Urbanization and Environment
Prof. Jenia Mukherjee
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur

Module - 05
First Hand Narratives: Learnings from Research Projects
Lecture - 39
Urban Environmentalism Heritage: Insights from Bengal's Mini – Europe

All right. So, with this, which I would like to share from again the first-hand project experience. So, we did a project on this particular space, which is exciting space by itself. This is Bengal's Mini-Europe, and like what is my take away, so far as urban environmental heritage in concerned you know, and how I draw, drew, or I mean insights and inputs you know from my hands on experience from this particular research project. So, this is the lecture all about.

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So, yes, the concepts that I will cover here would be like urban, and ecological heritage. So, what urban ecological heritage is all about? Because heritage is something which has really you know, flooded the scene now, and it is being discussed by landscape architects, by people like from the civil engineering discipline, from people involved in humanities and social sciences research, to urban planners, experts, and who not. So, this is something which is being discussed by anyone and everyone under the sun.

So, it is very important for us to actually understand what do we really mean by urban heritage or more specifically, urban ecological heritage when we are discussing heritage for that matter. So, and is it really important to rethink and reorient urban, ecological and connotations like heritage. So, what is our understanding, what kind of lessons are we drawing from the different kinds of projects which we are involved with. So, this is something which I would like to discuss here.

And I would also like to shed light on this particular concept known as heritage scapes. So, for why it is important for us or rather, whether it is important for us to make a move from the concept of heritage to heritage scapes, so what are the additional dimensions that heritage scape is imbued with. And yes, as I discussed that this empirical frame of reference here is Bengal.

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So, I would like to also provide a bit of a background where actually you know that, that how we started this project, how we got this project, started it, and like the entire like technical process which led us to get exposed to what urban, ecological and heritage connotations are all about.

So, there was a call by or from ICHR and it was basically a joint research call between where two partners were kind of jointly collaborating on this particular topic of Cultural Heritage and Rapid Urbanization in India. So, these two partnering organizations where ICHR, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, and AHRC, Arts and

Humanities Research Council, UK. So, and in this call which was like launched in 2015 first, and then again in 2016-17. So, the, if you also see the call that is available online now as well.

So, you will see that you know, there they pointed out that within the larger rubric of cultural heritage and rapid urbanization in India, they wanted to, wanted researchers to basically explore how historical experiences of urbanization can inform contemporary issues and policy. So, and also like they would like researchers and academicians to kind of examine the role, that heritage can play in sustainable economic growth and social cohesion. So, I found this call to be very very significant. And definitely I applied for this, and got it.

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So, this provided me with the opportunity to get in touch with the researchers from UK who were also thinking about you know heritage and also cultural heritage and rapid urbanization and the connections between the two more or less on similar lines. So, and one must remember that you know this UNESCO ah formulation of intangible cultural heritage, and this UNESCO list of 2003, was very very crucial.

Because after this development of the concept of intangible cultural heritage, and the UNESCO lays like several researchers from multiple fields. They started discussing heritage from diverse entry points and from multiple vantage points for that matter. So, if you go to the website of UNESCO, you will see how they have tried to kind of define

this intangible cultural heritage and the kind of attributes they talk about when they discuss intangible cultural heritage.

So, these are the different characteristics on my left-hand side, that are there so far as ICH or Intangible Cultural Heritage is concerned. So, it has to be traditional yet contemporary, and living at the same time. It does not mean that heritage has to be a dead artifact, but heritage can also be living.

So, this was actually recognized and that is why this is intangible. So, it, I mean it should not be only like a building or a site or a river for that matter, but you know the several intangible components that also make you know a river for that matter or a building or the place and the space you know surrounding it.

So, definitely the focus was on inclusivity, representation, and also community based. So, it is not only about you know, again big buildings, and palaces, and palatial buildings, etcetera, but it is also about you know society, social cohesion at large, the role of community you know, and also communities as heritage. So, different practices, the folklores for that matter.

So, the several other practices that communities perform. For example, also ecosystem dependent communities you know perform since ages, and how these practices you know they had kind of nurtured their community through this continued like traditional practices, which had come down to us through intergenerational transmission of knowledge. So, again, I would encourage you to go through this particular website. Here you see and I find this diagram to be very very significant, and my scholars Shreyashi actually first drew my attention, you know to this particular diagram.

And so, if you go to this site, you will be able to engage yourself with the visual navigation, you know of more than like 500 elements that is there in this website and in the diagram. So, and this 500 elements it comprise of different like domains, themes, geographies, ecosystems, and what not, and also, most importantly their larger and deeper interconnections.

