CHAPTER 5:

FRAMEWORK ADAPTATION FOR A PLACE-BASED ENQUIRY AT VRINDAVAN
5.1 Context

The previous chapter establishes a generic theoretical framework based on expert opinion for examination of the linkages between culture, urban planning and sustainability in context of pilgrimage towns in India. This chapter presents adaptation of the generic framework for a specific urban and cultural context through conducting a place-based research enquiry embedded at pilgrimage town of Vrindavan. The significance of place-based study to address the complexities of planning were earlier raised by Geddes in his analytical framework of “place” “work” and “folk” triad (Welter, 2002). Place-based research is finding application in varying domains of urban sustainable development (Andren, 2009), regional development (Zaucha & Swiatek, 2013), integrated land-use management (Woltjer, et al., 2015), sustainable urban renewal (O’Donnell, et al., 2016), conservation (Williams, et al., 2013), landuse planning and design (Buffalo greencode, 2015) and other urban domains (Baczyk, et al., 2016). Contemporary works suggest that place-based research may either derive from a theoretical framework, or even be developed during the course of research (Silva, et al., 2015; Pinel, 2015). The approach to place-based enquiry is explored through obtaining cultural characteristics in its intersection with local and regional spatial and urban planning issues. The interlinkages between culture and urban planning are further explored through advancing adaptation of the generic framework by assimilation of the indigenous urban characteristics of Vrindavan.

This following stage in Chapter 5 initiates an enquiry at Vrindavan to explore the emergent dimensions at Chapter 3 through a place-based adaptation of the framework developed in Chapter 4. Study of the dimensions at Vrindavan is presented through Section 5.1 to Section 5.7, and Section 5.8 presents the adapted framework for study of linkages between culture and urban planning at Vrindavan (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5. 1: Structure of Chapter 5
This chapter partially addresses the objective 3 (Figure 5.2) of the research that focuses on adapting and testing the framework through embedding it in a place-based cultural context.

Figure 5.2: Chapter positioning

**Initiation of a place-based inquiry at Vrindavan-dham, Brajbhoomi**

Chapter three elucidates the diverse and dynamic religio-pilgrimage contexts that underpin the physical and temporal evolution of pilgrimage towns. In view of diversity of religio-cultural contexts at Indian pilgrimage towns, embedding the inquiry at specific pilgrimage town provides advantage of a real place-based cultural and urban context for empirical exploration of linkages between culture and urban planning.

Vrindavan has been cited as the birthplace of Sri Krishna in the ancient text of Srimadbhagawatam, and is currently a major Hindu pilgrimage town widely recognized as Sri Krishna’s dham – His permanent earthly abode permeated with His divine presence. Located in Braj kshetra it is perceived as a lotus-shape in a sacred geography circumscribed within 84kos (252kms) and is known to have included 5 sacred hills, 12 vanas (forests), 24 upavana (groves) and 84 sacred water bodies. Vrindavan is a sacred town of primal spiritual significance for the Hindus and is firmly embedded in Indian consciousness as both the physical and ethereal abode of Sri Krishna. The mythological texts depict Vrindavan as a settlement of immense natural beauty and gaiety, often invoked through imagery (Figure
5.3) and verse as a sacred, meditative, transcendent and verdant source of eternal bliss. In early half of the sixteenth century Srila Prabodhanand Sarasvati wrote about the nectarean glories of Vrindavan in satakas of one hundred verses each (Sarasvati, 2002). It is a well-recognized as a center of Vaishnava theology, practice and learning (Entwistle, 1987; Lahiri, 1993; Haberman, 2003; Wong, 2015) . The reverence for the place and its sacrality is firmly entrenched in public memory and is reflected in large number of pilgrims visiting Vrindavan for spiritual advancement and ritual performance. Vrindavan is a small town with population of 63,000, which experienced a very gradual growth in its population of 30% over past twenty years. This period is simultaneously accompanied by a fourfold growth in pilgrimage visitations to 12.6 million. Major physical transformations are observed in built environment of the pilgrimage town, which adversely affects the experiential aspects due to the symbolic imagery attached with Vrindavan. Contemporary happenings may lead to obliteration of the unique cultural identity of Vrindavan, subsumed in development patterns linked to its urbanization.

