

Geeta Wahidua

# FUTURE OF THE PAST

The organization of annual conference of ISOLA on the theme of *Ancient Cultural Landscapes of India* and staging of interpretation of the play *Andha Yug* written by Dharamvir Bharati for radio in 1954 (based on the events of the last day of the Mahabharata) recently were two events that triggered within me the idea of penning few thoughts about the role of history in our lives.

Bhanu Bharti, director of the play in an interview stated, “In the second decade of the 21st century, we are still grappling for solutions. Everything seems to have failed. We have not learnt any lessons from history. With this play, I am striving to create a yearning for some kind of sanity, for security in today’s madding times.”

Can history become a basis of questioning the present? Can it offer valuable insights in the way we see our present world? Does it have a role in guiding our future?

History is a repository of related and isolated happenings, stories of various dynastic rulers and governments set in different times around the world. On one level, it is a great source of enrichment to our souls as any other work of art. Past images, stories of personalities, places and times that we have not experienced first hand are intriguing and interesting. Books and films on history hold our full attention span at all times. History evokes memories and nostalgia. At the same time, it is understood for its uniqueness as something totally different and unconnected to our present world. Here lies the irony; the subject in actual terms is an isolated entity holding less meaning and relevance in our lives.

History is *we*. Every past moment is a small step, stage and a phase that is an integral part of what we are now. Everything in past has added in some way to make our present. The first step towards making some sense of history is to accept this fact. Unless we are able

## a sentimental and marginal attitude towards studying history is a big hindrance against a rational and practical approach towards the subject

to appreciate this point of view, we will judge our historic characters and events without a sense of belonging and real attachment, and therefore will have a very peripheral understanding.

In fact, history holds promise for future. From it, new lessons can be learnt and new directions be carved out and followed. A sentimental and marginal attitude towards studying history is a big hindrance against a rational and practical approach towards the subject. One has to look at it as sequence of unique practical real narratives of significant aspects – political, social, economical, cultural and environmental – of the world community at large set in different cultures and times.

Now, when the present generation with its aspirations in the new dynamic and liberal world order is trying to create a separate identity without a burden of the past but with aspirations of the future, it is time to start thinking about a critical engagement between past and present, on the relevance of history. The most important step is to create and evolve distinctive and imaginative ways of studying history with a specific focus of looking at it as practical history, something to which we can refer to, relate to and use in present times. The study of history in a structured and well thought of manner may hold learning for us for understanding our present.

History is a complex process of changing times, holding roots of our present identities. An understanding of it as events and processes set in specific and unique contexts is the right way to approach the subject holistically. For example, the study of historic gardens, settlements, forts, town planning etc. may be done in a holistic manner taking in account various layers of social, economic and political contexts. The knowledge of contextual history may create within us a mindset where we are empowered to look at it as an extremely intriguing learning process with lessons in related but never identical aspects from the past. Such references can then become case studies for students, researchers and professionals working and practicing not only in subjects related to history but also in modern domains.

