CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION
1.1 Context

The sustainability debate has increasingly focussed on urban development, and sustainability is being considered unattainable without achieving sustainable urban development (UN-HABITAT, 2002). Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s) adopted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes the goal of making “cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” (UN, 2015). Developing countries envisage emergence of alternative urban development paradigms with greater inclusivity in response to the sustainability imperatives and homogenizing influence of globalization (UNESCO, 2015).

With emergent challenges and shifting goals, urban planning praxis and theory explore alternative urban and spatial planning paradigms. Sustainability imperatives are variously interpreted in urban planning domain, and consequently diverse conceptualizations are emergent to achieve urban sustainability. These variegated approaches include conceptualization of eco-villages, eco-cities (Register, 1987) and eco² cities (Suzuki, et al., 2010); new urbanism (Talen, 2013) and sustainable urbanism (Farr, 2008); compact cities, green cities and resilient cities amongst others. Simultaneously in response to globalization, place-based factors which impart uniqueness to local contexts are assuming significance in urban and spatial planning paradigms (WHO, 1999; UN-DESA, n.d.). Embedded in the local discourse, culture emerged as a vitally significant local, place-based determinant in urban planning process for achieving sustainable urban development. However, the linkage between cultural heritage and urbanization to make cities sustainable and resilient remained tenuous; its advancement is confounded by abstractness in concepts of culture and sustainability, insufficient empirical evidence and a near absence of integrated conceptual framework (Parr, 2000).

To explore the potential influence of culture, UNESCO initiated a ‘Global Report on Culture and Sustainable Urban Development’ to provide guidelines and recommendations to foster culture-based urban sustainable development initiatives at international, national, regional and local levels (UNESCO, 2015). Currently, SDG’s recognize the role of culture as an enabler of sustainable development to ‘make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’, and resolve to ‘protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage’ (UN, 2015). In a beginning, UNESCO has advanced a policy framework document that enquires the role of culture for sustainable urban development.
and focuses on cultural realities for evolving urban strategies for sustainable urban planning (UNESCO, 2016). The New Urban Agenda identifies culture as a priority component of urban plans and for protection of heritage from disruptive development (HABITAT III, 2016).

Literature suggests that inclusion of culture/cultural aspects in planning processes of a place considerably enhances its sustainability prospects (Hawkes, 2001; Duxbury & Jeannotte, 2010; Horlings, 2015). Taking from this theoretical position of sustainability, this research adopts an inter-disciplinary perspective to explore potential linkages between culture and urban planning. In recognition of diversity and heterogeneity of common cultural heritage, place-based built and natural environment, spaces and places, communities and practices are significant considerations for synthesis of culture and urban planning (UNESCO, 2016). In context of the critical need of empirical research situated in varying cultural contexts (Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013), this exploratory research attempts to bridge this gap by establishing linkages between culture, urban planning and sustainability situated in context of pilgrimage towns in India. The study focuses on pilgrimage towns wherein the sacrality of the place and the pilgrimage activity underpin the cultural evolution of a town.

The prevalence of pilgrimage is a well-recognized phenomenon almost universally through all geographies with approximately 215 million pilgrimages undertaken annually only counting at forty locations in 2014 (Alliance of Religions and Conservation, 2014). It is primarily recognized as a journey to sacred places for spiritual progress, and prevails as a major ritual practice across religions in Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Jews, and also prevalent in Sikhs, Buddhists and Confucians. Pilgrimage tradition has been institutionalized in India for more than a thousand years (Singh, 2004) and is posited to have contributed to imagination of India as an integrated geo-cultural entity (Eck, 2012). About 100 million people in India embark on pilgrimage or religious tourism visits each year (Cochrane, 2008) to about 1800 recognized sacred pilgrimage sites in India (Bhardwaj, 1983). The increasing visitations and large congregations on significant occasions inflict an indelible impact on the built environment supporting pilgrimage (Shinde, 2012).

Contextually, the research explores linkages between culture of pilgrimage and urban planning for sustainability of pilgrimage towns in India.

