

ICOA1602: IMPACT OF URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS ON TRADITIONAL CRAFTS SKILLS: AMRITSAR'S HISTORIC CORE

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Abstract: Investing in the intangible heritage reflected in the oral traditions, social practices, rituals, festivals, and skills to produce traditional crafts contribute towards social and economic wellbeing and improvement in their overall quality of life of the communities residing in the historic urban areas. In the context of urbanization that is often uncontrolled, the historic areas undergo transformations that include destruction of built heritage as well as loss of social structure and traditional economic organization. While there is an increasing focus on the physical fabric, the present urban conservation processes in India place relatively lesser emphasis on retaining the communities who are the main casualty of these changes and whose sustainability often rests on traditional skill based livelihoods.

The historic urban area of Amritsar is anchored around Sri Harmandir Sahib; the holiest shrine of Sikhs. The layout of the historic core and its built fabric, social organisation of the neighbourhoods, festivals and rituals, and various traditional crafts are rooted in the distinctive culture and milieu of the region. Preliminary studies of the area show neglect of the built heritage, changing socio-cultural dynamics and disappearing traditional crafts and livelihoods. Studies also indicate selective crafts having tourism potential getting more recognition and having better prospect of survival unlike those that are more intimately connected to the community.

The paper analyses the impact of the physical transformation processes in the historic urban area of Amritsar on the community based crafts that have long contributed to their sustainability. Socio-cultural issues affecting the crafts will also be discussed. Methodology of study would include analysis on communities and their crafts at neighbourhood level, collected through semi structured interviews as well as participatory observations.

Key words: *Sustainability, Community, Urban transformations, Traditional crafts, Heritage*

Introduction

Cultural heritage is not limited to material manifestations. There is a changing paradigm seeking preservation of intangible aspect of cultural heritage such as the traditional craft knowledge which, once lost, may be almost impossible to recapture. Crafts as a cultural expression of the communities who maintain, practice and develop them play a critical role in building a sense of identity, supporting tourism, contributing to the rural and urban economies and overall wellbeing of the society.

While there is predominant focus on the physical fabric, the present urban conservation processes in India place relatively lesser emphasis on retaining the traditional skills that are in many cases the reason for sustenance of the local communities. The nationally protected monuments come under the custodianship of Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the legal protection of the site and control over the 'prohibited' and 'regulated' areas around the site is through the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act – 1958 and 2010. This act is monument driven and lacks inclusion of the intangible as well as the community component of the historic areas.

As Lewis Mumford states “The city in its complete sense is a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theatre of social action and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity” (Mumford, 1937:185). The crafts, idiosyncratic in nature are a critical component of this complex system. UNESCO in its creative economy report propagates the importance of creativity as an economic driver and traditional crafts being one of the subset (UNESCO, 2013:10).

Amritsar, one of the important religious cities of Punjab is a rich repository of heritage that has both spiritual as well as national values. The historic area is an urban ensemble anchored around Sri Harmandir Sahib; the holiest shrine of Sikhs with an average of one lakh tourist per day. The evolution of the town over the ages and its association with some of the greatest historical figures of the region, have given the town a particular 'sacred and socio political geography', typified by buildings and sites as well as routes and processional paths. The planning of historical area of Amritsar is organic with many lanes and by lanes enclosed within 12 gates¹.

The paper attempts to examine the status of the traditional crafts in Amritsar in the backdrop of the urban transformation over the years.

Historical Narrative

The Indian economy before the 18th century was predominantly agriculture, with scriptures boasting of high level of development in agriculture technology. However, crafts and trade, concentrated within urban boundaries were also a critical determinant of a city's existence. While most cities were home to a variety of crafts, some cities had a specialisation in certain crafts, e.g. Ahmedabad, Lahore and Multan for Textiles, Srinagar and Sarkhej for dyes etc. The bazaars² were nerve centres of every city, big or small; with cities like Delhi, Ahmedabad, Lahore having dozens of bazaars each specialising in different types of commodity (Vanina, 2004:5,7).

Punjab had always had a very advantageous physical and geographical position in terms of the agricultural and non-agricultural resources with a direct passage to the regions of central Asia. Amritsar was originally conceived as religious centre along with the bazaars around. By the late 19th Century, the city became an important trade mart connected to Lahore, Karachi and Kashmir in the North-West with Bombay in south and Calcutta in the east. Strategically located on one of the ancient Silk Route, It traded silks, shawls and copper ware from Kashmir in return for raw silk, gold, carpets and horses from Afghanistan and Central Asia including tea from the north east India.

