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Symbolism the Understated Aspect of Vernacular Practices

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***Abstract:** As the globalisation promptly captivate the cities of the world, the architecture of the globe become more monotonous and singular. The international style of architecture dominates the skyline from New Delhi, Tokyo, and London to Dubai irrespective of the environmental and cultural conditions of the place. This new architecture is completely detached from traditional learning's and knowledge base developed with time by the people.*

Vernacular architecture practices are the denominator of climatic issues, the aspirations of the people and satisfy the practical and socio cultural need of the society which generates them. When architectural expression become more than a physical manifestation and represents a social art and responds to a set of spatial criteria in order to decipher their values and culture, it is considered symbolic. The relevance of these symbols expressed through different means generates a non-verbal communication which evokes meaningfulness in its users.

The intent of paper is to establish a connection between symbols and their meanings practised in different vernacular architecture and extract the learning which can help to lay the ground for modern practices to follow. Architecture of different region has various inherent meanings and ways of response which can be compared and can be categorised through this research. Hierarchy of spaces through spatial organisation, defining spaces for gender uses, designs inspired by cosmology and symbols which transform over time. Thus, establish an understanding with the help of examples from different vernacular practices. It is believed that architecture evolved from local is passively sustainable in terms of social and environmental concerns. The underline meaning of such symbols or designs can bridge the gap between the lost identity (of place) and factual development of the place rather than the proposition which dilute the multi cultural diversity of people and their livelihood.

***Keywords:** Vernacular, Symbolism, meaning, modern practices, globalisation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the conscious for sustainability has evoked the sensitivity towards environment, efforts are done to make our habitat better and cognisant. As a discipline, architects have tried to find solutions either by means of technology or through the learning from the past, to seek solutions those are beneficiary for living beings on earth at present time and for their sustenance as a whole.

But, under the influence of globalisation, we are growing as a unit conurbation of the global setting. This paradigm of global city has brought a lot of potential threats along with the visible benefits. The possibilities and opportunities in terms of transportation, trade, movement and intangible connect have developed an era of a kind of international style. For example, a city belonging to a hilly region is seen having substantial similarities in architecture to a city dwelling in hot and arid region without having any consideration of climatic constraints. Not only the direct built environment, but the cultural, technical, economical and social structure of the human habitat is influenced through the global shift. This kind of development generates plenty of unidentified and detached spaces with no sense of identity and connection with the place. This meagre architectural vocabulary has limitations which makes all the places look similar in comparison to all regional and vernacular architecture which create strong impression on to the dweller or onlooker.

Vernacular architecture evolved through the action of climate, culture, local resources, habitants and context and community participation, whereas architecture of recent times has displayed biases for technology and has human centric approach to address economic and social growth of individual over greater system it belongs to. Vernacular practices have shown different aspects of sustainability practiced without stating or underlying intent by collective approach towards environment. As explained by OLIVER PAUL, Vernacular architecture is a dynamic and creative process through which people, as active agents, interpret past knowledge and experience to face the challenge and demands of the present, built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and the ways of life of the cultures that produce them. Places where inhabitants have a relationship with built environment, society and community living and its development ascertain sense of attachment and belongingness to that place.

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Humans have conversing attributes, which help them decipher, deduce and interpret different experiences by what they see and observe in their life. These elicited communication or symbols by directing knowledge and ideas that works behind its genesis bring value and meaning to their universal experiences. The knowledge embodied within the form, organisation or in embellishments generally creates an image which may be directly illustrated or perceived by understanding the idea or concept of its colossal meaning. Architecture always manifest instruments to express habitants beliefs, values, practices and cultural connect through different media which sometimes are part of their dwellings, and many times dwelling itself are the representative of those values and meanings. When architectural forms become the vehicles of content—in terms of conglomerated form, plan, elevation, and decoration—they are referred as symbolic.

A. Relevance of the study

This research paper is an attempt to infer those greater meanings and values attached with symbols that has sustained or transformed overtime to validate the purpose. It was accepted that the primitive and vernacular practices of architecture are more cohesive in terms of climate responsiveness, socio-cultural aspects, and are environment and ecologically prudent. Different aspects have been integrated by various means and methods in their built environment which sometimes have explicitly perceptible meanings but otherwise dissemble. Through the expressions of symbols like spatial planning, elements, embellishments etc. one can understand the denotation and purpose it explicates. Even the connotations it cultivate with time acquire significance if it has inclusive purpose. This research would help to configure such signs and symbols which can possibly be used to determine various purposes for a better present and future habitation. By ascertaining the significance of its genesis and development one can consider stimulating and adapting such symbols in the present practices and built environment.

