CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD
7.1 Introduction

The central focus of this research is to explore the synthesis of culture with the urban planning process. In the present context, urban planning processes predominantly address material aspects of culture through an expert-led landuse-based master plan approach. Therein, the process usually focuses on tangible aspects of culture, and within the contemporary framework, urban planning initiatives focus on heritage conservation or adaptive reuse as strategies to integrate culture and planning. Even conservation of architectural heritage appears to be included as supplementary to the main planning process, and pre-empts assessment of local culture for its potential in urban futures which is more complex. Moreover, exploration of linkages between local culture and urban planning is still an emerging area of research. The distinctiveness of this research is in development of a comprehensive framework to explore linkages between culture and urban planning at pilgrimage towns in India for future urban planning initiatives. Pilgrimage towns are largely identified with sacred geography and prominence of religion-centric culture to a varying degree. The inclusion of local culture in urban planning of pilgrimage towns is still restricted to conservation of built-heritage, a strategy adopted uniformly across a spectrum of divergent towns. There is a gap in envisioning holistic culture-integrated urban planning that this research addresses through its exploration at Indian pilgrimage town.

This chapter focusses on the main findings from the research and draws the overall conclusions of the thesis which are presented in three main sections. The main findings are discussed in the Section 7.2 and the policy significance of this research is presented in Section 7.3. Section 7.4 discusses the potential areas of future research.

7.2 Principal findings

An inquiry linking to research objective 1 explores theoretical linkages between culture, urban planning and sustainability through literature review and pilot field studies. It reveals that exploration of linkages between culture and urban planning is a fast emerging topic of contemporary research. Literature study reveals the paucity of case examples to reinforce empirical significance of synthesis of culture with urban planning. It also raises the critical significance of more empirical place-specific case examples for advancements in theoretical information about linkages between culture and urban planning. The paucity of either empirical place-specific case examples or evolved theoretical knowledge necessitates
embedding of the study in a specific cultural context to examine linkages between local culture and urban planning. The research raises the significance of embarking on a place-specific cultural context for examination of its linkages with urban planning.

Embedding the research that explores linkages between culture and urban planning of sacred pilgrimage towns necessitates focusing on distinctiveness and relevance of its cultural context for urban planning initiatives. An important outcome of this research is emergence of eight key thematic dimensions that are significant to explore synthesis of culture and urban planning at Hindu pilgrimage towns in India. The identified thematic dimensions are cultural heritage, urban morphology, urban governance, spatial growth, cultural economy, theological values, ecological values and community engagement. Investigating the thematic dimensions identified in the framework has potential to leads to identification of specific attributes that manifest linkages between culture and urban planning for sustainability of sacred pilgrimage towns.

A key outcome of this research that links to objective 2 is development of an expert-led evaluative framework for integration of culture and urban planning for sacred pilgrimage towns in India. This framework is an advancement of eight thematic dimensions identified earlier (in Chapter 3). The comprehensive framework includes significant attributes for establishing culturally-responsive urban planning priorities at Indian pilgrimage towns, and also assesses priority they are accorded in praxis. The components and attributes are evaluated by the subject experts for its comprehensiveness and relative relevance, and the results are construed to represent the professional planning perspective.

Cultural heritage materialize as the most significant consideration for initiatives leading to synthesis of cultural and urban planning. Distinctively for sacred pilgrimage towns, attributes linked to intangible heritage appear to be of greater significance than tangible heritage; sacred geography being the most significant constituent attribute. The opinion elicited from the subject experts’ accord low priority to cultural economy considerations and spatial growth driven by endogenous demand. These very attributes have been evidently invoked for justification of major urbanization initiatives at certain Indian pilgrimage towns, which makes this finding significant. The paradoxical finding purports latent potential of evolving an alternative view of urban development and planning at pilgrimage towns which is more centered on cultural aspects of sacred towns. Experts’ view gathered through the survey process also reinforces potential of an alternative view through affirming only marginal integration of culture with contemporary urban planning praxis at
pilgrimage towns. This particular possibility has been validated through exploring a place-based inquiry embedded in a sacred pilgrimage town providing a religion-centric cultural context.

