

Book Review by Narendra Dengle

OF UNCHARTED PATHS, STEERED DESTINY, ENCOUNTERS, RITUALS, AND MEDITATIONS

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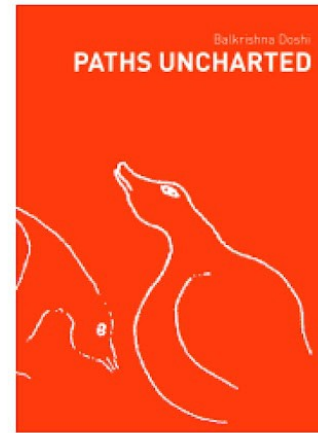
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Autobiographical writings assume importance especially if these come from someone who has given numerous talks, written extensively, and has a body of architectural works rich in diversity of concerns and opportunities standing testimony to his/her insight shaped over a life spanning across eight decades. Such writing is of interest for at least three reasons: first - how the autobiographical sketch relates to the above mentioned existing body of works, speeches, and writings and the film on him; second: how it has looked at the self and the 'other'; third - what is its literary and architectural value for the contemporary times and also for posterity. Often an autobiographical work entraps the author with narcissism, self importance, pretentiousness, and even falsification of facts. It is a quicksand which has been avoided by many a famous writer including Samuel Beckett, or architects like Le Corbusier, or Louis Kahn - the latter two being the foremost of masters of architecture whom Balkrishna Doshi reveres as his *gurus*. In such cases, however, a host of biographical works

emerges from different people with varied foci. Doshi succeeds on all the three fronts with a wonderfully engaging narrative in his '*Paths Uncharted*', which not being chronologically written, contributes a fresh outlook to his intuitive mind, keeping distance with any direct discussion on architecture. The jigsaw puzzle of Doshi's life, which has had many other pieces in place, now gets an introspective thread to tie them together - dissolving in the process the dichotomy between the 'uncharted' and the 'destined' into a life story of an ever attentive and observant being. Doshi himself calls the notes from his diaries as '*links to my straying and uncharted life*'.

Few people at eighty-five look as young as Doshi, which makes one wonder what might be the secret of this delusion of age and enviable young spirit in him! Can we find the secret of his youth in his autobiographical sketch?! It must have something to do with how he looks at life, and perceives its 'accidents', 'events', and 'encounters' as contributors to his thought and action besides



his daily chore of eating, working, sleeping, etc. Doshi says, 'act with posterity and allow change if it happened'. He sees himself as an 'entrepreneur obsessed with the next big thing'. He obviously enjoys challenges, and is charged when confronted with the unknown so as to find new meanings and directions for his works without repeating himself. Doshi is deeply rooted in the soil of his birth and committed to uncovering the ancient wisdom to address contemporary issues. He has unflinching faith in joint family system, which he almost recommends, even for the future, for its perpetual capacity to give affection and strength to all members, especially when in distress or in state of duality or confusion about major decisions in life.

Every 'path' has its signs and hallmarks. Even when unnoticed there are other sets of signs to show another path which we learn about only in hindsight! In Doshi's case, one thing is clear. He was not only looking for signs that hinted at his future possible course, but he was also willing to risk changing paths sud-

denly by taking the signs extremely seriously. We meet a reckless adventurer, who turns a serious and observant explorer, who never lost the connection with the port of his embarkation, who struggles to overcome ignorance, adverse circumstances, unfamiliar surroundings, ideologies, to eventually seek what he was always destined for. Not all explorers reach their destinations. Some reach wrong shores, some turn perpetual wanderers, some quickly compromise to seek comfort but not Doshi, who gets what he always hoped for. He gets to work with the masters, see closely how they worked and in the process touches his philosopher's stone.

