

Culture as a Catalyst for Sustainable Urban Transformation – A Case of Revival of Delhi's Urban Village

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Abstract

Urban transformation has traditionally been influenced by culture which gives communities a means of re-establishing linkages to their past by encouraging their civic involvement and also promoting long-term economic success. Most cities in India have this strong cultural and historical foundation that shapes its urban fabric that have shaped their function. With its many intricate layers of history, Delhi proves to be an engaging example of how culture may be utilized to revitalize particularly in case of its urban villages (areas that were formerly rural settlements but have now been assimilated into the growing city). The revival of abandoned or underutilized neighborhoods within these villages with artistic, cultural and heritage-focused initiatives may lead to a culture-driven urban regeneration which might involve community-based projects, cultural events and adaptive reuse of old structures. These villages including Hauz Khas Village, Shahpur Jat, Nizamuddin Basti, Mehrauli and Lado Sarai exemplify the need for diverse approaches for cultural rejuvenation through adaptive reuse, heritage conservation, creative economies and community-driven projects. Many of these urban villages in Delhi have undergone this change, striking a balance between their historical value and the needs of modern cities. Even though culture has been considered as crucial in bringing Delhi's urban villages back to life but issues, such as over-commercialization, the loss of affordability by its residents and the disregard for the intangible heritage, are still persistent. These gentrifications brought on by commercialization, the loss of affordability for local populations and the disregard for the socio-cultural traditions that formerly characterized these areas are some of the issues that these urban villages confront despite their cultural renaissance. Some of the indigenous people have been marginalized and the natural character of these locations has changed over the course of time because of the entry of economic interests. The paper will analyze how cultural interventions contribute to urban rejuvenation particularly in case of urban villages in Delhi by ensuring their historical continuity while fostering economic and social revitalization. The paper will also explore the role of cultural heritage in shaping urban transformation and impact of adaptive reuse in Delhi's urban villages.

Keywords: Culture, heritage, rejuvenation, social revitalization, urban villages

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INTRODUCTION

Urban village is a convoluted concept where contemporary urban life transverse with the traditional rural social relationships thus challenging the contradiction of between urban and rural lifestyles. The term was initially coined by American sociologist Herbert Gans in his 1962 ethnographic study of Italian-Americans in Boston that have described how certain low-income urban settings in which social life had characteristics of close-knitted sociability more usually associated with villages than with cities. The continuation of the existing cultural customs that have their roots in this rural social life

that the migrants or their ancestors came from is what determines the identities of these urban villages. In urban villages, the social ties are strong and often long lasting and are usually based on family networks. Community life is mostly inward-looking and based on the aspiration for prestige inside the group rather than in accordance with the social standards. This trend can be explained by the urban villager's common poverty, the way that group membership strengthens individual identities and the defence it provides against antagonistic outside factors (such ethnic prejudice) (Crow, 2009) [1]. Michael Leaf in their research article (Leaf, 2002) [2] has mentioned these urban villages as a new type of urbanism that has "a vibrant diversity of intermixed landscapes comprising of walled residential estates, ad hoc densification of pre-existing villages and the congested intermingling of small-scale industries with commercial, residential and agricultural activities" (Beasley, 2015) [3]. This type of conditions can largely be seen in the countries of China and India that have some of the largest cities both in terms of size and population with hundreds of urban villages encompassing them (Oostrum, 2021) [4].

LITERATURE STUDY

Urban villages are viewed quite differently in the developing countries of Global South than they are in developed Western countries, like America, where they are primarily used to describe a planned scheme. In Global South primarily in East Asian Nations these locations of the urban villages are often considered as the consequence of urban growth and expansion. Some prime examples are the cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou in China, where the where the urban expansion have engulfed the surrounding farmlands of the villages falling within their vicinity (Gupta, 2023) [5]. These newly acquired farmlands are then further used for construction of residential, commercial and industrial areas (Smith, 2014) [6]. The key highlights of urban villages are that they are compact in size; provide mixed use multimodal neighborhoods where all the nearby areas have easy accessibility through means of walking, cycling and micro modes instead of heavy vehicles. They also help in reducing the impact of anthropogenic activities within the environment (Figure 1) (Litman, 2022) [7].

