THE SABARMATI STORY: MEMORY OF WATER AND NOTIONS OF PLACE

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Abstract

An eco-semiotic perspective[1] on nature explains how it exists and gets transformed in four stages: stage zero being wilderness, one – interpreting, identifying, describing, nature two – material interpretation, translation, and production of nature, and three – virtual nature (as represented in the classical and formal arts for instance). A vernacular tradition may be understood as situated in stage one, wherein people convert the physical proximity to nature into a space replete with meaning and association. In a recent interdisciplinary workshop at CEPT University, India we explored the semiotically constructed notions of space and geography in villages on either side of the Sabarmati River in Gujarat.

The presence of the river has particular topographical and spatial impacts on the region, and a number of myths and stories have been developed around its presence. What is interesting is that the river has been dammed, has now nearly dried and patterns of life and livelihood along its banks have significantly changed.

The myths however remain, and have become ingrained in the settlement and landscape through built symbols such as temples, shrines and other religious iconography or more elusively, in the oral narrative traditions of the local people. These icons and narratives take on the responsibility of being repositories of a vernacular worldview constructed around associations with the river, even when the essence of the myths i.e. the river is no longer present.

[1]*The ecosemiotic view has been developed on the basis of writings by the Tartu School of Semiotics, Semiotic Ecology by Kalevi Kull, Floyd Merrell etc)*

Introduction

The relation between nature, people and semiotics as seen in the narrative and mythical landscapes of India is the central concern of this paper, and its relevance to vernacular architecture lies in the fact that notions of place and meaning are central to the vernacular architecture discourse. We argue that an eco-semiotic perspective on the relationship of humans with nature can help understand the process of 'making meing', and that this process is mediated through 'signs' and elements that come together in a fascinating array of systemic order corresponding to the geographical order. This paper therefore, explores the idea of a vernacular worldview, and the mental constructs of inhabited space, rather than with the built object. The site of investigation of this paper is the Sabarmati River in the state of Gujarat in Western India. We seek to understand the specific meanings attributed to the riverine landscape – meanings that continue to persist even though the river itself has dried out and the landscape substantially changed. The river continues to flow in the minds of the people, through iconic figures and institutions that stand for flattened layers of history of the settlements in the region. Today, these memories and icons have no visible connection to the water, but interestingly, are deeply connected to the geographical landscape in the 'narratives' of the local inhabitants. This kind of conceptualization about imaginations of place and nature even when the physical setting transforms is an interesting starting point for exploring the persistence of vernacular world views in the face of changing times and context.

Vocabulary of Water – the workshop [2]

This paper is based on an interdisciplinary workshop conducted by the authors at CEPT University, Ahmedabad in November and December 2009. The basic premise of the workshop was to explore through, oral narratives, how people converted proximity to nature into a system replete with meaning and association. In conceptualizing the workshop, we began with an eco-semiotic perspective on the relationship between humans and nature. In semiotic terms, human perception and interpretation change nature, creating a 'second' nature. Humans tend to change, manipulate, and take nature under control to build a 'second' nature. Human culture adds to nature by supplementing it with additional information and values. There are four stages of nature and its transformation:

Zero – Nature in its wilderness (what is out there)

Stage one – Identifying, interpreting, describing nature (in myths, folktales, through the naming the river and other elements, and through narratives)

Stage Two – Material interpretation and translation of nature ('produced' nature such as parks, gardens, river fronts)

Stage Three – Virtual nature – nature as represented in the arts, in science etc

The broader question for the workshop was how the recognition and categorization of the surroundings of the Sabarmati in human terms has changed the natural landscape of the Sabarmati into a memory of narratives for the people who could no longer physically 'see' the river.