B. Objectives

1) To understand the significance of symbolism by giving general proposition in order to establish the generic meanings it inculcates for various regions and vernacular practices.
2) To categorise the symbols by determining the possible derivatives behind its origin and purpose it serve for the community. Categorization is made with context and case specific examples under the broader meaning/purpose it elucidate.
3) To establish relationships with architectural vocabulary by comprehending symbols as per their application in the built form either as a manifestation of architectural embellishment or spatial planning or configuration.

II. METHODOLOGY

The anatomy of the research is pivoted around the symbols used in various vernacular practices and their inherited meanings and values, which can lay the foundation for better future practices. The examples instilled are gathered both from literature study, documentations and personal experiences. The structure and framework of the research is as per the understanding established with the known and identified symbols, which may be enhanced with more cases. This research is limited to the Indian vernacular architecture, and can have added dimension of International practices if the subject is further elaborated. The objectives framed are explained and illustrated with the relevant examples.

A. Significance of Symbolism

Different signs and symbols can be observed with relation to the built environment and by the means of architectural vocabulary which foster many implicit meanings and values. Symbolism in physical built environment cultivates the idea of association to its users or onlookers; it is that impalpable aspect which manifolds meanings and values embodied in their culture, practices over time. Though every culture and region has their own parameters and engagements which dictate their symbols and meanings, but some of the inherited meanings are mentioned:

1) Level of details and intricacy of embellishments portraits the prosperity of the community, wealth of the owners or eminence within the society. In the living fort of Jaisalmer, the exquisitely detailed stone façade denotes the owners' proximity with the ruler. The wealth and social status is the outcome of the concomitant, where only great acquaintances were allowed to have such details in the interface of the building. Another example from Oudh, Uttar Pradesh, where motifs of fish is used on doors in both small scale dwellings and monumental buildings which was once the totem of the ruling dynasty [figure1] (Cooper & Dawson, 1998).

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2) Emphasize the regional variations through the character, construction and planning approach of the buildings. Though regionally these are part of the state of Himachal Pradesh, but Kullu, Manali, Kinnaur, Lahaul and Spiti, regions have significant local differences in terms of vernacular architecture. In kinnaur there are two significant styles, where the construction techniques are dominant with pakka and kuchha structure of dwellings, characteristically disassociate lower and upper kinnaur respectively [figure2&3].

Fig 1: Example of Fish motifs, Fig2: Upper kinnaur dwelling, Fig3: Lower Kinnaur dwelling, Fig4: Churu Haveli, Fig5: Shekhawati Haveli

Another illustration would be from Rajasthan, where upward growing dwellings are Churu Havelis whereas the outward Havelis are the ones which predominantly showcase the characteristics of Shekhawati Havelis of the Ramgarh region, as a result the horizontal and vertical growth determines their user groups [figure4&5].

3) Response to the climatic conditions by means of functional elements and appropriate construction techniques and materials. In hot and arid and in cold and arid region, where landscape dominants desolateness and barrenness, it is observed that the inhabitants of these regions very wisely countered it by colour preferences, and treatment of the built surfaces which augments the beauty and life by the manifestation of art and architecture [figure6&7]. Another example can be taken from the traditional architectural practices of Kerala where the system of shaped struts and laths form this particular lattice wall which are designed such to allow ventilation and provide source of natural light into the interiors of the dwellings in a context of hot and humid climate throughout the year[figure8].

4) Accentuate architectural expression which highlights intricacies of cultural, societal and human behaviour and beliefs. To elaborate it with the example of configuration of the temple city of Madurai. It has referred for its order to the cosmos and its concentric loops that revolve around the supreme centre of Meenakshi-Sundareshwara temple. The religious belief and significance dictates the city fabric and its requirements. Streets accommodating Rath Yatras, built structure like dharamshalas, water bodies, kunds built along the axes for annual rituals and festivals are not just the denominator but the essence of the place which characterised its significance [figure9]. Similarly, the architecture of dessert is dominated by the simple dwellings of bhungas to the great forts of desert whereas another typology which has significance not less than the later one was BAOLIs where the form is symbolically representing the presence of amenities in a public structure and its religious dominance.