Similarly, if one investigates the landscape of India, there are many exiting old villages within the precincts of urban areas have conformed themselves to impacts of urbanization and expansion of urban areas. The impacts of urbanization in regards as a physical phenomenon most often take two directions, firstly through their expansion of existing urban bodies by engulfing the surrounding villages into their territory and secondly through the independent transformation of rural areas into these urban areas. Most often primarily in India, these urban villages are characterized by their informal housing arrangements that also lack basic infrastructural amenities such as supply of clean water, electricity, and sanitation (Singh, Kumar, & Dutta, 2024) [8].

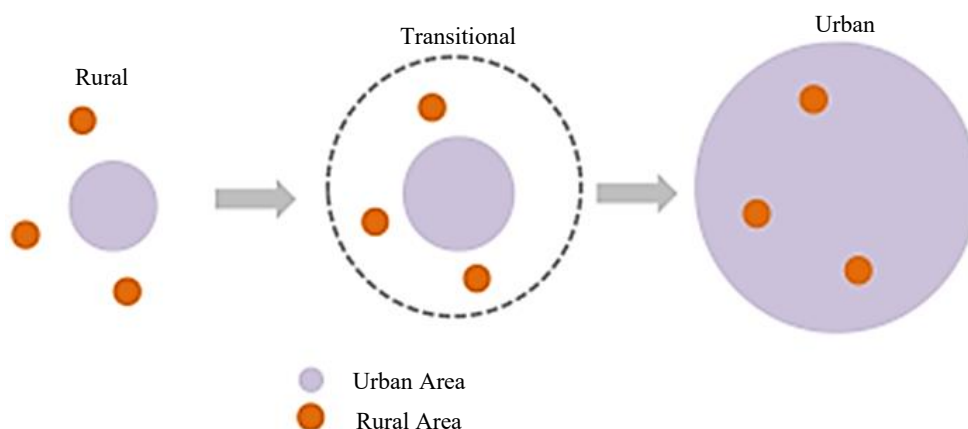


Figure 1. The stages of transformation of rural areas into urban villages.

But these urban villages are rapidly transforming not only in their spatial layout but also functionally due to the increase pressure of urbanization and influx of migrants which had led to high density problem, change in land value dynamics and congestion of basic services (Singh, Kumar, & Dutta, 2024) [8].

The key characteristics that can be observed in the urban villages can be categorized into six major headings (Figure 2):

- *Smaller in Size:* The buildings and spaces are appropriate and pleasant, and the region is readily traversed on foot. This ensures that the residential density can sustain several essential services.
- *Spatial Identity with Traditions and Collective Memory:* The area has clear boundaries, a distinct center, unique atmosphere, community landmarks, regular events and residents create collective memories.
- *Designed Primarily for Social Interaction:* The area offers ample public and green spaces for various activities, community events, and daily activities, with a central hub for social interaction and a network of walkable routes.
- *Community and Locally Driven and Responsive:* While officials speak for the community and handle its issues, residents actively oversee daily operations in the village while promoting a long-term vision.
- *Functional:* The community is well served by public and private transport, with local core services available for a mix of uses.
- *A Mix Used Community:* The community is diverse in age, background, income, and housing tenure, with long-term residents providing continuity (Stuart, 2016) [9].

