REGENRATIVE URBANISM OF PANJ TIRATH

The transformative Gandhian cultural landscape of South Gujarat, India

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ABSTRACT (RESUMEN)

Architecture is an amalgamation of the built environment, traditions, ecology, and sociocultural practices of human habitation. It has an innate power to raise aspirations, instill a sense of pride and belonging, and nurture social behaviour. Post Independence of India in 1947 A.D., there was a need to define the language of a new habitat that would characterize the future of the nation. This research is based on five settlements in the proximity of Surat city which we would propose to be identified as '*Panj Tirath'* which is the Gandhian cultural landscape of South Gujarat; a paradigm of regenerative urbanism at a regional scale. These places are deeply influenced by the Gandhian philosophy and have been sustained, re-interpreted, and bolstered with time. These settlements include Dandi, Haripura, Vedchi, Bardoli, and Dharasana and have been pivotal to India's freedom struggle. The result of the research is documented narratives of multi-disciplinary perceptions of urbanity and the transformations these five places have observed post-independence.

Keywords (Palabras clave): Cultural Landscape, Living Heritage, Development Praxis, Gandhian Philosophy
Thematic Block (Bloque temático): Analysis and organization of the Landscape (análisis y ordenación del paisaje)

1. Introduction

The built environment of a place comprises of and emerges from a complex interplay of environment, ecological milieu, cultural practices, and ideological underpinnings in a constant state of flux. It has the power to generate an emotional response at a communal level as well as an individual level and is simultaneously shaped by them. There was an immense shift in the paradigm of shaping architecture that was observed in the post-independence of India after 1947 A.D (Prakash, 2002). The process of shaping Architecture shifted from being locally created and conceptualized in a response to ecological limits to building up of new imaginations of hábitat not necessarily emerging from the local context. This quest to shape a new way of living was not only a response to the newly attained Independence or transfer of power but also a mark to reimagine hábitat as representative and symbolic of being independent. However, this did not come entirely as being disjunct from the past and there were deliberations to establish a continuum whilst also responding to the globally evolving architectural language. At the time of post-Independence deliberations on the imaginations of hábitat, there were two prevailing broad ideological umbrellas. The first one, Gandhian philosophy thrived upon the idea of a nation as the summation of its village which is self-sustaining, socially progressive, inclusive, and primarily agrarian. This also observed the village as being technologically advancing and having the highest quality of life to its citizens with equitable access to resources establishing a regenerative system of habitation being a part of the natural world. Whereas the second one, Nehru's vision of a modern India comprised of planned developments of new technocratic cities, and industrially advanced which would keep India at par with the West. Subsequently, this led to the formation of cities like; Chandigarh, followed by Jamshedpur, Bhubaneswar, and so on. Many of these cities were being developed as greenfield cities which did not observe much continuum with the past, cultural roots, and social-ecological fabric that evolved over millennia. Seventy-five years post-independence, India's trajectory of development and realizing the ideal way of living has pre-dominantly been biased towards the notion of an 'urbane city' (edited by Wolfgang Sachs, 1992) (Goldsmith, 1995). However, the exponential influx of population from rural areas burdens these cities and is posing threats to our ecology, resource distribution, and natural habitat. Additionally, it also elevates inequality, inequity, marginalization, poverty, and poor living conditions. Whilst, this nature of urban transformation brought about a sense of surprise, newness, and aspirational gaze into the future it also created a new perception of the city as an entity existing in isolation and further separation from the natural world it was inevitably dependent on. The regenerative processes of living systems which cities are an invariable part of became less palpable over time, bringing a sense of detachment from the source and the cycles. This over the period of the next seventy-five years as observed till the present has brought to front ecological crises of unprecedented scale and intensity (Shah, 2021).

