

**Course Name: An Introduction To Urban Ecological Heritage: Theories and Applications**

**Professor Dr. Jenia Mukherjee**

**Humanities of Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur.**

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**Kolkata's heritage – Applying the urban ecological heritage lens**

Kolkata's heritage beyond tangible dimensions. In this presentation, we will cover what we mean by heritage of Kolkata. Kolkata, the city of Kolkata is already renowned you know it is known as the city of joy, it is known as the city of palaces. So, what does it imply when we talk about heritage of Kolkata? Does it imply built structures, colonial and native structures, also the intangible aspects and also you know the water heritage so far as this specific city is concerned all you know all of them. So, what do we mean by historic sewers you know which also constitute engineering heritage of the city.

And finally, we also talk about the expansion of the concept or the connotation of heritage and why is it important for us to internalize you know this expansion. So, the city of joy and you see the map here and this particular part the pinkish part the pink color over here, it comprises the Dalhousie area CBD which means Central Business District area and this is old Kolkata, but this is also colonial Kolkata and Kolkata of course, was developed as a colonial city. And in this area I mean this area like it flaunts, fabulously flaunts British administrative, public and commercial buildings. And apart from this we have this you know this yellow part which is the Chitpur area which also comprises like palatial structures and buildings apart from the colonial edifice.

And this is mainly indigenous styles, but it also to an extent reflects European style. So, there is an amalgamation of different styles such as Palladian, Baroque, Gothic, Neoclassical and also Indo-Saracenic styles of architecture. So, these are some of the historic buildings and architectural heritage of the city of joy. So, here you see the town hall, Victoria Memorial, the Nizam Palace and this is the Jorashakho Thakurbari, the house of Rabindranath Tagore, the first Bengali and Nobel Laureate of India. And here you see the marble palace of Rabindranath Malik.

So, the philanthropist and the person who belong to the Shubharnavani community and very elite and like one of the very elite personalities from the then Kolkata and also this beautiful courtyard of the Bose family or the Bose building from Bagbajar. So, apart from the tangible heritage Kolkata of course, is very famous so far has in so far her intangible you know cultural aspects and heritage components are concerned. So, from Boipara, College Street Boipara to Rashogolla to the Tramways and to the Kumors called the this

clay idol making you know as a craft which has brought so much of visibility and exposure to the city. And I am emphasizing on this because in the year 2020 Durga Pujo was nominated as part of the or you know is to be enlisted in the representative list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity the UNESCO list into 2020. And this is a very interesting book it has not been published yet, but you can read the concept of this book from the internet and this book has been written by Shashoti Bhattacharya and the name of this book is Potters without wheel the title is so intriguing.

So, potters without wheel ethnography of the mritshil piece in Kolkata. So, she says the Kumartuli potters they do not consider themselves as artisans because they consider themselves as artists because they do not use the wheel for making the clays they use their hands as an artist uses his or her hand. So, they use their hand and that is why they are the potters without the wheel and that is why they are the artist and not the artisans. So, this book is going to be very interesting because through this ethnographic method through the application of ethnography qualitative you know investigations on the mritshil piece of Kolkata. Bhattacharya is or will be bringing out the structural relationship between urbanization, globalization, neo liberalism and you know these the idol makers of Kumartuli and their indigenous occupational as part of indigenous occupational categories and also identity politics.

Now there is lot of hue and cry. So far as protecting safeguarding Kolkata's built structures are concerned because Kolkata also you know she draw her nomenclature is like a city of palaces in a hoary past. So you know so far as this heritage movement is concerned there is lot of discussions about the preservation of the colonial edifice in the central business district area or the conservation of the big palatial architectural you know structures or the buildings in the northern part of Kolkata. But barely seldom there are discussions there are you know considerations so far as the standard residential buildings of the middle class Bengali you know in the southern part of Kolkata is concerned. So this is where Amit Choudhary he has started a movement he has launched movement since few years where he is keen to talk about and you know protect the standard residential buildings that otherwise you know do not gain much limelight.

So far as the heritage conservation movement is concerned. So Amit Choudhary is interested to really talk about and to preserve these buildings in the southern part of Kolkata and because he says that Kolkata's architecture is unique and of course, its disaster destruction it is catastrophic for the city. And so Amit Choudhary is also trying to you know save these structures from the fell hands of philistine developers or promoters in the local panis. So I think considering this movement becomes very very important so far as the heritage activism and the heritage conservation discussions for the city of Kolkata are concerned. Now coming to the very interesting part what is the heritage of Kolkata? So

when we are talking about heritage should we only talk about the built structures ok, then we move on to also talk about the softer elements you know Durga Pujo or Boipara or tram lines or and tramways or Roshogolla.

