

Chapter 8

Significance of Cultural Dimensions in Urban Planning Process for Sustainability of Pilgrimage Towns in India

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ABSTRACT

This chapter raises the significance of integration of cultural attributes in the urban planning process for sustainability of pilgrimage towns. It identifies the spatial connotations of cultural practices, processes and events to review synergies between culture and urban planning. Two Indian pilgrimage towns of Vrindavan and Haridwar with congruent cultural context but diverse urban setting have been examined. Eight significant diverse attributes of both case studies are discussed for examining linkages of cultural dimensions with urban planning, and sustainability of indigenous urbanism of Indian pilgrimage towns. Recent policy initiatives in India envision an increasing inclusion of cultural and heritage aspects in urban development, but are constrained by paucity of empirical spatial research on Indian pilgrimage towns.

INTRODUCTION

The sustainability debate increasingly focuses on urban development and sustainability is being considered unattainable without achieving sustainable urban development (UN-HABITAT, 2002). Further, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) adopted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit includes making "cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" as a goal (UN, 2015). At global scale, UN-Habitat summarizes climate change, gaps in energy supply, food security, changing demographics, size of cities and towns, income inequality and managing the cultural diversity as critical issues facing urbanism. In context of developing countries,

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additional challenges of urban growth, urban informality, growth in peri-urban areas, linking of green and brown agendas and institutional and professional capacity building are identified issues to be addressed (UN-HABITAT, 2009). Emergence of alternative paradigms of urban development with greater inclusivity is envisaged in response to homogenizing influence of globalization in the developing countries.

With a shift in goals and emergent challenges, urban planning praxis and theory explore alternative urban and spatial planning paradigms. The attributes of sustainability imperative are variously interpreted in urban planning domain, and diverse approaches to achieve urban sustainability include conceptualization of eco-villages, eco-cities (Register, 1987) and eco² cities (Suzuki, Dastur, & Moffat, 2010); new urbanism (Talen, 2013) and sustainable urbanism (Farr, 2008); compact cities, green cities and resilient cities amongst others. Simultaneously, in response to globalization the place-based factors of local contexts are assuming significance in urban and spatial planning paradigms (WHO, 1999) (UN-DESA). Embedded in the local discourse, culture has emerged as a significant local, place-based determinant in urban planning process necessary for achieving sustainable urban development. UNESCO has initiated preparation of a 'Global Report on Culture and Sustainable Urban Development' for negotiations in the post 2015 Agenda which aims to provide guidelines and recommendations aimed to foster culture-based urban sustainable development initiatives at the international, national, regional and local levels (UNESCO, 2015). Significantly, the SDG's have adopted 'inclusive and sustainable urbanization' and to 'protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage' for making cities resilient and sustainable (UN, 2015) amongst other adopted goals. However, presently the linkage between cultural heritage and sustainable urbanization to make cities resilient and sustainable is tenuous and its progress is confounded by abstractions in definitions of both culture and sustainability, insufficient empirical evidence and a near absence of integrated conceptual framework (Parr, 2000). This chapter examines this gap through an exploratory study situated in context of pilgrimage towns in India.

Pilgrimage towns in India are characterized by high visitations of pilgrims, which stress the prevailing environmental services and result in degradation of built environment. The need for pilgrimage infrastructure results in urban growth; which, in absence of appropriate planning regulations, threatens cultural and environmental sustainability of the pilgrimage town (Shinde, 2012). Culture-led and event based urban regeneration strategies have been identified as a key theme for urban regeneration (Singhal, McGreal, & Berry, 2013). A recent Government of India scheme - Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY) - recognizes the need to undertake strategic and planned development for sustainable development of heritage cities in India. Most of the cities shortlisted for the scheme involve an element of sacrality and attract pilgrims at varying scales. The scheme envisages to "preserve and revitalize soul of the heritage city to reflect the city's unique character....and facilitate inclusive heritage linked urban development" (Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India, 2015).

This chapter explores the relevance of identifying place-specific cultural characteristics and establish the need for its embedding in urban planning process at pilgrimage towns in India; fundamentally premised on significance of culture for sustainable urban development. The links between cultural characteristics - values, aspirations, activities, processes and patterns of a place, and urban planning are examined at two Hindu pilgrimage towns - Vrindavan and Haridwar - to predicate the relevance of culture to sustainable urban planning at pilgrimage towns in India. The case study towns exhibit congruence in terms of their religious significance, well-regarded sacredness, riverine geography and primacy of pilgrimage - and divergence in terms of presiding deity and associated rituals, cultural vitality, demographic patterns, urbanization trends and urban scale of the town. Briefly, the two selected case-study towns have convergent cultural backgrounds but divergent urban context.

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