Pilgrimage towns in India such as Varanasi, Bhubaneshwar, Dwarka, Allahabad, Ajmer, Bodh Gaya, Haridwar, Pushkar etc. are characterized by high visitations of pilgrims, which stress the prevailing environmental services (Shinde, 2007) and result in the degradation of
built environment. The need for pilgrimage infrastructure results in urban growth, which in absence of appropriate planning regulations, threatens cultural and environmental sustainability of the pilgrimage town (Shinde, 2012). A recent Government of India scheme - Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY) - recognizes the need for strategic and planned initiatives for sustainable development of heritage cities in India. Most cities such as Dwarka, Mathura, Gaya, Kancheepuram, Puri, Varanasi, Amravati, and Ajmer shortlisted for the scheme involve an element of sacrality, and attract pilgrims at varying scales. The scheme envisages to “preserve and revitalize soul of the heritage city to reflect the city’s unique character….and facilitate inclusive heritage linked urban development” (Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India, 2015). These indicate growing recognition of a need to focus on cultural aspects in urban planning processes at heritage/pilgrimage cities.

![Map of India and Mathura District](image)

Figure 1.1: Location of Vrindavan

The study is embedded in the Indian Hindu pilgrimage town of Vrindavan-dham in Uttar Pradesh. Vrindavan-dham is a very significant settlement within the cultural region of Braj-kshetra - which includes other settlements viz. Mathura, Goverdhan, Barsana etc. that collectively constitute the sacred geography of Braj. The belief of Braj as being the earthly realm of Sri Krishna not only imparts a sacred context, but also underpins cultural unity of the region. Vrindavan is of primal spiritual significance in consciousness of the devout, and
also a leading centre of Vaishnavism theology/practice. Physically, it is a small town located in Mathura district with a population base of 63,000 (Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority, 2008), and attracts 12.6 million visitors (Tourism, 2016) for its sacrality. A strong sacred-pilgrimage cultural context, asymmetry of spatial development and urban growth patterns indicate that Vrindavan is at the cusp of major spatial transformations and has been selected as a case example for this research.

With exponential growth in urbanization, the trajectory of urban futures at sacred pilgrimage towns appears ambivalent in their engagement with the prevailing culture underpinned by sacrality and pilgrimage. This research envisions urban planning as a medium for mediation between culture and sustainable urban futures of sacred pilgrimage towns in India. It explores the linkages between the cultural characteristics of a sacred place with its spatial dimensions/urbanism in a temporal perspective to establish the interrelationship between culture and urban planning. This study is embedded in Indian pilgrimage towns and seeks to evolve and synthesize a holistic framework of linkages between culture and urban planning for addressing sustainability concerns at Indian pilgrimage towns.

1.2 Research question

What are key components reflecting linkages between culture and urban planning process for sustainability of pilgrimage towns in India?

1.3 Research objectives

1. To examine theoretical inter-linkages between culture, urban planning and sustainability.
2. To develop a framework for examining linkages between culture and urban planning at pilgrimage towns in India.
3. To adapt and test the framework through embedding it in a place-based cultural context.
1.4 Methodological approach

Exploration of nebulous thematic interrelationships, linkages and the patterns in this research mandated adoption of a multi-disciplinary research approach. It led to adoption of mixed methods for research design, and included both qualitative and quantitative methods (Figure. 1.1). The generic dimensions of the thematic inter-linkages are deducted from literature study, and the linkages have been further explicated by seeking expert advice. Empirical field studies are situated in an identified pilgrimage town, which provides a place-based context for observation of qualitative linkages between the thematic variables. The emergent need for understanding the stakeholders’ perspective on embedded thematic relationships and linkages are conducted through field studies and surveys. Visual and spatial data to explore the manifest linkages between culture and urban planning has been collated by adoption of photo-documentation, graphic and mapping methods.

The methodological approach has two main stages, each predicated on reiterative dialogue between theoretical and empirical data/information gathered cumulatively at respective stages. The first stage focuses on development of a theoretical framework for inquiry into various dimensions of the thematic inter-linkages. The attributes contributing to the inter-linkages are derived from content analysis of literature and adopting an expert-led process for its inquiry at pilgrimage towns in India. The second stage builds upon these linkages to embed the theoretical framework in a place-based context to orient it towards a praxis responsive evaluative framework. A bottom-up approach was adopted for place-based investigation that led to adaptation of the framework for obtaining relative significance of cultural aspects for urban planning in a sustainability context.