Figure 5. 3: Imagery of Vrindavan as a place of transcendental beauty
In this context, field studies are conducted at Vrindavan-dham at Brajbhoomi in Uttar Pradesh. Content analysis is undertaken through interdisciplinary literature including local and vernacular sources from diverse domains of historical (Habib, 1996; Horstmann, 2002), urban and spatial studies (Bhatt, n.d.; Entwistle, 1987; Goswami, 1989; Infrastructure Professionals Enterprise (P) Ltd, 2006; Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority, 2008; The Braj Foundation, 2016), pilgrimage and tourism studies (Shinde, 2007; Shinde, 2012), cultural geography (Haberman, 1994; Goswami, 2003; Sinha, 2014), socio-cultural (Growse, 1882; Ghose, 2004; Shah, 2007), and philosophy (Sarasvati, 2002), religious and quasi-religious (Lahiri, 1993; Haberman, 2003; Maharaj, 2007) sources specific to the town. The objective of the literature study is to comprehend through secondary sources the intersections and interlinkages between phenomenon of pilgrimage, local cultural characteristics and urban planning processes at Vrindavan before commencement of field inquiry. Reconnaissance field visits are undertaken to develop preliminary understanding of Vrindavan, and also assess complexities of conducting field studies.

The place-based inquiry for exploration of linkages between culture and urban planning at Vrindavan builds upon content analysis of literature and theoretical dimensions of the inquiry at Chapter 2 & Chapter 3, and the expert led framework development in Chapter 4. At this stage, place-based literature study is aligned with preliminary field observations, informal discussions with pilgrims/residents and unstructured interviews with key local informants at Vrindavan to infer interrelation between their spatial and cultural characteristics and comprehend the interface between them.

5.2 Urban and cultural dimensions of Vrindavan-dham

Vrindavan is a town embedded in Indian consciousness for its association with Sri Krishna and River Yamuna. A small town in District Mathura, Vrindavan is within the administrative division of Agra – a city situated in Western Uttar Pradesh (Figure 5.4). It is in close physical proximity of about 12 kilometers to Mathura, which dates back to 500BCE in historical records though its antiquity is believed to date much earlier. Mathura is amongst the oldest living cities and its continuity in different historical periods is well represented in its present cultural hybridity. Vrindavan and Mathura are culturally intertwined by both being receptacles of incidences related to Sri Krishna’s childhood as narrated in great epics Mahabharata and Srimad Bhagawata Purana. However, whereas Mathura is represented as an urban regal capital of King Kansa, Vrindavan is envisaged as the pastoral village of cowherds, where Sri Krishna strode as a child (Vajapye, 1955).
Vrindavan is locally administered through a municipality and has a population of around 63,000 people distributed in 25 wards (Annexure 5.1). It is a significant pilgrimage town where over six million pilgrims visited the sacred town in 2012 (Shinde, 2012), and the figures have increased exponentially to 12.6 million in 2015 (Tourism, 2016). To formulate an urban planning perspective, guidelines in India classify a town based on its prime economic activity and/or evolution of the town (TCPO, 2015), which has a bearing on formulation of a planning approach. According to the guidelines, Vrindavan may be classified as a religious town for the primary role of religion in defining its cultural basis.

Culturally, Vrindavan is recognized as the eternal abode of Sri Krishna; Goloka Vrindavan is a ‘dham’ (Eck, 2012) – earthly paradise where divine Sri Krishna dwells, takes form, manifests his power and where one experiences his presence. Vrindavan is not only a sacred place, but is believed as a metonym of earthly Sri Krishna – his own ‘svarupa’ (Maharaj, 2007; Anon., 2014).
Theological synthesis and scholarship allude to Vrindavan as a blissful sacred transcendental realm bearing strong identification with Sri Krishna and Krishna lilas, Vaishnavism belief and practices, bhakti/madhuriya bhava – values that constitute the raison d'être of Vrindavan and permeates its living culture (Thakura, n.d.). Intrinsically steeped in the metaphor of Radha-Sri Krishna, the spiritual culture is the wellspring of many performing art forms like painting, sculpture, theatre, music; local crafts like sanjhi (Ghose, 2004), phool bangla (Sharma & Sharma, 2011); and braj bhasha (language) poetry and dance. This living culture of bhakti (devotion) is institutionalized through medium of temples (Plate 1), ashrams, mathas, centres of scholarship and sacred actors; and is transmitted through various idioms of culture including temple arts and the performing arts. The visual media of temple arts for presentation includes local crafts involving decoration of deities (Packert, 2010), sanjhi, phool bangla (Sharma & Sharma, 2011); and the performing arts include rituals, devotional songs, sankirtan, dance-drama (Figure 5.5, 5.6, 5.7) (Mason, 2009) viz. charkula and mayur nritya (Figure 5.8, 5.9) etc.
Vrindavan is colloquially known to celebrate more festivals and occasions than are the days in a year, uniquely. Most of the celebrations reinforce the living tradition suffused with divinity of Sri Krishna. The cultural traditions of either the temple arts or performing arts invoke Sri Krishna and are devotional for His pleasure. Every festival is celebrated through cultural enactment of rituals, temple arts or cultural performances. The occurrence of pan-Braj festive celebrations are linked to episodes linked to Sri Krishna’s allegories, significance events in his life, local harvesting festivals viz. Holi, Janamashtmi, rath-yatra (Figure 5.10, 5.11) etc.; and temple-based celebrations are linked to appearance and disappearance of holy saints, consecration of temples and samadhi etc.
Support for pilgrimage activities viz. floral shops, prasad shops, ashrams, dharamshalas, pandas, etc. support enactment of traditional cultural practices viz. pilgrimage, parikrama, darshan, sankirtan (Fig. 5.12), ritual bathing, Bhagawatam discourses etc. ‘Raas Lila’ enacts the divine dance signifying unison of God with his devotees, and many other related allegories are favourite themes of prominent classical dance forms all over India. These cultural enactments and other activities are suggested to act as mnemonic devices that build cultural memory (Sinha, 2014). Vrindavan town has been imagined as a unique cultural construct - an ideal of human-nature-spirit interaction, termed a “Human Sanctuary” by Sharan (Nash, 2012).

