

Historic Cities in India-An Overview

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Abstract

The historic town is a significant part of the contemporary Indian environment harbouring large population in its defined limit. Along with the art, architecture, buildings and historic settlements, India has a rich cultural heritage. Due to rapid urbanisation and changing lifestyles of the people in the recent years, alarming crisis of these cultural heritages is getting exposed. Due to various reasons, both traditional and contemporary planning practices in India have failed to develop standards and norms for historic cities. In this paper the issue of planning for historic cities in the Indian cities is examined. The finds that the changing social and economic scenarios in the cities have introduced a fused culture collage of the traditional and contemporary era.

Keywords: Historic cities, culture, conservation and morphology

1. INTRODUCTION

Historic cities in terms of civilisation consist of location, morphology, and physical aspect that differs, correspond to its environment. They are, mostly, built with indigenous belief and wisdom which reflects human legacy on how it is settled with traditional, economic, political and spatial aspect (Rapoport, 1990). Culture usually affects behaviour pattern of communities more than the environment. However, the environment is shaped by the mentioned factors as it includes the restraint of human livelihood (Strange, 1997). It is important that a historic centre is inhabited and forms a live cultural nucleus. The presence of historic cities in modern era merits us and brings us the self-esteem of residents. Therefore, belief, politics, customs and tradition have laid the foundation, which involves not only physical planning but also a social cohesion for residents in those cities. This may lead us to understand more about how and what elements can be chosen to address the issues pertaining to conservation.

1.2 Historic Cities of India

The evolution of cities in India dates back to 2500 B.C. The cities Harappa and Mohanjodaro of Indus Valley civilization flourished during 1700 B.C and 600 B.C. Since then India has a continued history of evolution of towns and cities. During this period, subsequent invasions and conquests by various rulers influenced the transformation of cities and architecture. The towns, cities, palaces, forts, etc., were developed over a period of time in India. As a consequence, India has probably more immovable artefacts than any other country in the world (Ribeiro, 1990). These historic places vary diversely on the basis of

religion, socio-economic conditions, political system, geographical location, size, age and archaeological interest. For instance, the physical layouts of towns and cities such as Bhubaneswar, Kanchipuram, Thanjavur, Varanasi, Srirangam, Madurai etc., developed during 500 A.D. and 1700 A.D. are the product of Hindu Vedic principles and the concepts of cosmos. The temple city of Srirangam with seven concentric walled enclosures (each with a *Gopuram* of receding size) illustrates this characteristic feature. The concentric form of the temple city is based on the Hindu philosophy of cosmic centre, which directs all motion inwards to the sacred centre (Martyn, 1990). Within the concentric walls, spaces are further marked by elaborate system of rituals and rules. On the other hand, the cities such as Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi), Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Meerut etc., developed between 15th and 18th century during the Muslim rule in India are in the form of large complexes of monuments with organic development around them. Their organic form is characterised by residential neighbourhoods (in the form of *Mohallas*, *Pols* etc.) and the housing typologies (*havelies*) linked together by a network of streets.

In addition, there is another type of historic settlement mainly concentrated in the desert territory of the province of Rajasthan. The cities of Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Jodhpur, Udaipur and Amber are a few better known settlements which have been in existence for around 250 to 1000 years. The most significant characteristics of Indian townscape (marked by densely packed built form and network of narrow and winding streets) are usually encircled within the walls of the city fort. This urban form is unique in responding to social, cultural and climatic need. The quality of these towns is further enhanced by highly ornamented facades of the buildings arranged in a sequential manner along the narrow shaded streets.

Almost each of 3000 cities and towns in India displays the bewildering diversity in their characteristics and therefore has the potential for conservation (Menon, 1989). Hence, all the cities in India can be considered to be historic in nature except the new cities founded by British for specific functions, for example: hill resorts (Shimla), cantonment towns, transport towns (Karagpur, Bilaspur), new planned cities in the post-independent India (Chandigarh), industrial townships (Jamshedpur, Rourkela), etc. British colonies (Bombay and Calcutta), the French colonies (Pondicherry) and Portuguese colonies (Panjim in Goa) are examples of fusion of Indian and colonial culture. Despite the varying nature of these historic cities, there are certain strong common characteristics among them. The physical and social fabric of these places has a rich architectural heritage, social and cultural values of the nation.

The urban form of historic cities of India is the physical expression of forces that affect the daily lives of people, representative of their self-image, wealth and aspirations. Assimilation of the forces of social patterning, historical consciousness, political and cultural influences, religious habits and ritual, symbolic associations, topography, geography, climate, restricted availability of materials, behavioural patterns and functions to be noted. From Figure 1, it can be clearly seen that how colonial settlement and historic settlement differs in urban form. One of the most important characteristics is that despite current problems, both are living cities and they continue to maintain the traditional physical and social well-being. Most of these

cities have now been transformed into major economic centres of the country. That is why historic cities of India are the symbol of country's living architectural, economic, social and cultural heritage (Jain, 1986).