¹The gates built during various periods exist though the walls have disappeared long back.

²A marketplace or shopping quarter, especially one in the Middle East and South Asia.

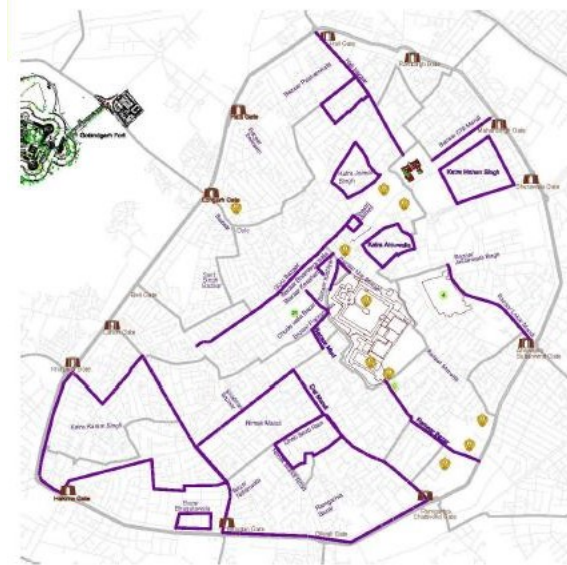


Fig. 1- Mapping of Bazaars as developed in the individual MISL. Source: CRCI (India) Pvt. Ltd.

In traditional cities, the concept of the ceremonial centre is created and though the religion does not become the main causative factor it becomes the symbols of concentration of social and political power derived from sacrally sanctioned authority (Champakalakhmi, 1996:6). Amritsar has strong religious connotations with crafts. The evolution of the craft and its bazaars goes back to the period when Guru Ram Das³ invited 52 types of artisans and craftsmen among other people, to settle around the Amrit Sarovar⁴. Later on, when the city was divided into Misal⁵ and led by individual chieftains, craftsmen and traders were invited from all regions to come and set up business. In the 18th century with Maharaja Ranjitsingh consolidating the Sikh empire, craftsmen and artisans were encouraged from all around to bring their practice to the city. Shawl-weavers from Kashmir and artists of the Kangra School of Art were among the most notable migrants. Some, like bazaar Papan, bazaar Kathian, Kanak Mandi were named for the product they offered, others, like Majithmandi (a market of dyers), Mandi Ahan Faroshan (for sellers of iron and iron ware) were named for the craftsmen and crafts to be found there (CRCI, 2010:).



Fig. 2- Craftman with his craft - Narsingha, a musical instrument for Gurudwara

³Ram Das, the fourth guru of the Sikhs is credited with founding the holy city of Amritsar

⁴ Guru Ram das got a water tank dug and invited people to settle around it. The temple, 'Harmandir Sahib' was commenced in its middle.

⁵In the face of imminent invasion by Ahmed Shah Abdali, in 1748 the Khalsa forces were divided into sixty-five jathas integrated into twelve misls.

Thus Amritsar with its historic core and its built fabric, social organisation of the neighbourhoods, festivals and rituals, was home to various traditional crafts including Phulkari, Jutti, metalwork Sikligar, Judau, Pottery, Durrie, Galeecha, Woolen Handloom, and many food items that are traditional to the place and rooted in the distinctive culture and milieu of the region. Even in the Colonial period, when historians talked about de-industrialization with respect to the destruction of Indian handicrafts (Habib, 2006:92) Amritsar remained one of the few cities to continue trading at regional level with carpets being one of the important commodities (Roy, 1999:27).

Today, within the historic areas, most of the above are available only as merchandise with their production shifted to either on the outskirts or neighbouring villages or sourced from neighbouring towns. The brass and metal utensils made by *thateras*, jewellery, and many of the food products including the popular *papadwadiyan* are still in production in the by lanes of the walled city. Though the *thateras*⁶ and jewellers's work is declining, they can be found operating with the equipment from the 1900s and earlier.

Major Physical Transformations

The geographical and spiritual component that was the reason for success of Amritsar has also become the source for political events that resulted in major physical transformations especially abutting the areas around the temple complex. At the time of India independence and subsequent partition, with Amritsar lying on the India-Pakistan border; thousands of people fled from this city.

Later on the blue star operation of 1984⁷ led to de-congestion of the area in the periphery of the temple complex resulting into the creation of the galleria⁸. Some of the shops were given space in a shopping centre built nearby while rest were shifted near the bus stand, few kilometres away.