[2] *This paper is dedicated to the entire team of students and faculty at CEPT University who participated in the workshop, 'Vocabulary of Water'.*

The ecosemiotic principles that formed the basic premises for the workshop were:

1. Nature is dependent on various contexts or situations.
-Structure and classification of nature
-What it means for people
-Personal or social relations to the components of nature – one's participation in/with nature

2. The Role of Memory
-Relationships between different types (short-term, long-term) memory in culture
-Valuation of Sabarmati
-Differences in seeing and understanding the Sabarmati
-Signal character of the behavior of people in relation to Sabarmati (when living close to the river/away from it, talking a walk down the river, reading about it in the papers/TV, speaking or dreaming about it)

3. Formation of Nature
-Constructing a notion of the Sabarmati environment using linguistic, aesthetic forms

Sites of Investigation and method of workshop

Initial discussions on selecting sites of investigation for an ecosemiotic study dealt with understanding the social/ cultural landscape along the Sabarmati in Gujarat. The area we studied were villages on either bank of the Sabarmati River – Agalod, Juna Sanghpur and Mahudi on the west bank, Sadra, Sanpad and Prantij on the east bank.The methodology consisted of collecting oral narratives, mapping the 'space' of the stories, identifying the protagonists and events by looking at the emergence of patterns of meanings that seemed to have strong 'systemic' implications.

Some of the systemic patterns we identified were:

1. The notion of 'cursed' versus 'blessed' land - Mahudi and Sandpar stories

2. More male deities on west bank versus female deities on east bank

3. Ghantakarna Mahavira – one of the important deities in the Mahudi temple - as a warrior protector figure for pilgrimage route –an interpretation based on the history and socio-political dynamics of the Mahudi region

4. The Sabarmati as pavitra(pure)river versus the Hathmati as apavitra (impure), their meeting as not a sangam (confluence) of the two rivers but the Sabarmati as stopping the Hathmati in its course.

5. The presence of local river goddesses unique to a locality - Habelma in Mahudi – rather than a broader conception of the Sabarmati as a venerated figure.

6. The persistence of the motif of the 'large ears' in mythical figures at Mahudi, and the recurrence of the notion of listening to the troubles of people by leaders.

What we would like to highlight from the workshop findings above are two distinct processes by which meaning has been ascribed to the landscape of the Sabarmati –

1. A flattening of a number of layers of history into an iconic religious figure of Ghantakarna Mahavira at Mahudi.

2. Values attributed to complimentary pairs of entities in the landscape such as either bank of a river or two rivers at their confluence.

Mahudi and the story of Ghantakarna Mahavira

Ghantakarna Mahavira is worshipped in a famous Jain temple located in the village of Mahudi by the Sabarmati. The village is separated from the river by a patch of ravines, while the temple is situated near the edge of the village. The temple is a famous pilgrimage spot for both Jain and non – Jain people, and the village is insignificant and not important for the large number of visitors to the temple.

The main deity at Mahudi is Padmaprabhu Swami, a tirthankar or spiritual leader typically worshipped in Jain temples. Ghantakarna Mahavira is a yaksha or protector figure, but incidentally, the shrine of Ghantakarna Mahavira is larger and centrally located. Most visitors themselves are likely to recall Ghantakarna Mahavira as the primary deity. The Mahudi temple is also very famous for sukhdi, a sweet preparation that is first offered to Ghantakarna Mahavira and then must be consumed within the temple premises itself. In short, all indications point to Ghantakarna Mahavira being an important figure at the Mahudi temple.

In documenting the myths and stories of the Mahudi village, we find a number of different influences that have possibly contributed to the mythology and iconography of Ghantakarna Mahavira as a figure of worship. Mahudi is located along a pilgrimage route for ascetics of the Jain community- it is situated between two important Jain centres of Agalod to the north and Ahmedabad to the south. This pilgrimage route goes along the west banks of the river, and has a number of sites where pilgrims could halt; Mahudi is one such location. Historically, the region around Mahudi was occupied by number of small royal households in the area, who were often in conflict with each other. The area was also home to dacoits and was largely unsafe for the Jain ascetics to travel through. It is plausible that sometime in the past, the Jains established a pact with some local royal leader for protection on the pilgrimage route. The presence of Ghantakarna Mahavira as a warrior protector figure in a Jain temple complex is possibly inspired by this history, and maybe even by a particular Rajput leader from the past.