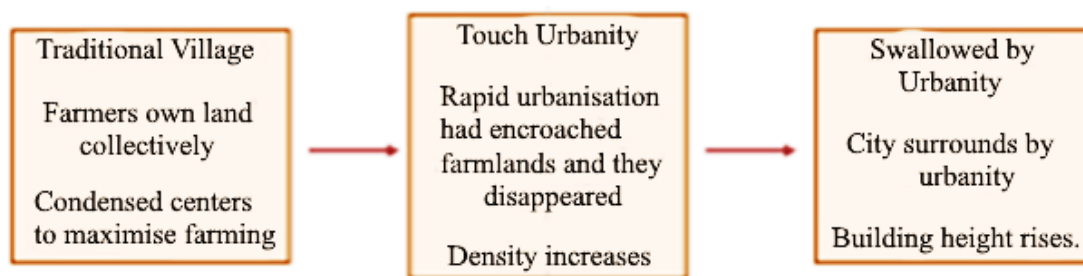


Figure 2. Formation of urban villages.

The urban villages scattered within the fringes of the city of Delhi were historically formed as a major part of the civilization but in recent times they have become enclaves of unregulated development that have been adapted over time with the expansion of the city. The framework behind these lies in the European concept of urban villages which are around a city where both rural and related activities have been planned to serve the main city. In Delhi, the term urban villages were first coined in the year 1961 during the formulation of the Master Plan of Delhi (Singh, Kumar, & Dutta, 2024) [8]. The agricultural lands left within these villages have already been acquired during the expansion of the city after 1947 leaving only the Abadi or settlement areas. But most of these Abadi areas even today are being left untouched by the planning bylaws leading to creation of unregulated built spaces without prior considerations (Pati, 2022) [10]. DDA's planning boundaries have led to unplanned expansion and unlawful building operations in urban communities, resulting in increased land value, gentrification, inadequate infrastructure, environmental deterioration, and slum-like conditions in some cases. As a result of urban expansion brought on by urban growth due to urbanization and increase in people influx, large number of these villages is incorporated into the city borders. Most of the people residing within these precincts have historically made their living from farming and other similar pursuits. With DDA's extensive purchase of their farms and fields for Delhi's planned expansion, the situation had shifted and over time these communities have lost their traditional atmosphere because of losing their farms, fields, and area for agricultural activity. The villagers' long-standing traditional agricultural and cattle-based livelihood was destroyed when they were forced to reside inside Lal Dora's boundaries.

In broad view, it can be stated that the urban village of Delhi exists as a concept in modern times, where the current planning strategies and development had led to these urban villages to be isolated and alienated. This further caused them to be largely exploited by property dealers, political power brokers and speculators. The pattern of development that emerges in these areas is HAP (Hazardous Air

Pollutants) hazarded and chaotic. This has led to creation of uncontrolled invasion of non-compatible land-uses and elimination of traditional interrelationships by outside and superfluous forces leads to the disintegration of the communities. The villages on the outskirts of the city undergo significant changes in their physical characteristics and sociocultural structure because of the economic and speculative forces that are unleashed upon them. The population of certain towns has increased by as much as 700 per cent in only ten years. A forced increase in harmful activities is present in the hamlet, but there are no controls in place to stop it. Despite offering the city's service classes economic benefits, like low land costs and affordable housing, urban villages' social and physical environments, are steadily deteriorating (Agarwal, 2003) [11].

The government of Delhi imposed completely different by-laws regarding land use and infrastructure in these urban villages for cultural preservation (Table 1). They are largely unregulated and exempt from the urban planning and infrastructural requirements expected of other areas in Delhi. These residential areas are now called Lal Dora (red thread) lands in Delhi due to their legal and cultural separation from the rest of the megacity's landscape (Murdeswar, 2022) [12].

Table 1. The timeline of acts and policies that were implemented to protect the status of these urban villages predominantly in case of Delhi.

