Reiterating a people’s perspective to our heritage marks a significant step in the resurrection of ICOMOS India. Nearly 1000 delegates from 113 nations were hosted at the 19th Triennial ICOMOS General Assembly in Delhi in December 2017. Discussions as part of the Scientific Symposium focused on ‘Heritage and Democracy’, a theme reflecting the status of India as the largest democracy and soon to become the most populous nation of the world.

On the successful completion of the General Assembly and Symposium, we reflect on the contribution of the deliberations to the objective of heritage, democracy, and India. This meeting, probably one of the largest of heritage professionals on our soil in recent times, sowed a seed. A thought, a word, a picture, a slide, a vision, an expression, a sharing of experiences from across geographies converged into the larger narrative of our current reality. A present where individual and shared pasts are in danger of being usurped by an uncertain future, a future made impossible due to the vagaries equally of climate as of limiting mind-sets.

The first sub-theme addressed ‘Integrating Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development by Engaging Diverse Communities for Heritage Management’. That this sub-theme attracted the most interest in the symposium in a way ratified the central theme of heritage and democracy right from the outset. The conversations around community, efforts of acknowledging, protecting, interpreting and adapting heritage across scale and geography brought forth a plethora of challenges and many success stories and good practices.

Figure 1: ICOMOS India on stage at the Closing Ceremony (photo: Anjali Ajit and Madhusudan)
In a world where political borders are etched deeper on the landscape, the boundaries of professional collaboration are blurred. Sub-theme 2 on the ‘Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation’ lent an insight into the future showcasing a unique blend of efforts in this current time of adversity and conflict. Presentations showcased global efforts, with problems faced by one nation being addressed by experts from another geography aided by funding from a third location.

‘Protecting and Interpreting Cultural Heritage in the Age of Digital Empowerment’. The fate of the past rests on the technology of the future. The interest towards sub-theme 3 was a reiteration of the role of innovation in conservation. With the heightening rate of loss of our heritage, there is an urgency to hold on to our past. The role and relevance of digital technology in re-envisioning our past amidst our fast dissolving physical reality came up for engaging deliberations. Presentations brought out the need and means of capturing the present reality alongside recreating lost memories.

The ‘Culture Nature Journey’ as sub-theme 4 aptly chose India as its first major destination after its initiation in Hawaii in 2016. In a society where our communities rely on traditional ecological knowledge, there is a range of good practice to demonstrate the interdependence of cultural practices responding to nature and nature-based solutions to our plethora of urban challenges.

The drafting of the Delhi Declaration was an elaborate effort and most challenging in that we hoped to keep the document succinct while attempting to do justice to the multiple voices of a 1.33 billion citizens, 122 major languages (1600 others), multiple religions and subcultures. This was an effort to acknowledge that the body and soul of our heritage is imbued in its people, those who have created, inherited, accepted, rejected, ignored or wilfully erased the past or simply allowed it to disappear.

The theme of the previous Triennial General Assembly at Florence, 2014 was ‘Heritage and Landscapes as Human Values’ and the 20th Triennial General Assembly proposed for 2020 at Sydney focuses on ‘Shared Cultures – Shared Heritage – Shared Responsibility’. The connected themes of the 18th, 19th and 20th General Assemblies highlight international recognition of centrality of communities in defining the future of their heritage. This particular issue of Historic Environment and the efforts undertaken by Australia ICOMOS will offer a significant connect between the General Assembly in Delhi and the next in Sydney as we strive to link the aspiration of the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals with the reality of good practice on ground.