

Yale FOX INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP

# HERITAGE IN INDIAN URBAN PLANNING

**Garima Dhabhai**

## RESEARCH

My research focuses on the growing importance of heritage as a factor in contemporary urban planning in India. I examine how cities with old quarters and layered histories are represented in today's era of modern urban development, with its policy of uniformity in the name of efficiency? I look primarily at the city of Jaipur in north-western India - an 18<sup>th</sup> century princely capital and now a burgeoning metropolis. Originally divided into nine almost equal squares surrounded by a wall on all sides, the city is considered to be exemplary and unique in terms of its planning.

At present, sprawling beyond its original walls, it has a population of almost two million. Most of the commercial activities are still confined to the walled city of Jaipur, which although forms a small part of what is known as Jaipur today, is nevertheless a center of rich architecture and popular traditions. The royal buildings in the centre, annual festival processions, craft traditions and its homogeneous pink façade are main tourist attractions of Jaipur. Shopping for local crafts and fabric, while experiencing 18<sup>th</sup> century architecture and street culture of the old city is an important part of its touristic profile. The government department of tourism and NGOs working on heritage restoration in this area organize several walking tours through the alleyways of old Jaipur. Its proximity to the national capital territory of Delhi also adds to Jaipur's advantage as a hub of 'heritage tourism'.

In this light, the 'old' city is created/restored by the state departments, aided by international agencies like UNESCO, Asian Development Bank and World Bank. Master Plans, the dominant urban planning approach in contemporary India, reflected on the growing salience of 'heritage' in urban planning of Jaipur in 1971, 1991 and 2011. In fact, even the new metro rail line being constructed in the walled city of Jaipur is justified in the name of tourism and long lasting protection of so called heritage structures in its vicinity, while overlooking any immediate dangers to them due to construction activity. Through a study of state-led restoration projects in the city, it seems that a generic approach to 'past' is about controlling the outer look of monuments and façade regulation, without considering the local social dynamics which makes the space 'culturally' vibrant at large or the older labour processes. Implicit in this is the logic of revenue generation through tourism, which makes old *havelis* (mansions) and streets with their craftsmen a storehouse of value.

Thus, in production of Jaipur's heritage, city space in its multiple layering is missing. Several local ways of engagement with urban space are erased in the fetishized city of

heritage experts. This brings one to the contours of conservation debate in Jaipur, between the state officials and NGOs. It ironically centres on an abstract idea of 'originality', which needs to be maintained while conserving the city. However, this 'original' may change according to the position of the conservation bodies- while for the state department, anything with revenue potential is original, reducing to heritage to a typical princely history, for the NGOs, local knowledge of monumental structures and so-called intangible traditions become more significant. In both these viewpoints, a privilege is granted to the 'old', which is also authentic. In this framework, no consideration is reserved for structures, which have no place in any dominant historical narrative of the city, but are a part of public memory, which is dispersed and socially located. Old cinema halls, small groceries, roadside shrines and street corner sweet sellers have no place, for instance, in the conservation discourse. They are considered as 'insignificant' aspects of city life, devoid of any royal charm, which is saleable in Jaipur. However, in everyday itineraries of people they hold significance as nodes of movement and a way of life. Smells, sights and sounds around one's home may be distinct from the desirable sensorium of a touristic city. The heritage narrative therefore seems constitutive of a straitjacketed past, which obfuscates its quotidian textures.

Most of the state-led pilot restoration projects have unfolded in specific zones of the walled city, which abound in *havelis* (residential structures built in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Jaipur, and have courtyards) and temples, mainly belonging to the Jain and Hindu communities. Most of the shops and showrooms in the market are owned and managed by these people, who also involve themselves in social and religious life of the city. Many big and small gem cutting and processing units can also be found in the area, which makes it a lucrative tourist haven. Craftsmen and merchants form the crux of heritage zoning here, along with somewhat well -preserved buildings. However as one moves towards areas of the walled city, which have relatively higher numbers of Muslim craftsmen and residents, one finds a receding of 'heritage' infrastructure. These areas, historically too, are said to have been set up as unplanned enclaves, and added to the urban fabric at a later stage. Most of the inhabitants, who do home-based work, some of which includes kite-making, silver foil making, dyeing among others, are living economically fragile lives and do not figure in the shaping of Jaipur's princely past.

Since the 1940s they are framed within narratives of communalism and poverty in governmental discourse. There is also a visual difference in terms of built structures, which involves more humble dwellings and streetscapes, as also non-vegetarian eateries (not considered to be quintessentially *Jaipuri* food culture). The pink of Jaipur, which is its signature icon, seems faded in these zones, where heritage activities are

practically non-existent, except for a few stray tourists. No major restoration project has ever been attempted in these zones, around the southeast and northeast part of walled city and there is an invisibility of these groups in local businesses around heritage. Walking through these enclaves is considered to be aesthetically unpleasing and dangerous owing to negative stereotyping of the poor Muslim. Even local residents' nostalgia has now been structured through tropes of official branding of urban spaces, which dissects the city into separate zones.

A balanced policy approach towards conservation of walled city may consist in rethinking the notion of 'past' itself- in its myriad forms. Master Plans as templates of urban development could produce generic spaces, in the process, erasing what they seek to protect- in Jaipur's case, its very identity as a well planned city of the 18th century seems to be at stake.

## POLICY AND STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS

### **Reshape Master Plans:**

Most of the formal urban development in India is undertaken by the means of Master Plans, policy documents, which not only organize the existing urban space but also determine projected growth pattern and extent of a given city. It delineates a framework for land use, transportation system and reorganization of urban zones, vis-à-vis surrounding rural areas and suburbs. A Master Plan also creates an economic growth model based on a city's resources- physical, cultural and human. However, most often these planning regimes are based on theoretical approaches, which are abstracted from the ground realities of urban life in the Global South, to use Annanya Roy's term.

### **Identify Primary Stakeholders:**

Given these issues with bureaucratic town planning and multiple institutional layers managing the city in India, it is imperative to narrow down the primary stakeholders in any development process, and create plans conducive to a given urban environment. This entails bringing together not only officials and experts, but also local residents and NGOs in the process of planning. It may ensure inclusion of different perceptions about the city in planning process. Taking note of varied standpoints and sensitivities becomes even more central to planning in cities that have been developing as 'heritage' precincts in recent times. The choice of their cultural and historic resources becomes a contentious issue in policy discourse.

