

MORPHOLOGY OF A SACRED URBAN LANDSCAPE: THE CASE STUDY OF SYLHET CITY, BANGLADESH

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Article History:

Received: 9 July
2020

Revised: 15 November
2020

Accepted: 14 December
2020

Available online: 18 December
2020

Abstract - This study investigates how different religious streams influence the morphological development of a historic city by giving a unique identity as a sacred landscape. Sylhet city, which is popularly known as the spiritual capital of Bangladesh, has been shaped by two different spiritual streams over years. From thousand years Sylhet is known for a transitional hub of political, cultural, ethnical and religious migration which shaped a unique urban fabric in the morphology of this city. The spirituality of Sylhet deeply influenced by two major streams of religious philosophy of both Islam and Hinduism, not in conventional form but in form of Sufism and Vaishnavism which is deeply rooted in a spirit of mysticism, humanity, and self-consciousness. God is prayed here not in form of temples or mosques but in Akhadas (informal shrine) and Mazars (tomb of saints, places are a mediator between creator and creation. These ritual centers also turned to be the focal point of the city surrounded by public spaces, road networks, commercial centers through the juxtaposition of sacred space and community space. Truly Mazars and Akhadas are a center of cultural transition beyond language, geography and race to shape this sacred land a spiritual identity and symbol of faith. This study focuses on these paradigms in terms of architecture and urban design to make a new approach to redefine the understanding of Sylhet city for future researchers and historians.

Keywords – Sacred urban Landscape, Sylhet city, Mysticism, Ethnicity, Tomb architecture, urban morphology.

Introduction

For any ethnic cities, creating a sense of continuity is an essential part of cultural identity. Solidarity and empowerment cannot occur unless the sense of common purpose, shared values, and affinity with others is anchored in the notion of a common culture through shared heritage. Historic and sacred sites are part of that shared heritage which forms an image of that city. Sylhet, historically known as the spiritual capital of Bangladesh, is a result of morphological development throughout the time.

This research is a preliminary approach to have a critical overview of existing religious practice and to find the city fabric. Hinduism and Islam, two major religious streams that shaped some key architectural monuments of the city have been discussed here. Moreover, analyzing the transformation of philosophy through an architectural form that helped to gain a visual perspective of Sylhet city was a key part of this discussion.

Sacred urban landscape and its elements

For a thousand years, sacred spaces have shaped historic cities with both tangible and intangible values. Sacred spaces have given deep meaning to cities and communities, highly influenced quality of life, belief, values of inhabitants (Foster 2019). The concept of 'Sacred

landscape' has become a topic of discussion from the last twenty years. Researchers have been more concerned to study how spaces are socially and culturally constructed in a present-day context in the perspective of religious landscape (Horster 2010). According to Bundling a sacred urban landscape can be a blend of public and civic spaces under a differentiated geographical and cultural configuration (2013). In an urban context, sacred sites can have a significant influence on patterns of urban development, distribution of public spaces, community places even natural settings. In this regard, numerous elements of sacred values, including temples, mosques, churches, tombs, streets, plaza, open spaces, gardens have simultaneously accommodated ritual functions in a cityscape. More often, a sacred urban landscape can be understood as a 'spiritual landscape' where 'spirit' as a force energies people to connect with a place, culture and nature (Catherine 2009). Hence, natural elements are an inherent part of any sacred landscape of any city. Spiritual values are associates with gardens, ancient trees, mounds, coasts, riverbanks, forests, stones depending on the meaning given to that particular culture. The black stones of Mecca, river stream of Varansi, Mount Garzim in Palestine show how landscape elements can construct a sacred image of an urban landscape.

In this research, the emphasis has been given to understand how the practice of a religious stream can influential to construct an urban context and to give a certain identity to a historic urban landscape. How religious values have been transformed to urban forms. From a theoretical point of view, urban morphology is a way to study urban form to develop a theory to city building process (Moudon 1997). Urban morphology investigates urban forms, streets, and open spaces from both cultural and philosophical perspectives. Hence, culturally, understanding morphology is a prerequisite to discover layers of meaning attached to an urban setting (Barke 2018). The researchers attempted to discover the inherent interconnection of sacred values and urban forms in making the case study area with an observational approach of urban morphology research.