5.3 Historical evolution

Notionally at center of the sacred geography of Braj (vraja) Kshetra (region) which is circumscribed by 84kos (252kms) (Figure 5.13), Vrindavan is believed to be the place where Sri Krishna spent his early childhood. Currently, its cultural identity is embodied in its spiritual values rooted in the belief of Vrindavan being a dham – eternal abode of God, and home to the divine Radha-Sri Krishna who are perceived as a living presence. Though Braj was recognized for its association with Sri Krishna and as a pilgrimage center since the fourth century C.E (Haberman, 1994), no records indicate prevalence of pilgrimage at the present location of Vrindavan until 15th century AD, when the Vaishnava/Bhakti movement was expanding northwards from South India. The physical emergence of Vrindavan coincided with Bhakti movement and the spread of Vaishnavism to North India.
Figure 5.13: Traditional map indicating the cultural region of Brajbhoomi

Vrindavan at its present location had sunk in total oblivion and existed only in memory, its physical existence totally obliterated. It existed as a Vrinda (Tulsi) - vana (forest) on banks of River Yamuna till the famous bhakti saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, during a visit in 1515CE divined it as the childhood playground of Sri Krishna. He divined various places as erstwhile sites of Sri Krishna’s activities allegorized in mythological texts, and the sites were rediscovered and geographically inscribed at Vrindavan during his four months stay at Braj (Goswami, 2003). It re-emerged as a sacred centre in sixteenth century, following visit of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Vallabhacharya - famous Vaishnava gurus and proponents of Bhakti movement (Entwistle, 1987). Following his departure Chaitanya sent his disciples to to ‘establish sites for Sri Krishna’s worship’ and to resurrect Vrindavan as the eternal abode of Sri Krishna (Haberman, 1994). Six of the major disciples identified collectively as ‘The Chhat (six) Goswamis (priests)’ were instrumental in initiating spatial development of the sacred city, and their stature sought patronage for development works at Vrindavan. The Six Goswamis construed association of sites at Vrindavan with various events to life of Sri Krishna with divine inspiration, vision, consciousness and memory and sought their development. The physical development of these sites was supported through royal patronage and wealthy followers which led to development of Vrindavan as a town.

The process of spatial development as a town effectively began in 1598 with declaration of Vrindavan as an independent revenue entity, wherein Akbar vested all land with the deity of Govinda deva. This was preceded by the first ever land grant at Vrindavan made to temple deity of Govinda deva in 1565, which was followed by other imperial land grants (Habib, 1996; Horstmann, 2002). The support and patronage extended by Rajput kings and
Imperial Mughal emperor initiated physical resurrection of not only Vrindavan, but also initiated spatial development at Gokul, Goverdhan and other significant sacred places throughout Braj. A total of about 35 temples are known to have developed in Braj by 1580 (Shinde, 2012). The sacred places and significant natural features at Vrindavan were sanctified, and gradually adorned through development of structures for ritual purposes. The ‘Six Goswamis’ as anointed spiritual leaders entered into discussions with Rajput and Mughal patrons, and were instrumental for physical development of Vrindavan.

The Goswamis were largely responsible for synthesis of Chaitanya’s Vaishnava theology as literary foundation for Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and also evolved theory to derive a cultural framework for pilgrimage rituals. Perpetuated through varied cultural idioms of Krishna bhakti, the vividness of Vrindavan in public consciousness stoked passions for its discovery and spatialization, which would enable experiencing dimensions of Krishna bhakti at his birthplace. Largely because of its associated sacredness, Vrindavan soon became a leading center of Vaishnavism, Vaishnava learning and pilgrimage from sixteenth century C.E (Shah, 2007).