In this given scenario, we must (re)view and reassess our definition of 'modernization and development' and shift the paradigm to 'Regenerative Urbanism'. The urban paradigm which understands ecological limits as foundational to the imagination of the built environment and allied processes (Andreotti Vanessa et al., 2018). This translates into a moving sense of urbanity, reinstating a deeper sense of flows, that define a place and sustain it. We need to look at habitat holistically over the prevailing classifications as a rural-urban binary and as a cultural landscape that observes a deeper relationship between human and non-human actors (Brenner Neil, 2014; Crowley et al., 2021). One such significant cultural living landscape setting observed in the western region of India is what we would like to call 'Panj Tirath'. Panj stands for five in Katchhi, Sindhi, and Punjabi language and Tirath stands for a pilgrimage to these five distinct landscapes as a unique inseparable journey encircling Surat as a centre (Gangar, 2019). This comprises of five settlements in the proximity of Surat city which is the Gandhian cultural landscape of South Gujarat. These places are deeply influenced by the Gandhian philosophy and ways of life and have been sustained, re-interpreted, and bolstered with time. Additionally, these are the places where historicity is not just been celebrated but lived. These settlements include Dandi, Haripura, Vedchi, Bardoli, and Dharasana (figure 01) and have been pivotal to also India's freedom struggle. While Surat is emerging as a prominent urban centre in the Indian subcontinent with an estimated population of 7 million inhabitants, the Panj Tirath settlements represent its rurban counterpart with population ranging roughly between 2500 for Vedchhi to 8500 for Bardoli. When these are observed as a unique cultural landscape rather than separate settlements they potentially bring a unique sense of place as a dynamic regenerative system, with the hinterlands simultaneously informing the notions of development in the centre of the *Panj Tirath,* which is currently the city of Surat. It builds up a quintessential discourse on reflections of the Gandhian way of life informing cities or larger settlements.
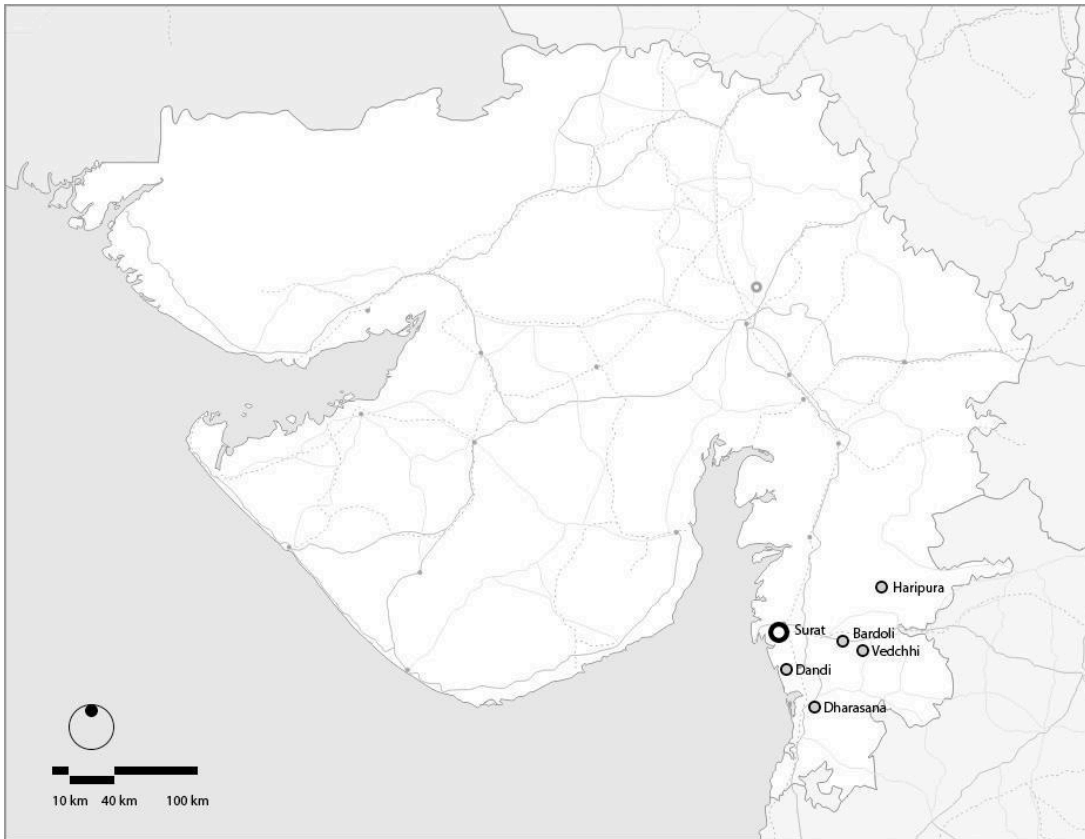
Fig. 01 Panj Tirath locational setting

2. Research Methodology

This research was undertaken in three parts over a span of eight years. The first phase comprised of short participant observation and a Research by design study undertaken by the author at the Swaraj Ashram Vedchi for a duration of six months. The next phase comprised of researching the five places including Surat using on-site semistructured interviews and experiential observational análisis being a part of a multidisciplinary collective of researchers. Artists, writers, and singers, which was also a multi-generational group.

