The Indian Historic Cities: Exploring the Cultural Capital

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Abstract
The Indian concept of cyclic time which continuously regenerates itself has always been contrasting to the linear perception of the west. This phenomenon is reflected in the process of examining Indian historic cities as well. The paper attempts to understand Indian city as a system – a multi-dimensional cultural entity, with several sub systems within, which altogether makes it a meaningful integral whole. It particularly focuses on to the theory of “Architectural knowledge systems approach” which introduces a new paradigm in the current scenario of understanding cities. This approach puts forth a larger framework for understanding heritage, which at this juncture is a historic city, as a product of three elements – The Time, Place and people which demands for a comprehensive set of information on historical, geographical and anthropological data respectively. These three fundamentals examined together gives the context in which a city needs to be identified and understood. Each city and each piece of architecture in it deserves its own unique verbal, architectural expression, which probes into its soul. It is the duty of us architects, to explore and precisely find out the meanings – both physical and metaphysical – associated with any architectural entity so that further interventions can be rightfully planned.

Specifically focusing on the historic city of Thrissur, in India, this paper will try to explore the possibilities of rightly deciphering a complicated, diverse Indian Historic city through its various layers of meanings. Thrissur, well known as the cultural capital of Kerala, has a unique identity among the Indian historic cities. The presence of one of the oldest Siva temples right in the city center with a central open space, the hierarchical veedhis radiating from it, the vibrant trading and commercial core, a well-planned water system inseparable from the town planning stratagems, Palaces, the Vedic learning center Brahmawom Madhom which are all “living” components that add on to the metaphysical charm of this historic city. Most important of all is the diverse community who occupied the city at various points of time and became an inseparable living entity of this cultural capital. It is this heritage along with the seamless manifestation of its spirit over the physical structure of the city which makes it a unique entity worth exploring.

Keywords: Historic city, Architectural Knowledge system, Paradigm, Cultural capital, Heritage

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1. Introduction

Heritage in India is an integral part of living fabric of the society, and like all living entities, it changes and transforms through time. Heritage is understood to be renewing and regenerating according to the cyclic concept of time and the elements are never viewed in isolation, but only as a part of the larger context. [1] Indian historic city being a cultural entity born in a specific geographical context adapted and modified by human activities at different historic epochs is a complex entity to explore. A historic city can only be understood as a part of the larger “context” – a complex network of systems and subsystems which ascribe the physical and metaphysical meanings to it. Unfortunately, the perspective of today’s planners in understanding a city has resulted in over simplifying these cultural artifacts as mere heritage zones or areas and totally ignores the dynamic quality of settlements. [2] This paper is a humble attempt to explore the physical and metaphysical layers of meanings imbided within the structure of an Indian temple town – Thrissur in Kerala. For this purpose, the theory of Architectural Knowledge Systems is adopted based on a conceptual framework developed by Prof. Nalini Thakur, specifically for the Indian situation. First and the most important step in protecting a historic city, is to understand it in its entirety, as a product of three major elements – The Time, Place and People. The method adopted here is to map the cultural city, respecting all the layers of meanings in it. Cultural resource mapping, listing exercise and architectural documentation of significant entities were some of the tools used in this process. Mapping was followed by chronological layering exercise which helped in understanding the various stages of growth of the city in all aspects. Not only buildings, but the natural and geographical layers, communities, festivals, and the oral histories associated with them were also mapped so that a holistic picture of the city is unveiled. Along with an extensive literature survey of available materials, Interviews and interactions with the local communities helped in exploring the cultural side of Thrissur and understand how the diverse cultural dynamics still thrives within the city. Interactions with experts in various disciplines related to the historic city - history, geography, religion, economics etc. helped us in bringing together a variety of information which contributed in understanding the city as a living cultural resource. The common thread running here is to increase the cultural resource data base thereby giving a new perception to the city through its historical, geographical and anthropological information. The paper also tries to put forward the point that – the way we perceive a historic city will indeed influence the way we intend to protect it; just as a visible physical entity or as an integral whole which carries within it the tangible, intangible and the living heritage components.