Methodology

Historic interpretation and case study research of urban form was the main approach to address the key research problem; because of the lack of literature data on the study area, this method will help eventually. Recon sense on-site field survey was the ultimate key to collect the data.

Selection of study area

The study area was selected according to the objective of the study. The researcher selected a distinct part of Sylhet city which is known as the core urban area of old Sylhet (fig 1). Most of the structures located within this periphery, as this is the historic urban district.



Figure 1 Study area: Historic Urban District of Sylhet

Data collection

Two types of data were collected for carrying out research which is both primary and secondary data. Several projects were selected for detail on-site surveys. Primary data were collected by a site survey, questioner survey and discussion. Site survey and documentation of structures were carried out by a team consisting of the researchers. The intension of field survey was based on historic interpretation to find the determinants which shaped the form-space as a symbol of cultural ethnicity. A literature survey also played a key role in this research process. Previously written books on the history of Sylhet city were the main source to develop a theoretical perception of spirituality. On second phase data collected from field survey was compiled with the previously achieved theoretical background.

Ethnicity in continuous transition: The city of Sylhet

Cities concentrate on a multitude of cultural, social, political, economic, and artistic activities and permit these to cross-fertilize each other in dynamic and creative ways (Rose, 2006). Housing, the layout of streets, the use of open spaces and monuments, building typologies, the relationship of the public to private space, and other elements of city form are studied for what they reveal of the cultures and societies which have created them and which infuse them with meaning and this is also true for an organically grown city like Sylhet. Even cities that are planned at the start undergo a continuous transformation. According to Bell and Rose (2011), "Clearly, some cities do express and prioritize different social and political values: what we can call an "ethos" or "spirit" of a city". Being a part of the modern world, this may be a contrast to the pluralistic image of today's city but a historic city like Sylhet represents a singular image i.e. the spirituality. Many historians think that Sylhet was an expanded commercial center from the ancient period which explains its original namesake as '*Sree Hotto* (Chowdhury 1910) means an enriched market place. But since the medieval period to date, Sylhet is eminent for its locative landscape, diverse cultural ethnicity and religious heritage value. It is known as the spiritual capital of Bangladesh, the Holy City (Chowdhury 2006a). Even, the national electoral campaign by the major political parties begins from this city's major landmark i.e. the tomb of great worrier saint *Hazrat Shahjalal* of 14th century. It is also a memorable holy city of *Sree Chaitanya*ⁱⁱ, other Sufi and Vaishnava saints. The story of mysticism is well-known to us. Its most common themes include the intellectual speculations of theosophists, the spiritual intoxication of poets and the diffusion of various institutionalized mystic orders. This all influenced the growth pattern of the historic Sylhet city. Here the concept of *Sufism*ⁱⁱⁱ has emerged as alternative manifestations of Muslim belief and practice that are more widespread. So, Muslim holy men (or *Pirs*) are celebrated as bearers of spiritual power (Bertocci 2006). The relationship between Sufis and cities is an ambiguous one. Though there is a difference among the indigenous people and tribal people concerning ethnology and language, they however inherit a common religious, cultural and social heritage (Mohanto 1999). This cultural diversity has given the scope of spiritual ethnicity to have multiplied.

According to Professor Syed M. Islam, "Sufism or mysticism merely evoke in such society which has elasticity, grants pluralism and cultural diversity. Basic thoughts of Sufism never explore in motorized or urban evolution. Like this socio-cultural elasticity, this mystic trend depends also upon the geophysical context, natural environment" (Islam 2012 a). As a result, Sylhet city is a promising place where ethnicity gets its character of contagious transition in chronicles. Although a religious sentiment is a basis behind this Sufism (Muslim mysticism), the concept stands upon persona's entity, it is not a part of that religion directly (Islam 2012 b). Being a thousand years old market place, the rustic behavior of this geophysical context helps to maintain this mystic attribute. Till 19th century's urban growth and development of Sylhet town can be found in Robert Lindsay's writing. He mentioned, 'On asking for the town, I found the whole consisted of an inconsiderable bazaar and market place, the houses of the inhabitants being fantastically built and scattered upon the numerous hills and rising ground, so buried in wood as to be scarcely discernible. The appurtenance is singular but had every mark of comfort' (Lindsay 1840 a).