Fig 6: Symbolic flags of Buddhism, Fig7: Colourful Bhunga, Fig8: Wall Details from Kerala, Fig8: Temple City Madurai, Fig9: Chorten from Spiti

B. Symbolism and Their Derivatives

Various signs and symbols are the illustration of some ingenious meanings which are the representative of different attribute of the society. Emphasizing on beliefs and practices these are imposing specifications which drive the construction and character of the buildings. These are explained with examples to establish understanding of each derivative. These derivative driven symbols can be broadly categorised as per elucidate meaning it serve:

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1) *Religious symbolism:* These are signs and symbols accentuating the religious practises and its inherited meanings which are transferred to generations, sometimes practiced or otherwise defied. These religion driven symbols have substantial significance for the built environment as they create an emotional connect with the community and individual's beliefs. To signify the same, the Stupas and Rows of chorten are used to symbolizing Buddha's presence in the region. Their shape represents Buddha with a crown in a seating posture on a throne, the square at the spire's base is his head, and the vase shape symbolizes his body, the steps considered as legs while the square foundation base is his throne [figure10]. In addition to the basic form, there are modifications which symbolically represent the different life events of Buddha. Such structure portraits eight different meanings like Lotus symbolises the birth, chorten of descent consists of a ladder on each side and commemorates the return of Buddha back to earth, Chorten of Reconciliation where octagonal chorten honours Buddha's efforts, Chorten with circular steps with no embellishments represent the victory, the bell shaped stupas represents his death and nirvana. Another example is of Hindu structures, where Ganesh, lord of beginning presides over the entrance of most dwellings set in or above the lintel. Sometimes inscribed, partial figures placed in a niche, or full figurative form used to extend the meaning of auspicious beginning [figure11].
2) *Cosmo-symbolism:* The ordinance of universal constitution and patterns engendered had been recognized in different cultures and architectural practises. The apparent movement of sun and stars, patterns of seasons were considered influential for the building forms and space configuration in order to maintain the harmony with nature. These space (cosmos) driven symbols are obligatory and cosmetics for some, but paradoxically the meaningful geometries concocted through these symbols justify the spatial planning and order for built environment. The beliefs was demonstrated and used to plan cities and buildings, the urban layout of Hampi is underlined by cosmic geometrics, several temple cities of southern India in the shape of concentric rings with a temple at its centre, representing and symbolises the structure of the cosmos. Jai Singh's decision to build and derive design for his new city Jaipur using mandala (a metaphysical way to plan different functions superimposed with the cosmological patterns), with the earth as its centre and to construct observatories as yantras with the cosmos as a frame of reference had marked his significance in history of architecture and town planning of India [figure12&13]. 'The phenomenon of Word within a world' is observed in temple towns of south India. Shrirangam, an entire city, conceived as a model of the cosmos comprises seven concentric wall enclosures [14].

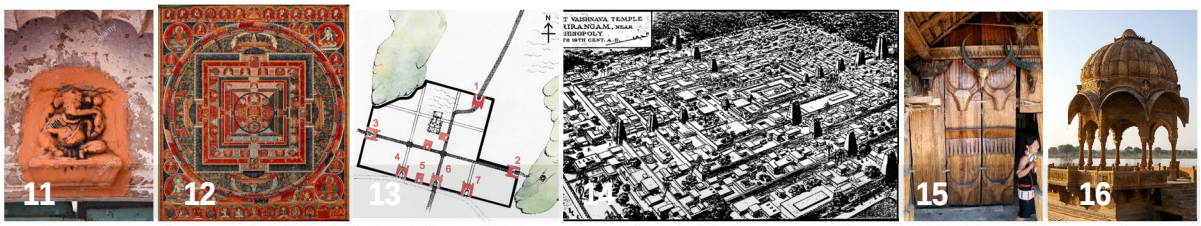

Fig 11: Ganesha figure, Fig12: Mandala, Fig13: Plan of Jaipur city, Fig14: Shrirangam City, Fig15: Naga House, Fig16: Hindu Chhatri