2. Exploring the Cultural capital: City as a Cultural Resource

Thrissur - Thiruvivaperoor (The city of sacred Siva), a well-planned fortified town, avowed for its trading and commercial core, rich in its spirituality and opulent culture, is widely known as the cultural capital of Kerala. The elevated hillock in the centre, the branching hierarchy of streets aligned according to the natural terrain and the fertile Kol wetlands which collected the drained water from the town, reflects a perfect agrarian system which supported the entire settlement in its heydays. Existing geographical setting here benefits the conscious placement of water bodies at strategic points exemplifying how well the “social” and the “sacred” are married. The living temple and settlement surrounding it forms a continuing cultural ensemble today together with the geography of the place. Although the tangible remains of the city - the fortifications and associated structures have almost disappeared from the current scene, the immaterial presence of its spirit still remains in this place and among its people, thus forming an inseparable trait of the metaphysical structure of this historic temple town. Even the town planning guidelines and its glorious architecture can be seen closely attached to the spiritual ambience of the town. With Vadakkunnathan Temple in the center and structures like Brahmawom Madhom – the ancient Vedic learning center–around, the town had strong spiritual connections within and to the larger schools of thought in the past. Although in the changed social circumstances, the connections are not as evident as it used to be earlier, it would be fascinating to look at these social linkages which make it a living heritage entity in the present along with the valuable patronage of
ancient traditional wisdom.

3. The Architectural Knowledge Systems Theory: A new paradigm

When it comes to the question of mainstreaming the cultural importance of a city and lack of protection, the perfect answer is shortage of our cultural resource knowledge. The generation of knowledge starts from looking at the historic city itself which is the primary source of knowledge. “One needs to appreciate the colossal information represented by the surviving heritage and need to find a way to realize and harness the same for extending our knowledge of historical architecture. One has to begin by identification of heritage and using the heritage as a source of knowledge. This source is of primary importance in research and documentation. When one develops by starting with the heritage as a knowledge base one starts recognizing that the systems of knowledge followed is different from the western model which is a linear model.” [3]

Three types of information are mentioned here basically - historical, geographical and anthropological, the amalgamation of which helps breaking up and reconstructing the resource information transforming the historical context itself as a source of knowledge.

4. Time: The Historic evolution of Cultural capital

History of any place should be traced not just as a celebration of glorious events, but as a well-defined method in which various aspects of the city in connection with its living traditions are analyzed. The complexities of change at various levels need to be grasped. Every structure and fragment in the historic city is a true document of cultural and technical knowledge systems. The evidences of their history are preserved as ‘layers’ of built fabric, making them highly readable entities. Coherence is added by the specific nature of heritage components, historic building typologies and their co relations. [4]

The temple town as a cultural entity has evolved through the influence of different religious and cultural traditions like Buddhism, Jainism, Brahmanism and various European colonial hegemonies throughout its history. Each stage of chronological evolution can be mapped in layers of history in which the political, social and cultural scenario interwoven with the tangible and intangible resources influence the growth pattern, architectural styles and diverse communities of the region. Mapping and analysis of these chronological layers are done with supporting evidences like ancient scripts, copper plates, numismatic, literary and material evidences, travelogues and colonial reports. Early social life of this region can be traced from scores of local literary works in which these stories are depicted. The fundamental idea is that nothing is frozen in time but is dynamic, interdependent and regenerating in the cyclic process.

In all stages of its historical evolution, Thrissur was inhabited and had its own significant role to play in the development of the region. Glory of this heritage town dates back to Iron Age, where we have a number of megaliths discovered around the settlement, still intact. Buddhism and Jainism made its presence felt in the town and when it came to the Hindu revival, it was gaining prominence as a scholastic center for Vedic learning in Brahmawom Madhom. The stronghold of Brahmanism and emergence of a caste based society is marked by the planned hierarchy of settlements around the central sacred core. The region also played an important role in promoting maritime trade relations between Kerala and the outside world. The phenomenal progress in trade resulted in a sizeable flow of wealth which further encouraged remarkable momentum in the field of art, music and architecture. Various building typologies and architectural styles mapped in the chronology of layers substantiate this change. Modern Thrissur owes its origin to the celebrated king Sakthan Thampuran, who envisioned planning of the town as we see it now. The huge open space in the centre, roads radiating in all cardinal directions, the sloping terrain that drains off water away from the town, strategic channelization of water to create water bodies at tactical points and the prudent positioning of functional areas around reveals the masterpiece of a planning visionary.
5. Place: The sacred geography

Indian philosophy understands geography more than just a setting of hills, water bodies and forests. Geography formed a colossal canvas in which the human interactions with nature are pictured in terms of habitation, adaptation and generation of traditional knowledge.