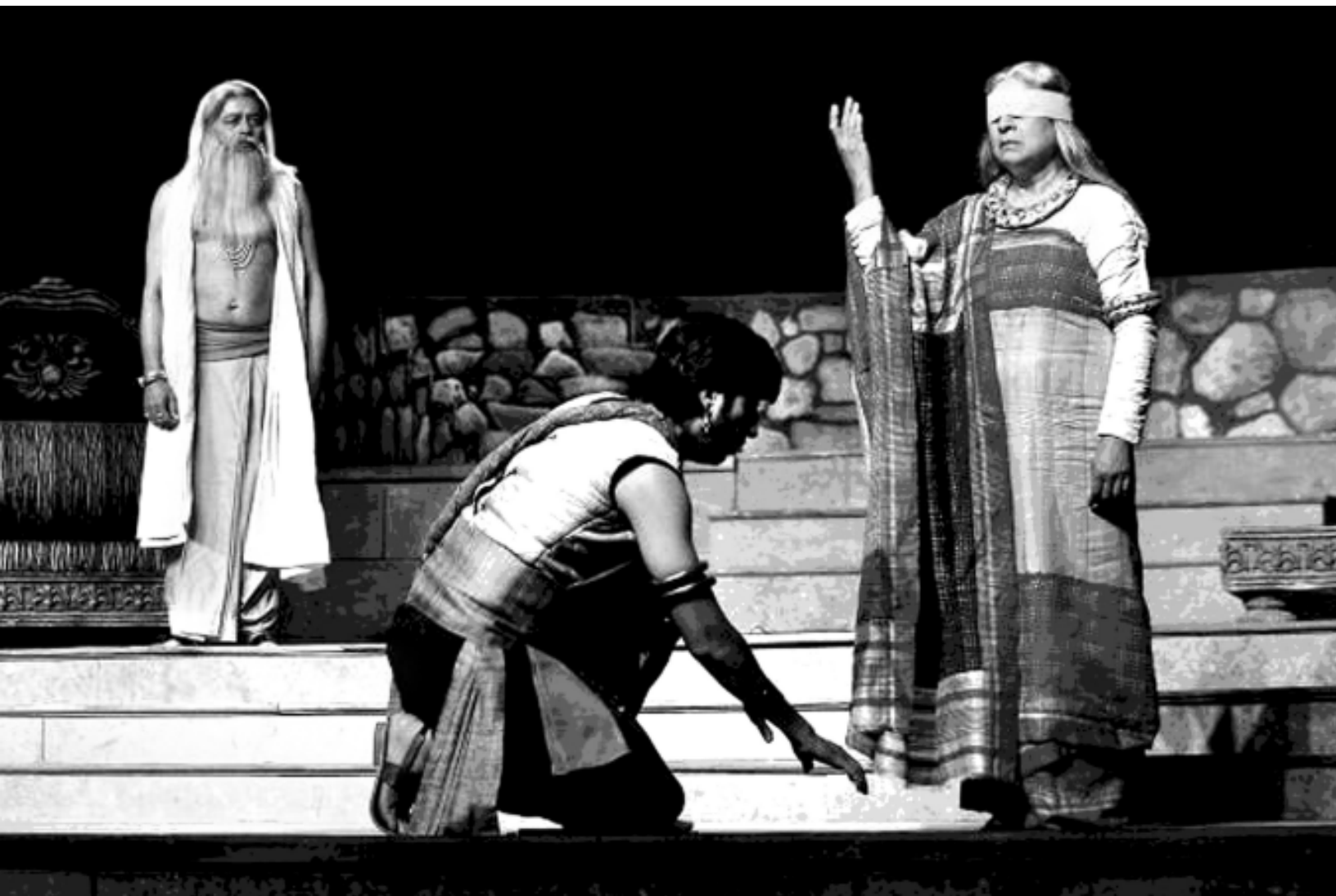
In landscape architecture, history adopts a more scientific approach, the importance of which cannot be overstated. Here, a professional cannot deny history of a place in terms of its evolution. The study of natural processes forms the basis of understanding of the intrinsic natural character of the landscape and associated geomorphologic processes. It forms the very basis of the birth of habitation at any place. It is inextricably linked with present and future of a region.

In planning and design, many developments and strategies in the past such as riverside settlements (Shahjahanabad), traditional systems of stepwells and baolis

(in the arid desert region of Rajasthan), design of expressways (Grand Trunk Road by Shershah Suri), irrigation systems of gardens (Mughal gardens), planning (early historic Harappa and Mohenjo-daro settlements) are few of the numerous examples if studied and understood within the right context may hold many new insights for us today.

Current design vocabularies of spatial planning in India have always been inspired from approaches towards nature and people that past designers evolved and adopted over many centuries. Sacred groves, hamlets, courtyard gardens, fruit orchards, *chahar bagh*, turfs, avenues, vistas, meadows, and tea garden estates are all but the reflections of layers of history of many rulers and governments that the country has witnessed over several centuries. It is time to elevate this inspiration to the next level of learning with some true lessons from the history rather than just imitating it without its accompanying contextual knowledge.

In this time of great flux, we should start looking at our past as an active player rather than silent witness in our present scheme of things. It has a significant, specific, relevant and unexplored role to play in the modern developments of the world today. Let us re-imagine our past for an imaginative future.



*Should we be blind to the history, or look at it with new eyes?  
Gandhari refuses to bless Yuyustu while Vidura looks on in the play 'Andha Yug'*  
Source: <http://mohallalive.com>

Geeta Wahi Dua can be contacted at [lajournalindia@gmail.com](mailto:lajournalindia@gmail.com)