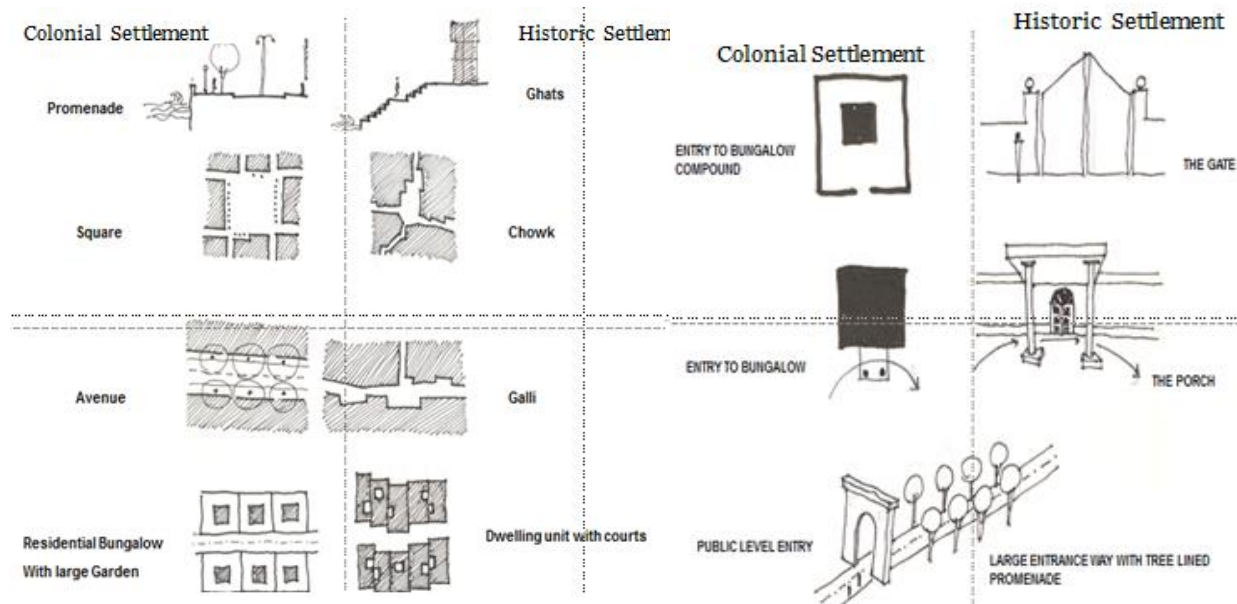


Figure 1 Comparative Analysis of Settlements

1.3 Issues

The evolution of Indian cities continued in a benevolent manner until recently when the changes appeared to be occurring quite rapidly. Since last three-four decades, phenomenal growth of cities is seen, most of which is directed towards its historic areas. In addition to Rapid commercialization and tourism, problems of rapid urbanization, densification, congestion, traffic, and stress on infrastructure are the most common ones that any growing city faces. Most of these problems are interrelated, for instance, excessive vehicular traffic has led to road widening subsequently disrupting the traditional buildings and lifestyle of the people living in the area. All this eventually led to the destruction of cultural as well as architectural heritage. The plight of the old city of Hyderabad is a testimony in the following words 'Congestion and heavy traffic in Hyderabad have necessitated the dismantling of most of the six-mile-long wall that gave the city of Qutub Shahis and the Asaf Jahis (the Nizams) protection and a definite boundary. Of the original 12 gates, the remnants of only two still survive'(Naidu, 1990).

Similarly in Jaisalmer, a large portion of fort, bastions and palaces collapsed due to lack of maintenance and increasing perforation in the walls (Nanda, 1990). The richly ornamented facades, *jharokhas* (balconies) of the *havelies* (mansions) are being mutilated because of indiscriminate construction activities and increasing demands for commercial spaces. In case of Udaipur, large population, commercialization and establishment of several modern industries inside the city have drastically changed the social and physical fabric of historic areas. The story of erosion of India's heritage does not stop here. There are many cities which

are undergoing similar changes. Planners and conservationists are concerned with the inadequacy of the present approaches and legislative framework to deal with conservation. Some argue that legal instruments to preserve the 'protected' monuments are needed; there is none to conserve the heritage of historical urban settlements and none for the integration of conservation with planning.

Most of the conservation efforts to date have gone in vain and in fact, have contributed more to the extinction of the heritage. This is evident from the following quote: 'It is an irony that since Independence, the main thrust of town planning in India has generally operated against the rehabilitation, revitalization or urban conservation of inner city areas. Even though the master plans during 1960s-70s sought to decongest the core areas through land use plans and zoning regulations, these documents only resulted in futile exercises'(Fonseca, 1971). With present research work, it can be emphatically stated that at the moment, there is no established approach to include conservation aspect in planning of the historic city.