3) *Social/Cultural symbolism:* Symbolism imparting meanings about social structure and cultural practices has greater significance as it divulge the approach and belief of the community as a whole. From the individual dwellings to the spaces of social and cultural importance, these have been practiced at various scale and details. For the understanding of the symbols derived from social and cultural forces examples are made; first is from the settlements of Banni, where the most elaborate and highly structured house belongs to the head of the hamlet, which is strategically placed in the centre. This supremacy gained by the owner is because of the stature, the economical affluence and exposure to the outside world than the rest of the community. His house has facilities for visitors, which create an interface with the people coming in to the community, including a platform of arrival point and a community meeting a reach out space, which considered as the most public space in the whole settlement. Another case of a Naga household with many frontal boards which is symbolically represents the owner's social merit. As it is considered as an entitlement granted like a reward to the habitant of the community who offered feasts to the larger population of the community [figure15]. Each feast called 'genna' entitles the provider a progressive characteristic to his societal status and adornment to his dwelling. Another illustration from the mountainous region is the use of Shel-Khang, a south facing room with extensively glazed windows, in contrast to the rest of the form of ladakhi house, used for welcoming guests or gathering space which extends the idea of direction and semi-private characteristics of the space. The Shel-Khang is used in the direction where the space can procure maximum of sunlight, which help to bring light and heat to the internal space which otherwise is dark to avoid the cold air infiltration[figure17&18].. Another example to illustrate from the Pol city of Ahmadabad, where the symbols

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carved in wood indicated the house ownership which can be highlight by Hindu or Muslim details. Similarly, the chhatri form developed in the fifteen century as a Hindu ways to equalize the Muslim tomb structures, where the dome is erected over the cremation site as a gesture of respect and significance of the deceased to the community [figure16].

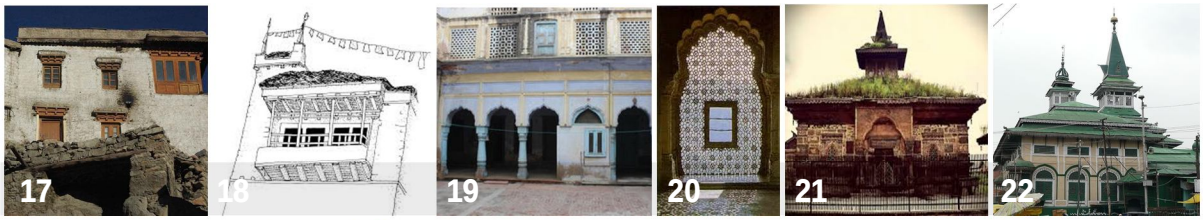

Fig 17&18: Shel-Khang, Fig19: Screen Walls, Fig20: Jalli Work, Fig21: Mosque of Madin Sahib with Turf roof, Fig22: Shrine of Dastgeer Sahib

4) *Gender symbolism:* Building and its spaces are characterised by the user group, which sometimes are self driven but many times imposed by the social setting and customary practices. Open and unrestricted spaces which have larger public interfaces are dominant by males in most of the cases where confined, controlled and private spaces are meant for female counterpart. The gender driven roles and function associated are always performed in their own definite space, bound to have certain manifestations to signify their belongingness. Placement of inner courtyard with deviated and contorted access, jharokhas of havelis with vertical segregation, screened windows or jaali work for space segregation and view control are various manners to speak for the belief of keeping sexes apart and defined to a space [figure19&20].

5) *Adaptive symbolism*: This category considered all types of signs and symbols which evolved, generated or descents with time to foster the trends and tradition of the Society with the development of time. Some lose their primary meaning and significance, when the denotation of their original form have superimposed by the cursory or ostentatious ways to create the physical impression. Some considered to be altered and adapted and gain a new perspective to endure the challenges of time. To elaborate it with an example of Srinagar, where the primitive architecture of the region specifically for mosques and shrines had turf roofs enduring the climate tremors. The earth filled roofs provides the insulation to the habitual spaces underneath and the green texture of grass sustaining the yearly stress blossomed by tulips and lilies creating a splendour impression to the onlookers. This expression absorbed by the later practices where the modern structured roofs are coloured green for the important structures without understanding the efficacy of the system conditioning the space beneath. [figure21&22]. Another example is from car Nicobar, where a tradition developed for putting a model of a boat outside the house to indicate to visiting traders that the occupants dealt in coconuts.

