

Cultural Landscape

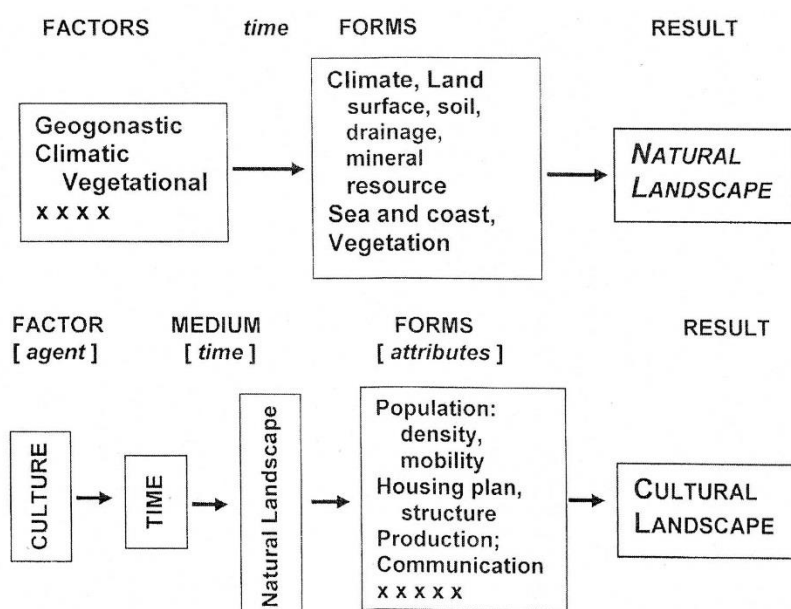
According to UNESCO “cultural landscape” embraces a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment. Cultural landscapes — ranging from cultivated terraces on lofty mountains, gardens, to sacred places — testify to the creative genius, social development and the imaginative and spiritual vitality of humanity. Cultural landscapes represent the “combined works of nature and of humankind”; thus, they are part of our collective identity, expressing a long and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environment; Cultural Landscape is a “*Design with Nature for Humankind*”. This way ‘cultural landscapes’ represent visionary symbiosis and interpretive synthesis. As established notion “cultural landscapes” inspired by the belief that preservation and protection of globally, nationally, regionally and locally significant cultural landscapes, both designed and vernacular, are critical to sustaining the continuum of land use and history across generations. Therefore, protection of these cultural landscape resources offers inspirational values and an appreciation of past and present ingenuity, accomplishments, hardships, and hopes, as well as insight into future land use, design solutions and maintenance of heritagescapes.

The German geographer Otto Schlüter (1872-1959) is credited with having first formally used “*cultural landscape*” as an academic term in the early twentieth century (Martin 2005: 175). In 1906, Schlüter argued that by defining geography as a *Landschaftskunde* (landscape science) this would give geography a logical subject matter shared by no other discipline (Elkins 1989: 27). He defined two forms of landscape: the *Urlandschaft* (translated as original landscape) or landscape that existed before major human induced changes and the *Kulturlandschaft* (translated as ‘cultural landscape’) — a landscape created by human culture. The major task of geography was to trace the changes in these two landscapes (Martin 2005: 176).

It was Carl O. Sauer, a human geographer, who was probably the most influential in promoting and developing the idea of *cultural landscapes* (for critique see Mitchell 2000: 27-28). Sauer was determined to stress the agency of culture as a force in shaping the visible features of the Earth’s surface in delimited areas (Singh 2013b). Within his definition, the physical environment retains a central significance, as the medium with and through which human cultures act that finally result into formation of ‘cultural landscape’ (Sauer 1925/1963: 337, 343; see the Fig. 1): “The cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area the medium, the cultural landscape is the result”. Cultural landscapes are literally an imprint of human history, representing a closely woven net of the interrelationships between people and their natural environment and are thus fundamental to the identity of the people. In northeast India, these are well represented in the cultural traditions, folklores, and nomenclatures of rainfall

characteristics and vegetal association (see Taher 1990). In addition, they tell us the story of a people and how they have transformed the natural landscape into the cultural landscape (see Bandarin and van Oers 2012: 10). Thus, this dialogue is based on the method of interpreting heritage in a holistic manner, and it argues that there is a mutual dependency between landscape and culture (Bridgewater and Bridgewater 2004).

Fig. 1. Interfacing Natural and Cultural Landscapes (after Sauer 1925/ 1963).



Sauer was determined to stress the agency of *culture* as a force in shaping the visible features of the Earth's surface in delimited areas, and his own landscape studies and methods. Of course Sauer's definition is grounded in a neat distinction between NATURE and CULTURE, reflected in the structure of his diagram, in Indian context, *per se* in the Oriental world, it always has inherent aliveness as an impartial interfaces between Nature and Culture.

Schein (1997), while seeking to retain the identification of cultural landscape with the 'tangible, visible scene' draws upon Massey's (1991) idea of places as 'moments' in a continuing networked process of social relations that stretch across space: 'Landscapes are always in the process of "becoming", no longer reified or concretised – inert and there – but continually under scrutiny, at once manipulable, always subject to change, and everywhere implicated in the ongoing formulation of social life' (Schein 1997: 662). With the introduction of UNESCO's framework of intangible cultural heritage, the notion of cultural landscape has been changed into more comprehensive way.

