



A DISCOURSE ON HOW ABANDONED HERITAGE CAN BE VALUED- A CASE OF SIDHPUR

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Abstract

Sidhpur is a multifaceted municipal town with a rich historical background of the Bohras Muslim community who came to the city more than 100 years ago. The Bohrawads are the neighborhoods of the Dawoodi Bohras, and their unique havelis have been the most despised identity markers of the city. In recent years, the impact of diasporas and exile of the indigenous Bohra population has been enormous, leading to the abandonment of these wads. The aim of the research is to understand how the existing heritage can be understood, valued, and utilized. As these havelis are owned privately, the stakeholders have different takes on the maintenance and conservation of the insignia of tangible heritage. Any intervention for resurgences requires the analysis of all the metaphysical and physical layers of these wads. This research is an effort to examine the desire for these areas' resuscitation and uncover the causes of the opposition to preserving them as living historical monuments. It may contribute to enriching the literature of regeneration processes which can be attempted in Indian context.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Heritage, Abandonment, Exile, Holistic.

Introduction

Brief Description

People and places are deeply intertwined in their existence, identity, and evolution. Particularly, a place of residence or habitation plays a crucial role in influencing a person's identity because it shapes their lives. (Relph, 1976). In the same context, Sidhpur is one such town which has ubiquitous cityscape with a dark nostalgia. This feeling is manifested here in its own right and meaning. Bohras who were the majority of Sidhpur a century ago. They are now settled across the globe owing to their business and now rarely inhabit their homes. It is a municipality town in Patan district in the Indian state of Gujarat (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Location Map of Sidhpur, Gujarat (*Source: Authors*)

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It is situated along the Sarasvati River. Their settlements are known as Bohrawads. They come to the town only for important occasions like marriages. Much is owed to these wads as they manifest their identity. These Bohrawads are the built heritage of the city and bring the cultural identity of this ethnic group. Furthermore, it is the knowledge of a single individual as well as of many pluralistic classes.

The impact of diasporas and exiles on the indigenous Bohra population has been enormous in recent years. And this has led to the abandoned state of the town. The built heritage, on the other hand, continues to exist with little or no maintenance and human intervention. The discourse remains here: how can the existing heritage be understood, valued, and utilized? The abandonment of these wads is leaving an obvious resort of demolition. Nonetheless this indeed is causing the loss of a rich repository of heritage. Even though the dwellings are no longer a part of people's everyday life, and their original role has vanished, the memory of the wads lives on. The meanings of these places and attachments are encapsulated in their sense of place memory. As these havelis are owned privately, the stakeholders have different takes on the maintenance and conservation of the insignia of tangible heritage.

The American photographer Sebastian Cortés's extensive photographic documentation work on the Bohrawads brought it to the notice of many. He states that Sidhpur is a beautiful stage set where the main players have left. History has a way of settling the score and bringing a sense of melancholy to a place. Most of the photographs are of the spaces because these buildings, which are influenced by colonial architecture, represent a sense of loss that appeals to me. The humans there are merely color strokes. Also, as mentioned above, he expressed the state of this built heritage marvelously. But ironically, the state of these Bohrawads is declining and turning towards debris.

Historical Background

The existence of Bohras can be traced back over a century. In the 11th Century Ismailis Muslims settlements emanated in Sidhpur. Around the 16th century, a phase of evangelism began, and Dais, the religious representatives of the Dawoodi Bohras, began preaching. In 1539, Syeda Yusuf Najmuddin (24th Overall) the first Dai was appointed from Sidhpur, and it was a significant event for the city to notice. The traders from the city earned a tag of 'Vaharau' which later was distorted to Bohras. As everywhere in the colonial India, the laying of railways incredibly changed the city's outlook and upturned the fortunes of these petty merchants, Sidhpur remained no different. (Kadi, 2010). The construction of the Rajputna Malwa railway provided new prospects. They had no qualms about crossing water, unlike their religious counterparts. As a result, they obtained fortune by travelling and trading to far-flung places.

In 1877-78, the Rajputana states of India, one of the cities of Rajasthan Sirohi imported grain at high prices from Sidhpur while facing famines (Gahlot, 2015). Despite the apprehensions in the region, this indicates Sidhpur's prosperity as a commercial town. The Great Gujarat Famine of 1903 (Chappanyo Dukal) provides a chance for Bohras to demonstrate their philanthropic zeal, which is rewarded by the Sijajirao Gaekwad with a tract of land that is now Najampura. A year later, the city's housing construction was at an all-time high.