Timeline of the acts and policies		
Year	Act / policy	Description
1908	Bombay Municipal Act	One of the earliest municipal laws where Development Control Regulations (DCR) were defined and urban regulations were introduced.
1951	Town Planning Act Extension	The Act was extended and Delhi's first Master Plan (MPD) was formulated under planning regulations.
1954	Green Belt Demarcation	Extended area was demarcated as a new boundary known as the "Green Belt."
1957	WCD Act / Formation of DDA	Delhi Development Authority (DDA) was formed and zoning powers along with building byelaws came under its control.
1983	CBA Building Byelaws	Unified construction byelaws were introduced to regulate development and construction activities more effectively.
2004	Standing Committee Decision	High-rise buildings were permitted in all zones as per revised development norms.
2016	Unified Building Byelaws	New unified building byelaws were implemented across Delhi to streamline urban development regulations

Source: Author.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology set for the paper involves a combination of methods that includes site visits and interviews for primary data collection, and literature study, archival research and survey reports for secondary data analysis. The selected area for the study is the urban village of Shahpur Jat located along the ruins of Siri Fort and Katwaria Sarai village which is one of the oldest settlements of south within the city of Delhi. Various layers of study were analyzed which included activity mapping both during peak hours and festival times, architectural study comprising of open spaces evolution and circulation patterns both in the realm of urban design and landscape ecology. These findings were later made into visual representation showcasing their impact and degree of changes that they have undergone.

ANALYSIS

The selected city for the study is the National Capital Territory of Delhi. The city numerous urban villages are located within the city's fringe and are constantly evolving due to urbanization and land changes. These villages are most often referred to as "urbanized" or "Lal Dora" villages that represent a unique blend of traditional rural social structures and contemporary urban development strategies. In the region of Delhi, Lal Dora villages were historically marked by a red line drawn on maps in 1908 for revenue record purposes. Approximately 135 villages were officially notified as urban between the 1950s and 1994, with further notifications in 2018 and 2019.

SHAHPUR JAT

Shahpur Jat is an urban village situated near the ruins of Siri Fort and is an abode to many designer studios and quirky shops (Figures 3–5). The streets of the village are narrow lanes, with certain murals of historic period located within specific locations and have several dilapidated houses within its perimeter. The village in its current stage is considered as one of the up scaled markets of South Delhi.

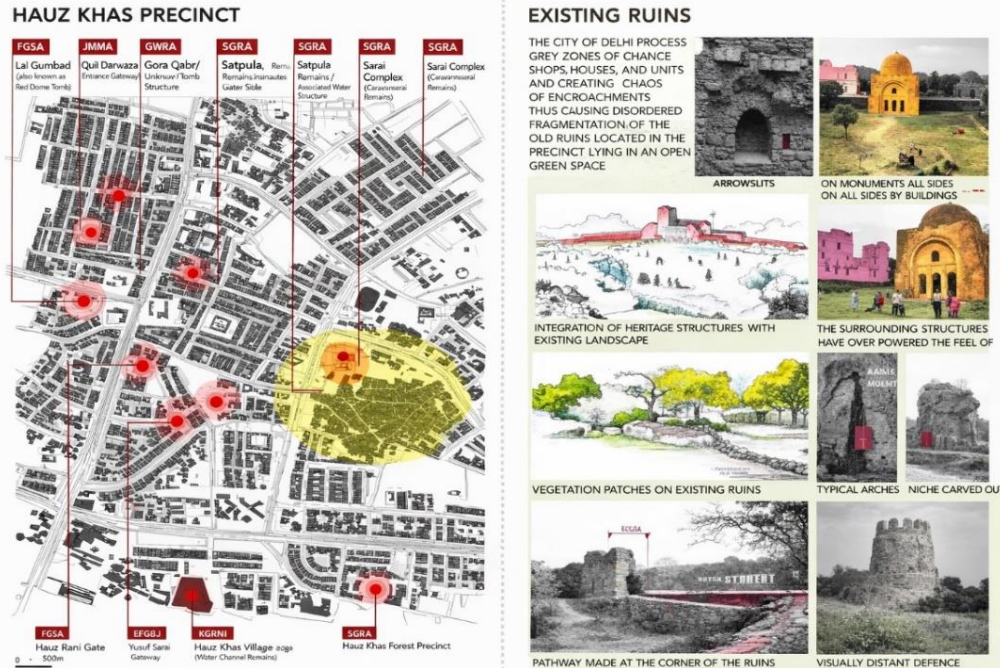


Figure 3. Shahpur Jat village is surrounded by majority of historical places and prominent landmarks of significance importance. The village is further surrounded by ruins of Siri Fort, and its architectural feature further reflects on the architectural pattern.