The colonial and post-independence period tried to give a customary urbanize image of Sylhet city by penetrating urban infrastructure, occupying available land, originating textual morphologies and new typological order, but inhabitants develop innovating processes on their relationships within the urban space, by living in it and appropriating it with innovative forms. Juxtaposition-contamination of sacred space and daily space, hybridization, or interpretation of distinct syntaxes express diversify experiences. Imply changes in the way how urban space is

useful and in urban qualities types, making them more consentaneous with their customs of space and maintain the spirit of the historic city as a cultural manifestation.



Figure 2 Tomb of Zindapir, juxtaposed between a commercial high-rise and street.

Altering theology: Sufism & Vaishnavism

According to researcher Syed Murtoza Ali, the *Pir, Murshid* (saint, priest, monk) those who influenced Sylhet most, had the voice of *Sufism* and *Vaishnavism*^{iv} (Karim 1999). Entering in Begnal, the Sufism of the Middle East was molded by Vaishnavism and Buddhism^v. Consequently, *Sufism* got its more acceptable stage (Islam 2012 c). According to multiple inscriptions of a different period, 14th century marked the beginning (1303-04 A.D) of Islamic influence in Sylhet by *Sufi* saints. In their expedition headed by warrior saint *Hazrat Shah Jalal* (R) (d. 1357) (Lindsay 1840b). *Hazrat Shahjalal* and his companies influenced existing religious practice and also a socio-cultural field of local people. Sri Chaitanya Dev (b.1486), founder and propagator of Vaishnava Cult, came to Sylhet in his early life. It was his homeland and also the abode of his father in law. He served as a teacher in Sanskrit school and earned a reputation. All these directly mark the close relationship of Sri Chaitanya with Sylhet (Ahmed 1999a). Thus, *Vaishnavism* as a historic phenomenon played its role in the construction of Sylheti socio-cultural trait. According to Sufi science expert U. M. Shelton, "it is not surprising that popular expressions of veneration should exhibit common characteristics between neighboring religious communities since so many aspects of their situation in time and place are shared" (Sheldon 2011). Artifacts like *Mazar*^{vi} and religious institutions of various Sufi saints are maintained by urban dwellers of all ethnic groups. A rapid unplanned urban growth has been seen for the last two decades but still, this change respects the existing historic shrine and tombs through a mechanism of juxtaposition (Figure2, 3). All these spiritual spaces and artifact are the part of the common people's day to day life rather than a segregated sacred place of worship, is a tool to long term sustainability.



Figure 3 Rapid urban growth along the pedestrian approach road of Hazrat Shahjalal (Rh) Mazar.

Sacred artifacts as spatial mores: Architecture of Akhada and Mazar

For the architectural historian Spiro Kostof, urban forms are expressions of cultures and societies, but not in an immediately transparent sense: “we ‘read’ form correctly only to the extent that we are familiar with the precise cultural conditions that generated it. The more we know about cultures, about the structure of society in various periods of history in different parts of the world, the better we can read their built environment.” (Rose 2006 b). People who are into urban cosmopolitan experiences don’t find Sylhet very appealing. People, who are into spirituality do. Even when they are not religious, usually acknowledge and accept the city’s religious flavor and atmosphere. If we like to understand the morphological specialist of Sylhet city, we need to understand the theology of the Sylhet region, which is not such rigid as it is in common sense. According to Professor M. Islam, the objective of mysticism is to achieve divine aptitude through pleasure and pain of the material world. Thus, a Sufi saint is a medium between heaven and earth (Islam 2012 d). The historical record seems to indicate a correlation between *Sufi* activity and urban life. Therefore, Far from turning their backs on city life, mystic saints have set out to tame it. Sufism seems to be anchored in the city.