5.4 Spatial growth

There appears no specific narrative or archeological evidence citing spatial presence of Vrindavan at its present location in the historical period and other locations have been alternatively posited (Chaturvedi, 1997; Hawley, 2015). Vrindavan’s spatial development was initiated by visit of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in 1515 with the purpose of recognizing places associated with childhood pastimes of Sri Krishna. Thus, spatial growth of Vrindavan as a settlement was uniquely suffused with metaphors of Sri Krishna, reaffirming sacred roots of its urban growth. Vrindavan grew as a major center of Vaishnavism in North India that triggered physical and spatial development of sacred sites viz. temple complexes, sacred water bodies and sacred groves. The spatial development initially pivoted on the resurrection of Vrindavan as the sacred landscape of Sri Krishna. The initial stages of the spatial development allude to exploration and resurrection of sacred sites at Vrindavan and other areas at Braj. It was characterized by divining association of earthly sites with mythical events in Sri Krishna’s lifetime in texts, which were gradually consecrated. Further spatial organization at Vrindavan is rooted in the cultural legacy of Sri Krishna. Progressively, an increasing number of sacred sites (sthala) divined with associations to Krishna lilas were reclaimed and consecrated, and used for devotional and
pilgrimage activities. It is advanced that the cultural imperative for Vrindavan’s growth was its spatial recreation as an embodiment of mythical image, and also to gain recognition as eternal abode of Sri Krishna for transmission of its image as a sacred landscape of Sri Krishna.

Spatial development at the reclaimed sites were incremental, broadly including an ensemble of temples, ghat, kunds and ashrams that served as sacred ritual places for the pilgrims and the priests. Immense significance was accorded to natural elements like the woods, rivers, mountains, ponds, river, hills, water bodies and sacred groves which were venerated as sacred, and setting of images and shrines were of secondary importance (Vaudeville, 1976). Territorially, Vrindavan is a peninsular land formation, with river Yamuna to its east, west and the north. The initial growth was predominantly guided by the Goswamis, who as spiritual leaders and devotional teachers exercised considerable influence in the town and region (Swami, 2010). Recognizing the sacralty of the place and the growing spiritual leadership therein, royal patronage including Mughal, Rajput and Jat patrons, and other wealthy class generously extended donation of land parcels and funds to these spiritual groups (Habib, 1996; Horstmann, 2002).

This earliest phase of growth was supported by an environment of religious tolerance of imperial Mughal emperors, and their patronage and encouragement towards development of sacred landscape of Vrindavan. It is widely believed that Akbar (1556-1605) visited Vrindavan in 1573 (Growse, 1882) possibly influenced by Rajput kings, and four major temples viz. Govind dev (1590), Gopinath (1589), Madan Mohan and Jugal Kishore (1627) were built at Vrindavan to commemorate his visit towards end sixteenth century. Amongst these, the significant temples of Govind dev and Madan Mohan were sited at advantageous locations over raised mounds at highest points in Vrindavan. Other significant temples developed such that their temple precincts were adjacent to river Yamuna. Raja Mansingham and Raja Todarmal, both Rajput kings at Akbar’s court also significantly patronized construction of religious structures at Vrindavan. Inspite of plural patterns of patronage and involvement of multiple actors, the build environment of the period displays remarkable unity, consistency and finesse. The influence of contemporaneous Mughal architecture on the structures can be clearly discerned, and craftsmanship is of uniformly high quality (Fig. 5.14, Fig. 5.15).
Figure 5.14: Gopinath temple

Figure 5.15: Govindadeva temple

Figure 5.14 & Figure 5.15: earliest temples at Vrindavan built with royal patronage and exquisite craftsmanship

This first phase of spatial developments at Vrindavan is characterized by its transition from uninhabited vana (jungle) to a sacred geography wherein multiple sacred centres were divined and resurrected (Fig. 5.16). The centres were geographically inscribed and consecrated which derived sacrality from theological frameworks synthesized by spiritual leaders, or from association with Sri Krishna’s mythical activities in acknowledged texts. The singularity of purpose in resurrection of the sacred place, kinetics of pilgrimage and the ritual performances based on cultural tradition knit the centres together as a unified sacred spatial entity. The developments included temples, ashrams, royal retreats, sacred groves, sacred water-bodies and institutions for advancement in spiritual practices and theological beliefs. The expanding of spiritual movements and related spatial developments led to establishment of Vrindavan as a spatio-cultural-religious town which started drawing numerous pilgrims from neighbouring territories.
Post 1970’s urban growth at Vrindavan

Figure 5. 16: Vrindavan map indicating initial spatial developments along the river edge.