The Motif of the 'Large Ears'

The figure of Ghantakarna Mahavira is portrayed as having large ears. We found three references to the motif of a large ear and the importance of listening in the stories collected, which may possibly be connected to the present day iconography of Ghantakarna Mahavira. First, some Buddhist archeological remains have been found in the region, indicating a Buddhist presence sometime in past. Buddha is usually portrayed as having large ears. Second, the establishment of Ghantakarna Mahavira at the temple is said to have happened because of Buddhisagarji, a venerated man who was performing penance for the betterment of the people of Mahudi. Buddhisagarji saw a divine figure descending from the sky towards Mahudi, but as soon as he opened his eyes, the figure disappeared. He immediately set about trying to capture the image into stone. But he was unable stone

good enough to sculpt, and used a washerman's stone block to carve the image. The image he had seen had large ears, and the figure of Ghantakarna Mahavira as it stands in the temple has the same.

A third reference is to a mythical king – Ghadeshwar - of the Mahudi region who donned the guise of a donkey every night to go out into the streets and listen to the problems of his people. Interestingly, the motif of the large ear appears again in the form of the donkey persona of the mythical king. It is likely that the relationship between the warrior like Ghantakarna Mahavira and the Jain deities in the temple could be rooted in some form of a protection pact between Jain pilgrims and royal figures of the Mahudi region in the past. In the process of deifying through history, the figure of Ghantakarna Mahavira is juxtaposed with images of other important figures in history and mythology such as Buddha and Gadheswar, and that result in the large ear motif seen in Ghantakarna Mahavira today. Snippets of historical events, myths and religious figures have all fused together in Mahudi, and all that stands in evidence of these layers of history is the worship of the warrior like Ghantakarna Mahavira at a Jain temple.

The cursed and blessed banks - stories from Mahudi and Sanpad

The two banks of the Sabarmati at most locations are in stark contrast to each other – one is a highly eroded ravine edge and the other, is a gentler, fertile beach like edge. The name Sabarmati itself comes from Shwabhramati (*shwabhra* – ravine) meaning one who bears ravines. Mahudi lies on a ravine edged bank while the village Sandpar lies on the opposite bank. The story of the mythical king of Mahudi – Gadheswar – who roamed the streets of his kingdom at night in the guise of a donkey, goes on to say that the queen did not approve of the king's night time wandering and ordered the army chief to burn his donkey guise. However, the king's soul resided in the guise, and as the guise burned, the king's body started to burn. As he died, the king cursed the queen that the land in which such a queen hand been born would become rocky and barren. And this is how the Mahudi region came to have the ravines.

Facing Mahudi on the other bank is the village of Sanpad, which is located at the confluence of the Sabarmati and Hathmati rivers. The delta region of the two regions is very fertile and cultivated even today. There are two stories that describe how the land around Sanpad came to green and fertile. A group of basket weavers once came and settled in the village of Sanpad. They were however a troublesome lot, prone to drinking, using foul language and disturbing the peace of the village in general. The villagers tried to convince them to change their ways by saying the Goddess Kali who protected the village would get angry at their vulgar behaviour. The group refused to listen and argued that if Kali really protected the village, then she should make her presence felt, and turn their bamboos green. The villagers prayed to the Goddess and the next day, the basket weavers' bamboos had turned green. Even today, the Kali temple at Sandpad has green bamboo clusters in the compound [3].