The great figures who founded or institutionalized Sufism as a social phenomenon were most often urbanites who focused their activities in cities (Rose 2006 c). And this is very much true for Sylhet city. The spiritual leader of various cults took the supreme authority and mold the administrative and institutional framework. So, to the urban development of the city. From the 14th century, Sufi institutions and from the 15th century, Vaishnava institutions have been powerful cultural and social agents in a great variety of historical and political contexts throughout the Sylhet region. They have impacted urban processes in various ways by creating public spaces devoted to ritual activities. For instance, the patronage of Sufi shrines by local elites to a significant reorientation of public space in towns such as playfields for spiritual assembly or urban node point for the annual religious fair. These urban places are laying a key role as a socio-spiritual junction for years. While the patronage of the *mazar* of certain Saints by the successive community has given rise to towns such as *Shah Paran* satellite town near Sylhet city. In some cases, the orders

have themselves been the principal agents of urbanization, creating entirely new power bases from which they could project themselves politically and socially. Thus, *Mazars* and their caretaking family hold the power to enforce a morphological change in this city. This is the case for the *Mazar* of *Hazrat Shahjalal*, situated in the center of historic part of the town (Figure 4), where over the years this pilgrim site has been turned to a major city center of the Sylhet city.

Moreover, the urban morphology of an organic city (not a designed one) like Sylhet, has an obvious impact of spiritual ethnicity, maybe an ambiguous one to declare. But it can be demonstrated that Sufi spiritual constructs have influenced the architecture of many Sufi shrines and that these shrines have had an impact on the surrounding urban fabric. According to history, there is no indication that the city as a whole has ever been regarded as an object of design by Sufis or their orders. The closest examples are the Sufi city *Touba*, shrine cities like Najaf (Iraq), Qom (Iran). Each of these cities is built around the tomb of some important religious person. Similar to Sylhet, these large tomb-shrines are at the origins of these cities and stand at the center of the urban fabric. Sacred sites are like the urban tissue of historic cities. In the Sylhet region, there are 6144 mosques, 960 temples, pagoda 7, church 52, and tomb 45. Most of them are inside the city limit, especially those that have heritage value (Chowdhury 2006 b).

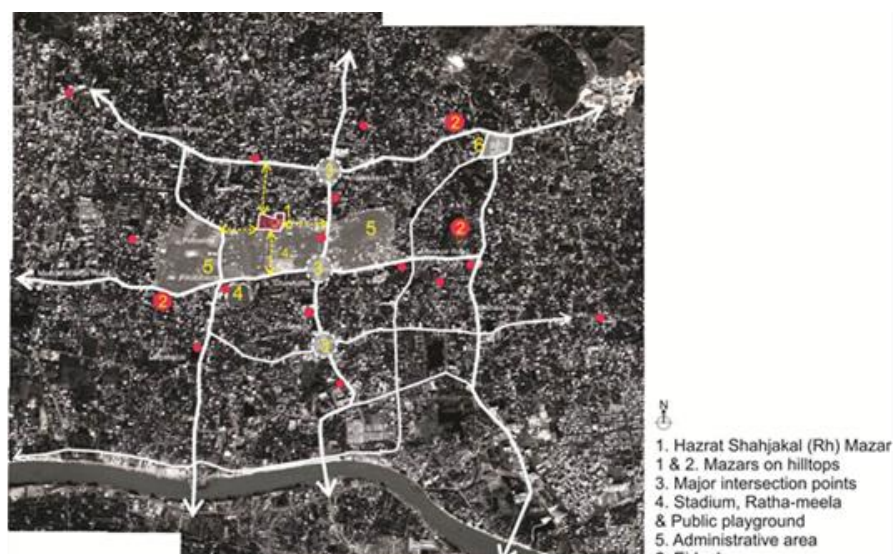


Figure 4 Showing major road networks & locations of selected road-adjacent mazars (Hazrat Shahjalal (Rh)'s Mazar is almost at the city center & allows pedestrian interchange of four access roads) on satellite view of Sylhet city.