Source: (Shinde, 2012)
This patronage continued following the rule of Akbar, and land deeds continued to be granted to religious communities. However, the harmonious trajectory of spatial developments at Vrindavan was interrupted by the combative religious framework of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707) all throughout the latter half of seventeenth century. Very few buildings, or spatial developments of marked significance emerged during this period, and installed deities in main temples were relocated because of perceived threat of desecration under Aurangzeb’s rule (Entwistle, 1987). The spatial developments were inhibited and evidently downscaled to escape attention. However, the pilgrimage and ritual activity continued unhindered, even as jizya tax (taxation on non-Muslims) was re-imposed during Aurangzeb’s reign. Post-Aurangzeb, weakening of the Mughal Empire spurred other independent Hindu kings and mercantile class to advance Vaishnavism through resurrection of Vrindavan dham. Apart from the continuing patronage of the Rajput kings at Jaipur, other royal patrons included Raja of Karauli, Jaipur, Udaipur, Kota, Bharatpur, Tehri etc. They readily patronized development of the sacred centres and encouraged pilgrimage activities in the sacred town. Consequently, Vrindavan has been described by Father Tieffenbthal in CE1754 as being constituted of ‘one long street….adorned with handsome, magnificent buildings of beautifully carved stone….as occasional residences’ (Growse, 1882).

With increase in pilgrimage activity, community or region-based lodging facilities were patronized by the rich or royalty. The entire support ecosystem appears spatially directed towards fostering devotional and pilgrimage activities and guided development of the sacred geography of Vrindavan as a contemplative pilgrimage settlement of religious values and spiritual significance. The charitable donations by mercantile class during their pilgrimage visits to Braj were utilized for resurrection of identified sacred sites and development of new temples, ashrams etc. The new patrons initiated construction of private mansions for their personal usage, contributed financially for development of dharamshalas to lodge pilgrims and appointed people for support and upkeep of lodging facilities during the patrons’ absence. The mercantile and wealthy class also sought legitimacy and derived an exalted status amid their peers and kinship (Goel, 2016) through patronage of significant religious activities and association with high religious functionaries at Vrindavan. This facilitated development of pilgrims’ facilities viz. lodging, food, travel and performance of ritual activities grew in proportion to increase in pilgrimage visitations; and resulted in spatial expansion of Vrindavan.
Figure 5.17: Excellence of skill and craftsmanship in architectural expression of temples, princely estates

The initial developments were along the north/north-west bank of river Yamuna and later growth expanded inwards (Figure 5.16) (Shinde, 2012). Temples, temple precincts, ashrams, dharamshalas (charitable rest houses), ghats (stepped bathing places along rivers) and princely estates were constructed with considerable architectural elegance, skill and craftsmanship (Figure 5.17) (Plate 1). The princely mansions were usually constructed along the riverfront which characteristically devised ghats at its interface with the riverfront to provide convenient access to the river. In addition, the ghats were also spatial appurtenances for ritual performances by pilgrims and community, and were punctuated by temples along the riverfront. The ensemble of temples, aesthetically constructed mansions

Figure 5.18: Riverfront at Vrindavan: world-class riverfront heritage

and ghats adjacent to the river contiguously for over two kilometers presented an extremely impressive waterfront, which easily equals the best in the world (Fig.5.18). In accordance to the traditional and scriptural knowledge, considerable significance and reverence was attached to natural elements such as vanas (sacred groves), kunds (man-made water tanks), river Yamuna and sacred hills (Figure 5.19). Architectural appurtenances were evidently employed to enhance beauty and utility of kunds, riverfront, and community-protected groves, forests and hills (Figure 5.20).
The manifested built fabric was of considerable architectural value; and places for observances of rituals and practices, and of symbolic value are largely circumscribes and connected through a pradakshina path (circumambulatory route).

Vrindavan parikrama (a circumambulatory loop) was metaphorically inscribed on the sacred scape of Vrindavan at Braj, and traversing this parikrama is recognized to have considerable spiritual significance. The parikrama of 10kms traverses along the interface with river Yamuna which is populated by an ensemble of ghats, temples, sites for enactment of rituals, ashrams and dharamshalas. In the mainland, it is routed along major temples, kunds and sacred groves. The parikrama includes sacred pilgrimage places that find mention in the earliest manuscript description of Braj parikrama in 1553 through its passage route in Vrindavan (Bhatt, n.d.). This document not only mentions the places, but also elaborates the rituals to be performed and the sacred mantras (invocations) to be chanted at the respective places. The parikrama is ritually traversed on-foot by residents and visiting pilgrims on auspicious Hindu days, festivals and days connected to events in life of spiritually exalted persons. Detailed description of the parikrama as existing about two hundred fifty years back, is compiled through oral sources (Goswami, 1989) which reaffirm the existing route of the parikrama through sacred natural and man-made sites.
However, quite a few earlier destinations are now missing owing to vagaries of time. A large part of the area inscribed in the parikrama is currently earmarked as a heritage zone – an area of heritage significance - in the Mathura Vrindavan Master Plan 2021 (Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority, 2008).