Urban Ecological Heritage

➤ towards the preservation of blue infrastructures of Kolkata

➤ from ecology "in" to ecology "of" cities

➤ beyond patch and mosaic towards basin dynamics

➤ socionatural rationale shaping heritage conservation

➤ HEUs - the history of the inheritance of the urban environ

So, with this like when I told you that when I applied for the call, my, during that time like in 2017. So, and 2017 you know the I did not know that I would be actually writing this book on Kolkata's canal yet, canals and wetlands or canal systems and wetlands yet, but definitely you know that was something in which I was deeply interested for, I mean since actually since my college days, university days.

So, when I applied for the call, my proposal focused on you know that we are discussing urban, we are discussing cultural heritage, so what about ecological heritage, what about you know ecological infrastructures of a city. And so when we are discussing like heritage, so if we say that the Adi Ganga on Kolkata is a heritage river. So, does the discussion actually end there?

So, is it sufficient to, it is ok; there is no problem in you know kind of perceiving the Adi Ganga as the heritage river, but what about the several other elements you know that also make way to this heritage. So, is it importance to also kind of shift our attention from, but and also along with I am not saying apart from, but also apart from and along with ecology into ecology of city? So, yes, what I mentioned was that yes that mosaics and patches are definitely important, but beyond that what about basin dynamics.

And this basin dynamics for a long period of time it had actually you know shaped Kolkata's urban environment at large. So, why should not we extend you know our heritage formulation or understanding to also include and incorporate this larger you

know discussions at the Basin level. So, I was definitely thinking about socio-natural rationale shaping heritage conservation. And that enabled me to kind of explain urban ecological heritage as also the history of the inheritance of the urban environmental predicament.

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So, yes, then, with this definitely I told you that when the proposal was selected. The this first one, against that small call got selected, and I got the opportunity to get in touch with researchers from UK. Fortunately, I got the chance to meet researchers from the University of Liverpool, UK , where they were passionate you know to kind of pursue a project on this particular stretch which is which has a very rich history and because this is the, this is Bengal's Mini-Europe.
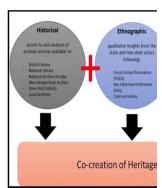
So, why Mini-Europe? Because it is a small stretch on the banks of the Hugli River. So, you see all small towns like Chandannagar, like Chuchura, Shrirampur, Bandel, Barrackpore, and these towns the small cities were actually ruled by different European rulers. So, it had a very rich history of like multiple European settlement in the small stretch, including the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the English and others.

So, this was, the stretch itself was historically you know very very vibrant and significant. So, this was the project then all about where then Liverpool and IIT, Kharagpur join hands to, you know, to kind of trace the history of this what we call the Hugli corridor or the Hugli River stretch from Bandel to Barrackpore.

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But this was not what was very interesting about this project, and the I mean why I was also quite passionate about this whole project from its design stage was that, it was not an academic project, it was not a purely academic project at all. Because from day one of the project design, the researchers, they talked about you know the action-oriented research that they wanted to do so far as this Hugli corridor was concerned.

And the aim of the project was finally, you know to come up with the HHMS, that is Hugli Heritage Management Strategy. So, what about this Hugli Heritage Management Strategy? So, it was you know the idea was to co-create. And why we are saying co-create?

Because this project involved not only academicians, but people from civil society, you know the NGOs, and the grassroots organizations, the bureaucratic circles, and all the for example, the West Bengal heritage commission, people from there and also the owner custodians.

So, owner custodians means you know people who were also, who owned you know the parental buildings, and several other people who were you know part of,   the people who were part of this project, they were also inhabitants you know from this cities. So, this was a co-creation exercise altogether, where the aim was to co-create an innovation toolkit of documentary and visual heritage resources.

And so, that you know people could also generate their livelihood, and so, that you know the economic prosperity of this particular stretch in the long run could be accounted for.

So, in that sense, the project was extremely ambitious. And if you see the title of the project you know it was the pilot project. So, the idea was that in the 2 years we will do an entire mapping exercise, we will complete the scoping exercise, and do the situational analysis. And then, that will provide a lot of cues to the policy makers, and to the people themselves, how to take this forward you know to the next levels. So, that was the plan.

So, we wanted to establish the role of the river as a conduit for cultural heritage condition, that is why you know the river played such an important role here. And of course, this Hugli corridor itself this idea was perceived and formulated, so that a cohesive community identity could be forged.

So, this project if you see, so this is the website of this particular project the archiam website. And if you go to this website, you will see the people who were involved in this particular project. And you will see you know from land from architects, landscape architects to environmental historians to people from literature background to people from diverse you know disciplinary backgrounds, they were part of this project, they were project partners.