Mazars and Akhadas : Spiritual spaces influence urban morphology

The study of urban morphology signifies the understanding of forms of urban fabric (levy 1999). As discussed the sacred image of Sylhet city is typically generated by *Akhadas*^{vii} and Mazar forms. These practices as urban forms have vast influences in both private and public scale, community space to important public intersections. Apart from religious differences, these spiritual spaces have a common appeal of 'Formlessness' which may be shaped by the philosophy of Sufism and Vaishnavism. Investigating the characters of *Vaishnava Akahdas* and *Sufi Mazars* may reveal a spiritual impact on urban fabric of Sylhet. First census report (1872) on Sylhet region showed that majority of Hindu locals were followers of Vaishnava cult and among the various ethnic groups *Manipuri*^{viii} communities who are located in urban Sylhet became followers of Vaishnava philosophy in 18th century (Ahmed 1999). Also, their traditional practices intermingled with Hindu-Vaishnava practices, consequently, Manipuri-temple reflects strong similarity with *Akhada*. Unlike a typical Hindu temple, *Akhadas* are more emphasized with ritualistic performance spaces.

The architecture of *Akhadas* follows very simple vernacular techniques, with a more traditional way of roofing structure (mostly pitched) and minimum partitions. Thus. Thus craft a simple congregation place of surrounding residences (Figure 5). Residential areas of Hindu ethnic-communities are intrinsic and introverted so *Akhadas* act as intermediary space between urban areas and housing, but approaches by simple gateway form that practically hide the area.

Community activities are other than rituals such as marriage ceremonies, early festivals held in such areas. Most of the traditional *Akhadas* are sited in comparatively older neighborhoods of Sylhet city. For a hundred years, these *Akhadas* are serving a key cultural junction of Sylhet city by hosting yearly music and dance festival.



Figure 5 Interior & exterior spaces of Shamsundar Akhada, Lamabazar, Sylhet.

Mazar is more of a holy abode than a sacred structure, the tomb of *Hazrat Shahjalal* and some of his prominent companies extend through the central part of the city. These *Mazars* gained a formal organization and sited on comparatively high ground or *Tilas* (mound) which are physically and administratively key places of Sylhet city like Police line, Stadium, Darga gate, Zindabazar, Manikpir Tila, Eidgah etc. Darga complexes of Saint Hazrat Shahjalal and saint Hazrat Shah Paran are institutions comprise of a mosque, prayer space, accommodation, public dining, pond, public ablution space and schools. Besides, *Mazars* are most importantly a space dominating organization, a vibrant urban stage that invites people from every social and religious group. Due to terrain topography of Sylhet city, most of these *Mazars* are placed on elevated earth mound. This makes an elevated connection with existing road networks. The elevated approach by steps is also a dominant character that disconnects the tomb from the crowd (Figure 6). However, unlike elevated *Mazars*, many small scale Sufi shrines scattered across the city are more undemanding forms, open to sky tombs mostly shaded by trees, resemble the traditional gathering place of Bengal. Visual and physical separation is being intentionally avoided here from any bazars, busy pedestrians, or private houses (Figure 7). These forms may be structurally insignificant but create the image of those areas as commercial and social activities grow around it.



Figure 6 Upraised approaches to Hazrat Shahjalal & Hazrat Shahporan Mazar resembles the topographical context of the city.



Figure 7 Roadside *Mazars* giving a unique in visual integrity of the city as a sacred landscape. (Google street view)

Conclusion

A great proportion of the 100 historic cities and nearly 200 sacred sites on the World Heritage List are located in the developing world, which is under threat of rapid urbanization (Rose 206 b). So to Sylhet. Hence, this study reminds the spirit and heritage of this city, and how that spirituality made it more sustainable through a process of transition, makes a new approach to define Sylhet city image as a spiritual one. Based on the above discussion, few findings remarks could be drawn as a conclusion. Sylhet, as scared landscape, possesses a unique urban morphology including religious architecture, natural sites, road networks, topography. This gives an identity of shared landscape heritage. Apart from physical elements, both *Akhada* and *Mazars* are associated with intangible cultural values, in terms of belief, faith, and sense of place. Besides, these heritage sites are deeply connected to community values. There is an organic growth of residential neighborhoods around the Holi sites, showing the intimate relation between scared landmarks and adjacent communities.

