



Creating Sacred Place In An Urban Setting: Emphasizing The Concept Of Cultural Sustainability

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Abstract

Traditional knowledge spread through practice and oral directions and stories and passes from one generation to the next. The significance of ritual practices has become equally important to society members as it is required the technical knowledge. The recent Smart City concept relies on sustainable development from social, economic, environmental and cultural point of view. Every policy maker is thus focusing on the procedures of protecting region's cultural heritage, cultural assets and people's knowledge as well as traditional artefacts.

This paper revolves around the concept of creating sacred place in a city to preserve and protect the society's cultural elements in a sustainable manner. Two temples of Kolkata, India has been selected for this study in order to show the occasional and regular social gathering would resolve numerous problems that today's globalised cities generate.

Key words: Sacred place, Culture, Worship, City, Sustainability

Introduction

Culture is considered as the 'fourth pillar' of sustainability (Hawkes, 2001; Astara, 2014; Sabatini, 2019), which links society's values and believes, resident's behaviour and attitudes with development that sustain for long time. In this regard, the concept of cultural sustainability relies on the procedures of protecting region's cultural heritage, cultural assets and people's knowledge as well as traditional artefacts. Traditional knowledge transfers from one generation to the next through practice and oral directions and stories. The inter-generational transfer of values, practices and knowledges make sense of creating an identity for every society maintaining its unique regionality. Based on three traditional pillars of sustainability and recent inclusion of the fourth pillar, most research topics of contemporary period stress on society, environment, economy and culture (Foladori, 2005; Perrings, 2006; Colantonio, 2009; Marana, 2010; Birch, 2015; Sabatini, 2019; Centiner et. al., 2021).

The sacred place within a regional periphery is constructed, when space, place and human experiences connect closely and has the capability to enhance the life experiences from moral, spiritual and psychological point of view. Values, beliefs and human behaviours are closely connected with the physical and psychological development of an individual in the society that are applied to assess human actions and outcomes within a specific spatial context. Cultural beliefs, spiritual artefacts, religious rituals and traditional knowledge connected with the story of a place, the symbols and the myths specific to a society- all help in the creation of a sacred place. Every sacred place in a city is a thematical construct of the residents at the first place and then it could be executed and constructed to make residents connect to each other not during any festivity but throughout the year in various ways. An important character of the sacred place is the existence of emotional attachment of local residents with the place apart from the spiritual attachment of devotees and worshippers who visit the place occasionally. Any place can become a sacred place, if there is a spiritual and emotional close connection.

Under the concept of sustainability, researchers argue that a balance should maintain between culture and all three pillars (social, economic and environmental) as humans observe the world through the lens of culture and act accordingly. Traditional heritage, indigenous knowledge, belief system that passes through one generation to the next one, i.e., the inter-generational knowledge transfer and also their way of transformation to develop a new, updated and unique community identity. Hence, culture play important role in long-term development of a region including all aspects of sustainable development. Only a few research have been conducted to focus on the dynamic character of culture from community perspective as cultural sustainability enable organisations to take the vital steps in order to achieve the place for sustainable institutions (Barthel-Bouchier, 2013; Dessein, et. al., 2015; Jeronen, 2020; Centiner et. al., 2021). As a fundamental, supportive and self-promoting agent, the role of culture is well-established since earlier days, which has gained tremendous boost in contemporary period apart from all the conventional ecological, social, and economic performances of culture. Culture's role is highly significant in generating a sustainable society and maintain sustainable development. Cultural beliefs and behaviours hold central role in the concept of sustainable development and hence, it is also the basis of all other dimensions of sustainability.

Construction of a Sacred Place

The Smart City concept is offering a scope to expand the traditional knowledge to the globalised cities with a belief of creating a sustainable environment to live. The sustainable living would not be possible unless we extend our psychological connection with the place we live and work. By ignoring the emotional and spiritual requirements of human emotional linkages with the specific place may create a true smart city but that would be without any emotional attachment and human-region interaction. As a home of age-old traditions, India, since ancient days, is guided and shaped by its culture and religious beliefs, where local regional traditions and cultural attributes play vital roles. Places always reflect the traditions of its residents through their activities, beliefs and attitudes. Hence, the construction of sacred place has been linked with a long course from traditions to modernity.

