

Visualizing the Structuring Principles of Sacred Urban Space – Ambala Tank, Ramtek

Milind Ashok Kamble
School of Planning and Architecture,
Vijayawada, India

Faiz Ahmed Chundeli
School of Planning and Architecture,
Vijayawada, India

Abstract— Organically evolved traditional settlement are combination of different spaces, i.e. cultural spaces, social spaces, sacred spaces, etc. together they define the idea of settlement. Sacred spaces are integral part of the society along which settlement and culture flourished. These spaces are the manifestation of societal myth and belief, as people are interconnected with sacred spaces through daily practice and rituals. As civilization evolved the role of these spaces also absorb the socio-cultural and economic dimensions and activity related to it. This article intends to understand structuring principles of sacred urban space in case of Ambala Tank, Ramtek, Maharashtra India. The analysis is carried out by understanding the positioning of sacred urban spaces its association with the place and the role of location, topography, mythology, etc. in transforming an ordinary space into a sacred urban space. The paper traces its chronological evolution of the case, its role in shaping the Tirtha and summarizes the myths, beliefs associated among the tourists, pilgrims and local people across the society. The findings of the paper contribute to understanding of the urban sacred spaces and could help architects and urban designers to look such spaces in different perspective.

Keywords— *Urban Spaces, Sacred Spaces, Architecture, Tanks*

I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional settlement is the outcome of evolutionary growth process. It takes the shape over a period of time and follows the process of continuity. For some the physical environment is 'seen as a context in which fundamental human values can be cultivated and the human spirit can be enriched [1]. Settlements are the final product of all processes that happens in history, and every city comes into existence with different reason or forces. i.e. every city is different with different characteristics, culture, experience and form. Similarly every organic settlement comes into existence having some structuring elements, processes, forces in history. These are power of rulers, natural settings, industries; religion, mythological bases etc., and settlement evolve around that. Whereas it represents the strong impact of natural elements, i.e., climate, topography, water, etc. and man-made elements, i.e., buildings, political, religious, aesthetics, etc. It is also a combination of distinctive built form, i.e. responsive to social and culture of surrounding [6]. These elements give identity to settlement through mythological, symbolical relationship formed by the people, and one such key element is sacred spaces in the settlements. Sacred spaces are complex structure of one's belief, identity and collectively accepted notion [5]. These are the places which have strong notion of societal values and cultural evolution. Sacredness of a place is defined by juxtaposition of universal setting with man-made elements

and creation of secondary environment which reflects human values and its association with the place. It is satisfying the social and cultural needs of the people more than physical aspects. Conceptually, attachment to sacred spaces can be seen as having several Categories based on the kind of space. This article intends to understand structuring principles of sacred urban space in case of Ambala Tank, Ramtek, Maharashtra, India. The analysis is carried out by understanding the positioning of sacred urban spaces and the role of location, topography, mythology, etc. in transforming an ordinary space into a sacred urban space.

II. RAMTEK TOWN

Ramtek is a small town with a population 22,310 as per 2011 census [3]. Located 45km to the north-east of Nagpur, Ramtek is a well-known pilgrimage center of the Vidarbha region and is a place of high tourism potentials. The town has a picturesque topographical setting. To its North lie the towering Ramgiri and Kaikai hills while, the town gradually slopes towards the south it is encircled by a series of lakes as shown in the Figure I. Dominating the town from Ramgiri hill stands the temple dedicated to Sri Ram. Considering its great mythological importance, the town was reconstructed in the seventeenth century by Raje Raghuji of the royal Bhosale family of Nagpur, who laid the foundations of this pilgrim town. He also built several other temples and Ghats which, along with the natural setting of the town, giving a distinct character. In the initial stages of its growth and development the town was scattered in the form of the distinct settlements around Shantinath temple, the weekly market and the Ambala tank. The rich agricultural areas surrounding the town brought prosperity, and it had been transformed from a small place of pilgrimage to a thriving Mandi town [2].



Fig. 1. Location and evolution map of the Ramtek Town

A. Evolution of the settlements in Ramtek town

The evolution of the settlements in Ramtek town can be broadly classified as follows: Phase I: (14th century), Garh Mandir was built on the top of the mountain to commemorate Lord Rama's visit to that place. Phase II: (17th Century), The God kings ruled over the region. Phase III: (early 18th century), The Bhonsala King came to power and brought about lot of renovation, they built the temples and increased the importance of Ramtek, thus bring about settlement to this area. Phase IV: (Mid-18th century), The Ghats and weekly market came into existence, hence settlement spread. Phase V: (late 18th century), The Shantinath temple was built and Ambala tank was developed. Phase VI: (19th century), the settlement at the foothills spread toward Shantinath temple [4].