To fulfill objective 3, for place-based testing and application of the framework, the enquiry is embedded in Vrindavan, Brajbhoomi. The place-based approach allows gathering qualitative information specific to the local culture. The expert-driven framework evolved earlier (in Chapter 4) is adapted to the local context for gathering nuanced qualitative data through adoption of a bottom-up approach. The development of a place-based framework through adaptation of the earlier expert-led framework implies inherent versatility and adaptability of the expert-led framework to specific cultural contexts. Moreover, the research methodology that included two-staged literature review, framework development and data collection; and adopted multiple tools to gather inter-disciplinary data, is distinctive for tractability in its evolution to primarily respond to the cultural context. The adaptation helps to develop an interdisciplinary approach to imagine indigenous urbanism at sacred Indian pilgrimage towns, and evolves an evaluative framework for exploration of its linkages with culture. It lays direction for aggregation of culturally relevant information for urban planning praxis through potential adaptations of the proposed framework.

Significantly, urban and spatial patterns and cultural heritage emerge as most significant components contributing towards synthesis of culture and urban planning from empirical field survey results. These local stakeholders’ survey results too indicate partially higher significance of intangible cultural heritage than tangible heritage for urban planning considerations at sacred pilgrimage towns in India. It indicates importance of understanding how the traditional beliefs, theological principles, pilgrimage rituals and patronage patterns underpin urbanism and its spatial manifestation. Spatial investigations into these significant components and emergence of linkages between cultural characteristics with indigenous urbanism raise the significance of place-based approach for culturally-responsive urban planning process.

This research reinforces a continuing significance of the sacred roots in origin of a pilgrimage city. A common finding from results of the expert-led and local stakeholders’ survey is the critical significance of the religion-based cultural characteristics to the urban planning process. An equally important finding congruent in both the surveys is a low priority accorded to economic growth aspects for the urban planning process at pilgrimage towns. The divergent finding is significant for planning at pilgrimage towns, for
contemporary urban planning is primarily driven through trigger of economic growth. Urban growth in the informal sector is again not considered very significant by either the experts or the local stakeholders. However, this appears counterintuitive, since most of the urban landscape is visually dominated by these temporary informal urban features. The predominance of informal as the predominant mode of urban development is distinctively discerned during site visits to many Hindu pilgrimage towns in India. The growing domain importance of informal urbanism to the formal urban planning process is also an area of emerging significance, and the spatial investigations in this research raises significance of engaging with indigenous informal urbanism for urban planning initiatives at sacred pilgrimage towns in India.

This research conveys the significance of synthesis of culture and urban planning at pilgrimage towns in India for culturally-responsive urban development in Indian pilgrimage towns. The findings of this research assume importance in view of various government schemes like HRIDAY and PRASAD focusing on urban development of pilgrimage towns in India. The methodological advancement of development of an expert-led generic framework for Indian pilgrimage towns, and its adaptation and testing in a place-based context may be applied at other similar pilgrimage towns to assess the frameworks’ suitability for culturally relevant urban planning at pilgrimage towns. Similarly, the framework can also be adapted for application and testing in other pilgrimage towns to explore praxis responsiveness of the framework.

Contemporary urban developments at Vrindavan underscore the relevance of the basic premise of the thesis. The local governance institution - Vrindavan nagar panchayat - is notified for merger with the Mathura local body to create Mathura-Vrindavan Municipal Corporation to provide for better tourist amenities and for greater financial autonomy. This act implies cognizance of the similarities between the two towns, but ceases to take into cognizance the distinctive cultural dimensions underlying the two towns. Similarly, considerable funds are apportioned for urban interventions at Vrindavan through a multitude of agencies viz. World Bank, Ministry of Tourism, and from HRIDAY mission at Mathura; for varying objectives viz. improvement of tourism infrastructure, riverfront development, de-congesting primary pilgrimage node (Bankey Bihariji temple). Significantly, absence of vision for the city is leading to civil and legal contestations concerning urban futures of the city, issues which are rooted in the sacred culture of the place. Also, absence of convergence between these various initiatives is leading to
fragmented and disjointed efforts, which threatens integrity of the built environment at the place. The study suggests that manifold initiatives for improvisation of urban environment at this sacred town be underpinned by a common vision of development gleaned through a larger participative process. The current urban developments contextualize, and also reinforce relevance of this thesis which argues for synthesis of culture with the planning process to develop a holistic vision for urban futures of sacred pilgrimage towns.