But apart from that we need to talk about water and riverfront heritage. So far as this particular city is concerned because this city owes everything its origin, its functioning, its survival everything to waters. The name Kolkata it is a Bengali nomenclature and according to some Kolkata means if you just you know segregate these two terms kol and kata. So kol means coast or shore and kata means you know being cut or kata means being cut by inlets or creeks. And some of the other places in the city or nearby like Krikrow, Ultudanga these are all names you know which manifest the riverine topography you know the riverine water topography of Kolkata.

So this particular these images these illustrations and the maps are from one very interesting paper by Sujan Rabordhan and Shob Poonipal from the department of architecture Jadupur university where they coined a particular term which they call Ghatscape. So Ghatscape implies you can see you know Ghatscape here. So this is their conceptual framework. So Ghatscape, Ghatscape implies river run pavilion with steps descending into the river and it is a distinct physical form so far as this particular place or space you know are concerned. And it constitutes different layers the Ghatscape constitute different layers of geography, geomorphology, hydrology, ecology, ritual, sacral, social and cultural means right.

And they try to come up with this historic cultural landscape approach which they say is a tool or is a methodology which then enables them to actually talk about the preservation of the larger ecological cultural landscape of Kolkata which is actually an attempt to preserve the rich history of you know this riverine topography. So this I found to be very very important. Now another very important understanding is about what is known as the engineering heritage of Kolkata. So what is the engineering heritage of Kolkata? So I came across a paper where one of our faculty members from the department of civil engineering professor Dhrubojoti Sheth is also a co-author and beautifully you know I have never come across you know this epithet, but beautifully they have used you know this particular epithet called engineering heritage of Kolkata. And by engineering heritage you see this map they are actually talking about the sewer lines, they are talking about the sewerage system of Kolkata and you see this is the historic sewer canal which has created an inter linkage between the core city area and the river Kulti which is the major outfall channel for the city of Kolkata.

And this scheme or this you know combined drainage sewage scheme dates back to several colonial officials most importantly you know colonial official called William Clark who

came up with his or who devised his combined drainage sewerage plan or scheme where you know he talked about the like two important canals playing very important role in terms of the city's drainage and sewerage function. So two major canals SWF this is the storm water flow channel here you can see it here and this is a dead Bidadhari river part of which became dysfunctional and Bidadhari river was officially declared to be dead in 1928. We will learn about this in great details in the next course of a presentation and, but here this is from their understanding this is from their you know article that this of course, you know this is the heritage of the city because what is a city? A city cannot function without its water in water out system. So for the operation for the functioning of a city it needs the river front, it needs water for the drinking purpose as basic utility and it also needs you know like drainage channels sewerage outlets and also outfall channels for that matter. And the way the British you know kind of designed and developed this scheme and the changes that these like this system had seen in the last few decades or centuries like this is amazing because it this is it is on this that the like hard infrastructure of Kolkata is actually standing.

And to a great extent we are discussing so much in terms of resilience urban resilience and cities like capability to bounce back to disasters to risk and this is so important because without this engineering heritage of Kolkata there is no point of having a discussion about the heritage of a particular city. So, a city not only means things that we see you know at the surface level, but it is also about the wires and the you know the complicated structures and the pipelines and sewers and everything that are also you know kind of are hidden that we do not see which a part of you know this invisible urban the invisible urban if we may put it like that. So yes I completely agree with them that you know a discussion on Kolkata or Kolkata's heritage is impossible without you know shedding light on the historic sewers or which is known which can be properly conceptualized and perceived in terms of the engineering heritage of the city. Now I draw your attention to a less explored saga, the saga of mutual inheritance you know the saga of sustainable flows between the city and her wider ecological infrastructure in the form of the East Kolkata wetlands. So, we will discuss in details in our next lecture, but I think there are lots of discussions about you know the importance the significance of this keystone or cornerstone ecosystem the East Kolkata wetlands.

But I do not think I have not come up with articles or with write ups or even I have not heard discussions where East Kolkata wetlands has been perceived as the ecological heritage of the city. Now what happens if we apply the heritage lens and try to understand the importance of East Kolkata wetlands. So, this is something which is a less explored you know area which we would be exploring in this particular course applying the lens of urban ecological heritage and why is this so important because this is very important so far as the contemporary discussions and debates you know on Kolkata's resilience are

concerned. Because there is a big debate which is going on that whether Kolkata is environmentally vulnerable or ecologically subsidized because on one hand the historians specifically historian Devjani Bhattacharyya for example, she thinks that Kolkata is environmentally vulnerable because the British you know just to promote and to facilitate you know and to accomplish their colonial calculus of rule to gain to earn revenues to have like very promised profits over investments they reclaimed the city the I mean later which become Kolkata. So, they reclaimed the city from the delta from swamps or from marshes, but they should have never you know designed the city on such a otherwise like volatile vulnerable space.