B. The Sacred Urban Space – Ambala Tank

Ambala tank is located on the north-east part of the Ramtek town. This beautiful lake is surrounded by Ram Giri hill, Motha Parvat and Narayana Tekdi hills and has temples and Ghats defining one of its banks as shown in the Figure II. It is segregated from the main town, because of the natural settings. It has evolved as one of the sacred places worship for the Hindu religion [5].



Fig. 2. Ambala tank and its setting

C. Mythological base

As the story goes, a very small lake was first present at the place where Ambala tank exists today. The reigning sovereign-king Ambarish had been asked by lord Rama to bath in the holy waters of the Ganga to cure his leprosy and while on a hunt one day, he happened to bathe in the waters of Gangastrot-and to his astonishment his leprosy got cured. This inspired king Ambarish to dig a large tank in that area and named after him. Ambala tank was deemed to have waters with medicinal properties that came from the herbs that lined the lake. A bund was made to stop the flow of water, and the rain water that flowed down the slopes of the hills on three sides eventually filled up the tank. Figure III shows the Ambala tank, temple and the Ghats surrounding it.



Fig. 3. Ambala tank, the temple and the ghats

D. History and the evolution of Ambala Tank

In 14th century, Vakataka king built the ram Mandir also known as, Garh Mandir. Devotees started using Ambala tank for ritual bathing before ascending to the temple by a long flight of steps. During Kartik Utsav period, the flow of people would increase with shops coming up on either side of the steps. In 17th century, another king of the time built the Shiv Mandir and Mahadev Mandir on the banks of Ambala tank. The shops that flanked the steps probably became permanent during this period. During 18th century, the Bhonsla kings erected the temples at Ambala tank. These temples were religious some served as Samadhis and one was a pleasure palace. Temples for the Shudras namely the Chamar temple were also made during this period. An entrance gate and a road running along the tank were also constructed. Eventually a number of festivals began to be celebrated here on a large scale. During the 20th century, the ASI renovated the Ghats and provided informal spaces with paving and seating. By now, religious activities in the temple had stopped and they were being used as residences for the descendants of the original Pujaris. New steps leading to temples were built to the new Samadhi dedicated to Narayan Swamy. A burning shed and a separate tank for Asthi Visarjan were also provided. New puja rooms, seating platforms and five new Dharamshalas were built to cope with the increasing number of visitors to the tank [4].

E. Nature of rituals associated with Ambala Tank

Ambala tank is visited over the year principally for four reasons, which are,

- i. To celebrate Kartik Purnima,
- ii. To celebrate shared Purnima,
- iii. To carry out Pind Daan, that is the last rites of a family member and
- iv. To undergo a bath in the holy water to cure leprosy.

Kartik Purnima: This festival is celebrated 15 days after Diwali. A fair is also set up in the Kartik fair ground during this time. A dense throng of devotees visit Ambala tank to take a bath before ascending to the Ram Mandir. They take the route along the western bank of the tank to reach the steps that lead to Garh Mandir. During this time, the fair grounds are crowded with visitors. To control traffic, a police barrier is set up a little before the entrance gate to stop the entry of vehicles. These vehicles are given a parking area at the side of the fair-ground. **Sharad Purnima:** is celebrated sometime during August-September. The conditions that prevail are more or less the same as those that prevail during Kartik Purnima, except that a fair is not set up. The circulation pattern and movement of people remains the same. **Pind Daan:** This is a set of rituals that is used to complete those last rites of a deceased family member or to pay homage to ones ancestors. Hence, it is done all throughout the year. The principal place where Pind Daan is done is the Asthi Visarjan Kund, hence the ritual bathing is also done on the Ghats in the vicinity. Thus, the occasional visitors who come or Pind Daan bath in the vicinity of the Kund, completes the rites and then leave the way they came. **Bath for leprosy cure:** This takes place only during the "Amavas" i.e. the new-moon days of the year. The visitors who come for this purpose head towards the Gangastrot – their route being along the eastern bank of Ambala tank, through the bunds leading to the Ganga Putra temple. After the holy bath they return to the entrance gate. Ambala tank is also visited by people who drive directly to the

Laxmi Narayan temple, or first take a bath and then proceed there. Visitors who go to the swami Narayan Samadhi take the road that leads to it directly; lastly the residents use the road that leads to the settlement as well as the one leading to the burning shed. All in all, Ambala tank is the most frequently visited place with the Samadhi of Swami Narayan coming second and the least visited place being the Laxmi Narayan temple.

