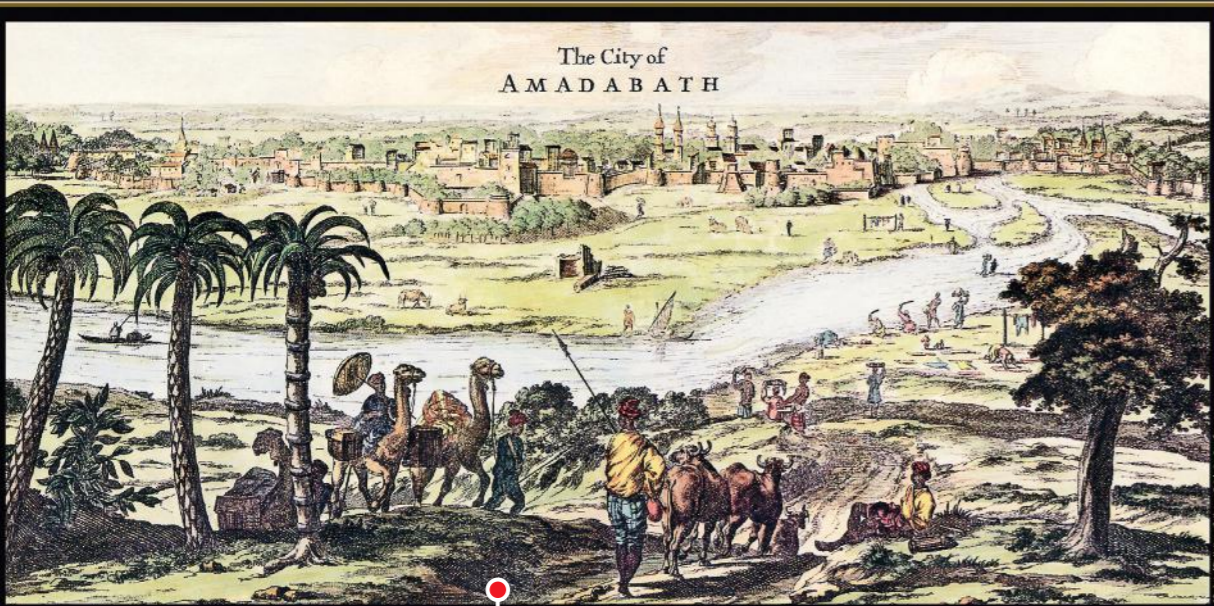
The past month has also witnessed debates and opposing views on the corporate sector and adoption of significant heritage places. The Red Fort and the Dalmia Bharat group have become the centre of attention. I have just conducted a weeklong studio with Anant Fellows at the Anant National University in Ahmedabad. The 35 young people mostly architects, planners and designers, were conclusive that ethical engagement, stakeholder benefit analysis and community ownership are benchmarks that all public private partnerships must consider, especially where the patrimony of the country is concerned. So, at last we have all woken up to real issues after a decade of rhetoric on Public Private Partnerships. Indeed, unintended consequences can be anticipated through constructive debates.



Traditional courtyards with Chabutra or bird feeders are traditional liveable spaces until recently. In addition to pigeons, the commonly sighted Chabutra in the walled World Heritage city, both inside and outside houses, are havens for parrots and sparrows that are rarely seen in the rapidly growing urban neighbourhoods.



Recycling of paper and other discarded waste is a welcome business in any place, especially the World Heritage City.



An early impression of Ahmedabad by Dutch traveller Philippus Baldaeus, 1672 AD. Quality research and documentation is quintessential for establishing the significance of heritage places.

Hawkers and vehicular parking are common outside most temples in India. Sri Swaminarayan Temple in Ahmedabad is no exception. Encroachments and recent constructions adjacent to heritage places often diminish the aesthetic ambience of places.

Heritage streetscapes with intricate wood work and architecture are endangered throughout India.



Ruminating bulls and cows are a common sight in many heritage towns in India.



Images courtesy of Anant Fellows - Joseph Asir and Jinal Doshi, Anant National University, Ahmedabad.

**NEXT WEEK**

Heritage Matters will profile Taman Mini, a miniature and representative landscape outside Jakarta, Indonesia. It could be a model to study for the representation of the 13 districts of AP in the new greenfield capital.