It is apparent from his writings that the signs Doshi learned to decode have led to tough beginnings but fortunate, humane, intelligent and dynamic gains. His path therefore becomes enchanting in that he meets ordinary people, people of tremendous talents, teachers, students, performing artists, scientists, friends, advisors, donors and of course clients. He does not take anyone lightly as he knows that almost anyone could be a torch bearer-like in a well-known story of Munshi Premchand. The narration of the path is frank, full of remembrances and acknowledgments-as if in the *guru-shishya parampara*—where his *gurus* are many, close and distant. He remembers, 'design every building as a temple of god', the advice given to him by Shilanand Swamy. Claiming 'unseen forces work for you', he seeks to go beyond reason or rationality to explain the

opportunity of working and communicating with Le Corbusier with little knowledge of English and without any knowledge of French. One thing leads to another leading to yet another event that is full of opportunities challenging our convictions, ideas, and principles of life-which is what the nature of life is. Life's nature is 'anything but constant' one of his *gurus* - his Motabhai tells him, and this message from the Geeta is one that Doshi never forgets. Doshi has dedicated the book to 'my mother Radha for her constant presence and guidance'. The fact that Doshi's mother passed away soon after his birth and he only remembers her through the photos that he saw of her much later, gives the dedication the added significance to his beliefs and convictions. The unseen mother's presence and the ever present wife's 'friendly and wise counsel, have helped steer the path', for him, he says. Like his book, which does not follow events in his life chronologically, Doshi often wanders on different planes of reality. The 'real' for him consists as much of sustainable concerns, light and ventilation in his buildings, as much as myths, stories, subconscious, and the surreal, all of which he floats through expertly and with the ease of a timeless traveller. Words and sketches in his book both stand testimony to his esoteric explorations, which he loves to narrate and decode in architecture.

Vastushastra has listed the *lakshanas* of the *sthapati*. Doshi quotes from the Vishnudharmottara purana, primarily a

text on painting that also touches upon architecture, which describes the knowledge and skills required of a good architect. The skills a person has to master include all crafts and performing arts before he/she can claim to be an architect. Hence, besides fulfilling requirements on mastering philosophy one must also be a deft craftsman to be a good architect. The situation today is considerably different. An architect is more of a coordinator, who must know the new materials dumped in the market and in touch with the best crafts-persons skilled to construct from them. While the Vishnudharmottara tells us how to draw but not what to draw, architects today are left on their own to search for clues as to what may be called relevant or good architecture. As in the past they do not have any 'text' for architecture. Ironically, most treat the building code and the development plan rules as the only texts to draw their inspiration from to make a business of architecture! Modernism tried to manifest ideas about modernity but arguably failed in ironing out solutions that were context and culture based while post modernist ideas coming into architecture from linguistics and philosophy tried to rediscover the significance of culture for architecture through various theories including the critical theory and the media theory. However, the profession continues to grope in the dark about its own cultural, social, and environmental commitment, turning more and more into large business practices, equipped to handle legal issues. The indications from Doshi's un-

charted path would once again stress the inevitability of apprenticeship with master so that the craft of architecture, which alone can lay claims on theory, is learned anew in contemporary times. Doshi has explained how much prone to influence he was from the masters. He not only could sketch almost like Le Corbusier did but he could imitate his signature as well! In his work he explains that he felt it was necessary 'to be there and be myself at the same time' – his personal vows being 'not imitating LC or LK'.

Doshi's first exposure to France was during the early fifties when he joined Le Corbusier's atelier as a novice. There is a vivid account of Doshi's entry into Le Corbusier's atelier. His own predicament in facing the master and learning the ABC of what Corbusier would teach him about 'scale' comes through his narrative as if the experience was engraved on his mind forever. École des Beaux-arts had already had a long tradition of teaching fine arts, sculpture and architecture. France had digested the late 19th century impressionism, early 20th century expressionism, and was familiar with modern techniques of abstraction in art. *'Critique of Dialectical Reason'* by Jean Paul Sartre, had already appeared as a major leftist thinking in France. Corbusier himself was about 64 and mature in handling and shaping ideas on urbanism also through his work in other countries than France. His post-war Unité de Habitation was complete. Doshi also mentions a design



competition for low cost housing in Delhi that he worked on while being at Corbusier's atelier. So there was no wonder that Doshi too came closer to 'leftist' thinking, which would stand him in good stead later while designing for the common man in India and mould his planning decisions with considerable thought for the local context.