The third phase of the research included an on-site interview with people who have inhabited Haripura for 5-8 decades, the indigenous communities, and studying local archives and secondary literature studies. The research investigates the aspects of habitat, ecology, lifestyle, and community living. The result of the research is documented narratives of multi-disciplinary perceptions of urbanity and the transformations these five places have observed post-independence.

Though this research has been undertaken over a long span, due to the mostly self-funded nature of engagement the research requires further deeper engagement with dedicated funded Project type engagement in the future. The outcome of this and future research will be used to get Panj Tirath recognized as UNESCO's cultural landscape category.

3. Transversal Observations

The first phase of research brought to the front lived experiences of inhabiting in Swaraj Ashram Vedchi. This was instrumental in understanding the unique architectural perception and ideological foundations of not non-conventional educational settings. This acts as a place of nurturing the youth in alignment and continuum with Gandhian ways of living; which essentially are founded on living with a light ecological footprint with consciousness of the local as a guiding force of all stages of life within the socio-ecological whole. The notion of being industrious and not industrialized shapes an individual into a globalized self and the community as a whole. The village becomes an aspirational habitation for the younger generation while the teachers quite

often observe an angst in the younger students when they first encounter the new digital platforms and are developing their perceptions of economic advancement as being paralleled to development. The Gandhian notion of development which is based on the actualization of one's fullest potential using local means becomes a guiding force to shape a distinctive way of life that is not imitation and homogenization of the built environment based on externalized visual models. The research by design engagement observed proposing a *gaushala* (cowshed) which would be developed as emerging from the educational pedagogy of the aashram which recognized and lived the philosophical construct of *Vasudev Kutumbakam,* one earth on family and cohabiting with other species as an invariable whole.

The second phase of research observations included experiencing the five settings of Panj Tirath.

3.1 The first setting was that of Dharasana. Post the march to the Dandi beach declaring civil disobedience towards unjust laws that denied sovereign making of salt, Mahatma Gandhi halted in Dharasana raiding the Dharasana salt Works in a non-violent manner, which is where even in the present times there is a unique salt-making technique using dried reeds mounds along with pans observed, figure 02.

Fig. 02 Salt-making mounds in Dharasana

3.2 The second setting which is the Dandi beach itself observes a colossal sculpture commemorating the Dandi march and an open-air museum in addition to the indoor collection housed inside the bungalow Saifee Villa. This setting however brings a unique dichotomy of experiencing architectural representation of Gandhian ideologies the first (figure 03) with the Sculpture and manicured park a capitalistic extravaganza of the Mahatma and the second setting (figure 04) which is a humble tribute to Mahatma Gandhi with a small sculpture resting below a giant banyan tree almost set amidst wilderness. This makes one introspect and reflect upon civilizational interpretations of Gandhian ideologies that have evolved in conjunction with neo-liberal economic transformations and emerging transnational language of architecture disembodied from the ideological roots.

Fig. 03 Colossal statue of Mahatma Gandhi in Dandi commemorating salt making as a mark of historic non-violent civil disobedience.
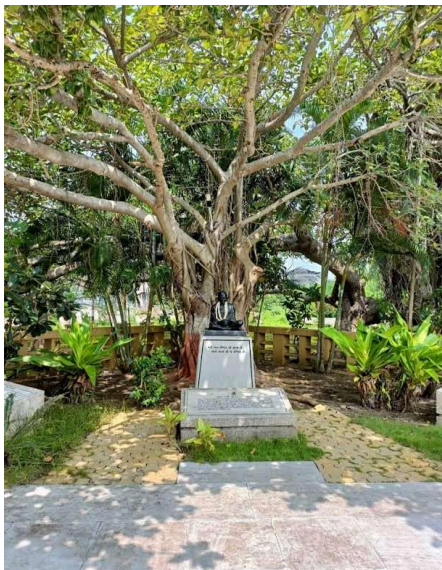

Fig. 04 Local statue of Mahatma Gandhi in Dandi less than half mile in proximity of the colosal statue at Dandi.