At the first stage, theoretical inputs include literature review focusing on gleaning thematic interrelationship between culture and urban planning in a sustainability context from cross disciplinary literature. The inter-relationship is reviewed through examining case studies, of which a few are situated in pilgrimage towns. At this stage, the emergent theoretical dimensions of thematic inter-linkages are in a discursive/dialogic mode with empirical investigations gathered through in-depth unstructured interviews with urban experts. The expert driven method resulted in formulation of a hierarchical framework for integrated investigation into linkages between culture and urban planning.

At the second stage, the thematic inquiry is situated at the pilgrimage town of Vrindavan, India to provide a place-based context aiming towards elimination of tautological
deductions at the first stage. The theoretical inputs at this stage include content analysis of inter-disciplinary literature for aggregation of place-based information on themes of local pilgrimage, theology, cultural and urban those are relevant for the place. The components/attributes based on the earlier framework are contextualized for validation and significance in specific context of Vrindavan. An adapted framework based on place-based theoretical inputs, reconnaissance field visits and unstructured interviews with local stakeholders led to the evolution of an adapted evaluative framework by adoption of a bottom-up approach.
Figure 1.2: Methodological approach adopted for the research
1.5 Structure of thesis

This thesis has been structured into following seven chapters:

Chapter 2.0 on ‘Literature perspectives: culture, urban planning and sustainability’ explores thematic interrelationships between culture, urban planning and sustainability through literature and gleans theoretical linkages between them.

Chapter 3.0 on ‘Culture and indigenous urbanism in Indian pilgrimage towns’ is based on multi-disciplinary literature review focusing on pilgrimage towns in India. The chapter explores evolution of pilgrimage towns and their contemporary urban characteristics, cultural considerations in urban planning framework and the phenomenon of Hindu pilgrimage.

Chapter 4.0 on ‘framework development through expert opinion’ constructs a framework of key components and attributes to examine linkages between culture and urban planning at Indian pilgrimage towns.

Chapter 5.0 on ‘framework adaptation through a place-based inquiry at Vrindavan’ involves cognition of inter-relations of cultural and urban characteristics embedded in a place-study, to advance the earlier framework through literature study, field observations and interaction with select on-field respondents.

Chapter 6.0 on ‘framework testing and application for a place-based bottom-up inquiry in Vrindavan’ targets collection and collation of information through structured field surveys, field observations, mapping and photo-documentation. It also presents findings derived through survey, analysis and interpretation of survey results.

Chapter 7.0 on ‘conclusions and the way-forward’ presents significance of principal findings and inferences of the research, and suggests direction for future research.

The section on appendix consists of the list of national experts and local expert participants’ for the survey, as well as invitation letters and questionnaires and proforma used for surveys.
1.6 Limitations

- The research focuses to explore synergies between thematic variables of culture and urban planning primarily from the perspective of urban planning intervention. It is widely postulated that synergies between culture and urban planning process contribute significantly to sustainability of towns. This axiom has been examined temporally through interdisciplinary literature of development studies, and increasing acceptance of this axiom has been established in the literature review sections.

- The research predominantly considers the perceptive and cognitive realms of sensory experience. Pilgrimage/sacred towns are often known to inhabit places linked to the primordial, and also for providing extra-sensory experiences to people which renders those places significant. Such personal experiences may be triggered off inexplicably by events, activities, communitas, blessings, faith or any other such reason. Spatial dimensions are known to impact human experience, but their contributions to such supra-natural experiences - which may be potentially significant at sacred places – are beyond the limits of this research.

- Experiencing a culture holistically would imply internalizing cultural experiences completely and holistically with all its patterns and linkages, and understanding the cognitive and embodied knowledge. Limitations of time mandated to focus on cognitive inquiry, and learning of embodied indigenous knowledge through key local resources and field experience.

- Vrindavan is selected as a case example for testing and application of the framework in view of its cultural significance and homogeneity, manageable territorial extent and a low population to limit the scale and complexity of the inquiry. The selection is further validated as Vrindavan is a recognized repository of cultural values which is at the cusp of potentially disruptive major urban transformations.