The capitalist advent to the city – the Bohra traders

The Bohras are a Shia Muslim sect that may be traced back to Egypt's Fatimid Caliph-Imams and Tunisia's Fatimid Caliph-Imams. The Caliph dispatched a small contingent to establish a footing and persuade many people to convert to their faith. One of the main reasons for their success was that they were able to fill commercial gaps in the supply of goods and services. They quickly rose through the ranks of merchants, traders, and service providers in a variety of industries. Sidhpur is a palimpsest of landscape layers inscribed over time, as well as a juxtaposition of Hindu and Islamic architectural and urban planning traditions.

As mentioned previously, these traders did not restrict themselves to the distance and brought not just the pecuniary gains but also was bestowed upon by the Art & Architecture styles of alliance countries. Resulting into bedazzling mohallas (neighborhoods) which have distinct English style and a markedly European piquancy reflected in their magnificent havelis (Figure 2). This is a direct result of being enamored by the styles of their 19th-century commercial counterparts in the western world. Clearly, they were inspired by Victorian architecture.

Growing income resulted in radical lifestyle changes. Most families only have one adult male in the home at any one period of the year, along with female family members, kids, and the elderly. The remaining working men would be gone running the family business in a far-off location. With change of time and aspirations, more members left the home and settled for good.



Figure 2. Colorful fascinating Facade of Bohrawads (*Source: Authors*)

The memory, identity & architecture

Cities are undergoing transformation and constant change. They are constantly changing and evolving in some way from what they were in the past—getting bigger, smaller, better, or worse. Undoubtedly, Sidhpur has also experienced a shift with time. The vintage housing stock is spread over 18 mohallas namely Najampur, Zampa Bazaar, Begumpura, Saifepura, Mahidhapura, Rahimpura, etc.

The various pastel-colored facades appear unified by aesthetics, unit size, and construction materials that are all comparable. The surface is treated with ornamented columns, brackets, and moldings. The aesthetic value of these built heritages makes an asset but as the town sits at the center to architectural heritage circuit of the state tourism. But these heritage mansions remain to subsist with less or least maintenance and interventions despite in ASI listing. In a self-effacing manner, some locals refer to these as makans (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Victorian influence on the exterior with indigenous Otlas of a restored Vintage Bohra House (*Source: Authors*)

The house facades are unique despite following the similar color palette. These showcase a variety of aesthetic expressions with intricate details in wood, pilasters, and extensive stucco in interiors. Each manor has its own distinctive, classy monogram that displays the family name. The year of building will be noted above the monogram, and a prayer is generally engraved above the main door beneath the monogram. Every nook and corner of the interior as well, are festooned includes photographs and canvases put in elaborate wooden frames. The lovely pastel-colored outside walls are also embossed with geometric tiles and intricate friezes. Floors are covered in exquisite geometric patterns but are often obscured by beautiful Persian rugs. The ceilings are plain but decorated with graceful plasterwork. The deep narrow plans of Bohra houses of have distinct typology of shared- parallel-walls where three or four rooms are in succession one behind the other. A typical House comprises of Ota which is high plinth at the entrance, Deli which acts as arrival space, Avas which is the main court of the house, Parsali which is portico, Ordo is the nomenclature for the rooms and the Agashi which is a terrace space. Each of the spaces has designated functions attributed to their cultural identity. The planning systems and collective living are manifested in the spaces and their functions. The individual house plans resemble the typical pol houses of Gujarat. Certain elements borrowed from local architecture, such as high plinths or an ota, create a transitional space at the entrance to the home which is seen prevalent in pol Houses. Family members usually sit together on these ota and chat, especially after dark. Equal Continuous Levels Raised Pedestals - Ota is the first interactive space at the entrance as limited privacy or footfall requires further entrances into the home (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The continuous same levels of elevated plinth – Ota (Source: Authors)

These houses, which are typical of a region with a hot and dry climate, have a small courtyard in the center and are deep yet narrow due to their central location. Keeping up with traditional structures, each house shares walls with the next and is constructed mainly with wood. The spaces are linearly arranged as per the privacy.

The eventful return, accompanied by a group of children, came as the head of the family returned home from his trip. Women would peek from their jharokas (verandahs). These Jharokhas have particularly lower sill levels. The enclosed balcony or lowered sill level of the windows on above floors are the spaces for the women in the family to keep an eye on the street as well. This is a direct influence of the cultural practice where the daily chores are performed by the women of the family while directly seating on the floor. Even though these residences are now occupied in less numbers, the associative memory remains intact.

The main problem is to recognize the sites where memories are stored while maintaining the authenticity of human experience. In the case of Sidhpur, these vintage houses are the totems and rewind the history and experiences of the inhabitants. The people of Sidhpur take pride to be identified by their houses.

Materials and Method

The instigation to study these Bohrawads began with the visit to the city. The guided tour to the ubiquitous heritage was intriguing to the real sense to the Bohra mohallas and later a documentation process allowed the deeper understanding of each layer of this unique settlement and its heritage value.