India is the home of many sacred cities and places at macro and meso level of analysis. As for example, the city of Benaras is said to be the ancient city, where people visit to enlighten their soul and create a path to go to heaven after death. On the contrary, at micro level, we can observe the existence of Sacred Groves, which are used to protect, preserve and value the environment in a sustainable way. Many people found strong attachment to specific trees as trees create the platform to gather, perform activities and developing economic spaces in a variety of way.

The construction of any sacred place should fulfil the following characters-

- Sacred places are attached to local residents emotionally,
- Sacred places act as the meeting point since its starting day,
- People feel spiritual enlightenment with every sacred place,
- Every sacred place is a healing place, where people feel safe and satisfies their emotional and spiritual demand,
- Sacred places enjoy the common character of spiritual practices,
- Sacred place ranges from a specific tree, a building, a pond, a mountain, a forest, a field related to a specific mythological story.

In today's globalized cities, when the development is in demand of artificial intelligences, traditions and human emotions also need a great support from the society, from the surrounding environment and from positive interaction among human beings. Though in reality, as a result of high rate of urban growth, human culture, value systems, traditions and interpersonal relationships are facing tremendous crisis. Thus, the construction of sacred places within the city can be of high significance, where people can enjoy their personal relations, boost up their performances in their working world through encouraging individual's emotions and also performing festive rituals collectively to develop a better world. Sacred place is that area, where an individual often finds peace and relaxation.

Defining 'Cultural Sustainability'

In the writings of Thomas Robert Malthus, the concept of economic sustainability was adopted. It was mentioned that, nature needs to be protected to maintain the production of food to feed growing population and on the other hand, population increase should be controlled to maintain the natural resources for the future generation. The neo-Malthusian viewpoint on population and resource explains modern concepts of population and consumption pressures on available environmental base of the country which can be demonstrated through energy flow, human socio-economic condition and other parameters of environment.

In general, the term 'sustainability' is linked to the personal development through maintaining the well-being of future generation and covers the environmental, social and economic dimensions of human civilization. On the other hand, the term 'cultural sustainability' was first defined as "an intergenerational access to cultural resources" by the International Committee on Culture and Development (Soini and Birkeland, 2014; Duxbury, et. al., 2017). The concept revolves around the multi-dimensional perspectives of human being and their structure of culture along with cultural development. Theoretically, specific aspects of culture are considered as a part of social sustainability, while others are considered as economic sustainability. Culture as an 'intellectual' product and psychological attribute, include hybridity in the dimensions of shared patterns of heritage, values, perceptions, behaviour, strength, differences, regionality, flexibility, and other characters of human civilization (Cuthill 2010; Barthel-Bouchier, 2013; Soini and Birkeland, 2014; Stephenson, 2023). Cultural sustainability also connects the livelihood systems and its transformation in ideas that are required to create a sustainable society. To achieve sustainability at the global scale, protection of cultural heritage, maintain bio-cultural diversity and preservation of socio-cultural traditions are highly significant in contemporary societies.

Theoretical Background

The shifting of research interests on sustainability from traditional views on environment and socio-economic concerns towards understanding a wide arena of cultural approaches has become highly

valuable and generates many significant changes in other related parameters of regional development. In recent decade, we are focusing our concern to calculate society's ecological footprint, people's eco-sensitive behaviours and indigenous cultural approaches to resource utilization which are also making awareness to create specific ethnic identity and formulate the environmentally sustainable livelihoods (Vining & Ebreo, 2002; Steg & Vlek, 2009; Onel & Mukherjee, 2014). These may be summarised as pro-environmental behaviours that generate awareness among various human civilizations at different stages of development and motivate people to utilize traditional resources (both materials and knowledge) in a sustainable manner. As a result, community well-being comes at first place with socio-cultural approach to incorporate traditional knowledge and values for future generation.

The conceptual framework behind any religious and spiritual activities within an urban area first needs a specific place to celebrate all religious rituals. As religious beliefs are not only reflective and for specific people of the society, but they are also persistent, continuous and bring people together. Since ancient days, religion and spiritual believe are important part of the global social fabric and provide frameworks to many on how to live life in a sustainable manner (Clarke and Halafoff, 2017). Sacred places may be constructed as a site for developmental activities, a deeper attachment through which many region-specific mythological stories can be celebrated and creates a platform, where people can share their joys and sorrows with their peers and relatives to gain mental and psychological boosting to jump again in their daily activities. According to the writings of Clarke and Halafoff (2017), the theories relating to "sacred place" can be considered as a 'component of successful development interventions' and also reflect the specific role of sacred site, in terms of buildings, trees and grounds by developing social networks in planning, implementing and promoting sustainable development.