C. *Relation between Symbols with Architectural Vocabulary*

Symbolism in different vernacular practices addresses huge spectrum of architectural vocabulary, from architectural embellishments including motifs, decorations, articulations and spatial arrangements, planning layouts, configurations of build forms and urban settings etc all simulate meanings and values. To comprehend their applicability, one has to establish the relationships between architectural elements used for the built environment with the superior meanings they serve. The categorisation is as per the revelation of different meanings and their imparting derivatives. For the purpose of classification, there can be broadly placed in categories as explained:

1) *Symbolism Through Structures, Forms and Figures:* these are the tangible illustrations by detached or integrated structures, forms, figures, objects and adornment within the built can be further classified as:

a) Inscriptions/Motifs/Decorations/Articulations-these two dimensional details applied on walls, surfaces, ceilings, windows, entrances etc. tangible on elevation and section of the building. There are added details which highlights certain aspect of design consideration of the practice. Illustrated through a traditional Chettiar house which will have roof supporting wooden pillars, characterised by peculiar shape, which was added with a brass ring around its lower section. The ring works as the conglomeration joint set the wooden section in a stone base primarily to discourage termites and secondly it a consideration towards availability of local material for construction which limits the stone usage for the entire form [figure23]. Another example of a Toda dwelling which bears sacred symbols and depiction of the buffalo, formerly imperative for the community. As the Toda community sustain themselves entirely on dairy products from their herds of buffalo until they turned to agriculture [figure24].

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b) Architectural Elements-these three dimensional elemental forms can be stand alone or integrated within the building. These forms or figures can be the insertion to accentuate the meaning engendered or these are the sole carrier of the value rendered. Like, in Nicobarese villages, the most striking objects inside some houses are the kareau, up to life size figures often armed with spears, intended to scare off the evil spirits. Whereas Bitoda, a conical cylindrical structures walled with mud and dung meant for storage which is generally practiced in the region of Punjab, Haryana, UP and in parts of Rajasthan. They resemble tiny dwellings signifying prosperity of the family [figure25].

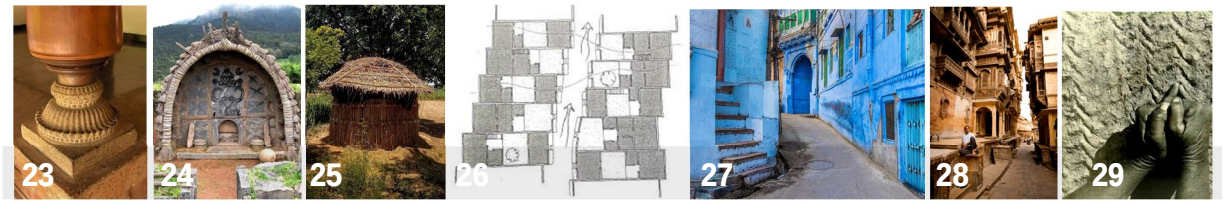

Fig 23: Column of Chettiar House, Fig24: Toda House, Fig25: Bitoda, Fig26: Plan of Bidada Village, Fig27: Jodhpur, Fig28: Jaisalmer, Fig29: Texture wall from Kutch

2) *Symbolism by means of Spatial Configuration, organization and arrangements:* these non tangible aspects of design are pertained while planning spaces or configuring the built form, conglomerated within the system which evolved the architecture. These designing attribute which can be effectuated horizontally and vertically or both ways deduce the characteristics of the built environment. The narrow meandering streets originate out of shifting dwellings of Bidada village of Kutch district render the meaningful consideration of space arrangement to control the wind flow in the arid conditions [figure26].

3) *Symbolism through Colour and Numbers*: the use of colours is symbolic in every culture since colour correlate message and image and has high impact in any cultural communication of which they form a part (George, 2005). Naturally occurring colours generally comprised in the palette, but some distinctive colours also utilized for a strong impression that differs region to region. Most of the time colours are used to augment or intensify the meanings. The idea manifested through the blue dwelling characterising Jodhpur, Yellow Jaisalmer stone evidently giving identity to the city of living fort [figure 27&28]. The absence of colour speaks as well for the environment, like in the settlement of Banni the colourlessness of a sombre dwelling communicate the message of someone demise in the family. Similarly, the application of numbers has potential to comprehend communication, which can represent culture and religion belief, social structure etc. In a Hindu dwelling from western desert region which will have a preference for odd numbers of architectural element like horizontal bands, supports or ribs which signify their religion connect and provide them visual identification.

4) *Symbols by Textures and Patterns:* Surface textures and patterns also signify the different meanings and values, stand alone illustrations of social-cultural significance, religious beliefs decorated on surfaces, patterns assisting climatic conditions. From the region of Bihar, textural complex patterns created through fingers and handprints combined with pinched outlines are functional for hot climate to sustain thermal cracks [figure29]. Where they can be embellished in concentric circles on the outer wall deflect the evil eye symbolically. (Jain & Jain, 2000)

III. CONCLUSION

Vernacular practices are functioned around time and context, conduit(ed) by religion, tradition, society and culture. Expression, style, aesthetics, construction techniques and details are conditioned by the geographical setting, social and economic structure, aspirations of habitants, behaviour patterns and their cultural beliefs. Symbols and their meanings are dividends of all such attributes of community.