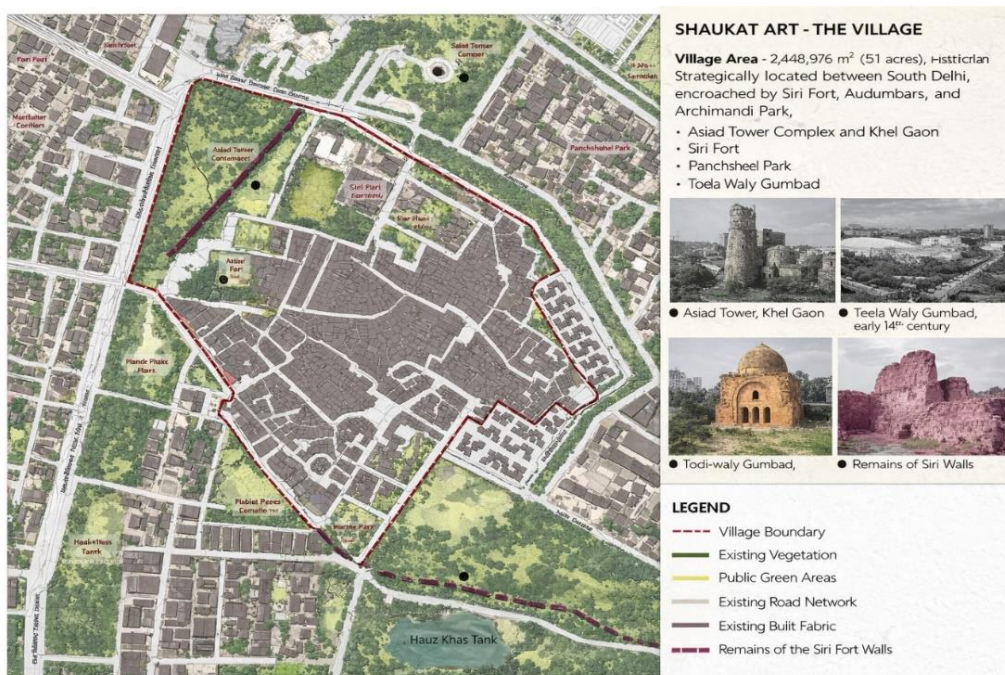


Figure 4. The physical boundary of the village shows the major prominent places in an around the village.

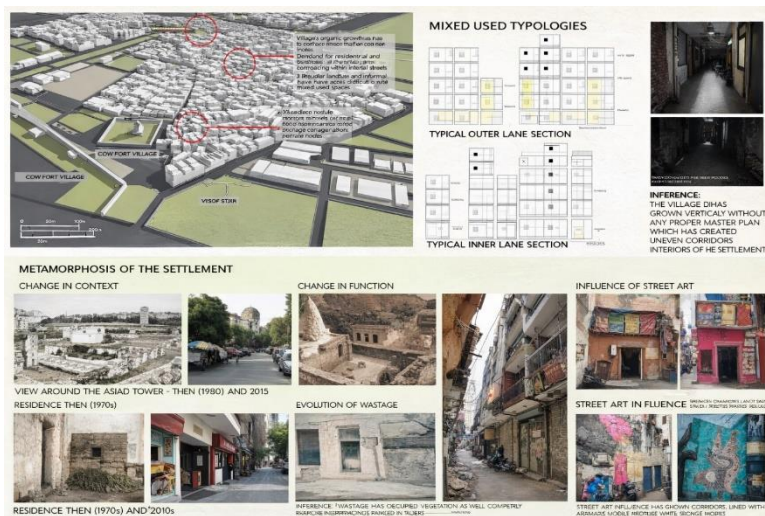


Figure 5. The buildings located within the village were observed to have grown vertically due to lack of open space and non-implementation of any planning policies that might overlook this pattern. Another striking element within the village premises that was the inclusion of street art within its precinct which has given a newer identity to the village.