III. EXPLORING THE SACREDNESS OF URBAN SPACES

Aspects of sacred spaces can be understood by location, topography, water bodies, tanks, mythology elements of sacred spaces and socio-economic activities. These aspects of sacred spaces as together contribute to the character of sacred spaces.

A. Location and topography

In India, locational value of sacred spaces is the major parameter that gives spatial order to the surrounding settlement and activity interrelated to it. It defines strong interconnectedness between religious, cultural and social spaces. The topography offers the very setting of the place. It adds value to existing structure, for instance in the case of temple complex, they are located at higher level, giving direction to pilgrimage, visually strategic point. As per Hindu religion temple at a higher level it forms part of the sacred geography of the region. If the structure is at a higher level, it suddenly reflect power, respect, it forms part of the sacred geography of the region. Example: Vaishano Devi, Naina Devi in North India, Sabrimala, Tirupati in South India etc. Sometime topography plays very important role, when it comes in contact with water, because of the difference in topography, water gets collected in some ponds and when topography and water comes in contact with temple it turns into sacred water, its physical manifestations are Ghats and Kunds. Topography also gives security, protection, because of the presence of royal palaces and temple complex at higher level, and dominates the entire townscape, example: Ram Mandir Ramtek etc. In Ambala tank, hillock gives character to sacred spaces, Sri Ram Temple on hill acts like marker for religious settlement. Ambala tank lies to the north east of the town surrounded by hills and scenic background segregated from the other religious spaces, through hills and offers unique religious background for sacred spaces. Here topography plays important role for the formation of tank, which lies at the bottom of hill, and surrounded by the hills guiding the articulation of built form which has resulted in strengthening the notion of the sacred place.

B. The sanctity of water

This is an invisible element related to sacredness of any place; man has always been associated with water for his sustenance. His dependence on water acts a life giving element. The physical transition from land to water is symbolically associated with the passage from life to death. This is the central idea which reinforces and strengthens the aspect of life, the river being respected as a sacred and holy entity. As a mode of trade and transport along with religious activity, valuing the water bodies has been continuing from long time resulting in rivers being initiators of all primary civilizations. Example: in India Hindus daily and festive life

elements in general and water in particular is shown respect. The river basin is virtual bowl of human activity, which is continuous over a period of about 200 year; this activity also symbolizes the city as a meeting place of people. Water has historically played a major role in the characteristic development of Ghats, Kunds, temples, civic structure, historical events and religious rites in a complex and urban precincts. Due to the life giving quality of water and its sanctity, it has entered religious boundaries. The Hindus attach great religious significance to water. They hold water as an utmost purifying and life giving element and also believed in the presence of Gods where water was found. So almost invariably, their holy sites were situated on the river banks, sea shores, and natural lakes or in and around the man-made pools. The Hindus have associated religion with water as inseparable. Here in case of Ambala tank, water is the central element being a mythological reason for the formation of space and surrounding settlement is playing the role to organize the socio-cultural mythological and socio economic aspects together.

C. The Ghats and the Kunds

Tirtha as a place of pilgrimage is the concept to the Hindu religion and the tradition. The places can be rivers, seashore, lake, kunds or ghats. The Sanskrit meaning of Tirtha means, a point of transition, as a door to the abode of gods and the internal life, where the ritual worship of the deity of the temple take place. The physical reality of this relationship is the formation of Ghats, where physical connection between sacred water and mythological importance is established. Ghats also play an important role in defining the settlement boundaries. The physical transition from land to water is symbolical and mythological, which translates into a place of worship, rituals and spiritual activity on the edges. Thus generally Ghats comes in relation to a temple already present at the banks.

Ghats are generally built on one side of the river and occupy the entire water-front. As these settlements are always on the high bank, the Ghats are very long and steep, and there is no room for a road along the embankment. Usually, there is one main road running parallel to the river and numerous perpendicular lanes lead down to the Ghats. This indicates the dominant orientation of the city towards the river, while the bazaar street facilitates communication between the various quarters. These are the urban layouts where the Ghats are the actual centers of the city and located prominently in the spatial system. Similarly, the Kunds are developed in an organic pattern starting with a small platform around or besides the water body. They are gradually developed into a series of steps, directed towards the water. These steps are terminated with platforms which are used for performing daily rituals of the water. To give more religious significance to the place around the Ghats and Kunds, temples, mandapas and samadhi's were built in the course of time. The river flow diversion system had been designed to keep maximum efficiency for a proper depth of water for bathing activities even in the dry season. These activities were specific and spiritually inclined during the evolutionary phase further growth of these Ghats was directed by social and economic dominance of the city people. In case of Ambala tank, Ghats are the physical manifestation of mythological beliefs. It is a

point of interaction for both religious beliefs and human notation and Ghats creates platform to celebrate the religious notion. It also creates ample opportunity for socio-economic activity and connects the different edges of the lake, thereby defining the physical connection.