In 2014, a major planning project was initiated by the Punjab government with its completion in 2016. This 124 crore rupees project includes creation of a large scale plaza just outside the temple, with a 500 meter long approach pedestrian pathway flanked by touristic shops leading to the temple from a multi-level parking. Some of the buildings have also reconstructed facades over the existing facades with some of the peripheral lanes also part of these interventions restricted to uniformity in shop signages, colour of the facades in addition to some infrastructure works. The pedestrian pathway and the various sculptures around are a visual treat for a typical tourist. Also within the premises of the on-going Hriday project, conservation work is going on at some important monument sites in and around the core city area.

Impact of physical transformations

Amritsar's economy saw the first regression with the partition. Post partition, with Amritsar located close to the new India border; it ceased to be the epicentre of the Asia in trade routes and focus shifted to Mumbai. Later with 1984 events and subsequent period of terrorism⁹ that followed, Punjab saw a major decline in economy. The creation of galleria shifted some of the smaller craftsmen away from the city centre. It also saw mass migration of people out of Amritsar. Changing aspirations of youth has continued this migration even today.

The tourism project even though a boon to the tourism has isolated the temple from the bazaars around. As found in the survey, the move was opposed by the residents in 2004 and 2014 but was overruled.

⁶ The community that is involved in traditional brass and copper craft of utensil making

⁷ A military operation undertaken by the Indian army to remove terrorists from within the temple

⁸ Post Operation Blue Star, a buffer zone was created immediately outside the Harmandir, known as the Galiara.

⁹ The period in the first half of 1980's was marked by terrorism in Punjab with death of thousands Hindus as well as Sikhs, leading to fear in the local residents.



Fig. 3- The pedestrian pathway with the tourist shops

Today, the tourist movement gets restricted to the pedestrian walkway and the plaza and they are not allured to explore the bazaars nor do they come in contact with the artisans working in the lanes around. One of the important drivers of economy i.e. the tourism that has today become a cause for disconnect of the link between Bazaars and the temple which was established centuries ago.

Impact of Socio Cultural changes

Like any creation, craft's survival is based on need. Products like jootis, phulkaris embroidery, shawls and many food items are thriving due to their popularity in the local culture as well as tourists. Bridal accessories like chuddis of Amritsar have the attached sacredness value due to the Harmandir sahib. On the other hand, the handcrafted utensils as done by the thateras have lost their need quotient with influx of stainless steel.

Also, most of the traditional methods of manufacturing goods and objects have been mechanized and are mass-produced. With the possibility of computer aided designs, and ban on some original material like leather for jootis and elephant tusk for chuddis, the process of traditional craftsmanship has transformed drastically. This has led to an influx of migrant workers instead of just family involvement and import of products like jootis from Patiala, Nabha, Abohar and even towns of Rajasthan. The design and motifs have also undergone a change from local specificity accessed through global patterns. Along with the traditional chuddis, which has its value in its sacredness, bangles of stonework from Jaipur are popularly sold. Along with phulkari, the work from Kolkata is also sold. From the 50 odd shops of chuddi in the area, only 5 have invested in their own manufacturing units on outskirts of the city. Also increase in vehicles has led to major congestion in the lanes, leading to most looms, chuddi makers leaving the area for factories outside the city. Some of the shop units that operated looms are now just used for receipt of official letters for the actual manufacturing unit outside the city.

Government and institutional policies

The Master Plan for Amritsar, 2010-2031, Punjab Government Gazette notification 2011 has no mention of crafts in its 9 categories of trade activities. Even though there is mention of lack of focus on preservation and conservation of heritage buildings and construction of contemporary buildings as destroying the heritage character of this area (Punjab government, 2010), there is no mention of the intangible heritage and any policies or strategies addressing them. With the new policies being introduced to take small scale enterprises away from the vicinity of the golden temple, the jewellers and some others crafts persons would also soon be leaving the core area.



Fig. 4- Shops used as letter boxes

Conclusion

Urban conservation efforts in India have so far focussed on physical fabric and the intangible aspects of heritage including crafts have not been given due consideration. For sustainability of the historic urban areas, one must consider supporting traditional urban livelihoods that will help in retaining traditional crafts and associated intangible heritage. Since majority of economy in India is based on small scale businesses and artisanal skills are still widely prevalent, these must get mainstreamed into wider economy development agenda. This will also support local community and help to curb gentrification and most importantly ensure holistic and sustainable protection of tangible and intangible heritage of historic urban areas.

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