In the aftermath of often heated debate over the definition and methods for studying cultural landscape within geography, "the concept itself has been rejuvenated; a wealth of substantive cultural landscape studies are appearing, and while the genealogy of the Sauerian concept remains fertile, the usage of the term cultural landscape within cultural geography no longer implies" in a sense what was once prevalent at Berkeley School (Cosgrove 2000: 141). Shackley describes

a cultural landscape as “an integrated complex of cultural and natural resources, whose values derive from their physical quality, as well as from associated human endeavours and traditions” (2001: 139). In Indian context, use of literature testing the spatial, landscapic and lifeways issues is a rich resource, but rarely tapped (cf. Singh 2004).

Framing the Indian Cultural Landscape (ICL)

Indian Cultural Landscape (ICL) is envisioned as amalgamated mosaic of mental construction, visual exposition, memorial repositories, monumental structures, physical existence, ritual happenings, cultural traditions, and several of their associates and auxiliaries that result into a complex web of a collection of religious, cultural and physical meanings ascribed to geographical components through collective memory, planted on the ground (shaped in the landscape) in active engagement with communities over generations (cf. Thakur 2012: 154-155). Predominantly, the **ICL** is a repository of the collective perceptions of geography, where memory, information and imagination converge to shape the landscape through imagination, realisation, memorisation and continuity and finally revelation. The physical form of the landscape that survives has the capacity to regenerate itself when associations, ideologies and continuity are re-established to engage the contemporary minds of the people (Singh, Rana 2013b: 37). The evidence of their history remains preserved as ‘historical layers’ and ‘cultural manifestations’ interwoven with the tangible and intangible resources and that result into embedded knowledge, which requires to be deciphered and dissected and disseminated in making cross-cultural understanding across all the borders of political, cultural and societal realm, especially in case of the South and the east Asia.

There always exists a ‘spirit of place’ which interconnects the varying niches of the levels. Of course, at present mostly perhaps due to increasing pace of individualism this unifying spirit is now in danger. Does India’s future maintain its long tradition of ‘unity among diversities’ is a question of doubt! However, by the ethical revival of the deeply rooted old values a healthy tradition of making a balance be promoted. Pilgrimages and heritage tourism are among the strongest traditions in this direction. The direct experience of sacred places has a transformational quality that inherently possesses the continuity; that is how it turns into complexity.

The process of formation of the landscape of India is unique. The knowledge and understanding of this process remains encapsulated in the collective consciousness of the diverse communities interspersed across the sub-continent. The myriad living traditions and intangible heritage grew to further reinforce this collective consciousness. These were later celebrated, consolidated and expanded over time through continuity, a process which has shaped the characteristics of the Indian Cultural Landscape.

Varied geography, imbued archaeology, framing past through history, innumerable faiths and cultural traditions have all come together in making and

shaping the Indian Cultural Landscapes (cf. Thakur 2012: 155). They have evolved through processes of cultural synthesis and specific practices within the complexities, diversities, transitions and mosaicism among various regional cultures, as exemplified in case of northeast India (Taher 1990). The cultural understanding of geography enabled the landscapes to be envisaged as a canvas against which the Indian traditional perspectives and knowledge were conceptualized, practiced and is celebrated in continuity, manifestations and performances. It also forms the context where man interacts with his environs based on a holistic knowledge of Nature within both sacred and secular underpinnings and purviews (see, Mukerji 2015).

The *ICL* has been described and exemplified in myths, legends, lyrics, oral traditions and religious texts, as also marked on the ground through construction of shrines, temples, mortuary structures, pavilions and tombs, and various forms of built-up landscapes. Often the reconfiguration of *ICL* incorporates rock-shelters, hills, boulders and streams in keeping with contemporary requirements. These were planted/imprinted on the ground from memory in the medieval times (at the backdrop of rise Islam to reinforce faith) and given a physical form by ascribing values, meaning and aesthetics and association to different forms of Nature. The unique pattern of natural features and forms networked with the sacred geography of faith and its secular norms supports integrated man, place and faith to shape a cohesive cultural landscape. The unity achieved at the physical and metaphysical levels gives rise to a continuity, consistency, complexity and comprehensiveness that reinforce the holistic cognition of the cultural landscape (cf. Thakur 2012). The bond among the physical, metaphysical and perceived parts of the landscape was further expanded after passage of time through man's engagement with their geography in various forms. This sacrality exists right from the memory to geography which gives greater meaning/ values through collective memory and association of local communities, resulting into the formation of layers, varieties, orderings, and similarly so many qualities and characteristics in the cultural landscapes.

Indian Cultural Landscape is an integral form and resultant of long understanding and practice of spatial manifestation of spirit and its exposition into variety of and complex web of mythologies, that further promoted and re-awakened the its *genius loci*. Sinha (2006: 31), concludes that "A place's *numen* may be explained in terms of opportunities for prospect-refuge, coincidence of terrestrial features and solar events, geomagnetic anomalies affecting the body's electrochemical processes, unusual topographic formations suggesting the appearance of land in the midst of a large expanse of waters, and features that have sustained human evolution; yet they shall remain secondary explanations of a phenomenon whose primary rationale lies in man's intrinsic search for spiritual transcendence." This is the personality of *ICL*.