![Conjectural drawing showing the terrain of the town with temple in the centre](source)

The temple town is situated on a rising ground with the sacred shrine at its summit. The elevated open space in the centre, circumambulating and diverging roads around and the holy shrine at its pinnacle not just created a circular planning pattern, but consciously crafted a cultural space in which all roads lead to the central spirit - physically and spiritually elevated in space.

Setting of the town cannot be limited inside the fortified area or the walled city alone, but spreads out into a larger cultural landscape with the diversified physical configuration of undulating land, water streams, consciously positioned water bodies along the aquifers, gardens which follow the water channels, and a number of sacred shrines sited within the lush greenery. The town surrounded by Kol wetlands at the lower periphery had made it fertile enough for an agrarian settlement to grow and flourish. Also it has made the water flow during monsoons quite easy in the town where street pattern itself was laid according to the terrain. A number of holy shrines associated with the central spirit, carefully set within the sacred geography along with a skillful combination of rich vegetation, water bodies and undulating topography, carve out beautiful spaces within the landscape. Altogether it showcases a perfect man-nature interface, where the resources are adapted and used judiciously creating a sustainable model.

6. People: The Living Heritage

Medieval map of the temple town reveals a well-defined hierarchy of settlements around the temple precincts. The Brahmin community, considered to be the top most layer of social hierarchy was privileged to settle closer to the temple followed by other communities responsible for various temple related activities. The first layer of Brahmins constituted the thantri who is the main priest in charge of all major rituals and festivals in the temple, melshanti and keezhshanti responsible for performing the daily rituals for the main deity and ancillary deities. The consecutive layers included the non-Brahmins who were associated with various activities of the temple like the Ambalavasis (pothuvals, warriers, nambeeshans etc.), Thachan (carpenters), and others related to dance and music. [6] People were appointed for all the day to day activities of the temple like gathering firewood, pounding of rice, collecting flowers and leaves, cleaning etc. At the bottom hierarchy were the farmers, considered as lower caste and remained in the periphery, closer to agricultural lands.
Dwellings for each community were planned such that it maintained a constant physical and spiritual linkage towards the temple which is one of the reasons why spirit of the place remains same in spite of the fast paced developments and changes which happened in the name of modern urbanization. Koothambalam—the splendid Temple theatre in Vadakkunnathan temple complex demonstrates the importance of arts and culture in a medieval society. It is from here that the celebrated temple art forms like Koothu and Koodiyattam grew and flourished. In short, temples were the institutionalized form of medieval culture in Kerala acting as centers of Vedic knowledge, astrology, Ayurveda and numerous arts and crafts. Economic base becomes the major deciding factor for social reforms in any historic town. Thrissur is often interpreted as the hinterland of Muziris - the glorious port of the western coast in India. Rather than a temple related economy, what is more evident in this historic town is the thriving trade and commerce which exploited the proximity to port and its hinterlands and the diverse communities who discovered the commercial prospects of this town and settled here at various time periods. The Christians who migrated during the Sakthan era were given land and other incentives for setting up trade thereby transforming an agrarian settlement into a commercial hub. They were followed by many other Christian communities who migrated to Thrissur, exploring the commercial potential of this territory. Study of numismatics reveal various business connections they had with Rome, Egypt and different parts of North India. Literary evidences and travelogues also talk about the strong Christian presence in the trade map of Thrissur. Colonial records of Portuguese, Dutch and English also give a detailed note on the significant trade and commercial activities here. The vital role of various Christian missionaries in the social and cultural development of Thrissur cannot be ignored. They instigated a number of educational institutions in Thrissur, as a part of imparting education to the marginalized population. Most of them still hold their heads high for the legacy of this old town. Hence from time immemorial, it can be observed that Thrissur welcomed people from different communities around the globe and remained a vibrant hub of trade and commerce. Today, Thrissur is a secular urban center where the coherence can be well perceived through the cultural understanding shared among its communities.