And of course, this was transectoral because as I mentioned that this was beyond the academics, this was beyond the purview of academicians, to include you know people from multiple sectors. Including the policy making circles, including you know the people residing in, at this Hugli stretch, at the in the Hugli corridor. And this was the methodology, if you can take a detailed, look.

I do not really need to explain the whole of it, but its self explanatory. So, if you see this first methodology, we actually deployed. So, again the methodology itself is also like multimodal. It is a multimodal, multinodal methodology for the creation of this Hugli Heritage Management Strategy Action Plan.

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So, yes, river of course, playing an important part and the idea was to learn from community to give back to the community, you know the kind of big big agendas that these big international projects often remain imbued with.

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So, whole lot of activities took place. You know it was really fun because I mean we as academicians got I mean we got the opportunity to get ourselves involved and engage with multiple opportunities, multiple you know activities, which otherwise generally do not fall within the purview of you know academic research or academic research project.

So, we engage ourselves in diverse collaborative activities along with you know all the various stakeholders and actors who were part of this project. So, from photo exhibitions to celebration of Heritage Day, to you know participation or workshop you know on the river and so, river symposium.

And then, celebration of Heritage Day, celebration of heritage faced with school children, college students to make them aware you know about the heritage or the about the historical value of the Hugli corridor. And also, like our very serious formal meetings and engagements with you know the policy making circles.

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So, yeah so, many people were involved here. So, lot of co-involvements took place, and also researchers came from other places, and we use the comparative typological framework where we brought experts you know from INTACH to discuss you know similar yet diverse places like Pondicherry and Travancore, which could be restored you know as heritage towns or heritage cities.

And what kind of lessons can, could this project actually draw from heritage cities like Pondicherry and Travancore. So, and of course, like it was mediatized a lot number of like newspapers and dailies and online platforms, discussed this project because it was unique it was really a unique project in its own sense.

And it involved like organizations like INTACH. So, INTACH is a very very renowned, and it is a very strong like organization which was established in 1984, to kind of create awareness about heritage. And it has different cells and departments and like 190 chapters all over the country with its headquarters in New Delhi. And one of the achievements or accomplishment of this project is that it could actually, it could actually establish the INTACH Hooghly chapter. So, it was established only last year.

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But, honestly speaking, and I really need to be transparent here. This project also like had lot of limitations. So, it was a 2 year project, but of course, it exposed us to its limits in a more rigorous manner than its potentials. And number of ends remain loose, which we could actually, we could not, how do I say, we could not view these ends into a composite wave together, unfortunately.

Why? Because it was very ambitious. If you ask me personally, then, yeah, it was quite ambitious. And the deliverables sometimes like the focus of the deliverables were lost and sometimes the deliverables also could not talk to each other. So, there needs to be always in project deliverables, there has to be a, and in I mean there has to be a very strong inter linkage across the components, across you know deliverables.

But, I personally again I think that you know that this project was imprecated with, was kind of dotted with the challenge of deviated deliverables and unfocused you know kind of scattered project components. Inadequacies in mapping converging interest. So, again,

I need to be quite honest and transparent here that we definitely, it was very it was how do I say like it was unique in its sense because it tried to include and in involve everyone.

But I think finally, you know this plural seemed to be a problem, more problematic for this project than its potential. So, we could really face the problem of the plural and the potential of the plural. So, what I am trying to say here is that one also needs to be very sensitive and aware of the kind of challenges that even this kind of so-called inclusive projects can actually unfold.

So, and urban ecological heritage, the way I am trying to, the way I am trying to explain it, the way I am trying to think and rethink this particular connotation, I think the larger meaning could not be made through this project and that is why the; though you know of course, I must say that it was success in terms of delivering several in terms of delivery of several components. But the you know, but the core agenda unfortunately could not be accomplished.

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So, this then kind of provoked us to you know because we drew lessons, we also drew lessons from failures, we drew lessons from the limits, and then we understood like what we nearly need to do. So, when the project was completed in January 2020, then we immediately like at IIT, Kharagpur myself and some of my colleagues together, and of course, our mentors from different departments and school, together, we started thinking

about you know kind of facilitating this idea, taking this idea, pushing this idea forward because this idea definitely, had definitely it had a whole lot of potentials.

And it was rich, and it was something which needed to be done. So, we immediately started thinking about you know this move from heritage to heritage scape. And my colleague Anayan Mukhopadhyay, you know he definitely, he has played a very important role in making me understand how plural you know, this idea can be and this plurality with caution.