KATWARIA SARAI

Katwaria Sarai village is considered as one of the oldest settlements of South Delhi and is surrounded mainly by the institutional areas with Jawaharlal Nehru University campus on its west and to the south of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Campus (Figure 6). During the time of the land acquisition in the year 1962, which was the first phase of acquisition under the MPD 1961, the land was primary acquired for the use of IIT campus. The village has a total area of approx. of 13.77 hectares with a population of about 38000 currently and was urbanized in 1961 (Figure 7). The village was initially inhabited by Jats and cultivation was their primary occupation prior to the acquisition of the land. The land was acquired in two different phases. The first phase of acquisition was done for the IIT campus and then under the next phase of bulk acquisition was for housing scheme of the DDA.

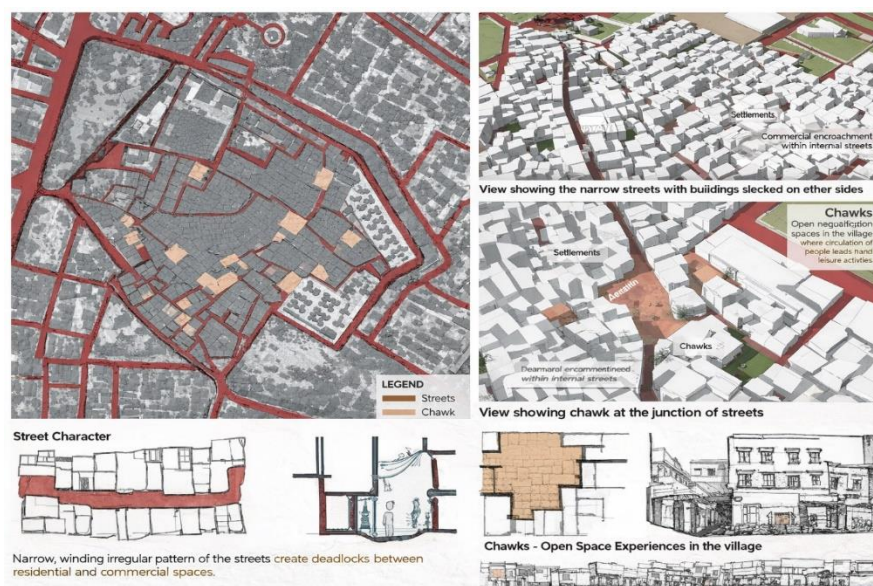


Figure 6. The streets were characterized by narrow lanes that also enhance the sense of observation and interaction among people. Further these narrow lanes would open up to chawks that are predominantly the only open spaces within the village which enriches the sense of enclosure and enhances the surrounding landscapes.