7.3 Policy significance

Various stages of this research through content analysis of literature review, structured interviews of national experts’ and key local stakeholders, and field studies have facilitated in examining the interrelationships between culture and urban planning. A significant message that the research conveys is the need for systemic inclusion of culture in urban planning process to strengthen sustainability of pilgrimage towns in India. Pilgrimage towns are known as repositories of unique cultural values and recognizing potential of the indigenous knowledge also raises the policy significance of this research. The methodological advancement for place-specific examination of linkages between culture and urban planning through national experts’ and local stakeholders’, addresses gaps in contemporary planning and development praxis of Indian pilgrimage towns.

Urban planning praxis initiatives predominantly leverage the heritage aspects of culture for economic gains in varying degree. This research proposes greater emphasis on genius loci of a place to planning process at sacred towns, and argues for cognition of cultural values linked to its sacrality. In view of the survey results and built form study, this thesis argues for a reduction in focus on increasing tourism and enhancing local economy as primary development objectives for pilgrimage towns. In particular, research highlights importance of recognizing inherent components intrinsic to cultural identity of a place and mapping its spatial dimensions for inclusion in culture-responsive urban planning. It is posited that an endogenous urban planning approach sensitive to embedded cultural characteristics is holistic in nature and shall provide a continuum for enhanced sustainability of pilgrimage towns in India. The research outcomes also indicate built environment as a prime cognitive determinant of place-cultural-experience at pilgrimage towns. It is premised that urban planning needs to be envisaged as a spatial organization tool for place-making to foster immersive experiences thereby generating cultural awareness and outreach.
In the context, this research raises the need for delineation of ‘Sacred Complex’ integrated into urban planning process at pilgrimage towns. This calls for identification of a zone of immanent cultural significance as a spatial embodiment of tangible and intangible heritage linked to traditional ethos and sacrality of a place. Urban planning at such areas of seminal importance entails unique initiatives relating to institutional mechanisms, built environment and development controls, mobility planning, local economic development, ecological interventions, active delivery of environmental services and mode of people’s engagement.

7.4 Potential areas of future research

Whilst this research takes a comprehensive perspective towards synthesis of culture with urban planning process, it reveals the potential for further examination of a number of issues. Also, this research is limited to the cognitive aspects of experiencing pilgrimage towns. Thus, cognitive aspects linked to sacred geographies that lead to extra-normal or spiritual experiences and its linkages to urban planning is an interesting subject domain for further research.

This research focuses on formulation of a theoretical framework which facilitates developing a context for examining linkages between culture and urban planning at sacred pilgrimage towns. It also develops and tests two-stage place-based evaluative framework for synthesis of culture and urban planning at pilgrimage towns in India. Praxis responsiveness of frameworks can be further affirmed by inclusion of advanced statistical analysis and increased sample size in further research to also enhance robustness of the framework.

The research studies highlight the critical importance of intangible cultural heritage to urban planning process at sacred Indian pilgrimage towns. Only limited studies have been initiated for identification and systematic documentation of cultural resources, assets or processes in cities, even lesser at pilgrimage towns. Focus on adoption of ‘cultural mapping’ as a systemic mode of inquiry and methodological tool for synthesis of culture and urban planning in future research shall significantly contribute towards sustainability of sacred pilgrimage towns in India.

Additional case examples of place-based application and testing through adaptation of the expert-led framework at various other sacred pilgrimage towns shall reinforce validity of the framework. It is anticipated that additional case examples at congruent sacred towns
such as Haridwar, Ayodhya, Mathura, Ujjain etc. would result in clearer exposition of inter-relationship between culture and urban evolution of sacred towns. Secondly, there is scope to adapt and apply the framework at other settlements in Braj such as Mathura, Barsana etc. to develop a regional perspective for sustainability of Braj Kshetra. Formulation of regional development initiatives embedded in substrata of the cultural unity of Braj bhoomi embodies potential of advancing an integrated regional framework for enabling harmonious spatial development, whereas specific spatial development interventions viz. master plan, local area plans may be based on place-characteristics of individual settlements. Furthermore, since traditional knowledge systems at Braj accord considerable significance to ecology and its constituent components viz. river, sacred groves, water management systems, hillocks etc., thus an ecological perspective in future research would potentially develop broader horizons for responsive planning policies and strategies for sustainability of pilgrimage towns in India.