Thus, the post-Aurangzeb to colonial period witnessed transition of Vrindavan from a solitary sacred place to an evolving human settlement, exhibiting diverse activities resulting from increase in pilgrimage activity. Vrindavan came to be recognized amongst large sacred Hindu towns, a well-established pilgrimage destination of significance greater than Mathura. This period was characterized by spatial expansion through development of diverse non-religious usages like recreational mansions and bazaars, and accelerated economic growth and plurality of patronage. However, the expansion of built environment in response to pilgrimage-driven activities continued to remain a key driver of spatial development. The dialectic between pilgrimage-based-development and significance of natural environment embedded in local culture emerged in this period, and has amplified to be a primary concern today.

Morphologically, Vrindavan developed in adherence to traditionally ordained Indian practice of developing riverine settlements on right bank of a river. Built on land granted through royal patronage to Vrindavan Goswamis and other priests, the developments mainly included a series of temples close to the river surrounded by sufficient attached temple land whose boundary enclosure was locally identified as its ghera (precinct). The ghersas functioned as learning centres and places for enactment and promotion of spiritual activities facilitated through religious functionaries. Vrindavan developed as a spatial ensemble of such temple complexes, ashrams, dharamshalas, public and private ghats in a linear pattern along River Yamuna.

Subsequently, railways were introduced at Vrindavan during the colonial rule in late nineteenth century, which further increased pilgrimage traffic. However, convenient accessibility through railways and improved roads, and development of pilgrim-facilities at Vrindavan reduced pilgrims’ dependence on local hosts who were earlier responsible for food, boarding, travelling and ritual performances of the pilgrims. Nevertheless, religious functionaries continued to be responsible for the welfare of the visiting pilgrims. To better manage the services for increasing pilgrimage, the colonial powers initiated major administrative changes in governance of Vrindavan through establishment of new non-religious civic institutions. The authority for addressing local issues thus shifted from
community-based mechanisms to institutions that were independent of the local socio-cultural milieu. The civic institutions viz. Vrindavan municipality were controlled by the colonial powers and vested with the responsibility of providing efficient utility services like water supply and sanitation, hygiene, and also management of events that attracted large number of pilgrims. Spatial developments perpetuated through densification of the sacred complex, and new construction progressed through subdivision and land-transfer. During this phase, civic structures like municipal office, schools, hospitals and Christian missions were developed with varied spatial configurations and building typologies away from the traditional core of the city, along the road connection to Mathura towards south of railway line. In this duration, Vrindavan was a pilgrimage-centric, temple-economy based human settlement with a population base of 21,467 people.

In this colonial phase, Vrindavan was characterized by transformations in its governance framework through state-control and involvement of additional actors, which consequently reduced influence of local religious functionaries in city development. The built environment was re-densified, and the urbanscape hybridized owing to myriad influences of diverse patronage that reflected in the built environment. The dialectic between the natural and the built environment intensified; and the resemblance of Vrindavan as a territorial embodiment of its mythological description and contemporaneous developments drifted as two distinct binaries. This drift perpetuated at varying pace in the post-independence period as well.

The architectural munificence largely faced the riverfront owing to the culturally accorded sanctity of the river, and because places associated with Krishna Lilas present along the river edge were embedded in cultural consciousness of the community. The indigenous place-based organization of the ensemble, effulgent with living culture of continuing belief and ritual enactment is unique of Vrindavan and results in a vibrant riverfront of significant architectural and cultural value. The settlement pattern appears guided by traditional principles of reverence to the river Yamuna, natural elements and sacred geography of the place. It is argued that the earlier evolution of the settlement was not only embedded in the ethos of the place, but consciously strived for perpetuation of indigenous cultural values.

The traditional ecological beliefs, sanctity of river Yamuna, and recognition of value and conservation of architectural heritage have been intrinsic to the way of life of the residents’. These values can be potentially leveraged to direct urban planning initiatives for addressing
challenges posed by ecological imbalance, environmental degradation, obsolescence of built fabric and deterioration of quality of life of residents.

5.5 Activity patterns

Collective memory, community values and beliefs underpin the temporal activities in the town that lead to distinctive activity patterns that also reflect spatially. Faith-driven residents or pilgrims converge at specific temples or river ghats for darshan of deities and/or ritual performances at varying periodicity. Extremely populated during the festivals, events and auspicious cycles of visitation, movement between the significant activity nodes and landmarks usually follow a pattern. Tradition of daily parikrama (circumambulation) along the pradakshina path is also a regular activity with many residents and pilgrims visiting Vrindavan. Pilgrimage movements along these networks present a livelihood option to the residents who develop trade and services’ establishments along the route. A mixed landuse pattern emerges with a rich mosaic of activities that impart vibrancy to the place, though it simultaneously congests meagre spatial capacity available. Awareness of the temporal spatial patterns of human ritualistic activities and movements at a local area level thus becomes a significant consideration for urban planning interventions.