These two stories – of Mahudi as a cursed land

[3] *There is another story of an ascetic who correctly answered a king's riddles, and requested the king to build a Kali temple in the Sanpad village as a prize. On being asked the reason, the ascetic replied that the land around Sanpad was barren and with the blessings of Goddess Kali, the two rivers meeting at Sanpad would flood and make the land fertile. The king built the temple and the river flooded bringing fertile silt into the delta region.*

and Sanpad as blessed land – directly correspond to the fertility of the land on either bank of the river. What is interesting is that a geographical feature of ravines and fertile delta land becomes a mythical blessed or cursed space in the minds of the people who inhabit it.

Pure and impure rivers: the metaphor of 'churning'

During the workshop, we deliberated on the confluence of the two rivers in Sanpad – the Sabarmati and the Hathmati, the latter being a small tributary of the former. In talking to the people of Sanpad, we found that their manner of referring to the rivers was entirely different. The two rivers were not simply converging at the point; rather the Sabarmati – a purer river – was stopping the waters of the relatively impure Hathmati and causing the floods in the delta region. This reference to notions of purity comes primarily from the idea of churning as a purifying process (Rosin, 2000). Since the Sabarmati traverses a longer course, it is churns more, and is therefore purer that the shorter Hathmati. This highly distinction between the two rivers only became through conversation with the local people of Sanpad. Their choice of words - that the Hathmati was 'stopped' by the Sabarmati – was in stark contrast to our description of the 'confluence' of the two rivers. This also highlights the difference in perception of the rivers – the nuanced distinction made by the local people and the similarity perceived by us, the outsiders.

Conclusion

This paper asserts in a Heidegger vein that 'people make places'. The complexity of 'place' results on account of its deep entrenchedness in the human existence. The underlying question that this paper addresses is, what are people actually making when they make places? Since the ontology of place is connected to human situatedness, making places means that one is making something with respect to situating one self. There is an equivalence relation between humans and places: no places exist without humans and, vice versa, no humans exist without places. Place is a precondition of human existence, and making places is thus to reinforce their placeness. This view can also be said to correspond with Bill Hillier's interpretation of the physical environment as both the reflection and the conveyer of social structure and interactions, where particular environmental features contribute to, and reflect the particular human worlds manifesting in a particular place.

A fascinating construct of the Indian identity through shared, living landscapes that transcend all its cultural and regional complexities has been well established in academic scholarship. These landscapes referred to as 'storied and mythical' have been studied more for the manner in which they are articulated that reinforce not one, but multiple layers of meaning. This mythology has also been linked to India's geography- its mountains, rivers, forests, shores, villages and cities. Diana Eck (1998) elaborates on a very important aspect to this link in the context of Pilgrimage in Hindu mythology that is the foundation of nationhood on the lines of

Hinduism. She says that this landscape is actually a 'system' of reference in which each of these pilgrimage points functions as a part of a whole fabric of pilgrimages. And in the end, the cumulative value of the landscape lies in all the linkages between the points. She goes on to establish the systemic elements that constitute this landscape that are knit together through repetitions and homologies. This kind of systemic structuring is of course supported by a cosmology in which the entire universe is construed as a system and hence it is flexible enough to allow for a pluralism of interrelated parts.

This kind of conceptualization about imaginations of collective beliefs has been an interesting starting point for specific instances of processes like those in the north Gujarat region where the Sabarmati river was once in great flow, and in which associations with landscape and geography, while connecting with larger notions of 'identities', also help to retain iconic meanings despite a sense of loss of real nature. By unearthing the specificities, localized and, dependent on 'memories' of a river and a river bank the patterns brought out in this paper speak volumes about notions of vernacular architecture that are inhabited at the level of the 'semiotic', which is the cultural unconscious. And it is at this level that no environmental ravaging can penetrate or destroy their habitations strewn with patterns that they weave in accordance to their proximity (both physical and mental) to a nature, that 'once was' and 'continues to be'. It is hoped that this paper will give rise to an alternative perspective on the notions of vernacular architecture in India that needs to be seen as narrative expressions of belief systems and people's understanding of nature around them.

References

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