Doshi was deeply interested in the 'exquisitely carved wooden buildings' in old Ahmedabad, but was at the same time convinced that 'Le Corbusier brought the world attention to India'. Among a few works discussed here are his housing projects and issues therein and some of the houses that Doshi designed including his own. The insight that he describes reveals his sense of awareness. 'Once visiting a brick kiln, I saw a woman descending a dusty worn-out staircase in front of four columns. The whole scene was lit by thin shafts of sunlight streaming through punctures in the old tin roof making it very memorable. This is the image that generated

the plan of my own house...', he says, pointing out that 'inspiration for design is not a simple phenomenon'. Although Doshi discusses his contemporaries from other fields of life he does not dwell much on contemporary architects. His account of building one of the most renowned institutes of planning and architecture in the country – CEPT gives but a brief description of his interaction with his colleagues. Those who look for clues on the sensibilities of planners and architects of his times may have to wait for another book wherein he wishes to discuss architecture related issues in a more direct way.

Doshi's decision to settle down in Ahmedabad after returning to India is what he rightly describes as 'fortunate'. Architecture cannot be done without the patronage of visionaries, who are knowledgeable, philanthropic, and committed to the society and community more than living a good life themselves. This was very much the Indian tradition that was well appreciated by industrial-

ists like Kasturbhai Lalbhai, and Vikram Sarabhai and others in Gujarat. Doshi and some of his contemporaries were influential in communicating ideas across to them and receive moral and other patronage in return to their effort both in education and practice. Although Achyut Kanvinde and Charles Correa met with him often in Ahmedabad and discussed Correa's suggestion to open a school of architecture in Mumbai – little seems to have come out of it as an effort put together by the three; although all of them were in their own ways committed to architectural education.

I once asked Doshi if a particular sketch in his book was of one of the oldest temples in Mahabaleshwar in Maharashtra, to which he said 'The sketch was from memory to express uniqueness of Hindu proportions.' The sketches featured in the book vary in content, style, intention, and quality. They vary from being conventional – of the known iconic image of the goddess Saraswati playing the veena, to jotting down the essentials of his experience of places, animals, trees, people, details, and ideas in a minimalist way. They show the influence of Le Corbusier on his sketching and his attempts to break free from it to explore the Indian psyche and context. Doshi's colour drawings of his projects based on the technique of Indian miniature paintings, though not part of the book, by now, are well known.

Autobiographical musings may be seen in at least three different aspects. First – as an introspective journey that goes

through the album of images, noting, and remembrances to see as if in awe or wonder of the bends in life; second – to examine and realise the connections between various events rationally to make a sense of one's life; third – to create a document for posterity as a diary written from a point of view of an observer, with a detachment from events connected to the person. Whether we can actually make sense of our life itself is doubtful! When one refers to a book on philosophy or spiritual epic – whether that book can explain miracles and illogical happenings in life also is doubtful. And yet, when we resort to looking at our past in hindsight we are perhaps trying to comprehend the connections between a destiny, or an entirely programmed life, and on the other hand, what one comes to realise as a series of events that perpetually modify and mutate the so called programme. A destined person is fully programmed-meaning the events and responses of his life are foretold. Doshi's attempt to relook at the events that he has chosen to for the purpose of this book, show his seriousness about relationships with people close to him and who mattered to him and his curiosity for events and deeds that occurred and led him to people and work. The film of his life unfolds selectively relating to his sense of history as and when needed to decode the happenings and perhaps viewing it to see

what one should expect of life in a life beyond. I wonder if at the end of writing an autobiographical note are we better informed of our life or in fact have only discovered yet another way, laterally speaking, to read our own perception differently!

Doshi says, 'I wanted to experience life through my studio' which cannot be taken too literally because the knowledgeable reader is aware of how much he travels and takes interest in wide range of things even today. He regrets that architects have not been able to 'open schools in hinterlands' and laments the fact that architecture and planning did not start movements similar to those by Mahatma Gandhi. He is obviously sure and ambitious that architecture and planning being close to people and places should be seen as a potential force to ignite social movements. There are hardly any personal regrets. It is as if the person is a wanderer with a keen perceptive eye gifted with memory and with this as his acquisition, he looks around, takes different roads, and lanes, to come to newer territories. He rests for a while making newer friends and clients, who entrust him with great responsibilities, which continue shaping his vision and confidence, leading to further unvisited fields of imagination. For Doshi the book must be just a small chapter in his long zest for life even if it continues uncharted forever.

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