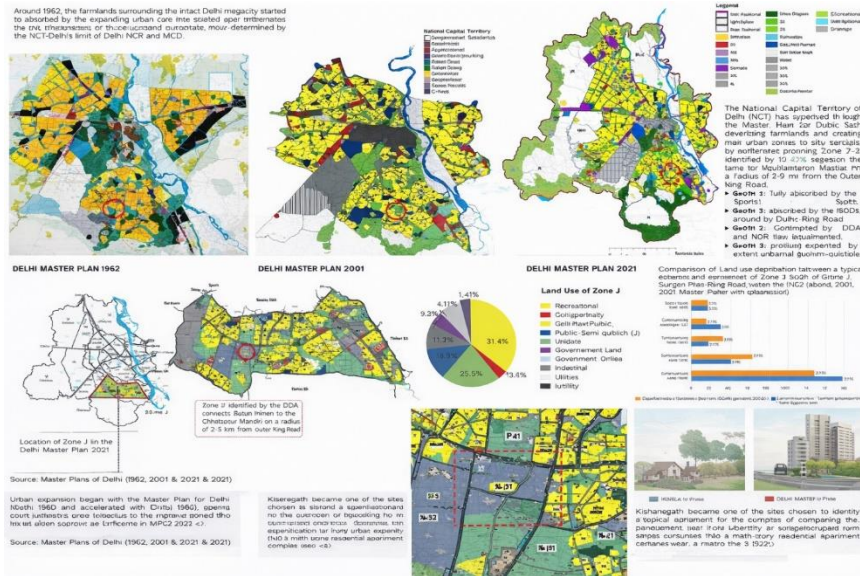


Figure 7. The land analysis highlights how significantly the village and its precincts had evolved over the period.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Though the study conducted in both the urban villages, namely Shahpur Jat and Katwaria Sarai, the following important points were observed that have significance in protecting the identities of these villages.

- Improper implementation of policies that has led to the vast physical distinction between the surrounding planned neighborhood and urbanized villages (Figure 8–10).
- Lack of consideration of tangible and intangible heritage within these villages requires proper safeguarding to support the socio-cultural economy.
- Neglect in safeguarding the open spaces that have significant role in protecting not only the identity of these villages but also serves its socio-ecological enrichment of the area and boosts natural ecological processes.



Figure 8. The urban fabric reveals how the village has its relationship with the built and open spaces. Most of the built structures are ranging from G+2 to G+4 story with greens on its periphery and scattered along the core. Majority of the green spaces are used as neighborhood parks by DDA flats that are in the village.

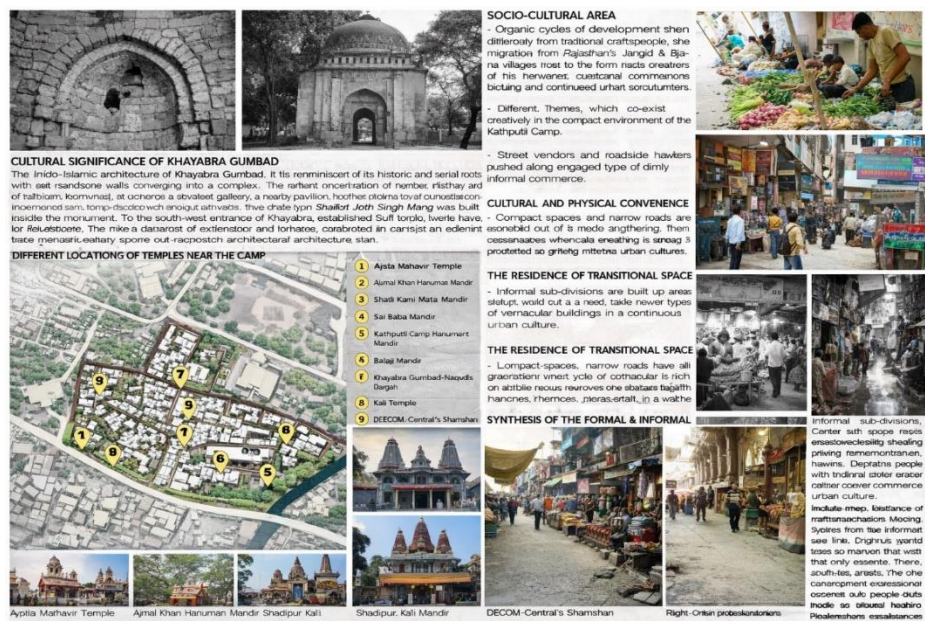


Figure 9. The village is also comprised of many religious structures that over time have defined its cultural association among its residents.