This approach to sacred place and sustainable development can be used to motivate people to make a positive contribution to society and regional development. The Indian approach to sacred places can be dates back to ancient days, when people used to worship nature and natural elements to satisfy the demand for environmental sustainability. It was completely different in form and practice that are existing in present days.

Creating Sacred Place in an Urban Setting

Kolkata, the former capital of India (during British rule in India), enjoys numerous sacred places in its core and extended city area. Being a preserver of historic and traditional colonial period, the city celebrates its every festive occasion in a specific mood of joy and encouragement. Residents of this city also celebrate every festival with much enthusiasm. Historic evidences show that, there were numerous places, where local residents celebrated some particular occasions even during pre-British period.



Photo 1: Dakat Kali Temple, Kolkata

Photo 1 reveals the picture of the Dakat Kali Bari, which was established in 1891. The place, where the temple is situated today, is a posh area of South Kolkata, i.e., Purna Das Road, Kolkata- 700029, or locally called the Gariahat area. Presently, this is a popular shopping centre of South Kolkata. Legends tell that, this Kali idol was worshipped by Manohar Bagdi during the middle of the 18th Century. This was the time, politically, when the battle of Plassey just ended and the Bengal faced a new situation in its political and financial environment. At that period, devotees used to take the course of Adi Ganga to visit the Kalighat temple to avoid the forest path. Decoits used to worship Kali Maa before plan for any burglary. From this legend, the name of this Kali Temple became the Dakat Kali Bari. Now-a-days, though everyday the Kali Maa is worshipped several times at a regular basis, but social gathering occurs mainly during the Kali Puja and during any special festive season.



Photo 2: ISKCON, Kolkata

Photo 2 reveals a society gathering to offer worship to Lord Krishna at ISKCON, Minto Park, Kolkata. Swami Prabhupada established ISKCON's first centre in India and it was at 3C Albert Road, Kolkata-700017. The first deity was installed in this temple in May 1971. This ISKCON temple is also famous for arranging the Rath Yatra which was started from 12th July 1972 and continue till today as an annual celebration with much enthusiasm and enjoyment. Hundreds of devotees come to join the program and worship the deity from their heart and soul. This temple has become a centre of devotee's gathering every day during the prayers, kirtan and bhajan.

Both the temples of Kolkata are highly significant as they create the place to social cohesion, gatherings, exchange ideas, soul relaxation and boosting local economies. Many famous pilgrimage centres of Kolkata like the Kalighat temple, the Dakshineswar temple generate regional trade through hospitality, handicrafts, local business. Another important work is done by temples, i.e., food distribution, which continues and maintain the tradition of social welfare, charity, community participation and social inclusivity. Such community welfare creates a place for nurturing India's traditional knowledge of helping others and stand beside the needy person. Besides daily activities, like regular prayers and worship, the annual festivals and special occasions bring more people to the temples and thus, creating a sacred place within a city would help in maintain the traditionality within the periphery of modernity.

Conclusion

Culture plays a pivotal role in achieving sustainable development as culture with all its elements including tangible and intangible heritage; traditions, belief system, values and behaviours; creative industries; artistic expressions; arts and crafts specializations etc which are strong contributors to social equality, economic development and environmental protection. Cultural policies should provide more importance in formulating policies and strategies for sustainable development, especially in countries with rich historical past, diverse cultural heritage and values, like India. Culture in sustainable development, culture for sustainable development and culture as sustainable development- all should be concerned with ecological, social and economic sustainability. Besides, intergenerational knowledge transfer; social justice; human wellbeing; equality in access to socio-cultural resources and benefits; participation and enjoyment for all members of society; cultural diversity for the process of economic, social and cultural development; protection of cultural heritage and traditional practices as well as the links between social, cultural, economic and environment that must not be seen in the process of sustainable development.

Cultural sustainability approach plays a significant role besides other traditional approaches of environmental, economic and social dimension. If we consider a specific urban site, all these approaches aim to preserve traditional knowledge, cultural beliefs, ritual performances, pattern and practices of traditional livelihood system with the single motto of attaining a sustainable future for everyone in the society of the urban centre. Thus, recent researchers are focusing on significance of sacred place in an urban setting to achieve socio-cultural parameters of sustainability and develop a positive human-nature interaction through spreading community togetherness, expressing spiritual-emotional reflections among other members of society.

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