The resource for the literature study remains the cited books, research papers and newspaper articles. Additionally, oral history shared by current owners or residents is instructive. They mentioned the several past events and experiences in connection with the buildings and their surroundings as stored in their memories. This intrigued the quest towards the nuances involved in the place, people, and memory. Undoubtedly, the photo exhibition by Sebastian Cortés showcasing the beauty and legacy of the city left no chance to leave the stone unturned.

Also, the various government agency involvement and policy documents are studied and analyzed for the deeper understanding of the government's vision towards the settlement. The analytical study is then performed, in reference to the precedent studies of similar scale and typology.

Results

Depopulation of Sidhpur- the exile & abandonment

The grandeur of these Bohrawads dismay the heart as these vintage houses lay empty, abandoned, and dilapidated. Though the Bohras have always been the patron of art, architecture, and culture but they are failing to keep up the burden of holding up the encumber of these built heritages. These houses are kept, owned, and partially maintained for occasional visits. The tranquility of Bohra lives was often disturbed and exposed to catastrophes like famines brought on by monsoon failures, earthquakes, the regular overthrow of one dynasty by another, and religious persecution.

Since Sidhpur fails to provide enough opportunities to these ever-growing ambitious traders; the exile was faced by the town. The first probable émigré began in the early 20th century, at the time of the community's religious leader, Syedna Abdullah Badruddin RA, when a famine ravaged Gujarat. Syedna advised the Dawoodi Bohras of Sidhpur to leave their hometown. A decision that prompted the community to start looking for business opportunities. Riots also broke out in the city in 1992. The peaceful Dawoodi Bohras and their havelis have never borne the burden of religious anger. However, their businesses and markets have been targeted, major Indian newspapers report. This added to dissatisfaction and partially caused relocation to create stronger ghettos in Mumbai, Surat, etc. The other reasons for exile have been the better prospects in the larger cities which seemed to be missing in Sidhpur. The Bohra community is progressive and nearly 100 percent literate. The younger generations have migrated for higher education to various institutions in India and abroad.

Presently total population of the Bohras in the India is approximately 12, 96,000 and in Gujarat alone it is 8, 14,000 i.e., 62.8 percentage. And Sidhpur had only meager percentage of 1.3 of the total population in the state. Irrespective of the populace the tangible heritage component is significant but facing deterioration due to reduced inhabitation. But the City is also experiencing rapid decline in the population of Bohras from 24.68 percentages to the 17.64 percentage in the recent times i.e., from 2001 to 2011 as per Census of India of respective year. The decline is almost 1 percent annually which is alarming.

Globally Dawoodi Bohra communities are well knit and are enumerated through a system of identity cards. Wherever there is a large community settled, the Dawat (the Mission) in Mumbai deposes an Amil or deputy Amil, trained at the Al Jamea-tus-Saifiyah theological institute in Surat, to act as the religious and temporal leader of such a community. This is important to understand the community living as their strength as it may help one to speculate the survival of the town.

Since, the memory recollects people have been moving towards bigger and thriving cities from Sidhpur but now the condition has reached where the rate of return is diminishing. And this is causing concern as the prides in these havelis are lost in time (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Partially Emptied houses on Zampi Pol (*Source: Authors*)

Discussion

The Quest- Conserve or not to be Conserved.

Maintaining the significance of the architectural heritage or location is the goal of conservation. Both material and intangible things can have significance. Conservation of historic buildings and sites must conserve their significance to the society in which they are found. Although this meaning could evolve over time, taking it into account guarantees that conservation will always have a modern logic supporting it. This demands that conservation be seen as a multidisciplinary endeavour. In case of Sidhpur, the decline in the population is directly impacting the vintage house stock. These housing stocks have reduced from 6000 to 1500 dwelling units in these 100 years of existence. The quantification of the loss is 45 dwelling units per year. This numeric value may include complete demolition or cataleptic renovations. By analyzing the moribund percentages of population and dwelling units, we can predict the magnitude of abandonment.

It may start with fewer or slightest modification as seen in Figure 6 where Otlas of the house is enclosed with a parapet wall leaving least scope of interaction.



Figure 6. Transformation of Otlas (*Source: Authors*)

As mentioned earlier, these spaces have undeniable importance in societal bonding. These Spectacular houses were majorly hand crafted and had ephemeral materiality. This probably also added to the challenge to preserve them. Also, the wall sharing system of construction leads to double the dilapidation as clearly seen in Figure 7.



Figure 7. Dilapidation of the Bohra Haveli (*Source: Authors*)

The identity of the city, as the essence of syncretised culture, lay in the constructed heritage of the Bohrawads, which is rapidly losing its authenticity (Figure 8).