3.3 The third setting of Haripura is a unique small settlement with prominent public squares which are reminiscent of the 1938 political meets which are brought to life with the statue of revered leader Subhash Chandra Bose (figure 05). Many of the multi-generational households in the settlement have the younger generation living off-shores however the people still residing fondly narrate vivid oral tales from the freedom movement which are etched into each Stone of the house, arcades of the public buildings, gargoyles, trees, and public squares. There are buildings that were specifically erected to house the Indian National Congress dignitaries which fondly house the photographic documentation of the freedom movement which was building up.

Fig. 05 Chowk, Haripura

3.4 The fourth setting was the school of Bardoli, which is an all girls school with architecture crafted in local earthen materials. The education in a place like this becomes a process of rooting oneself into the local ecological wisdom invariably an act of being a Gandhian in the 21st century (figure 06).

Fig. 06 Bardoli Gandhian School

3.5 The fifth setting was the Swaraj Aashram Vedchhi (figure 7), which had evolved over the past eight years as visited by the author as a researcher for the first time and the second time with the collective. The precinct of Aashram had evolved into a living Gandhian laboratory with food being grown locally and understanding the deeper ecological web of life. This brings across a critical discourse of realization of the *Rita* the higher truths and the real green revolution which is internalized as opposed to the post-1960s industrial agricultural green revolution that was enslaved upon the developing economies such as India. Deeper insights into Gandhi as a lived experience emerged in conversations with Umaben, daughter of late Narayan bhai Desai and Dr. Surendra Gadekar living and passing on the Gandhian ways of living through living it as an embodied experience of knowledge.

Fig. 07 Swaraj Aashram Vedchhi

The third phase of the research brought to light narratives of a continuum of the struggle for freedom and the spirit of *Swadeshi*; local and self-governance which is foundational to deep democracy. Haripura became a center for many more dissenting movements such as rice *Satyagraha* as a representation of freedom and sovereignty to grow, to be able to decide its local economic value and the food sovereignty safeguarding the farming families which became extremely threatened across the country and especially in the western part of India; Gujarat and Maharashtra and the northern part comprising Punjab, Haryana during the era of imposed green revolution. The attempts at commercialization of local food systems and the introduction of herbicides, and pesticides to make farming a market-dependent system were opposed, and the long multi-generational wisdom of growing locally with indigenous knowledge was held as a higher mark of self-reliance and governance. As part of the rice *Satyagraha* (Figure 08) women of Haripura came out with sacks of rice, of all different varieties and colours to the public squares, *Chowks,* and streets to build up a public dialogue around the issues of agriculture and food sovereignty.

Fig. 08 Rice Satyagraha, Haripura

4. Analysis

These narratives of the *Panj Tirath* create a complex palimpsest comprising ecological wisdom, socio-cultural roots, and political struggle, resulting in a new language of the landscape and architecture, and a strong people-centric history of the commoner, of their persistent quest for freedom and sovereignty. The key analysis that emerges from this research is as follows;

1. The *Panj Tirath* cannot be looked upon as mere five separate settlements with the city of Surat as a central big city but they comprise a continuum of the Gandhian cultural landscape which has the capacity to address complex issues of our contemporary times such as; climate chaos, socio-economic polarization, and deeper intertwined ecological crises.
2. Recognizing the capacity of this continuum of the landscape and the Gandhian ideology has the potential to transform the sense of 'urbanity' which not only looks at the city as being central but builds a model of multi-nuclei regional setting that transforms the relationship of communities with their hábitat.
3. The architectural language that has shaped over the past seven decades represents the post-independence dichotomy of urbanizing India concerning its imaginations of hábitat, invariably making it a place of contemplation, reflection, and rooting.

5. Conclusions and Way Forward

The results of this research bring the possibility of expanding our imagination of hábitat not limiting it to the confines of a city but observing it as an interconnected dynamic region. It brings the immense potential to undertake a regional planning process within the ecological regenerative limits of a place. This is by essentially examining the deeper interplay between human settlements and the natural world as a cultural landscape. The Gandhian worldview becomes even more pertinent This forms a cultural landscape that is not just a pilgrimage but a new urban system. In the future, this will potentially shape newer paradigms of living within ecological limits or being Gandhian in a city. The future research trajectory should entail deeper investigation into each setting with attempts at undertaking regional planning.

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