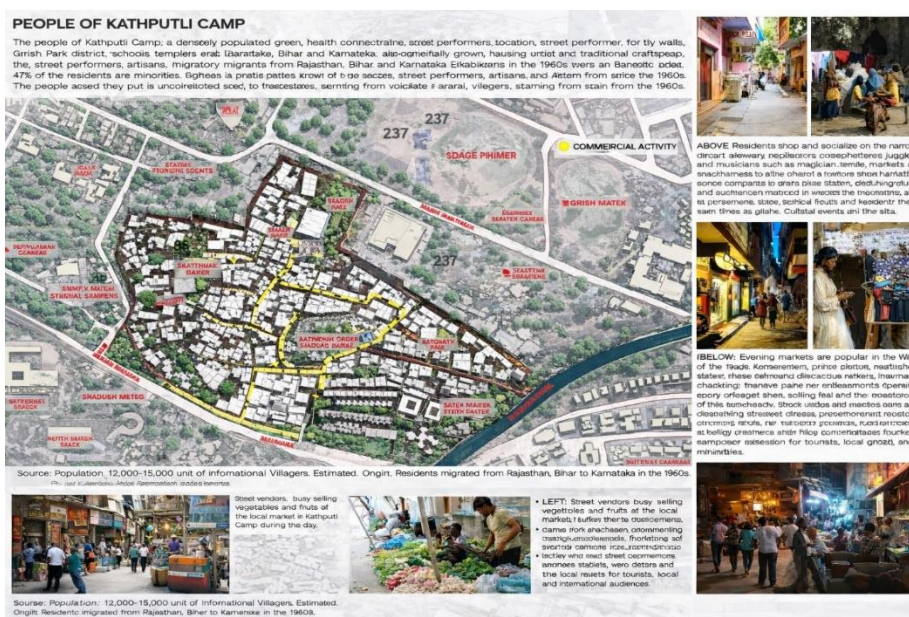


Figure 10. The cultural influences also further enrich the people's association with the place which further defines its activity patterns.

Furthermore, it was also observed that the open spaces over the period have transformed into socio-cultural landscapes giving rise to an ethnographic landscapes pertaining to these urban villages. These spaces act as community grounds where people from varying backgrounds come together during different festivals and occasions. Even the building typologies and architectural elements within these villages are different and provide glimpses of the bygone period which further highlights the people association with this area.

CONCLUSION

The urban villages of India are currently facing issues of infrastructural challenges that were magnified due to their location within the vicinity of well-developed neighborhoods. These villages can

be seen with severe increase of population leading to increased carrying capacity of the area that leads to further environmental and social challenges. Through the study it was observed that most of the villages lack successful implementation of various planning policies that have led to unregulated growth, if this rate growth continues then these villages over time might lose their significance. Most of these villages also have intricate layers of heritage, both tangible and intangible aspects that are imbedded in them during their course of evolution. This embedded history and heritage needs to be safeguarded through various preservation and conservation strategies along with the protection of their surrounding greens. The urban villages within India particularly in case of Delhi, have a great potential to develop into centers of cultural sustainability for the future where thriving neighborhoods with respect to their cultural landscapes can be planned and that will invite people from all age groups, economic backgrounds and will further create cultural stability.

It needs to be noted that any further planning and development policies within these urban villages should safeguard their existing cultural landscapes and built environment so that the future generations are made aware of this history. The open spaces also need to be preserved as they provide specific cultural activities within the existing communities and are also part of the scattered religious precincts within these villages. These open spaces also provide shelter for the local flora and fauna which is essential for strengthening the urban landscapes of the city in times of climate change. Additional open spaces need to be provided around the vicinity of these villages that may act as a buffer ground and may provide restrictions for illegal encroachment. Proper building byelaws are also essential particularly pertaining to these villages as the existing ones have no criteria for them because of which many illegal encroachment and constructions of cramped up structures are taking place which have harmed the existing architecture and spatial layout of these villages.

Declaration of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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