

Making heritage relevant to the local community, exploring the role of the digital technology and bespoke engagement strategies in heritage conservation :A case of erstwhile colonial settlements of Chandernagore & Chinsurah in suburban Calcutta, India

Abstract

In a scenario where cultural value is embodied in layered histories and narratives while the built heritage is defined by non monumental buildings, the challenges of urban conservation become far more complex. A unique cultural landscape of the Hooghly river where European colonial powers first set up their trading stations in the 17th century, are a living example of this contradiction. Now part of the suburban Calcutta, the once important trading towns of the Danish (Srerampore), Dutch (Chinsurah), French (Chandernagore) and Portuguese(Bandel) are grappling with issues of urban development, infrastructure and socio-economic development. While experts at conferences and seminars romanticise about the glory of the past, the citizens deal with the everyday issues of health, sanitation, property disputes and economics making heritage conservation an elitist dream. The fundamental question that one needs to answer is whose heritage is it anyway? At a time where there is a paradigm shift from expert driven to community led, the methodologies for urban heritage conservation demand to be re-written and re-interpreted to make heritage relevant to the local community. There is a far greater chance of the survival of this heritage with the community as its custodian, in the current situation where there is negligible legislation to protect these heritage buildings. What is then expected out of the local community when it is not even aware of what is its heritage?

In semi-urban India, where the community is insular with limited exposure to social media and the internet, a brand new interpretation for crowdsourcing has to be developed. Strategies for community engagement have to be bespoke for the local understanding in line with the psyche of the community. This paper will examine the challenges in the application of open source digital media and technology for heritage conservation through case studies of the Dutch in Chinsurah Project and the Heritage & People of Chandernagore project . It shall explore the role of the conservation professional as a design strategist in encouraging a sustainable grass root level movement, developing education and engagement programmes for the youth to inspire them and inculcate in them a sense of pride for their town's heritage. It shall also consider how heritage, memories and narratives shall be carried forward into the future and help shape the development of these towns.

Ms Aishwarya Tipnis,

Architect & Conservation Planner, **Aishwarya Tipnis Architects**

83-D, DDA Flats , Masjid Moth Phase II, Greater Kailash III, New Delhi-110048 India

T: +91 11 29221690 M: +91 9873926003 Email: aishwaryatipnisarchitects@gmail.com

Website: www.aishwaryatipnisarchitects.com