Sri Krishna is believed to permanently reside at Vrindavan, and the people reinforce His Grace and living presence by organizing community events and activities regularly. Colloquially, Braj is known for celebrating more festivals that exceed the number of days in a year. The festivals, fairs and events are organized at varying scales ranging from a local to global scale and attract participation accordingly. Amongst many, the major congregation amongst others occur on annual festivals of Janamashtmi and Holi which have a global/national catchment, recitation of Srimad Bhagavatam katha (scriptural discourse) with a regional catchment, and sankirtan (congregational singing of devotional songs with music accompaniment) at local level that occurs daily. Devotional community activities – participants include local populace and visiting pilgrims – are of profound cultural significance for perpetuation of traditions believed to contribute positively to the well-being of the community.

Temporal patterns of participatory community activities and the imperative to provide accessibility, sufficiency, safety and hygiene for continued enactment of these activities are key considerations for evolving urban planning strategies. Urban planning in accordance to the existing patterns of the community and the pilgrims activities reduces conflicts, and
enables not only an enhanced quality of life for the residents but improves the pilgrim experience as well.

5.6 Cultural economy

Vrindavan has a population of sixty three thousand people in the 2011 census, and a thriving pilgrimage-based cultural economy with about 12.6 million visitors annually. With more than five thousand temples, Vrindavan is a temple-town wherein sacred temples are centre of economic activities accrued through pilgrimage activities. The temple-trusts are in possessions of substantial land holdings as custodian of the divinity. The temples are also sites for organization of cultural events viz. religious, ritual, festive celebration etc. and attract large number of visiting devotees. The trusts thus become patrons of religious practitioners, cultural performers, event managers etc. Similarly, temples are also involved in providing of ritual offerings which again generates employment. Floral decoration including phool bangla of the deity/temple is undertaken devotionally on festive occasions, which provide engagement opportunities for the craftsmen. The decoration and maintenance of temples and their gheras involve service providers for food, prasad, flower decorators, painters, housekeeping, tailors etc. The entire process has evolved through a complex system of patronage which includes traditional service providers continuing over generations, certain caste-based services; mostly offered through a devotional mindscape.

Most of the pilgrimage-based earnings largely accrue to spiritual institutions and actors who host the pilgrims and provide for their accommodation and travel. There is however a process that has again evolved for redistribution of gains between the temple custodians, which is normally private. However, the pilgrimage activity also supports several allied activities, of which some are rooted in traditional cultural production and arts. The allied activities include carving of stone statues, mukuts (crowns) and decorative clothes for deities, sanjhi and local cuisine amongst others. Presently, the production is undertaken usually in households informally at disjointed locations (Figure 5.21).

Aggregation and scaling-up of the production activities through spatial planning initiatives may foster innovation by peer learning, economies of scale and better connect with the demand side. Thus, mapping of the processes and practices of culture-based economy and assessment of its potential to generate sustainable livelihoods is an important component of urban planning initiative.
Figure 5.21: Local crafts production at disjointed, unorganized places

5.7 Community engagement

Numerous NGO’s and community-based organizations related to tradition-based cultural domains are presently active to address divergent issues existent in Vrindavan. These issues primarily include revitalization of the holy river Yamuna and its ghats, conservation and restoration of built heritage, facilitation and promotion of pilgrimage and community activities, propagation of traditionally community activities like sankirtan, Srimad Bhagavatam katha, revitalization of pradakshina path (circumambulation route), innovation and promotion of local arts and crafts, veneration and protection of cow and promotion of traditional cow-based economy. A few of these organizations are custodians of local practices and repositories of traditional knowledge; and are immense resource for cultural mapping and interpretative efforts. A few prominent organizations include ISKCON, Caitanya Prem Sansthan, The Braj Foundation, Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Akshay Patra, Yamuna Mission, Maitri India, Friends of Vrindavan, Sulabh International, Braj Vrindavan Heritage Alliance, and ISKCON Bhaktivedanta Swami Goshala. Local spiritual leaders and influential citizens, with urban development concerns usually place-based and local, patronize numerous significant organizations. A few enjoy easy access to the decision makers and exercise considerable influence on the residents and non-residents from across the globe. The significant numbers and outreach of these organizations offers a medium with a high capacity for mediation of local issues with official urban planning process. The participation of such organizations in urban planning framework can impart considerable insights in formulating development objectives of local community in response to the needs and aspirations of their communities. There is a serious disquiet over the sporadic urban development in response to endogenous triggers, and an inclusion of all stakeholders in the development process can potentially render urbanization framework sustainable.
5.8 Urban governance

The integrated urban governance framework includes a hierarchical delegation of responsibilities distributed across levels of central, state, district and local institutions. Central government agencies address pollution of river Yamuna through the Yamuna Action Plan (YAP). Related issues of river ecology are also addressed at a state level through Uttar Pradesh Jal Nigam (UPJN). River-based environmental issues are addressed through the Uttar Pradesh State Pollution Control Board which also looks into other air, water, noise pollution related issues (Shinde, 2013). The district and local government institutions is responsible for providing engineering infrastructure viz. water supply, sewerage, storm water drainage, solid waste disposal and electricity. Conservation of cultural heritage is shared responsibility of central, state and local agencies (Infrastructure Professionals Enterprise (P) Ltd, 2006). The governance is characterized by a multitude of agencies, their overlapping functional domains and lack of inter-departmental co-ordination.