So, he like being a student or being rather a scholar from the literature background, he drew me to this idea of scapes which Arjun Appadurai had actually used. And by scapes we mean you know; so, heritage basically you still get the idea of its tangibility, but then when you talk about scape you immediately you know, you do not even need to explain it.

But you immediately accommodate and include the practices, skills, understanding, emotions, whole lot of you know intangible attributes that make way or that are like inseparable, that which are entangled you know with the connotation or the concept of or the physical existence of a heritage itself.

So, we immediately understood that we really needed to re-ontologize the urban, ecological, and heritage. So, what is urban then? Beyond its you know urban boundaries. So, what is ecological then? So, ecological of cities, of spaces, and for cities, for spaces is not limited to ecology in cities or ecology in you know geographical territories its beyond that because it again political ecology you know kind of enable me to think about ecological, in terms of, in terms of metabolism, in terms of flows, in terms of sustainable flows.
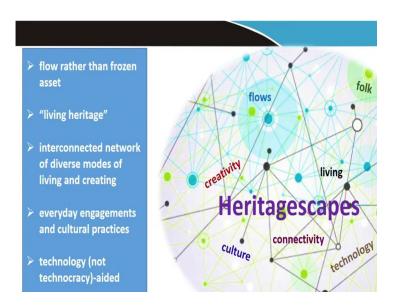
You know between the concrete and nature you know all kinds of social arrangements, and the socio technical processes, the apparatuses, the material attributes along with the cultural ones that actually shape you know space. And also, our identities and belonging and connect, our connections to it.

So, yes, so immediately we kind of planned a workshop, but we did not want to be we really did not look forward to be too ambitious because we definitely wanted to provide a proper weightage to the feasibility factor. And that is why we thought about we thought

of you know kind of discussing the heritage potentials of the urban riverine heritage scape, so far as Bengal, as the state or Bengal, as the geographical unit of reference is concerned.

So, it was a very exciting workshop where you know scholars presented about the kumors and the boatmen, and the you know clay makers, and the portuas, and several other communities who are part of our you know Bengal's urban riverine heritage. Again urban, so the city again, city the river they remain as significant conduits, but the discussion cannot be restricted to the urban.

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So, this is how you know the workshop went on for like 2 days. And I mean it was extremely stimulating because like the kind of concepts that is we discuss, it enable us to I am again emphasizing on this to make a move from like heritage to heritage scape, where we discuss creativity, culture, connectivity, technology, folk, living, everything, and their deeper and larger connections.

So, like again my colleague and also our mentor PPC and my colleague Anuradha Chaudhary together, I mean again it was a, it was like, it was a great activity, where we also brainstorm about like the, we thought like if heritage is an acronym then how can we expand this idea. And this is something which has been developed by Anuradha and then PC sir also added his inputs in this idea.

So, heritage was expanded in this particular way. And you can see you know that this idea of heritage is actually heritage scapes. So, historically enriched rational interpretations-cum interventions using technology aided grassroots engagements. So, here we heritage scape is about interconnected network of diverse moon of living and creating.

So, here heritage, it is like it is a process, and it is not the end product. So, it is not a monolithic monochrome, but it is rather an opening, not a closure and. So, where we also talk I mean heritage is living heritage, it is not about dead artifacts, but it is also you know about living beings, living artifacts, there have been representations, imaginations, re-imaginations of our cultures, places that we inhabit you know everything enmeshed together in that sense.

So, it is about flow rather than frozen asset and it is about definitely everyday engagements and cultural practices. And it is also about technology, but technology is like, technology remains socially aware, and technology is like wrapped within larger goals and agenda of humanistic endeavors, right. So, it is not technocracy, but this is heritage also definitely need to be technology aided socially aware technology.

So, yes, so we the major like argument that we kind of, that we could formulate here is that when we discuss heritage and make this move from heritage to heritage scapes, and this move remains crucial because it provoke us to not remain restricted to the yearnings of a nostalgic past.

But, it help us to construct like just and resilient a future which is so very inclusive and which like a kind of accommodates everything, you know marginalized people, different social sectors, the environment, and their larger and deeper interconnections. So, this is what we could learn from this project. And the major significance of this project was it helped us to kind of, by adding to the epistemological layers, it actually enable us to re-ontologize urban environment and heritage for that matter.

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CONCLUSION: Key highlights

➢ from heritage to "heritagescapes"

➢ framing and forging an inclusive meaning and rationale of U

So, yes, this is what we have discussed here. And go through some of this references.

Thank you.