1.4 Rationale

Demolition appears a better solution than planning, where the problem is severe. Historic city is a unique organic morphology which defines and reflects the culture, ideologies and a way of life. Historic buildings had a higher degree of perfection reflecting their attitude towards life. Similar outcome is also expressed in their buildings and the related spaces, such as the neighbourliness, the sense of an intense community life etc. It would be unfair if due to negligence these rich heritages are lost. It is the past that informs the present and directs the future.

1.5 Urban Challenges

Historic cities of India today face many urban challenges. From ancient times to the British period, the physical expansion within the historic settlement was limited due to its defined urban form through city wall or fortification and geo-climatic constraints. However, due to increasing urbanisation, modernization, political and economic factors, as well as technological progress, a new set of difficulties are observed in expansion of the cities and shift in the axis of growth. The formal and informal economic sectors have started existing together. The old traditions now accommodate and integrate new cultural element resulting in a continuous interpenetration of modernity into tradition.

1.6 Result

1.6.1 Changing morphology of the city

Most Indian cities now bear a close resemblance to each other, irrespective of where they are located. One of the most noticeable features of Indian cities is their combination of high population density in the core areas and relatively low density in the newer developments. This characteristic is evident from the study of the cities like Delhi, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Ujjain, Varanasi, Thanjavur and many more. The new additions to the original settlement appear to be incompatible to the overall structure and sustenance of the city and are exerting a

lot of pressure on the historical core areas. The shift in the development of the cities occurred during the colonial rule when the new formal areas in the form of the cantonment, civil lines and new suburbs were developed outside the old city. The changing economic sector due to industrialization attracted people from the surrounding rural and semi-urban areas. Since then, there has been a huge influx of people in the city in search of jobs and place to live. The city has changed becoming central area in a larger metropolitan context. However, it is important to recognize that these parts are now organically related to each other and their interdependence must be viewed in the context that current trend and pattern of Urbanization is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

1.6.2 Congestion

One of the basic physical problems occurring in the historical areas is congestion. Congestion refers to inadequate facilities in housing, inadequate infrastructure in the neighbourhoods and lack of circulation space. According to various studies, it is not the density as a commonly perceived problem, but it is congestion. Congestion occurs when physical infrastructure cannot cope up with the density of an area (Naidu, 1990). To a large extent, it is being caused by the intricate physical fabric of Indian cities where primary and secondary streets are limited, low rise and densely packed houses which are far beyond renovation, and laying of new sewerage lines etc. The existing roads, sewerage lines, water-pipes, electricity and playground have become old, obsolete, overloaded and are inadequate for the present population. According to statistics, nearly a fourth of the population in most Indian cities don't have either tapped water or sewage facilities and a third live without electricity. In old city of Hyderabad, residents do not have a proper sewage system (Naidu, 1990). In addition to the overload on physical infrastructure, certain vital social infrastructure facilities e.g. schools, banks, post offices, hospitals, and playgrounds etc. have also not been able to keep up with the increasing population. Furthermore, congestion is compounding due to lack of proper circulation space. The circulation system in the walled city is in the form of narrow and winding streets, reflecting different era and a different culture. They are unsuitable for present needs as they obstruct the free flow of fast-moving and heavy vehicles which passes through them as thoroughfare. The slow-moving vehicles like cycles and rickshaws still run in the walled city which in turn force fast moving vehicles to move at a speed slower than what they are designed for, causing further congestion. As a result, there are frequent breakdowns in the flow of traffic and the roads which have already crossed their carrying capacity, are deteriorating further. Survey of old part of Hyderabad reveals that almost all of roads are in bad shape (Naidu, 1990). Further, in order to cater to the demands of the automobile, boundary walls of the cities have been brought down; several residential, commercial and religious structures are demolished for widening the roads. The cumulative result of all this is a further escalation in traffic, increasing congestion and air and noise pollution.

1.6.3 Housing

Despite India being important economic centres, the problem of poor-quality housing and dilapidation in the historical areas is quite high. Naidu's study of Old Hyderabad further indicates that poor quality of houses in the walled city is due to the presence of a large

number mud houses and the economic inability of the inhabitants to renovate them. Dilapidation has further increased due to sub-letting rooms. In Delhi, the entire walled city of Shahjahanbad has been declared a slum due to acute congestion and high proportion of dilapidated buildings.