Traditionally, sacred sites are mostly managed by local communities as a shared approach, hence in future community stakeholders can play an important role to conserve these scared heritage sites. The Holi sites including, *Akhadas*, Tombs, temples are good examples of how urban forms can be settled inside the topographic context of the city. Most of the sites are placed on the top of earth mounds locally known as *Tilas*^{ix}, without interrupting the topographic authenticity. This placement strategy, makes the form visible from a distant road while protecting it

from flash flooding due to heavy rainfall in this region. Long ascending stairways connecting the forms and the streets create a unique morphology of path-space relationship. This also gives the pilgrims a metaphoric experience of an eternal journey towards serenity. With increasing socio-economic value of pilgrimage sites of Sylhet city, there is a growth of economic functions around important Holi sites. The traditional land use pattern is shifting from residential to commercial. New functions like hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops are emerging. These changes also triggering drastic changes of adjacent neighborhoods in terms of fabric and scale. These changes have accelerated the demolition of the historic urban fabric.

Additionally, there is an arising conflict scenario, between the physical development of the city and surrounding religious sites. The city corporation is taking measures like constructing drains, pedestrians, widening the roads. Since most of the sites are place very adjacent to local roads and pedestrians, the sites are subject to demolition and land acquisition. Very often, sites are losing connection with the roads and surrounded by heavy boundaries, causing a detachment from the community. To make a balance between identity and development, there is a need for comprehensive heritage planning for Sylhet city, where all dimensions of tangible-intangible, nature-culture values would be preserved with systematic conservation. A landscape-based holistic conservation approach would be more sustainable in this context. The authors expect that urban policymakers, conservators, environmentalists, planners would take further steps to conduct more in-depth research in this area and this study will give a baseline for support their work.

This research aimed to discuss the relevance of sacred values in shaping the urban morphology of historic Sylhet city. Authors have discussed several aspects of how religious streams like *Sufism* and *Vaishnavism* have influenced urban pattern of the city. By identifying connections between both tangible and intangible values, the authors want to emphasis on perceiving Sylhet city as a sacred landscape heritage. This is also been observed that scared values of this city are deeply connected to community identity and people's tradition. Social connections, interactions, community engagements are the main ingredients to construct this urban landscape. Moreover, particular attention should be given to natural assets with in the city which gives a unique image and meaning to the urban fabric. Most importantly, despite rapid urbanization and destruction, spiritual traces are still visible in the city giving a sacred identity. The authors believe that local inhabitants, politicians, planners have a unique responsibility in acknowledging, protecting these spiritual places, and to preserve the identity of Sylhet city. To preserve the spiritual and historic continuity of the city, a futuristic vision in a broader spectrum is essential.

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ⁱ Hazrat Shahjalal is a celebrated Sufi Muslim saint, who migrated from Yemen to Sylhet to spread Islam to that region.

ⁱⁱ Shri Krishna Chaitanya is a saint in Hinduism. He is famously known for his contribution to spread Vaishnavism in Bengal and societal movement against casting system.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sufism is variously known as Islamic Mysticism, a sect of internalization and intensification of Islamic faith and practice. Practitioners of Sufism have been referred to as "Sufis".

^{iv} Vaishnavism is one of the major philosophic stream of Modern Hinduism. Vaishnavism has its emphasis on God as a personal being, with self-searching and devotion. Members of Vaishnavism are called Vaishnavites or Vaishnavas.

^v Buddhism is an Indian religion founded on the teachings of a mendicant and spiritual teacher called "the Buddha"

^{vi} Mazar is a Mausoleum or tomb structure often built on graves of important persons like Muslim saints, noble persons, and political leaders.

^{vii} Akhada is a typology of Hindu Vaishnava temple, mostly found in Bengal region. Common feature of Akhada is a central temple and a performing hall for prayer and chanting. In middle age Akhadas played an important role to spread Vaishnavism philosophy in Bengal. Some Akhadas also contain mausoleum tomb of their saint.

^{viii} Manipuri is a migrated ethnic community of Sylhet region. As religious stream Manipuris strictly follow Vaishnava philosophy. Most of the Akhadas in Sylhet are built by Manipuri community.

^{ix} Tila is a local name of earth mounds. Tilas are a major topographical feature of Sylhet landscape.