Architecture evolved with such association is unique, timeless, experiential and full of values. In order to learn what should be practise and integrate into modern built environment, one must probe through its evolution and adaptations to configure its value and meaning. Individuality and distinctness is the dominant facet of vernacular practices, which cannot be obtain or generate with the impeded force. Communication and its means are important to know the genesis of the force to achieve a meaningful and sustainable built environment.

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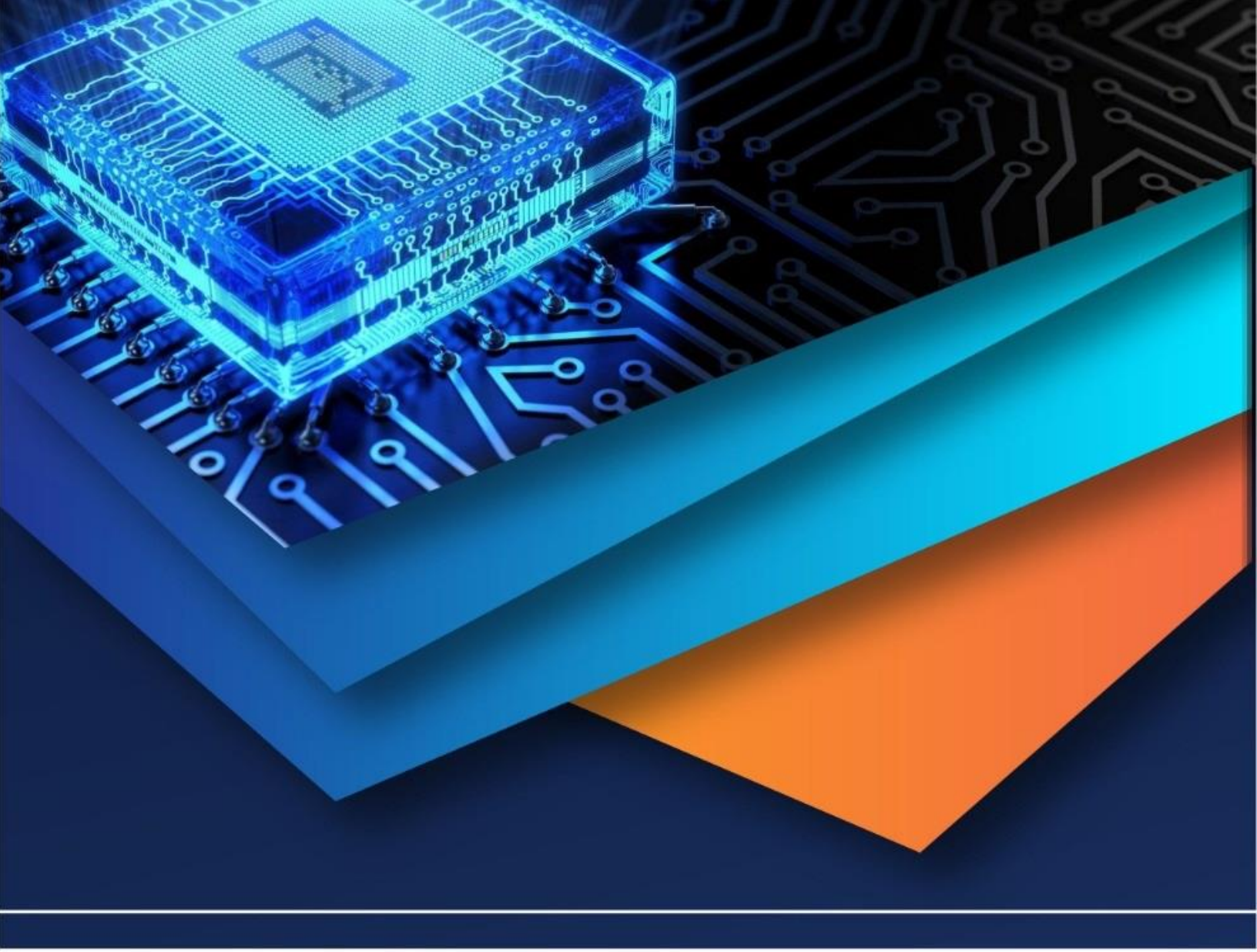

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