1.6.4 Community and Social Dynamics

Besides these physical changes, cities are also undergoing rapid cultural and social transformation. There is a continuous erosion of the old order and emergence of a new social organization. Social units which are being formed are smaller in size and relatively uniform by class, ethnicity and interest. In many historic cities of India, the social conditions are such that they are leading to 'Multiple deprivation'. 'Multiple deprivations' is a series of correlated, cross cutting deprivations which often compound one another. In the social science literature, this vicious cycle of multiple deprivations, for instance, poor education and training, low income, poor diet and poor hygienic conditions lead to low efficiency and ability to enhance incomes, is analytically studied to understand the poverty at the individual, community and class levels (Naidu, 1990).

1.6.5 Economic Dynamics

The indigenous economy of the old city coexists with a powerful parallel economy of the formal sector which constitutes large international and national business corporations, bureaucratic enterprises and industrial establishments. This modern economy has mostly emerged under the direct influence of the colonial rule. The informal bazaar economy reflects more of social and religious characteristics rather than economic. The introduction of the new formal economic sector has significant repercussions on the society as a whole. It is transforming the society into capitalist market economy. This coupled with privatization is leading to a further breakdown of the communities and the emergence of individualism and ethos of self-interest. The two sectors of the city's economy in turn have introduced two social and economic status based on consumption and employment operating within the same city area. The bazaar sector of the old city traditionally consists of four layers. Among those layers, the upper class consists of wholesalers, merchants, religious leaders etc. The middle class comprises of self-employed artisans, shopkeepers, religious teachers, and skilled workers etc.

1.6.6 Commercialization

The introduction of new formal economic order into the existing informal sector of economy has resulted in a large scale conversion of old residential areas into commercial zones. The scarcity of land and increasing population have increased the land value many times in these areas, giving better financial returns from the property that is converted into a commercial use. The commercialization has introduced some more changes in the physical fabric of the city to accommodate new needs for example production space, storage areas, increased traffic in the form of heavy vehicles e.g. trucks, vans etc.

1.6.7 Tourism

The rapid transformation of economy of historic cities is affected by Tourism. The rich architecture and unique experience of monuments to markets to the traditional lifestyles of

the people in the historic city attracts a large portion of both domestic and foreign tourists. While the tourism industry is generally beneficial to the nation's economy, its environmental, cultural and social repercussions are quite severe. Many cities such as Udaipur and Jaisalmer are facing a potential threat to their cultural heritage due to unregulated tourism. To cater to the needs of the tourists, roads have been widened to allow buses and cars to come as close to the historic monuments as possible. Hotels and recreation facilities are now mushrooming up in the historic areas, further adding to the congestion, leading to the introduction of an elite class culture as well as economy increasing gap between the rich and the poor.

1.6.8 National and Regional Planning

Most of the above problems occurring in the cities affecting historical areas are attributed to the tidal flow of population due to the "pull" effect of big cities acting as the potential economic centres. A number of policies and programmes are implemented for altering the urban structure remained by and large ineffective. The concept of developing ring towns or "countermagnets" to the metropolitan cities was implemented in an attempt to stem the growth of large urban areas. However, the alternative townships could not offer the same level of economic activities and infrastructure as that of metropolitan city and thus, the population continues to migrate to major cities for employment. Industrial decentralization, another attempt made by the Government also ended up in failure. This time the problem was the close proximity of the new industrial towns to the existing major urban centres. The establishment of industries had displaced the local population as the industries could not provide the type of jobs, they were suited for. Furthermore, the process of decentralization of the industrial activities in the city resulted in ribbon development along the arterial route and contributed more to the peripheral sprawl. It is the ineffectiveness of the policies coupled with mishandling of planning issues by local development authorities, which has led to social, physical and economic transformation of the cities.

1.7 Conclusion

The historic town is a significant part of the contemporary Indian environment harbouring large population in its defined limit. Although it is not a part of the formal sector of the city, it is being influenced and in turn influencing the other sectors and city as a whole. Therefore, it can be reiterated that "historic parts of the Indian cities cannot be isolated for planning and conservation purposes as is done in the case of individual structures. It is also not possible to fence off these areas and convert them into living museums. What is considered important is the idea that a historic city or a part of it must relate to the larger urban context around it and respond to the aspects which demand its interaction with the rest of the city. At the same time, an historic area should have the privilege of making claims on the rest of the city for a special position (Jain, 1990). The new developments in cities must be coherent with the characteristics of the historic areas in the form of spatial relationships, land use, material and master plan. Conservation of historic cities has to respect their changing and evolving nature taking the inherent continuous development activity into account. It can thus be asserted that planning in India needs to shift its status to what is becoming of historic cities rather than on what they were. This shift in values is predicated based on the current reality of Indian cities through National Heritage Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY), Heritage

Management Plan, etc. and future prospects that will change in morphology, social condition and urban economy. The changing social and economic scenarios in the cities have introduced a fused culture collage of the traditional and contemporary era.

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