Figure 8. City losing its identity with continuous modification (*Source: Authors*)

The vision as stated in the Sidhpur Master Plan (SMP) 2021 is to create enabling spatial and land use-planning framework. The future growth and development of the urban centers will be critical to define the framework. As proposed by the SMP, the promotion of the planned growth and transformation to an urban center is imperative and a tool to attain the vision of development. SMP also guides to provide a framework for traffic.

But it is neither majorly acknowledging these heritage settlements nor there is any discourse regarding their conservation. As rightly mentioned by Anjali K.Mohan, according to an urban and regional planner, development planning that results in the creation of enclaves and the preservation and protection of cultural heritage causes gaps in the development fabric (Mohan, 2010). The SMP's approach is alike in creating a creek between the practice of development and conservation of these built heritages.

Sidhpur has the highest rate of land for industrial use i.e., 750 rupees per square meters in the district as per Regional Office, GIDC, Mehsana. This implies the strategic location of the city may bring greater business opportunity. But these development policies are being ignorant towards the encountering effect of existing heritage and proposed extensive industrialization. The proximity of proposed industrial development to these Bohrawads envisioned in the revised land use plan will bring major threats to the built heritage. The SMP is envisioning addition of population and creating more opportunities for the in migrants. While being oblivious to the émigré of the indigenous population. The in migrants may require housing stocks but their needs will not be in sync with existing opulent havelis. The transformation is already defacing the Victorian ornamented facades to compensate the present needs of the users (Figure 9 & 10).



Figure 9 & 10. Transformation of Otlas – Openings and Materiality to suit the present needs (*Source: Authors*)

But there is a silver lining as it renders emphasis on tourism and provides an avenue for the development with a heritage perspective. This in turn offers prospects in acknowledging the value of these Bohrawads. This may indeed will cause the conservation discourse to begin and localized actions to spur.

There are four types of tours offered by the Gujarat tourism department, which have specific circuit based on the interest of the tourist, and dismally none of them mentions Sidhpur. Only under cinematic tourism, Sidhpur gets a mention where the department documents it as a place where the film shootings have been done or can be done with permission. The city may be recognized now for its built heritage and receive a mention in the tourism circuits. The gap persists between the SMP and the tourism department as the objective of making the city regionally connected has missing threads.

Since the recognition and acknowledgement of the Bohrawads are still not substantial, there remains a contestation between the owners and the government agencies and conservationists whether to conserve or let the demolition continue.

Conclusion

There is always a challenge in heritage resource management where the protection and maintenance of heritage sites lie with the individual owners. Hence, the fiscal component of conservation is not shared or incentivized by the government. The survival and continuity of the intangible and tangible components of these Bohrawads are under the same subjugation. The owners of these havelis have relocated and make occasional visits to the site. Hence, these havelis are being maintained the least.

A tourist-oriented re-awakening of this quiescent town is the need of the hour. As it lies along the tourist circuit of Gujarat, there could be potential for developing this site as a living heritage town to be experienced by travelers and tourists. Similar towns and hamlets in Italy have faced similar shrinking populations. Trevinano is one such example, having been able to win government funds for rejuvenation. The government has earmarked 1 billion Euros in rejuvenation funds for 200 of the hamlets (Hughes, R., 2022).

In the 2022 Budget of India, Rs 3009.05 crore was aimed for Ministry of Culture for 2020-21 which will have contribution towards architectural conservation. It is also suggested to establish an Indian Institute of Heritage and Conservation under the Ministry of Culture, with the status of a declared university (Annual Budget 2022-23).

These steps can be considered on the way forward towards heritage-oriented development. Like the discussed precedent, Sidhpur can be aided with funds to restore the glorious past.

Unorchestrated revivals of many rural settlements were seen in the pandemic as people escaped the cities and chose to remotely work from small countryside villages or smaller cities and towns. Many of those who did not have their abodes in such places missed this opportunity. A pandemic has shown the possible potential for towns like Sidhpur to be revived with this mindset also. The city, if facilitated with basic amenities and convenient services that provide a certain level of comfort, can become a great getaway from the bigger, bustling city. Taking instance of Sidhpur, residing in vintage houses, and experiencing the community living are added benefits.

Considering the top-down approach, policy level intervention is imperative for the conservation of this town. It might to be done with the assertion of little unique and alternative leverages to the Haveli owners. They can be aided for conservations, or transferable development rights can be provided to them. This may trigger and drive the process of conservation. Also, a participatory approach may offer a pull in providing enhancing socioeconomic inequality in Sidhpur's cultural monuments by positive conversation amongst the many parties.

Sidhpur has a treasure of intangible, metaphysical heritage due to an abundance of myths, legends, festivities, and rituals associated with community living. Taking stakeholders' aspirations and expectations into account, the best proposals for regeneration or rejuvenation of the city can be attempted.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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