D. Mythological significance

According to Peters (1986, p. 3): Every urban settlement has its holy places-shrines, temples, churches or the tombs of the holy, the learned, or the martyred. What constitutes a holy city is not mere existence of such holy places, but rather the presence in the city of a sacrum, or perhaps several of such an order of importance or allure that are culturally connected with it exercises. Sacred spaces exist because of their mythological events, interconnected with landscape, where religious components like temples, water etc. becoming the elements of sacredness. Mythology is a connection of reality that posits the penetration of the world of everyday experience by sacred forces in the process entailing a high degree of continuity between the social and cosmic order. The idea of Ambala tank as a conception of sacred spaces revolves around the water as a notion of sacredness. This is complimenting an existing geography, respecting the topography. Here the mythological notion leads sacredness in the spaces and evolution of settlements around it. Such notion and religious places surrounding it are one of the reasons for socio-economic survival of the city.

E. Design elements

The city is evolved around the temple as its nucleus. The festivals and its processional paths around the temple, enacting various mythological rituals led to the evolution of street patterns, and the built form gave the sense of enclosure. Entrance gates gave security to the places, Ghats, samadhis and the temples. Ghats defines the edge of the Ambala tank there is no boundary between the Ghats, so that it defines the space for public.

F. Socio-economic activities

The Ambala Tank, is mainly famous for pilgrimage center, mostly people come here for bathing and for the fairs. And the socio-economic structure of Ambala is based on these activities. There is an organization between different cast, communities in relation to pilgrimage. There is the factor of dependency. Brahmins: there houses are large enough in sizes; so that they can accommodate a near about 200 people at a time and these activities include Bhojan, Puja, Vishram. Bahmins economic structure depends on pilgrimage for the activity of Pind dan and Pujas. Nayi: people community's economy is based on the Mundan activity. Other communities like Chambhar Samaj and Gowari Samaj's economy is based on agricultural activity and boating. Figure IV shows the socio-economic activities of the people of the Ramtek town.

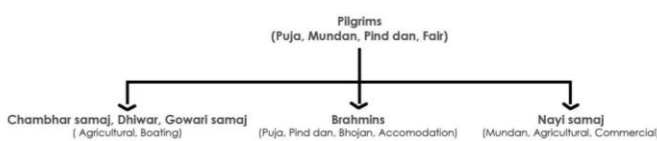


Fig. 4. Socio-economic activities of the Ramtek town

G. Activity mapping of the Ambala tank

Figure V shows the activity mapping of Ambala tank and its surroundings.

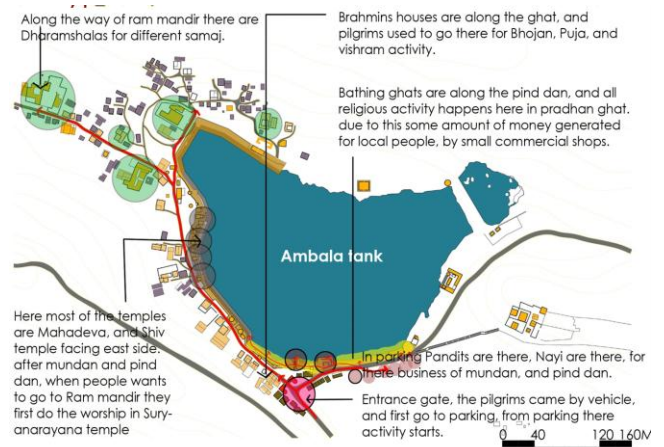


Fig. 5. Activity mapping of the Ambala Tank

IV. CONCLUSION

The study has resulted in understanding the overall performance of the place in terms of its sacredness. The finds of the study shows that the context of a place plays an important role in evolving structuring element of the city and it acts as a nucleus of the development around which settlements thrive. The study also concludes that the mythology helps in creating certain kinds of spaces, which could be of cultural, religious and social importance. The influence of religion and belief of a people is one of the instrumental factors affecting the functioning of the sacred urban spaces. The religious precinct provides an environment around which the city evolves. It is not only perceived as a strong physical centre, but at the same time holds a centrality and is symbolic in the minds of the people. The findings of the paper contribute to understanding of the urban sacred spaces and could help architects and urban designers to look such spaces in different perspective.

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