So, this is a major argument, but they did it out of their you know profit out of the profiteering and profit making intentions and agendas. But on the other hand if you go through like the writings of Dr. Dhruvajothi Ghosh who was the sanitation engineer who passed away few years back. So, he his argument is completely different. So, he says that Kolkata is ecologically subsidized because of her you know river front because of her wetlands because she is actually located at the mouth of the delta because she is a delta city and that is why she is ecologically subsidized because she has like river Hooghly the Bhagirathi Hooghly as the channel providing drinking water to the city which is one of the very important distributaries of the Ganga.

On the other hand like there is this Kulti gang there was Bidadhori and there is Kulti river which are all like distributaries of the river Ganga very important distributaries and there is no dearth of channels and inlets and creeks and streams in the in this lower Ganga basin where Kolkata or Calcutta is located. And that is why the cost of living and the because the cost of like infrastructure built infrastructure was very less on the city because she was she is ecologically subsidized. So, she depends on her East Kolkata wetlands you know for dumping and disposing her effluent and in return she gets fish at very low cost and East Kolkata wetlands is just at the back here of the city it is located in the back here of Kolkata. So, Kolkata till date does not have a separate sewage treatment plant and that is why and that is how Kolkata becomes so, subsidized. So, like now which argument has greater weightage this is something which we will discuss next, but I think you know this debate is important to show us that why we need to apply an urban ecological heritage lens approach or perspective when we are discussing urban heritage.

So, and I have used this particular concept of what I call web and web means weaved existential belongings and I really like this you know this dotted, but very messy and meshy meshed up you know like diagram. So, and which is a web and which also demonstrates and showcases you know weaved existential belongings. Now, when I say belongings here I of course, means that belonging is something that we carry. So, it is our possession, but when I say possession I do not mean it in terms of you know like the

political theory of possessive individualism, but I mean it you know as part and parcel of what we carry with us which are you know part and parcel of our existential and essential you know like reality. And so, like it is part and parcel of our survival of our functioning and of the days or the future that we can envision we can think of in terms of the of what we do what we are able to do with this existential belongings.

So, that is why I think this saga or this you know the story or the narrative of the mutual inheritance of this larger city nature relationship becomes so, very important. So, these are some of the references and I think the all these references are very important. So, you see this article I was mentioning about the engineering heritage of Kolkata and this is the article which talks about this engineering heritage of Kolkata where this historic sewers they. So, the authors call this sewers historic sewers and of course, because they are part and parcel of the rich drainage sewerage history of the city and on this the city is actually resting and relying on we should not forget. So, heritage is not only about the glorious glossy past, but it is also about you know the invisible city the like second nature and it is also about you know that part of the city which is like very messy, very complex and very technical and which we sometimes cannot see because you know they are they are positioned at the underground level.

Then like this is the book which is about to come out like 2022 is the copyright, but the book is coming out next year January. And then this article by Sujandra Bardan and Shopani Pal where they have talked about this historical cultural landscape and they have used this beautiful coinage called the heart scape of Kolkata. So, here we have learned that the city of Kolkata is also known as the city of joy, the city of palaces flaunting colonial edifices and trans cultural architectural structures and styles. We have talked about you know these palatial buildings and the very famous renowned architectural designs and you know the buildings and the sites in the northern and central part of the city mainly during the time of the British rule. And then Kolkata is also renowned of course, for not only her tangible, but also her intangible heritage with the Durga Puja being India's official nomination for UNESCO's 2020 representative list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity which were already discussed in one of her initial you know presentations on global declarations conventions and the agencies. And then how the river front or the ghats of Kolkata are given importance should be given importance as spaces of cultural heritage and how this is being I mean this is a new development and that is why there is an epistemic shift in the understanding of heritage. And so, there is also recent scholarship on engineering heritage of Kolkata historic sewers as historic sewers storm weather flow channel and dry weather flow channel and that is why and here I emphasis there is a need to understand heritage beyond tangible dimension that is that is why this is there in the subtitle. So, it is we need to there is need to understand heritage beyond tangible dimensions and this gives an entry point to understand the mutual

inheritance to appreciate you know the saga of mutual inheritance. So, far as the relationship between the city of Kolkata and her wider ecological infrastructure are concerned which we will be covering in the next sets of presentation because we will be applying more specifically the urban ecological heritage lens when we discuss urban heritage.