To sustain and enhance the rich cultural and historical significance through urban and spatial planning process, Uttar Pradesh Urban Planning and Development Act, 1973 mandates the Development Authorities for preparation and implementation of the master and the zonal plans. Vrindavan is regulated by the Mathura Vrindavan Master Plan 2021 – an integrated plan which includes both towns in the boundary delineating the master plan’s jurisdiction (Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority, 2008). The master plan delineates a heritage zone at Vrindavan; thereby implying critical importance of the cultural significance of built heritage and cultural precincts in the earmarked zone (Figure 5.22) (Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority, 2008). The heritage zone falls in the municipal area, and under the administrative jurisdiction of the municipality. It also recommends conservation of ancient religious, cultural and archaeological buildings, areas and precincts. Special development controls and guidelines are recommended in the building byelaws for physical development in the heritage zone. Zonal plans are mandated to include specific spatial recommendations for development of site plans and use/activity plans for achieving objectives envisaged in the master plan. The zonal plans for Vrindavan are not yet formulated, and thus the objectives envisaged in the master plan are under achieved.
The master plan doesn’t appear to consider the distinctive cultural identity and urban context of the two towns. Mathura is presently a large urban settlement of 600,000 population, a historic city with a continuous civilization for more than 2500 years. It witnessed heterogeneous religious influences and had been an important economic center. In contrast, Vrindavan is a small sacred settlement with a geographical history of 500 years and present population of 63,000 which exhibit great religious homogeneity. Vrindavan is predominantly an important pilgrimage center owing to its sacred roots and a center of Vaishnava tradition.

Inspite of congruent identities linked to association with Sri Krishna, the master plan should envision distinctive vision of two towns. In fact, the cultural identity of Vrindavan may be subsumed resulting from contiguous spatial development envisaged in the master plan. Thus, spatial development based on place-based characteristics, and stronger functional linkages with other pilgrimage areas in Braj would support equitable all-round development of the cultural region of Braj.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 5. 22: The heritage zone delineation in the Vrindavan Master Plan 2022.**  
**Source:** (Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority, 2008)

The Vrindavan Eco-city project highlights people’s concern relating to protection of cultural and traditional values (Kulshrestha, 2007); and field interactions reveal a real desire for engagement with the cultural aspects by the authorities as well. However, the role of the state witnesses a multitude of implementation agencies (Shinde, 2012), wherein
overlapping responsibilities and jurisdictions act as barriers in holistic fulfilment of objectives envisaged in master plan. Coherent action is also constrained by a lack of capacity and expertise in the prevailing planning system to evolve context specific urban planning strategies. Vrindavan Eco-city project concludes that a participatory approach to planning and development appeared replicable.

It thus emerges that the potential of traditional and cultural ethos, beliefs and practices to influence the urban planning process is circumvented due to disregard of cultural dimensions in its implementation tools viz. master/zonal plan, urban planning laws, planning regulations and conflicting institutional responsibilities. It is also implicit that culturally aware state, institutions and citizenry, conscious of traditional values accorded to the river Yamuna, hills forests, sacred groves, water bodies, temples etc. will be better positioned to imagine potential contribution of indigenous urbanism towards contemporary urban development. A cultural orientation is required for capacity building of individuals and institutions to understand and sustain the embedded patterns of urbanism as cultural expressions, and leverage them as catalysts to advance a sustainable urban development trajectory.

5.9 Conclusion

It emerges that the religious belief and values, temple-based cultural and pilgrimage activities are prime factors that influence life patterns at Vrindavan which manifest in spatial patterns that have evolved temporally at Vrindavan. Adopting a bottom up approach also facilitated in identification of local happenings, events, activities etc. which are significant considerations for examination of linkages between culture and urban planning. These have been identified as attributes contributing to linkages between culture and urban planning at Vrindavan, and are hierarchically aggregated into sub-components and components to evolve an adapted hierarchical framework (Figure 5.23) for a bottom-up place-based inquiry at sacred Indian pilgrimage town. The adaptation was facilitated through a process involving careful review of place-specific literature from interdisciplinary domains, reconnaissance field visits, preliminary field observations, informal discussions with pilgrims/residents and unstructured interviews with key local informants. The process is also informed of the expert-led hierarchical framework and helps achieve fulfilment of research objective 3. The testing and application of this adapted framework at Vrindavan is presented in the following Chapter 6.
Figure 5.23: Adapted framework for Vrindavan through adoption of a bottom-up approach