6.1 Architectural Heritage

The built heritage of any town will be closely linked with the living population and its cultural habits. Residential pattern in Thrissur, which was horizontal rather than vertical, maintained an intimate human scale within the town. The decreasing scale of buildings towards the periphery showcases the influence of caste system and impact of social hierarchy in architecture. Similarly each street which branched off from the center has its own architectural and social identity which resonates in its style, construction system, use of materials and so on. Brahmaswom Madhom and the related structures retain its ancient pride with the huge traditional pond, rich architectural edifices and spiritual ambience of Vedic chanting still resonating in its walls. Similarly Pazhayanadakavu, predominantly occupied by the Tamil Brahmans has its own visual identity and character similar to that of a typical Tamil Agrahara street with row houses of elongated plan and tiny front yards, three to four sectors inside and a well on the rear. Whereas, when it comes to Erinjeri Angadi or Nayarangadi in the commercial core, where the most diversified communities are settled, a completely different architectural ambience can be noticed. Interestingly, this change in societal pattern not only affects the architectural style, but also the visual and spiritual ambience of a place. Every street had specialized markets in various commodities like rice, pulses, vegetables & fruits, fish & meat, gold & silver etc. Shop houses in the commercial core are of great interest and known for its unique hybrid architecture as a result of the various colonial hegemonies which existed here. Shops with elongated plans open out to streets on both the sides creating an uninterrupted skyline. The famous Appam maker’s street of Thrissur is a significant example of living heritage in the town. They are a group of household chefs who prepare the indigenous cuisine in earthen ovens at their street fronts and supply it around the town. Apart from built heritage, the cordial community spaces offered by the urban fabric of this town are also worth mentioning. The Anjuvilakku Junction which witnessed many socially imperative events in the history of Thrissur still stands as an important community meeting place in the commercial core.
7. Conclusion

A basic comparison of the historical layers of Thrissur with the real ground scenario reveals a high concentration of its natural, built and intangible heritage components, functioning together as a single urban spatial entity. The open spaces, community tanks, number of sacred shrines, traditional institutions, traditional and vernacular housing stocks, angadis (Market Places), ceremonial routes, rituals, festivals, customs and practices along with the social and spiritual fabric of the town, has got an irreplaceable relationship within themselves and the geography. The Vadakkunnathan temple located right in the heart of the town has been serving as a nucleus for the urban centre to grow and develop. The processional routes, functional and social hierarchy of settlements have been the prime determinant of its urban form. The constant curvature of the streets around the temple complex calls its attention to the basic orientation of circumambulation around the temple complex. All events in town, throughout the year happen around the central open space which holds these linkages and define the city as a place. Thrissur Pooram festival exemplifies these connections annually through its myriad ways of associating itself with the people. Being a festival which celebrates the communal harmony and cultural diversities of this space, Pooram holds good for the spatial design and morphology of the town. The entire town gears up for the festival, the buildings around the core with its projecting balconies and the excited crowd overlooks the central space to celebrate Pooram which is the strength of the town, on which the culture based development strategy of Thrissur should be pivoted.

Understanding a historic city in its entirety being a complex task can only be accomplished at various levels of abstraction and detail. The various heritage resources should be seen and dealt as cultural assets, rather than dilapidated remnants, scary old buildings or quaint museum pieces. Being vibrant centers of spiritual and social dynamics, Indian heritage cities possess a larger potential - yet to be explored. This paper is an attempt to reinvent the holistic picture of an Indian historic city by exploring various layers of meanings in it. The method adopted here puts forward a multidimensional understanding of the city which probes into its soul and structure, such that the city itself becomes a cultural resource base, on which the further initiatives can be based upon. The monument centric western way of perceiving heritage, tends to isolate these complex layers of history and confines itself to administrative territories or zones which hinders the conservation of many historic towns in India. There exist an urgent need to develop this concept to comprehend the city in terms of its culture, nature and people and to develop a distinctive method to look at these cultural cores as specific cases with unique characteristics and practices. This awareness can provide a holistic attitude to the subject which assists in making the historical context itself a source of knowledge.

References
4) Ibid.